MEANINGFUL WORK IN BRAZIL: PROCESSES, TENSIONS, DESIGN, AND DECOLONIALITY

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Tese de Doutorado apresentada ao Programa de Pós-Graduação em Engenharia de Produção, COPPE, da Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, como parte dos requisitos necessários à obtenção do título de Doutor em Engenharia de Produção

Orientadora: Carla Martins Cipolla

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SENTIDOS DO TRABALHO NO BRASIL: PROCESSOS, TENSÕES, DESIGN E DECOLONIALIDADE

Gustavo Santos Dias Barreto

Junho/2024

Orientadora: Carla Martins Cipolla

Programa: Engenharia de Produção

Todos os dias, as pessoas vão ao trabalho porque seu trabalho lhes significa algo. O sentido do trabalho tem impactos em níveis organizacional e pessoal; duas tendências aparecem na literatura para explicar sua ontologia. A primeira é o *sentido do trabalho como um benefício* que considera o sentido como consequência de um limitado conjunto de fatores e como um constructo estático. A segunda é o *sentido do trabalho como uma necessidade* que considera que o sentido surge de um ilimitado conjunto de fatores e é processual. A presente tese objetiva apresentar a robustez e a utilidade do entendimento do sentido do trabalho como uma necessidade, através dos seus três textos, com um objetivo cada: investigar os processos desenvolvidos pelos trabalhadores para obter sentido, propor estratégias para que organizações possam ajudar seus funcionários a encontrar sentido em seu trabalho e discutir como a pesquisa em sentido do trabalho pode seguir a opção decolonial. "Brazilian White-Collar Employees' Discourses of Meaningful Work and Calling" corresponde ao primeiro objetivo e detecta três processos associados ao propósito realizados por empregados brasileiros de colarinho branco para encontrar sentido. "Meaningful Work Canvas: A Visual Tool for Service Designers" corresponde ao segundo objetivo e apresenta uma o desenvolvimento e a aplicação de uma ferramenta visual para projetar serviços que auxiliem o processo de criação de sentido dos provedores. "Three guidelines to a decolonial research agenda on meaningful work: the case of the preferred worker," é um ensaio teórico sobre o terceiro objetivo. A tese discute resultados adicionais do entendimento dos três textos de forma integrada.

Abstract of Thesis presented to COPPE/UFRJ as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Science (D.Sc.)

MEANINGFUL WORK IN BRAZIL: PROCESSES, TENSIONS, DESIGN, AND DECOLONIALITY

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June/2024

Advisor: Carla Martins Cipolla

Department: Industrial Engineering

Every day, when people go to work, they do so because this job means something to them. Meaningful work is related to outcomes at the organizational and personal levels; two trends emerge in the literature explaining its ontology. The first is *meaningful work as a benefit*, considering that meaningfulness stems from a limited set of factors and has a static fashion. The second is *meaningful work as a need*, considering that it stems from an unlimited set of factors and has a processual character. This thesis aims to present the robustness and usefulness of understanding meaningful work as a need through its three texts, each with the following goals: investigating the processes developed by workers to derive meaningfulness, proposing strategies for organizations to help employees derive meaningfulness, and discussing how research on meaningful work can follow the decolonial option. “Brazilian White-Collar Employees’ Discourses of Meaningful Work and Calling” concerns the first goal and detected three processes associated with purpose enacted by Brazilian white-collar employees to derive meaningfulness. “Meaningful Work Canvas: A Visual Tool for Service Designers” concerns the second goal and presents the development and application of a visual tool to project services that facilitate meaningfulness-making from their providers. “Three guidelines to a decolonial research agenda on meaningful work: the case of the preferred worker,” is a theoretical essay addressing the third goal. The thesis discusses additional findings from the integrated assessment of the three contributions.

Sumário

1. Introduction

1.1. Quest for meaningfulness

Every day, when people wake up to go to work, they do so because this job means something to them. Discovering and fostering those meanings has generated interest among multiple researchers in the last decades. Humans are "hardwired to seek meaning" (MARTELA, PESSI, 2018), and work is a central arena in this quest (COHEN-MEITAR, CARMELI, *et al.*, 2009, MARTELA, PESSI, 2018). In contrast, deprivation of meaningfulness is associated with depression, mortality, and suicide ideation due to a contemporary pressure to live authentically (BENDASSOLLI, 2024, MARTELA, PESSI, 2018).

In the corporative milieu, meaningful work has a critical role in mediating work characteristics and desirable organizational outcomes (BARRICK, MOUNT, *et al.*, 2013, DEMIRTAS, HANNAH, *et al.*, 2017). Table 1 presents the desirable organizational outcomes mediated by meaningful work and table 2 presents the personal level ones.

Table 1 – Desirable organizational outcomes mediated or caused by Meaningful Work

Outcome	Studies Presenting	Definition
Creativity	(CHAUDHARY, PANDA, 2018)	"Creativity involves creation of novel and valuable ideas about products, services, methods and processes" (CHAUDHARY, PANDA, 2018, p.3)
Organizational Commitment	(HALL, Kelly R. R., GONG, *et al.*, 2023, SUYATNO, PAMBUDI, *et al.*, 2022, YIN, GUAN, *et al.*, 2023)	"The psychological phenomenon of employees wanting to stay with the organization as they become committed to it and is a psychological binding force that motivates employees to stay on" (YIN, GUAN, *et al.,* 2023, p.3478)
Employee Proactive Socialization	(WU, ZHANG, *et al.*, 2023)	Proactive socialization was "defined that employees actively adopted some strategic behaviors to quickly adapt to the organization when they first entered the company. (…) Wang et al. divided proactive socialization into three dimensions that consisted of feedback seeking, general socializing and superior relationship building" (WU, ZHANG, *et al.,* 2023, p.3)
Work Engagement	(ERSOY, PEKER, *et al.*, 2023, GUO, HOU, 2022, MENG, XU, *et al.*, 2022, SILVA, DUARTE, *et al.*, 2023, TAN, CHAM, *et al.*, 2023)	"Engagement consists of employees' heightened energy and profound connection with and positive mindset toward work tasks, which allows individuals to meet the challenges inherent in their workplace roles more effectively. Work Engagement comprises an affective-cognitive state that persists over time and transcends specific events, individuals, behaviors, or objects." (SILVA, DUARTE, *et al*., 2023, pp.3-4)

Innovative Performance	(LIU, LIU, *et al.*, 2022)	"Intentional development and implementation of novel and useful ideas within an organization in order to benefit role performance, a group, or an organization" (LIU, LIU, *et al.*, 2022, p.02)
Innovative Work Behavior	(ALMAZROUEI, BANI-MELHEM, *et al.*, 2023, LIANG, LIN, *et al.*, 2022)	"A process in which employees generate novel and potentially economic or socially valuable ideas based on their knowledge and experience, which include the production of new products or services through innovative labor or innovative ideas from manufacturing methods and business management thinking." (LIANG, LIN *et al.*, 2023, p.3)
Job Performance	(ESTRALE, SINGH, *et al.*, 2022, KUBIAK, 2022, RABIUL, MANSUR AHMED, *et al.*, 2023, SHANG, 2022, ZEGLAT, JANBEIK, 2019, ZHOU, SACRAMENTO, *et al.*, 2023)	"Job performance reflects whether the work performed by employees is effective and demonstrates their ability and influence within the organization. It includes two aspects: in-role performance relates to activities that are consistent with organizational goals and functions; extra-role performance relates to supporting a healthy work climate" (SHANG, 2022, p. 3)
Job Satisfaction	(ERTUGRUL, 2022, HAQUE, KHAN, 2023, NEGRI, CILIA, *et al.*, 2022)	"A pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from an appraisal of one's job or job experiences" (NEGRI, CILIA, *et al*., p.1904)
Knowledge Sharing	(PHAM, 2022)	"Individuals' behavior concerning the sharing of their. It refers to a series of activities designed to transmit knowledge among people information or knowledge with others" (PHAM, 2022, p.4)

Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB)	(CHANDRA, SRIVASTAVA, *et al.*, 2024, ELSHAER, AZAZZ, *et al.*, 2023, GUSMEROTTI, TODARO, *et al.*, 2023, KONG, BELKIN, 2022, OUWERKERK, BARTELS, 2022)	"Involves employees going beyond their call of duty to contribute to the organization in different ways, such as helping co-employees who have heavier workloads, helping new employees adjust to their jobs, or offering constructive suggestions for organizational development. Although OCB promotes the effective functioning of the organization, it is discretionary behavior on the part of employees that goes beyond formal job requirements" (CHANDRA, SRIVASTAVA, *et al*., 2024, p.128)
Turnover Intentions (Buffering effect) / Intentions to stay	(CHEN, Xin, HANSEN, *et al.*, 2023, DECHAWATANAPAISAL, 2023, HEATH, WILLIAMS, *et al.*, 2024, LE, HANCER, *et al.*, 2023, LEUNISSEN, SEDIKIDES, *et al.*, 2018, OPREA, PADURARU, *et al.*, 2022, POPAITOON, 2022, QUEMENER, DE BOSSCHER, *et al.*, 2023)	"Refers to three particular elements in the withdrawal process: thoughts of quitting the job, the intention to search for a different job, and the intention to quit. This means that an employee might be thinking of leaving the organization, but they do not take the necessary steps to leave" (HEATH, WILLIAMS, *et al*., 2024, p.87)

Source: The author

The desirable outcomes of meaningful work can be grouped in binding the worker to the organization (commitment, job satisfaction, turnover intentions), enhancing the results delivered to the organization (creativity, employee proactive socialization, work engagement, innovative performance, innovative work behavior, job performance, knowledge sharing, OCB), and contributing to the creation of a better work environment (job performance, OCB).

The relationship between turnover intentions and meaningful work gains importance with the recent emergence of the Great Resignation. This term describes the phenomenon in 2021, where many workers did not return to their jobs after the isolation period from the

COVID-19 pandemic. By the end of 2021, over 47 million professionals in the United States quit their jobs (FORMICA, SFODERA, 2022). Resignation rates were high in white-collar jobs like engineering, technology, and healthcare (SERENKO, 2023). In Brazil, almost half of the resignations in this period happened with professionals with graduation degrees (48.2%), while the rates plummeted to 25% among the less educated (GONÇALVES, 2023).

Among the causes pointed out by specialists, some are well-studied existential antecedents or dimensions of meaningful work like fulfillment, purpose/calling (FORMICA, SFODERA, 2022), and sense of belonging (LIU-LASTRES, WEN, et al., 2023). In addition, businesses with healthy workplace cultures had attrition rates below the average during the Great Resignation (LIU-LASTRES, WEN, et al., 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst for The Great Resignation, accelerating the reasons associated with the phenomenon that existed before the pandemic. The lockdown provided an opportunity for workers to reflect on their career and life goals, leading many to seek a better work-life balance (SERENKO, 2023, LIU-LASTRES, WEN, et al., 2023). In a broader sense, the phenomenon is a consequence of the gap between the promises organizations made regarding employees' self-development, flexibility, and freedom, and the reality that often falls short of these promises (KUZIOR, KETTLER, et al.,2023). As the end of the pandemic does not signify the end of the reasons for high turnover rates, organizations should listen to their employees and proactively address workers' concerns and needs (SERENKO,2023).

Table 2 – Personal level outcomes mediated or caused by Meaningful Work

Outcome	Studies Presenting	Definition
Burnout (buffering effect)	(BENDASSOLLI, 2024, KROK, 2016, LAVY, 2022, SUYATNO, PAMBUDI, *et al.*, 2022, TAN, YEAP, 2022)	"The three characterizations of Job Burnout (JBO) are emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishments. Emotional exhaustion is central to JBO, where individuals are emotionally lethargic and drained. Depersonalization is a form of dissociative disorder, where one's cynicism and impersonality manifest in attitudes toward work and interpersonal relationships. Finally, reduced personal accomplishments reduce one's sense of efficacy through disregard for one's past accomplishments" (TAN, YEAP, 2022, p.3047)
Health	(ALLAN, BATZ-BARBARICH, *et al.*, 2019, ZUBERBUHLER, CALCAGNI, *et al.*, 2023)	Mental health is "a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to contribute to his or her community" (ZUBERBUHLER, CALGANI, *et al.,* 2023, p.03) "General health refers to one's overall physical functioning" (ALLAN, BATZ-BARBARICH, *et al*., 2019, p.505)
Life Satisfaction	(DUARTE-LORES, ROLO-GONZALEZ, *et al.*, 2023, KIM, Minseo, BEEHR, 2018)	"Refers to a cognitive and global assessment of a person's quality of life as a whole" (KIM, BEEHR, 2018, p.388)
Stress / Distress	(CANBOY, TILLOU, *et al.*, 2023, COOK, SACKETT, *et al.*, 2024, LIPS-	"Affective distress is a dimensional and tripartite concept, consisting of depression, anxiety, and high stress. (…) For example, higher levels of affective distress are more problematic—

	WIERSMA, HAAR, *et al.*, 2023)	signaling greater levels of symptoms, functional impairment, and possibly evidence of a clinical diagnosis (e.g., anxiety or depressive disorder). However, persons who experience low levels of affective distress may also experience troubling symptoms, even though the severity of distress may not indicate a psychiatric diagnosis" (COOK, SACKETT, *et al*., 2024, p.4) "Job Stress occurs when job demands exceeds an employee's resources to manage" (LIPS-WIERSMA, HAAR, *et al*., 2023, p.326) Organizational stress is defined as "a sequence of events that includes the presence of a demand, the perception that the demand is significant and is taxing on an individual's resources, and the generation of a response that typically affects the individual's well-being" (CANBOY, TILOU, *et al*., 2023, p.91)
Work-Family Conflict (Buffering Effect)	(NIELSEN, THOMPSON, *et al.*, 2020)	n/a
Workers' Well-Being	(CHAMANI, SAFAEIZADEH, *et al.*, 2023, CHAO, CHEUNG, *et al.*, 2023, LIPS-WIERSMA, HAAR, *et al.*, 2023, WALLACE, 2019, ZUBERBUHLER,	"Three core clusters of job characteristics that are hypothesized relevant to veterinarian well-being. These include: actualizing self, helping others (animals or people) and a sense of belonging (to team or profession" (WALLACE, 2019, p.2) "An individual's subjective evaluation of their overall quality of life, which includes their emotional state, cognitive appraisal of their life circumstances, and overall life satisfaction"

	CALCAGNI, *et al.*, 2023)	(CHAMANI, SAFAEIZADEH, *et. al*., 2023, p.02)

Source: The author

The personal-level outcomes from meaningful work encompass providing wellness to workers (life satisfaction, workers' well-being) and avoiding pathological conditions (burnout, stress, health). Meaningful work has a buffering effect against pathological conditions; that is, this experience can protect individuals from situations like stress and burnout.

Despite the relevance of the topic, there is no consensus on the definition of meaningful work (BAILEY, YEOMAN, *et al.*, 2018, DEMIRTAS, HANNAH, *et al.*, 2017, TYSSEDAL, 2023). Literature offers a range of descriptions of what meaningful work is, from the most restricted ones, like "one's perception of how his/her job contributes towards higher purposes of life" (PRADHAN, PRADHAN, 2016, p.182), to the broader ones like "meaningful work enables agency, enhances belonging, creates opportunities for influence, permits people to use and develop their talents, contributes to a greater good, and provides income for a decent living" (BARRETT, DAILEY, 2018, p.4), or more generic definitions like "the balance or harmony between the characteristics of the employees and expectations of the employee" (AKGUNDUZ, ALKAN, *et al.*, 2018, p.105). In addition, meaningful work is often conflated with its antecedents and outcomes, generating exaggerated scales to assess the construct (MARTELA, PESSI, 2018, TAN, CHAM, *et al.*, 2023). In 2018, a literature review found twenty-eight scales in fifty-six empirical studies on meaningful work (BAILEY, YEOMAN, *et al.*, 2018).

ROSSO et al. (2010) presented a helpful distinction that will drive the understanding of meaningful work and meaning of work concepts in this thesis. Meanings of work are the roles work has in people's lives; for example *work as a paycheck* and *work as a purpose*, while meaningful work relates to the amount of significance that the meanings of work have for individuals, that is, a work that is "perceived as particularly significant and holding more positive meaning for individuals" (ROSSO, DEKAS, *et al.*, 2010, p.95).

To better navigate this fragmented literature, this thesis presents two significant trends in contemporary literature based on classifications presented in previous works (BAILEY, YEOMAN, *et al.*, 2018, YEOMAN, 2014): perceiving *meaningful work as a benefit* or

perceiving *meaningful work as a need*. The two trends differ in how they approach the ontology of work meaningfulness and the problem of work meaninglessness. This distinction clarifies what is at stake when a work is considered meaningful (or meaningless).

The trend of meaningful work as a benefit considers the concept as resulting from a fit between the characteristics of a worker and the ones from the job (MICHAELSON, PRATT, *et al.*, 2014, MITRA, BUZZANELL, 2017, RAI, KIM, *et al.*, 2023). Therefore, organizations provide meaningful work by matching the right features in job positions and the right employees who value such features. When this combination is employed, meaningful work results from these static characteristics (LIANG, LIN, *et al.*, 2022).

This understanding contributes to a truncated rendering of the ontology of meaningful work due to the positivistic idea around the idea of "right." If there are "right" characteristics of a job and a worker, it is possible to point out a better profile of workers to seize these characteristics better. These features coalesce around a work-centered life, such as professional development, job impact, and autonomy. Thus, providing meaningful work becomes a human resources management (HRM) strategy to establish specific characteristics in job positions and recruit and/or shape workers to these features (DHONDT, OEIJ, *et al.*, 2021) implying a colonizing effort.

Meaningless work is the one that could not afford such characteristics to employees, a list of jobs that could encompass repetitive work (ISAKSEN, 2000) and dirty work (SIMPSON, HUGHES, *et al.*, 2014) as examples. Having a meaningless work is an option that an individual can (or cannot) afford to do and exchange for other benefits regarding work like pay and job stability (WARD, 2023).

In addition to the mentioned colonial character of meaningful work as a benefit trend, scholars have pointed out three other limitations. First, considering the fit between workers and job characteristics would assume a steady state is an assumption that does not correspond to the contested site of organizations, infused with human conflict and dilemmas that generate tensions. Therefore, individuals negotiate these tensions to create new meanings and keep work meaningful. This dynamic represents a processual character of meaningful work ontology.

Second, the steady state that meaningful work could imply concealing some potential adverse effects of experiencing too much meaningfulness (FLORIAN, COSTAS, *et al.*, 2019, MAGRIZOS, ROUMPI, *et al.*, 2023). Individuals can engage in deleterious behaviors to satisfy their need for meaningfulness at work, like struggling with inadequate conditions, engaging in long working hours, accepting insufficient wages, and even realizing counterproductive deeds to keep work meaningfulness (BUNDERSON, THOMPSON, 2009, FLORIAN, COSTAS, *et al.*, 2019).

Third, meaningless work is not just a downturn but can trigger processes of psychological distancing as a strategy to deal with this poignant experience. In turn, psychological distancing can result in long-term pathological conditions like burnout, depression, or suicide ideation.

Multiple fields study the concept of work, like anthropology, sociology, and economics. For example, in economics, work—in that case, deemed labor—is a production factor along with capital and land. This field also studies how work contributes to income distribution through the wages provided in job markets. This thesis does not discuss work through these framings.

Consequently, meaningful work is also a multiple-studied construct. In Brazil, we highlight the contributions of the sociologist Ricardo Antunes to this discussion. ANTUNES (2009) opposes two renderings of the concept of meaningful work. The first rendering is truly meaningful work, where the needs of individuals and collectives organize work. The individual can find self-actualization because she exposes herself as a subjective through work, in the teleological act that creates and responds to the causal world (ANTUNES, 2009).

The second rendering of work meaningfulness is alienating, where work structures the capital while exploring and disappointing the social being. According to the author, it becomes impossible to achieve work meaningfulness because “the meaning of work that structures the capital becomes destructuring to the humanity, while the work that is structuring to humanity is potentially destructuring to the capital” (ANTUNES, 2009, p.12, translated by the author).

According to Antunes, this last rendering results from how capitalism promotes the worship of subjectivism and individualism, opposing experiences of solidarity and

social/collective action (ANTUNES, 2009). Capitalists understood that they could offer autonomy to go beyond to explore the muscular force from workers and multiply their profits by exploring workers' imagination and cooperation (ANTUNES, 2009). Nonetheless, autonomy is a feature reserved for a small share of the labor force, while most workers will still deal with part-time jobs with overwhelming routines, being far from achieving this limited self-actualization. Antunes brought significant contributions that reflect some of the assumptions and conclusions in the present thesis. However, this thesis does not affiliate with his understanding of work meaningfulness.

This thesis offers contributions in multiple fields of research, highlighting the interdisciplinary nature of the study and its relevance to a larger academic community. Each of its three texts addresses different communities. The first paper, "Brazilian White-Collar Employees' Discourses of Meaningful Work and Calling", uses the concepts of Discourses and discourses from communication studies and the influence of culture to understand the processes enacted by Brazilian white-collar employees to derive meaningfulness in work. The second paper, "Meaningful Work Canvas: A Visual Tool for Service Designers", introduces the Meaningful Work Canvas, a service design tool developed to assist designers in creating services that facilitate the meaningfulness-making process from its providers. The theoretical essay, "Three guidelines to a decolonial research agenda on meaningful work: the case of the preferred worker", contributes to the discussion in Managerial studies on how to decolonize Management and Organizational Knowledge (MOK). Meaningful work has multiple positive impacts on the organizational and personal levels, which are strong motivations to study the concept. In the next session, other motivations for this thesis will be presented along with the objectives associated with them.

1.2. Objectives and Motivations

This thesis aims to demonstrate that the understanding of meaningful work as a need is more robust and useful than the one that considers meaningful work a benefit. It meets this goal through three secondary objectives. The first is understanding the processes white-collar employees enact to derive meaningfulness from work. Processes are an essential concept in the ontology of meaningful work as a need. They are a starting point for discussing how organizations can help foster meaningful work and benefit more employees.

The choice of investigating white-collar employees was not by chance. There is a focus on literature in investigating workers from “economically marginal but symbolically significant” occupations (BUNDERSON, THOMPSON, 2009, p.436), like the case of the volunteers of a refugee shelter in Germany (FLORIAN, COSTAS, *et al.*, 2019) or the sustainability practitioners (MITRA, BUZZANELL, 2017). The literature review of the thesis will present multiple pieces of evidence on the influence of the job a worker has and how a worker frames work meaningfulness.

To meet this objective, this thesis will present in Chapter 4 the article "Brazilian White-Collar Employees' Discourses of Meaningful Work and Calling," which shows three processes enacted by white-collar employees to render work as meaningful: being competent, being an explorer, and being a builder of a better world. This paper also highlights the impact of dysfunctional work cultures and toxic work environments on blocking the process of meaningfulness-making, resulting in the deflation of meaningfulness, resulting in psychological distancing, emotional distress, and turnover intentions.

After investigating the processes enacted by Brazilian white-collar employees, the next secondary objective is to use this expertise to propose strategies for organizations to help employees derive meaningfulness from work. A visual tool was developed to help designers create and improve services that facilitate employees' pursuit of work meaningfulness. Because of its processual characteristic, which makes the pursuit of meaningfulness an ongoing effort (MITRA, BUZANELL, 2017), the verb “to facilitate” is used. Organizations cannot just provide certain characteristics and select the

professionals who fit them; employees will always have to create new meanings to deal with tensions at work. There is a lack of studies in service design concerned with providers' working conditions, which contributes to making service designers close to being complicit in perpetuating social inequality in their projects (PENIN, SORUCO, 2021).

In Chapter 5, the article “Meaningful Work Canvas: A Visual Tool for Designers” describes a visual tool developed to meet this objective. The visual tool blends characteristics from job design and job crafting. Meaningfulness-making is a codesign process between organizations and their employees.

The last secondary objective is to discuss how research on meaningful work can follow the decolonial option. Most of knowledge about meaningful work stems from developed countries, mainly the United States. Pushing noncritically this knowledge in contexts apart from the U.S. may lead to deleterious consequences from workers.

Business schools trained managers in practices that followed the spirit of the U.S.-led capitalism, exporting those practices to the Global South, reproducing “dynamics of dependency and inequality within the global management education system” (JAMMULAMADAKA, FARIA, *et al.*, 2021, p.722). Now, these institutions are invited to play a role in the decolonial turn (MALDONADO-TORRES, 2011), developing managerial knowledge and practices that unfold the colonial differences and emerge as alternatives coloniality.

In Chapter 6, this thesis presents the essay “Three guidelines to a decolonial research agenda on meaningful work: the case of the preferred worker” to meet the third objective. The essay argues that meaningful work literature helped to create an idea of a preferred worker, an image in line with neoliberal values. Understanding meaningful work as a need creates new renderings dislodged from the prescriptions of the preferred worker. The guidelines are examining the dynamics of acceptance and re-existence against the preferred worker archetype, revealing the voices of subaltern individuals about what work means to them, and expanding the ontological structure of meaningful work. Following the guidelines can help the assessment of the oppressions suffered by the subalterns in the organizational milieu, their strategies of acceptance and re-existence, and allow scholars

to understand the possibilities of meaningful work beyond the archetype of the preferred worker.

The present thesis is organized as follows. In Chapter 2, there is a methods section describing the relationship of the papers and how the literature review was developed. Chapter 3 presents the literature review. The papers "*Brazilian White-Collar Employees' Discourses of Meaningful Work and Calling*" and "*Meaningful Work Canvas: A Visual Tool for Designers*" are presented in chapter 4 and chapter 5 respectively. Chapter 6 presents the theoretical essay "*Three guidelines to a decolonial research agenda on meaningful work: the case of the preferred worker*". The text is wrapped up by the discussion and conclusion on Chapter 7 and Chapter 8 respectively.

2. Methods

This thesis will be presented as a collection of papers, following the instructions given in the study of KUBOTA *et al*. (2018). The advisor and the Ph.D. candidate have opted for this model due to the requirement from the Ph.D. program to have a paper accepted for publication in a journal indexed by the Journal Citation Reports (JCR) index. The first paper was published in *Management Communication Quarterly*, a journal indexed in JCR.

Following this session, the candidate presents a literature review that intends to offer an overarching understanding of meaningful work research, which is not feasible in the limited space of any of the papers that compose this thesis. The literature review accounts for the historical evolution of the meaningful work concept. This account does not intend to be a definitive document of the process but to offer an interpretation of the changes and incorporations that the concept of meaningful work suffered over time.

The literature review details the distinction presented in the introduction between the trends of *meaningful work as a benefit* and *meaningful work as a need*. As mentioned above, this distinction is useful for navigating fragmented literature as the one studying meaningful work. The discussion is relevant in demonstrating which trend is more adherent to the objectives outlined in this thesis.

Discussions on the relationship between meaningful work with ergonomics – specifically, with the concept of activity from ergonomics – and the decolonial option in organizational studies end the literature review. Ergonomics is a well-studied field at Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro that carries touchpoints with meaningful work research. *Decoloniality* is a lens that allows meaningful work research to unveil power dynamics into the work milieu and provide possibilities for reducing or erasing these dynamics to create plural work environments. This thesis does not intend to exhaust the discussion on decoloniality in the milieu of work.

KUBOTA *et al.* (2018) pointed out the importance of connecting the papers in the thesis with the research goals rather than presenting them as an unconnected set of studies. According to the authors, it is important to weave these works, evidencing how one study leads to another (KUBOTA, MIGUEL, *et al.*, 2018). The three studies that compose the

present thesis – two papers and one technical essay – coalesce around the approach of meaningful work as need.

The first paper, "*Brazilian White-Collar Employees' Discourses of Meaningful Work and Calling*," presented the processes enacted by Brazilian white-collar employees to derive meaningfulness from their work associated with the concept of purpose. The PhD candidate conducted thirteen interviews with workers from 25 to 35 years old between 2019 and 2020 and assessed the results using thematic analysis. The paper described three themes associated with the concept of purpose enacted by interviewees to render their work meaningful: being an explorer, being curious, and being the builder of a better world. Participants dealt with tensions at their jobs by affiliating with these three themes.

After developing this first paper, which focused on describing the processes enacted by workers to render work meaningful, the Ph.D. candidate and the advisor detected a necessity of understanding how the proposed approach of meaningful work could drive interventions in the milieu of work. With this goal, they developed the Meaningful Work Canvas, a visual tool to support designers in creating services that facilitated meaningfulness-making processes from its providers. The second paper, "*Meaningful Work Canvas: A Visual Tool for Designers,*" describes the tool's creation and sharpening process.

Meaningful Work Canvas was based on the Comprehensive Meaningful Work Scale (LIPS-WIERSMA, WRIGHT, 2012) because this scale acknowledges the processual, comprehensive, and multidimensional character of meaningful work. The visual tool blends characteristics of job design and job crafting. Job design refers to organizational initiatives to reconfigure job positions to make work more meaningful for individuals. Job crafting is how employees alter characteristics from their work to foster meaningfulness.

The PhD candidate and the advisor conducted workshops in a postgraduate class with eight students. They codesigned the visual tool, and the students could go beyond the first specifications when applying the tool to their research sample. The third author of the paper "*Meaningful Work Canvas: A Visual Tool for Designers*" was one of the students whose work illustrates the tool's operation and proposed the structure's final version.

