[Short Paper for Theme 5: Career and Personal Life Sustainability]

The Role of Developmental Relationships in Career Starters' Meaning of Work

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Abstract

This study examined how career starters (age: 26-33 years) experience work meaning and how their developmental network influences this sense of work meaning. Accordingly, we interviewed 16 career starters about how they sense purpose, values, self-efficacy, and positive self-worth in their work. Moreover, they shared how both work and non-work developers influence these work meaning processes. This study contributes to the discussion on how meaning of work contributes to "the good life" in two ways. First, this study contributes to the definition of the phenomenon of meaningful work, by exploring how the four basic human needs of Baumeister (1999) are translated into career starter's work context. Next, we show how both work and non-work developers act as co-scripters of these processes. Career starters identified the importance of their developers' need-supportive functions to their sense of work meaning, including (anti-) role modeling, provision of objectivity (*purpose*), forming communities to share values with (*values*), supporting the development of personal competencies (*self-efficacy*), benchmarking, and creating possibilities to express emotions (*self-worth*). In the discussion section, we highlight several questions that arise from this study.

Keywords: work meaning; career starters; life meaning; developmental networks

1. Introduction

Within the framework of Positive Organizational Scholarship (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003), the concept of meaningfulness in the workplace gained attention in last years. Meaningfulness can be described as "the amount of significance something holds for an individual" (Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010, p. 95). According to Baumeister (1991), the perception of meaning in life depends on the fulfillment of four specific needs. First, the sense of purpose in life means that one defines ongoing activities by their anticipated future outcomes, that is, how these activities help an individual to reach one's goals. Second, the need for values reflects that people want their actions to be morally correct. Next, the defining characteristic of self-efficacy is that people want to perceive that they have control over the outcome of their activities, that they perceive making a difference in what they are doing. Last, people have a need for positive self-worth, which means that people seek criteria according to which they can confirm themselves and others to be good and worthy.

As the influence of neighborhoods, churches, and civic groups on one's search for meaning in life seems to decline, the importance of one's workplace as a source for meaningfulness, increases (Cartwright & Holmes, 2006). Work meaning can be described as "employees' understandings of what they do at work as well as the significance of what they do." (Wrzesniewski, 2003, p. 99) A number of aspects seem to influence one's work meaning (Rosso et al., 2010): individual factors (e.g., values, beliefs), others (coworkers, leaders, family), and characteristics of the work context (design of job tasks, national culture).

This study addresses an important gap in the current understanding of work meaning. Compared to the influence of individual factors and characteristics of the work context on work meaning, the literature on the influence of others on one's work meaning is underdeveloped (Rosso et al., 2010). Studies in this area often focus on connections to larger workplace communities or identity groups, instead of on the influence of dyadic interpersonal

relationships. The role of specific significant others in the workplace, such as mentors, is underexplored (Rosso et al., 2010). Moreover, although individuals' most salient non-work relationships are those with their family-members, only few studies have moved beyond organizational boundaries and examined the influence of family on the meaning of one's work. Therefore, the current study focuses on the role of these others on individuals' work meaning, by qualitatively examining how one's developmental network are of influence on career starters' sense of work meaning. Having its origin in mentoring literature, developmental networks are defined as: "a set of people a protégé names as taking an active interest in and action to advance the protégé's career by providing developmental assistance" (Higgins & Kram, 2001, p. 268). These networks include both work (e.g., colleagues, supervisors, mentors) and non-work (e.g., spouses, parents, friends) developers. Our research questions are: (1) How does life meaning translate into work meaning for career starters? (2) How do developers influence the fulfillment of career starters' needs for purpose, values, self-efficacy, and positive self-worth?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

A total of 16 participants from 13 organizations based in Germany were selected using purposive sampling (Patton, 1990). All participants (9 men, 7 women) held at least an educational level of a four-year college degree and were white-collar employees at for example marking or public relation agencies, management consultancies, and law firms. Employees represented job categories such as Junior Key Account Manager, Junior Marketing Manager, and Management Assistant. Participants were aged between 26 and 33 years (mean = 28 years). Their average work experience was 20 months (ranging from 12 months to 36 months.

2.2. Semi-structured Interviews

Interviews typically lasted 60 minutes. We started each interview by asking the participant to describe their job and their daily work routines. Then, we asked the participant why and how he or she got the job. In order to have a basis of discussion for the main part of the interviews, the participants were asked to think of their developmental network ("Can you name the people, who take or took an active interest in the development of your career?") The participants were asked to write down the names or pseudonyms of both work and non-work developers on cards. This way, the participants were able to refer to these developers during the following parts of the interview.

The main part of the interview focused on participants' meaning making processes and how developers influence these processes. This part was divided into four sections, corresponding with the four basic human needs for meaning (Baumeister, 1991). For each need, we asked participants how they perceive the fulfillment of this need in their work. Next, we asked participants if and how their developers influence the fulfillment of these needs.

