# "We're not scum, we're human": agential responses in the face of meaningless work

**Abstract**

We adopt a relational sociology lens to explore the experience of work as meaningless. Through interviews with 47 participants in four different occupations, we found that meaninglessness arises through four relational processes: powerlessness, disconnection, devaluation and self-doubt. Individuals enacted five agential responses to this experience. Two of these, switching and responsibility-taking, were 'altering' strategies, and three, acceptance, distancing and resistance, were 'coping' strategies. These responses were not equally available to all workers in all occupations, suggestive of a stratified experience of work meaninglessness. Our study contributes to understandings of how work is rendered meaningless and how individuals might respond.

Keywords: alienation; meaningful work; meaningless work; relational sociology

Meaningful work is a topic of significant interest at present in the management field, and a growing body of literature has begun to shed light on the processes by which work is rendered meaningful to the individual worker (Mitra and Buzzanell, 2016; Rosso et al., 2010; Wrzesniewski, 2010). Meaningful work has been defined as work that enables a sense of unity with others, the perception that one's work is of service to others or a transcendent cause, self-expression, and the development of one's inner self through work (Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2009).

However, no prior studies have addressed the related, yet equally important question of how and under what circumstances work is rendered meaning*less*. Is it simply the case that the absence of these factors leads to a sense of work lacking in meaning, or are other issues at play? Equally, there has been no empirical research on the agential responses available to individuals in the face of such experiences. Do people struggle against or deny the meaninglessness of their work, capitulate to the experience, or seek out instead a pathway to meaningfulness? What is the role of management in this context, given concerns about the impacts on workers when leaders and others draw unethically on worker 'hunger' for meaning (Ashford and Vaidyanath, 2002: 364), and in the context of precarious work structures and employee relations, where the potential for work to provide a sense of unity or connection to a transcendent cause is diminished because of weakened attachment to employers and discontinuous, insecure work relations (Kalleberg, 2009).

Knowing more about these issues would make an important contribution to our understanding of the lived experience of meaningful and meaningless work. In particular, since individuals have an innate motivation to build and maintain a sense of meaningfulness (Frankl, 1984; Heine, Proulx & Vohs, 2006; Yeoman, 2014), and given the perceived link between

meaningfulness and well-being (Arnold, Turner, Barling, Kelloway & McKee; Littman-Ovadia & Steger, 2010), the experience of meaningless work is likely to engender significant psychic distress and moral harm (Ciulla, 2012; May, Li, Mencl & Huang, 2014).

Although there are some relevant insights into these issues from classical sociology, for example in the related field of alienation (Chiaburu et al., 2014; Seeman, 1959), it cannot be taken for granted that alienation and meaninglessness are synonymous. Alienation has a rich sociological history arising from the 'structured antagonism' of capitalist social relations (Delbridge and Keenoy, 2010: 801) leading to feelings of isolation and self-estrangement. More recently, the structure of the employment relation within which the idea of alienation was framed has evolved as a result of the emergence of information and knowledge-based economies and the need for flexible production, altering the centralised and formalised bases of work organisation traditionally seen as preconditions of alienation (Nair and Vohra, 2010). However, for Blauner (1964), meaninglessness is but one facet of alienation. Meaningful work is defined as 'the subjective experience of the existential significance or purpose' of work (Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2009: 492), and its obverse, meaningless work 'the subjective experience of the absence of an existential significance or purpose of work', can therefore be regarded as a separate from, although undoubtedly related to, alienation.

In this article, we focus on how and why individuals derive a sense of meaninglessness from their work, and their agential responses to these experiences. To date, it has been noted that the meaningful work literature has been overly reliant on self-oriented mechanisms such as self-actualization and personal fulfilment in accounting for how and why people find their work to be meaningful or meaningless (Rosso et al., 2010). Wrzesniewski (2003, p. 95) argues that this body of research has therefore suffered from a "shallow understanding of the role of others at

work". Consequently, the social and relational context in which the experience of meaningfulness or meaninglessness arises has been neglected and "we have been left with rather simplistic views of how people construct meaning and meaningfulness in their work" (Rosso, et al., 2010, p. 116). This is especially troublesome, given the centrality of the interpersonal relationships, or the 'relational architecture' of jobs, in enabling employees to experience their work as important and meaningful (Grant, 2007: 395). As Roy (2015: 402) points out: 'from a relational perspective, work is not just an activity that individuals do or have feelings about; it is something that happens between workers and material, workers and other workers, workers and supervisors … or workers and others in their lives'.

In addressing this, we combine insights from the field of relational sociology (Emirbayer, 1997; Erikson, 2013) with the meaningful work literature to generate new understandings of meaningless work and, by extension, of meaningful work. Relational sociology provides a useful lens through which to analyse these phenomena, as it provides a theoretical foundation for the notion that what is considered meaningful or meaningless by the individual does not arise within a vacuum or reside purely within the individual psyche, but rather is dynamically constituted within 'circles of recognition' (Emirbayer, 1997: 296). These are the interpersonal, social or even virtual circles within which individual identities are constructed. The relational approach, which has recently begun to attract attention within the wider critical management literature, therefore provides a situated, inter-subjective and contextualised account of individual sensemaking and permits an analysis of agential capacity (Jenkins and Delbridge, 2014).

