

Meaningful work from and for others: Exploring how others at work (through which mechanisms) contribute to employees' experience of work as meaningful

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Deprived of meaningful work, men and women
lose their reason for existence; they go stark,
raving mad.

(Fyodor Dostoevsky)

Meaningful work & Others at work

- **Meaningful work** – *individuals' subjective experience of work as purposeful and significant* (e.g., Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010).
- **Sources of Meaningful work**
 - The self, other persons, work context, and spiritual life (Rosso et al., 2010).
 - “Developing and becoming self”, “unity with others”, “serving others”, and “expressing self” (Lips-Wiersma, 2002; Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009).

The focus of this study

- **Others at work** (i.e., coworkers, managers, and clients/customers) play important role in shaping the meaningfulness of one's work.
- Mainly conceptual work exists on the topic (Wrzesniewski, Dutton, & Debebe, 2003; Kahn, 2007; Grant, 2007; Blustein, 2011; Rosso et al., 2010).
- Limited empirical research focuses either on coworkers (e.g., May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004; Colbert, Bono, & Purvanova, 2016) or on leaders (e.g., Arnold et al., 2007; Nielsen et al., 2008; Peng et al., 2015).
- The role of customers in fostering meaningful work is underexplored.

Theoretical background & RQ

- POS research that concerns how positive interpersonal relationships (high quality connections) influence employees' work experience (e.g., Dutton & Heaphy, 2003; Dutton & Ragins, 2007; Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, 2010).
- ***Interpersonal sensemaking perspective*** (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003) suggests that daily interactions with others (i.e., coworkers, managers, etc.) in their organizational context have the central position in the process of employees building meaning into their work.

How (through which mechanisms) do various others at work contribute to employees' experience of meaningful work?

Overview of the studies

● Study 1 (quantitative)

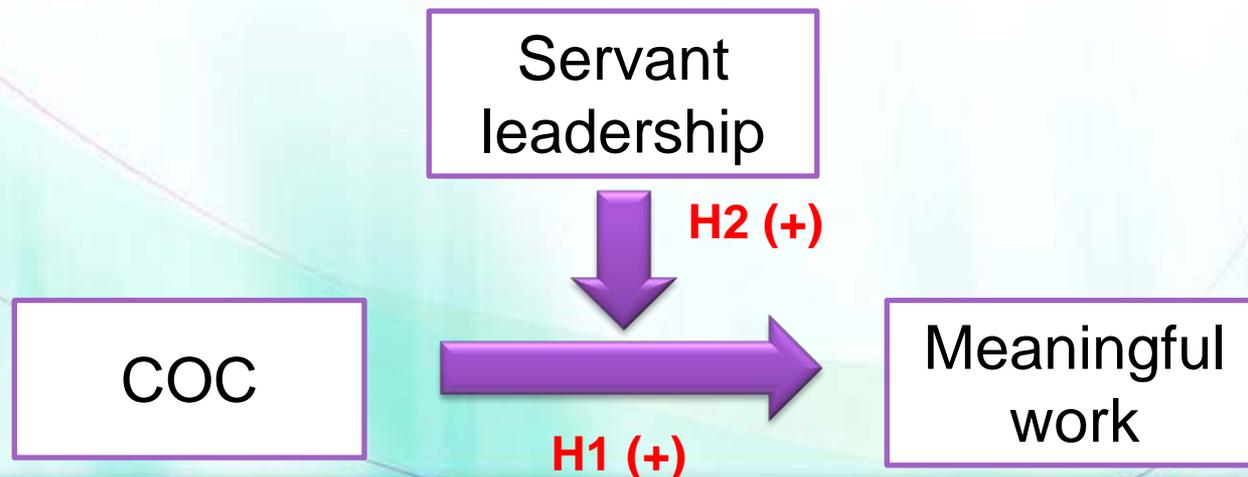
- The focus is on *examining the role of coworkers and managers in contributing to employees' experience of meaningful work and how it translates to in employees' service to customers.*
- Data collected in China and in the Netherlands

● Study 2 (qualitative)

- The focus is on *exploring the mechanisms through which various others at work (coworkers, managers, and clients) contribute to employees' experience of meaningful work.*
- Data collected in the Netherlands

