

# The meaning of work and cultural psychology: Ideas for new directions

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## Abstract

Work is one arena in which human beings constitute their identities and participate in collective-cultural enterprises. But research on factors affecting the meaning of work and its outcomes focuses mostly on individual-level variables related to workers' experience. However, scholars have recently proposed a shift towards a more collective dimension of meaningfulness, in particular, the cultural level. This article discusses and expands on this recent trend, demonstrating how growing attention to cultural factors of work's meaning raises some problematic, crucial issues about the very definition of culture and its role in meaning-making. A particular issue is the assumption that culture is *transmitted to* people, that it is primarily a collective endeavour based on shared values and that culture can endow work with meaning. Based on a cultural psychology perspective, we revisit both the relationship between person and culture and the idea of work as a cultural phenomenon. We argue that work is *inherently* a meaningful activity, mediating between personal and collective culture. We end by proposing some potential new directions to explore.

## Keywords

Meaning-making, meaningfulness, work, cultural psychology, personal culture

## Introduction

Work is an existential question. It is an arena in which human beings constitute their identities and their participation in that collective enterprise we call "culture". However, work (especially in relation to its standardised economic and social form: job) is today also a dramatic arena in which many persons (including more "vulnerable" social categories such as young people, minorities, migrants and elder workers) are striving to

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find dignity and a means of social liberation. According to Bauman (1998), the meaning of work in a person's life has undergone several historical changes. In pre-modern and modern societies, work was "the decisive, pivotal classification from which everything else relevant to living among others followed" (Bauman, 1998, p. 17), that is, a placeholder for social identity. However, in late post-modern society, "the prospect of constructing a lifelong identity on the foundation of work is for the great majority of people [something] dead and buried" (p. 27). The ideology of flexibility, continuous innovation and striving for excitement have rendered it very difficult to ground a person's identity into the sliding soil of work's meaning. Work thus becomes one of many commodities that we, as consumers, look for in the "ubiquitous chase for 'experience'" (Weber, 1991, p. 149). As Bauman concludes: "'the flexible labour market' neither offers nor permits commitment and dedication to any currently performed occupation" (p. 34).

From this perspective, unsurprisingly, meaning seems to have become a new asset in current human resource management (HRM) jargon: the "quest for meaning" has become a central goal of HRM politics and practices. Similarly, meaning has been indicated as "(...) one of the most important questions for organisational scholarship" (Podolny et al., 2005, p. 1). Furthermore, HRM has described meaning as a way to produce outcomes as valuable as persistence and to support high disposition for overcoming obstacles (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009): work engagement, job involvement and intrinsic motivation associated with the idea of a calling (e.g. Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2011); well-being (Cheney et al., 2008) and job performance (Grant, 2008), to mention but a few examples (see Lepisto & Pratt, 2016).

Conversely, the lack, absence or impoverishment of meaning would potentially undermine the person-work-organisation relationship. For instance, Cederström and Fleming (2012) use the metaphor of a "dead man" to describe daily work endeavours' pointlessness in modern corporations (which Berardi prefers to call "the factory of unhappiness", 2009, p. 90). According to this metaphor, modern work environments (e.g. call centres, one activity mentioned by Cederström and Fleming) are "killing" work's meaning in people's lives. Similar to characters in Becket's existential play *Waiting for Godot* (1954), people working in corporations are trapped into "eternal return of the same", facing the "problem of meaning" – a situation when people find it difficult to endow meaning (or meaningfulness) on work.

The problem of meaning, an issue at once theoretical and practical, has been addressed from at least four perspectives, during the last two decades, within the organisational studies. The first perspective is the HRM approach, emphasising enrichment of work conditions for promoting meaningful work situations (e.g. Hackman & Oldham, 1980). The second refers to an "anti-system" perspective, presented by authors attempting to denunciate the meaningless(ness) (of) work in modern corporations; it is mainly concerned with stimulating resistance to mainstream business ideologies (e.g. Cederström & Fleming, 2012; Fleming, 2009). Popular media represent the third perspective, which ranges from self-help (e.g. Hanh, 2008) to philosophy (e.g. Svendsen, 2015; Veltman, 2016). The fourth, examined further in this paper, is represented by empirically oriented research that we can generally label "meaning of work literature" (e.g. Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1996; Dik, Byrne, & Steger, 2013; Lips-Wiersma

& Morris, 2009; MOW, 1987; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010). Broadly speaking, this literature addresses, for example, conditions under which work may seem a meaningful activity (or conversely, a meaningless one); sources of meaning (e.g. in the self); core problems that prevent people from experiencing meaning (e.g. task characteristics) and how to overcome them (e.g. by enriching one's job) (Lepisto & Pratt, 2016).

A late-1980s reference study that helped to establish the fourth perspective defines the meaning of work as “the significance, beliefs, definitions and the value which individuals and groups attach to working as a major stream of human activity” (Meaning of Work Research Team [MOW], 1987, p. 13). More recently, meaningful work is defined “not as simply whatever work means to people (meaning), but as work that is both significant and positive in valence (meaningfulness)” (Steger, Dik, & Duffy, 2012, p. 2). After a comprehensive review of the topic, Lepisto and Pratt (2016) expand on this later definition, proposing a “justification perspective” on meaningful work. This perspective emphasises the process through which people, in a context of *anomie* and *ambiguity* that has followed the rise (and the “crisis”) of modernity, justify the worth (value) of their work by “picking out” symbolic resources available through culture. By proposing culture as central in meaning-making, Lepisto and Pratt (2016) seek to overcome an individualistic bias characterising meaning of work literature, with its accent on how people may satisfy their need for self-realisation through work.

Animating debate on meaningful work with a culture-based perspective is worthwhile. However, Lepisto and Pratt's proposal, which appears to represent this literature's novelty and to indicate its apparent direction, gives rise to some critical issues related to the role assigned to culture in meaning-making. Thus, taking Lepisto and Pratt's paper as a starting point, our goals are to offer some reflections on culture and meaning-making and to establish some potential future directions for research in this particular domain within organisational studies.

We begin by contextualising the problem of meaning into a broader perspective, i.e. how key social thinkers have understood it in their discussion on modernity. Then, the paper focuses on the central argument that culture is not *transmitted* to people, but that it is a process of elaboration, co-coordination and negotiation of meanings that emerges out of the person–environment open system of relationships. We argue that these relationships are entangled in two dimensions of culture: personal culture and collective culture. Meaning-making is considered an on-going process occurring through these two dimensions, with work having both a mediating and mediated function between them. We also posit that work is a cultural phenomenon, and, as such, is an inherently meaningful activity, not one on which “external” meanings must be foisted, as implied in Lepisto and Pratt's analysis. Finally, we suggest that ambiguity (*anomie*) is an inherent feature of meaning-making, not an externality from the decay of modernity and its major institutions. Collective culture is a heterogeneous arena, not a mono-block that we can “gain or lose”. In the paper's final section, we highlight the acting person's central role in co-creating culture and new meanings through work.

