

Scoping out the Common-Sense Perspective on Meaningful Work: Theory, Data and Implications for Human Resource Management and Development

Francesco TOMMASI*, Riccardo SARTORI, Andrea CESCHI

Department of Human Sciences, University of Verona, Italy, francesco.tommasi@univr.it (*corresponding author), riccardo.sartori@univr.it, andrea.ceschi@univr.it

Background/Purpose: Meaningful work is a topic of relevant interest to management and organizational scholars. The study of meaningful work has been heavily characterized by theories from different disciplines, yet the common-sense perspective is often overlooked, i.e., a non-academic perspective of meaningful work. The paper presents a qualitative study on how non-academics define meaningful work.

Methods: Adopting the lens of Aristotelian logic, the paper presents a methodological-theoretical approach to explore how non-academics define human resource management concepts. We asked 194 workers to propose ultimate definitions of the concept of meaningful work. The questions were submitted via a short survey collecting demographics.

Results: The analysis of the collected definitions led to the proposition of an intensive definition of meaningful work according to which meaningful work is a positive experience associated with a sense of competence, the presence of positive relation with others, significance and purpose of work. Yet, there must be good reasons to experience work as meaningful as the environment may contain barriers to the presence of meaningfulness.

Conclusion: Methodologically, the paper advances a novel approach to the study of human resource management and development concepts. Theoretically, the study proposes a novel perspective of meaningful work prioritizing concerns on the common-sense.

Keywords: *Meaningful work, Common-sense, Employee wellbeing, Human resource management and development*

1 Introduction

The phenomenon of meaningful work, the experience and perception of work as holding significance, is a topic of importance at present for the human resource management field and in a variety of domains of research (e.g., employee's wellbeing, job design and corporate social responsibility). To date, scholars have been witnessing

heightened attention on this topic with a burgeoning interest in understanding the contextual factors, relational dynamics, and individual processes fostering meaningful work (Yeoman et al. 2019). Unsurprisingly, there are as many definitions and theories of meaningful work as scholars have studied it: thus, the only thing about which authors can agree on meaningful work is that no one can agree on what meaningful work really is (Bailey & Madden, 2020; Martikainen et al. 2021).

In human resource management, organization studies, and particularly traditional organizational psychology, there are many definitions and a lack of clarity about what is related to them (Martikainen et al. 2021). Recent reviews of the literature (Bailey et al., 2018) have grouped the existing definitions into five main categories of studies, namely:

(a) those that draw on the Job Characteristics Model with meaningful work defined as a positive psychological state part of one's job (Hackman & Oldham, 1975);

(b) those within the work spirituality approach with meaningful work interpreted as resulting from the balance between inner life and occupation (Milliman et al., 2017);

(c) those within the humanistic tradition who view meaningful work as related to the meaning of life (Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012);

(d) those who conceptualize meaningful work as a multifaceted eudemonic psychological state (Ryff, 2018);

(e) those who define meaningful work as a specific state of occupation according to (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009).

In turn, authors interested in approaching meaningful work tend to view different and separate categories of meaning of meaningful work as non-exclusive. Such a condition makes it difficult to approach meaningful work in the organizational context (Michaelson et al., 2014). The challenges around meaningful work remain questioning if meaningful work represents a greedy ideal that sets up to fail, or if individuals really experience and perceive such a phenomenon of meaningfulness in contemporary society (Carton 2018; Martikainen et al. 2021; Muirhead, 2004).

This is to say that current academic debates embracing the definition of meaningful work have never benefited from the way non-academic individuals define it. Constellations around the meaning of meaningful work have been heavily influenced by perspectives belonging to empirical and factual studies. These rely on multiple theories and tend to infer the presence of meaningful work through either deductive or inductive methods. Quantitative investigations assess the presence of meaningful work (Bailey et al., 2018; Bailey & Madden 2017; Martikainen et al., 2021), while qualitative inquiries are usually limited to descriptions of specific experiences and shared affective states (Carton 2018). As recently stated by Lips-Wiersma and her colleagues (2022), it is difficult for people to talk about meaningful work and to explain what meaningful work means to them. In turn, the examination of the characteristics and discourses of meaningful work from a common-sense perspective has never been present in the literature. Studying how individuals are capable to define – or articulate definitions of – meaningful work can be particularly relevant for scholars striving to find concrete definitions of such an abstract concept. Perhaps, conceptual ambiguity around the notion of meaningful work due to the lack of agreement among academic authors may

also suggest conceptual ambiguity among (working) individuals. Considering the common-sense perspectives as a source of unique and concrete knowledge, speculation about the meaning of meaningful work may not meet the subjective instances.