Contexts influence meaningfulness-making processes, necessitating grounding this research in the Brazilian context, as most research on meaningful work comes from the West, specifically in the U.S. (BAILEY, YEOMAN, *et al.*, 2018). The first paper addressed this question by discussing the *vira-lata* complex and characteristics of the Brazilian middle class. Nonetheless, the third study from this thesis, "*Three guidelines to a decolonial research agenda on meaningful work: the case of the preferred worker*," brings the reflections of the Ph.D. candidate on guidelines to a decolonial research agenda on the concept that goes beyond the description of how contexts in the Global South shape meaningful work and sheds light on the power dynamics that influences processes of meaningfulness-making.

Coloniality considers Western European modernity as the pinnacle of all human civilizations, devaluing the praxes of living, cosmologies, and cultures from other civilizational trajectories like the multiple civilizations in Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas. Since World War II, the United States has become the New West, acting as the matrix of contemporary coloniality. In this new stage, coloniality works in themes like MOK. It spreads neoliberal values such as technicity, meritocracy, and individualism as a unique way of modernizing the outdated managerial practices of other countries, mainly those in underdeveloped economies in the Global South but also Western European ones, like in the criticism of the welfare state and labor rights.

Regarding meaningful work, the colonial power dynamics push individuals into the archetype of the preferred worker – male, white, and affiliated with neoliberal values. A decolonial agenda on meaningful work can describe how subalternized individuals deal with the tensions from this pressure. The guideline, "examining the dynamics of acceptance and re-existence against the preferred worker archetype," suggests investigating whether (and how) workers accept or reject – and other possibilities in between this continuum – the prescriptions of the preferred worker archetype to render work as meaningful.

The guideline "revealing the voices of subaltern individuals about what work means to them" suggests how research can assess meaningfulness-making processes from workers who are not white or male. For example, previous studies on female workers revealed identity tensions they face to affiliate to masculine activities like late-night gatherings and

how they render work as meaningful vis-à-vis the marginalization they suffer in organizations such as the Police.

The processual assessment can unveil new paths for individuals deriving meaningful work. Literature has a strong presence of quantitative studies with scales that cannot expand the ontology of significant work to other possible dimensions of the concept. This is more dramatic because such scales consider the preferred worker as a reference, an archetype with a strong work-centrality. This essay presented the last guideline, "expanding the ontological structure of meaningful work," to fill the gap of the limited comprehensiveness of the concept

In the essay, some studies illustrate the guidelines to prove which are more or less developed in current literature. The central database used to find the articles mentioned in the essay was the Web of Science (WoS). Nonetheless, other studies came from the references in overarching papers about the decolonial option on management and organization studies (MOS – ABDALLA, FARIA, 2017, JAMMULAMADAKA, FARIA, *et al.*, 2021). Given the relevance of WoS, this scenario evidences that studies discussing the decolonial option on meaningful work are still on the fringes of mainstream literature.

The present thesis has a discussion session with the contributions that are transversal to the three studies, following the recommendations from KUBOTA et al. of providing an overview of the main results from the papers, but without repeating the discussions from each study.

3. Theoretical Background

This section provides a background that embraces and goes beyond the literature reviews from the three texts – two papers and a theoretical essay – that compose the thesis. The first subsection has a non-exhaustive, non-systematic historical account of how meaningful literature evolved, from the seminal investigation of Viktor Frankl on the power of meaningfulness, passing to early studies that aimed to understand if there were other motivations to work rather than the material ones, and arriving at studies on the late 20th century that tried to grasp the complexity of meaningful work using multidimensional models. Then, the theoretical background describes two contemporary trends in literature: meaningful work as a benefit and meaningful work as a need, explaining how the second trend sought to fix the limitations of the first.

Subsection 3.4 explains the relationship between meaningful work research and the concept of activity from ergonomics. This subsection shows how the meaning of the activity may be independent of the actions conducted by the worker and explains how fields like psychodynamics of work and social psychology of work discuss the problem of work meaningfulness. Subsection 3.5 discusses how meaningful work can be fostered, with mechanisms split into two categories: job design, when the organization creates job characteristics that can contribute to work meaningfulness, and job crafting, when the worker has the autonomy to make their work meaningful by crafting its characteristics. This subsection refers to the paper presented in Chapter 5 about the visual tool to create services that help individuals foster meaningfulness. This tool blends characteristics from job design and job crafting.

To finish, subsection 3.6 describes the role of contexts and introduces the discussion of decolonial option conducted in Chapter 6. Most research in meaningful work is conducted in the United States and other Western countries. Therefore, it is necessary to underpin this thesis on the Brazilian context to assess better the processes conducted by the interviewees from the study presented in Chapter 4 and the results from the visual tool described in Chapter 5. The decolonial option outlines power dynamics in the Organizational milieu that influence how individuals derive meaningfulness and the impact of these renderings on their personal and organizational outcomes.

3.1. History of Meaningful Work Research – How the literature evolved into the two trends

Establishing a timeline for the evolution of Meaningful Work Research is not straightforward, as rendering work as a meaningful activity can have multiple starting points in human history. For example, in the first half of the 20th century, the sociotechnical systems theory defended the influence of the broader social milieu in work (HACKMAN, OLDHAM, 1976) rather than considering the employee as a mere flesh robot as in the Fordism-Theory tradition. Some centuries earlier, during the Protestant Reformation, society shifted from viewing work as a "curse that prevented humankind from engaging in the more sublime and worthwhile pursuits of the mind" to assessing it as a "divine calling by which a person participates in God's ongoing providence for the human race." (BUNDERSON, THOMPSON, 2009, pp.32-33).

Nonetheless, it is important to outline how meaningful work research has evolved to posit where the present thesis is on this trajectory. Without aiming to be a definitive document on the historical evolution from meaningful work literature, the present study considers the book "*Man's Search for Meaning*" by Austrian psychologist Viktor Frankl as a starting point for this research area. The book presented the concentration camp inmates' experiences in the light of psychiatric knowledge, splitting the imprisonment into three stages: *delusion of reprieve*, *apathy*, and the *psychology of the prisoner after the liberation* (FRANKL, 2017). The two first stages are of relevance for the present thesis.

Delusion of Reprieve happened in the early days at the concentration camp, whereby prisoners considered that soon someone would rescue them, and life at the camp would not be so bad. Right after this, the prisoner strikes out his new life as an inmate, and leaving the camp becomes a distant possibility, triggering the second stage, *apathy* (FRANKL, 2017).

In the *apathy* stage, prisoners focused their emotions on preserving their lives. Acting as naturally as possible was determinant to not drawing attention from camp guards, which made them develop a shell against the dejecting conditions and the brutal punishments

they suffered at the camp. They framed fear as curiosity and fostered a strange sense of humor. As time went on, the inmates' familiarization with the horrifying life at the camp made them capable of grabbing pieces of meals from their dead colleagues or stealing clothing and shoes from the corpses at the camp without feeling any regret (FRANKL, 2017).

Normalizing life at the camp was risky because it was a "world which no longer recognized the value of human life and human dignity" (FRANKL, 2017, p.52). Being embedded in this context triggered a "turmoil" that threaten inmates' values (FRANKL, 2017, p.52). Surrendering to this assault meant losing the "feeling of being an individual, a being with a mind, with inner freedom" (FRANKL, 2017, p.52) and "to descend to the level of animal life" (FRANKL, 2017, p.52).

Some individuals resisted this degrading place through their "inner freedom" (FRANKL, 2017, p.69), as what a prisoner became was the result of an inner decision and not a pure influence of the environment at the camp. This resistance strategy provided opportunities for prisoners to derive meaningfulness by remaining unselfish, brave, and dignified. Another strategy detected was "escaping into the past," where the prisoner could find a refuge from emptiness, desolation, and the spiritual poverty of his existence.

The limitlessness of time inside the camp made inmates perceive their existence as provisional. They could not ascribe to a future and became occupied with retrospective thoughts (FRANKL, 2017), restricting their possibilities to seize the opportunities to make something positive from camp life. This inability was another threat to their survival as they experienced a meaningless life at the camp, suffering mental and physical decay. At the camp, this decay had a typical fashion. The prisoner refused to dress, wash, or do their activities. No blows or punishments had any effect. He felt sick and lay somewhere, refusing to go to the sick bay. He simply gave up (FRANKL, 2017).

The conditions experienced in a concentration camp are not similar to most of the reality of work worldwide. Nonetheless, the study from FRANKL (2017) presented the power of individuals to bear such a horrific situation by reframing their condition in a meaningful way. The thesis will show other examples of how reframing negative situations into something meaningful is essential to human well-being. After FRANKL's (2017) study, more interest has grown in understanding the meaningfulness of work.

3.2. Early studies

3.2.1. Lottery Studies

This group of studies that emerged in the 1950s aimed to understand whether workers would leave or keep working if they earned sufficient money to live comfortably without wages (ROSSO, DEKAS, *et al.*, 2010). Instead of the name, these studies did not necessarily ask participants what they would do if they won the lottery. For example, Morse and Weiss asked their interviewees "If by some chance you inherited enough money to live comfortably without working, do you think you would work anyway or not?" (MORSE, WEISS, 1955, p.192). Of 401 workers in the sample, eighty percent answered that they would keep working, representing that work meant more than an amount of money to these individuals. Other studies conducted in the following decades found similar figures. For example, the MOW interviewed 15,008 individuals, and 86% said they would continue working if they had enough money to live comfortably (MOW, 1987).

MORSE and WEISS's (1955) study brought other findings that influenced ulterior studies and this present thesis. As work represented more than earning a livelihood for interviewees, they investigated what work meant de facto for the participants. One insight from the two researchers was splitting the sample into two main categories: middle-class and working-class occupations (MORSE, WEISS, 1955, p.194). The middle-class work encompassed professional jobs, managers, and sales, which is very similar to the contemporary concept of white-collar jobs. On the other hand, the working class occupations were supervisors, trades, crafts, semi-skilled, unskilled, machine operators, and service, that is, blue-collar jobs.

Although both groups presented similar figures for their tendency to keep working even if they inherited enough money to live comfortably without their wages, they justified this decision differently. Individuals in white-collar occupations emphasize "the interest to be found in their jobs, and the sense of accomplishment which comes from the work well done" (MORSE, WEISS, 1955, p.195). On the other hand, blue-collar workers emphasized" "the necessity for some directed activity which will occupy his time, his minds and his hands" (MORSE, WEISS, 1955, p.193). A life without working for a white-

collar employee would be less purposeful and stimulating, while for the blue-collar one, without work, life would be a life without anything to do.

The non-economic reasons for work were more critical to white-collar than to blue-collar interviewees, evidenced in the interest of blue-collar interviewees in changing their jobs if they did not need the wage to live comfortably. Those participants said they wanted to do business for themselves, although they did not know which business they would do. According to the authors, it demonstrated that blue-collar interviewees desired a more prestigious, freer job than they had at that time (MORSE, WEISS, 1955).

The participants presented elevated rates of job satisfaction, but researchers found different reasons for these answers according to the occupation. Blue-collar employees working in unskilled and service occupations were satisfied because that was the only job they could get and the socialization with colleagues. According to the authors, the resignation present in these answers reflected a tendency workers had to adjust themselves for the job they had and "base that adjustment on the particular attributes of the job and the job situation" (MORSE, WEISS, 1955, pp.197-198). MORSE and WEISS's (1955) investigation participants framed their work as positive by emphasizing the good in their contexts, like concentration camp inmates who tried to derive something meaningful from their dejecting situations. For the two authors, work gave interviewees "feeling of being tied into the larger society, of having something to do, of having a purpose in life" (MORSE, WEISS, 1955, p.191), and these other functions were "evidently" (MORSE, WEISS, 1955, p.191) not perceived as possible non-work activities.

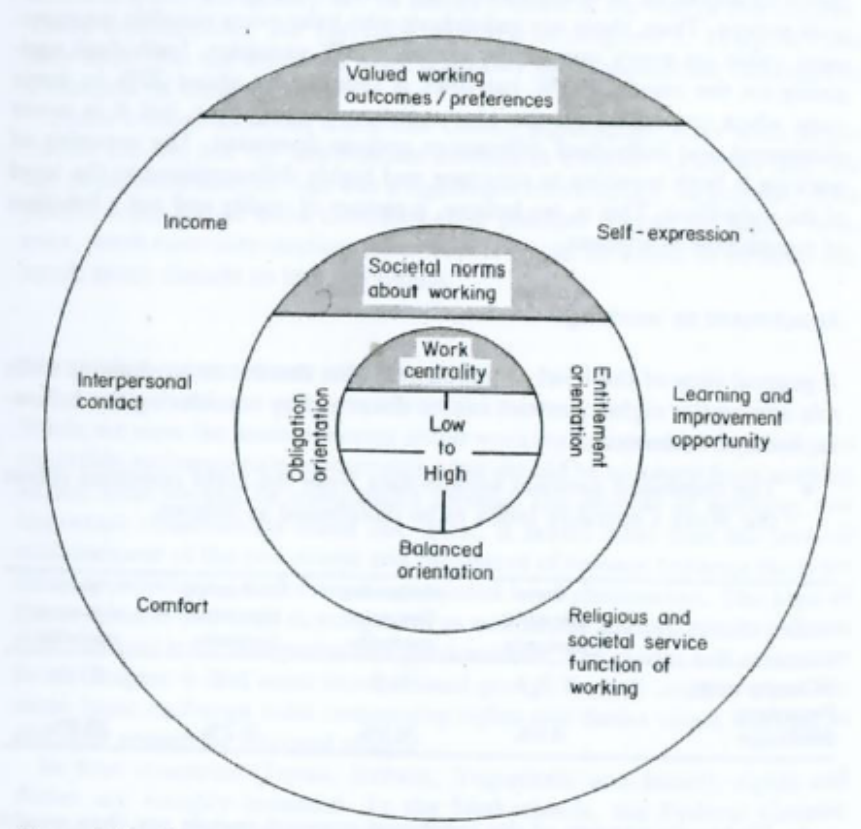
Two decades later, VECCHIO (1980) revisited MORSE and WEISS's (1955) study due to the cultural changes that occurred in the Western culture, which led to a decline in the value of work in an "era of narcissism and self-indulgence" during the seventies (VECCHIO, 1980, p.362). VECCHIO questioned the following question to 1,099 men "If you were to get enough money to live as comfortably as you would like for the rest of your life, would you continue to work or would you stop working?" (VECCHIO, 1980, p.363), a different inquiry from MORSE and WEISS (1955) because he considered interviewees would judge as extremely unlikely earn an inheritance able to make them leave work. A share of 72.2 percent of respondents indicated they would keep working if they had sufficient money to live, representing a statistically significant difference from

the 80 percent found by MORSE and WEISS (1955). Vecchio attributed the difference to “an attitudinal shift in the male labor force” (VECCHIO, 1980, p.367), which generated a decline in the perceived value of work in the U.S. culture. The growth of recreational industries and the concern with leisure activities indicated a greater interest in the quality of leisure life vis-à-vis quality of work. VECCHIO (1980) alluded to the possibility of a leisure ethic replacing the traditional work ethic in the United States. The author found a statistically significant relationship between interviewees' occupations and the desire to continue to work (VECCHIO, 1980).

3.2.2. MOW International Research Team

MORSE and WEISS's (1955) and VECCHIO's (1980) studies showed that work meaningfulness differed for white-collar and blue-collar workers. The MOW extended this inquiry by investigating if there were differences in work meaningfulness between different societies, exploring answers from eight industrialized countries between the late 1970s and the early 1980s: Belgium, the Federal Republic of Germany, Great Britain, Israel, Japan, Netherlands, the United States of America, and Yugoslavia. Before assessing the difference between countries, researchers proposed a structure of work meaningfulness derived from a survey with about 15,000 participants, with three main dimensions - work centrality, societal norms, and valued work outcomes - as presented in Figure 1:

Figure 1 - The structure of meaningful work proposed by the MOW INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH TEAM



Source: MOW (1987)

Work centrality was at the center because researchers considered that this dimension should represent how an individual is attached, from a values perspective to working as a life role (MOW, 1987). Work centrality is the belief in the value of work in one's life, which has two theoretical components: a value orientation toward working as a life role and a decision orientation about preferred life spheres.

The value component has two significant properties: identification and commitment. Work identification is the cognitive comparison between work as an activity and perceptions of the self. This comparison may generate outcomes in a continuum between work as central or peripheral to one's self-image (MOW, 1987). Work commitment is an affective response to the importance of work in one’s life, represented, for example, in time spent on work activities (MOW, 1987).

In turn, decision orientation encompasses the judgment one makes about work, positing a more or less preferred position among life spheres. An individual will participate in a less preferred sphere because it affords relevant rewards but will render as meaningful the behaviors in life spheres that are more preferred (MOW, 1987).

Societal norms are on the model's second circle because they represent society's influence on work meaningfulness (MOW, 1987). The authors limited the societal norms to duties and rights exchanged between individuals and collectivities associated with historical and cultural factors relative to each society or group. Perceptions regarding justice on the balance between obligations and entitlements may frame work meaningfulness.

Valued work outcomes encompass any outcome work may have for an individual, ranging from economic ones like wages, job stability, and promotions to existentialistic ones like self-actualization or purpose (MOW, 1987). According to the authors, labor market characteristics, occupation, and culture significantly influence the perceived relationship between such outcomes (MOW, 1987). Valued work outcomes are in the more external circle as they are the most open-ended dimension, representing any outcome, incentive, need, goal, or value an individual can aspire from work. They are different in forms, from measurable notions like working hours to highly abstract ones like self-expression. The research team proposed a division between the basic needs that lead a person to work and the goals an individual prefers to find or obtain in the work. In the first group, the economic rationale was predominant for over half the sample, while in the second set, the expressive dimension of work was the preferred one (MOW, 1987).

From this structure, the researchers evaluated which dimensions were more salient for workers in different countries and cohorts (MOW, 1987). They found only slight differences between the weights given by participants to meaningful work dimensions across the nations, as there was a similarity of 75-90% in those weights (MOW, 1987). Nonetheless, the study presented some exciting contrasts inside each country. For example, in Belgium, West Germany, the Netherlands, and Israel, researchers perceived a tendency for people with low educational levels to consider work negative, emphasizing work's economic and material dimensions. On the other hand, in these four countries, workers with high educational levels defined work as something positive and highlighted the expressive aspects of working. A similar trend emerged regarding the participants' occupations. In all countries researched except Israel, specialists, administrators, and

entrepreneurs valued expressive aspects of work. In contrast, production workers, service workers, and salespeople emphasize work's economic and material conditions (MOW, 1987).

In sum, researchers found two clusters. In the first cluster, workers presented low work centrality, rendered work negatively, saw it as something they needed to do, and value work's economic and material aspects. The second cluster presented high work centrality, defined work positively as an activity that produces something of value for society, and emphasized the self-expressive aspects of working (MOW, 1987). Again, the results point to specificities in deriving work meaningfulness from different professions, like what MORSE and WEISS (1955), and VECCHIO (1980) previously found. Like the studies previously presented, people in high-skilled jobs valued the expressional characteristics of work to render it meaningful. At the same time, blue-collar workers were attached to the economic rewards from work, had a negative view of their activities, and derived meaningfulness as a strategy of adaption.

3.3. Contemporary Trends on Meaningful Work Research

Contemporary research on meaningful work can be split into two major trends. The first trend considers meaningful work as a benefit, restricted to a limited set of antecedents, and a meaningless job would only prevent individuals from having these benefits. The second trend frames meaningful work as a need, emerging in as many fashions as the multiple ways of living are, where meaningless work can lead to deleterious psychological conditions like burnout and depression (BENDASSOLLI, 2017, 2024).

3.3.1. Meaningful work as a benefit: The 21st century and positive psychology

The bulk of literature frames as meaningful the work that fulfills person's needs or matches the values and beliefs an individual holds (MICHAELSON, PRATT, *et al.*, 2014). In other words, meaningful work results from a fit between the characteristics of the individual and the job (MICHAELSON, PRATT, *et al.*, 2014, MITRA, BUZZANELL, 2017, RAI, KIM, *et al.*, 2023). For example, the job characteristics model states that the meaningfulness one derives from work comes from job characteristics – task identity, skill variety, and task significance – and individual growth needs (HACKMAN, OLDHAM, 1976). RAI and colleagues argue for meaningful work stemming from a fit between workers' values and the organization's ethical climate (RAI, KIM, *et al*., 2023).

Positive psychology emerged at the beginning of the 21st century, aiming to provide happiness and individual development grounded on a narrative of limitless human potential (BECKER, MARECEK, 2008). According to this tradition, the *fit* that generates meaningful work has a new element "the desire to make a positive impact or contribute to the greater good" (BAILEY, YEOMAN, *et al*., 2018, p.9).

Simultaneously, workplace spirituality offered an understanding that work is meaningful if it provides cognitively meaningful tasks and creates a sense of joy, "connecting workers to a larger good and things viewed by the worker as important in life" (BAILEY, YEOMAN, *et al*., 2018, p.8). In sum, meaningful work nourishes and is nourished by "an inner life" each individual has (BAILEY, YEOMAN, *et al*., 2018).

The influence of positive psychology and workplace spirituality attracted organizations, as they could impact and allegedly have a responsibility to provide meaningfulness for their employees (MICHAELSON, PRATT, *et al*., 2014). Providing meaningfulness generated performance-related outcomes delivered by an individual willing to employ greater efforts in working on something she considers significant and worthwhile, a logic expressed by BENDASSOLLI and TATEO through the epitome "merry worker, better worker" (BENDASSOLLI, TATEO, 2018, p.20).

Scholars generally use quantitative methods to assess the role of meaningful work as a mediator antecedent of professional and personal outcomes (MITRA, BUZZANELL, 2017). This strategy generated twenty-eight scales to assess meaningful work, which hindered the construction of a consensus over what meaningful work is (BAILEY, YEOMAN, *et al*., 2018).

From this perspective, meaningful work emerges as a benefit, as the quest for meaningfulness allows individuals to engage in activities in concert with their selves and reach self-actualization. This stream of literature treats meaningful work through a "components lens," whereby specific factors make a work to be meaningful (MITRA, BUZZANELL, 2017, p.596). A meaningless job falls short of providing these factors to employees.

A consequence of this understanding of meaningful work is a positivistic view that considers meaningful work as deriving from a limited set of factors, like contributing to the greater good, reaching self-actualization, and having autonomy or job satisfaction (KUHN, GOLDEN, *et al.*, 2008, LAIR, SHENOY, *et al.*, 2008, MITRA, BUZZANELL, 2017).

Several scholars questioned if rendering meaningful work as a benefit was contributing to a perception that some ways of living were more worthy than others as there is a positivistic underlying system of judgments and concerns defining what human development is (BECKER, MARECEK, 2008, BENDASSOLLI, TATEO, 2018, LAIR, SHENOY, *et al.*, 2008, SAMBAJEE, SCHOLARIOS, 2023). In that case, pursuing meaningful work means having a work-centered life and blurring distinctions between private and professional domains (BUNDERSON, THOMPSON, 2009, KUHN, GOLDEN, *et al.*, 2008, LAIR, SHENOY, *et al.*, 2008, MITRA, BUZZANELL, 2017).

Workers who cannot follow this mindset may suffer marginalization at their jobs as organizations create and maintain specific values, rendering alternative understandings unthinkable (LAIR, SHENOY, *et al*., 2008). For example, pregnant women and their partners try to avoid this marginalization and keep their jobs safe by concealing pregnancy and affirming that children will not impact productivity. They want to convince the organization that they will keep a work-centered life (LAIR, SHENOY, *et al*., 2008).

Limiting the definition of meaningful work to this restricted set of characteristics contributes to the colonization dynamics in the organizational milieu because most of the knowledge on the construct emerged from research on the experience of Western, mainly U.S.-native, white-collar workers. The way that this cohort derives meaningfulness does not apply to every context, like women from lower castes in India, whose work is only a way to educate their children, gain some financial independence, and pull themselves and their families out of poverty (LAIR, SHENOY, *et al*., 2008). Assessing meaningful work based on an elitist set of characteristics may at least generate organizations that yield suboptimal performance results.

Miguel di Simoni's approach to meaningful work as a benefit

Organizations were interested in the perception of meaningful work as a benefit because of its impact on several performance-related outcomes. Nonetheless, meaningful work as a benefit can ground criticisms on the capitalist way of thinking, like the approach from Miguel de Simoni.

DE SIMONI (2006) framed meaningful work based on the deeds of Saint Francis of Assisi. For the researcher, in contemporary times and when Saint Francis lived, society faced a crisis that hindered individuals from searching for meaningfulness (DE SIMONI, 2006) due to the zeitgeists considering money as a central value. The opposition between the quest for meaningfulness and the pursuit of money and considering society as facing a void of meaningfulness are the two pieces of evidence that align DE SIMONI's (2006) perception with the scholars who believe meaningful work is a benefit. DE SIMONI (2006) defended a restricted set of characteristics that could generate meaningful work from which considering working as a way to earn a livelihood did not belong. According

to the author, working to make a livelihood represents a spiritual void, as working loses the ability to link the worker with other human beings and the creator (DE SIMONI, 2006).

Saint Francis was born into a wealthy family in a period that witnessed the birth of the classes that framed the capitalist society. The bourgeois families, like Saint Francis', had the only duty to pay wages to workers who conducted the actual work, that is, transforming nature (DE SIMONI, 2006). This division amplified the social inequalities between the two classes and the poverty in the new capitalist society, which rendered money the only driver of human deeds (DE SIMONI, 2006).

Saint Francis offered an alternative to provide meaningfulness to people grounded in three pillars: the connection with God (transcendence), the centrality of work, and a new way to create relationships between humans. The search for meaningfulness needs to be transcendent toward an entity, in that case, God. Saint Francis did not want to be isolated in the monastery as the friars from other orders and considered work the best way to connect his spiritual life with the profane world (DE SIMONI, 2006).

The Franciscan order prayed a radical opposition to money as a driving force in that society. If work did not generate livelihood, the friars should ask for alms, delivering the problem of subsistence to God's providence. Eliminating the relationship between money and work was how Saint Francis criticized the structure of power that emerged in his times, which was perverse with the poor ones, and how he demonstrated confidence in the hearts of the other individuals (DE SIMONI, 2006).

At that time, money had created a structure that divided individuals into two classes. Saint Francis proposed work as a collective activity rather than generating the ascendence of a group of individuals over another. Therefore, no activity would be classified as more important than others, as action and contemplation coalesced at work. Still, on the division of labor presented in his society, Saint Francis considered that workers were only the ones who directly transformed nature through their activities. Consequently, individuals in management roles and the bourgeois were not workers nor earned the right to material or spiritual food. In the Franciscan order, there were no supervising functions (DE SIMONI, 2006).

Following the strict rules from Franciscan orders is an endeavor for few, and that was not the goal of DE SIMONI (2006) when he presented his vision of work meaningfulness. He wanted to dislodge the experience of meaningfulness from the objectives of capitalist organizations, pointing out that individuals find meaningfulness by working to provide the greater good (DE SIMONI, 2006). In this framing, DE SIMONI restricted what stands as meaningful work to a limited set of characteristics, and the meaningless work did not lead to a pathological emotional state, as most of society does not experience meaningful work. Besides, this view presented the role of the more horizontal relationships at work in fostering meaningfulness.

3.3.2. Meaningful work as a need: the processual assessment of meaningful work

Scholars pointed out two other limitations of assessing meaningful work as a benefit. The first is that considering working as experiencing a steady state of satisfaction or jubilation is a somewhat naive assumption (MITRA, BUZZANELL, 2017). Organizations are conflicting sites of human activity, generating a range of tensions, that is, practical dilemmas expressed through paradoxes, contradictions, and ironies (TRETHEWEY, ASHCRAFT, 2004). MITRA and BUZZANELL (2017) defended a tensional perspective on meaningful work where tensions are not a flaw in the organizational fabric but a routine characteristic of the corporate life derived from an inherent lack of transparency on organizational communication and the struggle for the primacy of various meanings of truth conducted by organizational members (TRETHEWEY, ASHCRAFT, 2004). According to this tension-centered perspective, individuals create new meanings to live with tensions, redefining what they find meaningful during shifts in multiple contexts, dilemmas, and harrowing or dejecting situations (MITRA, BUZZANELL, 2017).

FLORIAN *et al.* (2019) provided an example of how shifting societal discourses emerged as tensions for volunteer workers "sustain meaningfulness" (FLORIAN, COSTAS, *et al.*, 2019, p.6) in a refugee shelter in Germany. After a group of refugees assaulted, raped, and robbed 1,200 women in Germany, public opinion shifted from a euphoric welcome extended to refugees to a public outcry against them. Before this episode, volunteers

perceived their work as making a difference and expressing exemplary citizenship. After these events, volunteers reframed their roles as integrating refugees into German society (FLORIAN, COSTAS, *et al.*, 2019).

The second limitation is the possible adverse effects of experiencing too much meaningfulness (FLORIAN, COSTAS, *et al.*, 2019, MAGRIZOS, ROUMPI, *et al.*, 2023), a situation described by the moniker "the dark side of meaningful work" (BAILEY, YEOMAN, *et al*., 2018). Individuals may subject themselves to deleterious work conditions, like in the case of the zookeepers who struggled with an absence of proper structure to work, long working hours, and insufficient pay on behalf of a job they found extremely meaningful (BUNDERSON, THOMPSON, 2009). Their strong commitment resulted from perceiving work as an unbending duty, a phenomenon the two researchers defined as "neoclassical calling", in reference to the Protestant work ethic (BUNDERSON, THOMPSON, 2009). The neoclassical calling contrasted with the "modern calling," whereby working toward the greater good was a benefit for self-actualization, which adheres to the perception of meaningful work as a benefit. Work meaningfulness was pictured as a "double-edged sword" as it could provide benefits and drawbacks.