We draw on these ideas to ask how a sense of work as meaningless is revealed, negotiated and challenged through processes of emplotment, in other words, the way we construct our identities by locating ourselves in social narratives (Foster, 2012). According to a

relational perspective, individuals situate themselves within stories of the social interactions

taking place in their everyday working lives, uncovering the recurrent patterns and sequences

that arise during these moments in time (Emirbayer, 1997). Our aim is to analyse the stories or

narratives that people recount about times when they have found their work to be meaningless,

and how they situate themselves within these accounts from a relational perspective, in order to

uncover the processes by which work is rendered meaningless, and how individuals respond.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we outline the relevant theoretical foundations for

our study by bringing together the literatures on meaningful work, relational sociology, and

agential responses to negative work experiences. We then present the methods used to gather and

analyse our data and our findings. Through an interpretivist analysis of our interview material,

we are able to identify four relational processes through which work is rendered meaningless,

and five agential responses enacted by participants in the face of these. We conclude the article

by explaining our contribution to both the empirical and the theoretical literature on meaningful

work.

**Meaningful and Meaningless Work from a Relational Sociology Perspective**

Work always has a *meaning* for the individual worker which, as Budd (2011) has argued,

can range at the extreme from being a curse, a disutility or, conversely, a source of freedom.

However, not all work is *meaningful,* and meaningful work is not the same as the 'meaning of'

work. Meaningful work is conditional on its connection to something beyond the immediate

tasks and roles, to something that is deemed, voluntarily, to be worthwhile in terms of overall life

purpose (Authors, 2017; Dik et al., 2009).  Meaningful work is therefore work that goes 'beyond

the self' in some way and is in this sense inevitably self-transcendent and relational (Heine et al.,

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2006; Palmer et al., 2010) or pro-social (Grant, 2007). For example, Pavlish and Hunt's (2012) study of meaningful work among nurses shows the importance of connecting with patients and family members, contribution to patient recovery and recognition for expertise and care as being central to the experience of meaningfulness. Bunderson and Thompson's (2009) research highlights the importance of the broader social purpose of conservation and care of animals to the meaningfulness of zookeepers' work.

At the opposite, Seeman's (1959: 786) analysis of alienation posits the emergence of meaninglessness as a direct result of increased functional rationalities associated with modernity, privileging the 'most efficient realisation of ends' and diminishing workers' choice and control. According to the labour process literature, alienation from work is associated with the structured relations of capitalist modes of production, the separation of conception from execution, and the diminishing of worker control and autonomy (Braverman, 1973). Alienation is moreover the subject of growing attention within the domain of social psychology, where it is associated with perceptions of disillusionment and unmet expectations (Mottaz, 1981). However, although alienation is associated with meaninglessness, they are not synonymous. For example, Luhman and Nasaro (2014) argue that meaningless work is a strong driver of alienation, whereas other commentators (Seeman, 1959) argue that meaninglessness is one constituent feature of alienation. For these reasons, we cannot assume that the individual experience of alienation is necessarily equivalent to that of meaninglessness.

What does seem especially pertinent to the subjective experience of meaningfulness or meaninglessness is the wider social milieu of work; as Note (2010: 140) argues, people are 'inherently embedded in discursive and social contexts which influence their underlying

ontological assumptions, their self-understanding, their "choices" of what they do and do not consider meaningful'.

Relational sociology lends additional insights to these notions. White (2008), for example, suggests that individuals seek to establish their social footing through a series of temporal, dynamic and contested narratives from which a sense of self-concept, and what is seen as meaningful to the self, are continually negotiated. These narratives emerge from intersecting and entangled socio-cultural realms, different but overlapping social networks and domains which he calls *netdoms* which are simultaneously the source of ambiguity and meaning.  The self, and what is meaningful to the self, is thus produced and reproduced through the transactional and reflexive processes of recognition and mutual 'name giving' (Emirbayer, 1997: 296) that are the cornerpiece of social interactions. Meaningfulness and meaninglessness therefore can be considered as reflecting a 'mode of being' or becoming, embodying not just the self but the self as a transitory social position, embedded in social interactions rather than a single, fixed, autonomous self-referential entity (May, 2011).

What we experience as meaningful or meaningless is inextricably linked to the interpersonal cues that arise in and across netdoms (White, 2008) in which we are embedded as we go about our work. These can affirm or deny our sense of what is meaningful, or even our right to determine for ourselves what is meaningful.  When our sense of what is personally meaningful is affirmed by those within a particular netdom, we are likely to experience a sense of belonging and recognition (Emirbayer, 1997; Honneth, 1997). However, where that affirmation is denied, then we perceive ourselves to be marginalised as 'other' (Quintaneiro, 2006), giving rise to a sense of meaninglessness (Nair and Vohra, 2009), and potentially to the impulse to suppress or reject these feelings.

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As we negotiate our sense of meaningfulness across those netdoms with which we interact through our work, we develop our own social narratives of meaningfulness or meaninglessness through *emplotment* (Foster, 2012). Emplotment refers to the processes people use to construct biographical coherence through integrating narratives based on their experiences and interactions with others. The stories we tell about our work, and the way we convey our sense of meaninglessness within these narratives, reveals the symbiotic relationship between meaningful work and our valorisation of the self as being worthy of inter-subjective recognition (Hancock, 2016). What is seen as meaningful or otherwise therefore lies in an evaluation of the worth of our individual and 'unique' contributions within their wider social and historical contexts (Baumeister and Mulraven, 1996: 415).

