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REVIEW ARTICLE

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Lessons learned from meaningful work: Implications for understanding meaningfulness in elite/high performance sport

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ABSTRACT

Exploring meaningful work in sport holds potential for organizational sport psychologists and could be particularly appealing because research in other fields demonstrates its benefits for well-being, productivity, and organizational commitment. Although the concept of meaningful work in sport is not completely new, its emergence can be facilitated by consulting disciplines with longer histories of meaning-focused scholarship for structure and guidance. Therefore, the aim of this article is to critically review the advances in study of meaningful work to identify key lessons learned that can inform research with high-performance athletes and sport organizations. Using a narrative review approach, we explored the key debates in meaningful work literature and present them in a form of four tensional knots: (1) beyond "the self" and subjectivity, (2) time and context, (3) the management of meaning, and (4) the dark side of meaningful work. Each tension is discussed with implications for sport psychology scholarship and organizational sport psychology. We conclude with a brief reflection on how the lessons extracted are embedded in current topical issues in sport organizational life and how the study of meaningful work can extend already prominent strands of organizational sport psychology research.

Lay summary: In this review, we explore the potential applications of the concept of meaningful work in organizational sport psychology. By identifying key tensions in meaningful work literature and their relevance to sport organizations, we provide directions for future research and recommendations for how sport psychologists can address meaningful work in their applied practice.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- Job design and task clarity can support meaningful work
- Reflective practice is a good starting point for sport psychologists to start exploring the tensions of meaningful work addressed in this paper
- Attempts to intervene with what is considered meaningful can be conceived as unwarranted manipulation and lead to skepticism

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Organizational sport psychology is now a significant subfield in sport psychology, dedicated to the development of knowledge and practice that supports the creation of performance environments through, and in support of, individual and group flourishing (Wagstaff, 2019b). Reflective of this broad scope, organizational sport psychology has drawn on established traditions in psychology to secure both its base and its development. An important starting point has been found in industrial organizational (I/O) psychology, which constitutes the scientific study of human behavior in organizations and the workplace and is a specialty that derives and applies principles of individual, group, and organizational behavior to the solution of human problems in work (American Psychological Association, 2011). More specifically, organizational sport psychology has pulled substantially from organizational psychology, which is a specific branch of I/O psychology that integrates social psychology and organizational behavior to tackle the emotional and motivational dimensions of organizational life (Sly et al., 2020; Wagstaff & Larner, 2015). A main aim of organizational psychology, and therefore, organizational sport psychology, has been to examine the motivations of employees so that they have a successful, productive, satisfying work environment, and in turn help organizations function more effectively (Wagstaff & Larner, 2015). This has meant fusing a concern for individual-level processes (e.g., emotions, attitudes, motivations, behaviors) and macro-organizational processes (e.g., culture, climate, organizational stress) and how they influence individual behavior (Wagstaff, 2019a). At its most positive (Positive Organizational Psychology in Sport or POPS), the goal of research in this area is to explore variables and constructs "which facilitate positive individual and organizational outcomes in a mutually causal manner" (Wagstaff et al., 2012, p. 90).

Wagstaff (2017) has provided a helpful organizing framework spanning four key domains of organizational sport psychology (emotions and attitudes; stress and well-being; organizational behavior; high performance environments) to align past and potential future lines of inquiry within the field. Yet, much more remains to be done to improve the organizational knowledge and competencies of applied sport psychology practitioners (Sly et al., 2020), not least because it has been argued that sport psychology has much "catching up" to do with regard to the sourcing and integration of key organizational topic areas (McDougall & Ronkainen, 2019; Wagstaff & Burton-Wylie, 2018). For example, Wagstaff and Burton-Wylie (2018) called for complementing the focus on culture as a source of competitive advantage with exploration of purpose and value in organizational life, and therefore encouraging a better balance between considerations of performance and wellbeing. In addition, both of the abovementioned critical commentaries noted the potential of making links to cultural sport psychology (CSP), thus placing greater attention on cultural identities and social justice issues. It is into this milieu of disciplinary reorientation and practice advancement that we introduce a key topic area that has captured the attention of I/O psychology and many other related disciplines—Meaningful Work.

Meaningful work

The study of meaning is vital because it is often argued that people are meaning-making creatures and that seeking meaning in life is a fundamental condition of being human

(Baumeister & Vohs, 2002; Frankl, 1985; Geertz, 1973). Historically, a rich body of literature has explored (shifting) meanings of work; for example, Super (1976) noted that in addition to its instrumental meanings (as a means of survival), work has been understood to carry a range of negative (a curse or burden) as well as more positive (as a source of identity, a way to structure life, or a means to self-fulfillment) meanings. The growing body of literature on meaningful work emphasizes that although work might carry many meanings, not all meanings make work meaning*ful*, with the latter typically indicating a positive evaluation of work as something worth doing (Rosso et al., 2010).

The contemporary focus on meaningful work across various disciplines is often justified with the assumptions that since work is a dominant preoccupation in working adults' lives, taking a major part of their waking hours, the quality of work has major implications for perceiving life as worthy and meaningful as a whole (Michaelson et al., 2014). The implicit need people seem to have for meaningful work, as well as the embeddedness of work in our wider lives has led to the claim that understanding how individuals find meaning and meaningfulness in and though work "should arguably be one of the most important questions for organizational scholarship" (Podolny, et al., 2004, p. 107). Reflecting the surge of scholarship in this area, the Society of Industrial Organizational Psychology (SIOP, 2020) recently listed meaning and purposeful work as a key trend in their well-publicized annual top ten work and organization trend list. Anecdotally, in our own wider professional sphere and network, we have also witnessed an increase in discussion about meaningful work and the gradual introduction of "explicitly" meaning-based consulting firms and applied services that recognize that meaningful work matters and has several benefits for individuals and organizations[1]. Concurrently, a groundbreaking report on purposeful business, by Prosper (Scotland's most influential membership organization and an economic and social think tank) recently posited the many positive outcomes that meaningful employment has for workers, businesses, investors, communities, and societies, including the enhancement of trust between the network of stakeholders that make up the business and social ecosystem (Prosper, 2022). These observations seem to align with commentary from SIOP that suggest that because people are no longer viewing work simply as a means to an end but rather as a way of life, that can be imbued with meaning, organizations will need to rethink their human capital strategy in order to evolve with the changing mindset of employees.