In this paper, we report our attempt to address this gap by reaching a definition of the phenomenon of meaningful work via a common-sense perspective. Notably, the overarching aim of this study is to address the question, “What is the perspective on meaningful work based on a common-sense definition, and how can this perspective inform theory and practice in human resource management and development?”. Studying common-sense perspective allows us to examine how non-academics define meaningfulness when related to work, while simultaneously presenting the elements which foster meaningful work. Based on the Aristotelian logic of definition, we conducted a qualitative study to explore the common-sense perspective of meaningful work. This can contribute to scientific knowledge by envisioning guidance on the subjective, social, and institutional elements associated with defining, providing, and protecting meaningful work. Although common-sense perspective is not historically present in the literature, examining how individuals propose shared definitions of such a phenomenon can reveal insights for contemporary discourse and practice on meaningful work.

We proceed as follows. First, we briefly discuss the use of common-sense perspective to explore notions and concepts of human resource management and development literature, e.g., meaningful work. We propose the radical revocation of the subject of work using common-sense perspective by referring to the Aristotelian logic of definition. Second, we present the methodology used to collect definitions of meaningful work from non-academics to reconstruct the meaning of meaningful work. Lastly, we discuss our findings by exchanging current definitions of meaningful work with interdisciplinary references to literature in management, human resource development and organizational psychology in order to complement and expand the perspective on meaningful work. Our discussion serves to offer resources for understanding, evaluating, and fostering meaningful work within the context of human resource management.

2 Common-sense perspective and management studies

Revoking the primacy of the subject on defining their experience is historically not a new way of doing research in the field of human resource management and development. Indeed, it would be a mistake to take the idea of common-sense perspective as being opposed to factual, intellectual, or theoretical knowledge. Central argument on the continuity is that non-academics have always

questioned and proposed their definition of phenomena beyond narrow and strict epistemological and methodological reasoning. According to Heider's (1958) definition of common-sense perspective "[it] has a great and deep understanding of himself [sic] and other people which [is] unformulated or only vaguely conceived" (p. 2). Common-sense perspective includes ordinary people's ideas about their behavior and the behavior of others and the backgrounds and effects of that behavior. This common-sense is expressed in language that we, as ordinary people, use to refer to people and stories we tell each other about one person, people, and types of people (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1992; Smedslund, 2013).

Common-sense and studies in human resource management and development are not separate. Conversely, there is a close relationship between academic knowledge and common-sense. First, studies within and human resource management and development necessarily stems from common-sense questions (Sartori et al., 2022). It is therefore erroneous to assume that such studies should not question how common-sense answers are similar to research questions. In this sense, common-sense can contribute to the cognitive development of organizational phenomena. Simultaneously, organizational studies influence common-sense by suggesting abstract ideas and perspectives (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1992). Hence, there are many reasons to think of continuity between academic studies and common-sense perspectives, although few studies have questioned how common-sense can define concepts and theories specific to the field (Smedslund, 2013).

In the study of meaningful work, useful and interesting data and perspectives emerge from the different definitions proposed and the various theories referred to. However, these data and perspectives are unable to directly answer the question of whether ordinary people can define the concept of meaningful work. This is because present studies within the literature indirectly analyses such an individual ability of proposing definitions on meaningful work. Most of the theories around meaningful work in human resource management are generally deduced without reference to common-sense. For example, qualitative studies about meaningful work generally consist of collecting and analysing accounts of meaningful experiences. Others, however, tend to look at examples of meaningful experiences at work. Consequently, naive definitions, i.e., common-sense, are deduced as a posteriori.

