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COMMENTARY

Deriving meaning from work is neither new nor bad

George M. Alliger*

Retired – SIOP Fellow
*Corresponding author. Email: alligerg@gmail.com

Mumby (2019) argues that work, which currently provides some part of a worker's identity and meaning as a person, previously (prior to the last 100 years or so) was considered a "marginal, rather distasteful activity." That is, you may have worked but it did not define who you were and was performed only out of necessity or coercion. But it is difficult to see how this could be true. Did stonecutters, masons, architects, weavers, pottery-throwers, printers, members of craft guilds, artists, and merchants all hate their work and despise their creations? Moreover, just as today, various societies and cultures seemed to have understood people in part by what they did. Why otherwise, for example, were people frequently bequeathed names based on their major work focus (e.g., Smith, Zapatero, Al-Mufti, Wright, Bhattacharya)? Thus it would seem the "What do you do?" question is not perhaps quite as modern as Mumby suggests and that work may previously have been as personally definitive as it is currently. To recognize this is in no way to deny that life in general may indeed for some have been "nasty, brutish, and short," as Hobbes averred, nor even that many or most labored in more-than-grim conditions as slaves, serfs, or servants. My first point is simply that it is at least debatable whether historically most people were alienated from their work or that work-informed personal identity is something new under the sun.

My second and more important point is that the infusion of meaning into life via work is not a negative thing. Indeed, on the face of it, why would the experience of meaning be bad? This is what I would like to develop briefly.

Currently, not everyone is alienated from her work. A recent survey with a sample of over 5000 adults found that 42% of employees in private firms, 65% in nonprofit, 67% in government, and 62% of self-employed report that their jobs give themselves a sense of identity. Moreover, as Thompson (2019) notes (admittedly to his puzzlement), many workers express this lack of alienation from their jobs by going "above and beyond" the required work intensity or time; Thompson calls this "workism"—"a kind of religion, promising identity, transcendence, and community." This dedication of effort could mean, as Mumby (2019) maintains, that workers are, in a sense, working "for free" part of the day. In effect, workers may lower their hourly rate consciously and voluntarily. This thinking reflects the (non-mainstream economics) "labor theory of value," which is central to Marxism and, per Mumby, apparently to neo-Marxism. In any case, given this way of viewing labor it is perhaps reasonable that anti-work thinkers seem not to like people being involved and engaged in their work, even if this engagement is a pleasant subjective experience.

Thus, while workers are supposed to be alienated from their work and to resist the tricks of "managerialism," many nevertheless are highly engaged. This seems to be objectionable; Cederstrom and Fleming (2012), for example, complain about "... the trend of injecting authenticity and other life affirming moments into work [which] is a central facet of modern managerialism."

So—is encouraging a link between work and meaning, is fostering work engagement, actually a managerial trick, a manipulation of the worker? First, let me cede some ground to Mumby, the neo-Marxists, and others who critique the very idea of work. It is true that there can be something problematic about being an employee. There is often a kind of submission of the will required. Thus Taleb (2010): "You exist if and only if you are free to do things without a visible objective, with no justification at all and, above all, outside the dictatorship of someone else's narrative" (p. 17). From this point of view, being an employee entails suppressing oneself and merely participating in someone else's narrative; an employee is not fully free, and perhaps cannot be said even to fully exist. To be an employee is, simply, to be exploited. Of course, economists argue that employer and employee participate as equal partners in a job contract, as crucially evidenced by the ability of the employee to exit her job at any time. This suggests the employee is in fact a totally free agent. But, as Anderson (2017) cogently points out, the right to exit a job does not really equate to full employee freedom or a lack of heavy managerial authority: It "is like saying that Mussolini was not a dictator, because Italians could emigrate" (p. 55). Moreover, who can argue that some jobs appear to be a tale from an absurdist novel, or that working conditions may call for acts of resistance (e.g., organizing)?

So, I concede that there is an imbalance of power in some organizations, and also that some jobs lack one or more of the critical job dimensions of Skill Variety, Task Identity, Task Significance, Autonomy, and/or Feedback (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). Jobs low in these dimensions can impose, almost irresistibly, a sense of boredom and meaninglessness. However, I would argue that workers often find enough "job material" with which to create a kind of meaning—they make their jobs part of their own narrative. That is, they nest the organization's narrative within their own. By an act of will and imagination, they do more than "resist"—they find and experience purpose and meaning. Industrial and organizational (I-O) psychologists would certainly say that the extent to which this occurs is driven in part by employee individual differences (e.g., Growth Need Strength, Need for Achievement, Openness to Experience, Work Centrality), but I elide that discussion here.

