

## Towards a Sociology of Meaningful Work

Work, Employment and Society

1–18

© The Author(s) 2021



Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: 10.1177/09500170211055998

[journals.sagepub.com/home/wes](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/wes)**Knut Laaser** 

Brandenburg University of Technology Cottbus–Senftenberg, Germany; University of Stirling, UK

**Jan Karlsson**

Karlstad University, Sweden

### Abstract

In the last decade, research on the nature, impact and prospect of meaningful work has flourished. Despite an upsurge in scholarly and practitioner interest, the research field is characterized by a lack of consensus over how meaningful work should be defined and whether its ingredients are exclusively subjective perceptions or solely triggered by objective job characteristics. The disconnection between objective and subjective dimensions of meaningful work results in a hampered understanding of how it emerges in relation to the interplay of workplace, managerial, societal and individual relations. The article addresses this gap and introduces a novel sociological meaningful work framework that features the objective and subjective dimensions of autonomy, dignity and recognition as its key pillars. In this way, a framework is offered that analyses how meaningful work is experienced at the agent level, but shaped by wider dynamics at the structural level.

### Keywords

critical realism, formal organization, labour agency, labour process, meaningful work, politics of working life

### Introduction

In the last decade, research on the nature, impact and prospect of meaningful work has flourished, producing a heterogeneous and vibrant debate (Bailey et al., 2019; Laaser and Bolton, Forthcoming; Yeoman et al., 2019) that is also increasingly picked up by labour organizations in their recent campaigns for decent and good work (DGB, 2019; ILO,

---

#### Corresponding author:

Knut Laaser, Brandenburg University of Technology Cottbus–Senftenberg, Fakultät 5, Erich Weinert Str. 1, 03046 Cottbus, Germany.

Email: [knut.laaser@b-tu.de](mailto:knut.laaser@b-tu.de)

2017). Despite an upsurge in interest, the field is characterized by a lack of consensus concerning what meaningful work means and consists of (Bailey et al., 2019; Lysova et al., 2019). This is visible in the existence of divergent frameworks and definitions that have a strong tendency to focus either exclusively on subjective experiences or objective job characteristics of meaningful work. The latter position is visible in understandings of job characteristics as key components of meaningful work (Hackman and Oldham, 1975), while the former understands it as an ‘authentic connection between [. . .] work and a broader transcendent life purpose beyond the self’ (Bailey and Madden, 2017: 4). Further, labour organizations and unions, such as the German Confederation of Trade Unions, operationalize meaningful work as workers’ perception of performing work that is interesting and useful for others (DGB, 2019: 62). This trait is strengthened by neighbouring concepts, such as job quality and job satisfaction, that show the same type of duality. Indeed, while job quality relates to objective characteristics of work, job satisfaction concerns workers’ emotional response to their working conditions (Brown et al., 2012). While the debate about the nature and operationalization of meaningful work marches on (Bailey et al., 2019; Yeoman et al., 2019), sociological contributions in general and critical labour process and politics of working life approaches in particular remain scant (Bailey and Madden, 2017). Yet, a sociological approach to the debate is all the more salient in the light of recent calls for research that have emphasized the need for contributions that critically examine the contextual fabric of meaningful work, taking societal, political, organizational and individual dimensions into account (Bailey et al., 2019; Lysova et al., 2019).

This article addresses these calls by developing a distinct sociological meaningful work framework that rests on the differentiation between the objective and subjective dimensions of autonomy, recognition and dignity. These dimensions are theorized and applied to meaningful work through the combination of a politics of working life approach, a critical realist concept of human agency and social theory of dignity and recognition. In this way, a framework is presented that analyses how meaningful work is created, experienced and defended at the agency level, but shaped, constrained or denied by wider dynamics of the employment and workplace level. The article offers a sociological contribution to the discussion that overcomes the dichotomous focus on either subjective or objective dimensions, adding a critical understanding of the labour process of meaningful work. Ultimately, the framework allows a deeper understanding of what workers want from work and why ‘work is objectively becoming more pressurized and precarious, but still a source of meaning and attachment for many employees’ (Thompson, 2021: ix). In turn, the article offers a timely contribution for labour organizations in their fight for making work better. To their traditional focus on decent and safe employment conditions, it adds the importance of the multi-layered informal organization of work for workers’ experience of meaningful work. The next section introduces the politics of working life and labour agency framework before discussing the meaningful work typology.

## **The politics of working life and labour agency**

The politics of working life utilized here takes its departure in the conceptualization of the capitalist workplace as an inherently instrumental technical-economic system that

focuses exclusively on efficiency, productivity and profit (Axelsson et al., 2019; Lysgaard, 2001; Thompson, 1989). Lysgaard (2001) provides a seminal contribution to an understanding of the politics of working life that is compatible with other prominent sociological theories of work, such as labour process theory. His approach suggests that the demands of the formal capitalist organization have three overarching characteristics. First, it is insatiable. The system is constantly striving for higher economic efficiency, productivity and profitability. It never lets up in what it requires from the employees. In the same vein, labour process theory points towards the competitive capitalist pressures that inform organizations' constant search for ways to revolutionize the production process in order to unlock the work–effort bargain.

Second, the demands of the formal organization of work are one-sided, demanding employees to do what they have been hired to do, ignoring what interests and other talents and skills each employee has. However, neither the formal organization of work nor the market can solve the indeterminacy of labour; that is, the transformation of abstract labour power into profitable work (Thompson, 1989). Therein, the one-sided nature of formal organizations goes hand in hand with a control imperative that aims to narrow down the indeterminacy gap. Measures for this are managerial control techniques that direct, monitor and evaluate employees' work effort, while creating policies that enable to discipline, or reward employees for their effort (Edwards, 1979).