From an epistemological point of view, such propositions and data on the topic of meaningful work thus tend to provide definitions based on the way knowledge is represented by non-academic subjects. However, the knowledge representation of a concept, e.g., meaningful work, is not the definition of the concept itself. First, the knowledge representation of a concept concerns the body of knowledge related to that concept derived from experience and learning. Second, concept definition itself concerns the

precise act of verbalizing the salient features of a given concept. Following classical Aristotelian logic, the purpose of the process of definition is to reduce uncertainty around a term of discourse (B, *definiendum*) by resolving its meaning into that of other terms (A, *definiens*) whose intelligibility has already been given. According to this assumption, two types of definitions can be proposed: classical definitions and intensive or attribute definitions. In the first case, these are definitions in which the attributes are clear (*definiens*) and sufficiently explanatory. However, such definitions are rather rare to obtain and mainly concern the second case, i.e., intensive definitions. These are based on the absence of sufficiently explanatory attributes and mainly reflect what constitutes the concept beyond its representativeness. Ultimately, the definitions of a concept may be for specific extensible attributes (classical definitions), which can however be enriched and clarified by examples (intensive definitions) (Agassi & Wettersten, 1987; Parry & Hacker, 1991).

From a pragmatic point of view, studying the common-sense perspective requires a formal research approach aimed at collecting classical and per-attribute definitions of a given concept. Non-academics are generally not inclined to formulate definitions concerning academic phenomena and therefore these must be questioned and solicited explicitly. This implies that there are different types of questions that can be asked characterized by varying degrees of precision, structuring and abstraction. Again, there may be different degrees of knowledge on the part of the participants. For this reason, the questions must be structured according to three levels of formalization of the definition, namely 1) analogy, 2) generalization, and 3) explanation. Following classical logic, we first have formulation by analogy, asking questions that prompt participants to indicate whether A (*definiens*) resembles B (*definiendum*) through associations of ideas. Second, formulation by generalizations whereby the question prompts participants to indicate the set of attributes that make A similar to B. Lastly, the question by explanation asks to indicate the set of attributes of A that are necessary and sufficient to identify B through causal explanatory reasoning. In the case of the study of the concept of meaningful work, the question for analogy can be rendered in a request such as "Can you define the concept of meaningful work for me through some examples?". In the second case, the question is asked "Can you define the concept of meaningful work for me by thinking about its characteristics?". In the third case, the question is asked by considering several aspects at the same time: "Can you define the concept of meaningful work for me by indicating what considerations are necessary and essential for having this experience?".

3 Methods

3.1 Procedure and Participants

Considering the assumptions of the classic logic for collecting the common-sense perspective, we encouraged individuals through explicit requests to revoke their subjective perspectives on the meaning of meaningful work. The requests referred to one out of the three open questions previously described, i.e., definition based on 1) analogy, 2) generalization or 3) explanation. That is, one group of respondents had to respond to an open question about proposing a definition of meaningful work based via analogy (i.e., Could you define the concept of meaningful work through some examples? Group 1). The second group had to respond to the open question for a general definition (Could you define the concept of meaningful work by thinking about its characteristics? Group 2), while the third group had a question asking for an explanation (Could you define the concept of meaningful work by indicating what considerations are necessary and essential for having this experience? Group 3).

Participants were invited via emails to voluntarily fill in the online questionnaire. In the email text, we informed the participants about the study and asked them to contribute. A link to access the online survey was reported allowing participation at a time convenient to them. After reading the description of the study, and privacy rules, they were asked to sign the informed consent in order to use the data for the purpose of the study. Completion of the questionnaire took about five minutes. We sent the questionnaire to $N = 197$ Italian employees among which only $n = 194$ participants (56.1%, $N = 109$ females, average age 41 years, $SD = 14$) voluntarily completed the questionnaire. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the three research groups mentioned above (i.e., 40.7%, $N = 79$, Group 1, 17.5%, $N = 34$, Group 2, and 41.8%, $N = 81$, Group 3). All data were anonymized right after collection and a unique numerical ID was assigned to each completed questionnaire.

The study has been approved by the ethical committee of the University of the first Author, according to the declaration of Helsinki.

