

# ***WHAT AM I WITHOUT MY WORK?*: EXPLORING MEANING MAKING AT WORK**

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What does 'work' mean?

- Lottery question studies
- Work Orientations
- MoW studies

Why/ When is work  
meaningful?

- Sources of Meaningfulness

How can we make it meaningful?

- Job Design Studies
- Job Crafting

How is meaning created?

- Sensemaking

# Studies in the Indian Context

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## Culture and Work

- ▶ Effect of work culture and organizational factors on work centrality. (*Sinha, 1990*)
- ▶ Work continued to be just a means of livelihood (*aajivika*)(*Sinha, 1990; Prakash 2011*)  
Changes in urban women (*Tripathi, 1990*).
- ▶ Technocrats in modern Indian industries also demonstrated more individualistic characteristics at work (*Gupta & Panda, 2003*)

## Work Values

- ▶ Work Values (*Singh, Bhandarker, Rai & Jain, 2011*)
- ▶ Karma Yoga (*Kejriwal & Krishnan, 2004; Narayanan & Krishnan, 2003; Mulla & Krishnan, 2006, 2008;2009;2011,2012*)



# Research Gaps

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- ▶ Multiplicity in Definitions
- ▶ Little is known about how judgments about meaning of work in everyday life are formed (*Wrzesniewski, Dutton & Debebe, 2003*).
- ▶ Empirical research on this topic has failed to keep up with these theoretical developments (*Park, 2010*).



# Definitions (Increases Construct Validity .Yin, 2003)

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**Meaning of work:** What is the function of work for people? / ‘Why do people work?’