Third, the formal organization has no other considerations than its drive for efficiency, productivity and profit, not hesitating to exchange any employee for someone or something else that serves it better. The inexorable interest of the formal organization finds its expression in the prevalence of hierarchical relations and a tight separation of execution from conception in the labour process combined with a lack of democratic workplace participation and employee empowerment (Thompson, 1989). Prominent accounts in the politics of working life literature suggest that these characteristics oppose employees' diverse interests, development concerns and desire for stability, instead limiting their power and increasing their replaceability (Lysgaard, 2001; Thompson and Vincent, 2010). Despite the disconnection of what wage labourers want from work and what they get, they depend on a job in order to make a living and therefore be members of the technical-economic system. It follows from this that competing rationales of management and workers result in on-going struggles over conflicting interests and meanings, though compromises are temporarily possible (Thompson, 1989).

According to the theory, the politics of working life illustrate the dynamics of the workplace as a contested terrain and workers' pursuit of scarce material resources, searching for ways through which they can mediate and re-shape the formal organization via formal and informal practices and relations (Thompson and Vincent, 2010). Understanding these responses and their link to meaningful work requires a strong concept of human agency that avoids conflating agency and structure. Archer (1995: 257) defines agents as 'sharing the same life chances'; that is, they share the same structural position, such as worker or capitalist. She therefore speaks of agents in the plural while stressing that interaction between agents provides the only effective causes of social life. Archer's critical realist approach explores in particular the interplay between structures that pre-date agency and thereby constrain and enable actions, and agents' capacity to transform structures due to their independent causal power to mediate and alter structural

resources (Archer, 1995: 375). This is expressed in this sequence: (1) an existing structure → (2) interaction between agents connected to the structure → (3) reproduction or transformation of the structure as a result of the interaction.

However, the capacity and opportunities to transform structures vary between groups of people and their relations to structural resources. Combining this critical realist position with the politics of working life stance informs two principles that guide the meaningful work typology. First, that workers are collective agents, bound together by their relation to the structural resource of waged work under capitalism. Second, that workers possess causal powers, informed by their capacity for ‘self-command’ and ‘degrees of freedom in determining their own course of action’ (Archer, 2003: 7). Thus, workers’ struggle for meaningful work is a fundamental condition of being human, inevitably interwoven with their nature of being autonomous yet dependent beings. This framework understands the search for meaningfulness as driven by the aim to establish and defend spaces of autonomy at work and be recognized for their efforts and treated with respect and dignity in the context of the social structures and necessity of the labour process. The struggle for meaningful work informs a wide range of activities that are ‘characterized by the impulse towards autonomy’ (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999: 55). These can be collectively co-ordinated or individually pursued in opposition to the formal organization or supplementing it. In the light of this conceptual backdrop, the next section evaluates key contributions in the field of meaningful work in terms of their understanding of the interplay between the formal and informal organization of work and the power of labour agency for meaningful work. This is followed by an introduction and discussion of the novel meaningful work typology and its dimensions.

## **Approaching meaningful work concepts**

Conceptualizing meaningful work as workers’ perception of their work as worthwhile and useful, Hackman and Oldham’s (1975) ‘Job Characteristic Model’ prominently links the experience with high levels of task identity, task significance and skill variety. This stance informs a wide range of organization and management studies that explore the importance of stable job characteristics of the formal organization of work in combination with leadership styles for the experience of meaningful work and the positive outcomes it has in terms of productivity and employee engagement (Lysova et al., 2019; Rosso et al., 2010). While the focus on decent and stable job conditions is valuable for identifying structural enablers of meaningful work, it is conceptualized as an outcome of the formal organization of work in general and managerial practices in particular. Analysed through a critical realism lens, these prominent positions represent a ‘downward conflationist’ theory, where ‘structure and agency are conflated because action is treated as fundamentally epiphenomenal’ (Archer, 1995: 81). In the light of the sequence of relations between structures and agents that we presented above, this means that ‘human actors are never granted the autonomy to have any independent effect upon [structure]’ (Archer, 1995: 83). Agency becomes part of structure: workers cannot be discerned as independently acting beings with their own sovereign powers. The politics of working life and critical realism perspective suggest as an alternative that workers have powers of their own that cannot be reduced to structural powers. Instead, they act

in innovative and unexpected ways to the situations in which structures place them (Danermark et al., 2019).

Other influential meaningful work contributions come from the field of humanities. Even though this field is wide, one unifying characteristic is the understanding of meaning making as a deeply human feature that enables workers to build a strong connection of work activities with their wider life purpose in the context of one's personal gifts and society's needs (Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2009; Yeoman et al., 2019). This literature places a strong emphasis on the subjective experience of meaningful work, defining it as an 'authentic connection between [. . .] work and a broader transcendent life purpose beyond the self' (Bailey and Madden, 2017: 4). A prominent representation of this field comes from Lips-Wiersma and Morris (2009), who conceptualize factors of meaningful work that bring together individual dimensions with 'other' related dynamics. Other-oriented dimensions refer to the experience of 'unity with others through work', stressing the centrality of positive relational experiences at work. The perception that work has a higher purpose beyond the self is captured by the experience of 'serving others'. Self-oriented factors are encapsulated in the opportunity to express one's full potential by creating and influencing processes and results at work, while the dimension of 'developing and becoming self' refers to work that allows workers to find their true self and develop virtues.

The focus of humanist approaches on individuals' desire for serving others, creating use-value while pursuing self-transcendence, adds a strong notion of agency to the meaningful work literature. Still, while downwards conflation is thereby avoided, the heavy focus on the individual in combination with a depoliticized understanding of the workplace results in an 'upward conflation' (Archer, 1995: 60), in which structure becomes an epiphenomenon to agency. Structures cannot be discerned as independent phenomena with their own autonomous powers: meaningful work becomes a product of workers' desires to find inner coherence, expressing their authentic desires by engaging in interesting practices from which others benefit.

