

The Brazilian Scientific Production on Sense and Meaning of Work: Review of Use of Terminology and Current Thematic Classifications

La producción científica brasileña sobre sentidos y significados del trabajo: una revisión de la utilización terminológica y de las clasificaciones temáticas existentes

A produção científica brasileira sobre sentidos e significados do trabalho: uma revisão dos usos terminológicos e das classificações temáticas existentes

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Abstract

This paper presents a review of the Brazilian scientific literature on the sense and meaning of work, in order to identify the researchers' use of terminology and the branches of research on the subject. We examine a corpus of 70 papers electronically retrieved from databases for psychology and related fields through software-aided content analysis. The studies on the sense and meaning of work have primarily been developed since the year 2000, especially in the field of psychology. Most of these studies have a qualitative aspect and rely on a wide variety of distinct theoretical perspectives. These perspectives can be understood through four categories of terminological use: exclusive use of *meaning* of work; exclusive use of *sense* of work; use of both *meaning* and

sense of work; and no identifiable or unique terminological preference.

Key words: work; sense of work; meaning of work; meaningful work.

Resumen

Este artículo revisa la producción científica brasileña sobre sentidos y significados del trabajo, identificando la utilización terminológica y las vertientes de investigación en el tema. El corpus del análisis está compuesto por setenta artículos recuperados electrónicamente en bases de datos de la psicología y áreas afines. Ese material fue sometido a un análisis de contenido asistido por *software*. Los resultados indican que las investigaciones sobre el tema se desarrollaron, sobre todo, en la última

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década y media, predominantemente en el campo de la psicología. La mayoría de los estudios son cualitativos. Revelan una amplia diversidad de perspectivas teóricas que pueden observarse de acuerdo con cuatro empleos terminológicos: solamente significado del trabajo; solamente sentido del trabajo; ambos, sentido y significado, y un conjunto amplio y fragmentado de investigaciones en que no se puede identificar una única opción terminológica.

Palabras clave: trabajo; sentido del trabajo; significado del trabajo; trabalho significativo.

Resumo

Este artigo tem como objetivo realizar uma revisão da produção científica brasileira sobre sentidos e significados do trabalho, identificando o uso de termos e as perspectivas de pesquisa sobre o tema. O corpus da análise é composto por 70 artigos recuperados eletronicamente em bases de dados da psicologia e áreas afins. Esse material foi submetido a uma análise de conteúdo assistida por software. Os resultados indicam que as pesquisas sobre o tema se desenvolveram sobretudo na última década e meia, predominantemente no campo da psicologia. A maioria dos estudos são qualitativos. Revelam ampla diversidade de perspectivas teóricas, as quais podem ser depreendidas a partir de quatro usos terminológicos: apenas significado do trabalho; apenas sentido do trabalho; ambos sentido e significado; e um conjunto amplo e fragmentado de pesquisas em que não se pode identificar uma única preferência terminológica. *Palavras chave:* Trabalho, sentido do trabalho, significado do trabalho, trabalho com sentido

The question of meaning in modernity, according to Vaz Lima (1997), can refer to a wide array of definitions, from those based on common sense to those coming from the most varied philosophical traditions. In particular, according to Vaz Lima, there are two central approaches to meaning in Western philosophical thought: (a) The logical-linguistic approach, which studies meaning

in its expressive form and the way it is embedded in language, and (b) the existential approach, in which meaning leaves the neutral field of logic and linguistics and deepens in the realms of existence, presenting itself as the *meaning of life*, the teleological purpose by which being is moved. This latter approach would be closer to philosophical traditions such as existentialism and hermeneutics, while the former would be present more in semiology/semiotics and in the philosophy of language, with its diverse consequences for human and social sciences since what is known as the *linguistic turn* (Rorty, 1967).

Regarding research in psychology, Smith (1997) highlights that the “problem of meaning” has been the focus of different schools of psychology, many of which are influenced by the previously mentioned philosophical approaches. In particular, Smith points to four main approaches in this field: (a) The referential approach, which separates being/object (ontology) from its representation (epistemology) or, from a pre-Kantian perspective, which separates the “thing-in-itself” and the “phenomenal thing”; (b) the mentalist approach, which associates meaning with ideas, viewing the cognitive content as something existing in itself, relative to or completely independent of concrete existence; (c) the contextualist approach, which aims to overcome the subject/object or subjective/objective dichotomy, emphasizing the subject’s interactions, through language, in both social and material contexts, and (d) the dissolutionist approach, which is closer to postmodern theories and authors for whom meaning is related to power games and certain forms of establishing representations/meaningfulness about reality and whose analysis would lead to its deconstruction/reconstruction, exposing the underlying power games (Bendassolli & Gondim, 2014).

Currently, the question of meaning has proved to be an object of growing interest for authors affiliated with the positive psychology perspective (e.g., Batthyany & Russo-Netzer, 2014; Dik, Byrne, & Steger, 2013). There are also the meaning ma-

king models utilized in clinical psychology (e.g., Park, 2010) as well as some integrative and emergent perspectives, including the neuroscientific influence (e.g., Markman, Proulx, & Lindberg, 2013).

The question of meaning is also present, more specifically, in the area of Work and Organizational Psychology (WOP), in studies on the meaning of work. Within this subarea of psychology, it is also possible to find different perspectives and approaches regarding the concept of meaning and methodological strategies to access it. For example, in a theoretical study of the assumptions underlying meaning of work studies, Borges (1998) identifies two dominant groups: (a) The empirical-descriptive (or idealistic-phenomenological) group, who consider meaning as a phenomenon that exists in itself, with cognitions having primacy or independence in relation to concrete existence; and (b) the transition group, in which the phenomenological influence is weakened while the existentialist-Marxist influence is strengthened with a recognition of the dialectical movement that constitutes reality. The latter group assumes that existence precedes essence, with consciousness taking on a secondary character in relation to matter.