Where the esteem of others towards the work we do is lacking, then we are likely to experience meaninglessness (Heine et al., 2006). Just as mutual recognition underpins confidence, responsibility and esteem, so the denial or with-holding of that which connects us to others - the 'consciousness of not being recognized in one's own self-understanding' – is a source of both personal and moral injury (Honneth, 1997: 25). Our vulnerability arises because our identity is 'from the beginning, dependent upon the help and affirmation of other human beings' (Honneth, 1997: 28).  For Taylor (1994), we are not only rendered vulnerable by a lack of affirmation, which he terms misrecognition, the denial of the distinctive aspects of our essence from which we understand our place in and contribution to the world is a form of oppression … 'imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being' (Taylor, 1994: 25). Where individuals feel excluded through marginalisation or stigmatisation then this can shore up the inequality of power relations and generate a feeling of otherness that is likely to be detrimental to a sense of meaningfulness (Quintaneiro, 2006).

The affordances of work for the experience of meaningfulness are therefore bound up in the social and ontological significance of the tasks we perform and the viewpoints of those in our netdom towards them (Mei, 2006). The implications is that work in and of itself has little or no inherent value as meaningful or meaningless, but rather the evaluation of these depends in large part on the perspective of the individual (Kenny et al., 2011), whose viewpoint is formed within the context of the multiple, contested perspectives of netdom participants.

Given the innate human impetus to meaning (Frankl, 1957), it seems inevitable that workers who derive a sense of meaninglessness from their work will be strongly motivated to respond in some way, for example by resisting or suppressing these feelings. As Heine et al (2006) argue, individuals experience a strong motivation to build and maintain a sense of meaningfulness and to avoid feeling alienated from the world around them. However, the meaningful work literature is thus far silent on such alternatives. Insights from the alienation literature show that workers may engage in deviant actions such as sabotage (Authors, 2015), resistance (Fleming and Spicer, 2008) or the withholding of effort (Crowley, 2012); alternatively, they may exhibit compliance (Willmott, 1993), or capitulation (Casey, 1995). As Fleming and Spicer (2008: 301) argue, organisations are political sites characterised by 'opposition, subversion and struggle', and the experience of meaninglessness is likely to be closely bound up with these.

In the next sections, we begin to explore the extent to which the same can be said of meaninglessness by considering how work narratives might reveal the inter-subjective nature of the construction of work as meaningless.
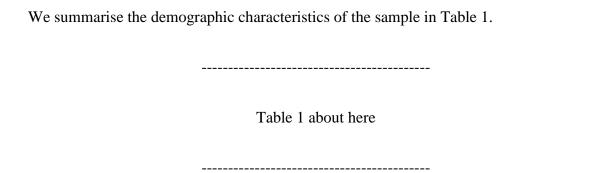
**Methods**

This article is based on the findings of 47 one hour, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with participants from four very different occupational groups: refuse collectors working in an out-sourced pubic service; creative artists, academics and clergy. All participants worked in the south of England. The occupational groups were purposively selected (Patton, 2002) to represent this divergent range of work contexts and relations, .

The *refuse collectors* worked for a multi-national firm to provide street cleansing services that had been out-sourced by a local authority. The work involved generic, manual labour such as street refuse collections and street sweeping. As workers in a stigmatised 'dirty' occupation, refuse collectors may experience particular challenges in experiencing their work as meaningful (Kidder, 2006). Access to this group was secured through a contact at the employing organisation. The *creative artists* were generally self-employed and spanned a number of activities including acting, music, writing and the visual/sonic arts. Creative artists work in increasingly uncertain and competitive contexts in what is often decribed as the gig economy - 'workers without employers' (Friedman, 2014: 171) and are often subject to non-standard employment practices (Siebert and Wilson, 2013) and are undertaking work that is increasingly characterised by many tasks that are 'uncreative'. However, this type of work still offers unique insights into the processes of 'creative labour' and 'opportunities for creative satisfaction through work' (Umney and Kretsos, 2014: 573). It might be conjectured that this group of participants would have particular opportunities to experience their work as meaningful, given the creative industries may epitomise empowering and flexible work and the opportunity for self-expression (Hodgson and Briand, 2013). Access to this group of participants was achieved through direct contact with individuals and snowball sampling.

Most of the *clergy* were attached to the Church of England, although there were participants from other traditions (Catholicism and Judaism). Debates about 'callings' suggest that those involved in calling work possess a unique, personal imperative to seek a sense of purpose through their work (French and Domene, 2010), which may offer important opportunities for meaningfulness yet at times renders them vulnerable to exploitation (Bunderson and Thompson, 2009). Participants were contacted individually, and some snowball sampling approaches were used to identify further participants.

*Academics* constitute a professional group with relatively high, albeit at times contested levels of freedom, autonomy and variety in their work as universities in the United Kingdom are increasingly pushed to be centres of 'academic capitalism' and the labour process within universities becomes increasingly commoditised and bureaucratised (Noonan, 2015: 110). The academics worked in science disciplines and contact was secured through the university's HR department.