2.3. Data analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and were then analyzed in two ways. First, we coded the interviews on the four basic human needs (purpose, values, self-efficacy, and self-worth). Using an iterative procedure, thus moving back and forth between literature and the interview data, we created subcategories (such as "work as a place to share values") and defined these (sub)categories in a codebook. An independent coder coded a sample of the interviews, resulting in a Cohen's kappa of .83. Second, we searched for comments reflecting the functions developers provide during participants' processes of meaning making. Subcategories such as "provide objective opinion to diminish uncertainties" were included in a codebook. Again, the independent coder coded a sample of the interviews, resulting in a Cohen's kappa of .73.

3.   Results

3.1. Translation of Life Meaning into Work Meaning

Participants reported how they can fulfill the four basic human needs of Baumeister (1999) in their work context. Because of space limits, we refer to Appendix A for these results, as for the preconference, we are most interested in the ways in which developers act as co-scripters of career starters' sense of work meaning.

3.2. Developers' Functions for Career Starters' Work Meaning

[Insert Table 1 about here]

3.2.1. Purpose. The need for purpose of career starters is fulfilled in the way that work enables them to develop and satisfy career goals. Table 1 shows how developers influence career starters' sense of work meaning in four ways. First, they represent a role model as inspiration to formulate goals. Second, they serve as anti-role model, as an example not to aim at certain goals. Third, developers provide sponsorship to facilitate goal achievement. Last, they provide an objective opinion to diminish uncertainties.

3.2.2. Values. To fulfill their need for values, people seek for groups to develop and share their values with (Baumeister, 1991). Developmental networks form such communities to share values with.

3.2.3. Self-efficacy. Table 1 shows that developers fulfill their need for self-efficacy in six ways. First, developers help career starters to develop their personal abilities through training or coaching. Second, developers increase participants' feeling of self-efficacy through the provision of challenging work tasks. Next, developers help career starters to discover their strengths and weaknesses and use existing strengths, while eliminate weaknesses. Friends and family, and especially the partner are important in this process because they hold close relationships with the career starter. Fourth, developers provide positive feedback for the accomplishment of tasks. Next, developers support career starters in times of challenges and uncertainty, by offering belongingness. Especially in times of struggle, when the first job

diminishes the self-efficacy of career starters, they seek for the community of others in order not to feel alone. Last, belongingness to a work team can reduce the perceived work pressure felt by the career starter.

3.2.4. Self-worth. Career starters' need for self-worth is fulfilled by their developers in four ways. First, career starters fulfill their need for self-worth by competing with or comparing their achievement to developers. Second, as most developmental relationships are reciprocal relationships, career starters may feel superior to their developers. Third, career starters receive positive regard from their developers, which boosts their perception of self-worth. Next, developers create freedom for the career starters by giving them chances to work independently. The perception of being trusted and not being controlled enhances participants' feelings of self-worth. Last, the work context for career starters often involves experiencing deep emotions, as they face completely new situations. In phases of happiness and satisfaction but also in phases of frustration and dissatisfaction related to the perception of being self-worth, developers provide support to career starters to live their emotions.

4. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine how career starters sense meaning in their work, by fulfilling the four basic needs of Baumeister (1999) in their work context, and how this sense of meaning is co-constructed with the help of developers. This way, our study contributes to the "definition of the phenomenon [of] meaningful work" (Cheney & Nadesan, 2008, p. 183) as it explores how four defining characteristics of meaning are formed in career starters' work contexts. We provide empirical evidence for how the work context of career starters enables them to fulfill their needs for purpose, values, self-efficacy, and self-worth. Second, our study shows the importance of others for one's sense of work meaning. As the first job for career starters represents a phase of personal development often accomplished by

struggle, most of the developers help career starters by overcoming these struggles, and by helping them to develop personal skills and competencies.

Several questions and discussion points arise from working with the data in this study. First, although this study shows in which ways developers are seen as supporters of career starters' process of work meaning, questions remain about how social interactions with these developers exactly contribute to the social understanding of work meaning. In other words, how do daily practices, conversations with developers, and (interpersonal) cues from one's work context contribute to one's sense of work meaning? Moreover, this study only examined the perspective of the career starters and not the perspective of their developers. However, each developer is an active interpreter of cues itself. As previous work discussed, meaning is shaped not only through intended but also through unintended actions (Wrzesniewski, Dutton, & Debebe, 2003). It would be interesting to examine how developers' interpretation of cues influences their protégés' sensemaking processes and vice versa. Also, as we worked with retrospective data, a taken-for-granted assumption in this study is that the fulfillment of the basic human needs is a conscious process. However, it is questionable to what extent work meaning processes are conscious processes. A shift from retrospective data to real-life data (e.g., conversation analysis) would be highly recommended, as we can then observe 'coupled pairs' in their sensemaking processes. Communication scholars may explore best practices in how to apply this kind of research on work meaning.

Next, this study shows how we need to move beyond formal organizational boundaries to understand social constructions of meaning of work (see Broadfoot et al., 2008). This study shows how both work and non-work developers are important in one's construction of meaning in work life. Especially family and partners were described as being highly important in one's sense of work meaning. Given the prominent role they fulfill in one's understanding of work life, it is almost impossible to exclude these co-scripters in studies on

work meaning. However, this raises questions on where to set organizational boundaries in both research and practice.

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Table 1.