A promising humanist meaningful work conceptualization that avoids upward or downward conflation comes from Yeoman (2014). Her approach illustrates the interplay between agents' meaning-making capacities and objective dimensions of meaningful work. Yeoman conceptualizes people as 'co-creators of values and meanings' who need to be empowered to become 'co-authorities in the realm of values' (2014: 235, 243). Against this backdrop, workers derive meaning from work when the organization of work features autonomy as non-alienation, freedom as non-domination and social recognition as dignified work. Based on this typology, Yeoman argues that the vast majority of workplaces are devoid of meaningful work, calling for a restructuring of the modern workplace with the help of institutions. While providing a valuable contribution to the meaningful work discourse that takes the political economy of work and labour agency seriously, Yeoman's framework operates as a normative heuristic that postulates how work ought to be in order to become meaningful. In this way, her work underplays the power of labour agency and the many ways meaning in the contemporary labour process is created and defended vis-a-vis the formal organization.

This discussion illustrates that meaningful work literature is a rich and heterogeneous field in which various disciplines contribute valuable insights into selective subjective or

objective dimensions of meaningful work. While this is the case, typologies remain scant that focus on the *interplay* of objective and subjective dimensions, acknowledge the politics of working life and avoid upward- or downward conflation. The next section presents a meaningful work framework that addresses this gap.

## Meaningful work typology

This section develops further a three-layered typology of meaningful work for low-skilled work that has been developed by one of the authors, consisting of subject-oriented dimensions of autonomy, dignity and recognition (Laaser and Bolton, Forthcoming). The aim is to provide a meaningful work framework that is applicable to all forms of waged work. Combining the politics of working life approach with a critical realism agency theory, the following conceptualizes objective and subjective dimensions of autonomy, dignity and recognition and illustrates their interplay. As will be showcased, the dynamics are understood to be interdependent causal powers that trigger distinctive sets of meaningful work tendencies.

### *Meaningful work and the objective and subjective dimensions of autonomy*

Approaches informed by the Job Characteristic Model, as well as wider humanist accounts, understand autonomy as central for meaningful work. The dissimilarity is that the former places emphasis on autonomy as job discretion and opportunities for direct participation, while the latter emphasizes agents' capacity for meaning making. The following differentiates between objective and subjective autonomy at work and in which way the distinction matters for the experience of meaningful work. It is widely argued that a prominent factor for experiencing meaningful work is objective autonomy (Yeoman et al., 2019). The term refers to opportunities for workers to independently exercise skill and judgement throughout the different stages of production or service creation, while possessing opportunities for direct participation (Gallie, 2019; Hodson, 2001). Thus, at the heart of objective autonomy is discretion at work, encapsulated in opportunities for individuals or groups of workers to decide about the methods they utilize to accomplish their tasks, how they use these methods, the sequencing and timing of the processes necessary to complete tasks and the criteria used for assessing their work effort (Felstead et al., 2009). In this way, opportunities for workers exist to modify job design and social environment along their own professional standard and engage in work that is characterized by self-determination and self-development (Bailey et al., 2019; Gallie, 2019). Even though objective autonomy is grounded in the formal organization of work and directed by the interests of the owners of production, it is a key enabler of meaningful work in the way it fosters workers' reflections over practices of meaning making. These reflections 'overcome technical reason by extending knowledge, developing skill, and re-uniting ends and means to complete necessary tasks' (Yeoman, 2014: 6). However, objective autonomy in the form of opportunities for workers to independently exercise skill and judgement tends to be seriously constrained in the capitalist labour process. Here, the

majority of workplace regimes feature a high level of division of labour, repetitive, monotonous tasks, tight managerial control and a lack of voice (Thompson and Vincent, 2010). Nevertheless, many workplaces offer relative autonomy, encoded in task-based and individual discretion that is visible in spaces for workers to decide how to approach different tasks, when to take breaks and some leeway concerning planning work steps (Gallie, 2019; Hughes et al., 2017).

In turn, subjective autonomy at work has played a key role in numerous workplace studies that have showcased how, even under draconian workplace regimes, workers create ‘thick cultural ensembles of their own making’ (Vallas, 2006: 1709) that offer sources for meaningful work. Lysgaard (2001) illustrates how workers secure autonomy from the formal organization by creating a worker collectivity that is informed by their own rules and values. Thereby, it provides them with a protected membership of the formal organization, buffering its instrumental demands. Informal collectives establish spheres of autonomy that inform a wide range of activities and practices. Indeed, a strong feature of workplace ethnographies lies in their analysis of workplace games whose rules, values and often existence, are unknown to management (Axelsson et al., 2019; Burawoy, 1979; Hodson, 2001). These games enable workers to derive meaning from routine and otherwise mentally exhausting practices by embedding them in an alternative meaning system that complements the formal organization of work. The practices are not motivated by work avoidance, even though they might include oppositional practices that are directed upwards in the hierarchy. Rather, they are informed by workers’ positive impulse to create independent spaces in which they develop identities, make work-related decisions on their own, building informal values and norms that guide how they relate to their work and to others (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999; Karlsson, 2012). The concept of subjective autonomy is defined as informal worker relations and practices at work that are driven by bottom-up norms and values that aim to establish and defend a sphere of autonomy and independent meaning systems from the formal organization and its demands. Closely interwoven with the objective and subjective dimensions of autonomy are the objective and subjective forms of dignity that will be discussed next.

### *Meaningful work and the objective and subjective dimensions of dignity*

The concept of dignity has gained prominence in sociological approaches to work concerning how workers are treated (Hodgkiss, 2016; Hodson, 2001; Honneth, 1995; Sayer, 2007). Hodson’s seminal work on workplace dignity conceptualizes dignity as ‘ability to establish a sense of self-worth and self-respect and to appreciate the respect of others’ (Hodson, 2001: 3). Central to this understanding is the position that workers, like all human beings, possess inherent value and unconditional worth (Bolton, 2007; Honneth, 1995). Consequently, objective dignity is conceptualized as organizational policies and management practices on the one hand and interactions between workers on the other that uphold workers’ dignity by meeting norms of respect and civility, while enhancing workers’ self-respect. For example, research showcases the importance of respectful treatment of workers by line managers, but also customers and workers, that acknowledges their diversity, plural interests, strengths and weaknesses, while not taking advantage of their vulnerabilities as dependent subordinates (Hodson, 2001; Sayer, 2007). In a

similar vein, organizational policies and workplace conditions contribute to dignity when respect and equality are established via material conditions that offer secure terms of employment, safe and healthy working conditions, just rewards and transparent monitoring and measurement practices (Bolton, 2007; Honneth, 2012).