In a more recent review, Tolfo, Coutinho, Baasch, and Cugnier (2011) identified five research approaches to the meaning of work: (a) The cognitivist approach, in which the Meaning of Work Research Team (MOW, 1987) study and Brazilian researchers influenced by this study (e.g., Borges, 1997; Borges, Tamayo, & Alves Filho, 2005) are situated; (b) the existentialist approach, influenced by Victor Frankl's perspective—here Tolfo et al. situate the research of Morin (2001, 2003), who proposes a model in which meaningful work is understood as an affective structure related to sense, orientation, and existential coherence; (c) the constructionist approach, according to which meaning is generated in everyday life through an individual's interpersonal interactions and individual socialization in the different meaning repertoires provided by the culture, which the individual uses

to structure his or her subjective experiences and actions; (d) the cultural studies approach, which understands culture as situated meaning practices based on language, institutions, and social productions; and (e) the sociohistorical approach, according to which *meaning* refers to most stable and socially shared zones of *sense*, while *sense* refers to deeper psychological processes related to the individual level.

In their review, Tolfo et al. (2011) observed that, in connection with the signification process, some authors use only the word *meaning* [*significado*], others use only the word *sense* [*sentido*]; and some authors make a theoretical distinction between the two. Tolfo et al. also noted that these differences in terminological use “may be attributed to linguistic or translation problems, which leads us to identify a need for greater conceptual precision” (p. 185, authors' translation). But are the differences merely terminological? To what extent might the preference for a certain terminological use reflect theoretical, epistemological, and ontological assumptions? What does such “conceptual (im)precision” mean?

We should note at the outset that we believe these terminological/conceptual issues are not unique to authors who investigate the meaning of work; these issues may also be observed in relation to such constructs as *health*, *mental health*, and *well-being at work* and *commitment*, *engagement*, and *involvement in work*—to mention only two examples from the WOP field. The choice of one of the designations contained in either example has theoretical and methodological implications. However, it would not be unwise to say that in each case, all of the terms concern the same phenomenon—namely, health (or lack of it) in the first case, and people's ties with their work in the second.

In the sense/meaning of work domain, we should consider aspects related to the face value of the terminology for the concepts and their translation into Portuguese. For example, in French, the original language of Morin (1997, 2001), there is the word *sens*—which can be translated into Portu-

guese as *sentido* [*sense*] or *significado* [*meaning*]. In English, there are both *sense* and *meaning* of work—but, recently, to point out their difference from other researchers, some English-speaking authors have preferred the term *meaningful work* (or *meaningfulness in work*)—e.g., Lips-Wiersma and Wright (2012); Steger, Dik, and Duffy (2012). Sense and meaningful or meaningfulness may have the same translation into Portuguese. In English, there are theoretical differences between these words, but analysis of the differences lies beyond the scope of this paper (for this, see Bendassolli & Borges-Andrade, 2013).¹

Conceptual imprecisions are related to problems in our ways of understanding what concepts are and what their role is in scientific research. Concepts are meaning-laden classifications that serve as building blocks for knowledge construction (Osigweh, 1989). According to Osigweh, a concept is composed of meanings that unfold in two dimensions: an extensional and an intensional dimension. *Extension* refers to the things or class of objects encompassed by the concept, its domain (denotation); *intension* refers to the conditions an object must satisfy to be correctly described by the concept—the characteristics, properties, or attributes indicated by the concept (its connotation).

A concept may be empirical (or abstract) and generic (or specific). For example, when a concept is empirical, its contents may vary, but this does not necessarily imply the emergence of another concept, since the variation may be only in the intensionality (associated attributes) of the concept. A concept that is defined generically may allow the incorporation of diverse classes of objects; however, if the generality is very large, this leads to inaccuracies. Conversely, if a concept is defined very strictly, this may hinder its generalizability.

1 For this reason, we have decided to employ predominantly *sense* (and *meaning*) throughout this paper. However, when we think is important, for theoretical reasons, we use *sense* or *meaningful* or *meaningfulness*.

Sometimes overlapping concepts and variables may lead to overly strict concepts. Concepts are not always treated as variables; they are building blocks integrated into theories. For Osigweh (1989), *conceptual accuracy* refers to researchers defining a concept in the same (or a similar) way and, consequently, being able to test it in different circumstances, being neither too general nor too specific.

Thus, we may understand that conceptual imprecision may simply concern terminological usage, with disagreement among researchers about which terms should be utilized to refer to the same phenomenon. But such disagreement may be circumstantial, as in the case of translation problems, or reveal deeper disagreements concerning either the phenomenon under investigation or how to conceptualize this phenomenon (both of which may be the same or different for researchers). Therefore, rather than merely being associated with the use of different words for the same phenomenon (a linguistic issue), terminological and conceptual differences may in fact be linked to different concepts and theories, if not to different phenomena. Hence it is important to understand the relations between terms, concepts, and theories/approaches because these reveal the structural connections of research and researchers in relation to the study of a particular phenomenon of interest.

Given this context, the purpose of the present paper is to investigate, through a literature review, the use of sense/meaning of work² terms by researchers in the field. The background question on which we will reflect is whether the possible distinction between these terms is related to terminological issues or whether it indicates different conceptualizations of the phenomenon in question—and therefore different approaches or lines

2 We use both terms together, separated by a “/”, because we don’t want to assume at this point an a priori distinction between sense and meaning (or meaningfulness and meaning). Only after analyzing the texts (the corpus) will we present our arguments and indicate our own position concerning this terminological difference.

of study concerning the sense/meaning of work, as suggested by Borges (1998) and Tolfo et al. (2011), among others (e.g., Bendassolli & Borges-Andrade, 2013; Bendassolli & Gondim, 2014). Operationally, we first characterize the sense/meaning research productions, identifying authorship, year, and geographical place of publication in addition to methodological aspects of the studies. Next, we analyze the terms used in the corpus we have chosen with a simple frequency analysis indicating whether each production uses only the term *meaning(s)*, only the term *sense*, *meaning(s)* and *sense* indiscriminately, or *meaning(s)* and *sense* interdependently. Finally, based on the terminological uses and on theoretical considerations, we will reflect on the overlaps and differences in the use of *sense/meaning* and their implications for theory and research in the meaning of work area.