## Origins of the crisis: The problem of meaning in modernity

The “problem of meaning” is an expression that comes from a particular sociology of modernity led mainly by Weber and Durkheim, and, to some extent, also by Marx. Initially, Weber (1946) employed the expression precisely in reference to consequences of transition from a religion-based to a secular worldview, which Weber designated a “cosmos of natural causality” (p. 355). Emergence of modernity has prompted dismantling of tradition and religion’s power to endow meaning on human actions. However, Weber continues, humans have a “metaphysical need for a meaningful cosmos” (p. 281), and if religion can no longer assign meaning to the senselessness inherent to life, then science should do so. According to Weber, however, science is also unable to fulfil this role. This leads him to conclude that “modern individuals face an existential dilemma unknown in its intensity and clarity to previous epochs: the problem of meaning” (Seidman, 1983, p. 268).

Durkheim (1933) also thought that modernity brought with it a moral crisis derived from the disarray of emerging social practices and values that have hitherto ruled society’s institutional life (customs that revolved around mechanic sociability). He believed, “ideas, beliefs, and symbols are vital social forces only if they are rooted in and empowered by the shared affective and emotional life of the group” (Seidman, 1985, p. 112). Hence, a cultural crisis stems from the fact that society’s particular shared moral code and symbolic configuration can no longer inscribe one’s conduct within a common and reassuring frame; this leads to emergence of unbelief, meaninglessness and moral disorientation. “Anomie” is thus, broadly speaking, a concept that tries to make sense of a dynamic situation of rupture or discontinuity in cultural institutions’ regulating power; it refers to a situation governed by uncertainty around what values should guide life in society, at both personal and collective levels.

While Durkheim (1933) has ascribed the origins of a cultural crisis to the breakdown of social solidarity, Marx (1844/1999/) took another direction. To him, such a crisis related to new conditions of work consequent to capitalism’s rise. The transition from a familiar, socially based organisation of work to an industrial, capitalistic one has given rise to an estranged, alienated labour force. Although Marx highlighted “objective conditions” underlying alienation (e.g. the new social division of work), this phenomenon also encompasses the problem of meaning. Indeed, alienation also has a subjective component, insofar as workers, under certain circumstances, begin to feel that their activity is meaningless, due to its simple, repetitive nature or to separation between work and its outcomes.

Other authors have further developed this line of reasoning in the materialistic tradition, notably Gramsci (1971), Braverman (1974), Anthony (1980) and Leontiev (2009), the latter two discussing precisely the problem of meaning implied in “alienated work”. Antonio Gramsci analysed the relationship between work and compliance with specific ethical and cultural values. The meaning of work entails

more than the mastery of the technical skills and knowledge required to complete an industrial or professional task competently. It also entails an awareness of moral obligation, an

appreciation of the political and economic implications of a job of work and, often, of the aesthetics of 'production'. (Entwistle, 1979, p. 130)

The meaning of work emerges within a social arena of storytelling, in which the workplace relates to ideology promoting a specific model of human being (e.g. consumer, producer). Different social groups can generate hegemonic storytelling, but also forms of resistance or counter-stories (Gramsci, 1971).

For these social thinkers, work relates to the dialectic between social continuity and discontinuity (Tateo, 2015a). On the one hand, work is a functional mean to social continuity, just as social continuity is functional to work. On the other hand, work is a potential source of social change (through crisis, innovation, social mobility, etc.), just as social change is necessary to development of new work forms. To Weber, for instance, without an ethos (an ethic), work would be an empty cage; his diagnosis was that bureaucracies would suppress vocational ethics and individual autonomy. To Durkheim, emergence of new work arrangements (new division of work) in the 19th century forced broad transformation of mechanic sociability, leading to the need for a new sociability, and, by extension, to new foundations for meaningfulness. To Marx, with capitalism, work had become a powerful machine capable of "destroying" meaning by turning work into a commodity whose worthiness is determined by its exchange value, rather than the value of personal creation. This broad social tradition's legacy includes culture as a collective representation, a broad range of rules guiding social and personal conduct, an *ethos*, which can be destroyed, transformed, ruined or even instrumentally used, having both positive and negative consequences to on-going meaning-making processes.

## Culture as a repository

Consequent to at least partial inspiration by that frame, Lepisto and Pratt (2016) assume a previous stage in which "granting institutions" assured the values and meanings that people found in their work. These values were mainly grounded in tradition or religion. However, in the transition to modernity, an entire established configuration of values, meanings and social practices related to work began to crumble, resulting in the phenomenon conveyed by anomie. In this case, anomie may be inferred from the fact that workers "face situations where the social meanings that surround them are insufficient in rendering their work as worthy" (Lepisto & Pratt, 2016, p. 11).

The cornerstone of Lepisto and Pratt's defence of the justification perspective is the claim, "justifying the worth of one's work is the central problem of meaningfulness" (p. 9). Assuming a Weberian tone, they assert, "(...) individuals were left in an "iron cage" without *culturally derived* accounts to endow their work with worthiness" (p. 9, emphasis added). Consequently, people find themselves experiencing "impoverished and uncertain meanings" (p. 10). The solution to overcome such a situation is by creating "better meanings" (p. 10) through an account-making process. Noticeably, Lepisto and Pratt (2016) propose to shift focus from *alienation* to *anomie*, based on the assumption that work itself (work conditions, for instance) is not sufficient for determining the

meaning-making process. In their description, a person has nowadays the unavoidable task of overcoming anomie regarding work's value.

The question related to a person's role in meaning-making can be traced to the work of Baumeister (1991), a major influence on Lepisto and Pratt's paper. In his book devoted to discussing meaning in life, Baumeister offers a similar diagnosis of the consequences of what he calls a "value gap" in modernity: "value and justification constitute one of the primary needs for meaning, and so this is the principal problem area for understanding how work fits into life's meaning" (p. 119). Similarly to Weber, he claims that the Protestant work ethic can no longer solve the dilemma of justification by ascertaining solid values towards establishing work's worth. To society, however, work still needs justification, i.e. people need reasons to engage themselves in it. When grand cultural narratives about work fade, concludes Baumeister, a person needs to retake control of the situation, in this case, by justifying the value, purpose and worthiness of work. Despite "cultural crises" allegedly promoted by modernity (and its correlate, the problem of meaning), culture is still posited as having a crucial role, both by Baumeister as by Lepisto and Pratt.