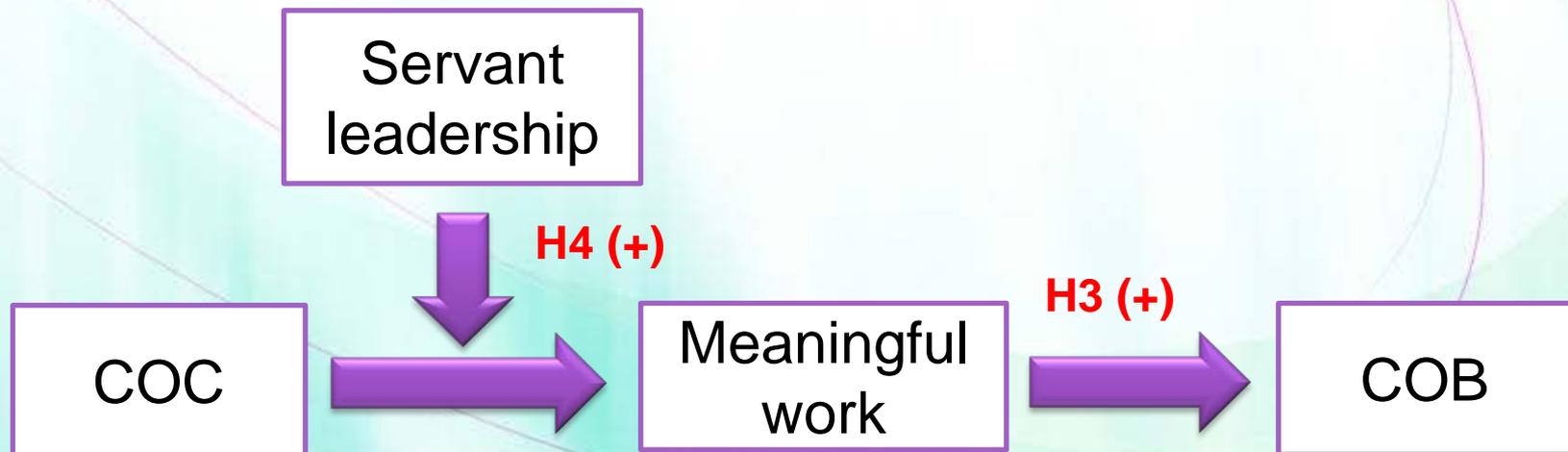
Study 1 (a)

- **Collegial organizational climate (COC)** – *individuals' perceptions of the extent to which there are warm and supportive relationships among employees in the organization (Muchinsky, 1976).*
- **Servant leadership** – *involves serving others (i.e., followers) by prioritizing the followers' interests over their own and facilitating the satisfaction and fulfillment of follower's personal and professional needs (Greenleaf, 1997; Liden et al., 2008).*



Study 1 (b)

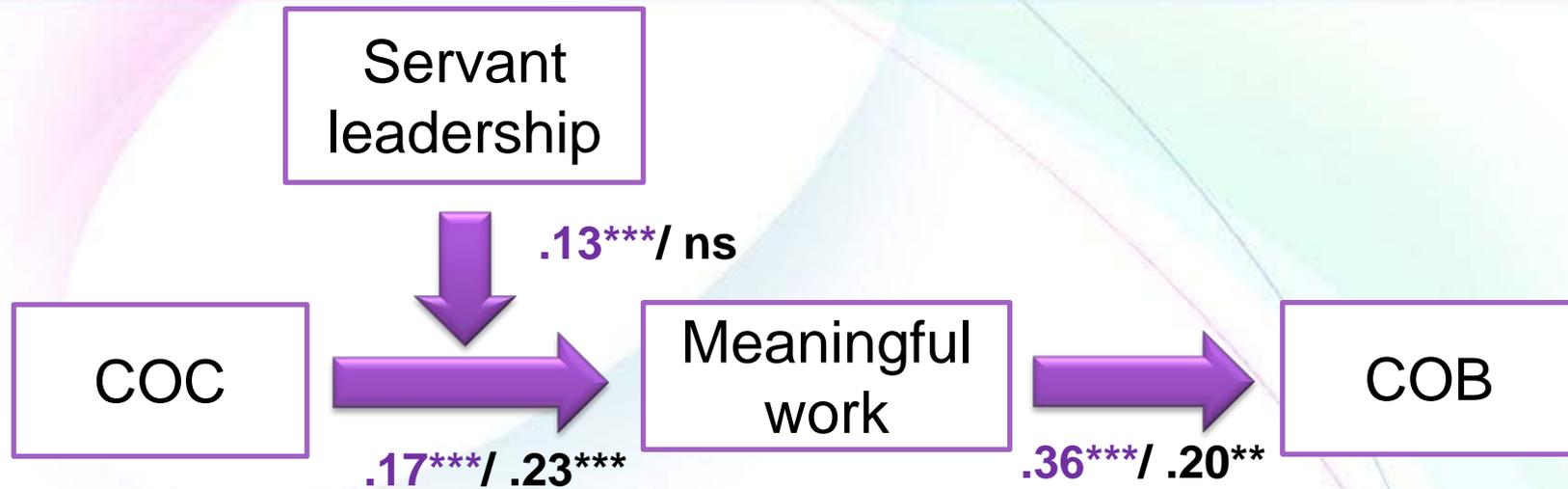
- **Customer-oriented behavior (COB)** – the extent to which employees engage in continuous improvement and exert effort on the job on behalf of customers (Perceci & Rosental, 2001, p. 837).
- Serving others lies at the heart of meaningful work (Lips-Wiersma, 2002; Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009, Michaelson, 2011).
- Meaningful work is likely to stimulate greater engagement in organizational citizenship behavior (Elangovan, Pinder, & McLean, 2010) and helping behavior (Grant, 2008).



