EXPLORING MEANINGFULNESS IN WORK: WHY SENSITIVITY MATTERS

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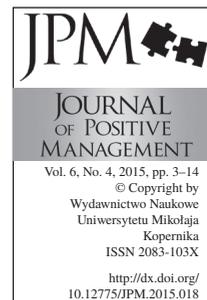
Abstract

Research purpose: The proposed qualitative research study seeks to answer the research question, "How best to define meaningfulness sensitivity in work?" Job design adaptation, which forms a foundation for finding meaningfulness in work, is a motivator that results in happier and more productive employees. Yet, not all employees find meaningfulness in work.

Originality/value: This research is important and original because, in defining a new construct, companies can help meaningfulness-sensitive staff to design their jobs for maximum satisfaction and productivity while helping less sensitive staff to develop a more personal value in their work. In addition, this proposed research might provide insight into ways to address negative employee outcomes such as cynicism and high attrition.

Methodology/approach: Researchers plan to use focus groups and interviews to collect data. Using an approach guided by the principles of grounded theory, data analysis will use several rounds of coding to define and develop the meaningfulness sensitivity construct, hopefully, identifying antecedents and personal characteristics of sensitive people as well.

Implications/limitations: This research seeks to extend positive-management research and meaningfulness in work research to identify those most likely to benefit from these approaches to management and job design. The convenience sample from only white-collar workers and managers, one industry, and one country limits its generalizability.

Further research: Compare and contrast different cultures to determine similarities and differences in individuals' meaningfulness sensitivity in work. To address study limitations, the research will be transparent enough to support replication across any number of environments and levels of staff.

Keywords: meaningfulness in work, meaningfulness sensitivity in work, positive management, job crafting

Paper type: Literature review with proposed research

1. Introduction

The proposed qualitative research study seeks to answer the research question, "How best to define meaningfulness sensitivity in work?" This research question is important because answering the research question provides information to managers for practical application to achieve positive employee outcomes and reduced negative employee outcomes, such as cynicism and high attrition. By identifying individuals with meaningfulness sensitivity, we may be able to use this new construct to select employees and to train those not sensitive to become more sensitive to their jobs' potential for meaningfulness.

Meaningfulness sensitivity in work is a new concept and is not associated with a formal theory. Thus, the researchers plan to use grounded theory as a basis for research to investigate the research question of how best to define meaningfulness sensitivity in work (Creswell, 2013).

A working definition was developed to assist in exploring the investigative questions. Thus, we hypothesize meaningfulness sensitivity in work as heightened mindfulness toward finding significance or purpose in work. Mindfulness is the presence or absence of attention to and awareness of some occurrence in the present (Brown and Ryan, 2003). To have meaningfulness in work, the work role is significant or has purpose (Pratt and Ashforth, 2003).

No research has explored or tested how an employee finds meaningfulness in the work role (Vuori et al., 2012). Indeed, determining how to best define meaningfulness sensitivity in work is an important question conjectured as a possible antecedent to finding meaningfulness in work. Meaningfulness in work is closely related to positive management, job crafting, and positive organizational outcomes.

Studies call for additional research on conceptualization, measurement and modelling of constructs relating to meaningful work (Albrecht, 2015; Yeoman, 2014). Yeoman (2014) suggests further research with a wider lens concentrating on meaningfulness in work based on the argument that basic human desires for freedom, autonomy and dignity make meaningfulness in work a fundamental human need. To advance understanding of how meaningfulness in work is motivated, this research expects to find meaningfulness *sensitivity in work* as antecedent to finding meaningfulness in work.

The remainder of the paper includes a literature review, proposed research method strategy, limitations, future research and a conclusion. The literature review section includes three strains of job design research and the expected constructs of meaningfulness sensitivity in work. Additionally, we discuss how grounded theory applies to design the research, select the respondents, collect and analyze data to develop the results of this proposed research.