**Meaning:** Presence of meaning (Meaningfulness) v/s Connotations  
(sensemaking function) (*Baumeister & Vohs, 2005*)

**Work:** Organizational Paid Employment

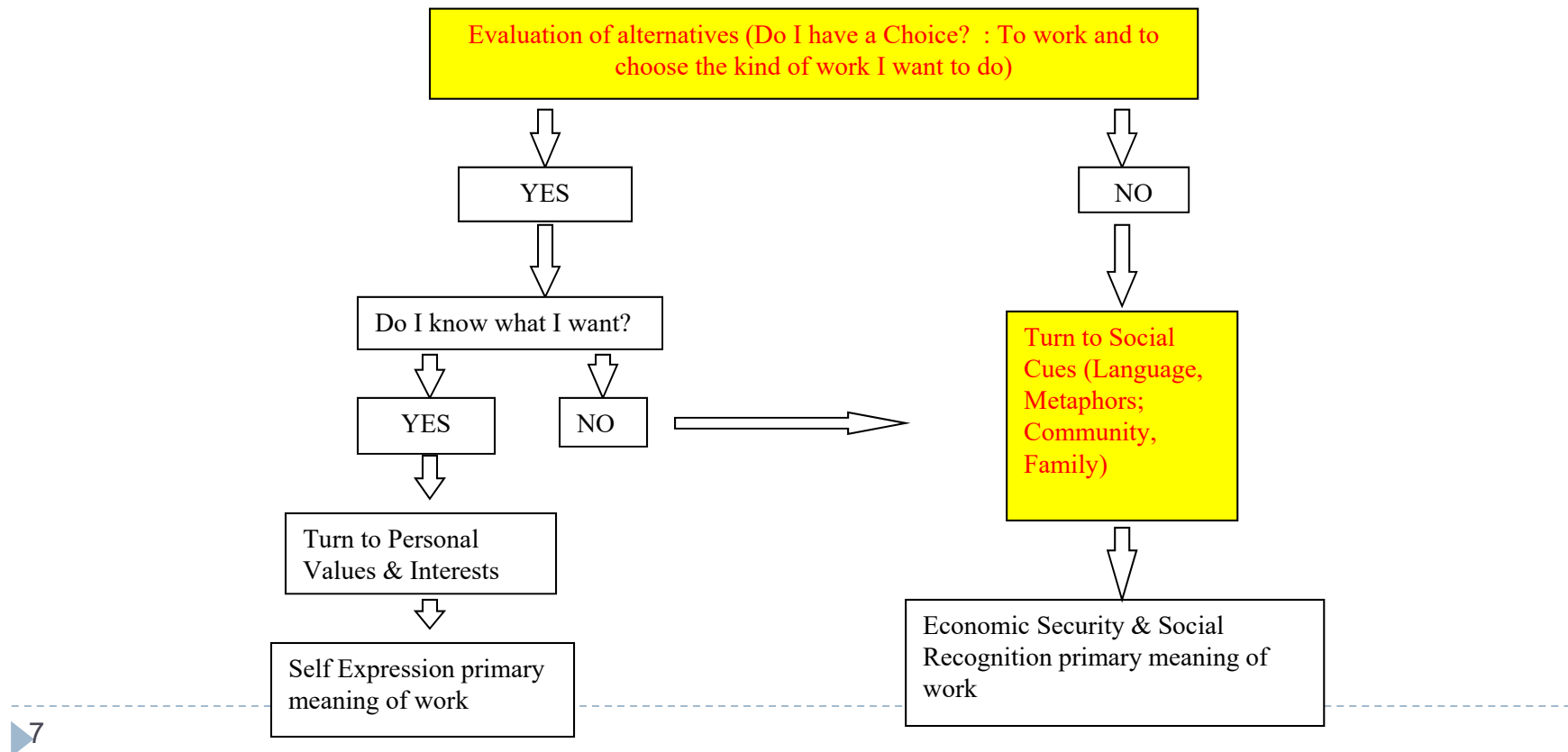
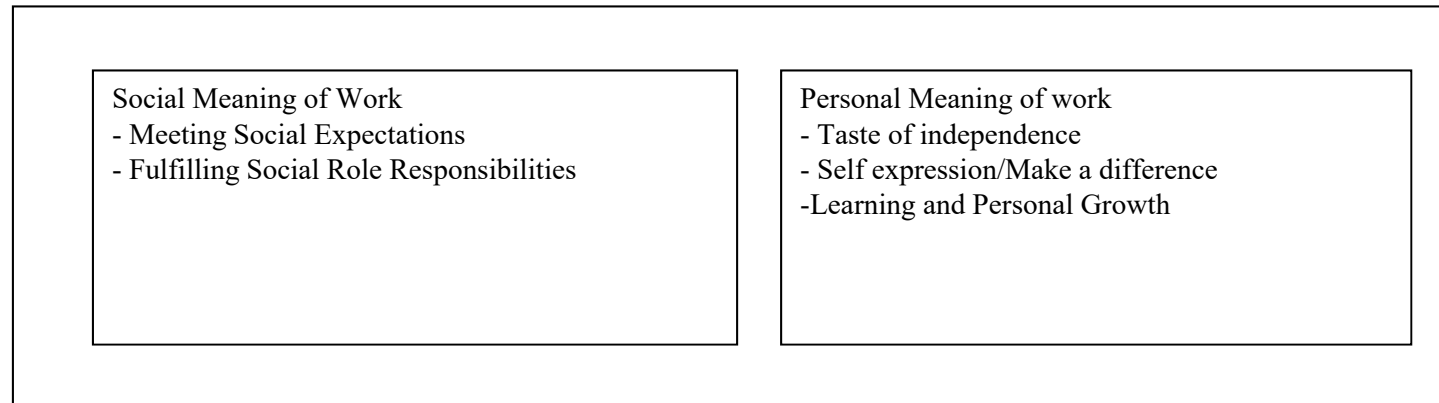


*To work or not to work: Construction of meaning of work and making work choices. Vikalpa, 39 (2): 7-19. 2014.*

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- How does meaning of work get constructed before people join work?
- How does meaning of work affect work choices?

**Diagram : Flow Chart Indicating the process of construction of meaning of work before joining work**



# Evidence of Social Influence on Meaning

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Views on Leisure versus Work

- ▶ Protestant Work Ethic
- ▶ Karma Yoga
- ▶ Cultural differences in response to lottery question





# Research Question

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Society's influence on the construction of meaning of work

- ▶ *How do societies/others shape the meaning an individual ascribes to work?*
  - Meaning Making through Interpersonal Interactions (*Wrzesniewski, Dutton & Debebe, 2003*)
    - Identity Work in Dirty Work (*Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999*)

Is social influence on meaning making limited to stigmatized professions only?