In our view, Lepisto and Pratt's main critical issues precisely surround the place assigned to culture. First, they characterise meaningfulness as "an individual-level phenomenon" (2016, p. 5). Then, they define it as experienced in terms of "positive emotions" (2016, p. 5). Accordingly, high-quality, meaningful work is to be based on value and worthiness. How should people create such meaningful experience? Second, accounts are presented as "culturally created and *culturally transmitted*" (Lepisto & Pratt, 2016, p. 14, emphasis added). The individual must access (or draw from) "scripts, schemas, narratives, symbolic boundaries, collective identities, symbols" (Lepisto & Pratt, 2016, p. 14) available in cultural contexts (like "recipes") to construct and account for their work's worth. As a result, "justifying why one's work is worthy *comes from* cultural and institutional sources" (Lepisto & Pratt, 2016, p. 14, emphasis added). What ultimately decides whether an individual ends with positive or, conversely, impoverished meanings, is the ability to accomplish worth justification. Lepisto and Pratt conclude by saying that "meaningfulness, at its core, *is cultural in nature*" (2016, p. 14, emphasis added). However, such "cultural nature" implies that culture is an entity apart from where meanings originate and are transmitted and from where values are justified and ultimately legitimised.

## The transmission model

Lepisto and Pratt's paper is only one example of a widespread concept of culture as *transmitted*. By a process of unilateral communication, symbols, values, meanings and so on are passed *from* institutions *to* individuals. In this form of culture, for instance, media would have power to enforce upon people some shared worldview, including views about ideal, meaningful work (Lepisto & Pratt, 2016). Schools, another institution promoting socialisation processes, would steer children, young people and even adults towards some expected pattern of behaviours, including work behaviours. The same

could apply to religion, as in the Durkheimian depiction. Religion would frame people's beliefs and conduct, causing them to share an *esprit de corps* and infusing their lives with meaning and purpose for the future.

Additionally, in the transmission model, a message is communicated through an asymmetric process (Valsiner, 2014). An institution, or a person performing a particular role of influence and power (a manager, a priest, a leader), would supposedly guide the process by which individuals absorb or incorporate some sensitive message, but without being able to change it significantly. In fact, the central purpose is to assure that such a message be reproduced with the lowest level of distortion possible. This implies, first, that any obstacle to message transmission could potentially digress from its original content, thus losing accuracy. Second, that ambiguity, although it may be considered an inherent aspect of the communication process itself in a "post-institutional" era (as implied in Lepisto and Pratt's analysis), must be tackled. Otherwise, if ambiguity overwhelms the process, people could not share a *common* frame of reference (shared values, for instance) and thus face anomie and the loss of meaning.

Following Lepisto and Pratt's idea could lead us to conclude that ambiguity about what makes work meaningful (or worth doing) would lead to any of these possible scenarios: (i) impoverished meaning (deprived of shared values); (ii) wide variability of meanings, when they would ultimately rely on each person, i.e. on how each one "cooks" ingredients selected from culture; (iii) shared, common (strong) frame of reference. All these results touch issues of the person–culture relationship.

In a paper addressing this relationship, Ratner (2016) started from the remark that, between behavioural predictions that can be made by considering cultural influences and the variability of an individual's actual conduct, there is a discrepancy. Ratner notes how "individuals actually use and modify cultural tools for their own purposes; they are not structured by these tools. Cultural factors cannot, therefore, explain, describe, or predict psychology in a meaningful manner" (2016/2017, p. 4). In different social contexts, an individual's conduct does not necessarily comply with what one would expect, considering cultural variables (or "ingredients"). As a consequence, cultural features identified by psychology, people's observable conduct and the meaning people assign their conduct do not necessarily overlap. This can be due to various reasons: Either culture does not organise individual psychology, or our understanding of culture is limited and does not allow us fully to apprehend its complex interactions.

In the first case, we should admit that in explaining subjective variability, only individual traits exist, i.e. we minimise cultural influence. In the second case, we need better understanding of what we mean by culture. As Ratner (2016) and Valsiner (2014) observe, such a limited understanding of "culture" as a variable cannot take us very far towards understanding inter-individual variability, unpredictability of personal choices and inherent ambivalence or ambiguity in how people make meaning or elaborate a conduct. In the next section, we reflect on a discussion about culture that goes beyond the transmission-model perspective and the dead-end issues it raises: Does culture explain conduct or do individuals ultimately do that?

## Co-constructing personal and collective culture

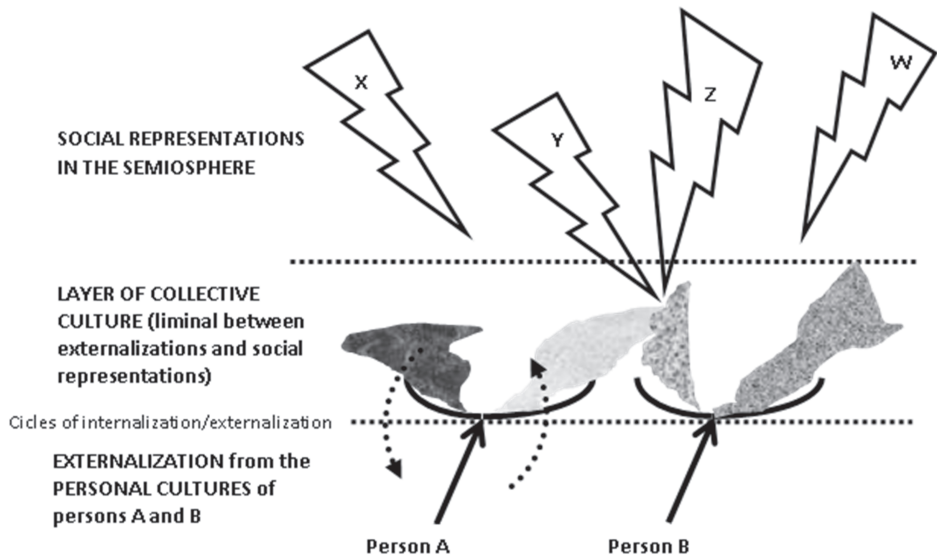
In the transmission model, culture and persons are two independent, separate entities. Either people are *inside* or *contained* by culture, or culture is a sort of epiphenomenon of individual variables or individual aggregates. Therefore, either meaning (defined based on individual variables, for instance: perception – Pratt & Ashforth, 2003) would drive people's behaviour at work, or, conversely, elements of the work or cultural context would act as forces (or contextual variables) pushing people's behaviour in certain directions. Consider, for instance, the concept of organisational culture, which conveys the idea that sharing a particular set of values, symbols and rituals implies exhibition of similar individual behaviour patterns at the organisational level. This is one conclusion that we could fairly draw from perspectives, for instance, like Hofstede's (2010), for whom culture is the mind's "software". From the same software, we may expect similar behaviours or a similar *form* of behaviours (their *content* may vary).