3.2 Analytical Strategy

The analytic strategy of the definitions collected consisted into three main phases using the content analysis approach. These were conducted by Author 1 and Author 2 who developed the study in collaboration with Author 3 who was not aware about the aim of the study. During phase 1, the three researchers worked individually and identified the sub-categories of meaning within all the

definitions collected. Then, the three researchers compared their analysis and agreed about the ultimate sub-categories. Simultaneously, descriptive statistics with frequencies tables indicated whether certain sub-categories of meaningful work were prevalent and/or specific for each group. Second, the three researchers worked together to identify the specific meso-categories covering the different units identified. Then, they identified the salient themes, namely the macro-categories grouping all the meso-categories of meaning. This coding phase involved a more abstract analysis of the data through macro categories that could lead to definitions of meaningful work phenomenon through the participants' perspectives. In the last phase, each of the researchers derived a definition of meaningful work in addition to the identification of the factors underpinning the phenomenon.

4 Results

Results cover definitions of meaningful, the descriptions of work and the diverse reflexive or critical standpoints leading to the experience and perception of meaningful work. In particular, the resulting analysis led to one broad definition of meaningful work and two framings of the factors related to meaningful work.

First, following the data analytic strategy, the initial step of Phase 1 led to the identification of sub-categories of meaning covering aspects related to meaningful work. By comparing our individual results, we agreed on the final set of $N = 29$ sub-categories. These covered both aspects related to the meaning of meaningful work itself and the conditions under which work is experienced and perceived as meaningful. Of the 29 categories, one category called "Problem with questions" was used to categorize all those answers where the participants reported that they were not able to understand the question about meaningful work (11.9%, $n = 23$). Another category, referred to those who reported that meaningful work does not exist arguing that work cannot be experienced as something meaningful due to specific job conditions (e.g., exploitation) and/or societal problems (7.3%, $n = 14$). The rest of the categories spanned from 1) intra/inter-individual dimensions such as calling, work passion, and sense of competence, 2) relational aspects as the connection between others and sense of contribution, and 3) societal-organizational aspects such as organizational conditions, and participation in business and society.

Second, during phase 2, we proceeded with the identification of meso-categories by analysing the sub-categories. After that, we identified meso-categories grouping the sub-categories into the following 9 meso-categories: 1) sense of competence, 2) calling, 3) purposeful task, 4) sense of relatedness, 5-6) salary & career barriers, 7) organizational policies, 8) organizational conditions partici-

pation in society, and 9) work as not-a-source of meaning.

Lastly, during phase 3, we grouped these 9 meso-categories into macro-categories relating to meaningful work. Accordingly, we identified the following four macro-categories: 1) meaningful work as an individual-based phenomenon, 2) meaningful work as work-based phenomenon, 3) meaningful work as an environmental-dependent phenomenon and 4) meaningful work compromised by impeding conditions of the workplace.

4.1 Common-sense & meaningful work

Following the analysis of the identified macro-categories, we advanced a definition of meaningful work and its conditions. According to the common-sense perspective, we define the concept of meaningful work as the experience and perception of meaning in work which is closely related to the task performed (Allan et al., 2017) and mastering skills at work (Martela & Reikki, 2018), but it is also dependent on the presence of positive conditions at the organizational and societal levels (Lysova et al., 2019; Tommasi et al., 2020) which may decrease the meaning-making of individuals.

Firstly, independently of the type of question, participants reported that tasks at work play a crucial role for them to experience and perceive their work as meaningful. Work is not meaningful per se and there are no occupation-based differences. Conversely, the meaning attributed by individuals depends on the possibility to express the individuals' know-how via significant and purposeful tasks allowing for self-actualization and self-expression. Moreover, participants discussed meaningful work to be both a permanent mindset and an episodic experience which appear on the continuum temporal axis of working experience and are strongly determined by intraindividual, relational, organizational, and institutional conditions (Tommasi et al., 2020).

Secondly, most of the responses of the participants contained a marked reference to the self and factors inextricably linked to personal characteristics. Specifically, participants used concepts such as pride, sense of importance in fulfilling their role, passion, commitment, and serenity derived from work, to explain the role of work in giving meaning and completeness to daily life. Most of the participants identified the sense of importance derived from work as the most relevant personal characteristic in defining this experience. However, above all the categories used, at the individual level, participants reported definitions of meaningful work by referring to their know-how (i.e., sense of competence) while echoing the crucial role of significance of the task. Lastly, participation in organizational life and society was reported as one of the sources of meaningfulness suggesting the relational and environmental dependence of such a phenomenon.