# Method

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- ▶ Qualitative Methodology
- ▶ Grounded Theory Approach
  
- ▶ Implicit Boundary Conditions (Constructivist GT Approach Suggested by Cathy Charmaz , 2006)
  - Meanings Constructed Dialectically
  - Researcher no Blank Slate
  
- ▶ Explicit Boundary Conditions
  - Definition
  - Sample



# Method

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## Semi Structured Interviews

### Interview protocol

- ▶ Reviewed by four experts and three laymen
- ▶ Warm up questions
- ▶ What work means to an individual (lottery question, work orientations)
- ▶ Narrate their 'work stories'- highs and lows

# Sample: Why Public Sector Employees?

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Awareness of meaning when there is a major shift in the social structure due to some significant event (*Maddi, 1967; Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005*)

- i. Wide range of work related experiences
- ii. Change in social perception of the Job



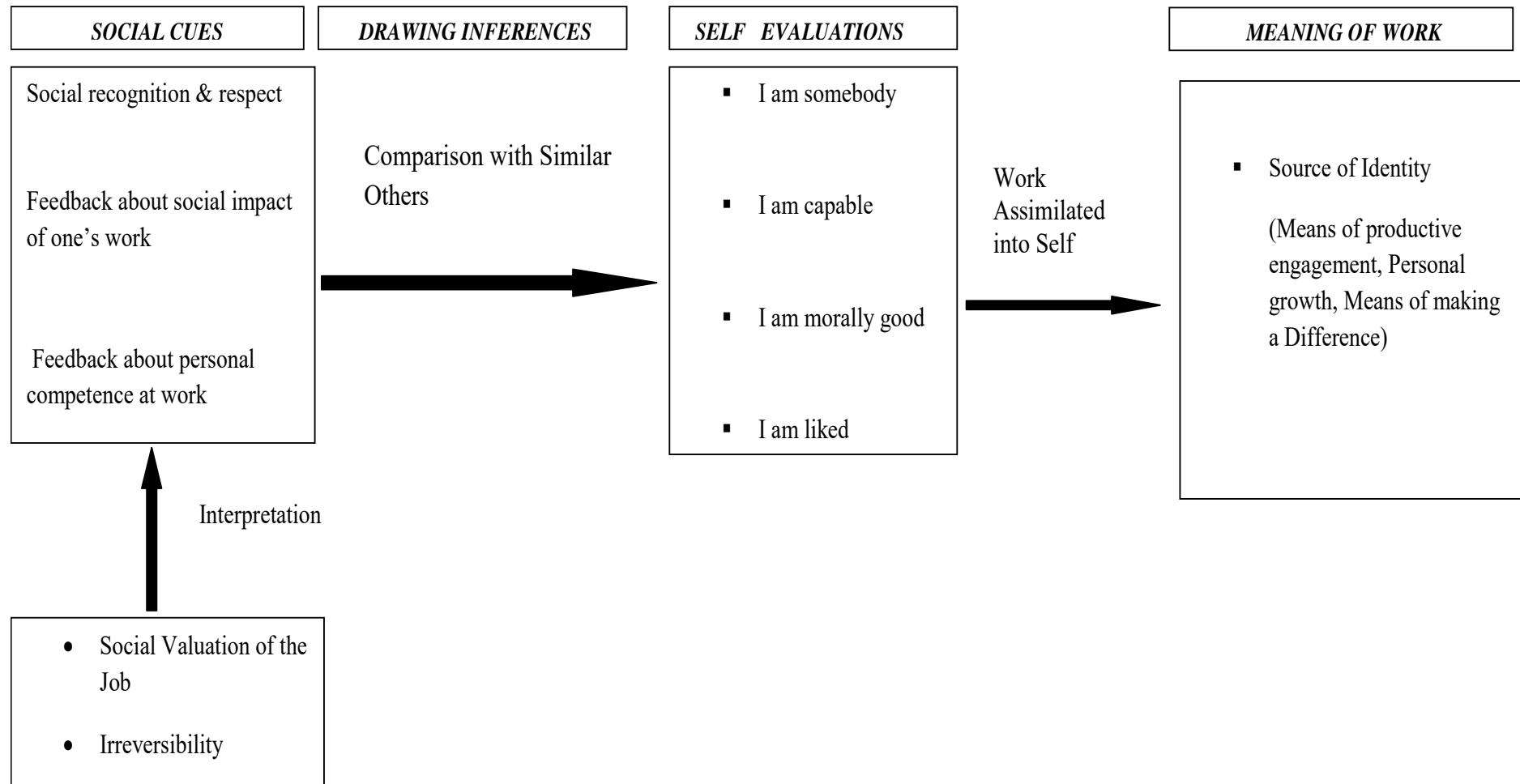
# Sampling

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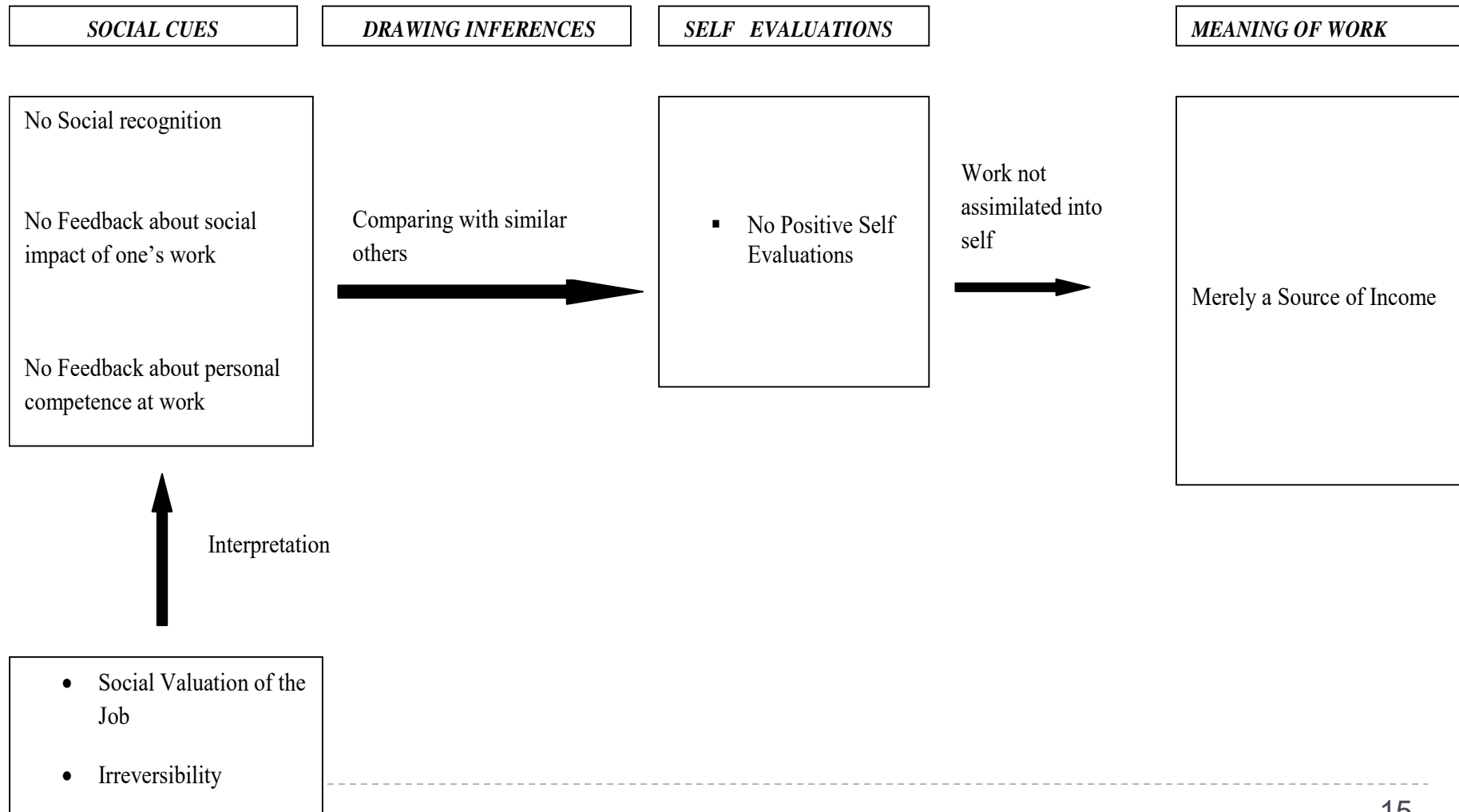
- ▶ Theoretical Sampling (*Eisenhardt, 1989; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Pokinghorne, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1998*).
- ▶ Constant Comparison Method (*Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Corbin & Strauss, 1990*)
- ▶ Theoretical Saturation: Total of 52 interviews
- ▶ 44 interviews were selected for final analysis.
  - 21 held managerial positions (more than 17 years of experience)
  - 6 were in the clerical cadre (more than 17 years of work experience)
  - 12 new entrants with work experience ranging from 1 year to 2 years
  - 5 older employees with about 5-10 years of work experience.