We summarise the demographic characteristics of the sample in Table 1.

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The interview schedule covered general background information about the interviewee, their current role and past work history, and their attitudes towards their work. In the final section, participants were asked to narrate a critical incident or story about a time when they found their work meaningless (Bernard and Ryan, 2010; Foster, 2012). This approach tied in

with our focus on experiences of meaninglessness within individual jobs, rather than overall work alienation. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was digitally recorded and professionally transcribed. Only those interviews where the informant told a clear story about the time they found their work meaningless were included, resulting in a final dataset of 47 interviews.

An interpretive methodology was selected due to its capacity to generate 'broader and richer descriptions, [and] sensitivity for the ideas and meanings of the individuals concerned' (Alvesson, 1996: 455). The data were analysed by both researchers using NVivo, coded initially using a narrative approach to the data. Plummer (2001: 395) states that focusing on narratives and the way people narrate their experience exposes something about how we 'connect the inner world to the outer world'. In focusing on how people tell stories about their experience they are constantly revealing something about – and trying to make sense of – the relationship between the personal self and the social self (Foster, 2012; Watson, 2008).

**Stories of Meaningless Work**

Four core themes emerged in the stories informants told about times their work was experienced as meaningless: powerlessness; disconnection; devaluation; and self-doubt. They also described their reactions to these experiences in one of two ways – by using either 'altering' or 'coping' strategies. 'Altering' strategies included switching between focal netdoms (intersecting realms of connections) and responsibility-taking (whereby informants saw it as their personal responsibility to cope with or alter the situation). 'Coping' strategies included distancing oneself from the source of the meaninglessness, resisting meaninglessness, or

accepting / capitulating to the situation. These reactions enabled informants to either endure the experience of meaninglessness, or to reinstate a lost sense of meaningfulness. However, not all strategies were equally available to all groups of workers, suggestive of a stratified experience of work meaninglessness.

**Powerlessness**

According to Elias, power underpins social configurations such that links are fostered through mutual dependencies (Quintaneiro, 2006). Power is associated with the asymmetrical control over resources that permit or constrain the fulfilment of individual needs through dynamically unfolding situations (Bourdieu, 1991; Emirbayer, 1997; Goffman, 1959). Seeman (1959) explains this asymmetry arises as powerlessness when workers are separated from their means of production and value creation. This emerged as a core theme, whereby experiencing a lack of power in relation to significant others undermined individuals' sense of the meaningfulness of their work.

Informants from the academic context associated powerlessness and meaninglessness with times when they felt controlled and monitored by their managers and taken away from the thing they saw as the real value of their work, teaching and research. Robert explained:

'It seems to me the whole place is moving towards a centralised, top-down managerial approach ... this is a complaint people raise all over the place not just [here] … It's this continual hemming in of what you are doing, euphemistically often described as the

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professionalisation of academic life, but actually it's the antipathy of that, it's taking

professionals and turning them into artisans. Everything now has to be checked up on.'


Here, Robert's narrative reflects his resistance to a growth of bureaucratic control in the

context of a professional occupation (Crowley, 2012). He explicitly distanced himself from a

depersonalised powerful 'other', ie 'the whole place', while switching from the focal netdom of

'the university' to one of 'academics' or 'professionals' when he added, 'a lot of other

academics feel exactly the same', thus aligning himself with a favoured majority group.  His

response was one of responsibility-taking as he decided to 'put my efforts somewhere else',

using the relative freedom and autonomy offered by academic work to craft his job towards areas

he perceived as less controlled and where he was therefore able to reassert the meaningfulness of

his work (Wrzesniewski, 2003). It reflects the social-psychological conceptualisation of

powerlessness described by Seeman (1959) as an expectancy (or probability) that one's actions

cannot determine outcomes.

Steve, a refuse collector, recounted how he had been encouraged to apply for promotion

but then found out after his interview that another colleague had been given the job a month

previously. He said:


'If they hadn't encouraged me, I would never have put in for it and I would never have

wasted my time going for the interview … [I felt] kicked in the teeth ... so now I just

come to work to get paid.'

In the more constrained context of a permanent low-skilled job where opportunities for job crafting were limited, Steve's response to feelings of powerlessness and unfairness was the withdrawal of his discretionary effort for the firm, a form of resistance and coping in the face of meaninglessness.  In other narratives, similar feelings were described as arising at times when individuals were rendered powerless by what they saw as bullying or unfair treatment meted out by line managers, or when they witnessed others in their netdoms being treated in this way. Trevor, an actor, spoke of the time when he was working on a major film:

'The director was such a poisonous bully that I just spent six weeks thinking, this is really, really soul destroying, this is just such a waste … I just found the whole atmosphere really alienating … I'm sure it's a very good film, but I haven't seen it.'

Trevor's response to the bullying behaviour of the director was to endure what he perceived  to be a finite situation as a form of acceptance and to dis-identify with, or distance himself from, the final product of the film as a means of coping (Humphreys and Brown, 2002), by focusing instead on other projects.