Cultural psychology (e.g. Valsiner, 2007 2014) proposes an alternative approach to understanding the culture–person relationship. According to Valsiner, communication is a process of negotiating meaning. Persons act *through* culture, both *internalising* available meanings, by bringing circulating messages into their individual field of meaning, and *externalising* new ones, by bringing new messages into a public field of meanings. People do not simply *receive* the content that institutions convey and with which they are expected to comply. An individual actively elaborates (creates, maintains and demolishes) meanings, co-constructing them and culture together. Meanings are more than encoded information transmitted ipso facto to people, but inherently *polyphonic* processes, open to multiple interpretations.

The internalisation–externalisation process traces to the distinction between meaning and sense initially proposed by Vygotsky (1935/1987)) in his attempt to address development of consciousness through language. While *meanings* refer to collective and shared symbolic contents made available through culture, allowing the communication process itself, *senses* point to the psychological process of decomposing messages (meanings) and recomposing them into new intra-psycho patterns, later bringing these patterns to others' spheres of accessibility. Elaborating upon the internalisation and externalisation perspective, Valsiner (2007, 2014) 2014) thus distinguishes between *personal* and *collective* culture. They do not overlap (my *personal* culture, by definition, is not the same of other people's: it is exactly *my own*); they are in a relation of "inclusive separation" (Valsiner, 1998), a process of mutual co-coordination, through which an individual is simultaneously related to her environment and turned towards her personal world.

*Personal culture* refers to the idea that each individual has a world that belongs only to her (a personal-centred world) and a layer of subjective experience that creates fuzzy boundaries between that individual and her environment. This double layer allows both establishing psychological *distancing* from the environment and acting reflexively upon it. At the same time, this double layer produces an inclusive relationship between the person and the environment, making them parts of a whole system (Valsiner, 2014). The relationship with the collective-culture layer occurs through externalisation: An





**Figure 1.** Where collective culture works (modified after Valsiner, 2014, p. 216, with permission).

individual produces meanings shared in the public arena through visible actions (or inhibition of action: for instance, a collective strike).

The *collective culture* “entails communally shared meanings, social norms and everyday life practices, all united into a heterogeneous complex” (Valsiner, 2014, p. 214). It is also a way of “thinking as usual” (Schütz, 1944), a set of trustworthy guides helping people interpret the world and act accordingly. In other words, people live in the assumption that life will continue as usual. However, such guides do not function as mandatory prescriptions because they are continuously actualised by specific persons’ doing. Besides, collective culture is “person-anchored—it extends from the person to the social space in-between persons” (Valsiner, 2014, p. 214): persons and culture form a system (Figure 1).

- As can be seen in Figure 1, collective and personal cultures are intertwined through the process of internalisation–externalisation. Such a process also relies on the wide range of meanings available in the semiosphere in the form of social representations which, according to Valsiner (2014), “(...) frame the collective culture creativity” (p. 216). As an example, working has been long considered an activity that people engage in for economic reasons (e.g. Applebaum, 1992); it has also been depicted as something related both to suffering (source of humiliation, physical and mental wear) and pleasure (self-fulfilment, self-realisation, giving purpose to life) (Dejours, 2009). These broad representations operate as historical resources, influencing the dynamic

between collective and personal culture. They are relatively “stable” meanings that connect, at the semiosphere level, the past and the present of human relationship with work.

- The collective culture, through the process of externalisation, is opened to new meanings to appear (see Figure 1 “Cycles of internalisation/externalisation line”). Particularly in the case of work, the collective culture operates by conveying collective shared meanings related to work. The collective culture points to a more “local” phenomenon, when compared to the social representations. For instance, although work may be depicted, in the semiosphere, as a source of suffering (a social representation), in the context of a particular collective culture or professional culture (e.g. of artists, see Bendassolli & Borges-Andrade, 2015; Menger, 2009), new meanings could be ascribed to it in a way that “suffering” itself could be regarded as a “creative suffering”.
- Finally, the person enters into the process of creating new forms of collective culture through externalisations, or a synthesis between different elements, including the social representations (see Y and Z suggestions in Figure 1). As Valsiner (2014) puts it: “(...) the participants can import into the current setting social representations from far-away places, historical periods, and levels of generalization” (p. 217). By its turn, the collective culture “(...) feeds into the personal culture of the participants, who internalize—constructively—the new collective-cultural meanings and practices” (p. 217).

The attempt to consider both internal (person/self) and external (environment/society) dimensions of meaning-making is no novelty. However, throughout history, the relation between them has often been thought of on a dualistic basis (Abbey, 2007; Valsiner, 1998). Indeed, many ecological perspectives on meaning have been proposed over the last decades. In common, they hold that there are not such extremes as the person, on the one hand, and the environment, on the other hand. Ecological perspectives try to go beyond simplistic dichotomies – for synthesis of those perspectives, see Bang (2009). The personal/collective-culture perspective fits into this same context.

One key feature of this perspective is the paradox of persons’ social embeddedness, but also, simultaneously, the assumption that personal culture is not isomorphic with collective culture. Indeed, collective culture is not a mere projection of or an imposition on personal culture. “[T]he construction of personal culture takes place along the canalising directions of the collective culture” (Valsiner, 2014, p. 213). A person negotiates meaning within a window of possibilities that society provides (Lepisto and Pratt consider them “social inputs”). Yet the person ultimately synthesises all the inputs, i.e. neither culture nor social system has *agency*; only the person has. According to Valsiner, the internalisation–externalisation process “guarantees the possibility of personal autonomy through the social embeddedness of person” (2014, p. 213).

Additionally, this perspective calls into question culture as a homogeneous and continuous field of *shared meanings*. We believe the opposite to be the case: Collective culture is dynamically heterogeneous, ambivalent and controversial, *exactly* to the extent

that it is shared by a number of people. For instance, in the “same” cultural context, we find different meaning orientations, sometimes implying opposing directions, and, unlike what Lepisto and Pratt (2016) suggested, this does not necessarily lead to anomie and “impoverished meanings”. Social demands and suggestions are irregular and inconsistent, insofar as people move from one set of meanings to another throughout their lives – from school to work, from work to family, from work to non-work and so forth. For this reason, meanings that people endow upon work do not spring uniquely from work-related contexts, but from various intertwined sources, all subject to negotiations the person conducts through internalisation (inwards to personal culture) and externalisation (outwards to collective culture). Finally, as Valsiner (2014) puts it:

Different persons reference the same external object in their communication through overlapping, yet different meanings. The ‘shared meaning’ is interpersonally ambiguous and needs constant clarification – while it is changing itself. On the basis of that complex collective-cultural negotiation, individual persons construct their personally idiosyncratic semi-otic system of symbols, practices, and personal objects, all of which constitute the personal culture. (p. 214)

Shared meaning is ultimately a dynamically stable zone of common externalisations, since “persons can ‘share’ meanings only via externalisation of their personal sense into the communication process” (Valsiner, 2014, p. 215).