Method

To carry out this review, we selected papers related to the sense/meaning of work that have been published in Brazilian journals and are capable of being recovered in an online search. Although we did not define a specific start date for the search, the works identified tended to reflect the timeframes of the implementation of the scientific journals in Brazil. We utilized the following research databases: Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO), Latin American and Caribbean Literature in Health Sciences (Literatura Latino-Americana e do Caribe em Ciências da Saúde [LILACS]), Electronics Journals in Psychology (PEPsic), and the Virtual Health Library-Psychology Brazil (Biblioteca Virtual em Saúde, Psicologia Brasil [BVS-Psi]). We also searched Google Scholar and researchers' resumes in the Lattes Platform to identify productions that might not have been identified through the other strategies.

We used the following keywords for all search strategies: *meaning(s) of work*, *sense of work* (or *meaningful work*), and *sense* (or *meaningful work*)

[and] *meaning(s) of work*. In this initial sorting, we recovered 91 documents, which we then submitted to a second sorting, based on the additional inclusion criteria: papers with sense/meaning of work as the main objective, whether through empirical research or theoretical essays, including papers of foreign researchers who published in Portuguese in Brazilian journals. We excluded documents that were published in conference proceedings, book chapters, Brazilian papers published in foreign journals, and papers that only mentioned the subject or that used *sense/meaning* in relation to phenomena other than work. We also eliminated duplicate papers.

We assumed that our exclusive choice of papers, and not chapters or books, would limit the range of findings, especially considering the tradition in Brazilian psychology of using books and chapters for knowledge dissemination. However, considering the recent growth and virtualization of scientific journals, we believe that we may fairly assume that this strategy of on-line searching has allowed us to adequately capture the current research situation on the subject—first, because a research production in the form of a paper probably “echoes” work previously published as a chapter or entire book, and second, because the changes owing to virtual journal implementation and the associated opening of scientific production as a whole cannot be ignored, reinforcing the increasingly central role of online papers in the Brazilian postgraduate and research context.

From the second sorting, we obtained 70 papers. We used this last contingent as the corpus for our analysis. First, we created categories corresponding to our objectives. In order to characterize the productions in this corpus, we extracted the papers' publication years, the area of the first author's training (his or her highest degree), the methodological design, the data-gathering instruments, and the characteristics of the sample used in the empirical research. To investigate terminological use, we analyzed the following terms and conditions:

papers in which the authors (a) only use *meaning(s)*, (b) only use *sense* [or *meaningfulness*], (c) use *sense* and *meaning(s)* interchangeably, or (d) use *sense* and *meaning(s)* in a necessarily interconnected way (although preserving the uniqueness of each individual term).

We then input the papers into the QDA-MINER (version 4.1) software and submitted them to a thematic content analysis. We began the analysis with a brief reading of the material in its entirety, to become familiar with it. Then, using the previously mentioned categories, we conducted a new reading to highlight the analysis units in each text that could correspond to the categories of interest. This resulted in the codification of the entire corpus in the thematic units corresponding to these categories. Then we used the software to recover the codes/themes based on their frequency of co-occurrence in each paper, and finally, we proceeded with the categorization of those themes. The last phase consisted of the analysis of these categories and their content.

Results

Characterization of the Productions (the Corpus)

The first item of information about the revised productions in the corpus is the period when they were published. For this purpose, we consider the year when each paper was originally published. The analysis revealed that during the period 1991–1995, three papers (4.2%) were published and that during 1996–2000, four papers (5.7%) were published. The production development intensified in the 2000s: 15 papers (21.5%) were produced during 2001–2005, 25 papers (35.8%) during 2006–2010, and 23 papers (32.8%) during 2011–2014. Overall, of the 70 papers considered in this analysis, 90% were published during the last decade. This is partly due to contextual factors such as coincidence with the availability of open-access electronic journals

and with development of the Brazilian postgraduate system and also to increased development of the WOP field in Brazil.

Turning to the first author's area of specialization (based on the highest degree according to the information available in each paper), we found that psychology had the largest number of publications—39 papers (55.9%), followed by administration with 14 papers (20%), nursing with 8 papers (11.5%), and then education (3 papers, or 4.2%), sociology (2 papers, or 2.8%), literature (2 papers, or 2.8%), and engineering and occupational therapy (1 paper each, or 2.8% in total). This shows that the subject of sense/meaning has most commonly served as the object of the researchers' training (considering the tendency of the papers to be associated with dissertations or theses) in psychology, compared to training in other disciplines. The proximity of the field of psychology to administration, especially in WOP, may help explain administration's second-place ranking for productions. We should also consider this diversity of training as contributing to the multidisciplinary nature of the study of the sense/meaning of work.

Table 1 provides information about methodological aspects of the papers. We observe a predominance of empirical work among the papers (78.5%), followed by theoretical texts or essays (15.7%) and a small contingent of literature reviews (5.8%). There is a diversity of data-gathering instruments. Some studies combine several data-gathering techniques, such as standardized questionnaires (scales) and interviews. Although a number of papers present a mixed- or multimethod design, the majority of the papers are qualitatively oriented. We consider a qualitative study to be one in which the authors have exclusively used interviews (as the data-gathering instrument) and qualitative content analysis or similar methods (as data analysis strategies). Interviews are the main data-gathering device in 60.6% of the papers in the analyzed corpus. Our identification of a qualitative orientation in most studies on the sense/meaning of work is consistent

with a review carried out more than a decade ago that also identified this characteristic (Mourão & Borges-Andrade, 2001).