The dark side of meaningful work leads to situations of workaholism, an "over-identification with work resulting in difficulty maintaining work and non-work balance" (DUFFY, DIK, 2013, p.433). Workaholic individuals make sacrifices in non-work domains, like enduring long working hours and spending little time with family and friends (LAIR, SHENOY, *et al*., 2008).

At last, the dark side may emerge when an individual desires meaningful work but cannot afford to do this, leading to adverse consequences (ALLAN, ROLNIAK, *et al.*, 2018). Raising workers' awareness of what they find meaningful can make them look for it elsewhere rather than in their current workplace (BAILEY, YEOMAN, *et al.,* 2018).

The tension-centered approach and the dark side of meaningful work advocate for an understanding of the quest for meaningful work as a human need (BAILEY, YEOMAN, *et al.,* 2018). Instead of choosing jobs with preferred characteristics, the individual cannot entirely leave the process of deriving meaningfulness of work at the expense of putting their health at risk, like the inmates that collapsed in the concentration camps described

by FRANKL (2017). To achieve this, workers create new meanings to render adverse situations as meaningful, as the German volunteers did after the shift of public opinion on refugees (FLORIAN, COSTAS, *et al.,* 2019).

The dark side of meaningful work can stimulate unscrupulous organizations to offer employees unfavorable pay and work conditions, a tendency observed by business ethics scholars (MICHAELSON, PRATT, *et al*., 2014). Besides the inherent character of the quest for meaningfulness, some employers offer meaningful work in exchange for suitable pay and benefits (MICHAELSON, PRATT, *et al*., 2014), and meaningful work can act as a buffer against burnout, turnover intentions, and frustration (FOUCHE, ROTHMANN, *et al.*, 2017, UGWU, ONYISHI, 2018). In contrast, other examples contradict the buffer effect, like the case of Brazilian white-collar workers, whose topic will be presented in detail in an article on this thesis (BARRETO, BUZZANELL, *et al.*, 2022), and the case of teachers who worked with trauma-affected students (BRUNZELL, STOKES, *et al.*, 2018), among others (MAHESHWARI, KAUR, *et al.*, 2023, SOZER-BOZ, TURGUT, *et al.*, 2023). In both situations, employees made sacrifices until a certain threshold, then emotional distress deflated the sense of meaningfulness the worker had previously built.

Professionals may enact unproductive behaviors to sustain meaningful work, like the volunteers in a refugee shelter who refused to collaborate with their paid counterparts due to an alleged fear of losing control of the refugee shelter (FLORIAN, COSTAS, *et al*., 2019). The volunteers created a parallel organization to care for refugees, reinforcing their sense of ownership and community while soring relationships with the paid staff (FLORIAN, COSTAS, *et al*., 2019). DASH and SAINI (2023) assessed a positive relationship between meaningful work and knowledge hoarding, defined as "the accumulation of knowledge without any specific intention to share the same" (DASH, SAINI, 2023, p.2377). According to the authors, a possible reason is that feelings of team cohesion that made work meaningful contributed to individuals hoarding knowledge to give their groups a competitive advantage (DASH, SAINI, 2023).

The perspective of meaningful work as a need implies a more complex understanding of the concept than the framing of meaningful work as a benefit. This complexity asks for the employment of qualitative methods like thematic analysis (BARRETO, BUZZANELL, *et al*., 2022) and grounded theory (MITRA, BUZZANELL, 2017), as they

are capable of untangling the dynamics employed by individuals to derive meaningfulness in an ongoing basis.

Understanding meaningful work as a need also changes the assessment of what is meaningless work. If the perspective of meaningful work as a benefit rendered work meaninglessness as a consequence of job conditions that are not adherent to a particular set of characteristics (MITRA, BUZZANELL, 2017), considering meaningful work as a need frames meaninglessness as stemming from an interruption in the process of meaningfulness-making (BENDASSOLLI, 2017). In this situation, the individual feels dislocated from work and devoid of transformative agency without being able to seek a future-oriented objective (BENDASSOLLI, 2017). Two anti-catalytic elements may hinder the meaningfulness-making process, generating dramatic consequences for workers: *placardisation* and psychological distancing.

Placardisation describes employees being put in a "suspended state", a metaphorical cupboard, excluding them from work activities (BENDASSOLLI, 2017, p.16). The term describes the case of workers who have irrelevant activities assigned to them, fostering feelings of uselessness, like professionals that employers cannot fire or are not able to retire. Employees are caged in a perpetual state of waiting, and work is no longer a future-oriented activity as the individual cannot seek the possibilities that work could afford them (BENDASSOLLI, 2017).

Psychological distancing represents situations whereby the worker detaches themselves from work, either affectively or in behavioral terms, in response to dysfunctional work contexts with characteristics like toxic relationships and overwhelming working hours (BENDASSOLLI, 2017). In the beginning, psychological distancing can be protective but can evolve into a "dissociative mechanism" (BENDASSOLLI, 2017, p.18). Meaningfulness-making is an affective process oriented towards the future, and when this is blocked, it can lead to a poignant experience of burnout. Burnout is defined as "an ongoing state of negative feelings regarding work, accompanied by anxiety and distress and by a feeling of low efficacy and low motivation or engagement regarding work" (BENDASSOLLI, 2017, p.17). The affected workers cannot care for their clients or their demands at work.

Despite overcoming the limited characteristics associated with framing meaningful work as a benefit, understanding meaningful work as a need has two significant limitations. First, suppose every activity that does not block the process of meaningfulness-making can be rendered as meaningful. In that case, these researchers may consider positive jobs positions of poor quality, like the ones with dull activities or that did not contribute to human nourishment, since they meet the criterion of not blocking meaningfulness-making (LAIR, SHENOY, *et al*., 2008). Developing taxonomies that allow organizations and workers to aspire for quality work is essential.

Second, when broadening the scope of what makes work meaningful, scholars must be cautious in considering meaningful activities that do not contribute positively to society, like terrorism (MICHAELSON, 2021). MICHAELSON (2021) presented an essay proposing a normative account that regarded as meaningful work that was “meaningful to oneself and meaningful to others but that it must be meaningful independently of personal experience and social perception” (MICHAELSON, 2021, p.422).

3.4. The Activity of Work and Meaningful Work

Ergonomics is a field of research and practice concerned with what an individual does at work (GUÉRIN, LAVILLE, et al., 2001), which is divided into two categories: task and activity. The task represents an anticipated result, defined by predetermined conditions; neither the results nor the conditions are real (GUÉRIN, LAVILLE, *et al*., 2001). The activity is how the worker executes the tasks, limited by the actual conditions and generating results different from the anticipated ones (GUÉRIN, LAVILLE, *et al*., 2001). The distance between the prescribed and the real represents a material manifestation of the contradictions presented at work.

The meaning of the activity of work may be independent of the actions conducted, like in the experience whereby a kid is asked to make drawings and experiences boredom after a certain time (CLOT, 2018). For a kid without any representative disability, shifting the meaning of the activity by asking her to teach another kid to draw was sufficient to overcome boredom. The activity remained the same – making drawings – however, the kid had a new goal: transmitting the knowledge to the other kid (CLOT, 2018).

The example from the kid's experience shows that the activity enacted is not only a personal attribute but a product of the meaning associated with it. It is possible to integrate the activity of work with the meaningfulness of work by considering the activity as a part of the worker's history. Two frameworks can drive this integration: the psychodynamics of work and the social psychology of work (CLOT, 2018).

The psychodynamics of work studies the intrasubjective and intersubjective dynamics, as "subjectivity is constructed by an activity upon oneself, on one's lived experience and one's unconscious willing" (CLOT, 2018, p.265, translated by the author). A key concept in this framework is the systems of defense, or how an individual copes with adversities and fears. These systems can lead the individual to experiences of pleasure or alienation, giving room to social pathologies and defensive displacements (CLOT, 2018).

The perspective from psychodynamics of work resembles the tensional approach as the systems of defense are a strategy for individuals to derive meaningfulness from the

negative aspects of work. The tensional approach considers that tensions arise from a clash between the self and the work environment or dejecting or harrowing situations at the workplace, and the psychodynamics of work considers the activity of working an inherent font of adverse conditions as working means bridging the gap between the task and the activity (CLOT, 2018). The worker affectively experiences this gap through frustration (CLOT, 2018), and the meanings of work represent a psychological elaboration of the suffering that workers experience (CLOT, 2018).

The social psychology of work criticizes the dichotomy of work/non-work because the individual seems to "fade" after passing through the gates of the office or the industry (CLOT, 2018, p.266, translated by the author). According to the criticized perspective, meaningful work is external to work and "the behavior on a sphere of life is regulated by the meaningfulness an individual attribute to it in other spheres of life" (CLOT, 2018, p.266, translated by the author).

Researchers in this tradition are interested in the "deregulation of the workers' systems of activities" (CLOT, 2018, p.266, translated by the author) that happens when a sphere of life is affected by societal and personal changes:

> By being a subject, the individual hesitates, resists, ponders, invents, tries, and chooses a position on the contradictions lived on her sub-spheres of life that she cannot ensure the inter-signification. We say that the individual personalizes herself. (CLOT, 2018, p.266, translated by the author)

The distance between the prescribed tasks and the real tasks is experienced by an actor engaged in multiple worlds and multiple times that she lives simultaneously, seeking to overcome the contradictions by demanding unity among the worlds that can be no more than an ideal.

The social psychology theory and the tensional approach of meaningful work are similar in defining meaningless work. According to the first, the regulations an individual enacts to create meaning from the disparities between the multiple spheres of her life may fail where "there is a change in the possibilities of reaction and control of the individual on herself and her situations of existence, when she cannot break free from dissatisfactions, suffering, and internal contradictions that become unbearable for her" (CLOT, 2018, p.267, translated by the author), generating psychopathological phenomena.

CLOT presents the example of the machine operator who cheats against the rules by making activities attributed to the mechanic to reach the goals set by the management. She informs the mechanic of her necessity to fix the machine and is authorized to repair it. Now, she has a new concern: convincing her employers to include setting machines in describing the activities attributed to the machine operators. The mechanic cannot consider the operator's formation as official, causing resentment to her that deals with a dilemma: stopping or continuing to make the mechanic's work. This scenario limits the potential development of the mechanic operator, putting the activity in a “painful expectative, generating a risk of loss of meaningfulness of work” (CLOT, 2018, p.274, translated by the author).

The machine operator suffers from the destruction of her capacity to act. The reprimed evolution of her can meet similar histories from her colleagues, fostering a collective desire to change the situation. On the other hand, if the operator does not have support from her colleagues, she can develop a pathologic reaction unless she has resources in different spheres of life capable of helping her set a psychological distance from her work (CLOT, 2018).

3.5. Fostering Meaningful Work

The lottery studies revealed meaningful work as stronger than money and the material benefits from work in justifying the individuals' willingness to work. This finding made scholars interested in how meaningful work could be fostered. A seminal work in this direction was the job characteristics model developed by HACKMAN and OLDHAM (1976), which considered that job characteristics and the worker's internal tendencies could prompt experienced (work) meaningfulness (HACKMAN, OLDHAM, 1976, p.255).

The authors defined experienced meaningfulness of the work as "the degree to which the individual experiences the job as one which is generally meaningful, valuable, and worthwhile" (HACKMAN, OLDHAM, 1976, p.256). In their model, three job characteristics could foster meaningful work: skill variety, task identity, and task significance.

Skill variety assesses the variability enacted in a job and the diversity of skills necessary to carry out the work. Task identity is "the degree to which the job requires completion of a 'whole' and identifiable piece of work; that is, doing a job from beginning to end with a visible outcome" (HACKMAN, OLDHAM, 1976, p.257). It represented the opposite of the alienation in the Fordist-Taylorist paradigm, whereby each worker did only a tiny, unidentifiable portion of constructing a good or providing a service. Task significance encompassed the impact of job activities on other people's lives, whether inside or outside the organization (HACKMAN, OLDHAM, 1976).

The model conceptualized the employees' characteristics by assessing their needs for personal growth and development through measuring the individual growth need strength (GNS). Employees with high GNS react more positively to enriched jobs than individuals with low GNS. Nonetheless, individuals with low GNS respond positively to improved jobs (HACKMAN, OLDHAM, 1976).

A limitation of the job characteristics model is evaluating meaningful work focusing only on the individual without directly addressing "interpersonal, technical, or situational moderators" (HACKMAN, OLDHAM, 1976, p.277). The two authors stressed that the

model is suitable only for jobs that are “carried out more-or-less independently by individuals” (HACKMAN, OLDHAM, 1976, p.277).

More recently, scholars have investigated the impact of specific organizational initiatives on meaningful work, mainly through qualitative models. An example is the corporative social responsibility (CSR), discretionary actions and politics that organizations enact to enhance the welfare of stakeholders – employees, shareholders, clients, environment, and community – addressing the triple-bottom-line of sustainability: environment, social and economic performance (CHAUDHARY, AKHOURI, 2019, KIM, NURUNNABI, *et al.*, 2018, SUPANTI, BUTCHER, 2019). The impact of CSR on work meaningfulness can be explained by Social Identity Theory, according to which the identification between the employee's values and the organizational ones makes work meaningful. This identification impacts work meaningfulness by fostering a sense of security that makes workers take more risks, display creativity, and endure greater efforts, as they do not perceive the risk of being fired or punished if something does not happen as expected (CHAUDHARY, AKHOURI, 2019).

Researchers found evidence of CSR as an antecedent of meaningful work (CHAUDHARY, AKHOURI, 2019, KIM, NURUNNABI, *et al.*, 2018, RAUB, BLUNSCHI, 2014) and of meaningful work as the mediator of the relationship between CSR and other positive work-related outcomes such as job satisfaction, personal initiative (RAUB, BLUNSCHI, 2014) helping behavior (SUPANTI, BUTCHER, 2019).

Another example of organizational initiatives associated with the flourishing of work meaningfulness is the multiple leadership styles apart from the traditional one. The relationship is assessed similarly to the example of CSR, with quantitative studies investigating the mediating role of meaningful work between leadership and positive work outcomes. Table 3 presents a summary of these studies.

Despite the multiple taxonomies of leadership, their definitions round around the idea of leaders of role models of the characteristics they intend their subordinates to mirror, i.e. authenticity (CAI, LYSOVA, *et al.*, 2018, CHAUDHARY, PANDA, 2018, DEMIRTAS, HANNAH, *et al.*, 2017, FRIEDER, WANG, *et al.*, 2018) and as intermediaries who connect employees' values with the organizational ones (CAI, LYSOVA, *et al.*, 2018, DEMIRTAS, HANNAH, *et al.*, 2017, FRIEDER, WANG, *et al.*, 2018). In turn, this sense

of belongingness can stimulate individuals to pursue behaviors that foster other domains of work meaningfulness, such as creative expression (CAI, LYSOVA, *et al.*, 2018).

Table 3 - Studies relating multiple types of leadership and meaningful work

Study	Leadership	Definition	Outcome mediated by MW
(CHAUDHARY, PANDA, 2018)	Authentic Leadership	“a pattern of leader behavior that draws upon and promotes both positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate, to foster greater self-awareness, an internalized moral perspective, balanced processing of information and relational transparency on the part of leaders working with followers” (p.2)	Creativity (partially mediated)
(DEMIRTAS, HANNAH, *et al*., 2017)	Ethical Leadership	"the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way-making communication, reinforcement, and decision” (AKDOGAN, ARSLAN, *et al.*, 2016, p. 216)	Engagement Organiz. Identification
(CAI, LYSOVA, *et al*., 2018)	Servant Leadership	"refers to developing employees to their fullest potential in the area of task effectiveness, community stewardship, self-motivation, and future leadership capabilities" (p.2)	Innovative Work Behavior
(FRIEDER, WANG, *et al.,* 2018)	Transformational Leadership	"transformational leaders motivate followers by articulating a compelling vision, serving as role models, stimulating their followers intellectually, and attending to each follower's unique career development needs by providing individualized coaching and mentoring (p.6)	Job Performance
(PRADHAN, JENA, 2017)	Abusive Supervision	Abusive supervision is one such negative managerial construct, which refers to supervisor’s sustained dysfunctional behavior towards the subordinates (p.825)	Intention to Quit

Source: The author

According to Social Identity Theory, this strategy can make work meaningful by associating organizational and individual values (CHAUDHARY, PANDA, 2018). Such leaders bring their subordinates to the core of decision-making, instilling “confidence among the followers that their opinion counts” (CHAUDHARY, PANDA, 2018, pp. 8-9).

The job characteristics model and the studies on CSR and leadership are part of what we can define as job design, a perspective that considers meaningful work as a consequence of how organizations design the work characteristics. On the other hand, a second perspective called job crafting considers workers as the protagonists in fostering meaningful work, with the employees having a supporting role.

Job Crafting is a concept presented for the first time by WRZIESNEWSKI and DUTTON (2001), defining the active change workers did regarding their jobs' characteristics to turn work into something meaningful. Workers changed their job characteristics across three boundaries. First, the task boundaries encompassed the activities associated with a particular job position. Individuals can extend or reduce the boundaries, that is, embrace more or less activities on their job to make work more meaningful, like the example of the engineers who realized tasks beyond their scope to foster a perception of having more control over their work activities (WRZESNIEWSKI, DUTTON, 2001). The second group is the *relational boundaries*, representing the individuals who workers interact with during their activities and those they do not. Professionals can avoid interacting with colleagues who present dysfunctional behaviors or pursuing new relationships during their activities, like the cleaning staff of a hospital that offered emotional support patients' relatives because they find this activity meaningful (WRZESNIEWSKI, DUTTON, 2001). The third group is the *cognitive boundaries*, defined as how individuals perceive their tasks and work. Cooks used to not following strictly the recipes provided by their employers on how to prepare the meals and preferred to create their tricks to build a meaningful identity of culinary artists (WRZESNIEWSKI, DUTTON, 2001).

Another approach to job crafting is the job demands-resources (JDR) model, which considers that individuals make work more meaningful by acting on the balance between their demands and their resources (TIMS, BAKKER, *et al.*, 2012). Demands are the aspects that requiring individuals' psychological and physical effort, while the resources represent the strategies to diminish the psychological costs of engaging in work and the

rewards individuals receive from work. For example, autonomy is a resource that workers can use to deal with complex demands at work, while feedback is a reward they receive for the excellent work they did (TIMS, BAKKER, *et al*., 2012). Empiric research points to an impact of balancing demands and resources on meaningful work by promoting a better person-job fit (TIMS, DERKS, *et al.*, 2016).

According to the JD-R model, individuals craft their work through three strategies. Increasing job resources, like autonomy, variety, and learning opportunities; increasing job challenging demands, for example, proactive involvement in projects; and decreasing job demands by reducing cognitive tasks or emotional interactions (TIMS, DERKS, *et al*., 2016). Evidence points that the strategy of lowering demands can have adverse effects as it relates to reduced work engagement and job performance, leading researchers to rewrite this strategy as optimizing demands, which is positively associated with work engagement (DEMEROUTI, HEWETT, *et al.*, 2020).

3.6. Decolonial Option and the Role of Contexts in Meaningful Work

Contexts are sources of tensions in the organizational milieu and provide resources for individuals to render what they find meaningful at work. An example of context is culture, or "a process by which we use signs to mediate our relationship with the environment" (BENDASSOLLI, 2017, p.615). Culture provides scripts, schemas, collective identities, and discourses that individuals use to construct an account for their work's worth, enabling or constraining their agency (BARRETT, DAILEY, 2018, BENDASSOLLI, TATEO, 2018, MITRA, BUZZANELL, 2017). Shared meanings and narratives prominent in a particular culture influence how individuals derive meaningfulness from work (BARRETT, DAILEY, 2018, FLORIAN, COSTAS, *et al*., 2019).

Cultural resources are distinct regarding geographical location, organizations, and social classes, like minorities (BERKELAAR, BUZZANELL, 2015, KUHN, GOLDEN, *et al.*, 2008, VU, 2022) emerging as an essential tool to investigate how people from different places and classes derive meaningfulness. For example, LONG *et al*. (2016) found that the notion of self-development in China has motivations and hindrances peculiar from that scenario.

A second context influencing meaningfulness-making is the economic one, which limits the opportunities an individual has to achieve decent wages or a comfortable life, affecting how one derives meaningfulness from work (BERKELAAR, BUZZANELL, 2015, LONG, BUZZANELL, *et al*., 2016, VU, 2022). For example, Indian women from lower castes prioritize financial gains over aspirations of calling or self-actualization as their need to push themselves and their relatives out of poverty (LAIR, SHENOY, *et al.,* 2008). In a broader sense, individuals with "greater financial needs will focus more on the economic value of work than other employees because they do not have the luxury of not to" (ROSSO, DEKAS, *et al.,* 2010, p.104).

The valorization of the economic rewards of work in meaningfulness-making was found in other examples from the Global South. Vietnamese workers rendered meaningful pursuing salaries that afford them good living standards and savings to secure the future

due to the insecurities presented in a transitional context from a closed economy to an open economy (VU, 2022). About two-thirds of the Chinese workers interviewed by LONG et al. discussed how financial pressure to maintain their living standards prevents them from seeking work aligned with their values (LONG, BUZZANELL, *et al.,* 2016).

3.6.1. Decolonial Option in Management Studies

The decolonial approach gives some hints on power dynamics presented in contexts. Colonization was the historical moment that started in the late fifteenth century when European countries pilled regions in what the Europeans themselves called the Americas, Africa, Asia, and Oceania. Simultaneously, another process was happening, but of an epistemic character, imposing the European ways of life, cosmologies, culture, and knowledge to the native populations of the new world. This second process is coloniality (MIGNOLO, WALSH, 2018).

Coloniality is grounded in a universalizing fiction that European Modernity was the pinnacle of all civilizational trajectories in the world (MIGNOLO, WALSH, 2018). Classification is a mechanism of this fiction that intends to frame real or ontological differences that only exist in the epistemological domain, creating the colonial difference (MIGNOLO, WALSH, 2018). Colonial difference creates hierarchies with the highest rank reserved for what is considered modern, rendering everything that does not fit this scheme as inferior, barbare, and subject to discrimination (JAMMULAMADAKA, FARIA, *et al.,* 2021, MIGNOLO, WALSH, 2018).

Although almost all modern colonies had become independent states by the mid-twentieth century coloniality is still an unfinished project (MIGNOLO, WALSH, 2018) that expanded their domains to multiple areas, like MOK. Since World War II, when the United States assumed the position of the new matrix from coloniality, the US-based MOK and development models spread worldwide, aiming at modernization and development from the underdeveloped localities (JAMMULAMADAKA, FARIA, *et al*., 2021).

There is multiple resistance against coloniality, with decoloniality emerging as an option. Decoloniality is "a heterogenous notion and set of practices" aiming to free individuals from the oppression coloniality, constructed by the colonized individuals themselves (JAMMULAMADAKA, FARIA, *et al*., 2021, p.720). It differs from other movements as it intends not to dominate the colonial matrix of power (CMP) but to create something new to replace the CMP (MIGNOLO, WALSH, 2018).

There is a relationship between the decolonial option in managerial studies and the concept of meaningful work. The process of meaningfulness-making is constrained and enabled by contexts infused with coloniality. In addition, the unmasking of invisibility promoted by Westernism and the development of discourses that will sustain meaningfulness-making are grounded on language and voices (IRIGARAY, CELANO, *et al.*, 2021). The universal fictions from coloniality have an aesthetic power affecting our senses, emotions, and desires (MIGNOLO, WALSH, 2018). The U.S.-based work ethic is firmly centered on the job as a means to achieve self-fulfillment and intends to be a way to secure “well-being and happiness to everyone on earth” (MIGNOLO, WALSH, 2018, p.139). However, as exemplified before by the example of the Indian women or the pregnant workers, this framing will not make everyone happy (LAIR, SHENOY, *et al*., 2008).

For example, IRIGARAY *et al.* (2021) used the adage "For English to See" to investigate how Brazilian managers resisted against their Western counterparts in transnational organizations. This adage had its roots in the eighteenth century when the Portuguese Court moved to Brazil and created institutions like schools and universities aiming for superficial external recognition. Nonetheless, such institutions had a provisional fashion and, as the English were one of the leading commercial patterns of Portugal, this effort was something only "For English to See" (IRIGARAY, CELANO, *et al.,* 2021). An alternative description assigns the origins of the adage to a series of useless laws on slavery. In the early nineteenth century, Great Britain asked Brazil to end slavery. The Portuguese Court and the Brazilian Court issued several laws between 1810 and 1831 aimed to end slavery gradually. However, slave traffic increased rather than reduced, so those initiatives were only “For English to See” (GOMES, 2010).

The Brazilian managers placed themselves in a “natural” role of colonized, perceiving themselves as inferior when in touch “with a culture that is perceived as superior”

(IRIGARAY, CELANO, et al., 2021, p.10). In addition, to deal with the bullying and the impossible demands from their Western counterparts, Brazilian managers played a decolonial resistance by fooling their colleagues from overseas. The Brazilian managers used the "For English to See" adage to frame their insubordination into something meaningful (IRIGARAY, CELANO, *et al*., 2021).

Renderings of the “ideal worker” differ around the countries or generations (BARRETT, DAILEY, 2018, LONG, BUZZANELL, *et al*., 2016) and can describe colonial tensions in the work milieu. In China, from 1949 to early 1980, the central narratives of work were influenced by three themes associated with Maoist ideology: equality, devotion, and nobility. After opening their economy, the U.S.-based capitalist ideology infused work meanings in China with valorizing materiality, meritocracy, and hierarchy (LONG, BUZZANELL, *et al*., 2016). In Norway, a masculinized work culture brought by foreign companies created pressure for productivity and more working hours for the native workers, against which they resisted by reinforcing their egalitarian local culture, which supports a strong welfare state and strict legislation on work rights (BARRETT, DAILEY, 2018). Both examples present clashes between regional cultures and the universalizing pressures from coloniality, expressed by a dichotomy between collectivism and individualism.

Brazilian and Chinese employees rejected workplace politics by considering it an unfair strategy to climb the organizational ladder (BARRETO, BUZZANELL, *et al*., 2022, LONG, BUZZANELL, et al., 2016). However, the two groups used different rationales to ground their criticism. In Brazil, the *Vira-Latas* myth (mogul, on free translation) that considers workplace politics a sign of inherent corruption associated with the Catholic origins of the country (BARRETO, BUZZANELL, *et al*., 2022) drives the complaints, while in China, the embracement of a meritocratic work view from the United States after the economic opening influences this understanding (LONG, BUZZANELL, *et al*., 2016). Instead of framing contributing to the development of China as meaningful and considering working for the government as “drinking tea and reading newspapers rather than really doing anything,” the public sector still is one of the most desired jobs for Chinese workers (LONG, BUZZANELL, *et al*., 2016, p.15) due to its good wages and stability. The uncertainty of the economic landscape, typical in countries from the Global South, complicates the quest for a job aligned with workers' worldviews.

Colonial dynamics emerge in meaningful work studies with minoritized populations. Trans women in sex work experience articulate their identities through work, negotiating the tension between an idealized body in concordance with their gender identity and a profitable body that satisfies their clients (TOPA, MOREIRA, *et al.*, 2023). One participant perceived that their clients valued the fact that they are transgender, which had an empowering effect on her (TOPA, MOREIRA, *et al*., 2023). For other participants, sex work was the only option they had, a disgusting and health-threatening activity they needed to engage in to survive and to affirm their gender more quickly through financing bodily interventions (TOPA, MOREIRA, *et al*., 2023).

Undocumented Mexican immigrants in the United States adopt the identities of hard workers to stifle their marginalization as a strategy to detach from the immigrant stigma and cope with the exploitation and liminality of their immigrant condition (ARMENTA, 2023). Attending conferences in other cities and accessing spaces restricted to them because of their jobs as direct sellers, they had geographical mobility that other fellow immigrants do not, making them engage in free work or sometimes even pay to work (ARMENTA, 2023).

4. Brazilian White-Collar Employees' Discourses of Meaningful Work and Calling

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Abstract

The search for meaningfulness in work is considered a human need, resulting in growing communication and interdisciplinary scholarship. However, most studies are quantitative and situated in Western, developed nations with different discourses and materialities based on whether studies focus on economically mainstream or marginal, but symbolically significant, occupations. Our study explores Brazilian white-collar employees' accounts of meaningful work. Three themes emerged from interview data: being competent, being an explorer, and being a builder of a better world. Participants cast meaningful work as tensional processes within and across themes, reflecting characteristics of Brazilian middle classes and globalized discourses. As participants aspired to meaningful work, they experienced dysfunctional and corrupt work cultures, toxic workplace relationships, and shifts in their worldviews that deflated their sense of meaningfulness, resulting in reported psychological distancing, emotional distress, and turnover intentions. We encourage organizational communication researchers to take up the 2009 MCQ call for further studies in Brazil.