*Diagram 1: Indicating the process of meaning making through assimilation of work into self*



**Diagram 2: Indicating the process of meaning making through dissociation of work and self**



# Trigger Events

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## Social Recognition & Respect due to work

*There's a big amount of social recognition in my family my relatives.... and my father is very proud of me ...my brothers are very proud of me ...in the work place people respect me...when the customers come they may not realize that I am an assistant manager.....but people here they realize they talk to me in a very...you know the manner it changes ...this has never happened to me...I have got a huge amount of confidence....that was completely lacking.....*

## Feedback about the significance of one's work

*One of the meetings we had attended, a self help group whom we had financed, a group of 10 to 15 women and all that, they pursue different activities, so we are giving them based on their eligibilities sometimes 3 lacs, 4 lacs, 5 lacs also. 10 members or so are sharing and doing it. One of the ladies got up and said "sir, really this has helped us a lot Sir, I have utilized my amount to pay my daughter's educational fee. She brought her daughter also, she completed her B.Tech. and that girl gets an employment..... I said (to myself) that family is going to come up!*

## Feedback about personal competence at work

*I was put in a branch .....that was the only rural branch having credit portfolio of 40 crores. So they put me only because of the reason that because of this reason, your aptitude we want to put there.*





# Why use social cues?

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## *Information Processing Model of Job Attitudes (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978)*

- ▶ Jobs are multidimensional and complex
  - the individual might not be able to evaluate one self unless he/she gets information from outside.
  - provide others interpretations of events therefore act as guides

# Underlying Mechanisms: Drawing Inferences

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## Comparing with Similar Others

*Many of my friends did not get a job then, and I got it...so I felt that I have achieved something. I have just received general education; I haven't specialized in any field of study. So all the more I felt like I have been able to achieve something. I entered the bank through the competitive exam so I felt like I have achieved something and succeeded in the competitive exam.*

*I left the job I got after engineering, with an ambition that I will get a better job after MBA. That didn't happen, all my engineering friends they are only B.Tech., they are doing good jobs and they are with good brands. So that is a source of frustration and my MBA friends, not all of them, but very good numbers of them are working in good companies with a good salary. So that is also a source of frustration.*

Using cumulative past experiences to draw inferences (*Markus, 1977; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978*)



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- ▶ Pratt & Ashforth (2003) when in doubt, people use social comparison
  - ▶ Comparison provides credibility to the external feedback
  - ▶ Affects the self perception of an individual and one comes to a sense of self worth through it (*Fine, 1996*).

*[A] man's work is one of the things by which he is judged, and certainly one of the more significant things by which he judges himself. Many people in our society work in named occupations. The names are tags, a combination of price tag and calling card. One has only to hear casual conversation to sense how important these tags are (Hughes (1971) as cited in Fine, 1996).*

# Drawing Inferences about the Self

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- ▶ Cues (Wrzesniewski, Dutton & Debebe, 2003)-behavior demonstrated by others that carry information about how they view us.
- ▶ Lines of action (*Tice & Wallace, 2003*)
- ▶ Reflected appraisals (*Schwalbe, Gecas & Baxter, 1986; Tice & Wallace, 2003*)
- ▶ Looking glass self (*Goldstein & Cialdini, 2007*).
- ▶ Baumeister (1991) & Terkel (1972): Self & Work
- ▶ **Four Needs of Meaning** : Need for self worth, Need for self efficacy, Need for justification/Value , Need for Purpose