Table 1
Concentration of articles by study design and instruments used

	<i>n</i>	%
Methodological design of the study		
Empirical	55	78.5
Theoretical	11	15.7
Literature review	04	5.8
Instruments		
Interview	40	60.6
Standardized questionnaire ^a	12	18.2
Nonstandardized questionnaire	05	7.5
Observation	03	4.6
Focus group	03	4.6
Oral history	01	1.5
Drawing	02	3.0

Note. The items in the “Instruments” column are not mutually exclusive, as some studies used more than one data-gathering instrument, and other studies (theoretical/review papers) made no use of instruments.

^a Some instruments developed and/or validated are (authors’ translations): *Inventário de Significado do Trabalho* [Inventory of Labor Meaning] (IST; Borges, 1999; Borges & Tamayo, 2001), *Inventário de Motivação e Significado do Trabalho* [Work Meaning and Motivation Inventory] (IMST; Borges & Alves Filho, 2001, 2003); *Escala de Significados Atribuídos ao Trabalho* [Scale of Meanings Assigned to Work] (ESAT-R; Fernandes, Gonçalves, & Oliveira, 2012); *Escala de Sentido do Trabalho* [Meaningful Work Scale] (EST; Morin, 2003; Bendassolli & Borges-Andrade, 2011); *Questionário sobre Aspectos do Trabalho* [Questionnaire on Aspects of Work] (QAT; Pereira, Del Prette, & Del Prette, 2008); *Questionário reduzido do MOW* [Reduced MOW Questionnaire] (Bastos, Pinho, & Costa, 1995); *Questionário sobre Significado do Trabalho* [Questionnaire on the Meaning of Work] (QST; Goulart, 2009a); *Questionário de fatores associados ao significado do trabalho* [Questionnaire on Factors Associated with the Meaning of Work] (Kubo & Gouvea, 2012); *Inventário de Significado e Centralidade do Trabalho* [Inventory of the Meaning and Centrality of Work] (Bendassolli, Alves, & Torres, 2014).

Finally, the last production characteristic for the sense/meaning of work research is the sample composition used for the empirical research carried out in the relevant papers. Here we observed a large diversity. For example, studies have been

conducted with health workers, executives/managers, professors, construction workers, bank employees, marketers, poultry company workers, funeral workers, artists, air traffic controllers, and judges. These occupations are distributed in a wide range of workspaces as private organizations, NGOs, public service providers, and cooperatives. We also identified studies aimed at people with disabilities, inmates, homeless people, mental health service users, people from the backwoods, and members of the Hip Hop movement. Regarding age, adults predominated, although we also identified a small number of studies with children and youth.

Terminology use and thematic content

Table 2 presents the classification of the corpus based on differentiation of the terminology used by the papers’ authors. The first column shows the predominant use of the terminology in a paper, the second shows the number of papers in which this occurred, and the third provides a brief description of what the group with this predominant use understands by the relevant term(s), in an attempt to identify the underlying conceptual definition of *sense/meaning* for these groups. However, we try to offer only a synthesis of these definitions; we have no conditions for or intention of identifying, in the third column, the exact operational definition provided by each of the authors classified in these groups. The last column presents examples of the papers that were considered in each group.

In the first group, which comprises 34.3% of the corpus, the authors predominantly use the term *meaning(s) of work*. At least two subgroups may be identified within this group: (a) one that is more directly influenced by MOW (1987), since its members apply the central variables of the MOW model as well as its scales (e.g., Bastos et al., 1995) and (b) another that, although also influenced by MOW, proposes its own model to define and measure the meaning of work. This latter model defines

Table 2
Terminology used, with a brief description of the concepts and examples from the corpus

Terminology used	n	%	Brief description	Corpus examples
Only meaning(s)	24	34.3	The meaning of work is a social cognition, with several facets. Articulates the personal dimension (personal history), societal (society-historical) conditions, and the occupational dimension, summed up in the concrete record of existence. The meaning of work is a historical subjective cognition and in continuous change.	Bastos, Pinho, and Costa (1995); Bendassolli, Alves and Torres (2014); Borges (1999); Borges, and Alves Filho (2001); Borges and Alves Filho (2003); Goulart (2009b);
Only sense [or meaningfulness]	11	15.8	The sense of work is an affective structure composed of three dimensions: signification, which is how the individual understands the work; orientation, which is the intention that guides the person's actions for an objective; and coherence, which is the balance between the work performed and existential expectations.	Morin (2001); Morin, Tonelli, and Pliopas (2007); Coutinho, Diogo, and Joaquim (2008); Bendassolli and Borges-Andrade (2011)
<i>Sense and meaning(s) used indiscriminately</i>	27	38.5	The sense/meaning of work is understood through the pleasure/suffering dichotomy, mediated by recognition. The subject produces sense/meaning as he or she elaborates on the actual work. Sense/meaning of work is seen as a historical construction, with social narratives on what it means to work through the ages.	Mazzilli and Paixão (2002); Coutinho, Magro, and Budde (2011); Lourenço, Ferreira, and Brito (2013) Araújo and Sachuk (2007); Lussi and Morato (2012); Oliveira and Silveira (2012)
<i>Sense and meaning(s) differentiated and articulated (interdependent)</i>	8	11.4	Sense/meaning of work is seen as the significance people develop from the activities they perform. It varies depending on certain conditions and/or changes in work routines. Meanings are understood as collective constructions. Sense is treated as the personal appropriation of the collective meanings within everyday experiences. Sense and meaning compose a dialectic unity (they are interdependent).	Souza and Boemer (1998); Souza and Lisboa (2006); Brito, Vianna, Silva, Costa, and Santos (2010) Basso (1998); Diogo (2007); Coutinho (2009); Lima, Tavares, Brito, and Cappelle (2013)
Total	70	100		

the meaning of work as “a subjective, historical, and dynamic cognition, characterized by multiple facets articulated in diverse manners” (Borges & Alves Filho, 2001, p. 179, authors’ translation), with the facets being work centrality, valorative work attributes (influenced by Schwartz’s values theory, 1992), descriptive attributes, and a hierarchy of both valorative and descriptive attributes.