Work is unlikely to go away, even if papitalism collapses (which is itself unlikely: as a variously attributed quote has it, "It is easier to imagine an end to the world than an end to capitalism"). Under erstwhile alternatives to capitalism such as the Soviet Union or the Paris Commune of 1871, authority and sanctions still existed, and people worked. So unless AI-enabled robots eliminate human work, including the necessary analysis of determining what work needs to be done and how, and by designing, building, and managing themselves, work and jobs are not going away. And, I suspect, people will continue to derive actual meaning from that work, even in the face of sometimes not being fully free.

Perhaps meaning can be extracted in well-paying higher-level jobs only? What about the "lower level worker" whose perspective Critical Management Studies (CMS) laudably "tends to assume"? But of course understanding the lower-level worker is not the purview only of CMS. Alongside outstanding colleagues, I have been privileged to participate in many job analyses of "blue collar" workers, from police to mechanics to grocers to miners. Uniformly, our approach has been radically worker-centered—the worker is the expert in every step of the process (see Alliger, Beard, Bennett, & Colegrove, 2012, for one instantiation of this worker-centered JA approach). And, uniformly, we find the workers to be agents in their own right, nesting the organization's narrative within their own, and exerting their own personalities, wills, and talents in carrying out their jobs. They take pride in their work. They have excellent and actionable suggestions on work process, training, safety, and communication improvements. Many non-psychologists have also provided ample evidence that this irreducible dignity of the worker is to be found whenever the worker is taken seriously. Terkel (1989) is one, as is De Botton (2010) in his *Pleasures and Sorrows of Work* (despite Mumby's citing an anti-work quote of his). Consider the gravedigger's description from Terkel's classic narrative captured from Elmer Ruiz, a gravedigger:

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> A gravedigger, you have to make a neat job. I had a fella once, he wanted to see a grave. He was a fella that digged sewers. He was impressed when he seen me diggin' this grave—how square and how perfect it was. A human body is goin' into this grave. That's why you need skill when you're gonna dig a grave. (Terkel, 1989, p. 658)

Here we have, in the virtual epitome of an "unskilled" trade, a worker who takes clear pride in what he is doing. You can say that he is suffering from "false consciousness"—that his way of thinking prevents him from grasping and resisting the exigencies of his situation. But, here is the point: If work is not going away, is it wrong to "accentuate the positive"? To attempt to alleviate the negatives of work or to help workers see how their jobs contribute to society? An interesting and very market-based example of this is the "one for one" business model—where (for example) every pair of shoes sold is matched by a pair of shoes provided to a child in need. It is easy to see how this should help add meaning to work. Work cooperatives other employee-ownership organizations also facilitate deriving meaning from work.

So what are we to do with the concept of workers as "self-exploiting" or "auto-exploiting" subjects—a concept endorsed by Mumby (2019)? With the image of workers who, intentionally or not, accede to and abet their own subjugation? Who, if they experience purpose and meaning in work, are to be understood as misled (perhaps by I-O psychologists and other agents of managerialism)? I think the answer is twofold. First, as I-O psychologists we should, in fact, be on the side of the employee quite as much as on the side of management. Our efforts in job redesign, orientation, training, and engagement boosting, in helping employees craft their jobs to the extent possible, should (and often do) take that balanced approach. And we cannot afford to ignore the "precariat"—those people who work but who are not enabled to achieve security thereby. Precarious jobs include those full-time jobs that simply do not pay enough, jobs with unpredictable or insupportable scheduling, and many jobs in the "gig" economy (e.g., ride-share driving, adjunct faculty). This is an area for Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP) to foster research and advocacy.

Second and perhaps ironically, given the critique of work by neo-Marxism, an employee-oriented stance such as the one just described entails rejection of the concept of "self-exploiting subjects." It does not comport with our profession's appreciation of the dignity of the worker. To describe someone as self-exploiting or auto-exploiting is not only condescending ("you do not know what is best or true for you"), but is itself an exercise in expert, or in the worst case coercive, power. This power is not in this case brought to bear by management, but rather by external or other internal influencers. It attempts to undermine, via arguments or perhaps even social sanctions (e.g., during organizing efforts), an employee's own understanding of herself and to devalue her personal narrative about her work—a narrative which often will include the experience of engagement, work flow, and meaning. I appreciate that workers often only organize into resistive units through prompting and education by outsiders and that such organizing can be highly beneficial—as labor's historical record attests. But depriving workers of meaning and pride in their work would seem contrary to everyone's interest.

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