Keywords: Meaningful work, White-Collar Employees, Purpose, Calling, Self-Efficacy, Brazil, Middle-Classes

4.1. Introduction

The search for meaningfulness as a human need and work as a primary source of existential meanings (BARRETT, DAILEY, 2018) has resulted in a growing body of communication and interdisciplinary research (e.g. BERKELAAR, BUZZANELL, 2015, LIPS-WIERSMA, WRIGHT, 2012). In studies with private employees in nongovernmental sectors, meaningful work is often framed as a static construct and as stemming from positive situations and person-work role fit (CHAUDHARY, PANDA, 2018, SUPANTI, BUTCHER, 2019). This static, positive view has limitations, however, as meaningful work also may stem from moral dilemmas and harrowing situations (BAILEY, YEOMAN, *et al.*, 2018, FLORIAN, COSTAS, *et al.*, 2019, MITRA, BUZZANELL, 2017) Tensions – "abiding dualisms" (MITRA, BUZZANELL, 2017, p. 597) – frame organizational experiences, both enabling and constraining workers' agency and meaningfulness (UMNEY, CODERRE-LAPALME, 2017). Individuals, organizations, and societies change such that people continuously renegotiate what they find worthwhile about work and how to transform adverse situations into something meaningful (BARRETT, DAILEY, 2018, FLORIAN, COSTAS, *et al.*, 2019, FRANKL, 2017, MITRA, BUZZANELL, 2017).

Moreover, how people constitute meaningfulness is culturally, socio-politically, and economically situated, with much scholarship derived from Western countries and mindsets (KUHN, GOLDEN, *et al.*, 2008). Although some organizational communication scholarship from non-Western perspectives relates meaningful work with diverse philosophies and behaviors grounded in cultural and socio-economic-political experiences (e.g. LONG, BUZZANELL, *et al.*, 2016, SHENOY-PACKER, BUZZANELL, 2013), there is little scholarship from South American perspectives on any topic, let alone on meaningful work and particular countries such as Brazil (exception: MCQ 2009 special issue, 22(4)).

Brazil offers unique opportunities for organizational communication scholars as a multicultural and complex country with work ranging from that of Amazonian indigenous tribes to high-tech and gig laborers in São Paulo. DO CARMO REIS (2009) described key events and processes that shape Brazilian organizational communication – industrialization, harsh military regime, reestablishment of democracy, and globalization

– to which impacts of economic stagnation, growing inequalities, widespread COVID-19 deaths, political corruption, and environmental concerns can be added over a decade later (COSTA, 2020, SCALON, CAETANO, *et al.*, 2021). The 2000s saw the rise of the Brazilian middle-class. Analyses pointed to lower unemployment, more formal economy and white-collar work, increased income and education, and greater consumption (e.g., mobile phones, washing machines; SALATA, SCALON, 2020). However, the rise of the middle-class is contested. Reanalysis of large-scale datasets display Brazilian workers' dissatisfaction and uneasy relationship with middle-class expectations, socioeconomic gaps between (upper) middle-class and working-class, perceived instabilities and injustices, and returns to the informal economy (COSTA, 2020, SALATA, SCALON, 2020).

To advance understandings of Brazilian organizational communication and meaningful work, we make three contributions. First, we attend to CRUZ and SODEKE's (2020) call for "dislodging Eurocentrism through a systematic unearthing of cultural assumptions … [and] other systems of oppression" (CRUZ, SODEKE, 2020, p. 15). In doing so, we challenge what meaningful work means outside of Western, developed countries, mainly the United States (BAILEY, YEOMAN, *et al.*, 2018, DUFFY, DOUGLASS, *et al.*, 2016), to generate different ways of knowing, doing, and valuing meaningful work in situ. Second, we add to the relatively limited empirical qualitative research regarding how meaningful work can arise from discursive tensions and conflicts, rather than investigating antecedents and outcomes of meaningful work in quantitative studies with static, positive orientations (BAILEY, YEOMAN, *et al.,* 2018). Third, we investigate sensemaking processes enacted by Brazilian white-collar employees to derive work meaningfulness, noting the aforementioned instabilities, dissatisfactions, and perceived injustices related to class and professionalism in Brazil and centering on purpose, a concept that often is conflated with calling (BERKELAAR, BUZZANELL, 2015).

4.2. Literature Review

We discuss the importance of purpose and values in meaningful work then distinguish these concepts from the concept of calling. We describe Brazilian white-collar workers, Brazilian and global discourses regarding work, and conclude with our research question.

4.2.1. Meaningfulness and Calling

Purpose is considered to be a dimension of meaningful work defined as a sense of directedness in life (ROSSO, DEKAS, *et al.,* 2010). Pursuing purpose provides meaningfulness to the degree that human beings would be unable to survive without it (FRANKL, 2017, ROSSO, DEKAS, *et al.*, 2010). Whereas some scholars define purpose's directedness as inherently oriented to the other (JIANG, F, GAO, 2018), our study refers to the definition from ROSSO *et al.* (2010) that encompasses understandings of purpose not being oriented to the other. Values, or states people desire and feel compelled to realize through several activities, including working (ROSSO, DEKAS, *et al.,* 2010), provide examples of framing not necessarily oriented to the other, defined here as *internally-driven purpose*. For example, working in concert with one's values promotes meaningfulness as individuals perceive that their work matters for their inner selves (LIPS-WIERSMA, WRIGHT, *et al.*, 2016, ROSSO, DEKAS, *et al.*, 2010) and offers perceived consistency between work and non-work behaviors, a "seamless meaningfulness" in individuals' lives (ROSSO, DEKAS, *et al.,* 2010, p. 104). Personal or professional growth (BARRICK, MOUNT, *et al.*, 2013) are examples of internally-driven purposes framed by values. These values form systems representing "set[s] of consistent values shared by a group of people" (ROSSO, DEKAS, *et al.,* 2010, p. 111) that place work meaningfulness in "societal and cultural context[s]" (VU, 2022, p. 2). Following value systems fosters meaningfulness by creating a sense that individuals are doing the right thing, reducing stress stemming from moral dilemmas (ROSSO, DEKAS, *et al.,* 2010, SOUZA, 2018).

Purpose and values are essential in calling, or the "belief that one's career is a central part of a broader sense of purpose and meaning in life" towards promoting the greater good or helping others (DUFFY, DIK, 2013, p. 429). Accordingly, calling can be associated

with purposes necessarily oriented to the other, here defined as *externally-driven purposes*, focusing on greater good and helping others. Nevertheless, some understandings preclude beyond-the-self orientations (i.e., "modern view," THOMPSON, BUNDERSON, 2019, p. 430) and intergenerational callings whereby the next and future generations aim to fulfill immigrants' dreams (SÁNCHEZ SÁNCHEZ, 2021). Additionally, instead of externally-driven orientations of calling's goals, such goals are framed by internal values and personal beliefs as illustrated by the religious origins of the concept. Most studies on calling are conducted in work settings "economically marginal but symbolically significant" (THOMPSON, BUNDERSON, 2019, p.436; see also DEMPSEY, SANDERS, 2010;) such as voluntary (Florian et al., 2019) and zookeepers' work (BUNDERSON, THOMPSON, 2009).

Calling has been primarily associated with two theoretical approaches and with possible negative consequences. Neoclassical approaches emphasize destiny and unbending duty (BUNDERSON, THOMPSON, 2009; DUFFY, DIK, 2013; THOMPSON, BUNDERSON, 2019). Modern (or secular) approaches focus on self-fulfillment and/or personal happiness (DUFFY, DIK 2013), whereby calling is framed as a benefit or passion instead of a duty (BUNDERSON, THOMPSON, 2009; THOMPSON, BUNDERSON, 2019). Whereas these approaches frame calling as positive, researchers also note negative outcomes. Individuals may experience unanswered callings in which they cannot live their callings in their jobs (GAZICA, SPECTOR, 2015), though there is evidence that unanswered callings do not represent hardship (MARSH, ALAYAN, *et al.*, 2020). Another adverse outcome occurs when callings are lived in unhealthy fashions, resulting in complications regarding work-life imbalances, exploitation, burnout, and sacrificing personal moral and ethical codes (DUFFY, DIK, 2013, DUFFY, DOUGLASS, *et al.*, 2016, FLORIAN, COSTAS, *et al.*, 2019, MARSH, ALAYAN, *et al.*, 2020, VU, 2022). This second outcome relates to neoclassical callings, fostering perceptions of work as a moral duty (BUNDERSON, THOMPSON, 2009).

Both approaches and possible outcomes depend, in part, on cultural contexts, which provides discourses and values whereby individuals make sense of realities and derive what is meaningful regarding their work and lives (BARRETT, DAILEY, 2018, BENDASSOLLI, 2017, FLORIAN, COSTAS, *et al.*, 2019). A growing number of publications assess the influence of national cultures and globalized discourses on

meaningful work (BARRETT, DAILEY, 2018, LONG, BUZZANELL, *et al.*, 2016, VU, 2022). As work interactions and economic transactions cross national borders, culturally- and nationally-grounded discourses regarding work may clash with globalized ones that often are based on efficiency and productivity (ANTUNES, 2009, BARRETT, DAILEY, 2018, KUHN, GOLDEN, *et al.*, 2008, LONG, BUZZANELL, *et al.*, 2016).

4.2.2. White Collar Workers in Brazil

Most studies investigating the meaningful work of white-collar (professional and managerial) employees blend these professionals in samples with blue-collar employees or focus on white-collar employees in symbolically significant occupations such as nurses, teachers, or professionals in the third sector. Research with employees in "economically mainstream" occupations (THOMPSON, BUNDERSON, 2019, p. 437), like IT services, engineering, and marketing, usually aims to assess the role of meaningful work as antecedents or mediators of desired work behaviors such as commitment (JUNG, YOON, 2016), creativity (CHAUDHARY, AKHOURI, 2019), organizational citizenship behavior (SUPANTI, BUTCHER, 2019), and performance (FRIEDER, WANG, *et al.*, 2018), without considering the processual and tensional nature of meaningfulness.

KUCHINKE *et al.* (2011) note that Brazil is not often studied with regard to human resource development; this is surprising as Brazil is the largest economy in Latin America. As stated earlier, white-collar workers in Brazil form precarious, shifting, and dissatisfied middle-classes (SOUZA, 2018). According to Souza, since their formation after the arrival of the Portuguese Court in Brazil at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the middle-classes have monopolized access to valued knowledge and have despised individuals from lower classes who often experience dehumanizing life conditions. White-collar workers in Brazilian middle-classes subscribe to illusions of their successes as coming from their efforts (meritocracy, individualism) rather than social origins (SALATA, SCALON, 2020). Given racial inequities in Brazilian social structures, most white-collar workers and upper-middle-class individuals are white (SCALON, CAETANO, et al., 2021) and work in urban settings. There are vast differences in Brazilian industrialized sectors. Overall, blue-collar employees represent 62% of industrial employees, whereas white-collar workers are 4% (CARNEIRO,

SILVA, 2020). White-collar employees are concentrated in municipalities, mostly in central-south Brazil (CARNEIRO, SILVA, 2020).

SOUZA (2018) presents the *Vira-Latas* Myth ("mongrel", in free translation) as the Brazilian national myth to understand middle-class thinking. This myth works as a colonial inferiority complex, whereby individuals attribute tendencies to corruption to Brazil's Catholic origins while associating asceticism and virtue with U.S. Protestant origins. A characteristic from these origins is the *cordial man*, whereby "*cordial*" stands for acting with the heart, benefiting individuals with affective relationships (friends, relatives) even when it goes against the rules. Competence emerges as a middle-class value as it opposes the cordial man because merit instead of politics and relationships define rewards and reflect the virtuousness of the ascetic American (SOUZA, 2018). According to this *Vira-Latas* Myth, politics and the public sector are inherently corrupt domains, such that workplace politics are more critical to promotions than competence. This myth legitimizes the privatization of state-owned companies, even though both public and private domains are composed of Brazilian citizens created in the same Catholicism-grounded society (SOUZA, 2018). Protestants deemed every kind of work equally dignifying as work offers ways to serve God by controlling human desires (SOUZA, 2018). Nonetheless, this understanding dimmed as some knowledge became more worthy and needed for white-collar positions, generating social distinctions for Brazilian middle-classes citizens (SOUZA, 2018).

KUCHINKE *et al.* (2011) conducted a cross-cultural comparison of meanings of work and work stress, and presented "*jeitinho brasilero*", the dexterity to overcome the maze of strict and centralized bureaucratic rules by using one's formal and informal resources and influence" (KUCHINKE, ARDICHVILI, *et al.*, 2011, p. 395) as a characteristic of Brazilian work milieu. This cultural modus operandi – plus economic orientations in white-collar Brazilian meanings of work – predicted high levels of work stress, particularly higher role ambiguity. In nongovernmental organizational (NGO) labor, MARCHIORI and BUZZANELL (MARCHIORI, BUZZANELL, 2017) found that tensional processes enabled Brazilian NGO volunteers to withstand difficulties involved in such a volatile and diverse environment. Volunteers described their labor as meaningful, thus transcending discursive-material contradictions in goals and practice.

Brazilian white-collar employees are subject to globalizing discourses regarding work and neoliberalism. Impermanence discourses uphold discontinuities in work and, by extension, personal lives in globalized markets (KUHN, GOLDEN, *et al*., 2008). Impermanence has been shown to manifest in low job stability, part-time jobs, informal sector work, ambiguities about class distributions and opportunities for social and income mobility (SCALON, CAETANO, et al., 2021), as well as meanings of class regarding inequalities and racial injustices (LUSTIG, PABON, *et al.*, 2020, SALATA, SCALON, 2020), and myths of meritocracy (WAYNE, CABRAL, 2021). Impermanence promotes workers' autonomy as means of dealing with discontinuities while also affording opportunities for more fluid work arrangements and pursuit of new experiences throughout careers (KUHN, GOLDEN, *et al*., 2008).

Moreover, since the 1990s, rhetoric stemming from entities like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank has considered rent-seeking behavior from public agents as the primary – sometimes the only (BROWN, CLOKE, 2004) – source of corruption in societies (GERRING, THACKER, 2005, REINSBERG, KENTIKELENIS, *et al.*, 2021). This rhetoric defends the reduction of the state as the solution for corruption (BROWN, CLOKE, 2004). Given the influences of national-bound and global/neoliberal discourses regarding work, recent national conflicts and the fact that socioeconomic gains in the early 2000s had faded by 2015 (SCALON, CAETANO, et al., 2021), we ask: How do Brazilian white-collar employees derive meaningfulness from their work?

4.3. Methods

4.3.1. Participants

Fifteen Brazilian white-collar employees agreed to participate in our study. All were 25-35 years old. Most self-described as more men (n=9, 60%) than women (n=6, 40%), more single (n=8, 53%) than married (n=6, 40%) or divorced (n=1, 7%), and more middle-class (n=13, 87%) than upper or lower class (n=1, 7%, each). Participants lived in four metropolitan areas: Rio de Janeiro (n=9, 60%), São Paulo (n=2, 13%), Porto Alegre (n=2, 13%), and Belo Horizonte (n=2, 13%). They worked in varied industries: engineering (n=8, 53%), information technology (IT, n=4, 27%), communication and advertising (n=2, 13%); and sustainability (n=1, 7%). Most worked in private organizations (n=10, 67%) and the rest worked in mixed-capital organizations (n=5, 33%). They worked in small (< 500 employees, n=9, 60%), mid-sized (500-5000 employees, n=1, 7%), and large (more than 5000 employees, n=5, 33%) organizations.

4.3.2. Procedures

The semi-structured interview protocol was constructed using knowledge of Brazilian workplaces and studies on the meanings and meaningfulness of work. Primary questions asked about participants' experiences as students and employees and about moments of unemployment, if any, as well as meaningfulness in work (e.g., "have you ever worked with purpose?"). All participants were asked if they had experienced health problems, what they considered interesting in their jobs, and reasons for career shifts.

After the university Ethics Committee approved the study, the first author used a convenience sampling to locate the initial eight white-collar participants, who then referred him to the other seven. Interviews were conducted in Portuguese, recorded, and transcribed verbatim in two cycles to ensure accuracy. Only the quotes presented in our study were translated into English, and participants' names were changed to pseudonyms.

The present study used a constructivist approach to obtain detailed and nuanced understandings of the formative role of context in meaningful work (AFIOUNI, KARAM,

2019). This inductive analysis involved multi-layered coding, resulting in themes grounded in data rather than a priori expectations from extant scholarship (BRAUN, CLARKE, 2006). Analyses were conducted using Atlas.Ti™ through three stages. In open coding, initial codes were based on interview passages that expressed single ideas. Focused coding clustered ideas into larger categories using theoretical groupings of similar codes from previous stages based on their relationships. For example, the category "*being an explorer*" encompassed codes like "*considering that sometimes it is good to change,*" which reflects participants' willingness to look for something new in their careers, and its relationship with the code "*needing to discover the career I have chosen*," as participants gained insight into their careers only after having internships and jobs. Participants noted that internship hopping and job hopping were strategies that helped them do their work and careers.

Coding processes continued until we reached theoretical saturation, which occurred after the twelfth interview. The first author conducted three more interviews to verify the coding, look for missing elements, and add richness to the dataset. During the coding process, the first and the second author met virtually several times and constructed individual and collaborative memos shared via email. After developing our findings, the first author engaged in member checking with four participants to assess the fit between participants' and researchers' interpretations of findings (CASTLEBERRY, NOLEN, 2018, NOWELL, NORRIS, *et al.*, 2017).

4.4. Results

Interviews revealed three themes regarding how Brazilian white-collar employees derive meaningfulness from their work: *being competent*, *being an explorer*, and *being a builder of a better world*. Participants described their needs to negotiate what they found meaningful within organizational and relational contexts, using purpose to drive the creation of new meanings to deal with obstacles. Participants reframed work meaningfulness in situ when they could not live out purposes or changed worldviews.

4.4.1. Being Competent

Over three-quarters of participants framed being competent as a purpose. They rendered competence as a value enacted in their careers. This rendering made them (a) criticize or reject workplace politics and (b) frame obstacles as opportunities to express their potential (LIPS-WIERSMA, WRIGHT, 2012) but also as dealing with dull activities and overwork.

Rejecting Workplace Politics and the Public Domain

Marco worked in one of the largest mixed-capital organizations in the engineering industry, his only job besides his internships. He expressed disdain for the use of "political indications" as criteria for promotions. For him, the new assessment policy at his job was an improvement, which brought "rationality" to the choices of new managers. Now, promotions are driven by "technical merit," and he intends to be promoted only by his competence. He discussed why he does not want to build a managerial profile, although many coworkers aim for executive roles. Instead, he aspires to consultancy roles that he perceives as "more fitting" for himself and his personal development:

> I aim to someday reach this position [consultant]. I'm not aiming for the role, per se; I seek my development as a professional. Eventually, I could find myself worthy of occupying such a position, of occupying this position to

> contribute to the organization …. So, when I can say that I'm a consultant, this will be because I learned well.

Marco considers workplace politics for promotion to be corruption, associating meritocracy with "rationality" that Brazilians associate with the private sector (SOUZA, 2018) and "obsession" with middle-class legitimization that perpetuates labor force inequities and national political divides in Brazil (WAYNE, CABRAL, 2021) : "So, when I can say that I'm a consultant, this will be because I learned well." Marco describes himself as middle-class, a designation befitting only 2% of the Brazilian population (WAYNE, CABRAL, 2021). He, like other Brazilian middle-class laborers, see themselves as contributors to the system ("I could find myself worthy of occupying such a position, of occupying this position to contribute to the organization") without ironically recognizing how much he and they rely upon the support of elites for their choices and merit designations (WAYNE, CABRAL, 2021). Work acquires meaningfulness through individual achievement based on one's own merit. These meanings correspond with lack of collaboration in workplaces, cast metaphorically as "*estatal*" (state-owned organization) and reflect the Vira-Lata myth, as it considers the public domain less efficient due to its tendency to corruption and politically-driven rewards (SOUZA, 2018).

Framing Obstacles as Challenges

Most participants framed the meaningfulness of their work through their competence in overcoming obstacles. In this way, they demonstrated their purpose, merit, and abilities to succeed despite barriers. They framed challenges as learning new complex work, making it through dull activities, and dealing with overwork.

In appreciating challenges as means to gain new and complex learnings and experiences, Daniela, a self-described middle-class IT employee in a small organization, was tasked with working on a product about which she knew nothing but considered such work a "cool" and "challenging" experience. Jéssica, also a self-described middle-class IT employee in a small organization, judged her obstacles as "*Eu amo ter problemas*," a delightful perception of obstacles she faced at work. Both Daniela and Jéssica are product managers.

Victor, who described himself as a member of the middle-class, is an engineer in a small organization that provides outsourcing services. The organization transferred him to a small town scarce on suppliers, and he considered this movement as a "challenge" that encouraged him to learn more and display his competence:

> There were many questions regarding commissioning activities: making the power plant work, it has eleven generators, four chillers, a storage heater, lots of machines, it was such a big plant, the biggest I've ever faced. It was a challenge because it was too hard to find suppliers there. So, I learned a lot because, when I worked in big cities, if I had a problem with equipment, I called a supplier and said: "solve it for me!" I didn't have this in the small town I was in. If critical equipment had problems, suppliers needed at least two days to buy airline tickets, find suitable flights, and make the six-hour trip … we had to solve lots of problems with low-qualified staff.

Over half of the participants considered obstacles to be experiences of doing dull activities that were tedious and frustrating. They knew that they needed to engage in these activities as conditions of their employment but also felt that these were a waste of their talents (using expressions like "filling sheets on Excel" or "pouring water for bosses"), a hurdle to expressing and developing themselves through work, or simply the drudgery of doing repetitive tasks. Julio, a middle-class worker in a large engineering business, described his internship in a consulting services firm:

> When I saw what my colleagues made there, that was a low intellectual job, very repetitive and not intellectual, and that bothered me a lot. I thought: I studied, I know a lot of stuff about industries, infrastructure, I have some specific knowledge on engineering, mainly in finance, economy, I know a few things about logistics, and I apply nothing here … I was 23 and had an engineering degree.

Like Julio, Pedro, a middle-class worker in a small IT company, negotiated his frustrations with dull activities by framing them as necessary to earn a livelihood and improve employability by learning or networking. In response to the question, "what made you stay on this job?" Julio replied, "Financial needs and... learning. I considered that as learning."

Still, other participants considered the lack of autonomy as the reason for feeling that they were engaging in dull activities. When working at an IT services provider organization, Daniela was bypassed by her colleagues on the workflow due to her boss's attitude, making her feel useless, an experience BENDASSOLLI (2017) described as *placardization*. Pedro, a middle-class participant, had a similar experience in a telecommunication services company that diminished the meaningfulness of his work and prompted him to leave his job:

> I left the company … because … there were some changes in the organizational structure last year. One of them suppressed the Product Managers' autonomy over the product backlog …. Before, I was responsible for delivering results and deciding how these results would be structured. Then I was relegated to filling in PowerPoint and Excel documents. So, I wasn't doing the tasks that I considered fulfilling as a professional anymore. I wasn't doing research, and working as a Product Manager is a scientific activity in some way: you have to establish hypotheses and conduct interviews …. [I needed] to ensure that what I'm developing can reach my desired goals. However, this [new organizational] model changed my activities. I became just an executive who builds relationships with the market. This hindered me from doing the creative tasks of a product manager.

Finally, autonomy helped participants construct meaningful work and deal with work overload. Paula, an employee in a small private communications firm who described herself as upper class, considered herself as having "two jobs" due to her formal job in a digital marketing agency and some freelancing she did. She managed them through a schedule defined by her as 9-to-9, but with flexibility to work from home. Pedro considered the flexibility of working from home and establishing his schedule as reasons for not having problems working overtime as a freelancer. However, when he worked as a product manager in a consultancy, he experienced an exhausting routine, while ironically working fewer hours than as a freelancer.

Other participants associated overwork with workaholic organizational cultures and mismanaged processes. In these situations, overwork did not represent a challenge but a

burden they did not intend to carry. Julio described the workaholic culture at a financial services company in which he worked more than 12 hours per day. He received criticism from colleagues for leaving the office before 8 p.m., which made him experience emotional distress and leave the organization. His example, along with those of six other participants, or half of our sample, associated work overload with mismanaged work processes. They experienced worthlessness accompanying overwork. Pedro considered advertising market activities "less intellectual" and "less creative" than he wished. Mariana, a self-described middle-class employee in a small engineering organization, "got tired" of working overtime to deliver tasks that became useless when clients changed their demands. These descriptors align with bullshit jobs that workers report sucking the meaningfulness out of work (GRAEBER, 2019).

In sum, participants considered being competent as the purpose or meaningfulness of their work. This purpose made them express criticism regarding workplace politics and frame adversities as challenges. However, they labeled some adversities as dull activities and undesirable work overload as "burdens," resulting in feelings of worthlessness.

4.4.2. Being an Explorer

For over three-quarters of participants, being an explorer meant (a) absorbing knowledge, even when learning was not vital for career development, (b) seeking opportunities to know a bigger world through their career, and (c) navigating precarities. Being an explorer made work meaningful because it was a value that coincided with actions addressing current circumstances and bridging past and aspirational futures.

Absorbing knowledge

By being explorers, participants gained knowledge and expertise necessary to fulfill career aspirations (ROSSO, DEKAS, *et al*., 2010). Mariana said she "desired to study hard and became an excellent professional" as an engineering undergraduate. For two-thirds of participants, learning was both a means to employability and a delightful experience per se, even when the knowledge seemed useless for their work and careers.

Carolina, a middle-class employee in a small communication company, described her undergraduate years and internships as happier times:

> I enjoyed attending the university, I enjoyed the graduation subjects, even those subjects that were … general, philosophy, sociology, stuff that I don't use today, they weren't so practical as the one I use today …. However, today I didn't work with anything I studied. My work is very different from what I expected, and I don't know if this [her perception about her work] is because I'm frustrated with my career.

Aiming to know a bigger world, absorbing knowledge, and learning coalesced around meaningful work, which coincides with the valorization of accumulating knowledge, a characteristic of the Brazilian middle-classes (SOUZA, 2018).

Learning a bigger world through work

Second, being an explorer also made participants seek and seize opportunities to learn a bigger world through their jobs, making them perceive their work as meaningful for themselves and others. More than a quarter of participants reported enjoying accessing places, people, and data they would not know if not by their jobs. Daniela and Letícia used their desire to seek opportunities as means of knowing a bigger world and negotiate situations of uncertainty regarding work. Letícia, a self-described middle-class employee in a sustainability services organization, endured long rides on dangerous roads and had a precarious infrastructure in which to maneuver her activities, which she described using the term "*perrengue*," Brazilian slang meaning "being in a pickle." She negotiated her uneasiness by considering her job as an opportunity to explore new places:

> Then I went to another state, this project began in January 2020, with Eolic energy, we stayed there for about one month, riding to some communities in which social responsibility projects could be developed. They wanted to map some communities and perceive their potentialities, to meet corporate social responsibility standards. It was a new experience, because we were in the *sertão* [desertic and very poor region of Brazil], and rode on precarious roads

…. It's good for me not having a routine, but traveling, meeting new places, except on [COVID-19] pandemic days.

Navigating precarities

Third, navigating precarities reflected upon volatile Brazilian economic, political, equity, and health realities. Participants experienced tensions between curiosity-stability and intrinsic-instrumental motivations to seek meaningful work. The mixed-capital organization in which Marco works is undergoing structural changes that threaten his job stability. This threat became meaningful when he reframed it as an opportunity to have new career experiences:

> **Researcher**: You've said you had a dilemma there, on one hand, you have stability, on the other hand, this stability could mean making the same tasks for a long time, and such tasks could be boring. Do you still perceive this dilemma today of "I'm afraid of having tedious tasks but staying there (because of the stability)"?
>
> **Marco**: We joke that our evaluation of the organization is positive even though we perceive risks of the company being sold and of not being what we used to know as the company …. People are valorizing what they have, the positive points ….
>
> **Researcher**: And how do you deal with the possibility of losing your stability soon?
>
> **Marco**: [T]he big bosses say all the time that this can be an opportunity and, at the same time, a challenge, as it is a problem …. From my viewpoint, I do not perceive too much insecurity …. I like it, because sometimes it's good to change.

Like Letícia, curiosity is how Marco dealt with adversity. However, he prefers the stability of staying at his current employer. He said it is a dilemma – he would only change for another position in this same organization to maintain stability, although he could not define where he wanted to go.

> Yes, it [dilemma of changing jobs or not] exists … however, I don't consider it more significant than it is. I don't perceive any area that I would like to migrate to. So, I'd rather stay where I am because I still have some benefits regarding task variety.

Jéssica and Carlos changed their jobs to have "new experiences" and not stay "stuck in the same organization." Both worked for a long time in the same organization before moving to another job because stability helped them build their reputations for the job market. Carlos, an IT employee who described himself as lower-class, explained:

> I was there for three years, working with that product … it was a small enterprise, CLT [formal job, CLT is the acronym for the work law in Brazil]. Still, it has few benefits [e.g., healthcare]. And about my new job, I was recruited by LinkedIn. It was a … very big company, considering the market, it was a former startup…. I already met a person who worked there, and I asked him. He said, "this is a good organization, don't be afraid to come," so this shift [changing to new job] became meaningful…. It was different from other career stages, in which I changed my job after a couple of months …. I was there for a long time, working on the same product, so I concluded that was the right moment to change my job. I wasn't anxious or anything. And, obviously, the context influenced my decision: wages, this company has an office in São Paulo, corporate is in São Paulo. I went there once a trimester [anyway] and visited my parents, so everything matched: personal side, career side, opportunities for which I would be eligible, and improvement in my knowledge about software. It was a heck of a match, and I'm still there.

Being an explorer drove participants' choices, even without instrumental benefits. The desire to have new experiences and manage tensions between exploring new opportunities and having stability were strategies to deal with adverse work situations and reputation-building necessities.