In turn, insecure employment, such as the prevalence of short-term or zero-hour contracts, undermine workers' dignity by exploiting their precarious position in the labour market, treating them as replaceable commodities and second-class workers (Bolton et al., 2012). Furthermore, an upsurge of work intensity that is perceived by workers as unreasonable is likely to lead to disengagement from work (Gallie, 2019), undermining workplace dignity by violating respect for workers' vulnerability as a human resource (Hodson, 2001; Lysgaard, 2001). Yet, objective dignity also includes the quality of horizontal relationships and whether co-worker relations are characterized by respect, appreciation and support (Bolton, 2007; Hodson, 2001). Thus, despite the contested terrain of the workplace, objective dignity refers to practices that treat workers as ends in themselves, respectfully acknowledging their vulnerabilities, strengths and weaknesses (Sayer, 2007).

However, workers experience dignity in the workplace not just through formal channels of the organization, but also via strategies that rest on autonomous behaviour and cultures that create and defend their dignity in the informal and often hidden channels of organizational life. This dynamic is particularly visible in research on worker solidarity (Hodson, 2001) and worker collectivity (Lysgaard, 2001). Here, workers create and maintain ties that they build over time, express voice formally and informally and intermesh them in moral norms and values of mutual recognition, trust and respect (Honneth, 2012). The moral texture of worker solidarity features an understanding of relationships and behaviour that goes beyond a rational calculation of costs and advantages. While subjective dignity becomes particularly visible in environments that threaten workers' dignity, it also operates in the absence of conflict. Indeed, case studies provide ample evidence that the experience of low-quality work can be humanized and transformed into a source of meaning via bottom-up rituals. Among the examples are physical and monotonous work (Burawoy, 1979) and stigmatized, so-called 'dirty work', like cleaners and refuse collectors (Deery et al., 2019; Hughes et al., 2017). The power of these rituals lies in their ability to struggle for and to create and exchange worth and self-esteem for trusting and being trustworthy and for actions and relations that are not captured by the formal organization of work (Honneth, 2012). For example, Burawoy's (1979) classic research amplifies how workers experience worth and respect at work via informal shop floor games that they invented as an alternative to the formal and highly repetitive work process. Consequently, Hodson (2001: 45) categorizes horizontal relationships and practices that sustain and embrace dignity at work as 'citizenship' behaviour, that 'transform[s] jobs with insufficient meaning into jobs that are more worthy of their personal stature, time and effort'. The contested terrain of the workplace and the instrumental and exploitative character of the labour process poses a constant threat to objective dignity in the workplace. Still, sources of subjective dignity are even more salient for meaningful work. Subjective dignity is defined as self-initiated and organized worker activities that allow them to derive and defend self-worth and respect, even when

sources for dignity at work are far from fulsome. In this way, dignity and patterns of recognition are closely aligned to each other.

### *Meaningful work and the objective and subjective dimensions of recognition*

The social theory of recognition rests on the premise that healthy self-relations, self-development and stable social relations more broadly are dependent on the on-going experience of intersubjective recognition. It is most prominently represented by the work of Axel Honneth (1995). Three interdependent patterns of recognition are distinguished, namely love, respect and social esteem, which are conceptualized to be institutionally shaped and guaranteed (Fraser and Honneth, 2003). Within this realm, the labour market in general and work in particular are considered central for workers' experience of respect and social esteem (Dejours et al., 2018; Honneth, 2012). Against this backdrop, objective and subjective recognition are utilized in the following as central dimensions in the meaningful work framework.

Even though all forms of recognition rest on the premise that actors are legally recognized as autonomous and responsible persons, legal recognition is strongly linked to recognition as self-respect (Honneth, 1995). Indeed, Honneth elaborates that legal recognition fosters self-respect when actors experience intersubjectively that they possess the same rights as others to participate in society, are encouraged to express 'voice' and decide about courses of action discursively. In this way, self-respect is anchored in a set of formal norms and collective understandings. In a similar vein, Castel (1996) argues that work only offers a source of social recognition when it is embedded in a system of regulation that guarantees workers a legal status that mitigates their subordination in the labour process, as well as guaranteeing that they can secure their livelihood through waged work. Yet, the achievement of recognition as self-respect in capitalist societies reflects an on-going emancipatory struggle at the individual and institutional level, and experiences of disrespect and insult are never far from reach (Honneth, 2012). The struggle for recognition is particularly visible in the capitalist organization of work and the labour market. Indeed, both are central facilitators of social integration and subject to the normative ideal of the individual as a legal actor who possesses the same rights, in theory, as others (Fraser and Honneth, 2003). At the workplace level, self-respect is embraced by management practices that understand workers' unconstrained entitlement to the values of respect and dignity due to their sovereign decision to work for the organization (Hancock and Tucker, 2020). This understanding informs the article's concept of objective recognition that refers back to workers' desire for equity, dignity and voice as forms of recognition that foster self-respect in the sphere of the formal organization of work and employment. These desires are acknowledged in opportunities for workers to participate in planning and decision making at work, as well as in the access to employment that offers equal and adequate pay, is secure and not in conflict with other life-goals (Hancock and Tucker, 2020; Honneth, 2012).