Lastly, participants argued about the absence of meaning when these aspects were decreased by the presence of certain work-barriers, societal and labour market conditions. Factors such as company policies, organizational change and training, the match between fatigue and work, work tasks as a tool for achieving a goal, work tasks performed for others, and serenity resulting from work were reported to be as the main sources of both meaningful work and the absence of meaning.

5 Discussion

Meaningful work is at the core of the most relevant domains of research in human resource management and development (Lips-Wiersma et al., 2018). Moreover, meaningfulness represents a moral and pragmatic concern for workers, organizations, and systems (Yeoman et al., 2019) beyond the multiple positive outcomes at the individual and organizational levels (Allan et al., 2019). Given such endeavours in human resource management and development studies and the relevance of such a phenomenon, there is an imperative for conducting investigations on meaningful work. Particularly, investigations on the meaning and the conditions of meaningful work are welcomed. In the present article, we aimed to contribute to such reflections by revoking the primacy of the subject in defining their experience. Using Aristotelian logic, the purpose of this study was to understand whether non-academics are able to define, and how they define meaningful work. Results of our qualitative study based on open questions on how to define meaningful work led to initial pieces of knowledge. These results can be taken into account against evidence and critical reflections on meaningful work present in contemporary literature. Ultimately, our results can serve to propose indications for future research and practice.

First, echoing the recent work by Bailey and colleagues (2022), we found that people have limited words to talk about meaningful work and that they may have difficulties in finding answers to the question "what is meaningful work"? We noted this by reading answers such as "I don't understand the question" and "I don't know what meaningful work is or should be" but also in the words used to present the linguistic meaning of meaningful work as well as for the examples of what meaningful work is. Nevertheless, the analysis of the participants' answers to the three types of questions showed that subjects have the capacity to provide meaningful definitions containing elements that are known, understandable, and common to the three required definitions. As mentioned, most of the answers were focused on intra/inter-individual aspects related to 1) personal characteristics and 2) aspects of the job. Another substantial portion of the answers focused on the environmental aspects related to 3) working and organizational conditions, and 4) socio-political context.

This resonates with the methodological framework of the present paper: namely, even non-academic individuals are able to provide intensive definitions of work and organizational phenomena. Although the degrees of complexity of the responses differ among the three types of responses, individuals responded to the explicit request to define the concept of meaningful work by producing answers (i.e., definitions) according to denotative aspects. That is, independently of the way a quest for definition is presented (i.e., classical or intensive), individuals propose a verbal description characterized by a diachronic and explanatory structure rather than a prototypical type. This is in contrast with what happens in the world of academic definitions where proposals for definitions tend to be structured via a prototypical type. In contrast, common-sense definitions are more dynamic and structural with the aim of proposing generic definitions which capture personal experiences of meaningful work. Moreover, these results inform also how ordinary, non-academic people are somewhat interested in providing explanations and definitions of their life and work experiences. Even more, non-academics appear to be interested in formulating tentative theories about the causes and consequences of certain experiences. The resulting common-sense formulations tended to explain the phenomenon of meaningful work on the basis of different and separate factors. Notably, non-academics formulate theories and reasoning that invoke various perspectives and studies of meaningful work in the areas of management, human resource development and organizational psychology.

Second, an interesting (common-sense) perspective emerged by considering the findings as opposed to what exists in the literature. This also can help to find an initial definition of meaningful work. First, such a perspective resonates with the definitions which are used in the literature according to which meaningful work represents a positive experience at work (Lysova et al., 2019; Rosso et al., 2010; Tommasi et al., 2020) given by the possibility of self-actualization and self-development via work (Yeoman et al., 2020). In this regard, central aspects for the discovery, experience and perception of meaningfulness in work are the presence of purpose (Martela & Pessi, 2018), the relationship with others (Martela & Reikki, 2018), the presence of significant tasks (Allan, 2017) and a sense of competence (Lips-Wierisma & Morris, 2009). According to the common-sense perspective, meaningful work would be determined by organizational dimensions such as a sense of belonging (Schnell et al., 2013; Schnell & Hoffmann, 2020; Tommasi et al., 2021; Tommasi et al., 2022). Indeed, such a definition covers aspects of meaningful work as an environmental dependent phenomenon. The environment presents conditions such as the possibilities for development and growth which have been described by the participants as possible impediments to meaningful work if they are lacking at an organizational