# *I am somebody !*

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*When you are the branch manager of an important branch you are a very well known figure in that area...people will know you...you get a lot of ....I mean.....respect and you get a.....and then while you are in small places the bank branch manager is almost equivalent to the district collector of that place.....so say if the Prime Minister is visiting that place .....he will be sitting in a conference where he will be sitting beside the DC and say the branch manager of the Bank.....so that recognition is there always ....its almost like ..you can say a very important and integral part of the society*

- ▶ Reiterates the sense of self worth (*Baumeister, 1991*)

# I am morally good

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- ▶ *At the end of the day I know that I have done something, for someone, in one way when you sanction a housing loan, you should see the satisfaction you get, when the customer is smiling and leaving. It's his dream house, you are giving him whatever he is eligible for, but the way he makes you feel at the end of day as if you have done a favor for him. It's not a favor, but the relief you see in their face, really is very satisfying*
- ▶ Need for justification (*Baumeister, 1991*)
- ▶ Greater sense of purpose (*Aronsson, Bejerot, & Harenstam, 1999; Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Grant, 2008*)
- ▶ Self efficacy (*Rosso, Dekas & Wrzesniewski, 2010*)

# *I am liked*

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*One day the elections were close and the local MLA, he turned up and he told me, he requested me to accompany him to few of the village areas which were in my service area with him for Election Campaign. So that is one thing that neither my conscience will allow me or nor my job will allow me. So I refused. But I was surprised why..... then I...I enquired about it. So the people from, I had around 14-15 villages under my service area. I..... normally, those days there was no Panchayat Election, so there was no Village Head as such, no Official Village Head, but every Village has a Head. ....So I went.....I used to participate in Village meetings. I...I participated in one of the Village Meetings, in one of the prominent Villages after that. ....Then I asked them, “Why do you think that he would request me to accompany”? .....“Sir, it was a simple thing. Aap manch pe khade ho ke ek baar bol dete ki inko vote do, to sab koi vote de deta. People like you so much”..... (Laughs)*

- ▶ Sociometer Hypothesis (Leary et al, 1998) – self esteem mirror of acceptance or rejection
- ▶ Self liking and self competence – two components of self esteem ( Tafari & Swann, 1995)

# *I am capable*

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*You have to build up the business, no parking of business from other branches. ....it was like setting up a new house, or planting a tree and see it growing. I remained in that branch for 2 years, stabilized it, and I feel happy when I go back to that branch if ever, people tell me, sir what ever system you have started then, that is what we are following today. And we are rated 'A' rated branch of the bank*

- ▶ Satisfaction of the Need for Self Efficacy & Self Worth (*Baumeister, 1991*)





# Attributions of Meaning to Work

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- ▶ Success on Job (Furukawa, 1972 as cited in Salancik & Pfeffer, 1977)
- ▶ Positive affect at work (King, Hicks, Krull & Del Gaiso, 2006) at work
- ▶ Lead to attribution of positive qualities to that job or work
- ▶ Experiences and evaluations are epigenetic i.e. one event influences a future event.

*I was compelled to get into a job .immediately after my graduation because my father had retired ...then I was the elder son of the family and because my younger brother was quite young ...so at that point of time I told you....I entered the bank just as an employment opportunity and a good employment opportunity*

*My Regional Manager along with me ..... he visited one of the private sector banks one day..... just to enquire about their business levels and just...just to have a feel of what they were doing and I was sitting outside. I didn't go along with him. ....He came back and told me the Branch Manager is curious with a certain Mr X (the participant's name) in our bank's personal banking branch. I said "why"? He said that you had forced him...this bank, to convert their intensions of doing retail business. ....Now they are doing only commercial business because none of it (retail business) is coming to them. Our bank is not known for this (retail banking) and at that point of time all big private sector banks, ultimately during my period, they stopped their operations in Ranchi, they just moved away because I... I remember one....one single day they had around 20-25 cars lined out for all the doctors of a certain hospital and they were all ready to take a... purchase a car from...I mean taking finance from one big private bank and....and all the 25 cars were ultimately financed by me on the same day...same day and they (the private bank) had to go back!*

*If I don't have anything to look forward to ...I will cease to exist...And self growth also (will not happen if he quits working)*



# What About Negative Social Cues?

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Reconstruction of negative experiences (Wethington, 2003)

Why did they feel the need to rationalize these negative experiences?