With respect to methodology, we observed the use of diverse techniques for gathering and for analyzing data in this first group, sometimes in the

same project or in the entire production of a specific author. In contrast to the other three groups, however, this group includes a large amount of research aimed at developing, validating, or revalidating standardized questionnaires (scales), most of which are mentioned in Table 1. In Tolfo et al.’s (2011) description, this group is classified as having a cognitivist approach, although Tolfo et al. do not clearly explain the reasons why they have classified the researchers this way or what they understand by the “cognitivist” label.

The second group comprises 15.8% of the corpus, and here, as in the previous case, two subgroups may also be identified: (a) one that closely follows the model proposed by Morin (2001, 2003), and (b) another that, although it uses only the term *sense* (or *meaningfulness*), is closest to the perspective of constructionism in social psychology. The Morin (1997) model is constructed from a reworking of elements derived from MOW (1987) and aspects of the humanistic-existential perspective, both in the vein of Victor Frankl and that of Irvin Yalom. For Morin, work is evaluated based on the identification of characteristics that makes it meaningful, such as the possibility of learning, autonomy, cooperation, utility, and justice or moral correctness. Essentially, work is understood as an activity that embraces or endorses a subject's psychological development, allowing him or her to express, develop, and adjust to the reality.

In the second subgroup, *sense* (or *meaningfulness*) is understood as a subjective and objective production, articulated through the practical knowledge generated in everyday life and embodied in social interactions. *Sense/meaningfulness* is understood as a social construction, historically and socially situated, aligned with the perspective of social constructionism in psychology (Spink, 2004). Thus, although they do not adhere to the model proposed by Morin (which even has a standardized questionnaire), authors in this subgroup use only the term *sense* (or *meaningfulness*), which reveals that such use is not restricted to Morin's model and her interlocutors.

In terms of methodology, this second group, like the first group, employs a diverse range of strategies. In the studies influenced by Morin (1997), some researchers utilize the standardized questionnaire developed by Morin and Dassa (2006)—e.g., Bendassolli & Borges-Andrade (2011). However, other researchers utilize other data-gathering strategies, such as interviews or nonstandardized questionnaires (even Morin herself has used these in her research). In the second subgroup, quali-

tative strategies, such as interviews, narratives, photos, or even open (unstructured) questionnaires, are predominant. These analyses often utilize thematization and categorization strategies, such as qualitative content analysis and also discourse analysis. In Tolfo et al.'s (2011) description, this group is classified as exemplifying the humanist approach (in the case of the first subgroup) as well as the constructionist approach (in the case of the second subgroup).

The third group in Table 2 comprises a set of papers in which we could not identify a clear-cut theoretical distinction between *sense* and *meaning*, which implies that these papers treat these terms as synonyms; these papers constitute 38.5% of the analyzed corpus. The definitions and perspectives that integrate this group include the psychodynamics of work. This perspective treats *sense* and *meaning* as interchangeable and considers the meaning (or sense) of work to be derived from the hiatus that (according to this theoretical perspective) exists between the prescribed aspects of work—the prescribed task—and what people actually perform at work (the real work). The sense/meaning of work also depends on the recognition process through which the individual is able to transform the suffering implied in work activities into pleasure (Dejours, 2008). The psychodynamic perspective is influenced by psychoanalysis, with sense/meaning essentially understood as subjective productions, products of the individual's interactions (and his or her desires) with reality. Overall, studies based on the psychodynamics of work constitute a minority within the set of papers assembled in this third group. They show qualitative research designs, emphasizing the interpretations of experience based on people's narratives.

This group has another subgroup (also a minority) of papers with a historical or sociological tone. In this subgroup, the sense/meaning of work refers, generally, to collective productions, to social and cultural narratives on what it means to work and on the values and purpose of work as well as

discussions about work arrangements throughout history and societies. These papers are not always based on research in psychology or may have no psychology references. Many are theoretical essays that, by their very nature, convey large overviews—for example, the sense/meaning of work from ancient Greece to the present day. It is important to highlight that in these studies, *sense* and *meaning* are basically synonymous terms with respect to work.

The largest contingent of the third group in Table 2 is represented by research in which the sense and meaning of work are neither theoretically differentiated nor based on a clear frame of reference or general approach. The sense/meaning designation is utilized in a broad sense (as in the common language—this will be discussed in the next section). These studies are based on authors' compilations and varied perspectives, emphasizing what “emerges” from the data. In this sense, the authors are pragmatic or “empiricists,” since they do not present or define any specific concept or the corresponding operationalization strategy necessary to measure it. The authors only display long lists of references regarding the subject, emphasizing the data or empirical results obtained through interviews with questions inserted in an ad hoc fashion and based on general aspects of the phenomenon—for example, “What does work mean to you?”

Finally, the last group in Table 2, comprising 11.4% of the papers, includes research that separates meaning and sense. The papers define each of the terms individually and then propose their articulations, which implies that the authors do not utilize *sense* and *meaning* interchangeably as in the previous group. Rather, sense and meaning compose a single and dialectical phenomenon in which meaning is understood as “collectively elaborate constructions in a given concrete historical, economic, and social context. In turn, sense is a personal production resulting from the individual appropriation of the collective meanings in every-

day experiences” (Coutinho, 2009, p. 193, authors' translation).