In a study on school early leavers and their difficult transition to the job market, Tateo (2015a) reports six case studies of Italian young people in their difficult task of elaborating the meaning of unsuccessful school experiences and the search for a new identity as workers. The accounts of the young people show how complex is the relationship between the person’s meaning-making, the material conditions of the context (e.g. mobility, availability of local resources, etc.), the different system of beliefs (of the family, the school, the workplace, etc.) and the system of social representations (of work, education, etc.) (Tateo, 2015a). Every single dropout student elaborates a personally negotiated synthesis of all these elements. The collective culture, which is embedded in institutions’ practices, can provide a certain “window of possibilities” that the person has to deal with. School can set developmental goals, suggest some meanings of study and work. Yet the person can comply or not with this “oughtness”, elaborating her personal version of cultural meanings. This process is particularly evident in those moments of transition (i.e. from school to job, from job to job, etc.) that requires sometimes a radical re-elaboration of meanings. It can lead to very different personal strategies, from acquaintance with collective values to nomadism, from rejection of those established rules to the elaboration of new, unexpected ways of doing (Tateo, 2015a). However, this generally happens through the personal participation to collective activities.

For instance, as a 19 years young man puts it: “keeping the adults company... that is you work with adults... you go out with adults... you do a job that... somehow makes you mature... because it makes you understand many things” (Tateo, 2015a, p. 39). A completely different outcome is represented by an 18 years boy, who left after a

disappointing school experience, and some initial work experience was “not able to construct a system of expectations with anything but very low-level goals” (Tateo, 2015a, p. 41). In the brief excerpt reported below, one can see how the young man, fictitiously named Emiliano, is not able to build a future project of life related to work:

Emiliano: I am pleased with anything [that] is not that.

Interviewer: What you would like to do?

E: [Does not respond]

I: Did you ever think about that?

E: I would like... what everybody likes... Doing nothing... with money in your pocket, no?

I: Yes. [both smile]

E: But well... you must work to live, isn't it? Thus, what comes... I mean... I am not that kind that leaves... what I see... that I get... don't have preferences.... It's normal to have preferences.... Like if they must put me... in an office or doing the hodman [then] I prefer the office.... With the hodman, you break your back.

I: Yeah.

E: Eh... nothing that's it. (Tateo, 2015a, p. 42)

From the examples above, one can see how different persons, with similar age, region of residence and condition of transition from early school leave to work, can elaborate very different meanings of the social object “work”. Both in positive and negative ways, work is thus an important medium through which people can also share and produce meanings. Through work, people *actively engage* in meaning-making. This makes our approach to meaning more processual. In fact, Lepisto and Pratt's paper seems to lack dynamic perspective, integrating both personal and collective dimensions of the phenomenon. Moreover, those authors assert that meaning-making *does not depend entirely on work*, but on the experience of struggling with a new (post-modern?) situation of uncertainty and ambiguity regarding values. Should we then conclude or infer that work is something *aside culture*, and that, as a consequence, meaning attached to it is supposed to be *imported* from the outside – from culture as a myriad of symbolic resources, narratives, scripts and schemas, to use Lepisto and Pratt's words? In the next section, we propose a different approach to such a question.

## Work and the dynamics of meaning-making

Work is both a mediating and a mediated activity. *Mediating* because, as a particular arena for human action and development, it permits us to act upon the environment and, in return, to build culture, in the sense of a meaningful environment. In other words, as human beings, we do not relate *directly* to the environment, but in a mediated way. The concept of *Umwelt* proposed by Uexküll (1982) may help us grasp this point.

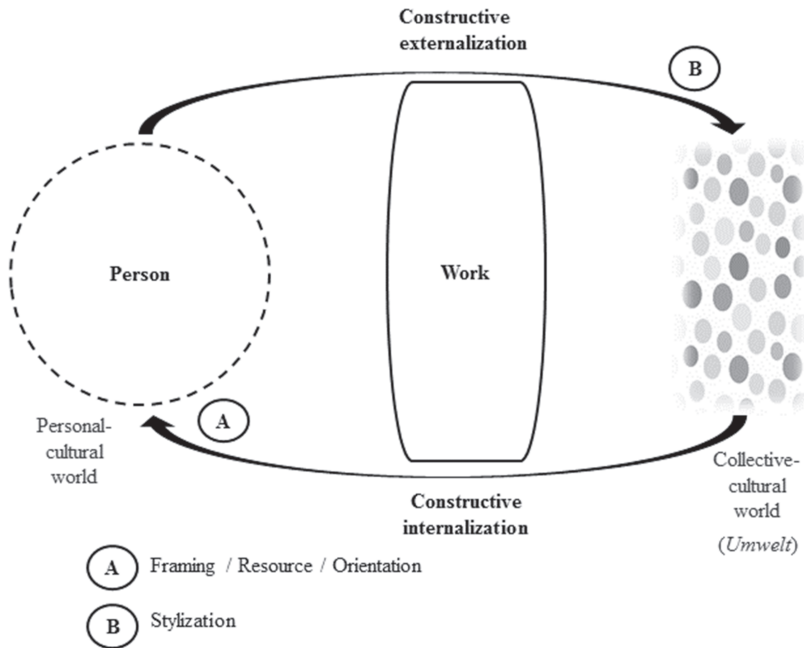
According to Uexküll (an important influence on cultural psychology), humans (like other animals) relate to worldly things based on perceptions and operations. By acting upon those things, they imprint meaning on them, turning them in an *Umwelt*, i.e. a subjective world. As a result, meanings are not created by a solipsistic mental operation, but through a process of *mutuality* established between the person (with her mind and body) and her environment. Individuals are considered meaning-carriers, able to create functional webs of meanings, objects and their relations. In this way, collective culture is a context in which undifferentiated things are transformed into objects through work as a mediating activity (Bendassolli, 2017[online first]), having, as a consequence, both material and immaterial dimensions. For instance, an acting person converts a certain amount of brass (undifferentiated thing) into a statue with meaningful functions. An object, such as a statue, will probably make sense only inside a particular *Umwelt*.

Work is a *mediated* activity as well. It is not a general label referring to a number of involuntary movements of the body, but an intra- and inter-personally coordinated set of purposeful and functional actions conducted towards a goal and the future. Most importantly, work is itself a cultural phenomenon (Bendassolli, 2017[online first]), *in the sense that it is an inherently meaningful activity*: mediated by meanings and tools embedded in collective culture, and, as we have said, an activity mediating construction of new objects and meanings. Hence, work is not a field where people merely reproduce or apply inherited/transmitted meanings, as if it were a dimension separate from culture – as we might infer from Lepisto and Pratt’s idea of “picking out from” culture. Perhaps Lepisto and Pratt (2016) are thinking of work as a job, i.e. a series of tasks a person is supposed to perform in a particular career, for an organisation by which she is remunerated. We contend, however, that work and job are interrelated by distinct realities.