Still, as the capitalist organization of work rests on the commodification of labour, if and how these normative claims are met or disrespected varies between national labour

markets, occupations and between positions in the hierarchy of an organization. Institutions play a key role for establishing objective recognition via the mediation of the power of the employer. As Thompson (2019) argues, the normative dimension of meaningful work is more likely met when collective bargaining, vocational training policies and worker participation rights are institutionalized. This tends to be the case in co-ordinated market economies, meeting key ingredients for the formation of workers' self-respect (Honneth, 2012). In countries where institutional mediation is weaker, HRM and organizational policies and practices are all the more important for objective recognition. Budd (2004) and Islam (2012) suggest that the formal organization of work and HRM practices in particular have the potential to offer workers formal recognition when they operate with the normative reference point of them as autonomous and yet responsible individuals who are worthy of concern and entitled to dignity. For example, Holtgrewe (2001) highlights how formalized schemes and events that celebrate workers' contributions can foster self-respect by enhancing visibility and admiration of work across the hierarchy. Meanwhile, Hancock and Tucker (2020) and Islam (2012) suggest that recognition as respect can be enhanced by organizational mechanisms that promote active engagement and respect for the seniority, work experience and formal and informal expertise of workers. However, considering the structured antagonism between capital and labour, objective recognition is shaped by the power asymmetry between capital and labour, constraining significantly the nature and extent of workers' rights claims.

Yet, subjective recognition rests on the central role waged work plays in the industrially organized division of labour, understanding work as a key source for the development of self-esteem (Fraser and Honneth, 2003). In contrast to objective recognition, recognition as self-esteem features the intersubjective acknowledgement of individuals' particular traits, abilities and contributions to a valued project (Honneth, 1995). However, what counts as a valuable project and an esteem-worthy trait is a product of on-going social and political dynamics within and beyond the organization. It thus represents a contested field to which a constant struggle for recognition is inherent. Against this backdrop, the concept of self-esteem as recognition has been further developed in the field of work and employment research (Dejours et al., 2018; Voswinkel, 2012). Taking Honneth's recognition theory as a starting point, Voswinkel (2012) understands admiration and appreciation as two distinguishable modes of recognition that esteem the worker in different ways. Appreciation refers to workers belonging to a workplace community and is conditional on their practices and engagement in relations that strengthen the community and reinforce its identity. In a similar vein, Sayer (2007) argues that mutual reciprocity, encapsulated in the daily give and take at work, and solidarity among co-workers, are key ingredients of the intersubjective experience of recognition as appreciation.

In Lysgaard's (2001) research on the worker collectivity, appreciation as a form of recognition is central. There is a strict distinction between 'us' subordinate workers who are members of the collectivity and 'them' with superordinate positions in the hierarchy of the workplace. Being part of 'us' is regarded as something positive, referring to the accumulated body of knowledge workers possess that is considered important for the actual work. Being part of 'them' is negative, referring to the lack of understanding about anything that is deemed necessary for running the production process. This horizontal relation between workers and the borderline against superordinates opens up the

possibility of appreciation by other members of the collectivity. These analyses mean that esteem is exchanged for being part of a mutual web of obligations and commitments, visible in formal and informal co-operation, the sharing of experiences and meanings and an attention to others' faring (Dejours et al., 2018; Honneth, 2012). Admiration, on the other hand, esteems a particular achievement or talent of a worker (Voswinkel, 2012). As admiration is grounded in shared workplace values and norms, it tends to be a form of vertical recognition that stresses the singularity of a worker and her actions. On the other hand, Dejours et al. (2018) argue that only colleague recognition can provide genuine esteem in the form of admiration due to their expert knowledge concerning what skills and effort it takes to do a job well and excel in it. In the light of these contributions, subjective recognition refers to intersubjective admiration and appreciation at the horizontal level of the labour process, shaped by the particular norms and values of the informal organization of work.

To sum up, as meaningful work discussions continue to flourish, they are still dominated by upwards and downwards conflation: workers become parts of structures or structures parts of workers. Therefore, a comprehensive framework that integrates a rich account of agency that adheres to subjective dimensions of meaningful work with structural conditions that foster its objective conditions becomes all the more salient for advancing the debate. This can open up the discussion to the sociology of work that has remained relatively silent on this topic thus far. This article introduces a sociological typology of meaningful work that is grounded in selective social theory and critical approaches to work that are framed by a critical realist ontology. The typology integrates perspectives of the agent, workplace and society and illustrates the interplay of these dimensions with the aim to inspire debate in the field of meaningful work in general and to stimulate sociological research on this topic in particular. In order to highlight the contribution and practicability of the typology, the following discussion and table illustrate the interplay of the six meaningful work dimensions, displaying how they function as mechanisms that are embedded in the political structure of wage labour and in workers.

## Discussion

The understanding of mechanisms goes back to the premises of critical realism, which views the social world as essentially open, consisting of differentiated but interrelated objects who possess powers that are determined by their internal structures. Meaningful work and its absence is created by the influence of mechanisms, namely the six dimensions of objective and subjective autonomy, dignity and recognition, respectively (Table 1). The relationship between mechanisms and effects are contingent, due to the complexity of the dynamics that emerge when several mechanisms operate at the same time, obscuring, constraining or enabling one another (Bhaskar, 1998; Danermark et al., 2019). Therefore, the concept of 'tendencies' is deployed, which enables acknowledgement of the complexity and contingency of the relationship between the different mechanisms and informs a discussion of the interplay of those mechanisms of meaningful work that may occur in workplaces. In the following, the theorizing technique of constructing property spaces is deployed. Property spaces relate dimensions and their properties, in this case tendencies, to each other in a systematic and structured way, such as through

**Table 1.** Objective and subjective tendencies of autonomy, dignity and recognition.

		Recognition		Dignity	
		Objective	Subjective	Objective	Subjective
Autonomy	Objective	X1	Z1	X2	Z2
	Subjective	Y1	W1	Y2	W2

Notes: X: all tendencies objective; Z: objective in combination with subjective tendencies; Y: subjective in combination with objective tendencies; W: all tendencies subjective.

fourfold tables that structure the relations between tendencies and allow for the process of creating a typology (Karlsson and Bergman, 2017). The results – that is, the outcomes of the combinations – still must be interpreted theoretically or through empirical examples. Taken together, this analytical approach explores whether the formal organization of work and the way it structures meaning is reproduced or transformed by workers. Five possible empirical scenarios are illustrated in the following, arguing that not all objective mechanisms need to be fulfilled in order to experience meaningful work, but that all subjective mechanisms need to be met. An absence of one of the subjective mechanisms would mean that an essential ingredient of meaningful work is missing and would necessarily undermine the objective mechanisms.