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2. Literature review

The goal of most research on individual jobs is to try to increase intrinsic motivation to increase quality and productivity of work (Fried and Ferris, 1987). This section will discuss two main topics, the three strains of job design research that led to explore meaningfulness sensitivity in work and the expected key constructs this proposed research recommends to explore.

2.1. *Job design research*

2.1.1. *Job diagnosis and redesign*

The job diagnosis and redesign research originated by Hackman and Oldham (1975, 1976), sought to analyze job characteristics to determine what could improve to relieve job tedium and increase job interest and how to go about job design to improve motivation and meaningfulness of the work (Hackman and Oldham, 1975, 1976; Kulik et al., 1987). To perform job design, the core job characteristics that focus on task, autonomy, and feedback were then matched to the desired psychological states of meaningfulness, responsibility, and knowledge of results, respectively, to obtain the desired outcomes of motivation, satisfaction, and effectiveness (Hackman and Oldham, 1976). After hundreds of studies, some key criticisms of the job design research led to new approaches to focus on meaningfulness as key to motivation and effectiveness (Fried and Ferris, 1987; Pratt and Ashforth, 2003). The two offshoots of the job design research, currently popular, were motivated by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi's (2000) and others discussions of how management practice has evolved into a focus on eliminating the negative rather than on leveraging and encouraging the positive aspects of work (Cameron et al., 2003; Csikszentmihalyi and Hunter, 2003; Luthans, 2002; Mintzberg, 2004; Nelson and Cooper, 2007). The outcome of such positive organizational scholarship research indicates a notion that happiness is a choice that leads to the positive management and job-crafting schools of thought, which we discuss next (cf. Schwartz et al., 2002).

2.1.2. *Positive management*

The management research focus on negative aspects of jobs includes research on job dissatisfaction, attrition, and barriers to performance, while a positive focus includes strength, passion, and wellbeing of individual workers (Burke, 2015; Cameron et al., 2003; Luthans, 2002). The shift to an emphasis on positive management is optimistic and constructive, seeking to replicate and expand positive outcomes (Cameron et al., 2003; Luthans, 2002).

Such positive outcomes include job engagement and self-efficacy. Job engagement research indicates that positive management fosters an environment to achieve high self-efficacy (Alessandri et al., 2015; Demerouti et al., 2015;

Tims et al., 2014). Thus, employees who do not have low self-efficacy increase job engagement, which positively relates to job outcomes and further heightens engagement. Currently, positive organizational behavior and employee engagement are viewed as the outcomes of managing with a positive approach that focusses on positive jobs aspects, which are also associated with positive outcomes including work meaningfulness and job crafting (Bakker and Schaufeli, 2008; Vuori et al., 2012).

2.1.3. Job crafting research

One of the key outcomes of job design research is meaningfulness of work (Hackman and Oldham, 1976). In the search to improve meaningfulness, research reports that the manager-driven, top-down approach to job design is less effective than a bottom-up, individual approach (Demerouti et al., 2015; Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001). Employees can redesign or craft their jobs with or without management involvement and customize it so that it has meaning *to them* (Demerourti et al., 2015; Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001; Wrzesniewski et al., 2013).

Individual job crafting positively relates to employees' ability to function effectively by rearranging work to amplify effectiveness and efficiency, thus increasing a job's meaningfulness (Berg et al., 2013; Wrzesniewski et al., 2013). Meaningfulness in work research has found that managers who allow job crafting can increase individual motivation and work engagement (Cameron and McNaughtan, 2014; Demerouti et al., 2015; Mills et al., 2013). As such, one of the criteria for job crafting is work meaningfulness (Berg et al., 2013; Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001; Wrzesniewski et al., 2013). That is, employees may alter job tasks in a manner that provides or enhances their sense of meaningfulness in their work. In addition to an increase in positive outcomes, meaningfulness in work can increase employee retention and individual motivation (Cameron and McNaughtan, 2014; Havener, 1999; Mills et al., 2013).