Work is an activity through which a person puts in motion both personal and collective cultures, while acting upon the environment (*Umwelt*), oriented towards a goal and imagining an outcome. An individual incorporates meanings already available in collective culture (through internalisation), but also creates new meanings (through externalisation). Figure 2 represents this process. In the following, we further illuminate the idea that meanings are elaborated by the person’s agency in the context of work as a cultural phenomenon (a meaningful activity), not something we could simply *ascribe based on*, or *import from*, a “surrounding” culture.

Essentially, work as an activity implies a person’s action over a thing (e.g. undifferentiated matter, something still to be created), an already existing object in the collective culture (both material and immaterial) or another person (think of a saleswoman trying to convince a potential customer to buy a product – this customer is the “object” of her activity). Such actions are goal-oriented. Looking at the arrow of Constructive internalisation (Figure 2, axis A), we can identify at least three distinct ways in which meaning-making relates to work at this level:

- A person works in an environment already encoded by collective culture (Valsiner, 2014). Meanings made available by collective culture *regulate* both the context and the expected ways in which a certain activity unfolds.



**Figure 2.** Work and meaning-making (based on Valsiner, 2014).

For instance, consider the work of a teacher. The entire situation of teaching (and learning) is already encoded in a meaningful way through specific suggestions distributed in the environment (Branco & Valsiner, 2012; Tateo, 2015a) –there is a place where lessons are given and where students are expected to sit in a certain arrangement; there are a curriculum and books, along with a whole set of materials, developed over history, that also help organize both the teacher and students' experience in schooling. Meanings that regulate or organize a particular situation are not static, however. They are in the form of more or less constraining suggestions and invitations to action ("promoter signs" – Valsiner, 2014) that can be resisted, ignored or changed by the person (teacher) through activity-based externalisations (Figure 1, axis B).

- Meanings also function as resources for people's action. First, resources concern things (undifferentiated matter), objects or even other people. When a doctor begins examining a patient, she supposedly knows how the patient's body is expected to function. She has already internalised the resources developed in the particular scientific field – medicine – that guide her, at least to some extent, through a particular procedure or to a particular outcome. The very idea of a "procedure" (some steps to be followed) can be defined as a resource developed within a specific professional community or *métier*, to standardise and channel people's actions. Second, *artefacts* are also embedded with meanings (Valsiner, 2014).

- Consider the case of a stethoscope. On the one hand, it is a piece of metal and rubber. On the other hand, however, it is a *tool* that mediates the doctor's contact with her patient, allowing the doctor to listen to the internal sounds of the patient's body. First developed by René Laennec in France in 1816, it has been improved ever since. Such improvements combine new meanings-*qua*-resources (for example, cognitive operational models) developed regarding materials (undifferentiated things, such as a piece of metal), human body functioning, the interpretation of certain noises as revealing some hidden illness and so forth. The transformation of a thing or artefact (metal, rubber) into a *tool* is an inherently meaningful process. An artefact is a meaning-carrier and a mediating device used in work.
- Collective culture also helps shape the direction, goal or objective of work. At least in part, (collective) culture suggests a particular action's value in the form of a hierarchy of meanings. As Valsiner (2014) puts it, collective culture can promote some goals by incentivising people to orient themselves towards those goals, while simultaneously inhibiting some actions. In both cases, collective culture *channels* human action through meanings. Unlike Lepisto and Pratt's (2016) position, this process does not take place by a person "picking out" values or orientations *from* culture. The person is so deeply embedded in collective culture that she operates *through* it, not apart from it. Additionally, as we have stated previously, collective culture is not a homogeneous block, but a set of diverse and sometimes conflicting orientations, suggestions and contra-suggestions. This is not necessarily akin to anomie, because anomie implies culture as a relatively stable common ground, a major narrative connecting people around the same goal or worldview. This sort of comprehension seems to deny both personal culture's acting role (her "doing" through work) and the fact that human beings *always* live in a meaningful or mediated environment.

In sum, by following arrow A in Figure 2, we more broadly described the meaning of "meaning" in work: It relates to the process of *regulating* a particular setting or "scene", in which borders (e.g. work  $\diamond$  non-work) are established, internal and external differentiations are drawn (e.g. doctor  $\diamond$  patient, paid  $\diamond$  non-paid work), helping people make sense of engaging in certain rituals and using certain tools and even guiding them towards use of proper discourse. Finally, there is also meaning at the level of values, as Lepisto and Pratt (2016) also indicated. In this case, collective culture channels (neither determines nor legitimises) how people are supposed to relate to some expected outcomes of their work or to the worthiness of what they do. Collective culture helps (instead of determining) people deal with: (a) the *why* (motives) of their action and (b) the *how* of the action (procedures and tool use). Moreover, collective culture also creates hierarchies of values, for instance, ranking jobs based on outcomes they supposedly generate, with impact on meaningfulness perception: A doctor would be placed in a socially higher position than a sanitation worker although both contribute to people's health. Presenting meaning-making as a dynamic process of internalisation–externalisation, we

discuss next how collective-cultural meaningfulness is re-elaborated by persons through their personal culture while they work.

## Personal culture, stylisation and ambivalence

Here, we must emphasise that the internalisation just described is not a one-way process. Both the internalisation and externalisation processes are, as indicated in Figure 2, *complementary* and *constructive*. While internalising collective culture, the person *actively acts* upon selected messages or content allowed to enter the intra-psychological (personal) culture. The same reasoning applies to the externalisation process (axis B, Figure 2), when the person chooses material to externalise – her feeling of autonomy is created in this way. She can even pretend an externalisation behaviour when she engages, for instance, in “empty talks” (Valsiner, 2014, p. 77). This means that someone can *publicly* comply with a value or shared meaning, but feels psychologically distant from those same values and meanings. How can externalisation operate through work?

In general terms, axis B in Figure 2 points to what we call *stylisation*, which constitutes the singular way a person operates through work, modelling her actions and forming a particular, meaningful relationship to it. Indeed, this could be true of all the levels of meaning discussed in the previous section. For instance, at the level of meaning as resources, a person can find a new way to use a certain tool. First, workers need to internalise the expected uses of a new mediating instrument. This entails having access to the “memory” or its history by reading a manual, attending a theoretical class about the uses of the tool (e.g. new software, a new machine, etc.), or observing its use by other workers. Such an internalisation also implies an adaptation of the object to the worker’s body; hence, “ergonomics” is an important applied discipline in the context of work. With time, the worker starts to creatively adapt the tool to their previous knowledge or experiences with tools. Additionally, using the tool in concrete activities is also at the origin of new stylisations. By using it and by facing a real and sometimes unpredictable situation, the person starts to develop new ways of employing the tool. Or else, she can even propose a new tool and a new set of meanings to operate it.

Stylisation implies, surely, a certain level of person’s autonomy. As the literature has reported, lack of autonomy (here understood as the possibility of developing a work style) is a powerful factor for suffering at work (e.g. Clot & Gollac, 2014; Dejours, 2009). However, pleasure/meaning and suffering in working is caught in a paradoxical situation.