4.4.3. Being a builder of a better world

Building a better world associated with calling and emerged in almost all (87%) of interviews. This theme emerged through the three processes of affecting customers' lives through the services or products provided, supporting marginalized people through work, and sharing knowledge. Participants also reflected on the contested experience of building a better world and on the deflation of work meaningfulness related to Brazilian socio-political-economic and corruption crises.

In building a better world, Paula perceived work as meaningful by affecting clients' lives: "when I worked directly with clients, I've felt it. I thought that I had a purpose; in each meeting I attended, I thought I was helping improve my client's business." Carolina also reflected on times when she felt she was building a better world because she was having an impact on marginalized people:

> I worked … in the health sector, which means that … I think it's something bigger, you know, because it's about many things: … disease … fragile people. As it was a big company … I worked on some exciting projects, where I really felt like I made a difference even if the difference would impact only three people's lives, I was happy. I guess this was the time I've felt most fulfilled. That was a very stressful job … However, this place is still where I think I've felt most fulfilled and had the happiest employee experience because I was able to perceive value in what I did.

Jéssica believed that sharing knowledge helped build a better world:

> When I learned to consume knowledge, I've felt a strong desire to share this knowledge with other people, I perceived a lot of people struggling with [problems], and I started to engage myself in … sharing … so I offered some workshops, with trivial themes not only business issues, for people experimenting … participating in design thinking process[es].

Our participants reflected upon contested experiences of being a builder of a better world while their organizational contexts posed obstacles. Julio perceived a mismatch between how, according to his values, the mixed-capital organization where he works should and does influence society. Working there is like "being in prison" and he intends to find job

activities closer to his values. Because he has not been able to make this shift yet, Julio expressed his resignation by framing himself as an employee, not a board [decision-making] member.

Letícia supported vulnerable populations in her job at a sustainability services organization, which "did the minimum" for these populations' welfare by prioritizing profits. Because of this "minimum," it was hard to meet citizens' expectations. For example, when she collected resumés to try to find jobs for members of the local population, it would often result "in nothing." She framed this experience as emotionally distressing:

> Oh, I've cried … I was making a job diagnostic survey, on a very small town, so this was a very vulnerable area, with a substantial lack of … job opportunities for the local population, and we collected resumés at the city. However, the organization said that it wouldn't be necessary and they won't use such resumés, but we had already announced to the population [that we would collect resumés], and we collected resumés through the whole morning … lots and lots of resumés, and I knew that it would result in nothing, but I had to go there, collect resumés, taking notes. This was highly frustrating … there is this problem, as I'm defending the organization's interests and I'm exposing myself to some risks. For example, a friend of mine works in a similar consultancy. On behalf of a big mining company, my friend spoke to the community that there was no risk of a nearby dam breaking. Soon after that, the dam broke, and she returned to the community, and a person recalled her and said, "you've said to us that there was no risk of this dam breaking." So, you have to create some distance, I try to speak the minimum, I don't promise anything [to the communities]. However, it's psychologically demanding to represent the organization. Still, I try to perceive myself as conveying the demands from the communities to the organization. If I didn't do that, the organization could do nothing, so I try to frame this problem in this way.

Letícia negotiated her frustrations by thinking that the lives of vulnerable populations could be even worse without her work. Nonetheless, she now intends to leave this job and work with public policies to benefit vulnerable populations.

Finally, after experiencing building a better world through work, some participants described a process of "deflation" of meaningfulness triggered by changes in workers' worldviews and contextual shifts like degradation of the workplace environment, which shook the balance between organizational practices and participants' values. Paula and Victor stated that this trigger was "watching things they disagreed with" to refer to some decisions from their superiors. Daniela experienced this deflation in an IT services provider with a "super-toxic environment" composed of predatory competition between colleagues, work overload, and misogynic and homophobic remarks. She related how a gay colleague suffered:

> I guess it's hard to ignore certain things, you know, like in a former workplace, man, that was a super-toxic environment, with extreme pressure, with colleagues pulling the rug under my feet, with misogynic remarks, with homophobic comments. I have a person on my team who was gay, and he suffered a lot. And I suffered with him. Obviously, that was a toxic organization, a very bad place to work, that wasn't a suitable place to work. And it's hard ignoring such things.

Mariana worked as a consultant in an outsourcing services company in which she perceived her work as a moral duty and desired to be a "reference on ethics." However, this purpose deflated when she considered that her work contributed to environmental degradation, especially when watching colleagues' behaviors with which she disagreed:

> I began to reflect on some questions, like consumption patterns, planned obsolescence … like environmental impacts and started to criticize unbridled greed. I blamed people who tread upon things I consider rightful to reach specific goals; financial or personal goals …. But this sense of purpose that I had before, it was fully deflated.

Pedro thought he was building a better world through providing online courses in a platform he developed. However, when he perceived that the courses were useless for clients, he gave up the idea of building a better world through corporate employment:

> I was developing an online platform with accessible courses for Latin American users in a former job … but when I entered the organization, I found that these courses were slot machines from phone providers. The user inserted

> three reais [Brazilian currency] on credits to use their cellphone and the provider made them sign up for the stuff without their approval. When I perceived that, I thought: "I am working to … steal money from the poor? I didn't study for it, you know?" This was a turning point in my career because, in 2018, I perceived that I was working for big companies, and I had knowledge that could help other people. Then I decided to join a social movement …. We recently released a platform whereby a user in need of a plumber, electrician, or babysitter asks a chatbot by typing, "hi, I'm needing a professional." Then, the bot asks the user's location, crosses this info with a database of workers [from the social movement's settlements] and their geolocation, and indicates to the user who is the closest professional to them. In the first two weeks, we created more than 30 job opportunities for houseless workers. For me, this means working with purpose.

Carolina considered her time working in a hospital the "most fulfilling" experience she ever had in a job. She negotiated work overload as a "delightful responsibility" by perceiving this job as a duty. However, she decided to leave the job due to a toxic work environment and low autonomy after "new owners bought the organization and changed how things worked there." She continued, "Everything became more bureaucratic, including my work. I was limited. My workplace became a hostile environment, and I reached a point where I couldn't stand it anymore." Carolina highlighted deflation of her purpose using the same sense of worthlessness presented by other participants who overworked, as previously discussed in the theme about being competent: "I tried to think that everything would be ok, but I was working too much, leaving the office very late, in a job [for which] I didn't see purpose anymore … so I got more and more demotivated." Carolina and Pedro negotiated the frustrations of feeling deflations of work meaningfulness, of not enacting their callings, by trying to fulfill meaningfulness in activities outside their jobs which they framed as only means to pay bills. As Carolina said: "I can find [purpose] elsewhere, and I will have to make money because this is how things work."

The experience of being a builder of a better world through work emerged in three ways: affecting customers' lives through the services or products provided, supporting marginalized people through work, and sharing knowledge. Dysfunctional behaviors

from colleagues and shifts in worldviews led some respondents to reframe callings in or outside of work (DUFFY, DIK, 2013; FRANKL, 2017). Perceiving work as a moral duty was insufficient for them to endure any sacrifice, resulting in a deflation of meaningfulness and sense of worthlessness, which fostered turnover intentions.

4.5. Discussion

In this study, white-collar employees working in varied industries in major Brazilian cities discussed meaningful work based on purposes of *being competent*, *being an explorer*, and *being a builder of a better world*. Being competent and being an explorer are respectively associated with self-efficacy and curiosity. Self-efficacy is a belief about the individuals' capabilities to manage and execute necessary actions to achieve desired goals (ALESSANDRI, FILOSA, *et al.*, 2021, ROSSO, DEKAS, *et al.*, 2010), while curiosity, an orientation toward knowledge accumulation that can foster exploratory behavior (CELIK, STROME, *et al*., 2016), is considered a personal trait (ABUKHAIT, BANI-MELHEM, *et al.*, 2020, CELIK, STORME, *et al.*, 2016). However, our participants described both constructs as goals they felt compelled to realize through enactment of their work and careers. The third theme, being a builder of a better world, described how participants experienced tensions in their callings to do good work and assist others, particularly customers and marginalized Brazilian societal members. However, many respondents simultaneously became so disillusioned by the corruption they witnessed and, at times, partook in as part of their job duties, and by the deleterious work relations they faced, that they changed jobs and occupations despite Brazilian economic instabilities. In these ways, they experienced the tensional nature of meaningful work – as exhilarating and deflating – that ebbed and flowed during different work experiences. The interactions among tensions and themes of being competent, explorers, and builders aligned with meaningful work as comprehensive sensemaking (LIPS-WIERSMA, WRIGHT, 2012) and as important to "integrated wholeness" (BAILEY, YEOMAN, *et al.*., 2018, p. 17), but also as attending to current realities and future possibilities.

Participants' purposes acted as drivers for negotiating obstacles they came across at work including corrupt organizations, organizational behaviors they considered unethical, and toxic work environments. To manage these tensions, respondents framed new meanings, rendering their work as something significant. These findings add evidence to the perception of work meaningfulness as tension-centered (AFIOUNI, KARAM, 2019, BENDASSOLLI, 2017, FLORIAN, COSTAS, *et al.*, 2019, LONG, BUZZANELL, *et al.*, 2016, MITRA, BUZZANELL, 2017, VU, 2022). To our knowledge, our investigation is only one of two organizational communication studies describing meaningful work as a tensional construct in Brazil and the first to focus on white-collar employees who form a

small percentage of workers from, and a declining middle-class in, the largest country in Latin America.

Brazilian culture affected meaningful work insofar as participants' interviews relayed underlying impermanence discourses (KUHN, GOLDEN, *et al.*, 2008) and neoliberal understandings regarding corruption. One consequence of rendering competence as a value was the criticism against workplace politics and valorization of technical performance and meritocracy as the only fair reasons for promotions. This criticism reflects the *Vira-Latas* Myth (SOUZA, 2018), which deems Brazilian society as willing to be corrupt due to its Catholic origins, while the Protestant origins provided virtue and asceticism to the U.S. American society. According to the *Vira-Latas* Myth, politics and the state are arenas in which corruption thrives; this led participants to use the term "*estatal*" (state-owned) as something depreciative and workplace politics as corruption. This rendering of workplace politics is similar to Chinese professionals' practices grounded in *guanxi*, social capital which may facilitate favor exchanges between individuals connected by sentimental dyadic ties (LONG, BUZZANELL, *et al.*, 2016) to climb organizational ladders.

Moreover, these findings can be linked to the neoliberal rhetoric on corruption that emerged from the IMF and World Bank in the 1990s and reinforced rejection of workplace politics and the state. This rhetoric considered the rent-seeking behavior from public agents as the primary – sometimes only – source of corruption in societies. However, studies using qualitative (BROWN, CLOKE, 2004) and quantitative tools (GERRING, THACKER, 2005, REINSBERG, KENTIKELENIS, *et al.*, 2021) have refuted the direct association between the size of the state and corruption.

The resonance between Brazilian culture on one side and impermanence and neoliberal rhetoric on corruption on the other results from strong U.S. American cultural influences in both global and Brazilian discourses (BARRETT, DAILEY, 2018; SOUZA, 2018). The *Vira-Latas* Myth renders values attributed to U.S. American society as superior to those from Iberic Catholicism to justify Brazilian social underdevelopment and to boost acceptance of American cultural symbols by Brazilian middle-classes citizens. According to SOUZA (2018), there are similarities in the national myths from culturally-dominated countries and their rulers, a position that warrants scholarly attention from organizational postcolonial/decolonial researchers.

Another consequence of impermanence discourses in the Brazilian context may be the heightened value of material work performance results. Descending from the middle-class in Brazil frequently means a precarious existence and dehumanized status (SOUZA, 2018), but a focus on material outcomes is more potent in periods of economic recession (HALL, CHANDLER, 2005) such as what Brazil is experiencing today. The present research describes how volatile economic landscapes shift cultural positioning with regard to meaningful work, as do influences of foreign organizations (BARRETT, DAILEY, 2018). Comparative organizational communication qualitative studies documenting the voices of diverse class and racial-ethnic members would assist in understanding Brazilian political and economic shifts and supplement the Brazilian secondary database analyses reviewed for this study.

Additionally, we contributed to a nuanced consideration of the relationship among turnover intentions, emotional distress, and work meaningfulness. Participants aimed to be competent and to build a better world through work. Nevertheless, in some situations, meeting those goals meant enduring long work hours, dealing with dysfunctional work environments, and perceiving that organizations used greater-good discourses only to increase profits, like the case of greenwashing (MITRA, BUZZANELL, 2017). Participants' worldviews changed, making them renegotiate what they found meaningful regarding work. Where they could not negotiate, participants psychologically distanced themselves as a protective mechanism (BENDASSOLLI, 2017). Emotional distress and the sense of worthlessness were reasons participants experienced intentions to leave their jobs, an ultimate consequence of unnegotiable tensions. Organizational communication scholars could track white-collar and other Brazilian workers to see how they rewrite their meaningful work scripts over the course of their careers and lifespans.

Finally, meaningful work literature presents studies whereby meaningful work acts as a buffer against burnout, frustration, and turnover intentions (FOUCHE, ROTHMANN, *et al.*, 2017, UGWU, ONYISHI, 2018). However, our results point to a limitation in this perception because, after time, it is not work meaningfulness that reduces emotional distress and turnover intention, but emotional distress that deflates work meaningfulness, resulting in perceived turnover intentions. BRUNZELL *et al.* reached similar conclusions about teachers who worked with trauma-affected students (BRUNZELL, STOKES, *et al.*, 2018). Our study contributes to this literature by showing that these interrelationships also

exist in “economic mainstream occupations” and not only in "economically marginal but symbolically significant" ones.

In these respects, our participants experienced the “dark side” (DUFFY, DOUGLASS, *et al.*, 2016, p. 1) of callings that may vary in different professions. White-collar employees in “economic mainstream occupations” have been shown to express different discourses from other professionals in “economic marginal, but symbolically significant” ones. For example, zookeepers (BUNDERSON, THOMPSON, 2009) and sustainable practitioners (MITRA, BUZZANELL, 2017) were more willing to experience detrimental sides of calling by enduring sacrifices than the white-collar participants in our research. Our research addresses the lack of studies assessing calling with mainstream occupations (THOMPSON, BUNDERSON, 2019), a line of scholarship about Brazil worth extending by organizational communication specialists.

To these theoretical contributions and implications, we add limitations and pragmatic applications. Given our small sample, we encourage larger qualitative studies of Brazilian white-collar employees as well as studies comparing these employees in different Brazilian cities and industries where white-collar employment and the middle-class are concentrated. Specifically, our study encompassed four metropolitan areas of Brazil, and the results are not expandable for other countries, even for other Brazilian regions. Furthermore, participants belonged to a strict class of workers, and other datasets can present different results. Due to our constructivist approach, we do not aim to draw generalizable results but to present interpretative constructions between participants and researchers (BRAUN, CLARKE, 2006), one of whom is a former Brazilian white-collar employee.

Furthermore, we do not know how the material circumstances of their lives assisted and thwarted participants from enacting their calling to build a better future healthily through work. Participants recounted considering fulfilling their desire to build a better world in activities outside work, representing a similar pragmatism perceived by VU (2022) with Vietnamese mainstream professionals, as their work preferences had become subsumed by contextual constraints. Pragmatically, online and offline networking events throughout Brazilian cities could offer sites where the individualized solutions we studied could become group-level action and enable structural change.

In closing, our participants' accounts revealed three themes, reflecting ways of deriving meaningfulness from work associated with purpose – *being competent, being an explorer, and being a builder of a better world* – and different paths for fulfillment or deflation and disenchantment with work and organizations. Our findings suggest understanding meaningful work as a comprehensive process, as other discourses and materialities influenced how participants experienced meaningfulness. Future studies can assess the influence of national culture and globalized discourses regarding work in how individuals constitute meaningfulness (BARRETT, DAILEY, 2018, LONG, BUZZANELL, *et al.*, 2016, VU, 2022), particularly in volatile political-economic-cultural and diverse national landscapes such as Brazil.

5. Meaningful Work Canvas: a visual tool for service designers

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Abstract

While “empathy” is a usual reference in design discourses and methodologies on design, the main focus may be how designers can increase their sensibility to the demands of the clients or users on future service provisions. Nonetheless, the consideration of the voices and presence of workers constitute a pressing demand for service design theory and practices, still almost neglected in the field. This paper presents the Meaningful Work Canvas, a visual tool developed to help designers create from scratch services that facilitate providers to pursue work meaningfulness. It blends characteristics from Job Design and Job Crafting literature. The two first authors conducted workshops with a post-graduate class to codesign the tool with the students. The paper presents a service created by a student from this class, the third author, to illustrate how the Meaningful Work Canvas works. Besides creating worker-centric services, the tool was able to identify some patterns regarding how workers perceive their jobs and to educate the students at the workshop on what influences meaningful work. Meaningful Work Canvas represents an initiative to fill the gap in Service Design literature about creating services centered on workers.

Keywords: Meaningful Work, Service Design, Workers Health, Meanings of Work

5.1. Introduction

While "empathy" is a usual reference in design discourses and methodologies on design, the main focus may be how designers can increase their sensibility to the demands of the clients or users on future service provisions. User-centric service designers may remain dangerously close to being complicit in perpetuating economic systems which are at the root of social inequality and racism (PENIN, SORUCO, 2021). There are many services whereby workers earn low wages and face precarious conditions or imminent unemployment, to which the term “servitude” would be more applicable.

The consideration of the voices and presence of workers constitute a pressing demand for service design theory and practices. This paper intends to contribute with one aspect: *work meaningfulness*. How could we support service designers to include considerations of work meaningfulness in their design processes and results? Our answer was to develop a visual tool to support designers in getting familiar with a set of concepts and theories related to the field and facilitating the application in their projects.

The search for meaningfulness is a fundamental human need (BARRETT, DAILEY, 2018). The lack of meaningfulness is seen as a "serious psychological deprivation" (MARTELA, PESSI, 2018, p.2) associated with depression and suicide ideation, not only due to its intrinsic outcomes but also due to a contemporary pressure to live authentically (MARTELA, PESSI, 2018). Work is one of the key domains whereby individuals derive meaningfulness (BARRETT, DAILEY, 2018; MARTELA, PESSI, 2018), given this centrality in people's lives (BARRETT, DAILEY, 2018). Besides protecting employees' health, meaningful work may act as the most potent mediator between work characteristics and outcomes (BARRICK, MOUNT, *et al.*, 2013) such as commitment and creativity.

According to ROSSO *et al.* (2010), work is meaningful if the roles individuals play at work hold a great amount of significance to them. Furthermore, meaningful work has multiple dimensions and is a comprehensive construct, which means that this experience is stronger when the multiple dimensions are balanced and simultaneously present (BAILEY, YEOMAN, *et al.*, 2018).

The importance of meaningful work described in this section led scholars to develop an interest in investigating how it could be fostered. This stream of research is split into two major traditions, depending on who is acting to facilitate meaningful work. *Job Design* represents a number of theories considering that the organization is in charge of fostering work meaningfulness for their employers (DWIVEDULA, BREDILLET, *et al.*, 2017). In the first decades of meaningful work research, scholars speculated that different types of work could offer more or less meaningfulness due to their characteristics. Consequently, the experience of meaningful work was a matter of adequately designing work characteristics, and organizations should make suitable choices in terms of, for example, autonomy to facilitate their employees to have this experience.

In the first years of the 21st century, however, researchers acknowledged workers' active role in pursuing meaningfulness in their work (CAI, LYSOVA, *et al.*, 2018). In opposition to the job design tradition, *job crafting* considers that workers are in charge of fostering work meaningfulness. A seminal study (WRZESNIEWSKI, DUTTON, 2001) presented job crafting as the external and internal actions endured by workers to change job characteristics.

The present study aims to show the Meaningful Work Canvas – a visual tool developed to create from scratch services that facilitate providers to pursue work meaningfulness. To meet that goal, this tool will have characteristics from both job design and job crafting traditions. The paper is organized as follows. The literature review section will discuss current status of workers' well-being in service design literature, outline the constructs of job crafting and job design in detail, and present the Comprehensive Meaningful Work Scale that grounded the Meaningful Work Canvas. Then, the methods section will explain how the tool was developed and how the workshops with postgraduate students were conducted. In the results section, the service designed by one of the students, the third author, will be an example to illustrate how the Meaningful Work Canvas works. The discussion, conclusion and limitations sections enclose the paper.

5.2. Literature Review

5.2.1. Workers and Service Design

Service design theory and practices evolved in the last decades to attend clients' demands, however the necessities from workers are a gap in this field, representing a rather worrying issue as "designing services is in great part designing service work" (ServDes.2020 Tensions, Paradoxes and Plurality Conference Proceedings, 2021, p. 611).

The Boolean "TI=(service*) AND TI=(design*) AND TI=(work*) NOT TI=(workflow*) NOT TI=(workshop*)" returns 47 papers published between 2017 and 2013 in Web of Science platform. Three papers presented services intending to improve workers' health (DEADY, PETERS, *et al.*, 2017, DULLI, FIELD, *et al.*, 2019, METCALF, GIBSON, *et al.*, 2023), positioning workers as the clients of such services; no study proposed services focusing on the well-being of its providers. Two other studies discussed interventions at work environments to enhance workers' well-being (DAVIS, YOUNG, *et al.*, 2019, NAGLER, STELSON, *et al.*, 2021).

Regarding ServDes, from the 153 full papers in the proceedings of 2016 and 2018 meetings, no one has the terms "*work*" and "*worker*" on the title or in the keywords. The exception from this list is a short paper presented in the 2016 edition, "*Towards sustainable impact after University-Government design projects – Case of worker services in Singapore*", whereby the workers would be clients of a service developed to "empower workers with knowledge of their rights and employment rules, and to drive take-up of self-help services when dealing with the Ministry" (Service Design Geographies, Proceedings of the ServDes2016 Conference, 2016, p. 539).

ServDes 2020 had a workshop to help practitioners perceive workers' demands and needs while designing services, "The Workers Tarot. A tool for designer worker solidarity", presented by Lara Penin and Antonia Yunge Soruco. The tarot was not conceived to directly designing new worker-centric services, but to make designers reflect upon the consequences their projects have on workers while developing services (PENIN, SORUCO, 2021). The tool adapts five elements from *Tarot de Marseille*. The major arcana are the multiple service workers archetypes, and the four suits are the artifacts used

by service workers, theories about work and workers, historical movements fighting for workers' rights, and trends affecting the present and the future of work (PENIN, SORUCO, 2021).

5.2.2. Comprehensive Meaningful Work Scale

The influence from positive psychology triggered the development of a massive number of scales intending to measure and establish antecedents and outcomes from meaningful work. One of the most recent and robust scales is the Comprehensive Meaningful Work Scale (CMWS), developed by Lips-Wiersma and Wright (LIPS-WIERSMA, WRIGHT, 2012), which considers work meaningfulness as a process derived from experiencing wholeness or coherence of the multiple meaningful work dimensions. This sense of wholeness, according to the authors, is a "dynamic process" (LIPS-WIERSMA, WRIGHT, 2012, p.658) as the worker makes conscious choices to "continue to integrate different aspects into a coherent whole" (LIPS-WIERSMA, WRIGHT, 2012, p.659). Therefore, they aimed to develop a scale that assessed comprehensively meaningful work dimensions and how they may interact with each other. In opposition to the positive psychology scholarship, CMWS acknowledges the dynamism of the process of deriving meaningfulness by describing two major tensions: tensions between aiming to meet the needs of others and aiming to meet the needs of the self; and tensions between the need for being (reflection) as well as the need for doing (action).

The CMWS scale has four central dimensions, described in a canvas-like framework. Developing and Becoming Self refers to how the work perceives developing herself and building her identity through work. As it depends on what each worker considers more critical, this dimension can represent desires like "wanting to be a good person," "getting the self out of the way," "being through to oneself," or developing "patience" or "detachment" (LIPS-WIERSMA, WRIGHT, 2012).

Unity with others refers to the meaningfulness workers develop from working with other human beings. A sense of shared values and a sense of belongingness are two paths that could impact this dimension. Unity should be achieved in diversity, not represent uniformity.

Expressing full potential refers to the opportunities to experience meaningfulness by displaying talents and creativity and having a sense of achievement. Service to others represents the meaningfulness of making a contribution to the well-being of others, society, or the environment.

The CMWS has two main axes, which reflect two tensions regarding meaningful work: being-doing and self-others. Being refers to how workers reflect on their relationships with other entities, not only with their colleagues. Doing represents all results from collective and individual worker's practices. Self is the worker driving some initiative toward herself, while others regard the relationship with colleagues, bosses, clients, and society.

5.2.3. Job Crafting and Job Design

Job Design is a tradition on research that investigated how the characteristics from a job could impact in several workers outcomes. A hallmark in this literature comes from Herzberg's Motivation-Hygiene Theory which considered that to improve employee performance and satisfaction, job characteristics should be enhanced rather than simplified, as Taylor believed (OLDHAM, FRIED, 2016). During the 1970s, HACKMAN and OLDHAM (1976) developed the Job Characteristics Model (JCM), listing five characteristics of attention to enrich jobs: skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and job-based feedback. *Skill variety* represents how different the activities in a job are and the skills needed to realize such activities. *Task Identity* is how an individual perceives herself in the products of their work as her activities build complete pieces of work rather than only small blocks. *Task significance* is the degree to which the individual's activities have an impact on society, which could be the local community, the whole society, or the environment. *Autonomy* is the degree of freedom and independence in matters like schedules and activities an individual has at work. Finally, *job-based feedback* is the degree an individual has feedback regarding their performance and effectiveness at work.

Despite the almost half-century from HACKMAN and OLDHAM's (1976) study Job Design literature keeps some of the limitations presented in JCM. First, as the power of

changing job conditions is in the hands of the managerial staff, it falls short in dealing with nuances among the different demands and desires that a large set of employees may have. Second, the role of social interactions is a neglected domain in job design (HERNAUS, CERNE, *et al.*, 2021). Third and last, this tradition is deeply rooted in work activities, paying little attention to other characteristics in work environments, like the organizational culture and how work impacts employees' identity (OLDHAM, FRIED, 2016).

In turn, job crafting represents the processes enacted by individuals to change their work characteristics to improve their meaningfulness. The seminal study on job crafting (WRZESNIEWSKI, DUTTON, 2001) considered that workers engage in job crafting by changing their three work boundaries: task boundary, relational boundary, and cognitive boundary. *Task boundaries* are the scope of the activities associated with a specific job position. Individuals could expand or reduce these boundaries to make work more meaningful, as in the example of engineers who embrace tasks beyond their scope to perceive themselves as having more control over their work and fostering new professional identities. *Relational boundaries* represent the worker's interactions' content and targets (who). Changing relational boundaries makes individuals build better connections with colleagues and customers and perceive new identities at work. For example, cleaning staff from a hospital that only interacted only with the medical crew passed to interact with patients' relatives to offer emotional support in dreadful moments. This shift made employees develop caring identities through work, bringing more centrality to workers' roles in the organizational structure. *Cognitive boundaries* are more abstract and reflect how individuals perceive their tasks and work. For example, individuals who worked in restaurants used some tips they developed instead of just following directions provided in the recipes, shifting from perceiving themselves as only recipe-followers to culinary artists.

The *job demands-resource* (JD-R) model is a second approach to job crafting. According to this model, job crafting represents the activities individuals enact to balance their demands with the resources available to them (TIMS, BAKKER, *et al.*, 2012). The demands are aspects of work that impose individuals to use their physical and/or psychological resources (TIMS, BAKKER, *et al.*, 2012). Resources are the tools workers use to make their tasks, and reduce their demands and their physical/psychological costs,

besides aspects that foster personal growth and professional development (BAKKER, TIMS, *et al.*, 2012).

Job crafting interventions have a similar fashion represented by four stages (COSTANTINI, DEMEROUTI, *et al.*, 2022). Before getting in touch with the employers targeted by the intervention, organizers map and explore key work characteristics. Then, a presentation shows the concepts of job crafting to employees to teach how they can identify opportunities for job crafting. In the third state, employees build individual goals they will attain during a specific period, usually one month. The last stage evaluates if and how individuals achieved the goals established and how they can enact job crafting after the intervention.

A significant limitation of the Job Crafting interventions is little attention to how the crafting process may be conducted collectively. In most interventions, the solo opportunity to team-build the process is during the goal-setting process, whereby individuals can refine their goals with colleagues. Nonetheless, the existence of "collaborative crafting" was discussed in some studies (CHEN, C Y, YEN, *et al.*, 2014, LEANA, APPELBAUM, *et al.*, 2009).

From the standpoint of design science, in job design, organizations design the work meaningfulness, while in job crafting, individuals design their meaningfulness. In other words, job design is a top-down strategy, while job crafting is a bottom-up one, which makes job crafting more dynamic than job design.

The Meaningful Work Canvas intends to go further than Workers' Tarot and represents a tool for designers directly develop services centered on workers' demands and needs. The Canvas is built upon the CMWS and blends the characteristics from job design and job crafting. To the best of our knowledge, there is not any study on service design literature providing a tool to directly designing services aiming to improving workers' well-being. Our study aims to fill this gap.