Members of the clergy also associated meaninglessness with times when they had had a 'difficult boss'. Stella, a priest, said, 'you can get crushed sometimes'. In contrast to Trevor who internalized and personalised his response to the perceived erosion of his power by narrating his story in the first person, Stella distanced herself by aligning herself with a generalised 'other' in the second person, ie 'you'. The resolution in her case however was an unspoken assertion of her

sense of being in the right, 'I felt, why are you saying this, when you're saying goodbye, why can't you just say something positive?'

**Disconnection**

The second core theme centred around disconnection from others, rendering individuals vulnerable to the harms arising from feeling unworthy of affiliation (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). Connection is at the heart of a relational viewpoint, since the act of interaction creates or instantiates relationships, with identities emerging in reflective comparison (Erikson, 2013; White, 2008). Conversely, processes of exclusion can lead to stigmatisation and marginalisation from social groups, challenging our 'ontological security' (Giddens, 1991) and fostering feelings of meaninglessness.

Estrangement from or rejection by others provoked a sense of meaninglessness for participants. For the refuse collectors, the team working on the refuse trucks constituted a strong community of belonging and mutual validation (Honneth, 1997). However, lack of connection or outright rejection emanated at times from wider society due to the taint attached to their work (Simpson et al., 2014). Greg's story shows how lack of elementary recognition (Taylor, 1994) fostered a sense of injustice and meaninglessness:

'Often bin men are invisible and you think, well, we're trying to do you a favour here … People ignore you and that and you think, well, we're not scum, we're human … I was doing the town centre and three times I ran past a girl I know, who I know really well, to

pick up bins in front of her and she just didn't even like see me ... I was almost invisible

… I was just background, that's all I was.'

Greg offered no resolution to his experience, just a resigned acceptance that such
invisibility is part and parcel of the job. However, he then distanced himself from 'others' who
treat refuse collectors badly as he said, 'normally *people like ourselves*, they're quite nice … and
then the richer people, it's like you're just another servant or something.' In this way, switching
netdoms (White, 2008) afforded Greg the opportunity to reclaim something meaningful about his
work identity by salvaging a sense of self-confidence (Honneth, 1997).

For the creatives, the absence of shared artistic values with collaborators led to a sense of
isolation associated with times of meaninglessness. Diane, an artist, spoke of the tension she
experienced working on a joint project where colleagues from other professional backgrounds
'are not really interested in the aims'. However, similar to Greg's case, Diane's narrative reveals
how switching netdoms helped her resolve the ensuing feelings of isolation when she added that
'being on the outside is part of being an artist maybe as well'. Paradoxically, by placing herself
as an artist 'on the outside' of the dominant group enabled her to reconnect with her preferred
artistic community of practice (Wenger, 1998) and reclaim a sense of meaningfulness.

Among the clergy, the most significant issues arose in relation to a sense of disconnect
from the church. Narratives showed how the clergy tended to direct these feelings away from
individual role incumbents towards the institution itself. Ann, a priest, described her anger with
'the church' at a time when she was leaving regular ministry to enter a secular hospital
chaplaincy role:

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'I was very angry … with the church … I remember this person from the Church

Commissioners wrote to me … and the whole demeanour and tone of the letter was

questioning whether by going into sector ministry as a hospital chaplain, it was actually

ministry as they knew it … yet those of us within it would say, "well, actually, yes we are

because we're face to face with people in very raw situations."'

Ann juxtaposed a depersonalised 'church' in her account, switching netdoms to the 'we'
of her new, shared community of secular chaplains. There was no easy resolution to her rejection
of the church itself, as when her contract with the hospital came to an end and she took the
decision to leave the church, no other job opportunities seemed open. She commented, 'they
[other employers] have looked at the religious thing and they think, "oh well, we don't really
want her here"'. In Ann's case this led to the pragmatic but resigned solution of a return to parish
ministry which offered both accommodation and a place of work, epitomising the 'capitulated
self' identified by Casey (1995).

Interestingly, academics offered no accounts centred around disconnection based on their
academic roles. However, in one narrative, Rose contrasted her earlier work in the insurance
industry with her current academic work:

'Delivering a whole load of spreadsheets that help an insurance company that's just a

faceless, amorphous mass … it didn't inspire me. … here, I know these students, I know

their names and I see their faces ... there's a direct one to one correspondence between

what I do and what they get.'

Rose's account shows the centrality of direct human contact for a sense of meaningfulness. Her choice to leave the dehumanised work of the insurance industry and begin an academic career was driven by a quest for intrinsic motivation through doing work that led to tangible human outcomes and to the opportunity for meaningfulness. Changing jobs in this context therefore constitutes an active and extreme form of switching between netdoms, an opportunity perhaps not open to all.

**Devaluation**

The third domain of meaninglessness concerned the relational invalidation of the self arising from a contestation of the belief that one's work enriches or brings value in some way to the lives of others. This domain can be understood through the lens of recognition (Honneth, 1997; Taylor, 1994), whereby a sense of self-respect arises from being recognised as a 'contributory member of society by others who also hold such status' (Hancock, 2016: 463) through undertaking work that is valued by others. Individuals identified moments of meaninglessness and moral injury (Honneth, 1997) arising at times when they were mis-recognised as unable to contribute anything of value in the eyes of others.