This focus on meaningful work across various disciplines, particularly in the Euro-American context, partly stems from its perceived lack, as it has been suggested that many employees are disengaged at work. Gallup polls have indicated that at least 50% of the U.S. workforce can be described as "quiet quitters" (Harter, 2022), which Galanis et al. (2023) characterized as involving three factors: detachment (e.g., task avoidance, taking a lot of breaks), lack of initiative, and lack of motivation, coinciding with Gallup's (2023) description of quiet quitting as non-engagement. These figures correspond with Gallup's State of the Art Global Workplace 2023 Report (which encompassed a global survey across, 160 countries 122,416 civilian respondents who are over the age of 15 and who were employed for any number of hours by an employer) indicating that 59% of the global workforce are quiet quitting.

Alongside these concerns, the attention to meaningful work can also be attributed to the positive aspects noted with its attainment. It has been argued that meaningful work has non-instrumental value, and therefore it should be desired for its own sake (Martela, 2023). In addition, there are compelling findings on its instrumental benefits: for example, studies have shown that people with meaningful work are more likely to experience personal benefits such as improved health and job and life satisfaction (Allan et al., 2019). At the same time, providing meaningful work is found to be beneficial to organizations because it increases organizational commitment, employee engagement, and job performance (Bailey, Yeoman, et al., 2019). Therefore, providing the conditions which support attainment of meaningful work has often been lifted as a key concern for organizations (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009). Indeed, certain organizational conditions, such as leadership style and well-defined jobs have been found to support the perceptions of meaningfulness (Bailey, Yeoman, et al., 2019).

Meaning and meaningfulness of sport-work

There is a tension in exploring sport through the lens of meaningful work because historically sport has often been considered "anti-work", that is, play and leisure. However, as Donnelly (2016) discussed, elite sport with its talent development systems has arguably made sport work-like for many youth athletes from a young age, and the vast industry that has grown around sport has created a plethora of sport-related occupations (in addition to unpaid volunteer work). Vermeulen et al. (2016) noted that sport always exists in the tension between work and play but argued that an increased formal organization diminishes the latter.

In the work-play dichotomy, the more negative connotations of work are often evoked; however, as already noted, work itself carries varied meanings from curse and burden to self-realization. As such, even if contemporary sport is technically work for many of those who are involved (as paid employment or volunteer work), its meaning remains contested and negotiated in relevant cultural contexts and fields of activity. It has been noted that the position of a professional athlete is associated with positive connotations (a dream come true, prestige, wealth; Bourke, 2003) and that their work is typically culturally constructed as "labour of love" (Roderick, 2006). Indeed, studies have demonstrated that athletes (e.g., Botelho & Agergaard, 2011; Mallett & Hanrahan, 2004), coaches (e.g., Ronkainen et al., 2021) and sport entrepreneurs (e.g., Winand et al., 2023) frequently talk about their love or passion for sport when justifying their investment in it. However, researchers also discuss shifts of meaning in sport-workers relationship with sport, for example with elite women athletes entering motherhood (Massey & Whitehead, 2022) or male footballers experiencing job loss (Roderick, 2014). Furthermore, scholarship positioned in CSP has emphasized the centrality of culture in the constitution of local meanings assigned to sport and the importance of intersecting identities (e.g., Ryba, 2017). Studies positioned in CSP have, among other things, explored athletic careers from a gender perspective, showing that the narratives surrounding gender, career, and a good life shape meanings athletes assign to sport and choices they make concerning their career paths (see Schinke et al., 2019).

Despite the broad literature addressing various meanings of sport(-work), only a handful of studies have also explicitly drawn on the concept of meaningful work in a sport context. In line with broader research literature, it has been shown that meaningful work could support well-being in sport organizations' employees in Iran (Mansouri et al., 2024). Furthermore, adopting a qualitative approach, Baer (2023) explored U.S. sport industry employees' perceptions of meaningful work and found that they most often considered their work meaningful because it was considered service to others, provided social connections, and contributed to something beyond the workers themselves. Additionally, many participants considered their work as a calling and discussed the benefits they experienced from living their calling, but also potential negative effects such as limited time for other life domains or accepting a low pay to do what they love. The notion of calling, often considered as an expression of highly meaningful work, was also explored in sport employees in athletic departments by Huml et al. (2024) who showed that those who reported having a calling were more committed to their work and had a reduced risk of burnout. Another study on volunteer coaches in England and Finland (Ronkainen et al., 2022) explored work meanings and showed that older coaches, compared to their younger colleagues, were more likely to consider their work as vocation or calling. Similar to Baer's (2023) findings, there could be both positive and potentially negative elements of experiencing coaching as a vocation or calling, such as compromises made in work or family life. However, regardless of whether coaches considered their activity as a hobby, career or calling, helping others and giving back to the sport were salient themes animating their commitment to coaching. Finally, Ronkainen et al. (2021) explored athletes' perceptions of meaning in sport using an adaptation of Work and Meaning Inventory (Steger et al., 2012). They found that adopting a craftsmanship approach to sport contributed to meaningfulness, as did religious affiliation. However, the participating athletes were of various levels from recreational to elite athletes, which arguably could have played a role in how well the concept of sport as meaningful work could apply to their sport involvement.