In summary, the three approaches to job design, one that is top-down, one that focusses on positive engagement, and one that focusses on employee job crafting, all approach the issue of job design with a goal of increasing meaningfulness, engagement, quality and quantity of employee output. In the top-down approach, while managers had a benevolent approach in job design, a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to a specific job role was taken (Hackman and Oldham, 1976). That one best approach has since been replaced with an individual customization. None of these research strains addresses the problem of how job redesign comes to be done, that is, is it a spontaneous act, is there a precipitating act, is it unconsciously done, etc. While Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001) found that some hospital workers crafted their jobs to increase meaningfulness, other hospital workers did not. The differences in those who do or do not redesign their own jobs have been

neglected. This research seeks to explore that difference. In that exploration, we seek to extend the positive management area and the job crafting area by seeking to identify if there is a *sensitivity* to how one derives job satisfaction from work meaningfulness. In that evaluation, it is important to analyze possible antecedents and the exact nature of the meaningfulness that is sought. In the next section, first meaningfulness *in work* versus *at work* are defined and this research is narrowed to focus on sensitivity to meaningfulness in work. Then, we describe prior research on the most likely antecedents to indicate sensitivity that we consider in this proposed research.

2.2. Meaningfulness and antecedents

2.2.1. Meaningfulness in work versus at work

Research distinguishes between meaningfulness *in work* and *at work* (Pratt and Ashforth, 2003; Vuori et al., 2012). Pratt and Ashforth (2003) clarify that the term *in work* focusses on the individual's work role that encompasses aggregated job tasks. The organizational community where employees conduct work pertains to meaningfulness *at work* (Pratt and Ashforth, 2003). The at work meaning then, is individually defined and comes from, for example, working for a prestigious company, or one that engages in socially popular activities. Thus, meaningfulness at work is an externally focused concept.

In contrast, meaningfulness *in work* is a subjective, internal state that varies by individual and includes a perception of significant and purposive positive meaning when producing work (Pratt and Ashforth, 2003; Vuori et al., 2012). The research proposed by this paper focusses on a narrower scope of the in work component of meaningfulness as we look at how best to define meaningfulness sensitivity in work. Since not all people experience or perceive any work meaningfulness, personal sensitivity to meaningfulness in work may be a necessary condition for one to find meaningfulness in work. Meaningfulness sensitivity in work is the construct that this paper's proposed research seeks to understand.

2.2.2. Defining meaningfulness in work

In seeking to define the concept of 'sensitivity' within the meaningfulness in work construct, it appears sensitivity is synonymous with the concept of mindfulness. The mindfulness construct draws upon both Buddhist psychological underpinnings and empirical psychology to emphasize the inner awareness of thoughts, emotions, intentions, and external stimuli on the presence or absence of attention to and awareness of what is occurring in the present (Brown et al., 2007; Brown et al., 2015; Hülsheger et al., 2013). Mindfulness appears to be positively related to work outcomes such as job satisfaction (Hülsheger et al., 2013). The ability to be sensitive to the present state aligns with the positive outcomes

found with the meaningfulness in work construct (Hülsheger et al., 2013). As a result, our working definition of meaningfulness sensitivity is mindfulness to external conditions and self that lead one to desire meaningfulness in work (or other) activities. What is unclear is if mindfulness fully explains meaningfulness sensitivity in work. This research will emphasize defining the psychological state of mindfulness as well as other possible meaningfulness sensitivity constructs.