- On the one hand, work activities are regulated by procedures that, generally speaking, could include standard rules, actions and tasks, leaving no room for personal autonomy. The latitude of control (autonomy) certainly varies as per the activity considered. For example, the standardised part of the activity of a fiction writer is supposedly lower than that of a clerk accountant. However, as Clot (2009) mentions, there is an “impersonal” dimension in any form of working, which is related to prescriptive procedures (this is partially why an employee might be replaced by another employee



without serious discontinuity) that help to regulate the activity. The same could apply to the contextual or environmental features in which the activity takes place, which may constrain the worker's level of autonomy.

- On the other hand, although every activity contains some degree of “impersonality”, rules, standard actions and procedures, they can be transformed or changed at some extent by the subject. This process is better grasped by the idea of internalisation–externalisation. Even the most “bureaucratic” (heteronomous) task is constructively transformed by being incorporated into the personal culture. As mentioned previously regarding tool use, rules and commands are internalised, re-elaborated (eventually, re-signified, or undergoing resistance) and then externalised in the form of (slightly or not) different ways of doing something. We assign the term “stylisation” precisely to this process of appropriation and constructive re-elaboration of the impersonal dimension of every activity.

However, the endeavour of actively reconstructing the prescribed aspects of work can be blocked to a smaller or larger degree (Bendassolli, 2017[online first]). Suffering in work emerges when this blocking stops the person creatively shaping the activity according to her personal culture. When the person has her activity blocked, she stops feeling as responsible for creating something with her “mark” imprinted, of being responsible for something that she perceives as making some difference in the world through her work. Suffering stems from not being able to add something personal to the collective culture, what Clot (2009) designs by “genre”.

The genre of an activity is the far-away and long-run memory of a particular professional body in its act of dealing with a particular object to be transformed. It contains the whole set of tips, strategies, informal procedures and rules that a *métier* has developed over time as succeeding ways of dealing with some objects. Being “healthy” at work depends, in part, on being able to contribute precisely to this collective memory. In the terminology we are developing in this paper, a healthy work is one in which the personal and the collective culture can combine and end up in new forms of working, new activity configurations, articulating, at the same time, the singular and the general, the already-there and the yet-not-there.

Similar reasoning seems to apply to the relationship between stylisation and meaning-making. By acting *within* collective culture, a person plays the active role of building upon *general guidelines* represented by meanings (including values) embedded in that environment. Take, for instance, working as “something someone does to help others”. This is a typical value or expected work outcome from extensive surveys on the meaning of work, in other words, the “social dimension” of that meaning (e.g. MOW, 1987). But while, at a general/collective level, it could be taken-for-granted, at the level of the personal culture, what does “helping” someone mean? At this level, *ambivalences* emerge, leading to potentially infinite trajectories or (personal) possibilities in meaning-making (Sato, Hidaka, & Fukuda, 2009; Tateo, 2015a).

Ambivalence also operates in on-going relationships that a person maintains with institutions. Indeed, these relationships are the arena where work usually takes place and where we notice the interplay of both personal culture (*stylisation*) and collective culture

(*canalisation*). Institutions operate by suggesting a particular set of meaningful paths and values to persons (Tateo, 2015a), encoding “usual thinking” (Schütz, 1944) and an acceptable range of behaviours. However, like collective culture, institutions offer ambivalent suggestions to people who belong to them. In the workplace, people are simultaneously asked to comply with values such as cooperation and commitment, while also being competitive and flexible. At school, students are stimulated to become independent, while also following the teacher (Tateo, 2015a). Thus, individuals cope with such ambivalences by stylising their relationships with those socially suggested, specific values. As Amsterdam and Bruner (2000) summarise:

Life in a culture is governed by a never-quite-resolvable tension between opposing, sometimes incompatible stances toward the world. These stances usually divide into those that are canonical, having to do with how things ordinarily are and should be, and those that are imaginatively possible, projecting how the world might be under altered circumstances. The dialectic between the two is endless, inherent in the demands of living communally, and reflects itself in law as elsewhere. (pp. 283–284)

Consequently, a person is embedded in quite complex, heterogeneous negotiations that occur between what is ambivalently suggested in the collective culture (and its institutions), and what “makes *sense*” (Vygotsky, 1987), in affective terms, to her personal culture. According to our view, stylisation is a compromise solution that a person develops in working through, in all senses, antagonistic or ambivalent forces. Hence, the “work of values” and the “value of work” cannot be understood without considering the interplay of both social canalisation and personal affective construction of meaning (stylisation).

A very good example of the processes we have described above can be found in teachers’ professional identity during the last two decades of school reforms (Ligorio & Tateo, 2008). School teachers are a type of workers who have been required to adapt to a rapid sequence of institutional changes in almost all Western countries during a short time span. School reforms have affected organisational aspects, teacher’s professional identity and teaching practices (Tateo, 2012a). How did teachers build the meaning of these changes? How did it affect their professional identity and the meaning of their work?

In different studies (e.g. Ligorio & Tateo, 2008; Tateo, 2012b), the meaning-making of teachers has been revealed to be a complex intermingle between personal biography, system of shared values and norms, classroom practices and institutional change. This process

can lead to a re-elaboration of teacher professional identity in order to cope with change, they can otherwise provoke a rejection of change, or, finally they can foster a superficial compliance with institutional framework but a different behaviour in everyday practice. (Tateo, 2012b)

The different teachers try to make a personal version of the rapid change in school by adopting different strategies: superficial acquaintance but continuing their traditional practices; enthusiastic acceptance of the new trends; complete indifference to change; open resistance and rejection, etc. (Ligorio & Tateo, 2008; Tateo, 2012a; Tateo, 2012b). What is clearly emerging is that the elaboration of meanings seems value-laden (Tateo, 2015a).

At the core of the meaning-making there seems to be a steady point of reference that must be always safeguarded: the relationship with the pupils. The main value seems to be “loving children”, which is never questioned in the context of changing of practices and school reforms. As a teacher put it (Ligorio & Tateo, 2008):

Interviewer: Do you think there have been some turning points in your career? Which ones?

Teacher: Turning Points? Yes, when:: I specialized in teaching English, (0.2) I had to face (.) many children, I had (0.5) 150, (0.2) and:: I had many colleagues, (0.5) it was very arduous (0.5) and it has been a VERY positive experience with the pupils, (.) also because:: new techniques for teaching foreign (0.2) languages are wonderful, (.) they are all based on communication, therefore I reflected a lot (.) on this:, on this method, on this approach to the discipline, in this:: in this teaching:, and I also really enjoyed (0.2) these four years. However the management of these classes was more complicated, (.) and then:: also the relationship with the colleagues, (0.5) really, sometimes complicated. (pp. 128–129)

Thus, no matter what kind of changes are introduced in school practices (technology, methods, etc.), at the core of teacher’s identity there is a “positive” relationship with the “child”, understood as an abstract value.