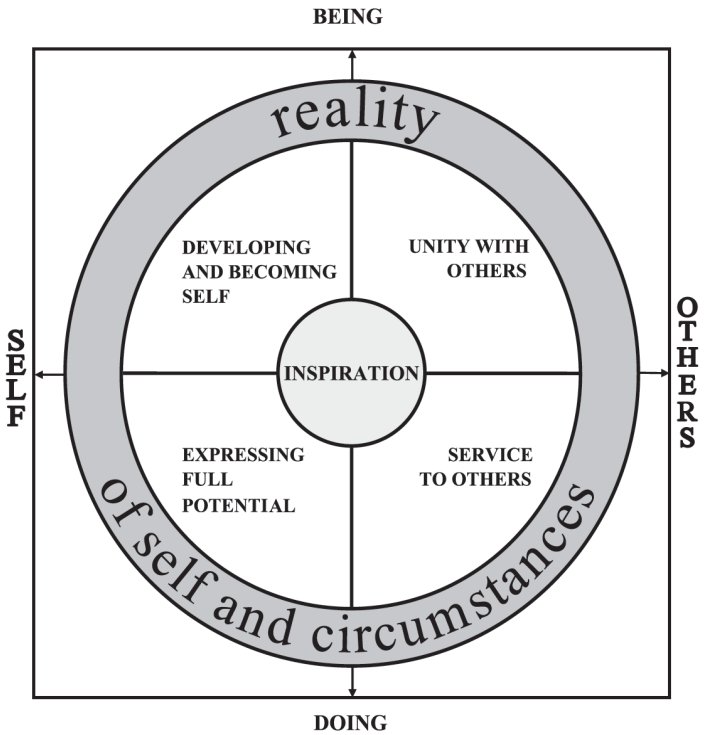
5.3. Methods

5.3.1. Developing the Visual Tool

The two first authors began the process by choosing CMWS as the framework for meaningful work which would ground the tool. The first reason is that CMWS considers meaningful work as a comprehensive, multidimensional, and dynamic construct, reflecting the state-of-the-art of this literature (BAILEY, YEOMAN, *et al*., 2018). The second reason was the canvas-like representation of CMWS, as presented in figure 2. The four quadrants represent meaningful work dimensions described in the literature review.

As described in the literature review, the CMWS has two axes: *being-doing* and *self-others*. *Being* represents how individuals perceive their relationships with other entities, while doing is associated with day-to-day work practices. *Self* stands for initiatives a worker drives toward herself and *others* reflects initiatives toward colleagues, clients, and society. The four quadrants represent the dimensions *developing the inner self, unity with others, service to others,* and *expressing full potential*.

Figure 2 - The Comprehensive Meaningful Work Scale (CMWS).



Source: Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012

To make CMWS useful to the ends of this design project, the two researchers shifted the definitions of the four quadrants. Quadrant #1 is the doing-self, renamed to *doing for the self*, which discusses how the worker builds herself as a worker. In this quadrant, the designers will evaluate opportunities workers have to develop their skills and express their talents if employees have autonomy and how work influences perceptions of self-efficacy.

Quadrant #2 is the doing-others, renamed to *doing for the others*. This quadrant evaluates how a worker's activities have an impact on colleagues, customers, and society, represented by her clients. In addition, this quadrant aims to understand if the worker can perceive such an impact.

Quadrant #3 is the being-others, renamed *relationship with others*. This quadrant assesses the relationship between the worker with colleagues, bosses, and customers. This quadrant investigates belongingness, feedback, and if the individual feels comfortable at work with colleagues and customers. This quadrant also evaluates if the individual builds her identity upon all those relationships.

Quadrant #4 is the being-self, renamed *relationship with the self*. This quadrant aims to understand if the worker is coherent with her values and beliefs at her job and how she builds her identity during their work activities. It differs from quadrant #1, as the latter refers to the individual as a worker, that is, her skills and her perception of self-efficacy, and quadrant #4 deals with personal traits.

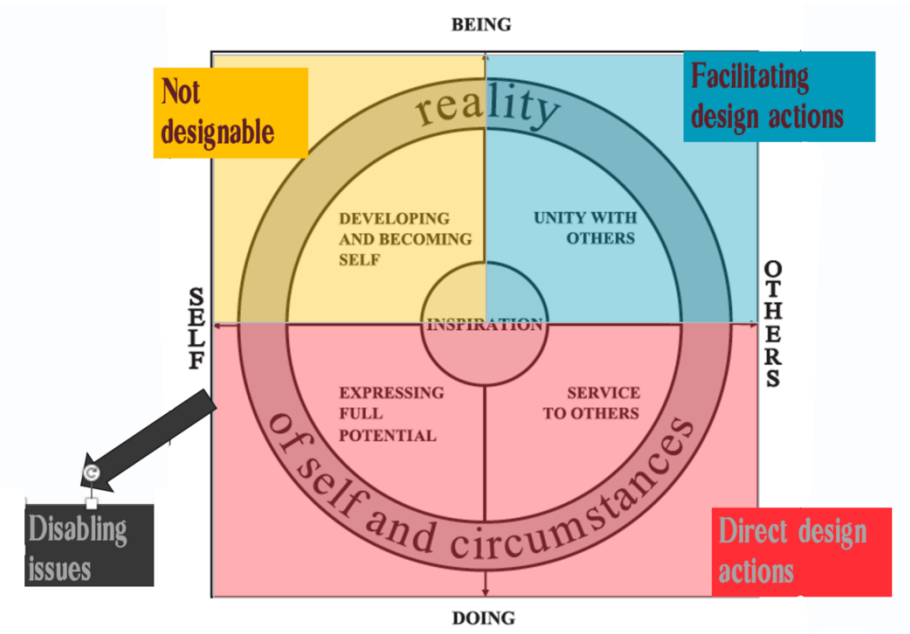
The last element of the tool is the *disabling issues*, which has no equivalent in CMWS. The disabling issues represent how negative aspects of work, like toxic environments, overwhelming working hours, and lower wages, can deflate meaningfulness, to use the term employed by BARRETO *et al.* (2022) in a recent study.

Designers can act in the four quadrants in different ways. In quadrant #1 and quadrant #2, designers employ *direct design actions*. In quadrant #1, the designer may project opportunities for workers to express their talents and develop themselves through the collective. In quadrant #2, designers should launch artifacts for workers to perceive how they can impact colleagues, customers, society, and the environment.

Quadrant #3 are subject to *facilitating design actions*, as the designers cannot manipulate the relationship between workers and colleagues and between workers and customers but create opportunities for these relationships to emerge and flourish. In this facilitating design actions, designers may create solutions that stimulate belongingness, recognition, and collective identity creation.

Quadrant #4 is *non-designable*, as the designers cannot (or should not) influence workers' values, beliefs, and worldviews. Nonetheless, this quadrant is essential to the tool, as, in this section, researchers will try to access what is hidden about the workers to design with empathy. The Figure 3 represents the modified CMWS model and the possible design actions for each quadrant.

Figure 3: CMWS model and possible design actions for each quadrant.

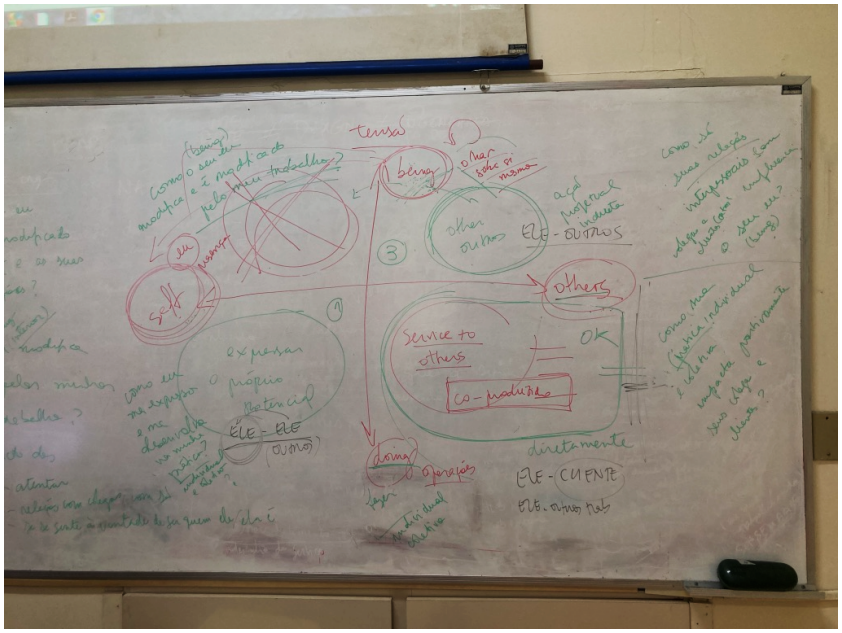


Source: adaptation from Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012

5.3.2. The Workshops

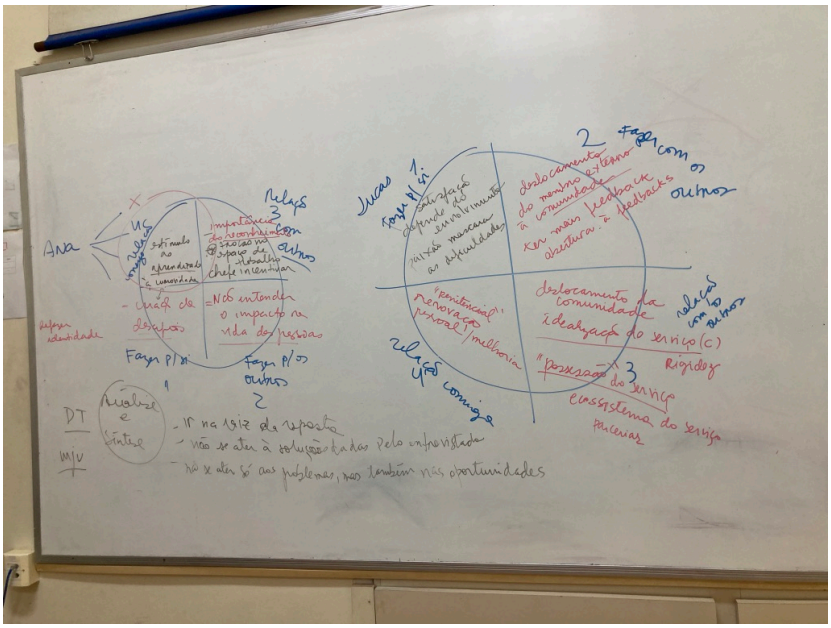
The two first authors conducted workshops in a postgraduate class with eight students for three months. Students codesigned the tool and were free to go beyond the protocol developed during the classes, given the experimental characteristics of the classes and the implementation. Figures 4 and 5 indicate the codesigning process during the classes.

Figure 4: Codesigning the tool with students



Source: the authors

Figure 5: Refining the tool with students



Source: the authors

5.3.3. Immersion Protocol

The immersion protocol collects two kinds of data: observation at the workplace and interviews with employees. This immersion should sensitize the designers to design work processes with dignity and to generate empathy with the workers' contexts.

There are three main stages in the protocol. First, the designer may find situations of work that are similar to the project she/he intends to design. For example, if the designer aims to project a solution to foster work meaningfulness for NGO workers, she/he has to investigate workers in this milieu.

In the second stage, the designers may observe the participants' working conditions and context. Again, visiting the workplace is the more assertive way to accomplish this task; however, not all students could do this during the discipline. To work around this limitation, the designers should ask workers to register their own workplace, for example, taking photos of their workplaces or how they act in specific moments of their work routine.

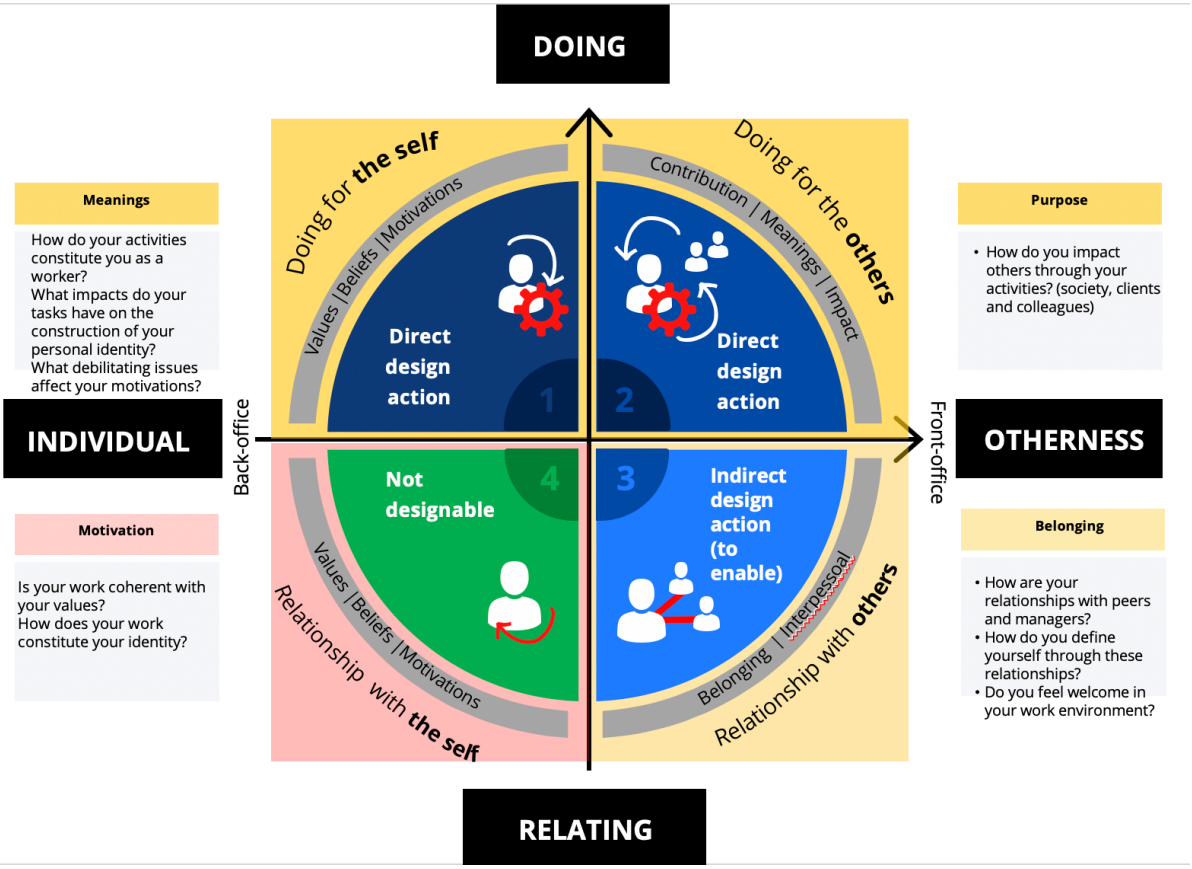
The last stage is conducting interviews with participants, running the four quadrants to sensitize the designer to the multiple dimensions of work meaningfulness and sharpen their skills to design the service. The designer may ask for detailed answers from participants, and the latter may illustrate their solutions with examples of daily routines. The protocol set an order to run the quadrants.

Before running the quadrants, designers should ask the worker the following question to acclimate the interviewee: "Describe your job (what do you do at work?)". Then, the students should ask questions from quadrant 1 to quadrant 4 and close the interviews by asking participants about the disabling issues.

5.4. Results: The Meaningful Work Canvas

One of the students, the third author, synthesized the codesigning process by providing a visual refinement for the tool and also included some innovations. For example, she changed the quadrants upside down because, in her opinion, this was a more suitable visualization as put in the upper side the dimensions whereby the designer has direct action, a suggestion the two first authors accepted. She also included the interview questions beside each quadrant and organized the theoretical concepts in a way to be quickly reminded by the designers. The last version of the tool, proposed by the third author, is presented in figure 6.

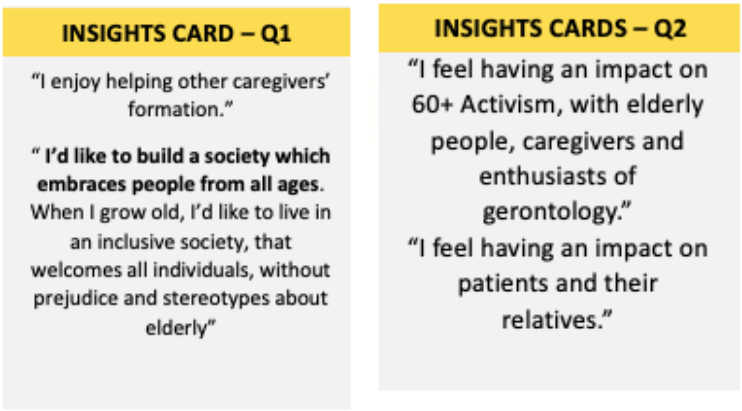
Figure 6 – The Meaningful Work Canvas.



Source: the authors.

Another contribution she proposed was picking some quotes from interviews and presenting them in insight cards to describe how quotes became insights in a more didactic and summarized way (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Two insight cards



Source: the authors

5.4.1. Using the Meaningful Work Canvas: an example

Each of the eight students presented one service that aimed to foster work meaningfulness for its providers. Therefore, those services must enhance questions regarding the four quadrants and address problems associated with the disabling issues. To illustrate the results, this article will present one of the services.

The chosen project is a platform to provide caregiving services for 60+ individuals. The third author interviewed two caregiving professionals focused on attending 60+ individuals and created two personas: Maria and Ana. Maria attends to 60+ patients, is an activist for disseminating knowledge on caregiving to older adults, and is a Ph.D. student. Ana is a nurse who attends to 60+ patients and is making other graduation to shift her career. The two personas presented both questions that fostered work meaningfulness and disabling issues.

For Maria, contributing to elderly well-being, being recognized by her peers, and developing knowledge of elderly care were questions that fostered work meaningfulness. On the other hand, being unable to set limits for her customers' relatives' solicitations and

her difficulty fixing a prince for her services represented disabling issues. Nonetheless, Maria loves being a 60+ activist and perceives her work as a calling.

Ana feels having an impact on her patients and their families, which fosters work meaningfulness. Like Maria, Ana has difficulties on setting limits, and sometimes she perceives her privacy as being invaded by her customers once the service is offered at the patient's home, in his family, and daily context. Besides, she does not feel adequately recognized for her work, either existentially or financially. She intends to shift her career, and her main reason to keep working is to earn a livelihood.

The third author developed insight cards presented in figure 7. In observing the two cards, there is a relative overlap between quadrant #1 and quadrant #2. Both quadrants express the desire to build a society that embraces older adults through caring activities and spreading knowledge on gerontology as a way of activism.

After filling the quadrants, the third author reframed the design challenge using the following question, translated into English by the authors: "How to overcome the obstacles of setting limits and stimulating relationships between caregivers, elderly patients, and patients' relatives?"

To meet this goal, the third author created a service called *Quali.Vita*. Quali.Vita is a health service that improves elderly well-being, connecting families and customers to workers through an online platform.

Quali.Vita has an algorithm capable of setting a price for the healthcare service based on the characteristics of the plan selected by the client: basic, intermediate, or advanced. The plan modality considers the duration of the service, how many days of the week the service would be provided, and how many specialists would be involved in the service team. These plans bridge the problem of establishing a price tag for the service, a question that could deflate meaningfulness for both personas. In addition, this feature provides a contract between providers and clients with a well-defined work schedule, addressing the problems of setting time limits to the service of caregivers and the providers' lack of privacy.

The service has feedback mechanisms either between clients and caregivers or between the caregivers. Clients evaluate the professionals in the following questions: service

quality, availability, technical knowledge, and positive impact on the customer, and they can make remarks about the service provided by the caregiver. This feature addresses the need for recognition expressed in the interviews, as having an impact fosters work meaningfulness to them. In the evaluation screen, customers can indicate professionals to others addressing the recognition question and the low wage problem identified in interviews.

Quali.Vita offers the full description of the professionals who attend to each client as a mechanism to facilitate knowledge sharing between them. Spreading knowledge was one path of impacting work meaningfulness, described in the persona Maria.

5.5. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study developed the Meaningful Work Canvas, a service design tool capable of fostering work meaningfulness and blocking situations that could deflate this experience, blending influences from Job Design and Job Crafting traditions, as the tool had dimensions subjected to direct design actions and to facilitating design actions.

The double influence can be observed in the Quali.Vita feedback mechanism because, on the one hand, the organization provides a space whereby it invites the service providers and the customers to evaluate in several quantitative and qualitative fields. Nonetheless, it is up to the service providers and the customers to foster other people's work meaningfulness, depending on the feedback's quantity and quality.

The feedback mechanism also illustrates another limitation of the models presented in this paper: the lack of collaborative construction of work meaningfulness. The meaningfulness experienced by individuals toward how they impact colleagues and customers is co-constructed between providers, customers, and peers. Quadrant #2 and quadrant #3 of the tool invite designers to project features whereby professionals establish a collective meaning(fulness)-making process.

The overlap between interviewees' statements in quadrant #1, quadrant #2, and quadrant #4 emerged when the professionals interviewed had a strong calling orientation, either modern or neoclassical (THOMPSON, BUNDERSON, 2019). To these professionals, it is imperative having an impact on people's lives or the environment. For them, how individuals build themselves as workers, which is the theme of quadrant #1, is through how they impact customers' lives and society, a theme from quadrant #2. Likewise, this process influences how workers build themselves personally (and not professionally) in work, an inquiry from quadrant #4. The researchers expect this pattern to frequently happen when designers project services to workers with calling orientations through work. Therefore, the Meaningful Work Canvas emerges also as a tool to evaluate how individuals perceive their work.

This study had a didactic role in making students more familiar with meaningful work dynamics. The second persona Ana presented the importance of balance between meaningful work dimensions. She valued the impact of her work in the world, but the

lack of peer and financial recognition made her pursue another career by making another graduation. The balance between dimensions is a point of attention for managers and employers, which aim to foster meaningful work experiences in their employees, and corroborates the contemporary understanding of the comprehensiveness of meaningful work.

The current version of the Meaningful Work Canvas is not trivial to employ. It includes many definitions and concepts from the literature in each quadrant; therefore, it requires some training before use.

The researchers observed that Meaningful Work Canvas had developed students' knowledge of meaningful work because the latter could identify how their interviewees derived meaningfulness and develop strategies to foster this experience or block elements that hinder meaningful work. The tool could advance the intentions presented on Workers' Tarot, as it did not only sensitized designers with themes important to workers, but provided tools to designers and workers codesign meaningful work. Future studies may develop new tools for worker-centric design and test the current tool in different contexts, like corporative organizations or in the public sector. This study represents an initiative to fill the gap in Service Design literature about creating services centered on workers.

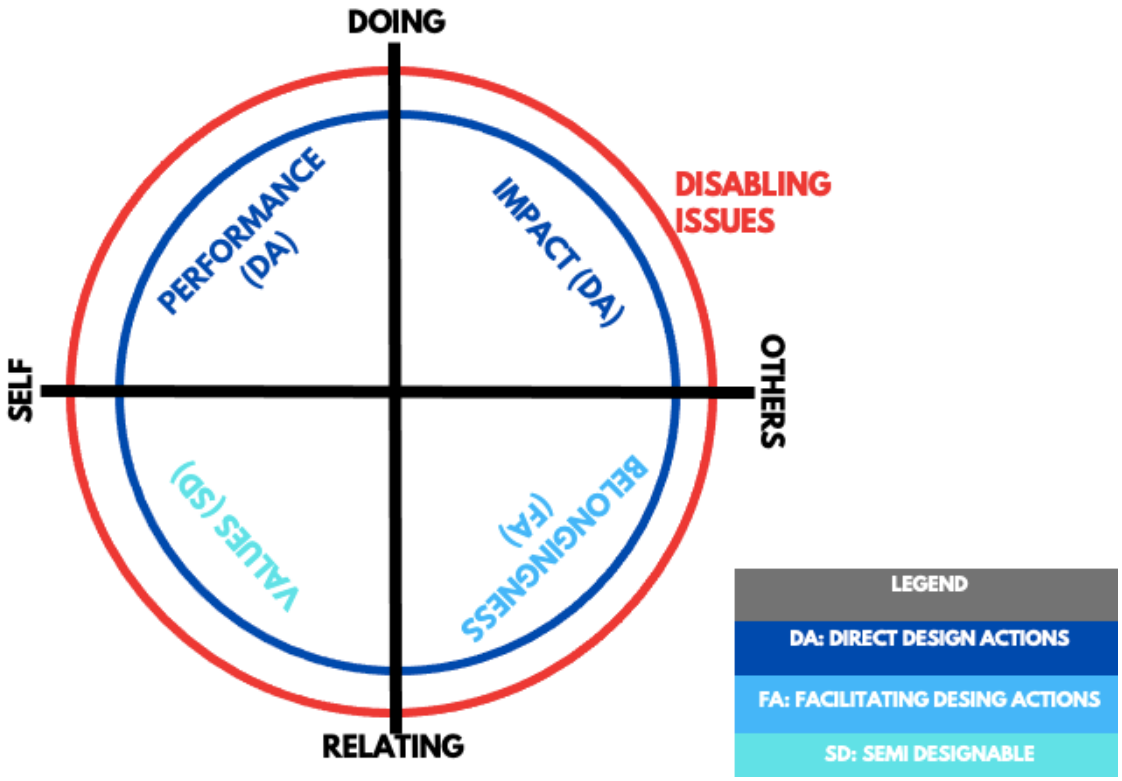
Scholars highlighted the absence of discussion on the shift from the term "being" presented in the axis "being-others" to the term "relationship". The tool had the goal to create or modify services, so the term "relationship" made clear what is to being designed, as it is easier to comprehend what means designing or facilitating the "relationship with others"/"relationship with the self" than "being [with] others"/"being [with] the self". The term "relationship" conveys the semantic of the activities through which the goals of the tool will be achieved. For example, creating better relationship with others is how organizations can foster experiences of belongingness, while just saying "being [with] others" does not apprehend this dynamic.

5.6. Epilogue: On the Meaningful Work Canvas evolution since the paper release

The authors and other researchers implemented the Meaningful Work Canvas again after the paper was published in the ServDes 2023 proceedings. Testing the tool with new samples of professionals and discussions on the tool led to updates presented in this epilogue.

First, the visual model in Figure 6 had excess information that confused and misled users, with few positive consequences. The grey sections outside the circle presented suggestions from the third researcher of what each quadrant could mean – "motivations," "impact," and "front-office" – that guided her implementation of the tool but led other users to become confused about the characteristics from each quadrant. The two first authors decided to update the visual tool in the direction of a cleaner design, presented in Figure 8:

Figure 8: Last Version of Meaningful Work Canvas



Source: the authors

The multiple diagrams – figure 2, figure 2, and figure 6 of the present thesis – presented in the paper also confused the users on how the actual design from Meaningful Work Canvas was. To clarify for the readers, figure 2 is the CMWS from Lips-Wiersma and Wright, the inspiration for the Meaningful Work Canvas, while Figure 3 represents how the two first authors approached CMWS to create the Meaningful Work Canvas. Figure 3 represents the first version of the Meaningful Work Canvas that the postgraduate students took to run the immersion protocol. They were allowed to bring suggestions for improvements to the tool, figure 6, the updated version of the visual model that the two first authors deemed as the ultimate version of the tool at that time. The third student reversed the dimensions upside-down to put the two dimensions subject to direct design actions on the upper side of the visual model, where the designers would have more protagonism in creating or modifying services.

6. Three guidelines to a Decolonial Research Agenda on Meaningful Work: The Case of the Preferred Worker

Author: Gustavo Barreto

Abstract

Coloniality is an epistemological process that regards European modernity as the pinnacle of all civilizational trajectories on the planet. This process, in turn, creates the colonial difference between the knowledge and life practices of the West and other civilizations. After World War II, coloniality entered a new stage centered in the U.S., where organizations and business schools became disseminators of knowledge and praxis of living based on neoliberal values. Research on meaningful work has contributed to this endeavor by constructing an image of preferred work that aligns with neoliberal values. This essay presents three guidelines for establishing a decolonial research agenda on meaningful work: *examining the dynamics of acceptance and re-existence against the preferred worker archetype, revealing the voices of subaltern individuals about what work means to them, and expanding the ontological structure of meaningful work*. Through these guidelines, scholars can examine how subalterns are oppressed in the organizational milieu and their strategies of acceptance or re-existence. Furthermore, these guidelines enable scholars to explore opportunities for understanding meaningful work beyond the archetype of the preferred worker. The findings from this study can guide efforts to develop decolonized workplaces that free subalterns from conforming to the preferred worker archetype and contribute to the economic and social goals of countries in the Global South.

Keywords: Meaningful Work. Decoloniality. Decolonial Option. West. Discourses.

6.1. Introduction

In 1492, European vessels reached a vast landmass that would later be named America. This event and its aftermath established the political global order through a process known as colonization. Consequently, Western European states subjugated colonies in the Americas, Africa, and Asia. During colonialism, millions of individuals in these territories were killed, and valuable resources from these continents, such as silver and gold, were pilled into Western Europe. A second process, not political but epistemological, legitimized the devastation caused by colonialism. Colonialism ended shortly after World War II (QUIJANO, 2005); however, this second process continues today and is called *coloniality*.

Coloniality presented European modernity as the endpoint for all civilizational paths on Earth (MIGNOLO, WALSH, 2018, p.118). This oppressive endeavor labeled all cosmologies, life practices, and knowledge from the subjugated territories with the lower status of "tradition" (MIGNOLO, WALSH, 2018). Tradition and modernity are concepts from modernity, which regards itself as the protagonist of its history. Modernity framed the arrival of Europeans in the New World as an opportunity to enlighten populations deemed to be stuck in their traditions, which were perceived to hinder their development (MIGNOLO, WALSH, 2018).