2.2.3. Identity theory

Although meaningfulness sensitivity in work does not have an associated theory, the in work component of the working definition derives from identity theory, which posits role-related behaviors within social structures are the primary focus (Stryker, 1968). The self is a multifaceted entity that exists within the various roles in society. These roles create distinctive self-concepts that Stryker (1968) called role identities. According to identity theory, an individual's identity is an accumulation of the roles that an individual occupies. Identity theory relates to the parts of the self that attributes the meanings to the roles that the person enacts (Stryker and Burke, 2000). Thus, the concept of meaningfulness in work stems from the foundation of identity theory. It might be possible to select and train employees who are not sensitive to become more sensitive to their jobs' potential for meaningfulness and greater congruence with their work role identities. The conjecture on identity theory relating to this research is that the extent to which one defines one's role as fulfilling (versus instrumental to get a pay check) should relate to the extent to which they are sensitive to finding meaningfulness in their work. Thus, instrumentalist job incumbents, who see their role as a means to an end, are expected to be less likely to be sensitive to work meaningfulness while people who seek fulfillment would be expected to be more sensitive to finding meaningfulness in their work.

3. Research method

Because there is no known research on meaningfulness sensitivity, this study uses a rigorous exploratory process based on grounded theory for data collection, coding analysis and theorizing (see Figure 1; Tweed and Charmaz, 2012). A conjectured definition for meaningfulness sensitivity provides the foundation to create the investigative questions during the data collection process while leaving open the possibility of unanticipated findings.

The proposed qualitative research study selected is a cross-sectional, exploratory project at an individual level of analysis. The objective of this research, how best to define meaningfulness sensitivity in work, is consistent with the philosophy underlying grounded theory. Grounded theory posits theory arises from data collected and grounded through qualitative means (Glaser and Strauss, 2012; Simmons, 2011). Using grounded theory, a study comprised

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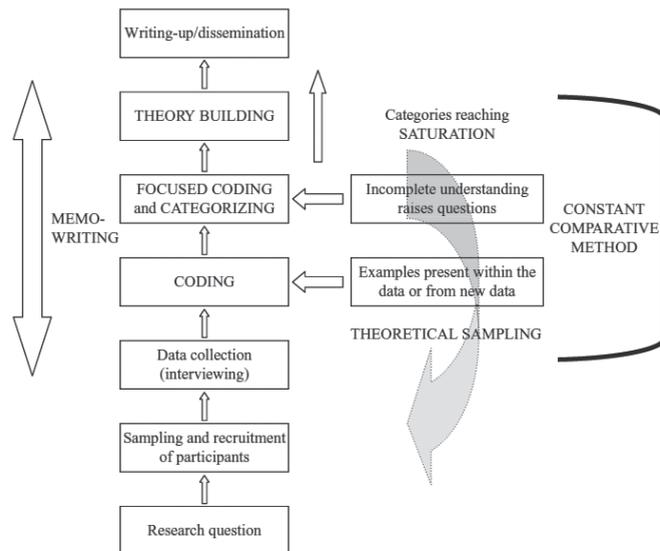
Figure 1. Grounded
Theory Process

Source: (Tweed and
Charmaz, 2012).

of participants' explanations, meanings, definitions, and interpretations has a heightened likelihood of portraying the world, social interactions and subjects' priorities more accurately than methods that commence by preconceiving the world and the meaning of the world (Simmons, 2011).

The approach is to investigate the occurrence without explicit expectations for definitions and theories to emerge (Creswell, 2013; Glaser and Strauss, 2012). Since this research method provides a rigorous process, our adherence to the grounded theory process can address the bias our worldview brings to this research endeavor. We will adhere to grounded theory data analysis processes to mitigate preconceived ideas, including the working definition of the construct, all of which could bias this study.

With the use of grounded theory concepts, the expected outcome of this study is to develop a definition of meaningfulness sensitivity in work and to develop an initial theory for quantitative evaluation on antecedents to meaningfulness sensitivity.

Participants will be selected from two companies in the airline industry. A total of 28 semi-structured interviews, 14 per company, will be conducted. Then, some of the respondents will also participate in two focus group sessions, one per company. The interviews and focus group sessions include multiple levels within each firm in order to have an opportunity for various job roles and levels to participate. The interview and focus group sessions seek to gather subjects' personal experiences and perspectives in a manner that provides rich information and insights. The interview and focus group sessions will follow the procedures

recommended by knowledgeable researchers (cf. Corbin and Strauss, 2015; Creswell, 2013; Glaser and Strauss, 2012; Hernandez, 2011). Thus, an interview guide and focus group script are planned to provide consistent means to collect the data (Foley and Timonen, 2015).