In general, the studies in the fourth group are influenced by the work of Vygotsky (2001), who discusses this differentiation between sense and meaning³ to develop his theory of the relation between thought and language. The signification process is based on the mechanisms of internalization and externalization, which are put into action by the individual's engagement with a semiotically mediate activity. Thus, it is possible to say that, based on Vygotsky's work, the signification process consists of a triadic set composed of individual, object (or other individual), and language/tools, situated in a particular sociocultural context. Vygotsky's ideas were appropriated by Leontiev (1978), an author who develops a theory of meaning in which the work activity has a central role. In methodological terms, the papers contained in this group show a preference for qualitative research, as indicated by a massive use of interviews and photos, followed by analysis based on qualitative thematization—identifying, for example, the “meaning core” (Aguiar & Ozella, 2006). In Tolfo et al.'s (2011) portrayal, this group is classified as belonging to the social-historical approach. We discuss the grounds for and implications of our classificatory system in the following section.

Discussion

This paper aimed to identify, based on a literature review on the sense/meaning of work, how authors publishing in the meaning of work area use the two terms. The central issue of this study was to determine whether the possible distinction between sense and meaning is related only to ter-

3 At this point we deliberately use *sense* instead of *meaningfulness*, because Vygotsky himself (and his followers) use this very word (according to its translation into English). As we have already said, in Portuguese, both *sense* and *meaningfulness* can be translated as *sentido*, that is, as a single word.

minology or rather reveals something more substantial, such as distinct conceptualizations of the same phenomenon, concepts referring to different phenomena, or even distinct theoretical-methodological approaches, as suggested by Tolfo et al. (2011). Even taking into account the constraints we faced in this study related to our methodological options and strategies, which we will describe along the way, we believe we have arrived at some stimulating findings. We begin with the objective characteristics of our corpus.

The data reveal that the production timeframe is primarily located at the beginning of the 2000s. Indeed, since the year 2000, there has been a growth of the sense/meaning of work studies that continues to the present day. However, the increased volume of publications about the sense/meaning of work in recent years does not fully reflect the facts concerning the entire history of studies on this subject, at least in the Brazilian context. For example, the studies of the 1990s, although smaller in number than other productions of other periods considered in this survey, were seminal, both by bringing the influence of MOW (1987) to Brazil and by launching new (and local) theoretical models that have gradually been improved, such as Borges's (1999) model (e.g., Borges & Barros, in press). Additionally, we observed a progressive differentiation of Brazilian research over time in relation to MOW (especially, perhaps, with respect to issues concerning measurement), a fact that materialized in the variability we found in the methodological and theoretical perspectives in the volume of publications we analyzed.

We must remember that the publication year data are also conditioned by this study's methodological choices. We have only included papers that are electronically available and have not covered either books and book chapters or theses and dissertations—some of which have had a clear impact on the Brazilian study of the meaning of work and were performed in the 1990s but have not been released in papers (e.g., Soares, 1992). The process

of virtualizing Brazilian psychological journals has only been intensified in recent years, which also explains the density of the volume of publications volume obtained in this study. The same can be said regarding the impact of the development of the national postgraduate system in Brazil during this period (Ouriques, 2011) on the publication volume. Finally, the growth of the number of studies on the sense/meaning of work can be also associated with the development of the WOP field in Brazil, as has been demonstrated in recent reviews (e.g., Borges-Andrade & Pagotto, 2010).

Regarding the methodological characteristics of the studies, we observed a prevalence of empirical studies, revealing a more “applied” character in this research area. There is also a remarkable development of standardized questionnaires—a total of twelve—provided by the researchers, and although these are influenced by MOW (1987), as already emphasized, they also reveal other influences and adaptations to the reality in Brazil. We consider the predominance of studies with qualitative guidance to be an important characteristic of this area, as already noted by Mourão & Borges-Andrade (2001). However, we have some questions concerning methodological orientations: To what extent should the methodological option reflect a researcher's adherence to the diverse approaches presented in Table 2? It is possible, for example, for a researcher aligned to the sociohistorical perspective (in the sense used in this paper) to utilize methods based on variable operationalization and measurement through the use of standardized questionnaires without risk of violating the core metatheoretical principles of his or her approach? In other words: How far may methodological eclecticism (Koppe, 2013) go in this area of study? These are important questions, and reflecting on them will allow us to better understand the possible differences and/or specificities among researchers on the sense/meaning of work. We will propose some answers below.

Now we return to the central issue of this paper, regarding the relation between terminological

usage and the studied phenomenon. As we do this, it is important to remember that although classificatory systems have the merit of systematizing a particular body of information, they also pose the risk of simplifying the reality, as they tend to ignore subtle individual similarities contained in the same aggregate body of information. This applies to the classification proposed by this paper, but also to other classifications, such as those of Borges (1998) and Tolfo et al. (2011). Additionally, there are conflicts of interpretation with respect to these classification initiatives, to the extent that there coexist, on the one hand, the authors' self-designations as belonging to a particular theoretical perspective and, on the other hand, the hetero-evaluations by third parties who try to classify these same authors in aggregate classifications with different generality levels. Moreover, some classification systems become so influential that they condition our interpretation of a given phenomenon, sometimes discouraging new insights and interpretations. With this in mind, we turn to our comments about the content of Table 2.

The first comment concerns the choice of one term over the other or the use of both. The term *meaning (of work)* is more traditional than *sense (or meaningfulness)* in the history of WOP research. It even appeared before the distinction between sense and meaning had been established in the WOP domain.⁴ Whether or not because of translation options during the early research on the meaning of work carried out in Brazil under the influence of MOW (1987), the fact is that the designation of *meaning* seems relatively disse-

minated, judging by the concentration of papers that have used it (34.3% of the total 70 papers we analyzed). Considering the group that uses *sense* and *meaning* interchangeably, we conclude that the choice of one term or the other may also be related to natural oscillations in the use of common language. As discussed in the area of terminology (e.g., Cabré, 1999), a common language (a natural language) corresponds to the linguistic repertoires of diverse social groups belonging to a society's cultural makeup. Thus, it should not be surprising that *sense/meaning*, common (natural language) terms, are also used in the research setting, where specialized languages usually operate (specific to certain academic groups, theories, and paradigms).