However, the notion that Western Europe represents the pinnacle of all civilization is a fallacy. Institutions such as the media, universities, and museums, which the rulers of coloniality control, reinforce this fallacy. These fictions “authorized actors and institutions to promote their universality and to demonize and devalue praxis of living and knowledges” (MIGNOLO, WALSH, 2018, p.172).

The narratives produced by missionaries, writers, and soldiers discussing the Americas, Africa, and Asia emphasized cultural disparities between European narrators and the narrated subjects (MIGNOLO, WALSH, 2018). Nonetheless, culture should be regarded as an epistemological construct rather than an ontological representation of something that really exists, and what was being created at that moment was colonial difference (MIGNOLO, WALSH, 2018). The colonial difference created a hierarchy prioritizing Western Europe's knowledge, practices, and cosmologies while disregarding and

belittling alternative histories from other civilizations (MIGNOLO, WALSH, 2018). Cultural difference was merely the ontological disguise of colonial difference.

The concept of human itself is an invention of coloniality, designed to classify individuals. The rulers of coloniality reserved the class of humans for themselves, securing them a privileged category as the superior subspecies: the white male. In contrast, the white male established categories for other individuals, designating them as lesser humans or subalterns, based on existing Christian cosmology categories like women and new coloniality fabrications such as race (MIGNOLO, WALSH, 2018). Enslaved Africans were classified as blacks, and the inhabitants of the Americas were referred to as Indians based on their race. Coloniality served colonialism and capitalism, also known as economic colonialism (MIGNOLO, WALSH, 2018), as it permitted humans to exploit individuals considered inferior through long hours of unpaid labor and violence to maintain control over their labor. The concepts of labor, capital, and land themselves are colonial formations, as posited by BANERJEE and BERRIER-LUCAS (2022). The oppression of people of color, or racism, and the oppression of women, or sexism, are fingerprints that indicate the existence of colonialism in our days (MIGNOLO, WALSH, 2018).

After World War II, the United States emerged as the epicenter of the colonial enterprise. Exporting management education and development models from the U.S. accompanied the claim of spreading modernization and growth across the globe (ALCADIPANI, KHAN, *et al.*, 2012). This approach promoted economic neoliberalism, including ideas of technicity, productivism, consumerist quality assurance, individualism, and a work-centered life (JAMMULAMADAKA, FARIA, *et al.*, 2021).

Coloniality exercises control over meaning-making, ascribing meaning “to a mix of interrelated activities within the praxis of living” (MIGNOLO, WALSH, 2018, p.137) and manages our subjectivities by providing a set of “global designs whose implementation would secure well-being and happiness for everyone on earth” (MIGNOLO, WALSH, 2018, p.139). It influences our emotions, sensations, and desires (MIGNOLO, WALSH, 2018, p. 187). Work plays a crucial role in meaning-making for individuals (BARRETT, DAILEY, 2018, COHEN-MEITAR, CARMELI, *et al.*, 2009, OZDEVECIOGLU, DEMIRTAS, *et al.*, 2015). However, the literature on meaningful work has contributed to shaping an ideal worker, the *preferred worker*, following

neoliberal economic values. This archetype is the workplace version of the previously mentioned colonial human, and we will discuss its creation in more detail in the next section.

Decoloniality represents a principled and plural response by subaltern individuals to "the totalitarian implications of a universal global design represented by the white-European-masculine-heterosexual subject" (JAMMULAMADAKA, FARIA, *et al.*, 2021, p. 720), which includes political, artistic, intellectual, and epistemic interventions. The subaltern shares material and intersubjective characteristics with Europeans, yet significant differences between the two groups exist (QUIJANO, 2005). Coloniality aims to transform the subaltern and their subjectivity into European clones (MIGNOLO, WALSH, 2018), resulting in a distorted self-image as an incomplete European subject for the subaltern (QUIJANO, 2005). From their position at the border of two worlds, the subalterns can overcome distortions through border-thinking. Border-thinking does not wholly reject colonial practices of living and learning but instead constructs new practices that reflect characteristics from both sides of the border. The different modes of detachment from the colonial structure are as varied as the numerous borders (MIGNOLO, WALSH, 2018).

This paper addresses two key questions. First, how do individuals accept or resist the imposition of the preferred worker and colonial dynamics in the workplace? Second, how can meaningful work structures be detached from the preferred worker archetype? While there are studies in the meaningful work literature that explore these topics, the body of research is limited. The pursuit of answers to these two inquiries can provide insights to compose the decolonial turn in the field of management and organization studies (MOS) that decolonizes business schools and organizations (JAMMULAMADAKA, FARIA, *et al.*, 2021, MALDONADO-TORRES, 2011). This pursuit involves aligning business practices with the country's objectives of promoting economic growth while addressing poverty, persistent unemployment, inequality, racism, and sexism (NKOMO, 2015).

The text is organized in the following manner. The upcoming section presents an approach to defining meaningful work as a processual and tensional construct. This approach offers an alternative to showcasing subaltern voices and practices beyond the preferred worker archetype. Additionally, the approach identifies coloniality and border-thinking within the organizational milieu. Next, a section explores how the research on

meaningful work can respond to the two queries raised in the previous paragraph through three guidelines: *examining the dynamics of acceptance and re-existence against the preferred worker archetype, revealing the voices of subaltern individuals about what work means to them, and expanding the ontological structure of meaningful work.* Finally, this essay offers concluding thoughts.

6.2. Meaningful work, coloniality, and decoloniality

The search for meaningfulness is a fundamental human need, and work plays a significant role due to its centrality (BARRETT, DAILEY, 2018, COHEN-MEITAR, CARMELI, *et al.*, 2009, OZDEVECIOGLU, DEMIRTAS, *et al.*, 2015). Viewing work as meaningful is the source of positive experiences contributes to identity formation and a range of work-related outcomes (COHEN-MEITAR, CARMELI, et al., 2009, OZDEVECIOGLU, DEMIRTAS, et al., 2015). In contrast, the absence of meaningfulness represents a "serious psychological deprivation associated with depression, mortality, and suicide ideation" (MARTELA, PESSI, 2018, p.1).

The notion of meaningful work experienced a significant transformation in the early 21st century, impacted by positive psychology and workplace spirituality. Positive psychology shifted the focus of psychology away from addressing emotional distress to promoting happiness and individual development, emphasizing a narrative of boundless human potential (BECKER, MARECEK, 2008). One of the fundamental tenets of this approach is the belief that work is meaningful when it satisfies a "desire to make a positive impact or contribute to the greater good" (BAILEY, YEOMAN, *et al*., 2018, p. 9). According to workplace spirituality, a job is meaningful if it offers cognitively meaningful tasks and induces a sense of pleasure. It connects workers to a greater good and things they deem important in their lives (BAILEY, YEOMAN, *et al*., 2018, p. 9). The two traditions endorse utilizing meaningful work to enhance employee productivity. The connection between meaningful work and performance results from an individual's increased devotion to a task that she considers valuable, which is captured by the adage "merry worker, better worker" (BENDASSOLLI, TATEO, 2018, p.154).

The impact of meaningful work on performance-related outcomes, including creativity (ZHANG, SUN, *et al.*, 2020), commitment (JIANG, JOHNSON, 2018), and job performance (ZEGLAT, JANBEIK, 2019), has sparked numerous quantitative studies examining this relationship. Such research intended to provide generalizable, "robust," and "precise" knowledge (ABDALLA, FARIA, 2017, p.920) that could drive initiatives aimed at improving organizational productivity in line with neoliberal expectations. Quantitative research, however, fails to criticize how this knowledge contributes to

inequality and poverty (ABDALLA, FARIA, 2017). To illustrate, the prevalence of quantitative studies is evident by the significant amount of twenty-eight different scales designed to assess meaningful work (BAILEY, YEOMAN, *et al*., 2018).

The widely used scale, Work and Meaning Inventory (WAMI), illustrates this trend, presenting meaningful work using three primary dimensions (STEGER, DIK, *et al.*, 2012). According to STEGER *et al*. (2012), Psychological Meaningfulness is "the sense that people judge their work to matter and be meaningful" (STEGER, DIK, *et a*l., 2012, p. 323). Meaning Making Through Work refers to how the meaningfulness of work can aid individuals in achieving a better understanding of themselves and the world, hence promoting personal growth (STEGER, DIK, *et a*l., 2012, p. 323). Greater Good motivations evaluate the aspiration to have a positive impact on others through work. WAMI frames meaningful work as a eudaimonic construct, where meaningfulness stems from unlimited personal growth by pursuing the greater good in one's career.

The concept of meaningful work, according to positive psychology and workplace spirituality, is the result of a limited set of factors, including contributing to the greater good, achieving self-actualization to tap into limitless human potential, and having the autonomy to pursue these goals at work (KUHN, GOLDEN, *et al.*, 2008, LAIR, SHENOY, *et al.*, 2008, MITRA, BUZZANELL, 2017). The quest for meaningful work entails centering one's life around work and blurring the lines between personal and professional spheres (BUNDERSON, THOMPSON, 2009, KUHN, GOLDEN, *et al.*, 2008, LAIR, SHENOY, *et al.*, 2008, MITRA, BUZZANELL, 2017). This results in a worker archetype coined as the *preferred worker*.

The *preferred worker* promotes coloniality by advocating for increased work intensity, which aligns with the unlimited expansion of economic neoliberalism. This individualistic perspective on life drives them to strive for the greater good, which they perceive as solely a matter of personal effort rather than a collectivistic or political concern. The significant infusion of knowledge from liberal Western institutions has bolstered modernization and development endeavors in the Global South, fueled by the pledge to incorporate developing nations into the globalized community (ABDALLA, FARIA, 2017). The preferred worker archetype epitomizes the contemporary employee.

Organizations are political entities that consider some values more important than others. Consequently, lifestyles that clash with the preferred worker are considered inconceivable, and individuals who strive to pursue them experience marginalization (LAIR, SHENOY, *et al*., 2008). LAIR *et al.* (2008) conducted a thought experiment to illustrate that the preferred worker archetype may not be suitable for all individuals. The researchers featured two examples: impoverished women in India and expectant mothers and fathers.

In contemporary India, caste, religious identity, and community restrict women's occupation, and the limited employment opportunities available determine the scope for meaningful work. For impoverished Indian women fighting for survival, social impact and self-actualization are irrelevant in pursuing meaningful work. Work is meaningful to them to break out of poverty, educate their children, fulfill familial duties and obligations, and achieve financial autonomy (LAIR, SHENOY, *et al*., 2008).

Pregnancy clashes with the taken-for-granted meanings of work, that privilege work as the primary source of meaningfulness in the corporative milieu. Raising a child necessitates women spending more time with their child, thus conflicting with centering one's life around work (LAIR, SHENOY, *et al*., 2008). To prevent marginalization, women, and occasionally their spouses, use tactics like reservation in revealing the pregnancy. They also endeavor to reassure colleagues, clients, and superiors that their pregnancy will not impact their job performance, which is deemed more critical than child-rearing in this setting.

The unfit individuals are treated as *lesser workers*, drawing parallels with the colonial notion of the lesser human that was discussed earlier in this essay. The two concepts overlap because pregnant women are part of a group that coloniality devalues, and Indian women are racialized individuals and, of course, women.

An alternative to expanding beyond the limited framework of the preferred worker is to adopt a tensional, processual approach to examining meaningful work. This approach defines meaningfulness as a continuing process of creating new meanings to bridge mismatches between individuals and their jobs, thereby preserving meaningfulness in work (MITRA, BUZZANELL, 2017). This perspective values varied interpretations and ways of creating meaning that mirror the socio-economic circumstances of laborers.

Additionally, laborers utilize cultural artifacts and Western and/or local Discourses, defined as “cultural formations or societal macrodiscourses”, to establish meaningfulness in work (BUZZANELL, 2010, p. 2). The importance of economic outcomes among Indian women, for instance, resulted from their financial status. The role of cultural aspects and socio-economic status in shaping meaning can uncover the mechanisms of colonial difference within the workplace context.

Studying how individuals craft the meaningfulness of work can contribute to decolonial research on the subject through three main guidelines: *examining the dynamics of acceptance and re-existence against the preferred worker archetype, revealing the voices of subaltern individuals about what work means to them, and expanding the ontological structure of meaningful work.* The forthcoming sections will outline these guidelines.

6.3. Examining the dynamics of acceptance and re-existence against the preferred worker archetype

The universalization of the Eurocentric modernity led by the United States (ABDALLA, FARIA, 2017) results in organizations uncritically embracing Western Discourses. As local culture and value systems influence individual meaningfulness-making processes (VU, 2022), employees navigate the colonial difference between U.S. globalization's (the preferred worker) and regional (the lesser worker) Discourses that arise at work.

LONG *et al.* (2016) analyzed how Post80 Chinese workers navigated career development against local and Western Discourses. *Guanxi*, a traditional Chinese cultural element, refers to a sentimental tie between the two parties that has the potential to facilitate favor exchanges. Chinese Post80 workers faced the challenge of reconciling the philosophy of *guanxi* in their society with the U.S. Discourses of technicity and meritocracy embraced in their organizations.

They sought to become the preferred worker by depicting *guanxi*-based promotions as unjustifiable compared to meritocratic ones, though the former is a hallmark of the Chinese occupational milieu. Nonetheless, they faced an overwhelming border-thinking task to successfully navigate the technicity of U.S. Discourses while cultivating their *guanxi* skills.

> Most of the colleagues in my cohort [except me] have already established certain type of *guanxi* with the leaders. I am not afraid of competing with talented people, but I am afraid of competing with talented people who also have good *guanxi* with the leaders. This is the competition that I am facing. The chance for me to stand out is very slim.
>
> (LONG, BUZZANELL, *et al.*, 2016)

Brazilian white-collar employees between the ages of 25 and 35 view competence as a significant value, leading them to conceive the public sector as corrupt (BARRETO, BUZZANELL, *et al.*, 2022). Two participants used "*estatal*" (public company in

Portuguese) to criticize their colleagues' laziness at work. This term may reflect the “Vira-Lata ("mongrel" in Portuguese) complex” (SOUZA, 2018). According to SOUZA (2018), this complex reflects a colonial difference that considers Brazilian culture inferior to the culture of the United States. The perception that corruption is a foundation of Brazilian culture reinforces this belief, contrasting with the asceticism and technicity associated with U.S. culture. The myth views the state and politics as highly permeated by corruption.

Brazilian white-collar workers share similar perceptions of the clash between technicity and relational ties as a means to climbing the organizational ladder with Chinese Post80 workers. The formers were willing to identify with the preferred worker archetype by defending meritocracy as a fair reason for promotions over politically motivated reasons. One of the interviewees in BARRETO *et al*.’s (2022) research expressed disdain for the use of political indications as a criterion for promotion; for him, promotion was a recognition of the contributions he made and can make to the organization.

Unlike Chinese individuals, accepting meritocratic discourses among Brazilian workers is not a generational phenomenon. This perception in Brazilian society may be due to the belief that the country is closer to developed countries than to subaltern ones, thus denying its place as a Latin American country (ABDALLA, FARIA, 2017). One interviewee in the study conducted by BARRETO *et al*. (2022) stated that her mother instilled in her the importance of seeking competence and the notion that work should not be enjoyable. Despite the differences, both cases illustrate the framing of anti-corruption as a value for reforming management in the Global South (JAMMULAMADAKA, FARIA, *et al.*, 2021). The examples of workers from Brazil and China illustrate a career development vision founded on individualism, competition, and advancement, reflecting values found in U.S. workplaces (IMAS, WESTON, 2012).

BARRETT and DAILEY's (2018) research indicates that employees may resist the preferred worker archetype. American oil and gas companies have commenced operations in Norway, requesting local workers to work extended hours and perform beyond the scope of their duties, aligning with the Discourse of labor intensification concerning neoliberal logic (BARRETT, DAILEY, 2018). These requests illustrate how nations in the Global North might be on the fringes of the U.S.'s approach to management, education, and theorization (ALCADIPANI, KHAN, *et al.*, 2012). Unlike their Brazilian

and Chinese counterparts, the Norwegian laborers responded by construing these suggestions as endeavors to infringe upon Norwegian laws that ensure workers are entitled to good health and life beyond their workplace (BARRETT, DAILEY, 2018). To enact border-thinking through meaningful work, employees utilized discourses characterized as linguistic selections and communicative interactions (BUZZANELL, 2010).

IRIGARAY *et al.* (2021) conducted a study investigating high-level executives' perception of the adage "For English to See" in Brazilian organizational settings. The proverb originated in the eighteenth century when the Portuguese court arrived in Brazil and represented individuals' strategies to feign compliance with a request. For the managers from Brazil in the study, this proverb exemplified how they navigated the power imbalance influenced by coloniality with their foreign superiors, who displayed tendencies akin to harassment. To avoid punishment for not meeting overseas standards that reflected oppression, Brazilian managers developed a strategy of superficial compliance with foreign superiors, known as doing things for the English to see (IRIGARAY, CELANO, *et al.*, 2021).

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is a well-researched predictor of meaningful work, as it supports the narrative of working towards the greater good through direct action when employees engage in CSR practices (SUPANTI, BUTCHER, 2019) or by simply being a part of a socially responsible organization that fosters a sense of belonging (Kim et al., 2018). Nonetheless, CSR initiatives may carry negative impacts, as seen in the construction of the Ralco hydroelectric dam that led to the displacement of Pehuenche indigenous people from their land (MAHER, HUENTEAO, *et al.*, 2022). The Pehuenche people were resettled in an area that did not align with their traditions and rituals, resulting in high levels of poverty, suicide, domestic violence, and a decline in their collective way of life and spirituality (MAHER, HUENTEAO, *et al*., 2022). Organizations that uphold high-profile CSR policies are attempting to dispossess indigenous peoples for extractivist purposes (BANERJEE, BERRIER-LUCAS, 2022). These organizations utilize the quest of the preferred worker to promote the common good to mask their colonial actions against indigenous communities.

How do individuals cope with the tension of organizations that claim to pursue the greater good while engaging in colonial activities? BARRETO *et al.*'s (2022) research offers

some possible explanations. Two interviewees stated that they work for organizations that make decisions that contradict participants' beliefs, and both expressed a sense of resignation towards this predicament. One interviewee noted that these were decisions made by the board, over which he had no influence. The other interviewee, who gathered resumes in vulnerable areas to fulfill the sustainability requirements of construction projects, stated that she conveyed the residents' demands. She acknowledged that their resumes would not result in hiring, as they were only a requirement of the sustainability protocols. However, she remarked that their situation would be worse without her intervention. Both interviewees expressed a strong desire to pursue other job opportunities. This resignation reflects a psychological detachment from their work due to difficulties in finding meaningfulness in the situation.

Individuals can articulate answers that fall between the continuum of resistance and acceptance. SRINIVAS (2012) examines how management knowledge in India reflects the hybridism between Indian philosophy and colonial management practices. The case of the Yoga camp highlights the utilization of Yoga philosophy that caters to Western managerial procedures and instrumental rationality (SRINIVAS, 2012). Individuals can navigate the tensions between local and foreign values through hybridism, projecting an image of authenticity, a trait deemed essential in contemporary society (MARTELA, PESSI, 2018). The case of Yoga camp, however, represents a distinct form of attachment to Western managerial practices.

Workers from diverse backgrounds and places suffer pressure to adhere to the archetype of the preferred worker. They may adopt these prescriptions by adhering to technicity, individualism, competitiveness, and meritocracy values, or they may articulate these pressures to reaffirm local narratives of collectivism, solidarity, and labor rights. In specific scenarios, workers may adopt hybrid perspectives that align local practices with neoliberal economic interests, as in the case of the Yoga camp in India. This adoption creates a preferred worker profile that emphasizes superficial features of diversity rather than a genuinely decolonial response (BANERJEE, BERRIER-LUCAS, 2022).

The desire of the preferred worker to impact the greater good through their job performance may mask colonization initiatives on the part of organizations, as in the case of CSR. In similar scenarios, laborers hailing from the Global South exhibited resignation when confronted with discrepancies between their values and the practices implemented

by their employers. Additionally, workers in such regions can resist ways of oppression that replicate the historical North-South power dynamics of colonialism, as demonstrated by the case of “For English to See.”

6.4. Revealing the voices of subaltern individuals about what work means to them

The second guideline is to investigate the processes of rendering work as meaningful carried out by individuals devalued due to coloniality. Decolonized knowledge should stem from the problems and voices of marginalized individuals (ABDALLA, FARIA, 2017). A gap exists in the literature on meaningful work as existing studies focus on individuals in specific sectors, countries, cohorts (white-collar, blue-collar), or organizations, with minimal attention given to marginalized populations. Subalterns encounter significant challenges while managing colonial differences in the workplace through border thinking.

Feminist studies investigate how women derive meaning in a globalized society where the preferred worker is male. Within the construction industry, female workers suffer pressure to emasculate themselves by conforming to a subculture centered around long work hours and male-oriented activities like pub nights to succeed (WATTS, 2009) (WATTS, 2009). This lifestyle can create conflicts with their personal and family responsibilities, which are often still stereotypically seen as "feminine," as well as their professional identities (WATTS, 2009). Maintaining professional integrity prevents these women from disengaging from the misogynistic structure (WATTS, 2009). Brazilian female police officers also reported the need to adopt masculine traits during work hours to succeed in a strongly male-dominated environment (SÁ, LEMOS, *et al.*, 2022). Despite facing misogyny from their male colleagues, these women achieved personal growth and social recognition through their work in the police force (SÁ, LEMOS, *et al*., 2022).

The fact that the preferred worker archetype is male results in devaluing occupations considered "good for women" (ENGLAND, BOYER, 2009, p.307). This colonial difference undermines skills required in these occupations, such as dexterity, by labeling them as inherently female, endangering the self-esteem and identity of women (ENGLAND, BOYER, 2009, HUH, 2008). Huh discovered a strong correlation between the undervaluing of care work done by migrant women and their marginalization in the countries they work in (HUH, 2008).

Studies of indigenous and Black individuals' processes to derive meaningful work are less common than for women. LEU *et al.* (2018) explored the significance of tourism-related labor for Sami natives residing in Sweden. The Sami view their tourism work as a chance to enlighten visitors on their culture. They have employed border-thinking by framing their identity as a "typical Swede" (LEU, ERIKSSON, *et al*., 2018, p. 8) to escape negative stereotypes while at the same time defending and preserving Sami culture and way of life through tourism work, which helps them to maintain traditions such as handicrafts and foster a sense of pride and honor. Due to the failure of Swedish institutions and national policies to provide livelihoods for Sami people, tourism has emerged as a means of providing them with livelihoods, raising awareness of the plight of reindeer herders and gaining political support for their cause (LEU, ERIKSSON, *et al.*, 2018). In summary, Sami people utilize tourism work to promote an image of themselves that is both Western and indigenous.

STEBLETON (2012) analyzed the meanings of work developed by black Sub-Saharan individuals who came to the United States to complete their education and work. While Sub-Saharan cultures are diverse, they share similar educational philosophies emphasizing collective good over individual success (STEBLETON, 2012). Living in a country with individualistic values, such as the United States, forces participants to adapt to new roles. In the new country, families are not as extended, requiring parents to take on greater responsibility for childcare, mainly when one parent is ill or unable to care for their child (STEBLETON, 2012). Participants viewed balancing their roles as students, employees, and caregivers positively, expressing gratitude for escaping their home countries' adverse political environment. For them, work was not just about personal fulfillment but also about providing financial aid to their communities in Africa. Their collectivist mindset led them to pursue careers in the human services field and make a difference through research or by creating scholarship funds (STEBLETON, 2012).

There is a dearth of research on subaltern individuals' meaningful work experiences. Such examination reveals border-thinking and border-doing effective strategies, exemplified by the Sami people, versus those that are less feasible due to material constraints, such as those faced by women.

6.5. Expanding the ontological structure of meaningful work

Meaningful work is a multidimensional construct under academic study, with ongoing debates surrounding the dimensions and ontologies that constitute it. For instance, Lair and colleagues found that Indian women living in poverty considered their work meaningful if they could earn income that could improve their and their families' living situations (LAIR, SHENOY, *et al.*, 2008). The preferred worker archetype does not consider wages or job stability as aspects of meaningful work. The given assumption signifies that meaningfulness in work goes beyond just earning money, as a "life worth living is more than mere survival" (MARTELA, PESSI, 2018, p.8). Steger and his co-researchers distinguished between "work just to earn money" and the idea of "work to *mean* something" (STEGER, DIK, *et al*., 2012, p.322, emphasis added).

The preferred worker wants their work to be more than just earning a living (DEMIRTAS, HANNAH, *et al.*, 2017, PRADHAN, JENA, 2017) and embraces a eudaimonic (growth-oriented) rather than a hedonic (pleasure-oriented) framework of meaningful work. The notions of eudaemonia and hedonism came from Greek philosophy, the birthplace of European philosophy. At the same time, the binary contrast between the two concepts is also a characteristic of Western thought (MIGNOLO, WALSH, 2018).

A decolonial approach to meaningful work requires diverse perspectives on meaningfulness that expand beyond the preferred worker archetype and embrace a plurality of workers. Rosso and colleagues' definition of meaningful work is fitting for this endeavor as it emphasizes the amount of significance a job holds for an individual (ROSSO, DEKAS, *et al*., 2010). This definition avoids presupposing any particular characteristics or structures of the meaningful work construct.

In their study, BARROS *et al*. (2017) discovered that money held significant meaning for civil construction employees beyond basic survival needs. The employees associated money with pleasure, which led to happiness, harmony, and satisfaction in their relationships. Additionally, money represented transcendence, as individuals could use their earnings to assist those in needs (BARROS, BORGES, *et al.*, 2017). These meanings reflect the lack of material conditions that civil construction workers previously had.

Material aspects such as money or job stability are relevant to workers in all parts of the world. However, individuals belonging to marginalized groups, such as women and people of color, in Global South nations are particularly susceptible to the adverse effects of economic downturns. As a result, they tend to prioritize material aspects of work over existential ones and may alter their perceptions of what constitutes meaningful work (BARROS, BORGES, *et al.*, 2017, HALL, CHANDLER, 2005, ROSSO, DEKAS, *et al.*, 2010). During an economic recession, Brazilian workers revised their assessment of what constitutes meaningful work to a less idealistic perspective, as keeping their jobs took on greater importance than previously (BARROS, BORGES, *et al.*, 2017). Meanwhile, Vu observed that middle-class Vietnamese hold a practical view of work's meaningfulness, with satisfying financial expectations as one method of achieving it. In response to an unstable economic context, workers highlighted the significance of earning a sufficient salary to maintain a high quality of life and save for the future (VU, 2022). To preserve their standard of living, individuals may refrain from pursuing career paths that align with their ideal selves (HALL, CHANDLER, 2005, LONG, BUZZANELL, *et al.*, 2016).

Another instance of expanding the structure of meaningful work is Barreto and colleagues' discussion of the multiple ways to understand the idea of purpose. While purpose is frequently used interchangeably with calling, BARRETO *et al.* (2022) present it as a sense of direction in life. In contrast, calling is the “belief that one's career is a central part of a broader sense of purpose and meaning in life” (DUFFY, DIK, 2013, p. 429) toward promoting the greater good or helping others. BARRETO *et al.* (2022) identified two forms of purpose beyond calling: being competent and being an explorer. Being competent demonstrated participants' support for neoliberal economic management, as they sought to enhance their performance outcomes and allowed them to subscribe to the illusions of their successes due to their efforts rather than their social rank (BARRETO, BUZZANELL, *et al*., 2022). The middle class in Brazil monopolized access to valuable knowledge and encouraged their members to pursue education. Therefore, the purpose of being curious indicates a desire from white-collar workers who were born into the middle class to continue learning (BARRETO, BUZZANELL, *et al*., 2022).

A third way of expanding the ontological structure of meaningful work is a different, collectivistic understanding of belongingness. Interactions in the organizational milieu

usually follow what Enrique Dussel defined as proxemics, relationships where the other is perceived as an object that is controlled, manipulated, bought, and used (COUTO, CARRIERI, 2018). For example, considering that (material) contributions given to the organization are the only reasons for promotions, as one interviewee from Barreto and colleagues' research did, means perceiving an employee just from her productivity. This understanding, sponsored by technicity from Western Discourses on work, transforms the employee into an object. Objectified individuals did not receive great ethical concerns on moral harassment directed against them, nor are eligible for decent work (COUTO, CARRIERI, 2018).

On the other hand, Dussel proposed the concept of proximity, a relationship where the other is perceived in her complete subjectivity. According to the author, humans have a natural willingness to proximity (COUTO, CARRIERI, 2018), however, coloniality shook this inclination. Perceiving an employee in full subjectivity means, for example, rendering pregnancy not from their impact on productivity but as a question to be embraced and supported by the organization. Proximity implies genuine concerns about how the activities engendered by the organization impact the subjectivity for its stakeholders, which differs from just aiming to meet CSR standards, as in the case of the Pehuenche people affected by the construction of the hydroelectric dam in Chile or in the interviewee from the study on Barreto and colleagues who had to collect resumes from vulnerable individuals to meet the environmental licenses requirements, even knowing that this action would achieve no result (BARRETO, BUZZANELL, *et al*., 2022). Embracing employees in their full subjectivity represents accommodating plural ways of life at the organization, mainly the excluded in the traditional organizational settings like gays, women, people of color, and peripheric individuals, allowing plural work environments.