The proposed sample population is a heterogeneous purposeful, convenience group. The participants will be selected from multiple job roles. Specifically, six employment groups will make up the samples, including front-line non-management, front-line managerial and front-line executives, clerical staff, managerial staff, and executive staff. The sample is from the Southern United States for convenience and accessibility. Although the sample represents only one industry type, overall the sample is heterogeneous due to the various job roles and levels included as part of the study. After the data are collected, if additional data is necessary, further sampling and interviews would be performed (Corbin and Strauss, 2015).

After obtaining company approval, participants will be solicited through an email invitation explaining the research, their voluntary participation, and their assured anonymity. Interviews and focus group sessions will be conducted over a nine week period, mindful of airline seasonal availability of the employees. No incentives will be offered to participants.

The data analysis portion of this study will include using transcribed data by coding using several coding schemes, written memos, constant data comparison, theoretical sampling, theoretical sensitivity, and data saturation (Amsteus, 2014; Creswell, 2013; Tweed and Charmaz, 2012).

It is anticipated that thematic, demographic, in vivo coding will be conducted. We expect two to three rounds of coding, consolidation and analysis followed by an attempt to develop a theoretical construct definition that includes antecedents.

Several techniques will be used to achieve quality for this research study. For systematic data transcription, both authors will code the same several interviews and conduct inter-rater reliability analysis. Any discrepancies will be reconciled. We will continue this process of dual-coding, inter-rater reliability analysis and reconciling until we reach 100% consistency on coding if possible. Areas of disagreement, if any remain, will be discussed as areas for follow-up research. Memoing will be used to document our thoughts and ideas during data collection and data analysis to bracket the selves through the process of written self-reflection. Then, we will review the memos and other thoughts that arise in the discussions with a third researcher who is versed in this research area. These discussions should surface conflicts, worldview clashes or possible biases, which we will mitigate. The techniques should provide a level of credibility, quality and transparency. In addition, in the discussion of results, any inferences will be identified as such so that, potential bias might be easily identified (Creswell, 2013).

4. Limitations and future research

The convenience sample from only white-collar workers and managers, one industry, and one country will limit research generalizability. In addition, the researchers have the same functional worldview, which might limit the ability to critique from a different viewpoint during debriefings. To address study limitations, the research will be transparent enough to support replication across any number of environments and levels of staff.

Future studies could develop a survey to identify meaningfulness sensitive people and evaluate the construct across many jobs and industries. Additionally, future research could compare and contrast different cultures to determine cultural contingencies and similarities and differences in individuals' meaningfulness sensitivity in work. Future research could consider longitudinal versus cross-sectional research to analyze the behavior over time and the impacts of meaningfulness sensitivity in work. In addition, studies could extend meaningfulness sensitivity to the work community concept to see if meaningfulness sensitivity *in* work applies to *at* work meaningfulness.

5. Conclusion

This proposed research seeks to develop a definition and antecedents to meaningfulness in work. In developing this construct, the definition should align with tenets of positive management and job crafting to allow its exploration in that context, answer the call to view meaningfulness in work through a broader lens, and extend the meaningfulness literature by helping to explain why only some people exhibit the ability to find meaningfulness in work (Yeoman, 2014).

Meaningfulness sensitivity in work is a new construct not associated with a formal theory; therefore, grounded theory concepts will be applied through interviews and focus groups as the methodology that will be followed.

This research is important and original because, in defining a new construct, companies can help meaningfulness-sensitive staff to design their jobs for maximum satisfaction and productivity while helping less sensitive staff to develop a more personal value in their work. In addition, defining meaningfulness sensitivity in work may provide insight into ways to address, negative employee outcomes such as, cynicism and high attrition.

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