Against this backdrop of the surge of interest in meaningful work, and the recent calls to expand the conceptual scope of organizational sport psychology, we explore the potential value of meaningful work for understanding work-life construction in sport. The current manuscript aims to explore opportunities and challenges in examining sport through the lens of meaningful work while proposing that it holds value for the development of individual (e.g., emotional, attitudinal, motivational, behavioral) and group (e.g., cultural, climatic) flourishing within organizations that is so central to the tenets of organizational sport psychology. At the same time, we want to critically scrutinize its potential negative implications and raise concerns about problematic applications. To reach our objectives, the article is structured as follows. First, we will discuss the definitions of meaningful work and their application to sport. We will then present the methodology of our review of meaningful work literature and the lessons learned in a form of four key tensional knots: (1) beyond "the self" and subjectivity, (2) time and context, (3) the management of meaning, and (4) the dark side of meaningful work. We conclude with a brief reflection on future directions in this research area.

Defining meaningful work

As noted previously, scholarship often distinguishes between various meaning(s) of work and meaningfulness. For example, Steger et al.'s (2012, p. 323) defined meaningful work "not as simply whatever work means to people (meaning), but as work that is both significant and positive in valence (meaningfulness)". Moreover, they suggested that the positive valence should be understood within a eudaimonic perspective—that is, the focus of meaningful work is on growth and a sense of purpose, rather than pleasure (the hedonistic perspective). The definitions that centralize subjective perceptions have provided a starting point for many studies on meaningful work (typically adopting a psychological perspective); however, recent debates have sought to distinguish features of meaningful work that transcend individual preferences. These debates will be discussed in detail below, but it should be briefly noted here that scholars dissatisfied with the favored definitions (work is meaningful whenever the worker experiences it so) have proposed alternative accounts. Michaelson (2021, p. 420) argued that meaningful work should have a normative element to it and suggested the following definition:

> Meaningful work is purposeful activity that one has good reasons to experience as meaningful, that others have good reasons to perceive as socially worthwhile, and that is independently (intersubjectively or objectively) meaningful—i.e., the meaningfulness of which is at least partly independent of whether it is individually experienced or socially perceived as meaningful and worthwhile.

From a different perspective, Lips-Wiersma et al. (2023) suggested discriminating between subjective meaningful work (perception of meaningfulness) and objective meaningful work, where the latter concerns the moral requirements of an employer-employee relationship such as ensuring dignity, autonomy, security and freedom in work. Relatedly, Laaser and Karlsson (2022) developed a sociological framework which aims to conceptualize objective and subjective meaningful work dimensions (of dignity, autonomy and recognition) and their interactions. Taken together, these conceptualisations point toward identifying norms and values that can be taken as constitutive of meaningful work. Such perspective, we argue, is especially important to consider for organizational sport psychology, as it can counter the potential of meaningful work to be used as a discourse facilitating exploitative practices (see the section on the dark side of meaningful work).

Materials and methods

We used a narrative review approach (Ferrari, 2015) to explore the landscape of meaningful work scholarship to identify ways that sport psychology can use this literature to inform future research and practice on meaningful work in sport. Using a narrative review allowed us to focus on exploring the quality of arguments and tracing the intellectually stimulating debates that are relevant for sport scholarship (sometimes across disciplines and tacitly drawing on closely related literature e.g., calling, organizational culture, organizational studies), rather than following a positivist model of review based on procedural validity (Hammersley, 2001)[2]. By identifying lively debates and key issues in the meaningful work literature, we aim to provide sport scholars and practitioners with both a base and some direction for future work in the sport domain. Moreover, as

Hammersley (2001) noted, research is ultimately aimed at being illuminative and useful for the reader, and the intended audience shapes the ways that reviews are put together. Therefore, our choice of articles was guided by thinking about parallel problems and debates in organizational sport psychology, and how the meaningful work scholarship and related practices could be usefully built upon in our field.

Lessons learned from meaningful work

Beyond "the self" and subjectivity

As already indicated in definitions of meaningful work, a common and persistent thread running through the various traditions[3] of literature is that meaningfulness is innate, something deeply personal and subjective (for overviews, see Rosso et al., 2010; Bailey, Yeoman, et al., 2019). Thus, meaningful work (often and primarily from psychological perspectives) is generally assumed to be signified by a subjective, individual experience in relation to work and located in a persons' perception of their work experiences and interactions (e.g., Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012). The individual—surrounded by a variety of potential sources of work meaning—has primary agency to evaluate the meaning of work for themselves, and hence meaningfulness as an experience incorporates both affective and cognitive mechanisms (Martela & Pessi, 2018; Rosso et al., 2010). Martela and Pessi (2018) summarize this perspective by calling meaningfulness a "type of feeling we have when we work or a feeling that arises when we think about our work. In essence, work feels or doesn't feel meaningful," (p. 3).

From these core assumptions, meaningful work researchers have investigated the cognitive and affective elements that give rise to perceptions of meaningful work. Similarly, many studies have also pursued understanding of how individuals can satisfy or amend personal motives, values, life-needs and goals in order to fulfill an innate "will to meaning" (Frankl, 1985). Since realization of one's own potential and self-actualization are often thought to be the foundation of meaningfulness, work-centric perspectives, although moving beyond an individual and agentic perspective, nonetheless retain a self-focus.