Proximity can foster meaningful work through a deep collectivistic sense of belongingness of an individual who genuinely perceives herself as a part of the group (ROSSO, DEKAS, *et al*., 2010). The literature presents similar perceptions regarding work however, they are outside the organizational environments. IMAS and WETSON (2012) showed that residents of the favelas (slums, in Portuguese) in Rio de Janeiro prioritize solidarity and collective action as driving forces behind their resistance to societal difficulties and efforts towards building a better life. The Sub-Saharan workers

living in the United States presented how their sense of belonging to a community influences their relationship with work (STEBLETON, 2012)

The preferred worker archetype influences a given structure of dimensions of what is meaningful work. By challenging this structure, alternative paths to derive meaning can be recognized, and colonial dynamics in creating meaningfulness can be perceived, as in the case of multiple purposes (BARRETO, BUZZANELL, *et al*., 2022).

6.6. Concluding thoughts

The strategy of coloniality involves exerting control over meaningfulness-making, and work plays a crucial part in this process. The current stage of coloniality in MOK, the practices from business schools, and the features of organizational life highlight the importance of decolonizing meaningful work as a crucial objective within a broader decolonial agenda. Decolonizing work meaningfulness helps to prevent the adverse effects of the gap between neoliberal values and the realities of developing nations and marginalized individuals (ABDALLA, FARIA, 2017).

Individuals' socio-economic conditions and the cultural contexts of their countries influence how they negotiate meaningful work. Countries in the Global South present specific, often unstable, socio-economic contexts and specific d/Discourses on work. Understanding meaningful work as a processual and tensional construct aids in identifying contextual influences on deriving meaningful work, revealing colonial aspects in meaningfulness-making, and developing strategies for re-existence through border-thinking.

This essay challenges the notion that only Global North management knowledge can achieve development, which limits policymakers and practitioners in the Global South to solely consuming knowledge from the U.S. (ABDALLA, FARIA, 2017, ALCADIPANI, KHAN, *et al.*, 2012). Most studies focus on Western countries in the literature on meaningful work (BAILEY, YEOMAN, *et al.*, 2018). Business schools in the Global South are vital in addressing the challenges and inequalities experienced by various segments of society and contributing to economic development. However, the prevailing Global North recommendations are unsuitable for this critical mission (ABDALLA, FARIA, 2017; NKOMO, 2015). The Brazilian context poses an additional challenge since our society regards the country as closer to developed nations and sees coloniality as a waning trend confined to the least developed economies in South America (ABDALLA, FARIA, 2017).

Three guidelines can aid in fostering the development of decolonial knowledge on meaningful work: examining the dynamics of acceptance and re-existence against the preferred worker archetype, revealing the voices of subaltern individuals about what work means to them, and expanding the ontological structure of meaningful work. Despite their

importance, there is a lack of research on these guidelines, mainly the latter two. This essay aims to fill this gap and assist other scholars in conducting related studies.

Decoloniality aims to articulate plural solutions that allow for the coexistence of multiple worlds instead of providing a singular solution to the problem of coloniality (ABDALLA, FARIA, 2017). Plurality means that each individual or group will have a particular understanding of what liberation from coloniality means (BANERJEE, BERRIER-LUCAS, 2022). Despite embracing diverse sets of individuals, it is essential to note that decoloniality should not be conflated with diversity. The decolonial option on meaningful work does not intend to understand the processes enacted by diverse subaltern individuals to derive meaningfulness but to understand how such processes reflect their subaltern conditions. Diversity is hegemonic, while decolonization poses an uncomfortable criticism (BANERJEE, BERRIER-LUCAS, 2022), which seeks to transcend the persistent effects of colonialism (NKOMO, 2015).

Organizations are political entities that devalue certain lifestyles that do not align with their values, leading to the marginalization of individuals who are unable to conform to the archetype of the preferred worker, which is associated with a strong centrality of work and values such as technicity, competence, individualism, and meritocracy. Choosing the preferred worker as a model to follow makes promoting meaningful work in the Global South a colonizing activity. In this sense, organizations on a smaller scale replicate the colonial dynamics present worldwide by adapting colonial differences in labor. The marginalization experienced by individuals leads to devaluation of their skills and problems of acceptance. For instance, the challenges faced by female civil engineers resulted in identity tensions. Such marginalization hinders workers' meaningfulness-making abilities and may result in devastating outcomes such as moral harassment and burnout. To address this challenge, the literature on meaningful work could amplify the perspectives of a diverse range of workers rather than solely evaluating conformity to the preferred worker archetype.

This essay seeks to contribute to constructing decolonized workplaces through the reflections and guidelines presented, promoting liberation from the archetype of the preferred worker. These workplaces embrace the diversity of lifestyles and backgrounds that humanity offers. The decolonial option in organizational studies should not be limited to academic discussions but also benefit the maximum number of subaltern workers.

7. Discussion

The present section discusses three points that are transversal to the texts from the three previous chapters when assessed as an integrated whole. The aim of this section is not to repeat what was previously discussed but to go beyond by highlighting what the set of these three texts and the theoretical background from Chapter 2 contribute to meaningful work literature.

Subsection 7.1 presents the advantages of understanding meaningful work as a need for research, as this thesis's main contribution is to present the usefulness and robustness of this approach. The three texts from this thesis follow this understanding of meaningful work ontology, which provides a nuanced view of meaningfulness that facilitates the examination of the construct for other disciplines, helps to assess the results from previous studies in detail, and allows the examination of power dynamics in the work milieu through d/Discourses. Subsection 7.2 discusses the last advantage in detail.

In addition, subsection 7.2 advocates for plural workplaces that embrace multiple worker profiles. This subsection discusses how the Meaningful Work Canvas, despite its five dimensions, aligns with the construction of plural workplaces.

Subsection 7.3 presents a brief discussion of the role of material aspects of a job in meaningful work. The two papers from this thesis gave examples of an intimate relationship between meaningful work and material aspects of a job, which opposes the understanding that the two questions are separate, exchangeable instances. Material conditions of a job can provide meaningfulness through identity and transcendence.

7.1. The advantages of understanding meaningfulness as a need

This thesis subscribes to understanding *meaningful work as a need* rather than the approach to *meaningful work as a benefit*. As the introduction mentions, this option allows a more nuanced view of work meaningfulness, where individuals articulate tensions from adverse situations to render work meaningful. The meaningful work as a need approach has three other methodological advantages.

First, it facilitates the examination of work meaningfulness for other disciplines. In the example from CLOT (2018), the kid felt absorbed in making drawings. However, this match between the activity and the kid's inner interest was insufficient to avoid boredom, as the idea that meaningfulness comes from the mere match between individuals and work characteristics could anticipate a rationale from the approach of meaningful work as a benefit. The kid escaped boredom when the tutor reframed the meaning of the activity to teach another kid to make drawings (CLOT, 2018).

In another example of this first methodological advantage, the social psychology theory considers that individuals create meanings from the disparities between the dimensions of their lives and that meaninglessness can foster psychopathological phenomena (CLOT 2018). While these disparities are examples of tensions, the latter relationship is a sheer consequence of the fact that individuals need to ascribe meaningfulness to work and are vulnerable to occupational diseases when this is not possible.

The concept of job crafting aligns with understanding meaningful work as a need. Both consider that individuals actively create new meanings to make work meaningful, with a difference in the focus of the observation. The understanding of meaningful work as a need places attention on the triggers (tensions) and the characteristics of the experience (processual), while job crafting discusses how individuals create those meanings (i.e., changing boundaries, optimizing demands, and seeking resources).

The example of the machine operator from CLOT (2018) shows the adverse effects of blocking an employee from creating meanings for their work and crafting her job. In that case, the operator absorbed a new activity, fixing the machines aiming to reach the goals set by the organization. However, when asked to stop doing this activity, the operator

perceived the destruction of her capacity to act, causing a poignant expectation that represented the risk of falling into meaninglessness. The maintenance of this adverse scenario will require the operator to create psychological distance from work to maintain her mental balance. Psychological distancing due to the blocking of possibilities to develop work meaningfulness is a conclusion presented in other studies in the literature (BARRETO, BUZZANELL, *et al*. 2022, BENDASSOLI, 2024). Specifically, the case of the operator resembles what BENDASSOLI defined as placardisation (BENDASSOLI, 2017).

The second methodological advantage is that the approach of meaningful work as a need helps to assess the results from previous studies in detail. MORSE and WEISS (1955) pointed out that blue-collar employees were dissatisfied with their current jobs and desired to pursue another career if they did not depend on their wages to live. Blue-collar employees dealt with their dissatisfaction by framing their jobs as the only jobs they could get and expressing resignation by emphasizing the positive aspects of their work contexts (MORSE, WEISS, 1955). In sum, the blue-collar employees had created meanings to deal with an adverse situation, as the tensional-centered approach of meaningful work states. Nonetheless, this ability to frame negative situations at work as positive has limits, as adversities like predatory competition, moral harassment, extended working hours, and perceiving the use of greater-good discourses just to increase profits fostered turnover intentions (BARRETO, BUZZANELL, *et al*. 2022).

The harmful effects of leaving the quest for meaningfulness were present in the accounting from FRANKL (2017) of life in Nazi concentration camps. Prisoners create meaningfulness by aspiring for a future outside the camp. Other inmates were stuck in the limitless time, restricting the possibilities of deriving meaningfulness from their experience at the camp, with some suffering a process of decay that led them to death (FRANKL, 2017). BENDASSOLLI (2017) perceived the problem of limitless time when he presented two anti-catalytic mechanisms that hindered the process of deriving meaningfulness from work: placardisation and psychological distancing. Both anti-catalytic mechanisms lead individuals to lose their capacity to perceive work as a future-oriented activity, as the inmates did regarding life at concentration camps, representing health-threatening issues.

The limitations of the ability to render work as meaningful is of attention to organizations and managers. The study from BARRETO *et al.* (2022) showed how interviewees valued displaying skills, creating a positive impact in society and the environment, that can lead employees to deliver better performance at work. However, when the interviewees perceived the organization limited them to display their skills or had inauthentic greater good motivations, this fostered a sense of worthlessness regarding their activities and intentions to leave, an ultimate consequence of unnegotiable tension. The sense of worthlessness, in this case, is a problem of "too much meaningfulness," or what literature defines as the dark side of meaningful work (BAILEY, YEOMAN, *et al*., 2018), specifically, an adverse consequence of desiring conducting meaningful work but not been allowed to. Organizations and managers may adopt authentic, not superficial, experiences of work meaningfulness to avoid the effects of this scenario, like turnover intentions and psychopathological conditions.

The MOW highlighted the role of culture in meaningful work in the concept of societal norms for rights and duties, framing culture as one of the main influences on differences in how individuals from different countries relate the outcomes from work (MOW, 1987). Recent literature has broadened this impact, uniting societal contexts and economic landscapes with culture as regional factors that can influence the processes of rendering work meaningful (BARRETO, BUZZANELL, *et al.*, 2022, BARRETT, DAILEY, 2018, LONG, BUZZANELL, *et al.*, 2016, MEJIA, 2023, MITRA, BUZZANELL, 2017, VU, 2022).

7.2. The decolonial turn, plural workplaces, and the Meaningful Work Canvas

The understanding of meaningful work as a need allows the examination of power dynamics in the work milieu through d/Discourses. The decolonial turn is a call to investigate the colonial dynamics in multiple fields, including organizational studies (JAMMULAMADAKA, FARIA, *et al.*, 2021, MALDONADO-TORRES, 2011). Coloniality is a process triggered by the Great Navigations that rendered to the male, European, and white the position of superior subspecies, giving a subaltern status to the other ones. In the 20th century, the matrix of coloniality shifted from Europe to the United States, and the process spread organizational knowledge grounded in neoliberal values like technicity and efficiency to modernize underdeveloped regions of the World.

The colonial power dynamics emerged in several moments from the present thesis. Women in careers like civil engineering and policewomen had to emasculate themselves, which created conflicts from engaging in activities that were not "female," from late-night gatherings to not menstruating for years due to the poor hygienic conditions of their workplaces (SÁ, LEMOS, *et al.*, 2022, WATTS, 2009). Brazilian managers dealt with bullying from their Western counterparts by creating a meaning to deceive them, grounded in the discourse of "For English to See" (IRIGARAY, CELANO, *et al.*, 2021). Similarly, Norwegian professionals from the Oil & Gas industry relied upon Discourses of job welfare to deal with the pressures of working extended hours from the U.S. organizations where they were employed (BARRETT, DAILEY, 2017).

Examining meaningful work through a decolonial lens exposes how workers deal with the clash between globalized work values like efficiency, customer orientation, and meritocracy with regional contexts like *guanxi* or uncertain economic scenarios. For example, the MOW (1987) perceived a materialistic perception of meaningful work, a characteristic of low-skilled groups in blue-collar jobs. This valorization appeared in the speeches from skilled professionals in the Global South (BARRETO, BUZZANELL, *et al.*, 2022, VU, 2022), pointing to a curious conclusion that white-collar employees from the Global South can have similar priorities to blue-collar individuals in The West.

In a broader sense, the centrality of work in people's lives represents a capitalist strategy to conceal labor exploitation (KUHN, GOLDEN, *et al.*, 2008, ANTUNES, 2009). Workers face dysfunctional workplaces and long working hours that transform this centrality into a potential source of psychological and health risks (BUNDERSON, THOMPSON, 2009). Besides, for working parents and poor people, work may be just how they attain goals from other spheres of their lives, like creating their children and pulling out from poverty (KUHN, GOLDEN, *et al*., 2008).

These examples reveal an effort to submit workers to the archetype of the preferred worker: male, white, and subscribing to neoliberal values, like efficiency and meritocracy (ANTUNES, 2009). According to QUIJANO (2005), this results in a distorted self-image as an incomplete individual, like the case of women who had conflicts by trying to follow a male lifestyle to preserve and improve their jobs or the bullying suffered by Brazilian managers as they are not Western individuals.

Organizations are institutions that render some values worthy while considering other ways of living as unthinkable (LAIR, SHENOY, *et al.*, 2008). Persons who do not fit this structure, epitomized in the figure of the preferred worker presented in the theoretical essay in Chapter 6, may suffer marginalization in those settings. It is crucial to bring the plurality of workers' voices to the discussion of how organizations project their structure and practices.

The Meaningful Work Canvas is a visual tool that could help to give sound to workers' voices. It aims to support designers in projecting work positions that facilitate operators to derive meaningfulness. A characteristic of the tool is the centrality of operators' voices in designing their work, which gives inputs to organizations aiming to provide plural workplaces. The workers actively craft meaningfulness, but at the same time, organizations are in charge of delivering features that contribute to such a process.

The canvas has five dimensions, but they do not restrict representations of work meaningfulness, as respondents can have diverse answers about what is meaningful for them in each dimension. The dimensions create a visual presentation and provide a set of questions supporting designers in immersing in the reality of their interviewees without needing a deep understanding of meaningful work characteristics.

In sum, meaningful work research can contribute to dislodging management from neoliberal values to address national concerns like poverty, persistent unemployment, inequality, racism, and sexism (NKOMO, 2015). Corporations interested in providing suitable workplaces should not display superficial diversity by imposing neoliberal values on individuals from different backgrounds, genders, and colors but build workplaces that embrace plural ways of living outside the logic of intensification of labor (BANERJEE, BERRIER-LUCAS, 2022).

7.3. Comprehensiveness of Meaningful work and the case of material aspects of a job

Some researchers consider the material conditions of a job and meaningful work as separate instances. They affirm that *working to earn money* differs from *working to mean something* (PRADHAN, JENA, 2017, STEGER, DIK, *et al.*, 2012) and that individuals choose between the two alternatives (DEMIRTAS, HANNAH, *et al.*, 2017, WARD, 2023). Working just to make a livelihood would represent a spiritual void (DE SIMONI, 2006).

Impermanence Discourses exemplify the alleged separation between work meaningfulness and its material conditions. These Discourses frame discontinuities in work, like low stability and part-time jobs, as opportunities for workers to exercise their autonomy in affording opportunities for more fluid work arrangements, pursuit of new experiences, and social mobility (KUHN, GOLDEN, *et al.*, 2008). The impermanence Discourses state that material stability prevents individuals from finding autonomy and unique work experiences.

Evidence, however, points to a closer relationship between the material conditions of a job and meaningful work. Two interviewees from BARRETO *et al*.' (2022) research presented in Chapter 4 negotiated their frustrations with board decisions and dull activities using their need to earn a livelihood and stay in their jobs. An interviewee from the research presented in Chapter 5 enjoyed her impact on elderly patients through her work but intends to shift to another career as she does not feel appropriately recognized existentially or financially (BARRETO, BUZZANELL, *et al*., 2023). Workers can avoid pursuing careers they feel are fulfilling to preserve their ideal standing of living and save for the future (HALL, Douglas T., CHANDLER, 2005, LONG, BUZZANELL, *et al.*, 2016, VU, 2022).

Individuals are willing to give more value to the material aspects of a job during periods of recession (HALL, CHANDLER, 2005) or when they live in an unstable economic landscape, a characteristic of the developing countries in the Global South (VU, 2022). Workers that perceive deflation of meaningfulness but stay in their jobs for its material conditions can reach advanced states of psychological distancing resulting in burnout (BENDASSOLLI, 2017). In sum, workers from countries with adverse or unstable

economic contexts are more vulnerable to psychopathologic conditions associated with work.

In addition, there are existential reasons to value the material conditions of a job. For example, money can help individuals construct their identity. Brazilian policewomen face misogyny from their male colleagues but value their careers by using wages to achieve independence from men outside work (SÁ, LEMOS, *et al.*, 2022). Transgender women who engage in sex work use the money they earn to accelerate their process of gender affirmation by financing bodily interventions (TOPA, MOREIRA, *et al.*, 2023).

Brazilian society has an exclusive structure. Individuals from lower classes face a precarious existence and a dehumanized status, rendering white-collar jobs an alternative to escape from this condition and migrating to the middle classes (SOUZA, 2018). In a broader sense, the material conditions of a job are a source of social status (BARROS, BORGES, *et al.*, 2017).

Money is an alternative way to exercise transcendence beyond the impact of an individual's actions during work. BARROS *et al.* (2017) detected that blue-collar workers in the construction sector perceived their wages as tools to help the less fortunate, representing a source of harmony. Individuals with limited material resources can perceive transcendence in working to provide for their families (MARTELA, PESSI, 2018, KUHN, GOLDEN, et al., 2008). Working to improve relatives' lives is a potential bridge between meaningful work and meaningful life.

The examples presented above highlight the impacts of the material conditions of a job on work meaningfulness through identity and transcendence. Meaningful work is a comprehensive construct, and the lack of balance between its dimensions may result in meaninglessness (LIPS-WIERSMA, WRIGHT, 2012). Neglecting the material conditions of a job when discussing meaningful work implies improving the risks of unbalancing that can result in the adverse consequences of meaningless work like burnout and psychological distancing. On the other hand, good work should go beyond providing proper wages and material conditions to create comprehensive, meaningful work (MARTELA, PESSI, 2018).

8. Conclusion

Two understandings of meaningful work dominate the current literature: *meaningful work as a benefit* and *meaningful work as a need*, and this thesis defends the prevalence from latter over the former. The review of the field presented how literature evolved into these two streams of research and how both understandings carry characteristics from past studies. Viewing meaningful work as a need encompasses its emergence from adverse situations, a processual rather than static character of the concept, and the fact that individuals who give up searching for meaningfulness may face psychopathologic conditions. Conceptualizing meaningful work as a need has three methodological advantages: facilitating the examination of work meaningfulness for other disciplines, assessing in detail the results from previous studies in meaningful work literature, and allowing the assessment of power dynamics in the work milieu.

The three studies presented in this thesis contribute to the secondary goal of understanding the processes enacted by workers, specifically white-collar employees, to render work meaningful. The first article explained three processes of developing work meaningfulness associated with the concept of purpose: *being competent, being an explorer,* and *being a builder of a better world*. Interviewees engaged in these processes to negotiate adverse situations in their jobs. Nonetheless, dysfunctional workplaces limit the negotiation process, resulting in psychological distancing and turnover intention.

The second paper considered the processual nature of meaningful work by projecting the Meaningful Work Canvas that did not aim to create "meaningful jobs" or "meaningful workplaces" but to facilitate workers in continuously engaging in meaningfulness-making. Through the visual tool, organizations should create the conditions and avoid the deflating issues that could prevent workers from crafting meaningfulness in their jobs.

The third study, a technical essay, showed how examining the process of meaningfulness-making can reveal colonial dynamics of power in the organizational milieu. In addition, the essay revealed how individuals can negotiate the tension between Western and local d/Discourses to accept or resist the colonial dynamics at work.

This thesis attends to the call from CRUZ and SODEKE (2022) to dislodge perceptions of meaningful work from Eurocentrism/Colonialism to reveal forms of oppression. U.S.-

based thinking is predominant in meaningful work research (BAILEY, YEOMAN, *et al.*, 2018, DUFFY, DOUGLASS, *et al.*, 2016) that renders cultural assumptions with the status of ontology and little from South American perspectives on meaningful work in South America (BARRETO, BUZZANELL, *et al.*, 2022).

Organizations value a worker archetype that this thesis defines as the preferred worker: white, male, and affiliated with neoliberal values like work-centrality, technicity, meritocracy, and efficiency. Individuals outside this archetype can be marginalized and suffer pressure to fit into this model, as revealed by the examples of policewomen (SÁ, LEMOS, *et al.*, 2022), working parents (KUHN, GOLDEN, *et al.*, 2008), and Norwegian employees in the Oil & Gas sector (BARRETT, DAILEY, 2018). In certain situations, unfitting this archetype generates unbearable tensions for workers, resulting in psychological distancing and psychopathological conditions like burnout, as expressed in the sense of worthlessness presented by interviewees from BARRETO and colleagues' study in Chapter 4 of the present thesis (BARRETO, BUZZANELL, *et al.*, 2022).

Companies can prevent their members from these unbearable tensions by creating plural workplaces that embrace multiple ways of living, which is different from pushing individuals with diverse backgrounds, colors, and genders into the archetype of the preferred worker on behalf of a superficial call of diversity (BANERJEE, BERRIER LUCAS, 2022). Countries in the Global South have urgent demands like eradicating poverty, sexism, and racism that organizations and management should consider in their practices (NKOMO, 2015).

The Meaningful Work Canvas emerges as an alternative to create plural workplaces. It gives centrality to workers' voices in designing job positions and services. At the same time, the tool highlights the role of the organization in creating opportunities for workers from a wide range of praxes of living to develop work meaningfulness.

Limitations

A limitation of the three studies presented in this thesis is that they do not empirically investigate the relationship between material questions and work meaningfulness in detail. Individuals in developing countries may attribute greater value to the economic

rewards from work (LAIR, SHENOY, *et a*l., 2008, LONG, BUZZANELL, *et al*., 2016, VU, 2022), as these societies have more individuals with deep financial needs (ROSSO, DEKAS, *et al*., 2010). Some researchers discussed the exchangeable value of meaningful work, as employees can opt to give up part of the economic rewards they receive to pursue jobs considered more existentially meaningful (BUNDERSON, THOMPSON, 2009; MICHAELSON, PRATT, *et al*., 2014; MOW, 1987).

Another limitation is that this thesis does not discuss activities with a contested status of "work," like voluntary work or reproductive labor. Reproductive labor is a Marxist concept that encompasses tasks that maintain family members at the material level, like preparing food and cleaning the home, providing emotional support and development through caring, socializing children, and giving emotional support (LAN, 2008).

The two empirical papers presented had a limited number of participants, and most of their samples were from white-collar employees, which fits with the studies' qualitative design. More research is necessary to test the conclusions presented in this thesis with a broader set of participants.

8.1. Future Directions

The three studies presented in this thesis provided different suggestions for future research. Chapter 4, "*Brazilian White-Collar Employees' Discourses of Meaningful Work and Calling*," suggested new studies comparing the processes of meaningfulness-making from individuals in different settings from white-collar positions in the four metropolitan areas presented in the sample from the paper – Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Porto Alegre, and Belo Horizonte. In addition, the paper recommends investigations on the influence of national culture and globalized discourses on how individuals perceive work meaningfulness.

The paper "*Meaningful Work Canvas: A Visual Tool for Service Designers*," presented in Chapter 5, suggests testing the visual tool in multiple contexts, which can lead to new relationships between the dimensions. To better assess the tool's results, longitudinal studies could follow the implementations driven by the Meaningful Work Canvas and evaluate how meaningfulness-making changed for individuals working in those settings.

The theoretical essay "*Three Guidelines to a Decolonial Research Agenda on Meaningful Work: The Case of the Preferred Worker*", presented in Chapter 6 gives three guidelines to decolonial research on meaningful work, that are themselves suggestions of future research: examining the dynamics of acceptance and re-existence against the preferred worker archetype, revealing the voices of subaltern individuals about what work means to them, and expanding the ontological structure of meaningful work.

The preferred worker is an archetype in concordance with neoliberal d/Discourses of work-centrality, individualism, and unlimited productivity. Organizations that try to impose this archetype may trigger dynamics of acceptance or resistance from employees.

Coloniality deemed as subaltern all individuals that are not white-male-Western. Subaltern individuals face this status in the organizational milieu which considers the preferred worker – a white male Western – the benchmark. From their standpoint, such individuals have different priorities and conditions that impact on how they derive meaningfulness.

Contexts from the Global South and subaltern individuals conditions challenge the ontological structure of meaningful work designed by studies conducted mostly in

Western countries. Those guidelines aim to embrace experiences of work meaningfulness and create suitable workplaces for a plurality of workers rather than fitting all workers into the preferred worker archetype.

In addition to the future directions provided by the three studies on this thesis, the present section will provide other suggestions in the following paragraphs.

The overlap between methods and conclusions between meaningful work research and other areas like social psychology theory signalizes a possibility of collaboration among those areas. For example, studies in ergonomics may investigate the meanings of activities, like in the case of the kid who did drawings, and how the activities conducted by the operators are part of a meaningful history of their works.

Investigating how individuals in blue-collar jobs derive work meaningfulness is another future direction. As white-collar employees in the Global South have perceptions similar to blue-collar workers in the West, how do the blue-collar employees in the Global South perceive their work? Brazil is a promising country for this endeavor due to the representative share of individuals working in informal jobs.

Chapter 7 discussed the relationship between a job's material conditions and work meaningfulness. The two papers presented in this thesis revealed a proximal relationship between the two constructs. Nonetheless, it fell short of discussing the impact of participants' jobs and material conditions on them. A future direction is to detail how the multiple roles of wages and job stability can have in meaningful work.

Neoliberal values strongly influence the process of deriving work meaningfulness, whether individuals resist or accept those values. A possible direction of future research is to investigate how individuals working in organizations that follow models different from the neoliberal derive meaningfulness. These individuals are at the border of working in organizations that defend values different from the neoliberal ones but living in a society that spreads neoliberal values.

Social innovation represents "the invention, development and implementation of new ideas to solve social problems faced by individuals, implementation of new ideas to solve social problems faced by individuals, groups or communities" (DHONDT, OEIJ, *et al.*, 2021, p. 99), a definition whereby social problems mean any situation that prevents

individuals from being included in the society or when there an individual, group, or community are excluded from social welfare (DHONDT, OEIJ, *et al.*, 2021).

Initiatives toward social innovation stands at the edge of neoliberal values, like in the cases of time banking and slow food. movement. Time banking is a mechanism of service exchange focusing on how an individual can contribute to the local community (TRANSIT, 2024). The currency driving the exchanges is the time spent providing or receiving the services. Due to its dynamics, time banking expresses values of cooperation, reciprocity, equality, and abundance, contrasting with neoliberal Discourses of competition, individualism, exploitation, and scarcity (TRANSIT, 2024).

Slow Food International Association works as an umbrella organization for its local groups, advocating for a new food system that promotes the right to food, food sovereignty, and biodiversity protection (TRANSIT, 2024b). The food industry does not perceive food as a right nor advocates for food sovereignty because the scarcity of this good elevates the profits from production according to the dynamics of supply and demand.

The Economy of Functionality and Cooperation (EFC) is an economic model that challenges neoliberal practices. EFC is centered on producing functionalities – the utility of goods or services – rather than goods or services (FERNANDES, SANTOS, *et al.*, 2021). For example, a car has the functionality of mobility, so the production of vehicles in a particular locality is developed and limited to the goals of mobility from that community. Through collaboration, producers, providers, and the community can define strategies of production that generate functionalities respecting environmental, societal, and economic concerns (FERNANDES, SANTOS, *et al.*, 2021).

This economic model challenges the neoliberal perception of maximizing profits that fosters values of productivity and efficiency. EFC offers an alternative to producing functionalities that question the hierarchical structure of capitalist organizations and individualism through a collaborative endeavor that defines the goals and how to reach them.

The initiatives at the margin of neoliberal values offer opportunities to investigate the processes of meaningfulness-making at the borders – to recollect the concept from Walter Mignolo (MIGNOLO, WALSH, 2018) – and to understand how to manage these

organizations, which is of interest in production/industrial engineering. As discussed in the paper describing the Meaningful Work Canvas in Chapter 5, a design of organizational characteristics and job positions that fits with the border condition from such organizations is important in facilitating meaningfulness-making.

Workers create meanings to keep rendering their work as meaningful. Those meanings are symbols of what work represents to them: work as an opportunity to build a better world, work as a way to display competence and deliver better goods and services to society, work to earn a paycheck and pull out of poverty, or simply keeping a good social position. Therefore, studying the meanings of work is looking at what work is for workers and the processes to create work meaningfulness, portraying how individuals change what work is for them.

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