It is important to reinforce that values are highly abstract, general and ill-defined fields of meaning promoted and taken for granted in a given community (or collective culture). So, in principle, nobody can disagree with a value (e.g. freedom, democracy, autonomy), as it brings a naturalised worldview that contains non-actualised ambivalences (Ratner, 2016). But at the level of personal elaboration of meaning and conduct (stylisation), ambivalence emerges and leads to what we have said before: to potentially infinite trajectories. One person can perfectly cope with an ambivalent situation of *meaningless work* (in the normative sense) by finding workable compromises (between complying with ambivalent values, while enacting acceptable conduct and elaborating personal “meaning” of motivation) within an acceptable range of possibilities not completely outside the “usual way of thinking” (Schütz, 1944). The example of school reforms nicely shows how assuming the primacy of culture as independent variable in any work context, inevitably leads to the failure of directing social change. Teachers (as workers) can apparently comply with reforms they do not share personally, yet every person will find her own way of making meaning of the change, no matter what are the institutional *desiderata* (Tateo, 2012a; Tateo, 2012b). As we argue next, this is a crucial dimension in the dialogue between person and culture during the construction of meaning of work.

## Conclusion: How we can re-orient research

Quite a common phenomenon in psychology and social sciences is to commit the ontological fallacy of reifying a theoretical concept, such as culture, into an existing object (Tateo, 2015b). When we start talking about culture in this way, it acquires properties, parts and features that can be measured; it also acquires causality relationships: Things do things. This means that the “thing” culture becomes a cause for something to happen in the world. But, as previously mentioned, culture has no agency; only persons do. If we consider the use that Lepisto and Pratt (2016) make of references to culture, we can see the difficulty of defining its borders. We might ask our worker: “What is your culture?” The first answer might be, “American”, “Spanish” or “Chinese”. Then we can go on asking: “And does your company have a culture?” The worker would probably answer: “Yes”. Then one could ask (to a Spaniard, for example): “Has your town a specific culture that differentiates it from Chinese-American culture in some respect?” Again, the answer would probably be: “Yes”. And we could go on *ad libitum*, asking such questions, uncovering thousands of sub-cultures and sub-sub-cultures (Tateo, 2015b). Thus, using “culture” as an independent variable cannot take us very far in understanding inter-individual variability, the unpredictability of personal choices (stylisation) and the inherent ambivalence in how people make meaning or elaborate their behaviour (Ratner, 2016; Valsiner, 2014).

Culture is not just poured into a person nor does a person just “cherry pick” objects from a “basket” of culture. The personal version of culture is an active and selective internalisation of messages by the agent, who in return produces and externalises meanings, logically leading to non-isomorphism between personal and collective culture (Ratner, 2016; Valsiner, 2014). A person can also *resist* cultural guidance in meaning-making, but at the same time, refer to it. For instance, if culture tells us that flexibility and creativity are highly meaningful in contemporary work (e.g. examine values commonly promoted by job offers), why can people still resist those suggestions (and surely, consequently be accused of “change resistance”)?

In our view, Lepisto and Pratt (2016) seem to consider (at face value) the construction of meaningful work as a phenomenon (a dynamic process of accounting-making). Accordingly, people are expected to engage themselves in a continuous task of justifying their work-based some culturally driven value. However, if we look more carefully, they are considering the very idea of “meaningful work” as a value itself. As a result, meaningful work could be considered a *prescriptive concept* developed in the particular context of “thinking as usual”, to use Schütz’s (1944) expression again. In other words, they use an implicit, value-laden idea of meaningfulness based on a “merry worker, better worker” assumption. But we need to remember that values at the collective-culture level are general, non-existing objects (i.e. they are hyper-generalised signs or ideas – Valsiner, 2014) that *only suggest* a specific direction or orientation (canalisation) for the meaning-making process. When values are considered at the personal-culture level, however, they undergo a continuous process of personal (*sense*-level; Vygotsky, 1987) elaboration (stylisation). Thus, the question should be: Why *must* work be meaningful and central in a person’s life experience?

The assumption is that meaningful work is a source of the worker's well-being, with several positive outcomes (in a mainstream nomological perspective), as we mentioned briefly in the introduction. This means that all stakeholders would be satisfied (especially the employer) if a "meaningful" context was created around work. Nonetheless, would workers' perspectives be fully considered? Would their personal cultures be taken into account? By focusing mainly at the collective-culture level, considering a reservoir of resources (narratives, symbols, values, "worthiness"), Lepisto and Pratt seem to endorse the hidden idea that, to overcome "anomie", individuals must create a shared perspective on meaningful work, based implicitly on what organisations find important.

One of the sharpest challenges in discussing meaning is that we are addressing an "entity", a given content of thought that can somehow be statically observed or measured. Meaning is observed in its historical and contextual process of doing through work (of engaging in the transformation of things into objects). Meaning is an intentional, future-oriented process, open and, to some extent, unpredictable. Current HRM research is still striving somehow to grasp the processual nature of meaning-making; probably Lepisto and Pratt's (2016) review reveals this unsolved problem.

Yet our goal is to move ahead. Starting from Lepisto and Pratt's (2016) valuable work, we have attempted to articulate theoretical reflection on the concept of "meaning of work" based on cultural psychology's proposal. Critical issues of addressing the relationship between person and culture, as HRM has handled it so far, require renovated theoretical and empirical research efforts. In this exploratory work, we suggest some potential new research directions. We have proposed the concepts of personal and collective culture interplay (canalisation and stylisation forces) as potential tools for reconsidering the problem of meaningfulness. Thus, our first move in a new direction would be to deconstruct "meaningfulness" as it has been loosely understood in HRM research. We have indeed argued that meaningfulness has been treated as an "objective" construct (or a variable), while it hides a specific set of values prescribing a specific way the worker ought to feel about a job.

Finally, we have described the process of meaning-making as a complex dynamic happening in a context encoded with value-driven existing social suggestions, which a person must negotiate during elaboration of her personal trajectory. Thus, new directions should develop a theoretical framework that accounts for the constructive relationship between personal culture and collective culture as a constant process of elaboration, maintenance and demolition of meanings. For instance, concepts of *stylisation* and *canalisation* could be explored as theoretical constructs to account for the person/context relationship. Empirical studies in this new direction should focus on, for instance: (a) micro-genetic processes of meaning "at work"; (b) internalisation and externalisation of meanings that promote and inhibit specific acceptable behaviours in the workplace and (c) interplay between different life contexts in elaboration of work's meaning, for instance, using instruments for emergence of ambivalence (e.g. construction of interviews based on dilemmatic situations to elicit critical meaning-making processes). With this critical stance in mind and thanks to cultural psychology's perspective, we can

attempt to grasp complex processes at stake in the social arena of work in which individuals daily construct their personal trajectories.

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