In practice, common language terms coexist with the terms of a specialized language, and vice versa. This seems to happen even more frequently in fields of psychology, where many terms are porous in relation to broader everyday social life. However, we contend that when common language terms overlap with the specialized language, this may introduce problems related to constructs. That is, when a researcher does not clearly define a concept that he or she uses, this can have a negative impact on several levels or dimensions of the research (at the measurement level, for instance). According to the analysis we have carried out in this paper, the group of researchers for whom we did not find differences in use of the term *sense* versus *meaning* (the third group in Table 2) is most subject to the risks arising from their weak definitions of the terms they use in their work. As a consequence, we believe that "preferences regarding terminological use in the meaning of work research do not merely reflect terminological differences, but rather conceptual ones—after all, the subgroup guided by the psychodynamics of work also uses the terms *sense* and *meaning* interchangeably. However, in a large part of the research of the third subgroup of this group (Table 2), we could not clearly identify a conceptual definition for the *meaning* or the *sense (or meaningfulness)* of work. This compromises

4 As a consequence, it may be asked: How can we use, in the present study, a classificatory system with terms that were not assumed in the cultural, social, and scientific background for the research at the time of the original investigations (for example, in MOW's investigations through the end of the 1970s)? Additionally, it should be remembered that the theoretical (not merely terminological) distinction between *sense* and *meaning* was made in the late 1930s by Vygotsky (2001), but this distinction was "exported" to WOP only recently (we can say around the 1950s).

the connection between concept and phenomenon (Koppe, 2013), leading to problems of theoretical and methodological operationalization.

A second comment, as mentioned in the introduction, is that sense/meaning is a phenomenon that pervades psychology and is reflected in many philosophical influences, perspectives, and approaches that do not necessarily have work as a central dimension of interest. The question of sense/meaning is present in almost all of the cognitive, post-cognitive, constructionist, interactionist, and interpretive approaches of psychology, to mention a few examples. We want to focus on the sociohistorical approach. This is the perspective embraced by authors affiliated with the tradition we can trace to Vygotsky. This perspective is influenced by historical-dialectical materialism (Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1996). Although the field of psychology is characterized by eclecticism (Koppe, 2013), when a researcher says that he or she belongs to a specific theoretical domain, we understand this to imply to at least some extent his or her adherence to the central assumptions of that domain (or to the “hard core” of theoretical assumptions, in the terminology of Lakatos, 1978): to its ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions (see also Crotty, 1998).

Reflecting in broader historical terms, the sociohistorical perspective was not primarily concerned with work activity (an exception being Leontiev, 1978). Thus, when Vygotsky (2001) proposed the distinction between (and interdependence of) *sense* and *meaning* in the context of mediation by activity and language, he was not strictly arguing about work activity, at least not in the way that organizational psychologists probably currently think. As a result, the Russian author’s ideas were imported to the psychology of work, where they were absorbed, reworked, and articulated with other perspectives to derive what would be a (an adapted?) sociohistorical “perspective” for thinking about the sense/meaning of work.

It should be argued, perhaps, that the sociohistorical perspective is not restricted to Vygotsky, just as psychoanalysis is not restricted to Freud, for example; neither implies an inflexible adherence to its “hard core” theoretical and methodological assumptions (such as the multilevel distinction between *sense* and *meaning* proposed by Vygotsky). Moreover, all theoretical approaches are naturally subject to change resulting from different interpretations, adaptations, and hybridism. Indeed, this may be a reason behind the use of *sense* in the Brazilian WOP literature—that is, it may be the reason for this appropriation of terms derived from a wide range of theories and approaches and for their use irrespective of those same theories and approaches. But is employing, for example, *sense and meaning* (jointly, as a whole) enough to set up, immediately, an adherence to the assumptions of the social-historical perspective?

In that regard, we observed in the fourth group of Table 2 that there are researchers who do indeed mention, generally in the literature review section, the differentiation proposed by Vygotsky (between sense and meaning). However, when we move to the methodological sections of their papers, we notice that they do not make clear to the reader *how* they operationally articulate and measure the two terms. We are led to believe that in such cases *sense* and *meaning* are, despite the reference to Vygotsky, used in a generic or ad hoc way. The researchers in question seem to combine these terms with “alien” terms extracted from other theoretical approaches. As a matter of fact, we can ask whether this “bricolage” of the original Vygotskian terms with other terms that are not primarily “sociohistorical” allows us to classify the authors that made this “mix” as “sociohistorical authors.”

In order to promote this question, discussion of which certainly goes beyond the scope of this paper, we decided to retain in the fourth group in Table 2 both research that effectively seems to endorse the entire sociohistorical rationale (theory,

method, and, as a consequence, the dialectical distinction between *sense* and *meaning*), and research that only mentions this perspective, along with others. In some cases, these other perspectives (in particular, social constructionism) seem to be more influential in the authors' interpretations of their findings and in their conclusions than the "socialhistorical" concepts to which these authors allude in their papers.

Possible ambiguities in the criteria regarding which conditions must be minimally satisfied for an author to be considered as belonging to a theoretical approach particularly pervade classifications such as that of Tolfo et al. (2011). Thus, authors who declare themselves to be influenced by the socialhistorical perspective (e.g., Borges, 1999) are nevertheless classified by Tolfo et al. as "cognitivist." In our case, in Table 2, researchers might appear in more than one group, according to the terms they employ (*sense/meaning*) in their papers. We will raise a question related to this at the end of our paper, since we have adopted the position that a mere terminological use is not enough to determine theoretical affiliations.