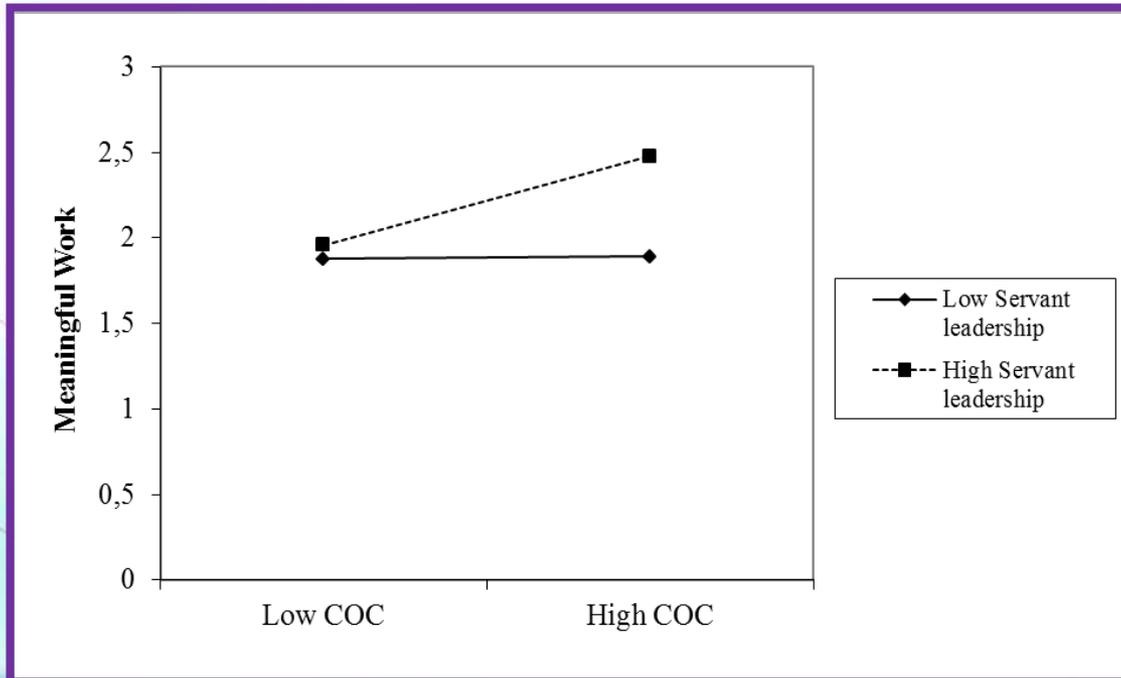
Study 1: Methods

- **Sample 1 (N=283)** collected in IT companies in China. 54.4% male; 30.14 years old and with 3.36 years org. tenure on average.
- **Sample 2 (N=202)** collected in a consultancy firm located in the Netherlands. 65.8% male. Majority of 20-34 years old (67.8%) with org. tenure of 1-5 years.
- **MEASURES**
 - COC (Muchinsky, 1976) (S1: $\alpha = .87$; S2: $\alpha = .75$). 3 items. “A friendly atmosphere prevails among the people in my department”
 - Meaningful Work (Steger, Dik & Duffy, 2012) (S1: $\alpha = .84$; S2: $\alpha = .88$). 7 items. “The work I do serves a greater purpose”.
 - Servant leadership (Liden et al., 2014) (S1: $\alpha = .89$; S2: $\alpha = .82$). 7 items. “My manager puts my best interests ahead of his/her own”
 - COB (Peccei & Rosenthal, 2001) (S1: $\alpha = .89$; S2: $\alpha = .82$). 6 items. “I often go out of my way to help customers”

Study 1: Results



Sample 1



Study 2: Methodology

- Semi-structured interviews with **58 employees** from different organizations.
- Predefined interview protocol that included questions about experiences of meaningful work and perceived facilitators and barriers to it.
- Respondents were mainly female (63.79%) and on average 35.48 years old. 39 of them worked in for-profit organizations and 19 worked in non-profit organizations

Study 2: Results

- **Meaning from others at work**

Positive relationships with

Managers

Coworkers

Customers

- **Meaning-making mechanisms**

Receiving
support &
development

Getting
inspiration

Receiving
appreciating

Identifying with coworkers, team and/or
organization as a whole



Results: Coworkers → MW

- “I personally find the atmosphere more important than ... whether the work is interesting or not.” (sales employee, waste processing industry)
- “if you do not derive enough meaning from the content of your job within this organization that you would do extra step for the customer, you will notice that there is a shift that people get more meaning out of collegiality” (project supervisor, charity)