level. Further impediments are given at the socio-political level. Recalling various perspectives from the literature, the dimension of meaningful work is strongly linked to institutions (Lysova, et al., 2019; Michaelson, 2021) and to the socio-political context (Tommasi et al., 2020). Our participants indicated that changes in the world of work, the lack of job protection and the frequency of the risk of labour exploitation represent impediments to the discovery of meaningful work. In this spirit, the results of the present study echo scholars who have recently highlighted the possibility that work can be meaningful only if there are good reasons for experiencing it as such (Tysedal, 2022). The perspective of our participants suggests that the dimension of meaningful work should be understood on a subjective level in contrast to an ideal of meaningful work as imbued by contemporary society. The phenomenon of meaningful work, therefore, seems to have a character of subjective uniqueness. However, this uniqueness must be sought in the whole of the different and separate elements that compose meaningful work itself.

Besides theoretical implications, to our knowledge this is the primary direct investigation on the common-sense perspective of academic concepts in the area of human resource management and development. Moreover, this is a primary direct investigation on how non-academic are able to define meaningful work. As such, this study offers a number of methodological and research implications for future directions in the study of meaningful work. Methodologically, our approach based on the Aristotelian logic of definition can be used for additional investigations on constructs and concepts in the area of human resource management, organization studies and organizational psychology. It is interesting to note the presence or absence of associations, as well as different perspectives between academic and non-academic. Considering individual, relational and organizational dimensions and how these are treated in organizational settings, revoking the subject perspective can help to ensure that both academic knowledge and practices reflect the individual experience. Moreover, it is also interesting to note that our pieces of empirical knowledge suggest that non-academics have the capacity to advance intensive definitions as well as unique perspectives. This result strengthens the potential of our approach of revoking the subject into academic perspectives.

With respect to the study of meaningful work, our results point to consider the possibility that participants of empirical studies might not understand or reflect questions and items used to investigate meaningful work. For further studies, it would be interesting to replicate the study by including measures of meaningful work to see how qualitative definitions reflect quantitative results and vice versa. In addition, further studies might replicate this study by taking into account a larger sample of participants including different cultural aspects as well as various occupations. As a preliminary investigation, the collected sample

did not include such differences. However, cultural differences might reflect specific aspects of meaningful work. Likewise, different dimensions of meaningful work might have a relevance for various kinds of occupations.

5.1 Practical implications

Our findings can be of value to human resource management scholars who are interested in proposing organizational interventions. First, the research design of the present study echoes recent calls for engaging employees in talking about meaningful work (Lips-Wiersma et al., 2022). The semantic and linguistic issues revealed in our study show how people are rarely engaged with questions around meaning and meaningfulness. Despite this, our study shows that they are actually able to propose intensive definitions by presenting the situation in which they are capable to experience and discover meaningfulness at work. Following this result, employers and managers could ask their employees about the meaning they attach to their work and whether they have or have not good reasons to experience their work as meaningful. Such an organizational survey may inform possible effective ways for fostering meaningfulness at work (Tommasi et al., 2020). Second, our results show how individuals can experience and perceive their work as meaningful by referring to their task significance (Allan, 2017), sense of competence (Martela & Riekkki, 2018), and relations with others (Martela & Riekkki, 2018). In turn, job design intervention could be implemented to address the way work is organized and its characteristics (Bailey & Madden, 2020). For example, training interventions could foster skills and competencies among employees in order to improve their sense of competence. Simultaneously, interventions at the team level could foster positive relations associated with meaningful work.

