

“We’re not scum, we’re human”:  
recognition, inter-subjectivity  
and the role of the ‘other’ in  
meaningful work

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# How does meaningfulness arise?

- Most research has taken place within the psychology field (Bailey et al., 2016)
- Positive psychological state arising eg from job design or from role identity
- Situated within theories of motivation
- Meaningfulness arises through processes such as self-concordance, self-actualisation
- The wider spirituality or humanities framework is more promising as it provides a more encompassing perspective on meaningfulness

# The role of the 'other' in meaningful work

- Most empirical research is focused on the 'self'
- Yet meaningfulness is linked with self-transcendence, belonging and contribution
- Lips-Wiersma and Morris (2009) define MW as comprising unity, service, self-expression and developing the self
- 'The role of the 'other' in the construction of the meaning of work is an important one' (Wrzesniewski, 2003: 95)
- Yet our understanding of how this role plays out is shallow and under-developed

# Recognition and meaningful work

- The self co-constituted in interaction with others
- What role can recognition play?
- Honneth (1997: 29) 'human subjects can develop an intact self-relation only by virtue of the fact that they see themselves affirmed or recognized according to the value of certain capabilities and rights'.
- Social acceptance and affirmation from others is the cornerstone of self-realization and self-identity
- Three features:
  - Self-confidence/concern
  - Self-respect/moral respect
  - Self-esteem/solidarity
- The struggle for recognition and the risk of moral injury - meaninglessness

# Methods

- 66 interviews
- Refuse collectors, solicitors, creative artists, entrepreneurs, clergy
- Located in south-east England
- Semi-structured interviews
- Background; attitudes towards work; critical incidents or stories
- Iterative approach to analysing the data



# Concern

- Feelings of belonging, attachment and acceptance with valued individuals, groups and communities
- Creative artists:
  - A shared communicative experience 'it's a connection of feeling alive'
  - Building communities and creative spaces
- Clergy:
  - Enabling the creation of caring communities, 'we had a packed congregation and I felt the sense of a town, a community, coming together'
  - Spatial element of the role of church buildings
  - The sense of having 'connected well' with someone

# Concern

- Refuse collectors:
  - Connection with the wider community even through unpleasant conditions
  - Intersubjective connection, 'the banter' as a shared dialogic arena
- Entrepreneurs:
  - Creating a space for employees to enjoy a shared purpose
  - Being part of a community of practice
- Solicitors:
  - Connection with clients, alleviation of suffering

# Moral respect

- Artists:
  - Public accolades, reaching out to an audience, 'that's 80,000 people who are listening to my stuff ... and it was all my creation'
  - Interpersonal acknowledgement from fellow artists, family, strangers
- Refuse collectors:
  - Kindness of strangers, someone coming up and giving him 'a big cuddle', being thanked and appreciated
- Clergy:
  - Acceptance and appreciation from families
- Solicitors:
  - Recognition of professionalism and expertise by clients and family
- Entrepreneurs:
  - Customer belief in their products or services

# Solidarity

- Artists:
  - Emotional enrichment of audiences, 'opening people's horizons'
  - Societal and cultural enrichment
- Clergy:
  - Contributing communitarian/societal values
  - Helping individuals in distress, 'holding and restoring, reconciling', or to achieve their potential
- Solicitors:
  - Winning cases and helping clients
- Entrepreneurs:
  - Providing employment and careers, providing products and services
- Refuse Collectors:
  - Providing a clean and safe environment short and long-term
  - Interpersonal helping

# Meaninglessness and the struggle for recognition

- Creative Artists:
  - Lack of appreciation of them and their art, isolation
  - Being taken advantage of by directors and others
- Clergy:
  - Focus of church elders on 'statistical or physical outcomes' at the expense of caring and community, disregard of different forms of ministry
  - Bureaucracy and meetings; time-wasting; lack of shared values
- Refuse Collectors:
  - Invisibility, lack of acknowledgement
  - Wasting time cleaning streets where people don't care
- Entrepreneurs:
  - Inauthentic connection, isolation, failure
- Solicitors:
  - Lack of human connection, focus on profits or bureaucracy, sense of not having contributed

# Conclusions

- Recognition emerged as foundational to experiences of meaningfulness
- Lack of recognition, or mis-recognition emerged as core to experiences of meaninglessness
- The significance of the various forms of recognition varied between occupational groups
- Meaningfulness was episodic and reflective not pervasive; it was not purely positive
- Study raised questions about the nature of the 'other' who confers recognition and the inter-subjective processes involved
- Vulnerability of individuals in all occupations to sense of meaninglessness arising through mis-recognition
- Protective actions or re-framing to avoid mis-recognition arising

# Thank you for listening

## **Please ask any questions!**

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