However, the unchecked prioritization of self needs has often negated closer examination of meaningful work in the context of wider relations to others and more normative considerations about a good life. The dissatisfaction with equating meaningfulness with whatever the individual considers worth pursuing is evident in recent scholarship on meaningful work (Lips-Wiersma et al., 2020, 2023) and has been present in philosophical work on meaning in life. Wolf (2016) suggested that "meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness" (p. 253). By that, she suggested that we have at least an intuitive and to a degree intersubjective way of distinguishing worthy projects from wastes of time. As a parallel discussion, Lips-Wiersma and colleagues (2020) drew on the growing discussions on the ethics of meaningful work and showed that perceptions of fairness, responsible leadership, and worthy work (the sense that work has independent value to society) were antecedents of meaningful work, with worthy work identified as the dominant antecedent. Their recent conceptualization of objectively meaningful work (Lips-Wiersma et al., 2023) further point toward some

criteria that are important, such as dignity and job security, whether they are recognized by the individual worker or not.

The move beyond subjectivity in meaningful work literature raises several questions for sport psychology researchers interested in meaningful sport-work. Subjective sense of meaningfulness is of course important, and one could argue necessary, for sport-work to be meaningful; there is certainly much space for knowledge advancement on how meaningfulness perceptions arise for people in various roles in sport organizations. At the same time, a lesson learned is that it is crucial to pay attention to the conditions where sport-workers are embedded and consider whether we are able to say something normative about meaningfulness. This lesson is consistent with the important role organizational sport psychology can play in dispelling the myth of individualism in sport, whereby a prevailing belief in sport cultures is that sport outcomes largely rest upon personal characteristics of individual athletes rather than wider interpersonal, group, and organizational factors (Wagstaff, 2019a).

There are arguably normative conditions of sport-work that lie outside of individual subjectivity and sphere of control and that can influence meaningfulness experienced. Elite and professional sport is a precarious context, and the threat that athletes become exploited by the systems of sport has often been raised (e.g., Beckmann, 2023). Furthermore, athletes and coaches rarely enjoy job security which Lips-Wiersma et al. (2023) consider as one aspect of objectively meaningful work. Sporting mega-events are also increasingly scrutinized for environmental and human rights issues (e.g., Ross & McDougall, 2022), which might lead participants to ask personal questions about the ethics of being involved, but also to more normative discussions whether sporting activities can be meaningful in a context where they are potentially causing harm. These types of considerations can occupy a central space in the reformulations of sport organizations that are part of the organizational sport psychology agenda and that would see sport organizations transformed from entities built on "winning at all cost" mentalities to agents of social change orientated geared toward social responsibility, diversity, and justice (Wagstaff, 2019a). Finally, within an objective or normative framework, it is not simply up to the individual to craft meaning in sport, but sport organizations are also responsible for striving to create conditions that make meaningfulness possible. By considering how organizational intervention can create, design, shape meaning to provide opportunities for self-fulfillment, sport psychologists can contribute to more opportunities for meaningfulness through sport-work.

Time and context

Scholarship on meaningful work has often considered meaningfulness (at least implicitly) as a relatively stable phenomenon, and only recently researchers have started exploring potential fluctuations and temporal ordering of meaningfulness. Bailey and Madden (2017) argued that meaningful work would be better understood as episodic and transitory, rather than a stable feature of certain working lives. Examining three occupational groups, refuse collectors, academics, and masons, they showed that a sense of meaningfulness arose in cycles (of days, years, etc.) and especially in rituals that marked the completion of a piece of work. The fluctuating nature of meaningful work

was also highlighted by Mitra and Buzzanell (2017) who drew on a poststructuralist perspective and examined tensions and negotiations that sustainability practitioners experienced in deriving meaningfulness at work. They emphasized that research participants had to negotiate meanings of different micromoments in their jobs, including those that were unsettling or annoying, to put together a broader (meaningful) macro story of their working lives. As such, meaningfulness was not constant, but was also contested in daily encounters and communications as well as in facing the reality of their jobs which could be different from expectations. Furthermore, de Boeck et al. (2019) have shown that future time perspective is important for understanding perceptions of meaningfulness. They argued that an imagined (desired) future shapes experiences of current meaningfulness, that is, when people experienced that they were realizing their potential, they could perceive a connection between their present work and a desired future.

Another neglected aspect of scholarship has been the contextual and situational conditions, including cultural discourses, that shape possibilities for meaningfulness to arise. Lepisto and Pratt (2017) noted that meaningful work has been often conceptualized from a self-realization perspective, where fostering basic need satisfaction and crafting more intrinsically motivating jobs are seen as the key applied messages. However, they advanced a justification perspective, where the "problem" is not having repetitive or boring jobs but being able to justify the value of what one is doing. In this latter perspective, meaningfulness is not inherently present or absent in specific types of tasks or jobs, but individuals must be able to make sense of how their work contributes to something worthwhile beyond the self. Here, the socio-cultural context plays an important role in providing narrative resources that help (or do not help) in justifying meaningfulness. In an empirical context, Florian et al., (2019) showed eloquently how shifting societal discourse influenced meaningfulness perceptions with volunteer workers in a German refugee shelter during the refugee crisis. In the beginning, volunteering was constructed in public discourse as highly meaningful work and was gaining a wealth of social recognition, whereas as months went by, the discourse surrounding refugees shifted to societal schisms, crime and practical problems around housing and employment. As internal problems in the shelter also arose over time (frustrated and "ungrateful" refugees, organizational changes), constructions of meaningfulness became more problematic, and the number of volunteers dropped significantly. Those who stayed found ways of compensating or reframing some of the experiences to sustain meaningfulness.