- “The setting of the work is really very nice, for me that's really more important than the work itself. [...] The work I do now is really very much sales-oriented and that gets boring very quickly because you feel less challenged, so, as long as the atmosphere is good and enjoyable amongst each other, that really compensates for a lot of that.” (sales trader)

Meaning-making mechanisms

- **[Getting inspiration]** “I feel inspired and I feel energized when I see that people around me are passionate about their work. ... So I like to be seating in the middle of a team or organization where I can feel that passion of others.” (corporate recruiter)
- **[Receiving appreciation]** “So actually my colleague sort of begged me that she would like me to come [work instead of another employee]. To me this is positive. It gives a positive self-image. And you go to work with a lot more fun when you know that your colleagues appreciate you. Then you really enjoy your work.” (caretaker for disabled people)
- **[Receiving development]** “But you can also learn a lot from others and this also applies to remedial teaching with difficult students, for example, or difficult situations, I find it very valuable to be able to share the knowledge with my colleagues.” (remedial teacher)

Meaning-making mechanisms

- **[Identifying with coworkers]** “[about MW] Just dealing with other people in a work situation, ... you are like building something with a bunch of ants. Apparently, ants also find this [working with each other] nice, because, otherwise, they would not do that. It gives a sense of community and belonging.”
- **[Identifying with team and the organization]** “I feel definitely connected to the [name of an organization]. This is mainly because I really consider myself a worthy member of the team. ... I also have frequent contact with colleagues outside the work context. Regarding my work this means that I feel valued, and therefore I do my work better.”” (system controller, transportation industry)

