



Towards a Sociology of Meaningful Work: Objective and Subjective Dimensions of Autonomy, Dignity, and Recognition

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Abstract

Over the last decade, meaningful work has become a major focus in organizational studies, sociology of work, and human resource management, driven by growing interest from scholars, labour organizations, and international institutions. Despite this attention, the field remains fragmented, particularly around the divide between subjective interpretations of meaning based on individual purpose and objective explanations centred on job characteristics and organizational structures. This paper addresses this dichotomy by advancing a sociological framework that integrates both perspectives. Drawing on the work of Knut Laaser and Jan-Ch Karlsson, the study adopts a critical realist approach grounded in the politics of working life, theories of agency, and social theories of dignity and recognition. It conceptualizes meaningful work as an emergent outcome of the interaction between structural conditions and workers' subjective practices. The analysis develops a three-dimensional framework based on autonomy, dignity, and recognition, each examined through objective and subjective dimensions. This approach highlights how institutional arrangements, managerial practices, and informal worker solidarities shape experiences of meaningfulness. The paper critically reviews existing approaches, including the Job Characteristics Model, humanist perspectives, and democratic theories of work, demonstrating their limitations in capturing the relationship between structure and agency. It further identifies five scenarios of meaningful work—strong and balanced, weak and unstable, constrained, struggle-oriented, and absent meaningfulness—to illustrate variations in workplace experiences. By integrating subjective and objective dimensions, the framework bridges key theoretical divisions in the sociology of work and offers analytical tools applicable across diverse occupational contexts, including precarious and low-skilled work. The study contributes to debates on workplace democracy, dignity, and labour politics, and emphasizes that meaningful work emerges through contested social practices within capitalist labour processes.

KEYWORDS: -Meaningful work; Autonomy; Dignity; Recognition; Sociology of work

INTRODUCTION

Background and Rationale Over the last decade, research on meaningful work has

become one of the most vibrant debates in organizational studies, sociology of work, and human resource management. This intellectual surge has been driven not only by academic interest but also by trade unions, labour organizations, and international bodies like the ILO that increasingly call for the promotion of “decent” and “good” work. Yet despite this widespread enthusiasm, the field is fragmented and lacks consensus. Scholars

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remain divided over fundamental questions: What exactly constitutes meaningful work? Is it primarily a subjective phenomenon—rooted in individual perception and purpose—or an objective reality—shaped by task characteristics, employment conditions, and managerial structures?

The persistence of this dichotomy produces a limited understanding of how meaningful work emerges. On the one hand, organizational psychologists and management scholars tend to operationalize meaningful work through job characteristics such as skill variety, autonomy, and task significance. On the other hand, humanist approaches emphasize workers' existential connection to purpose, authenticity, and service to others. Both perspectives shed light on parts of the problem but fail to integrate structure and agency, the formal and the informal, or the individual and collective dimensions of labour.

A sociological perspective is urgently required. Sociological traditions, especially labour process theory, critical realism, and the politics of working life, are well equipped to transcend the unhelpful polarity between subjective and objective accounts. By doing so, we can understand not just what makes work meaningful in principle, but how it is contested, created, defended, and sometimes denied within capitalist workplaces.

This article by Knut Laaser and Jan Ch Karlsson responds to these calls by advancing a novel sociological framework of meaningful work. Their central claim is that meaningful work can only be grasped by analysing the interplay between objective and subjective dimensions of three interdependent categories:

autonomy, dignity, and recognition. The framework demonstrates how workers experience and defends meaningfulness at the agent level, while simultaneously being shaped, constrained, or undermined by broader workplace, organizational, and societal structures.

Theoretical Foundations

The authors ground their framework in three interlocking bodies of theory:

1. Politics of Working Life Originating in Scandinavian sociology (notably Lysgaard), this approach sees the capitalist workplace as a technical-economic system oriented toward efficiency, productivity, and profit. It identifies three inherent features of formal organizations: insatiability (constant demand for higher performance), one-sidedness (ignoring workers' talents and interests beyond their hired role), and replaceability (workers are expendable if efficiency requires). These structural imperatives collide with workers' own interests, producing an ongoing terrain of conflict, compromise, and negotiation.

2. Critical Realist Theory of Agency Drawing on Archer, critical realism distinguishes structures (pre-existing conditions that enable or constrain action) from agency (the causal powers of individuals and groups to reproduce or transform those structures). Workers are not passive; they act with degrees of freedom and self-command. Their search for meaningful work is understood as a fundamental human impulse toward autonomy, dignity, and recognition, even under highly constrained labour processes.

3. Social Theory of Dignity and Recognition Building on Honneth, dignity is conceptualized as respect for human worth and recognition as the intersubjective acknowledgment of



individuals’ rights, contributions, and esteem. These are not merely psychological but socially embedded phenomena, mediated through both formal organizational practices and informal worker solidarities.

By combining these traditions, Laaser and Karlsson propose a sociological lens that avoids both downward conflation (reducing agency to structures) and upward conflation (reducing structures to individual meaning-making). Instead, meaningful work is seen as an emergent outcome of the dialectic between objective conditions and subjective practices.

Review of Existing Approaches

Before introducing their own framework, the authors critically evaluate major strands of the literature:

- **Job Characteristics Model (Hackman & Oldham, 1975):** Highlights task identity, task significance, and skill variety as structural enablers of meaningful work. Yet, from a critical realist standpoint, this reduces agency to mere by-products of structure, neglecting workers’ capacity to reinterpret or resist.

- **Humanist Approaches (Lips-Wiersma, Morris, Bailey, Madden):** Emphasize purpose, self-actualization, and service to others. These perspectives highlight agency but risk an “upward conflation,” treating structures as mere backdrops to individual meaning-making.