Fluctuations of meaning in sport have also been noted in studies with athletes. The shifting meanings in sport across athletes' careers have been discussed by Ronkainen et al. (2015), who showed that when progressing to higher levels of competition, some athletes expressed that they had struggled with the changing context and sense of losing authenticity when performance and results started to increasingly dominate the lifeworld. Roderick (2014) similarly discussed mature footballers' increasing dis-identification from their profession that had not fulfilled their childhood dreams. In a shorter time perspective, Luzzeri and Chow (2020) even showed that, in collegiate student-athletes, there was a positive relationship between satisfaction with recent athletic performance and experienced meaning in sport. For applied sport psychology practitioners working with athletes and sport organizations, these findings indicate a need for sensitivity to the temporal flows in the lives of sport-workers. For example, post-Olympic period has been found a challenging period not only for elite athletes but also coaches

and support staff, for whom navigating and overcoming the blues has been described as "a combination of reflecting on values, redefining purpose, and having the next task to work on" (DeWolfe & Dithurbide, 2022, p. 1254). More broadly, athletes' career transitions have been identified as periods when meaning might sometimes get lost (Oblinger-Peters, 2024).

Bailey and Madden (2017) noted that meaningfulness arises when employees reflect on their contribution within a broader horizon, whereas meaninglessness is experienced when past and future perspectives are lost, in moments of "lost present" (p. 16). From that perspective, applied practitioners working with sport organizations can work to create spaces where different members of the organization can reflect on their work experiences and seek to connect them with broader goals and values they attach to their work. At the same time, since meanings of work that are drawn on to produce meaningfulness are contextual and depend on socio-cultural discourses and narratives, applied practitioners need to be aware that sport-workers "personal problems" (with meaningfulness) are often reflections of broader organizational or socio-cultural issues, as already noted in the section on the self and subjectivity.

The management of meaning

It has been observed by meaningful work scholars how the major stream of research on meaningful work has emerged from functionalist, managerialist perspectives aimed at understanding how to manage meaning (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009). Such a singular focus is embedded in the longer history of the study of work and organization(s), which has been tightly coupled from the beginning with ideas of leadership and organizational rationality, and the subsequent responsibility bestowed on authority figures to manage (and control) the affective domain of workers (Willmott, 1993). Correspondingly, it is long been understood that most of the core issues of managerial and work life pivot in one way or another around ideas of meaning (Jackall, 1988, as cited in Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2009). As such, there is substantial interest in the sources, creation, and management of meaningful work because they are seen as a primary method to harness employee's motivation and attachment to work; and, therefore, naturally related to a multitude of ongoing work concerns like productivity, commitment, worker well-being and problems of retention/turnover (Bailey et al., 2017; Rosso et al., 2010). Furthermore, as meaningful work is something which most people want or expect to experience (Lysova et al., 2019), then from a management (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003) or normative (Michaelson, 2021) perspective, there is a significant role for leaders and organizations in the development of meaningful work.

This type of architectural influence can come in many guises. Attempts to manage meaning may be ethical (e.g., guided by genuine concern and desire to support worker well-being or reduction of stress) or more cynical (e.g., involving a manipulation of meanings such as greater good ideals and values that unite and inspire, but that, for instance, are intended to operate in the service of profit maximization; Groß, 2010). Typically, it is proposed that meaningful work can be managed through several commonly used mechanisms. These include job design (e.g., designing jobs to increase empowerment, task identity, task significance), human resource practices (e.g., careful

design of job adverts to create person-job "fit", fair pay, professional development, policy creation), and leadership styles (e.g., transformational leadership; authentic personalities) (cf., Bailey et al., 2017; Bailey, Lips-Wiersma, et al., 2019; Bailey, Yeoman, et al., 2019; Lysova et al., 2019). However, it is in leadership intent to work with and within the organizational cultural domain where the management of meaning is perhaps most evident because meaningfulness at work has been closely associated with "strong" value-driven organizational cultures (Bailey et al., 2017). Research with these aims has usually been predicated on the assumption that organizational culture can be managed by leaders and that the unique culture of an organization should act to provide organizational members with meanings and factors that contribute to meaningful work (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009). Here, the culture-meaningfulness link is assumed to be possible through the creation of shared and consensus values, powerful and inspiring mission statements, and the development of family-like dynamics and feelings of belonging that can inspire and enhance loyalty and cohesion (Alvesson, 2002; Bailey et al., 2017). Hence, in sport organizational culture literature, it is often recommended that sport leaders and sport psychologists attempt to manage organizational culture and associated collectively held understandings and meanings through a range of tactics (but, for critiques, see McDougall et al., 2020, Wagstaff & Burton-Wylie, 2018). These can include modeling behavior, reward systems, and strategically developing and selling key messages and values that are spread by influential allies to all team and/or organizational members (e.g., Cruickshank & Collins, 2015; Fletcher & Arnold, 2011).

However, as Gabriel (1999) and others have noted, cultures based on strong core and consensus values, tend to have tacitly implied "right" and "wrong" attitudes and behaviors that invade "the totality of the individual's emotional and symbolic life" (p. 188). Gabriel (1999, p.184) refers to this encroachment as the "symbolic manipulation of meanings" while Lips-Wiersma and Morris (2009) similarly stated that the management of meaning is an attempt to control the emotional and existential domain of individuals. Critical voices have also added that when organizations attempt to manage employees' experiences of meaningfulness without providing opportunity to opt in, then negative and unintended outcomes usually ensue, such as inauthenticity, meaninglessness, and resistance to control attempts (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009; Willmott, 1993). Similar views exist in foundational (Weber & Kalberg, 2013) and emerging (Rosa, 2020) sociological literature, cautioning that the world made manageable forfeits its meaning and results, instead, in disenchantment.