Comparing the two groups of people – the ones who encountered negative events and made negative evaluations of work and the ones who did not

I. Accumulated past self-evaluations (Markus, 1977 as cited in Krieshok, Black & McKay, 2009; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1977)

II. Social Valuation of the Job

III. Irreversibility



*When I joined an MBA institute, I thought I would be passing out with a hefty package and a good brand name. But unfortunately that didn't happen, because being the first batch we didn't get the scope of getting so many number of companies on the campus. So unfortunately I had to join the bank.*

*All my engineering friends they are only B.Tech., they are doing good jobs and they are with good brands. So that is a source of frustration and my MBA friends, not all of them, but very good numbers of them are working in a good company with a good salary. So that is also a source of frustration.*

*When I came to the Zonal office, after 3 or 4 months, the Zonal Manager changed. So when he came I made a proposal and accordingly I recommended that, but after three, four days the whole proposal remained the same, only the recommendation part, the wording was modified little bit, but my name was not there. In the recommendation that recommended by so and so, that part was not there, even though the whole proposal was made by me. I don't know why it was done, but I felt de-motivated after that because the whole proposal was made by me but nowhere my signature was there, it was not known to other people that I had made the proposal. So the motivation I got then is going down... You will get reprimand 10 times but you will get appreciation only once.*

*What I have learnt till date, I must have some scope and opportunity to apply it. The scope and opportunity is here in the bank, but I am not getting the opportunity because of adamant attitude of our higher authorities ...Now I am not so enthusiastic to continue in this organization.....I don't feel motivated or encouraged. I just want to do what is the basic requirement of the bank, that's what I am doing. I am not utilizing my mind, I am just utilizing what is there on the paper and trying to fill up the blanks.*

# Social Valuation: Influence of Dominant Metaphors

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- ▶ Influence of dominant metaphors and similar others (Schwalbe, Gecas & Baxter, 1986; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003).
- ▶ Dominant metaphor of “*being an MBA*”.
- ▶ Perception of Public sector employment no more ‘respectable’ (Chakrabarti, 2010).

# Irreversibility

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- ▶ Develop Justifications for actions that cannot be undone (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1977; Weick, 2001; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2003)
- ▶ Further exploration of this aspect is required.

# Influence of negative feedback on Self Evaluations

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- ▶ No Negative Self Evaluation
- ▶ Expressed “feeling frustrated” with work
- ▶ ‘Need for positive self- worth’ (Baumeister, 1991; Baumeister & Vohs, 2002; Salancik & Pfeffer 1978)

# Theoretical Implications

## Epistemological Implications

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- ▶ Questions the assumptions of static work theories
- ▶ Positive attributions to work despite frustrations

## Conceptual Implications

- ▶ Identity Work
- ▶ Use of metaphors (multiple metaphors, what factors influence the creation and salience)
- ▶ Role of Society/Social Expectations in construction of meaning of work
- ▶ Improvising the job characteristics model (*Hackman & Oldham, 1975; 1976*)
  - Feedback (Can use Customer satisfaction rating)
  - Moral correctness is another dimension that is fairly rare in job design models (*Morin, 2008*)

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- ▶ Career adaptability, Vocational Self Concept, Career Exploration



# Limitations

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- ▶ Use of a single data source- reconstruction of actual events
- ▶ Did not look at how meaning of work would influence various on job performance criteria.
- ▶ Generalizability of the findings
- ▶ Confounding through personal life changes , career changes
  - Do people change automatically with age or do these changes come about through life experiences?'
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  - Instead of Controlling made comparisons between employees of different ages and in different life stages.



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Questions/Suggestions for Improvement?