### *Scenario 1: Strong and balanced meaningful work*

When all mechanisms interact (X1; X2; Z1; Z2; Y1; Y2; W1; W2), meaningful work tends to be strong and balanced between the subjective and objective dimensions of work. Here, the organization of work, employment conditions and social relations at work enable workers to engage in work that is characterized by autonomy, offers opportunities to learn and develop, features respectful and fair treatment and employment conditions that give workers a sense of security. Meanwhile, the informal organizational space is not invaded by the formal one, enabling workers to exercise agency by engaging with their work on their own terms, and establish lasting and respectful relationships with co-workers in which patterns of esteem and sources of dignity are created (Dejours et al., 2018). In accordance with selective organization and management studies, this tendency highlights the importance of high levels of autonomy, skill variety and task relevance for meaningful work (Hackman and Oldham, 1975; Rosso et al., 2010). Yet, it differs significantly from these approaches by the centrality that is ascribed to the informal organization. This organization and the subjective mechanisms of meaningful work go beyond personal factors and encompass dialectical but autonomous relations, actions and identities of workers that can go in tandem with formalized expectations and roles, but may also be in conflict (Sayer, 2007). These tendencies are strengthened by the existence at the workplace of a strong worker collectivity that reinforces the workers' possibility of experiencing dignity and providing them with an agency of their own through its buffering effect, fostering solidarity (Honneth, 2012). Likely settings for this scenario can be found in the public sector, such as civil servants and academics, particularly in

continental and social democratic regimes that feature robust industrial relations, employment conditions and skill-development opportunities (Thompson, 2019). While the majority of labour market participants do not have access to such privileged conditions, meaningful work in this setting is vulnerable to dynamics within and outside the organization, namely the digitalization of work and austerity regimes.

### *Scenario 2: Weak and unstable meaningful work*

In this scenario, work is characterized by objective dimensions of MW (X1 and X2). Here, high levels of job discretion, sufficiently complex tasks, job security and institutional forms of labour representation are combined with a formal management system that features objective recognition via platforms for labour voice and appraisal mechanisms. These conditions enable workers to derive self-respect from possessing, at least formally, the same rights and claims as others, informing their right to participate in the organization (Honneth, 1995). However, self-respect is not enriched by sources of self-esteem. This is because the informal organization of work is weak, due to an individualized, demanding and competitive labour process that fosters competing interests and concerns and constrains a collective experience of the labour process. In this environment, workers' struggle for meaningful work is primarily visible in individual practices, as relations of mutual recognition, autonomous spaces and independent meaning systems. Collective practices that create and defend dignity are fragile and fragmented by the formal organization. In this setting, workers might temporarily experience their work as meaningful, but the experience is fragile, as the sources of recognition and dignity are rooted in the unbuffered technical nature of work that pushes for over-identification and over-investment in work. Such excesses in work may heavily constrain objectively meaningful work. Case studies of professional occupations that are experienced as 'deeply meaningful work' (Bunderson and Thompson, 2009), such as junior doctors and teachers, report workaholism and a lack of boundary drawing, resulting in burn-out and personal sacrifices that hamper the experience of meaningful work (Berkelaar and Buzzanell, 2015). In reference to recent inquiries in meaningful work debates about whether and how far meaningfulness can be orchestrated by management (Bailey et al., 2019), meaningful work is framed by objective conditions, but not engineered by them. This is because workers' informal organization is context-dependent and relational, connected to but autonomous from the formal organization of work. Workers are not docile subjects that can be manipulated into experiencing work as meaningful, as a healthy and stable informal organization is organic and reflects workers' wider needs and interests. In this scenario, meaningful work is weak and unstable.

### *Scenario 3: Constrained meaningful work*

In this scenario, objective autonomy meets subjective meaningfulness (Z1, W1, Z2 and W2). Recent research on work has explored the phenomenon that workers in objectively labelled poor-quality jobs and in 'dirty' work may nevertheless express high levels of job satisfaction (Deery et al., 2019; Hodson, 2001; Hughes et al., 2017). A common finding in this literature is that jobs are experienced as meaningful even though they are weak on

objective recognition and dignity. The reason for this paradoxical finding is rooted in a labour process that features levels of objective autonomy, visible in the form of task, individual and group level discretion. Here, workers' struggle for meaningful work is manifested in the way they appropriate and humanize tasks and relationships, engage in job crafting and build relations of mutual recognition and dignity. It requires, however, that the tasks performed are not overly monotonous and devoid of use value. For example, research on 'dirty work' shows that physical and emotionally demanding work is mediated via subjective mechanisms of recognition and dignity, fostering an understanding that the work they and others perform is useful for recipients and the wider society. The objective dimensions work against a more fulsome experience of meaningful work and might be in conflict with its subjective conditions.

#### *Scenario 4: Struggle for meaningful work*

When only the tendencies of W1 and W2 are met, objective meaningful work tendencies are absent, but subjective tendencies are strong. Here, workers lack autonomy at work, are subjected to managerial control practices and a rigid social and technical division of labour, are engaged in repetitive work, lack adequate compensation, face insecure employment and suffer under hostile management practices. Thus, formal sources of meaningfulness are scant. However, as many classic and contemporary sociological workplace studies highlight (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999; Hodson, 2001; Lysgaard, 2001), workers have a strong drive to participate meaningfully in work even when objective conditions are bad. This is visible in informal collectives at work that give workers the feeling of belonging, exchanging recognition for certain roles and work effort in the organization, deriving dignity from communities of coping, while forming relationships and rituals that result in shared identities and sources of meaning over time. Therefore, meaningful work can emerge through the informal spaces and can be temporarily stable, but is ultimately subject to the on-going struggle to mediate the lack of objective meaningful work. In this way, parallels exist to humanist meaningful work concepts that stress workers' 'will to meaning' (Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2009: 492). Yet, the focus of the meaningful work approach proposed here is not on the individual and their desire for self-transcendence and actualization, but rather the drive for autonomy in the contested terrain of the workplace that is primarily achieved within the realm of the informal organization. This tendency suggests that meaningful work is established over oppositional practices and struggles vis-a-vis the formal organization that can include attempts to establish 'authentic connections' (Bailey and Madden, 2017: 4) between work and the individual, but go beyond it.