For the growing number of sport organizational scholars, these concerns and debates offer essential insights into the value *and* risks of attempts to manage meaning and raise important about who has the power to craft meaning for whom (Bailey, Lips-Wiersma, et al., 2019). However, it is important to note that meaning is not only shaped by conscious, intentional, and surfaced leadership actions and transactional processes. Through a flow of action and interaction—words and utterances, images, symbolic actions and gestures, not always thought through or intentional—leaders also focus attention and shape interpretations of employees about what is meaningful and how (Smircich & Morgan, 1982), In other words, while leadership can certainly be "dark" (Cruickshank & Collins, 2015) and involve cynical machination, it "punctuates contexts in ways that provide a focus for the creation of meaning" (Smircich & Morgan, 1982, p. 261) anyway, regardless

of strategic intent to manage meaning or not. Hence, and as pointed out by McDougall et al. (2020), there is considerable scope in sport psychology to understand leadership and organization as a phenomenon based on the intentional *and* unintentional shaping of meanings and therefore opportunity to penetrate more deeply into the meaning (and power-based) structures that underlie action in sport organizational settings. Further consideration of how meaningful work can become a valuable dimension of the broader cultural context within which sport workers live and work without being instrumentalized and experienced as a mode of management control will be a key (and complex) issue for researchers and practitioners to grapple with.

The "dark side" of meaningful work

The majority of meaningful work literature—often embedded within positive psychology framing—has pushed the view of meaningful work as an inherently and predominantly positive construct. There are several reasons for this, beginning with commonly held understandings of key terms. "Meaning" and "meaningfulness" usually hold a positive valance in meaningful work literature (cf. Rosso et al., 2010), as do many associated ideas (e.g., authenticity, transcendence, self-esteem, connection, belongingness, personal growth etc.) that are often used to theorize about how meaningfulness arises. Moreover, a significant body of meaningful work research has emerged from positivistic and quantitative approaches that are often unwittingly wedded to instrumental and unitarist perceptions of work and organization (Bailey, Lips-Wiersma, et al., 2019). Accordingly, meaningful work research has trended in a number of now fairly predictable directions: the identification of positive work meanings that can be found or made by employees, the exploration of associated benefits of meaningful work, and the investigation into antecedents of meaningful work and how they may be established or cultivated to induce meaningfulness.

In response to such lopsidedness, there is rising awareness of a dark side to meaningful work, providing some promising footholds for sport scholars to investigate the construct's negative aspects and outcomes within different sport contexts. Confronting a base assumption within meaningful work literature, researchers have begun to outline how meaningful work is not necessarily a positive or desirable experience for all and can be challenging, difficult, and effortful to obtain and maintain (e.g., Bailey & Madden, 2017; Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012). Meaningful work can also push people to detriment and harmful excesses (Bailey, Lips-Wiersma, et al., 2019). These can encompass long and irregular hours, over exertion and workaholism, tolerance of exploitative practices, worse compensation and conditions, and the construction of poor work-life balance whereby work is prioritized over other life domains and relations (which could also provide sources of meaningfulness) (Dempsey & Sanders, 2010).

The abovementioned issues also align with studies with different sport workers, and the potential dark sides of sport-work have already been discussed by several scholars. For example, Dixon and colleagues have written extensively on tensions in coaches' work-family interface (Dixon & Bruening, 2007; Graham & Dixon, 2014) and recent studies have addressed overwork culture in North American athletic departments (e.g., Huml et al., 2024; Krahn, 2024). For example, Krahn (2024) found that an overwork culture was normalized in a Canadian university sport coaching setting, leaving coaches

in a vulnerable position and some participants mentioned deciding not to have children or becoming divorced mostly because of their job. Baer's (2023) study that explicitly focused on meaningful work in sport administrators also indicated that the construction of sport-work as a calling could lead employees to accept conditions that compromised their well-being and life balance.

Studies with talented and professional athletes have shown that becoming a professional is often constructed as a dream come true, and something worth pursuing at the expense of other life domains and interests (Douglas & Carless, 2006; Roderick, 2014; Storm et al., 2022). As shown in meaningful work literature, some types of work, fueled by societal discourses, are framed as exceptionally meaningful which can serve as a mobilizing force initially, yet lead to meaninglessness later as the context shifts or the work does not live up to wider expectations (Florian et al., 2019). This logic is easily applied to high performance sport contexts where over investment in a career widely perceived as highly meaningful could lead to personal detriment for athletes, coaches and even sport psychologists (McDougall et al., 2015). For instance, athletes regularly normalize injury and play through pain (Everard, et al., 2021), or they may place their development in sport before other aspects of life in order to progress within a vocation and structure that has a statistically low chance of eventual success (Roderick, 2014). Other figures in sport, such as coaches and sport scientists/psychologists can also experience burnout, psychological distress, and other costs while pursuing personal goals or working in the service of others (a key dimension of meaningfulness) (McCormack et al., 2015).

A further, and more indirect potential dark side to meaningful work can also surface, not through its realization, but through it remaining un-realized. Some studies have indicated that having a calling but being unable to live it out has been associated with negative outcomes such as lower well-being (Berg et al., 2010; Gazica & Spector, 2015). The findings of these studies could conceivably have implications within the nuanced conditions and context of sport. For athletes and coaches, careers in sport are often unpredictable, and deselection or job loss can prevent them from accessing the very activities that provide them with meaningfulness. Yet, and suggesting the need for more studies to understand the phenomenon, a more recent study (Marsh et al., 2020) confirmed that answered callings had several benefits but, unlike earlier studies, suggested that unanswered callings were no worse than lacking a calling. With these mixed findings, an interesting potential line of future research is whether unanswered callings are associated with adverse effects for those involved in sport. As it is well-known, only a fraction of talented athletes progress to senior level elite sport, despite the dedication and investment from an early age. Understanding whether experiencing sport as a calling has an influence on adjustment to dropout, opt-out or retirement and subsequent life path (e.g., adopting a coaching role) would be valuable for sport organizations in terms of developing support programmes to help athletes transition out of the talent pathway or elite sport.