Nick, a refuse collector, described having to clean an area where the residents did not care about their environment:

'Just going there every Monday you think, let's just do this and go … it's just soul-destroying because they don't care about where they live. You know that after you've cleaned it … you're just wasting your time really. It would be nicer to fence it off and just

let it build up until they can't breathe because there's so much refuse there and then they might think, "hey, what's happening?"'

Nick's story shows how he felt personally devalued by association with work that was not regarded as important by the resident. He used a form of distancing, juxtaposing the refuse collectors as 'you' with 'they' who live in the area. His controlled work setting did not enable him to pursue constructive ways of handling the situation, so he coped with this by resorting to a revenge-wish, as a means to reassert the value of his contribution and reclaim a sense of meaningfulness. Like the actor Trevor, Nick also spoke about the 'soul destroying' nature of meaningless work, echoing the negative effect of wasted opportunity and exposing, despite the very different and contrasting nature of their roles, the disappointments and vulnerabilities of meaningless work.

For the creative artists, times when the value of the artistic endeavour was brought into question caused a sense of meaninglessness. Christina, a singer, said:

'Whenever you go to a conference [representing the arts], you question it [whether your work has any point] because people will always ask, "why do the arts get money?" and, you know, sometimes you work very hard to do something and there's no-one really interested in it. It does happen and you kind of think, well, what's the point? … but that's a very "performer thing" that most performers have, and they have to learn how to deal with really.'

Here, Christina's experience of meaninglessness drew on an expansive netdom where she felt 'no-one' was interested in her work. She pointed to the difficulty of dealing with such times with resigned acceptance, and placed the responsibility of finding ways to cope on herself.

For the clergy, a sense of failing to add value arose at times when they felt they had misjudged what others wanted from them. Oliver's story related to a time when he was trying to connect with a new church community:

'In one community, when I started, I misjudged them, they were pretty blank and they all started to fall asleep so that's when I realised that I had to change, use a different standard, and that's when I introduced my three minute "thought for the day" … and they all woke up … you've got to know who you're talking to otherwise you're wasting your time.'

Oliver's narrative constituted a highly personalised form of responsibility-taking as, after initially pointing to his own failure to connect with his parishioners, he then realised that he needed to change his approach to achieve a successful outcome. In this way, meaninglessness formed a pathway to the creation of a positive connection and hence converting the experience to one of meaningfulness, reminiscent of the tension-centred approach highlighted by Mitra and Buzzanell (2016).

For the academics, meaninglessness arose at times they were asked to do pointless work that was not valued by the recipients. John talked of the university requirement to hold meetings with his personal tutees:

'There are times when I am doing utterly pointless things for this university and I get pretty fed up and think, "why am I doing it?" I am an academic advisor now and I have to interview 120 students twice, and if you think how many hours that takes up … I don't want to interview them, the students themselves don't want to be interviewed … Why am I doing it? I am doing it because I'm an academic advisor and I've been told I'll be in trouble if I don't do it.'

John's strategy of distancing conveys his frustration at being asked to direct his energies to seemingly pointless tasks that were not valued by the recipients. His account tells of the increasing bureaucratisation of academic work (Noonan, 2015), and the pervasiveness of a rules-based approach to managing (Crowley, 2012). It is indicative of a resigned compliance, or acceptance, in the face of overwhelming organisational obligations.

**Self-doubt**

The ethic of success reinforces the significance of paid employment as a potential source of valued identity, the absence or denial of which can reinforce insecurities and vulnerabilities (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Meaninglessness was associated by participants with such times when they doubted their competence or capabilities.

For the creative artists, meaninglessness centred on uncertainties concerning whether they had the necessary skills for their art, arising either in response to negative feedback from others, or in the form of an imagined future response. Clare, a writer, talked about the debilitating doubts she experienced:

'You're in the middle of the book and you don't know if anyone will ever want to read it, and you ask yourself, "well, why on earth should they?" And the only way most writers get through this is saying, "well, there are a lot of much worse books out there, so I don't see why I shouldn't finish it". There's a lot of self-doubt and, you know, going round muttering to oneself.'

Clare's way to make sense of this was to relate this self-doubt to a mode of being that was shared by 'writers' in general, rather than being personal to her. Efforts to dispel the doubt were important for her to continue her work and focused on positive self-talk, as well as allowing herself time and space to allow 'this thought to enter your head, and you think, Ah!'. Thus, Clare's narrative switched from the imagined future readership of her book with their potentially dismissive attitude, to the netdom of 'most writers', thereby taking a responsibility-centred stance to reinstate meaningfulness.

In the context of the clergy, feelings of self-doubt arose from the demands of the job, which meant that many worked seven days a week. Lesley talked of 'occasions when you're surrounded by numerous things to do and you think, how am I going to get this done on time?' … On occasions, you just have to prioritise and say, "well, sorry, I haven't done that" … It can feel bad.' In her narrative, Lesley switched from a focus on impersonal 'others' who she felt she had let down, to her husband, who shared her views on the unrealistic volume of her workload as a form of self-validation. The narrative combines elements of switching with responsibility-taking in order to alter the meaninglessness that she felt was integral to her work.

For the academics, in contrast, a sense of inadequacy appeared to be an inevitable feature of the work process. For example, Rick said he often found his work meaningless:

'If you do something that is, well, for me, worth doing, you have to push your boundaries and leave your comfort zone. Leaving your comfort zone is by definition uncomfortable and, yes, sometimes it faces you with your own inadequacies. Especially at the beginning, I thought, "what if I never have a really good idea again? What if nothing that I'll ever do is ever going to work again? Maybe I'm a one-hit wonder?"'