Results of the Content Analysis for How Developers Support Career Starters' Meaning of Work

Basic Need	Subcategory	Sample comments
Purpose	Represent a role model as inspiration to formulate goals	"My ex-partner showed me how extremely loyal one can be towards his or her employer and what a person is able to achieve. That is something I really admired about him"
	Represent an anti-role model as negative example not to aim at certain goals	"Both my direct supervisor and her boss are negative example for me, because they risk their health in favor of work. They both suffer from high blood pressure, gastritis, and migraine. They know it results from their work, but aren't willing to change anything"
	Engage in sponsorship facilitating goal achievement	"From my former employer I can expect assistance in the form of the provision of contact to important persons. Also, my parents were able to provide me with influential contact, but as they don't work anymore, for my future I have to rely on other sources"
	Provide objective opinion to diminish uncertainties	"My former supervisor really helped me. She already left the company some time ago and she often talks to me very openly about the working conditions at the company. In the beginning I neglected her warning, but now I know that she was right"
Values	Form a community to share values	"My study colleagues, most of them live in the same city as I do. With them, I can share experiences and I discovered that I don't stand alone with my concerns, problems, and feelings"

Table 1. *(continued)*

Basic Need	Subcategory	Sample comments
Self-efficacy	Provide training for the development of skills	"My supervisor provides me with tips and further training"
	Provide challenging tasks	"My direct supervisors for sure create new opportunities for me by for example expanding my work tasks"
	Enable and support the development of personal strengths and weaknesses	"I often consider the opinion of former fellow students of mine, who I also regard as friends. They can best comprehend how I feel, they know the things I want to improve and they can provide me with relevant information and advice"
	Provide feedback to stimulate personal advancement	"I also get a lot of feedback from my supervisors, especially positive feedback in the form of approval"
	Offer belongingness in times of challenges and uncertainty	"My friends are in the same situation as I am, thus they are new in the job and know about the advantages and disadvantages of being a newcomer at a company"
	Create team spirit to reduce work pressure	"I was also able to collaborate with the student trainees at our company. With them, I discussed a lot about different possibilities. Of course, we also discussed problems"
Self-worth	Serve as benchmark to compare against	"Two friends are now applying for their first job. As usual, they also have to state their salary requirements within their letter of motivation. If I compare their claims with what I receive, I'm satisfied with my salary"
	Provide appreciation	"A lot of it comes from my parents. They are extremely proud of me"
	Create freedom to enable personal growth	"I was allowed to do a lot of things on my own. To work independent from others satisfied me a lot"
	Provide support to live emotions	"I know, whatever I would do, my family and also my friends would stand by me"

Appendix A.

Results of the Content Analysis for how Career Starters' Life Meaning Translates into Meaning of Work

Basic need	Subcategory	Sample comments
Purpose		
People see current activities in relation to expected outcomes, such as a future goal state. People evaluate behavioral alternatives against each other in order to choose for the one most likely to achieve the goal	Goal achievement: finding one's first job	"This job fits well into my goal setting. For the next two years I have the security of an employment contract, and from that I can look further"
	(Re)formulation of career goals	"My short term goals are to advance from a junior management position to a senior management position"
	First job as facilitator to achieve goals related to one's private life	"I want to have a family in the future. What is important to me is that I receive an acceptable salary, so I can feed a family from it"
Values		
Peoples' actions are motivated by the notion that they are right, good, and justifiable. Therefore, people seek for sources of value and communities to share their values	Work as a place to share values	"Loyalty is very important for me, and also for [company]. They are loyal towards their clients, but also towards their employees. They do a lot for the wellbeing of their employees"
	Work as a place for the development of new values	"I discovered that with regard to work, honesty is very important to me. So, no secrets among colleagues, or gossip about colleagues"
	Finding a right work-life balance	"Leisure time, or to say it in other words, a good work-life balance, is also important for me. From others I see how much they work, and I know for sure that I'm not willing to do so"

(continued)

Basic need	Subcategory	Sample comments
Self-efficacy		
People need to believe that they are not overwhelmed by the challenges of life. The need for self-efficacy is perceived to be fulfilled, when people get the feeling that they have control over events	Accomplishment of tasks increases feeling of self-efficacy	"From time to time I miss a deadline and sometimes the workload is heavy, but I seldom feel that I'm losing control"
	Personal development increases feeling of self-confidence	"I learned that it's okay to make mistakes. Sometimes I forget that, but I can see that In a positive sense as well, namely that I'm deeply committed to the company"
Self-worth		
People need to have positive value in life. The need for self-worth leads people to develop criteria by which they can feel superior to others. As a result, they feel virtuous and deserve good rewards	Making a difference through working	"This is rooted in the nature of my job. By teaching, I influence others' lives"
	Work as a source of criteria for self-worth	"When I successfully completed a project or when I participated in an event that we organized, then I'm proud of that"
	Work provides deserved rewards	"My direct supervisor asked me to continue working for him although there are research assistants as well. For me, this represents a great approval of my work"
	Use of personal skills at work	"I can really use my technical skills in my job. However, the so called soft skills, I can't use here. For example, I'm a good team player, but we don't work in teams"