Concluding thoughts: Putting meaningful work into organizational sport psychology research and practice agenda

In this article, our aim was to critically review key tensions and debates in meaningful work literature to inspire and guide emergent scholarship on the topic in organizational

sport psychology. While the findings surrounding the positive implications of meaningful work for individuals and organizations provide a strong rationale for sport organizational scholars to pay attention to the construct, it seems vital to attend to complexities and ethical dimensions attached to it when starting to explore its potential. In our narrative review, we extracted four key lessons: the need to think beyond the subjective experience and framing of meaningful work to consider the potentially normative aspects, the importance of temporality and shifting context, the value and risks of managing meaning, and being aware of the potential dark sides of meaningful work.

While the centrality of subjective evaluations of what is meaningful and what is not has dominated perceptions of how meaningfulness is ultimately realized, our review highlights the need for a complementary consideration of the potential objective and normative qualities of meaningfulness. The possibility for a normative structure to meaningful work implicates sport organizations in the realization of it. Practically, the application of a subjective-normative dialectic as a means to think through ideas of meaningfulness could prove fruitful in several sport domains where meaningfulness is strategically developed, for example, as a regulatory mechanism as different sport organizations continue to grapple with conflicts of performance and well-being and how to weight them. As noted, getting this "wrong" sometimes leading to scandal and abuse (cf. Feddersen et al., 2020) when the importance of the former is held as greater than the importance of the latter.

Holding meaningful work as fluid and shifting over time and depending on context encourages sport scholars to attend to meaningfulness of work longitudinally, which makes sense, in relation to questions of normativity, as societal attitudes toward sport change. Considering the broader context, elite sport has gone through various crises (e.g., in relation to environmental and human rights issues, reports of abuse and misconduct, athletes' mental health struggles etc.). Sport organizations wishing to support meaningful work may therefore also have to address such questions about the societal justification and value of elite sport. Furthermore, the dangers inherent in attempts to support—and thus manage—meaning is important to bear in mind as sport psychologists increasingly undertake organizational type work (Wagstaff, 2019b). As the organizational capabilities and responsibilities of sport psychologists continue to grow, we concur with recommendations that a business ethics lens (i.e., a domain of applied philosophy focused on moral aspects of business activities; de Colle, 2015) can shed light on critical questions about the nature and extent of a responsibility for organizations to foster meaningfulness in and at work; and the responsibility of individuals and organizations to engage in work that they perceive as significant and purposeful (Michaelson et al., 2014).

The four lessons identified in this paper should not be seen as distinct, but instead interacting and constitutive of the others. A failure to wrestle with the complexities within and between these lessons could theoretically and methodologically restrict the construct, as has happened across meaningful work literature, and may also impede original and useful application of the construct as our discipline moves toward meaningful work practices. However, in regard to this, we caution against the instrumentalization of meaningful work, where it is used only with a performative intent. Rather, in addition to exploring whether elite athletes and other sport workers experience sport as

meaningful work, how it might be enhanced, and what outcomes it brings, contemporary debates in meaningful work encourage us to engage in larger imaginings. For example, whether and how meaningful sport-work can be obtained amid fundamental shifts in work and society from which sport does not stand apart (e.g., "great resignation" and "quiet quitting", shifting economy characterized by artificial intelligence, automation and remote work, etc.; Ng & Stanton, 2023). We hope that the debates and lessons learned explored in this paper will encourage organizational sport psychology researchers to explore further how the concept resonates with sport organizational life, and also to "think big" when it comes to meaning of sport in contemporary societies.

Given the newness of meaningful work in relation to sport, there are few firm applied recommendations to support integration into sport psychology practice. Indeed, well-known meaningful work researchers who are making forays into organizational intervention warn that meaningful work is a "special" but difficult construct to apply for several reasons related to the tensional knots we have described (Attuned, 2023). In light of such difficulty, the "specialness" of the construct—like many of the central ideas that organizational consulting gravitates around (for example, culture)—could easily be folded into prevailing, but outdated modes and models of change and organizing that act to frame and constrain sport organizational practice rather than push it forward. It is not difficult to envisage meaningful work theory being co-opted into practical "how to lists", linear programmes of change where cultures of meaningful work are sought, or where meaningful work is used as conceptual fodder for the crafting of generalized and banal purpose/mission statements. Such uses may reflect well-intentioned, even common-sense, attempts to make meaningful work possible, but they neither account for variation of values in the workplace nor the complexity of non-linear interactions between people and systems they work within.

These kinds of uses are also likely to invite resistance from organizational members. Resistance tends to be under-considered in sport organizational research and practice already, mainly because such literature tends to be based around models of consensus (McDougall et al, 2020). Yet, meaningful work is conceptually entangled with who we are and how we change over time. As such, it relates to other important aspects of life such as relationships, personal interests, life projects, as well as our changing interpretations of significant events in social, cultural, and political domains, where meanings shift and are contested. As noted in our overview, attempts to interfere with perceptions and experience of meaningful work can therefore easily be conceived of as unwarranted manipulation which could lead to eventual skepticism and about the value and uses of the construct. For these types of reasons, and in line with writings that reflect the changing nature of sport psychology, we are understandably wary of "off the shelf" (Sly et al., 2020, p. 96) meaningful work interventions that are neither tailored to context nor mindful of idiosyncratic needs of various sport domains and clients. Hence, although we conclude with some focused practice suggestions (spanning various levels of intervention), we advise both caution and creativity in the application. One fundamental and high impact area of practice for sport psychologists is simply to guard against casual usage of the construct.