- **Yeoman’s Democratic Approach (2014):** Offers a promising balance by linking autonomy, freedom, and recognition to institutional arrangements. However, it tends toward normative prescription—what work ought to be—rather than analysing how meaning is actually created and defended in everyday workplaces.

The Novel Framework: Objective and Subjective Dimensions

Laaser and Karlsson propose a three-pillar typology of meaningful work, each with an objective and a subjective dimension.

1. Autonomy

- **Objective Autonomy:** Opportunities for workers to exercise discretion, skill, and judgment in their tasks. Includes participation in decision-making, task sequencing, and self-determined pacing.

- **Subjective Autonomy:** Informal practices and collectives that carve out spaces of independence from managerial control. Workers create cultural ensembles, rituals, and shop-floor games that generate meaning even under oppressive regimes.

2. Dignity

- **Objective Dignity:** Respectful treatment through policies, stable employment, fair wages, and recognition of vulnerabilities. Horizontal relations that support civility and equality also matter.

- **Subjective Dignity:** Workers’ self-organized strategies to uphold worth, solidarity, and self-respect, especially when formal dignity is denied. Communities of coping, rituals, and bottom-up citizenship behaviors transform degrading jobs into meaningful experiences.

3. Recognition

- **Objective Recognition:** Institutional and organizational practices that acknowledge workers’ rights, provide secure employment,



ensure voice in decision-making, and respect legal equality.

- **Subjective Recognition:**

Interpersonal appreciation and admiration among co-workers. Workers derive esteem by contributing to collective projects, sharing knowledge, and being recognized by peers for skills and effort.

Together, these six dimensions interact as mechanisms that shape tendencies toward or away from meaningful work.

Scenarios of Meaningful Work

Applying their framework, the authors outline five possible scenarios:

1. **Strong and Balanced Meaningful Work:** Occurs when both objective and subjective mechanisms align. Jobs with discretion, security, fair treatment, and strong informal solidarities enable stable, deep meaningfulness. Likely in public sector or professions under robust industrial relations regimes.
2. **Weak and Unstable Meaningful Work:** Present when objective conditions are supportive but subjective mechanisms (collectively, solidarity) are weak. Work may feel temporarily meaningful but prone to burnout, over-investment, and fragility. Examples include junior doctors and teachers.
3. **Constrained Meaningful Work:** Emerges when subjective mechanisms flourish despite weak objective recognition and dignity, provided some autonomy exists. Dirty work such as cleaning or refuse collection can be meaningful through solidarity and social

usefulness, even if undervalued structurally.

4. **Struggle for Meaningful Work:** Occurs when objective conditions are poor but workers mobilize informal solidarities, rituals, and oppositional practices. Meaning is carved out “against the grain” of managerial control, but remains precarious and constantly under threat.
5. **Absence of Meaningful Work:** When both objective and subjective mechanisms are absent. Workers face precarious contracts, lack autonomy, suffer disrespect, and have no space to build solidarities. Jobs like security guards or porters employed through agencies exemplify this bleak scenario.

These scenarios illustrate that subjective mechanisms are indispensable—if dignity, recognition, or autonomy are absent at the subjective level, meaningfulness collapses, even if objective conditions are partly favourable.

Contributions to Sociology of Work

The framework makes several contributions:

1. **Integration of Structure and Agency:** It bridges the longstanding gap between subjective and objective approaches to meaningful work, rooted in a critical realist ontology.
2. **Focus on Politics of Work:** It situates meaningfulness within struggles over control, autonomy, and dignity, emphasizing the contested terrain of capitalist labour processes.
3. **Typology of Mechanisms:** By distinguishing objective and subjective dimensions of autonomy, dignity, and



recognition, the framework provides analytical tools to assess workplace dynamics across diverse contexts.

4. **Applicability Across Job Types:** Unlike many frameworks biased toward high-skill or professional work, it explicitly includes low-skill, precarious, and stigmatized occupations.
5. **Implications for Labor Movements:** For unions and organizations campaigning for better work, the framework highlights that beyond safe conditions and fair pay, informal solidarities and recognition dynamics are crucial for meaningfulness.

Implications and Future Research

- **Policy and Institutional Design:** Stronger labour rights, collective bargaining, and worker participation can bolster objective recognition and dignity. However, sustaining subjective mechanisms requires space for informal solidarities, which cannot be engineered top-down.

- **Global Perspective:** The framework currently draws heavily on Global North theories and empirical cases. Comparative studies across the Global South are necessary to test universality and reveal cultural and political-economic variations.

- **Digitalization and Platform Work:** Emerging technologies and algorithmic management may erode informal spaces central to subjective autonomy and recognition. Future research should examine how platform workers create or struggle

for meaningfulness under such conditions.

- **Interdisciplinary Dialogue:** By engaging sociology, management studies, philosophy, and labour economics, the framework can enrich debates across disciplines and inform more holistic interventions.

Conclusion

Laaser and Karlsson’s framework marks a significant advance in the sociology of work by moving “beyond the dichotomy” of subjective vs. objective definitions of meaningful work. By foregrounding the interplay of autonomy, dignity, and recognition in both objective and subjective forms, it captures the richness of workers lived struggles for meaning within the constraints of capitalist labour processes.

The framework demonstrates that meaningful work is neither wholly given by job design nor entirely constructed by individual perception. It is instead the result of contested practices, solidarities, and institutional conditions—always vulnerable, always partial, yet always sought after by workers as part of their fundamental human drive for worth and autonomy.

As the nature of work transforms under globalization, precarization, and digitalization, this sociological lens provides essential guidance for researchers, policymakers, and labour organizations seeking to understand and defend the conditions that make work meaningful.

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