#### *Scenario 5: The absence of meaningful work*

The last scenario illustrates the absence of objective and subjective tendencies and mechanisms of meaningful work. The lack of objective dimensions is not being mediated by the subjective dimensions, encoded in a workplace that is deprived of spaces of subjective autonomy, respect and dignity, offering a bleak environment in which conflict and struggle are daily occurrences. Worker resistance to the conditions of the labour process

is likely, but the lack of an informal organization individualizes resistance and the struggle for meaningful work, making a transformation from within impossible. Jobs that are likely to be bereft of meaningful work include security guards, porters and watchmen deployed as contract labour. These jobs are characterized by low pay, precarious employment conditions, disrespect and disconnection due to workers being transferred from one client to the other, undermining the potential to foster horizontal bonds and derive subjective recognition and dignity (Noronha et al., 2020).

## Conclusion

While research on the nature, impact and prospect of meaningful work is flourishing, sociological concepts that capture the objective and subjective dimensions of meaningful work remain scant. Combining a politics of working life approach and a critical realist conceptualization of agency, this article offers a novel sociological meaningful work framework that is set out to explore how meaningfulness is fought for and struggled over in different ways in the formal and informal spaces of a wider range of workplace settings. This is accomplished via the conceptual spotlight on the interplay between, on the one hand, structural mechanisms that are the objective dimensions of meaningful work, represented by the formal organization of work and employment conditions, and on the other hand, the mechanisms of human agency, featured in workers' formal and informal collective and individual actions.

The conceptualization of the objective and subjective dimensions of meaningful work and their interplay provides additional tools for academics, policy makers and unions alike to protect and enhance meaningful work in the light of the pressures of the capitalist accumulation regime. Understanding and supporting workers' struggle for meaningful work is important for all forms of work, but particularly salient for new forms of paid work, such as platform-mediated work, where the objective and subjective dimensions of meaningful work are under attack due to the lack of adequate regulations.

The typology is not free from limitations. While the framework acknowledges the importance of dynamics beyond the level of the workplace, further conceptual work is needed to strengthen an understanding of the variety of institutional arrangements and how they shape objective and subjective dimensions of meaningful work. In the same vein, the majority of research on meaningful work, and this framework as well, rests overwhelmingly on theories and empirical studies that are informed by conceptual and empirical discourses from the global North. To gain an understanding of and to what degree the dimensions of meaningful work are universal or culturally and political-economically contingent, integrating the growing research and policy evidence from the global South is all the more salient. Lastly, in the light of the significant technological changes at and beyond the workplace, a key question for research on meaningful work that applies this framework will be if and how various digital technologies narrow down the informal spaces of work that are central for the experience of meaningfulness. Examples are wearable technologies that track and direct labour, as well as the new forms of digitalized work, such as platform work. The article offers one cornerstone in the project of a critical sociological approach to meaningful work and calls for research to explore the politics of meaningful work and its many faces.

## Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## ORCID iD

Knut Laaser  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3230-3423>

## References

- Ackroyd S and Thompson P (1999) *Organizational Misbehaviour*. London: SAGE.
- Archer M (1995) *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Archer M (2003) *Structure, Agency, and the Internal Conversation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Axelsson J, Karlsson JCh and Skorstad EJ (2019) *Collective Mobilization in Changing Conditions. Worker Collectivity in a Turbulent Age*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bailey C and Madden A (2017) Time reclaimed: temporality and meaningful work. *Work, Employment and Society* 31(1): 3–18.
- Bailey C, Lips-Wiersma M, Madden A et al. (2019) The five paradoxes of meaningful work: introduction to the special issue ‘Meaningful work: prospects for the 21st century’. *Journal of Management Studies* 56(3): 481–499.
- Berkelaar B and Buzzanell P (2015) Bait and switch or double-edged sword? The (sometimes) failed promises of calling. *Human Relations* 68(1): 157–178.
- Bhaskar R (1998) *The Possibility of Naturalism*. London: Routledge.
- Bolton S (2007) Dignity in and at work: why it matters. In: Bolton S (ed.) *Dimensions of Dignity at Work*. Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 3–16.
- Bolton S, Houlihan M and Laaser K (2012) Contingent work and its contradictions: towards a moral economy framework. *Journal of Business Ethics* 111(1): 121–132.
- Brown A, Charlwood A and Spencer DA (2012) Not all that it might seem: why job satisfaction is worth studying despite it being a poor summary measure of job quality. *Work, Employment and Society* 26(6): 1007–1018.
- Budd JW (2004) *Employment with a Human Face: Balancing Efficiency, Equity, and Voice*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Bunderson J and Thompson J (2009) The call of the wild: zookeepers, callings, and the double-edged sword of deeply meaningful work. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 54(1): 32–57.
- Burawoy M (1979) *Manufacturing Consent: Changes in the Labor Process under Monopoly Capitalism*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Castel R (1996) Work and usefulness to the world. *International Labour Review* 135(6): 615–622.
- Danermark B, Ekström M and Karlsson JCh (2019) *Explaining Society. Critical Realism in the Social Sciences*, 2nd Edition. London: Routledge.
- Deery S, Kolar D and Walsh J (2019) Can dirty work be satisfying? A mixed method study of workers doing dirty jobs. *Work, Employment and Society* 33(4): 631–647.
- Dejours C, Deranty J-P, Renault E et al. (2018) *The Return of Work in Critical Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- DGB (2019) Arbeiten am limit. Available at: <https://index-gute-arbeit.dgb.de/++co++07123474-1042-11ea-bc98-52540088cada> (accessed 19 September 2020).
- Edwards R (1979) *Contested Terrain: The Transformation of the Workplace in the Twentieth Century*. London: Heinemann.