At the individual level, simple communication strategies suggested by Bailey and Allan (Attuned, 2023), can be used by sport psychologists to facilitate meaningfulness

through job design and increasing task clarity. A key component of meaningful work is that it contributes to something beyond the self. Therefore, explaining or encouraging awareness about how the work one does, or aspects of it, matters or makes things better for someone else, is likely to enhance perceptions and experiences of meaningfulness. This can be particularly impactful in relation to articulating the reasons for tasks that could be seen as mundane or not having much point, and in basic practice terms, involves the clear communication of why a sport worker is being asked to do something.

Recognizing that moments of pause and reflection can be rare in high level sport (McDougall et al., 2015), opportunities to weigh what is meaningful either need to be cultivated or integrated into existing and emerging practices. One promising avenue could be to reflect on meaningful work within performance decompression sessions. At the time of writing, this practice has recently made headlines in UK media for their use with British athletes post-Paris Olympic Games. It is quite common for athletes to lose focus post-Olympics: to question whether all the sacrifice was worth it, to focus on the next and new tasks, and to consider changes of directions due to age and likelihood of future success (BBC Radio 5 Live, n.d.). These are reflection points that seem to naturally coalesce around key dimensions of meaningfulness and that could benefit from the broader but directive theoretical framing meaningful work can provide. Moreover, given that people generally do not become aware of what is meaningful on command, and that awareness of what is meaningful can evade consciousness and unfold over time, the multi-session and phased structure of decompression sessions are advantageous practically, taking account of the temporal aspects of meaningful work.

While a full examination of the range of possibilities to facilitate meaningful work through intervention at the organizational level lies beyond the scope of this article, in general, sport psychologists must be careful to avoid intervention that provides prescriptions of meaningful work. Instead, they should engage in more contemporary organizational practices that support the development of sport ecosystems where people have opportunities to find and access meaningful work for themselves. The normative conditions outlined previously can provide guidance about how meaningfulness may arise for sport workers, and contribute to quality of life within sport organizations. However, they should be seen as conditions and enablers that support meaningfulness as an emergent, non-controllable phenomenon, rather than antecedents that lead to meaningful work through linear causality.

Such work can be supported practically by clearer sport psychologist disengagement from organizational practices propped up by (post)positivism and rational modes of management science (McDougall, et al., 2020). For example, meaningful work knowledge could be fused with organizational culture expertise devolved from n-step frameworks of change, where "cultures of meaningful work" become the next desirable type or function of culture. Such alternatives are instead based in critical-interpretative cultural theorizing (and corresponding practices) that makes space for unpacking what meaning and meaningfulness involves for different individuals. It could also involve becoming more cognizant of organizational practices based in systems and complexity thinking, which are currently providing much value in broader consulting spheres. Recent perspectives on system-informed approaches in sport warn us that tinkering in

complex systems can have unintended consequences (Wagstaff & Quartiroli, 2023). In relation to meaningful work, the design of organizational purpose statements is fashionable and one identified means to raise worker understanding of why their work matters, and subsequently to increase experience of meaningfulness (Attuned, 2023). There can be unanticipated effects, however, resulting from both the content of purpose statements and the processes by which they are typically created. Though attempting to describe an organization's singular reasons for existing and what they are uniquely positioned to attend to in the world, purpose statements often end up generic, inauthentic, and full of fancy buzzwords. They can also create fault lines between intent (who we say we are) and action (what we actually do).

Rather than being complicit in the design of such statements and the strategizing that tends to ensue, sport psychologists could adopt the role of a "critical organizational friend". This might involve listening for how purpose statements are "picked apart" and discredited around the "water cooler" and finding stories about meaningful work, or lack thereof, that can contradict, challenge, or refine purpose statements and related strategizing. In this way, the presence or absence of meaningful work is attended to in real time, continuously, and is a means of collective sensemaking, not simply a desired organizational goal or destination to be arrived at.

Finally, questions about meaningfulness not only to arise in work with clients, but also when sport psychology practitioners reflect on their own work. Therefore, reflective practice is a good starting point for exploring the tensional knots addressed in this paper, as well as identifying other dimensions impacting meaningful work in sport. In our own reflecting, we have found value in conferences and networking beyond our own discipline, not least because there tends to be more attunement (and conceptual tools) to attend to the sociological, the cultural and the political dimensions that influence what might be meaningful in a particular time, place, and context. Sport psychology practitioners can also scan for the zeitgeist across these spheres by sourcing nonacademic events, media, publications, and public intellectuals who cut through the noise and alert us to subtle as well as more consequential changes in the wind that provide broader framing for meaningfulness in and out of sport.

Notes

1. These observations stem from the second author's work as an organizational consultant (often outside of sport) and embedding in an extensive global community and network of organizational change practitioners.
2. As Hammersley (2020) noted, the systematic review method has been critiqued within different perspectives that come 'after' positivism, including realist evaluation and many types of qualitative scholarship. The critiques concern, for example, the requirement of an exhaustive search (which itself does not guarantee increased validity of findings), quality assessment (which is contested especially in qualitative research) and the degree of formalisation of the synthesis of findings. As an alternative to procedural validity, we draw on Maxwell's (2017) broadly realist claim that validity is a property of inferences – that is, the adequacy of the conclusions and theories generated from the data. This does not imply that procedures have no value, but rather that they alone are insufficient for evaluating the quality of a piece of research.
3. which includes primarily psychological approaches within positive psychology, human resources, and organisational behaviour, as well as humanities scholarship.

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Data availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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