Rick's account reveals the inevitability within the academe of challenging work and the accompanying sense of discomfort and anxiety. However, the resolution was a sense that this discomfort was not only unavoidable, but even desirable in order to avoid a 'mediocre' result and thereby generate the potential for a pathway towards meaningfulness. In this sense, Rick adopted a responsibility-taking stance.

For the refuse collectors, self-doubt centred around times of danger or risk associated with their work. For example, Mike told of the time when he had been driving his truck down a narrow country lane and an accident made him call his competence as a driver into question:

'The road beneath me gave way … the health and safety investigation team found animals had been burrowing beneath the road and so there was nothing supporting the weight of the vehicle. It was quite scary … I had a guy in the truck and I'm responsible for him ... if he had been injured, I would certainly be thinking of a new career … having somebody else with me in the lorry and rolling it, that certainly plays on your mind.'

Here, Mike showed how the responsibilities of driving rendered him vulnerable to a sense of guilt and self-doubt, despite the unavoidable circumstances that led to the accident. Mike's response featured a form of switching, whereby his imagined alternate outcome would have led to serious repercussions for himself and his co-worker, thus rendering the actual outcome more bearable. However, it was also characterised by a form of responsibility-taking since, in the alternate scenario, Mike imagined he was likely to have changed jobs. Rather than seeking to reinstate meaningfulness, Mike's scenario is indicative of an effort to cope with meaninglessness.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

Meaningfulness has been described as a fundamental human need (Heine et al., 2006; Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2009), and hence the experience of work as meaningless is likely to be perceived as a threat. Drawing on insights from relational sociology (Emirbayer, 1997; White, 2008), we have attempted to show how individuals in four divergent occupations locate themselves within social narratives through emplotment (Foster, 2012), revealing the multi-layered and textural nature of responses to the processes through which work is rendered meaningless.

Although prior empirical studies on meaningful work have downplayed the variety and complexity of the interpersonal, social and structural milieu within which work takes place (Rosso et al., 2010), our research shows that meaninglessness arises in a relational and broader

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ontological context (Mei, 2006; Tablan, 2015). Work is generative of a sense of meaningfulness or meaninglessness when refracted through the perspective of others.

Participants' responses to the relational processes of powerlessness, disconnection, devaluation and self-doubt reveal how individuals handle the tensions inherent in situations that challenge the meaningfulness of their work. In contrast to the findings of Mitra and Buzzanell (2016), it was by no means the case that negative experiences inevitably led to the reconstruction of meaning. Instead, responses were shaped and constrained by interpersonal and occupational contexts as well as individual dispositions. As Emirbayer (1997) has argued, individual agency is path-dependent and situationally embedded. It was also the case that responses were directed towards either coping with unavoidable meaninglessness or towards the deliberate crafting of opportunities to create a sense of meaningfulness.

In contrast to what might have been expected based on the alienation literature (Fleming and Spicer, 2008), deviant responses or even resistance to the meaninglessness of work rarely arose. Here, however, the withdrawal of discretionary effort emerged in the narrative of one of the refuse collectors in the face of a sense of powerlessness, a subtle subversion in response to the threat to self-esteem engendered in manual occupations in the face of the dehumanisation of work (Crowley, 2012; Fleming and Spicer, 2008).

There was more evidence of acceptance of the meaninglessness of work, although often only as a pathway to more nuanced and agentic interpretations and responses. In the case of the creative artists, resigned acceptance (Legge, 2005) of their powerlessness or the devaluation of the artistic endeavour was evocative of growing uncertainty and exploitation within the creative industries (Siebert and Wilson, 2013). Trevor's story of powerlessness in the face of a bullying

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director led to a secondary response of distancing himself from the situation by not watching the resultant film, thus deliberately depriving himself of the potential for the realisation of creative satisfaction (Umney and Krestos, 2014). Although this might seem a somewhat negative and passive outcome that did not lead to the reinstatement of meaning, in fact, the relatively high status and project-based nature of the creative labour process enabled him to enact this coping mechanism without material deprivation.

This can be contrasted with refuse collector Greg's narrative of resigned acceptance in the face of disconnection and a consequent threat to his social esteem (Hancock, 2016; Honneth, 2014) as he was ignored in the street by a friend. In his more constrained case, this acceptance was followed by secondary response of a deliberate switching of netdoms as he shifted his focus to identify with 'people like us' who treat refuse collectors with respect. In doing this, Greg was able to recapture a sense of valued identity and to reinstate meaningfulness, redolent of a preoccupation among manual workers with the construction of a dignified self (Sennett and Cobb, 1977; Simpson et al., 2014).

In a similar way, individuals used a distancing response and the impetus to separate from the source of meaninglessness, but without necessarily switching netdoms in the quest for an alternative valued 'other', as a precursor to an assertion of the self. The story told by Stella, a priest, about her critical senior manager, and that recounted by Nick, a refuse collector, about cleaning an area populated by uncaring residents, illustrate this. However, Stella's story reveals a self-confidence in her own beliefs that is permitted to emerge in the context of a calling-based occupation, whereas Nick's story uses the motif of a revenge-fantasy that paradoxically reveals the powerlessness and lack of freedom of the manual labour process (Seeman, 1959).