Our third comment concerns a possible confusion between theoretical approaches and methodological decisions. Shall research be classified as "cognitivist," for example, based on its use of data-gathering techniques and analysis considered as quantitative among its strategies? We notice that a certain view persists in the Brazilian psychology literature concerning what defines research as quantitative or qualitative—a kind of caricature or social representation about quantitative research. In this representation, quantitative research is research that uses variables at the construct level and standardized questionnaires at the operational level. Based on this, and thinking specifically about the case of Brazilian social psychology (which exerts a notable influence on Brazilian work psychology), where there are still some active epistemological and political "wars," we notice that the "cogniti-

vism" label is more frequently assigned to "quantitative" research.

In the sense/meaning domain of research, we can easily observe a tendency to associate the MOW (1987) research with the social cognition perspective. While there may be arguments to justify such an interpretation, the fact is that the MOW team, in its original model, proposed an integration of several dimensions that assumes the dynamic, multifaceted, and processual nature of the phenomenon (the meaning of work). The MOW model also recognized the influence of contextual factors such as occupation and of individual characteristics such as personal and family circumstances and career histories. So where are the differences between what the MOW team proposed and what other so-alleged "noncognitivist" approaches propose?

It may be defensible to assume that the MOW model is situated as one of the broadest landmarks of the social cognition perspective (e.g., Borges, 1998). However, under the influence of the social representation mentioned earlier, Brazilian authors whose research is based on the seminal MOW model have all automatically been considered to be "cognitivist" as well. Thus, regardless of the hybridisms that can be observed in such authors as Borges (1999), the classification schemas keep identifying this model as "cognitivist." Although Borges and other authors use the term *meaning*, we do not believe that this suffices for her exclusive classification in only one theoretical-methodological branch of research (in this case, cognitivism). Indeed, if that classification were correct, Morin (1997) should, instead of being exclusively classified in the "humanist" branch of psychology, also be classified in the "cognitive" branch. We would like to draw attention to the existing overlap of approaches in several ongoing classificatory systems, including the one we present in this paper. However, although we have chosen to differentiate authors and their respective approaches (Table 2) based on their terminological use, we contend

that applying only this strategy is not enough for defining the theoretical-methodological affiliation of an author.

What, then, is unique to the groups in Table 2, and what is shared between them? Without repeating a discussion similar to that already carried out by Tolfo et al. (2011) in this regard, we would like to make a proposal that goes in the direction of trying to recast the main characteristics of the investigated phenomenon (the meaning of work), in hope of placing the discussion at a level that transcends the merely terminological accent.

We understand that, *mutatis mutandis*, the four groups in Table 2, distinguished exclusively based on their terminological use, focus on the signification process in/of work. And what is involved in this process? First, the signification process depends on an *individual*. The individual processes information and produces, reproduces, or assigns sense/meaning—which can be operationalized as (social) cognition, affections, schemes, stories, narratives, or (social) representations. The individual has a unique history, a personal biography, and experience with work. This individual is placed in a *context* that is historical, social, and cultural and from which arise the linguistic and cognitive repertoires the individual uses to characterize or reframe his or her experiences and which guide his or her work actions or behavior. The individual is also in *interaction* with others, whether close (intersubjectivity) or generic (transpersonality—for example, the “significant other” of culture), mediated by social institutions and an objective structure of work organization and division. Finally, the signification process involves an *object of signification*—in this case, the work, its centrality, and its role in the development of the individual.

This proposal for thinking at the level of the phenomenon does not, however, obliterate the fact that there are differences between the approaches described in Table 2. We believe, backed by our analysis, that the terminological differentiation is

a *weak differentiation*. That is to say, it is weak if used as a sole criterion for discriminating different approaches to the sense/meaning of work. If a researcher prefers to denominate the signification process using the term *sense* (or *meaningfulness*), this preference does not imply that he or she is the only one in a position to grasp the singular aspects of this phenomenon (since, as we have seen in the Vygotskyan approach, *sense* is associated with the individual level, a personal understanding at a point in time, a particular), while a researcher who prefers to use *meaning* is not able to do that. A difference occurs in the case of the social-historical approach. Here, the use of *meaning* or *sense* is not merely a question of preference, but a deep or “hard” adherence to the ontological and epistemological principles contained in that approach. However, as we have observed, there are very few studies that operate according to this more restrictive interpretation.

Putting aside the purely terminological question, we believe that there is a more subtle difference between the groups of Table 2, which we mention in order to collaborate and improve the “conceptual precision” alluded to by Tolfo et al. (2011). This difference has to do with the two dimensions of meaning we already discussed in the introduction, concerning the extensionality and intensionality of the concepts (Osigweh, 1989). It seems that the group that uses only *meaning* (the first group) shows more conceptual precision concerning the attributes that define such meaning. Consider the case of MOW (1987) or the model of Borges (1999): the dimensions or facets that compose their constructs are clearly presented. Tolfo et al. (2011) seem to treat such dimensions as “variables,” not observing that these dimensions are, first and foremost, attributes or conceptual characteristics (concepts should not be mistaken for variables).

The second and third groups also seem to share a more general definition for their constructs, often

inaccurate with respect to intension and extension (the meaning of the concept). This, as Osigweh (1989) warns, hinders the understanding of a *same phenomenon* by the researchers (which we assumed to be the case). Perhaps this is due to the priority given to qualitative research. Although such studies rely, as much as quantitative studies, on operational definitions of concepts, qualitative studies may be distorted, in the Brazilian context, by the social representation proposed earlier concerning what quantitative research is—although this is a hypothesis that must be further developed. In other words, a confusion of “qualitative” with “eclectic or conceptually flexible” (leave the phenomenon to “emerge from the data”; see Bendassolli, 2014) may contribute to more broadly defined, if not vague, concepts. Although this generality may allow, in such circumstances, a larger extension for such constructs, it also hinders a more proper integration between concept and measure, contributing, in theory, to a fragmentation of the phenomenon (when diversity becomes cacophony!). But, as mentioned, this is a hypothesis that deserves further investigation.

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