Lastly, our results suggest that there are certain organizational and institutional barriers which may decrease the presence of positive experiences at work, such as meaningful work. Managers could consider possible organizational barriers and support human resource development in order to foster meaningfulness. First, echoing the recent work by Baily and colleagues (2022), we found that people have limited words to talk about meaningful work and that they may have difficulties in finding answers to the question “what is meaningful work”? We noted this by reading answers such as “I don’t understand the question” and “I don’t know what meaningful work is or should be” but also in the words used to present the linguistic meaning of meaningful work as well as for the examples of what meaningful work is. Nevertheless, the content analysis of the participants’ answers to the three types of questions showed that subjects have the capacity to provide meaningful definitions containing elements

that are known, understandable, and common to the three required definitions. As mentioned, most of the answers were focused on intra/inter- individual aspects related to 1) personal characteristics and 2) aspects of the job. Another substantial portion of the answers focused on the environmental aspects related to 3) working and organizational conditions, and 4) socio-political context. This resonates with the methodological framework of the present paper: namely, even non-academic individuals are able to provide intensive definitions of work and organizational phenomena. Although the degrees of complexity of the responses differ among the three types of responses, individuals responded to the explicit request to define the concept of meaningful work by producing answers (i.e., definitions) according to denotative aspects. That is, independently of the way a quest for definition is presented (i.e., classical or intensive), individuals propose a verbal description characterized by a diachronic and explanatory structure rather than a prototypical type. This is in contrast with what happens in the world of academic definitions where proposals for definitions tend to be structured via a prototypical type. In contrast, common-sense definitions are more dynamic and structural with the aim of proposing generic definitions which capture personal experiences of meaningful work. Moreover, these results inform how ordinary, non-academic people are somewhat interested in providing explanations and definitions of their life and work experiences. Even more, non-academics appear to be interested in formulating tentative theories about the causes and consequences of certain experiences. The resulting common-sense formulations tended to explain the phenomenon of meaningful work on the basis of various and different factors. In particular, non-academics formulate theories and reasoning that invoke various perspectives and studies of meaningful work in the areas of management, human resource development and organizational psychology.

5.2 Limitations

Lastly, we must acknowledge some limitations of the current study, with findings having to be interpreted with some caution. Indeed, we limited our data collection to those who decided to voluntarily participate in the study. Also, our sample was limited to only 194 participants, and we did not have participants from specific job classes. Further studies may address this limit by carrying out a more extensive survey of different workers from multiple disciplines. Although this aspect does not affect the implications of our results per se, it may limit the extensiveness of our interpretation which could be enriched by further studies on the common-sense perspective.

6 Conclusion

The present study provides indications for theory, research and practice in the field of studies on meaningful work. Firstly, this study provides an initial basis for understanding the potential of inquiring non-academics about the meaning of meaningful work and how non-academics are capable of offering novel perspectives on it. Secondly, we present a conceptual background for theorizing and testing possible interventions aimed at fostering meaningful work. Thirdly, we offer an initial frame of orientation for scoping out the common-sense perspective by which further critical investigation can be advanced in the empirical investigations in human resource management and development. In closing, we invite scholars to address current debates around notions and concepts in the literature to look at how non-academics may engage, subvert, criticize, and renovate the meaning and relevance of this phenomenon.

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Francesco Tommasi is a Postdoctoral Researcher in Work and Organizational Psychology, University of Verona, Department of Human Sciences, Italy, and Visiting Fellow in Critical Social, Work and Organizational Psychology at Europa-Universität Flensburg. He works on different topics within social, work and organizational psychology, and educational science issues.

Riccardo Sartori is an Associate Professor of work and organizational psychology at the Human Sciences Department of Verona University. He is a psychologist and psychotherapist, who graduated in Work and Organizational Psychology, Ph.D. in Perception and Psychophysics. His interests focus on 1) Assessment of candidates and personnel (individual, group, and organizational assessment); 2) Training and Development of Human resources; 3) Business consulting dealing with organizational dynamics (organizational co-habitation, cooperation, conflict, etc.). He is the Director of the research center APRESO (Applied Research in Society and Organizations).

Andrea Ceschi is an Associate Professor in Work and Organizational Psychology (WOP) at the Human Sciences Department of Verona University. Co-Founder and Scientific Director of the research center APRESO (Applied Research in Society and Organizations), my expertise lies in organizational behavior, individual differences, and decision-making at work, and social dynamics in the applied psychology field.