- Felstead A, Fuller A, Jewson N et al. (2009) *Improving Working as Learning*. New York: Routledge.
- Fraser N and Honneth A (2003) *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political–Philosophical Exchange*. London: Verso.
- Gallie D (2019) Direct participation and meaningful work: the implications of task discretion and organizational participation. In: Yeoman R, Bailey C, Madden A, et al. (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Meaningful Work*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 373–387.
- Hackman R and Oldham G (1975) Development of the job diagnostic survey. *Journal of Applied Psychology* 60(2): 159–170.
- Hancock P and Tucker DA (2020) Recognition and change: embracing a mobile policing initiative. *Journal of Organizational Change Management* 33(5): 965–977.
- Hodgkiss P (2016) The origins of the idea and ideal of dignity in the sociology of work and employment. In: Edgell S, Gottfried H and Granter E (eds) *The SAGE Handbook of the Sociology of Work and Employment*. London: SAGE, 129–147.
- Hodson R (2001) *Dignity at Work*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Holtgrewe U (2001) Recognition, intersubjectivity and service work: labour conflicts in call centres. *The German Journal of Industrial Relations* 8(1): 37–54.
- Honneth A (1995) *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Honneth A (2012) *The I in We: Studies in the Theory of Recognition*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Hughes J, Simpson R, Slutskaya N et al. (2017) Beyond the symbolic: a relational approach to dirty work through a study of refuse collectors and street cleaners. *Work, Employment and Society* 31(1): 106–122.
- ILO (2017) *A Reflection on the Future of Work and Society*. Geneva: International Labour Office.
- Islam G (2012) Recognition, reification and practices of forgetting: ethical implications of Human Resource Management. *Journal of Business Ethics* 11(1): 37–48.
- Karlsson JCh (2012) *Organizational Misbehaviour in the Workplace. Narratives of Dignity and Resistance*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Karlsson JCh and Bergman A (2017) *Methods for Social Theory. Analytical Tools for Theorizing and Writing*. London: Routledge.
- Laaser K and Bolton S (Forthcoming) Core autonomy, respectful recognition, and derived dignity: how meaningful work is created and sustained in low-skilled work. *International Journal of Management Reviews*. DOI: 10.1111/ijmr.12282.
- Lips-Wiersma M and Morris L (2009) Discriminating between ‘meaningful work’ and the ‘management of meaning’. *Journal of Business Ethics* 88(5): 491–511.
- Lysgaard S (2001) *Arbeiderkollektivet*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Lysova E, Allan B, Dik B et al. (2019) Fostering meaningful work in organizations: a multi-level review. *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 110: 374–389.
- Noronha E, Chakraborty S and D’Cruz P (2020) ‘Doing dignity work’: Indian security guards’ interface with precariousness. *Journal of Business Ethics* 162: 553–575.
- Rosso B, Dekas K and Wrzesniewski A (2010) On the meaning of work: a theoretical integration and review. *Research in Organizational Behavior* 30(1): 91–127.
- Sayer A (2007) Dignity at work: broadening the agenda. *Organization* 14(4): 565–581.
- Thompson M (2019) Bringing political economy back in: a comparative institutionalist perspective on meaningful work. In: Yeoman R, Bailey C, Madden A et al. (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Meaningful Work*. New York: Oxford University Press, 447–465.
- Thompson P (1989) *The Nature of Work: An Introduction to Debates on the Labour Process*. London: Macmillan.

- Thompson P (2021) Foreword. In: Kupfer A (ed.) *Work Appropriation and Social Inequality*. Wilmington, DE: Vernon Press, ix–xiii.
- Thompson P and Vincent S (2010) Labour process theory and critical realism. In: Thompson P and Smith C (eds) *Working Life: Renewing Labour Process Analysis*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 47–69.
- Vallas S (2006) Empowerment redux: structure, agency, and the remaking of managerial authority. *American Journal of Sociology* 111(6): 1677–1717.
- Voswinkel S (2012) ‘Recognition’ and ‘interest’: a multidimensional concept in the sociology of work. *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory* 13(1): 21–41.
- Yeoman R (2014) *Meaningful Work and Workplace Democracy: A Philosophy of Work and a Politics of Meaningfulness*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Yeoman R, Bailey C, Madden A et al. (2019) Introduction and overview. In: Yeoman R, Bailey C, Madden A et al. (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Meaningful Work*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1–17.

Knut Laaser is a senior researcher at the Brandenburg University of Technology Cottbus–Senftenberg and a lecturer at the University of Stirling. His current research project focuses on the many faces of meaningful work and he has published widely on the moral economy of employment and labour process issues in leading journals. He is writing a book with Jan Ch Karlsson on meaningful work under contract with Cambridge University Press.

Jan Ch Karlsson is professor emeritus of sociology at Department of Working Life Science, Karlstad University, Sweden. He has published *Organizational Misbehaviour in the Workplace. Narratives of Dignity and Resistance* (London: Routledge, 2012), *Methods for Social Theory. Analytical Tools for Theorizing and Writing* (with Ann Bergman; Routledge, 2017), *Collective Mobilization in Changing Conditions. Worker Collectivity in a Turbulent Age* (with Jonas Axelsson and Egil J Skorstad; Palgrave Macmillan, 2019) and *Explaining Society. Critical Realism in the Social Sciences* (with Berth Danermark and Mats Ekström; Routledge, 2019, 2nd edition).

**Date submitted** December 2020

**Date accepted** October 2021