White's (2008) notion of purposeful, situative switching between netdoms as a pathway to the emergence of meanings and identities creates a framework for understanding one of the most common forms of response to the experience of meaninglessness. By switching netdoms, individuals are able to challenge or subvert the perceived categorisation by others or themselves that their work lacks meaning and to craft a sense of meaningfulness. In this sense, the strategy was one of 'altering' the experience of meaninglessness. Diane's story from the creative arts about a time she felt isolated on a collaborative project due to lack of shared values featured a switch of netdom to identify with all artists as being 'on the outside'. By paradoxically aligning herself with an excluded group and their shared ideals, she was able to reappropriate the meaningfulness of her contribution. Similarly, Clare was able to switch from seeing herself among the imagined future readers of her book with their negative reaction to her work, to aligning herself with her community of practice comprising 'most writers' as a means to reclaim her sense of purpose and meaningfulness in the writing process. Thus, within the context of the creative arts, establishing the artistic community as their primary netdom enables creatives to marshal their personal resources to transcend moments of meaninglessness.

Finally, responsibility-taking emerged as a common 'altering' theme in stories of meaninglessness, often arising as a secondary response after an initial response of acceptance or switching, as in Clare's case above. Here, individuals' stories focused on how they either had already, or could in the future, take personal responsibility for restoring the meaningfulness of their work.  For example, Robert's narrative about the increasing bureaucratisation of university work led to his decision to focus his efforts 'elsewhere' through processes of job crafting to reclaim his sense of meaningfulness (Wrzesniewski, 2003). Such options may only be open to

those enjoying the relative freedom and autonomy of academic work, despite its growing

constraints (Noonan, 2015).

Lesley's account of her excessive workload within the church led to her taking the

responsibility for managing this in realistic ways. However, it was notable that such accounts of

responsibility-taking through strategies to make changes to workloads were less evident in the

more circumscribed context of the refuse collectors, suggestive of their relative lack of freedom

to shape their work context. Mike's story comes closest to a responsibility-taking perspective,

but his narrative is based on an imagined future scenario rather than a response to real events.

Given the heavily controlled work environment, fantasies of autonomous action may be one of a

limited range of resolutions open to the refuse collectors, whose accounts often involved

strategies of coping rather than altering (Crowley, 2012).

Add paragraph here explaining the overall contribution in relation perhaps to the

literature on alienation/meaningfulness.

Although our study has been able to shed light on the under-research topic of

meaninglessness, it nevertheless has certain limitations. First, our study is confined to a sample

of just four occupational groups, and studies that examined strategies for dealing with

meaninglessness among a wider sample of occupations would enable further insights. Second,

our study took place in the United Kingdom which may offer a very different context for the

experience of meaningless work compared with other cultures. Third, our focus was on the

experience of episodes of meaninglessness during the course of work, rather than of an over-

arching experience of work as meaningless. It would be useful for future research to explore

more deeply how individuals cope with and respond to the experience of their work as a whole as meaningless.

Our research contributes to the meaningful work literature by revealing how meaningless work experiences arise through the relational processes of powerlessness, disconnection, devaluation and self-doubt.  In dealing with these, we have shown that individuals deploy a complex and interconnected range of agential responses. Not all responses are geared towards the reinstatement of meaningfulness; rather, in some instances, individuals are concerned with coping with the experience of meaninglessness which some explicitly state to be an inevitable, yet episodic feature of their work (Authors, 2016). A relational sociology perspective has enabled us to shed light on how a sense of work as meaningless arises in an interpersonal context (Erikson, 2013), thereby contributing to gaps in the meaningful work literature concerning the role of 'others' in meaningful work (Rosso et al., 2010).

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**Table 1: Participant Characteristics**

| Occupational group | N | Gender | | Age | | | | | Ethnicity | | | | | | Length of time in job | | | Work pattern | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Male | Female | <18 | 18-34 | 35-49 | 50-65 | 65+ | White British | White Other | Black British | Black Other | Asian | Other | <1 yr | >1 but <5 yrs | >5 yrs | Full time | Part time | Other |
| **Academics** | 11 | 7 | 4 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 7 | 0 | 6 | 4 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 8 | 9 | 2 | 0 |
| **Refuse collectors** | 15 | 15 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 3 | 6 | 1 | 14 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 11 | 15 | 0 | 0 |
| **Creative artists** | 10 | 4 | 6 | 0 | 2 | 5 | 3 | 0 | 7 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 8 | 8 | 0 | 2 |
| **Clergy** | 11 | 6 | 5 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 6 | 3 | 9 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 11 | 11 | 0 | 0 |
| **Totals** | 47 | 32 | 15 | 0 | 9 | 12 | 22 | 4 | 36 | 10 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 7 | 38 | 43 | 2 | 2 |
| **%** | 100 | 68.1 | 31.9 | 0 | 19.1 | 25.5 | 46.8 | 8.5 | 76.6 | 21.3 | 0 | 2.1 | 0 | 0 | 4.2 | 14.9 | 80.1 | 91.5 | 4.2 | 4.2 |