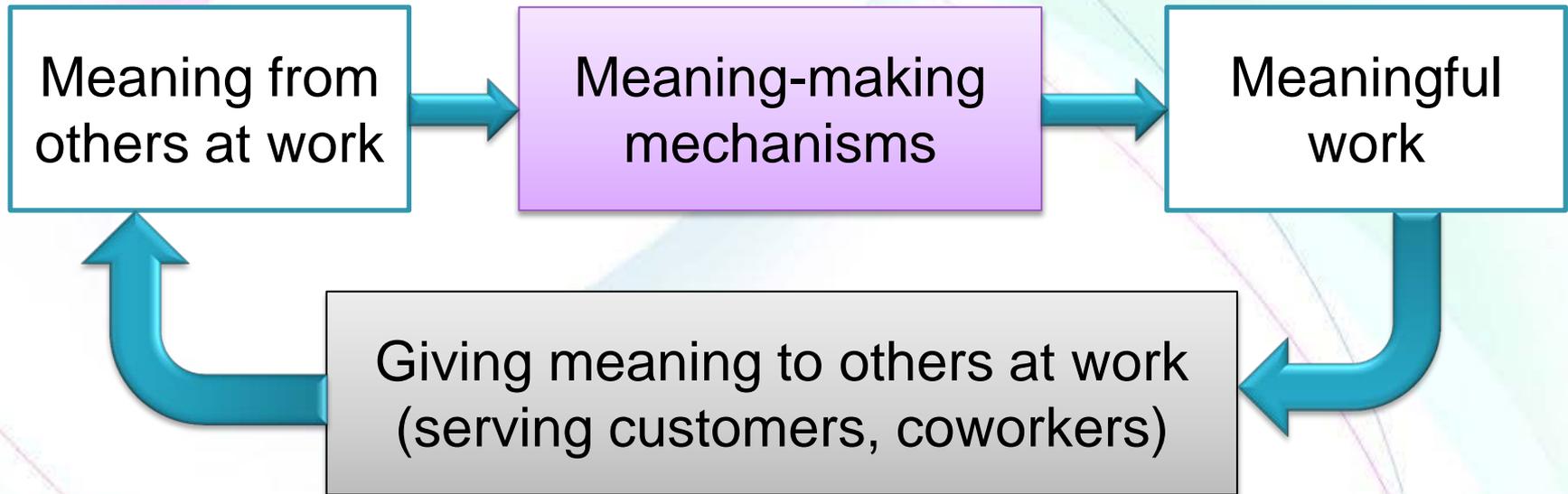
Results: Customers → MW

- **[customers & coworkers]** “A while ago a patient came in who was very skeptical about the care in Netherlands. ... Eventually this gentleman physically recovered and his attitude was more positive. This originated from us as a team. ... It is valuable to me because you see that you can help someone. Also, you get the compliments of the patient, and yes this also results in me feeling satisfied. And also for all my colleagues it leads to fulfillment. Our cooperation as a team and mutual appreciation is valuable to both me as well as my colleagues.” (nurse, medical rehabilitation center)
- **Meaning-making mechanism → [Receiving appreciation]**
- “It's just beautiful that ... you can see how happy customers are with the web shop and how satisfied they are with the service. ... This is also a form of appreciation that you feel and it makes me really proud about the work that I do. It is really something inspirational to do and to make people happy with our products. ... The appreciation I get from customers and that customers come back to you to buy something, you notice that you don't do your work without a purpose.” (e-commerce employee, web shop)

MW → Giving meaning for others

- "I really think if you go to work with a good feeling, and also knowing that you have great colleagues, you... even though it is work the same as at my previous XXX, and the XXX was exactly the same work, I experienced it cozier in my previous department, so I think I had the desire to make more effort for the department and the customers, then where I work now. Because I have it so less. I certainly think that if you experience fun at work, your work is more meaningful, simply because you are more involved." (Employee, supermarket)
- "Sometimes you take an extra task upon yourself, because you think someone else may benefit from that. ... But people acknowledge that and you build a bond of trust and relationship with them, which perhaps also goes beyond what it is expected of you. [...] You put the other people in the center of attention, you focus purely on their interests." (Rehabilitation nurse)

Giving meaning to others



- “If I solve a problem for customers and receive appreciation for that from clients and colleagues, I feel a lot better because of that. This is reflected in my behavior. It's a kind of vicious circle, in the sense that I get more pleasure from my work. I feel satisfied if I add value for other people but I must then also be aware of that.” (Risk assurance specialist)

Contributions

- This paper extends research on the important role of others at work in stimulating experiences of meaningful work (e.g., May et al., 2004; Grant, 2007), which is above and beyond the role of job characteristics. Introducing customers.
- Integrating various others at work in relation to one's MW, exploring relative influence of different organizational influences over MW ("respond to a call", Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009).
- We empirically explore the underlying mechanisms explaining how from cues that employees obtain from others at work they come to experience their work more meaningful (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003; "respond to a call", Colbert et al., 2016)
- We extend research on positive outcomes of MW, acknowledging that the meaning is not only made by an individual through cues obtained from others at work but also that this individual gives meaning to others (Grant, 2007; 2013).

Practical implications

- Organizations should create conditions that would develop or sustain positive meaningful relationships between coworkers and employees with customers. Especially in commercial settings.
- Focus on managerial practices that nurture good collegial climate (DNA) are needed (e.g., recruitment, selection, etc.)
- Relative importance of manager's influence on MW in different cultural contexts.

Thank you for your attention!

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