

# The Subjective Experience of Personal Fulfillment in a Job with a Sense of Purpose

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## Summary

The main objective of this article is to reflect on the subjective experience of working with meaning.

## Introduction

Work as an exclusively human activity of transformation of physical and social reality, and as a subjective experience of personal fulfillment or self-realization according to Maslow [1], acquires different senses or meanings from the processes of social attribution, as a result of the knowledge that people acquire and build on a part of the socially shared reality. In industrial modernity, for example, the meaning and value of work were guided by answers to why and what people work for. These answers have theoretical and practical implications for the professional practice of psychologists at work and organizations since they facilitate the understanding of the meaning and value that people assign to work and the role or role that this social and above all symbolic activity plays in their lives. In short, and according to the studies carried out by Porras Velásquez [2-14], what is at stake here is to rescue the importance and centrality of work in the psychic structuring of people.

## Why does the question arise about the meaning of work?

It is evident that human beings are not always consciously looking for the meaning of our life or of each of the actions we perform in our existence. However, on some occasions, we do not find a satisfactory answer to the questions about the why and why of what we do at work. In those circumstances or moments of our existence we feel an “existential void”, a lack of coherence, congruence and internal consistency between what we think, feel and do that generates psychic, emotional and spiritual discomfort. In the specific case of work, there are moments in our working life, when we feel too pressured, exhausted, distressed and overwhelmed by the tasks or activities we have, we must or committed to do, despite the great efforts and dedication to comply with what was agreed and we think that if we are not complying it is because we do not like or we are no longer passionate about what we do, despite recognizing ourselves and feeling competent or capable. Those moments of anguish and uncertainty in which the feeling of existential emptiness produces, we do not achieve high levels of performance or job satisfaction. For now, suffice it to say that the process of reconnecting again-reconnecting-from what we think, feel and do with the activities, circumstances, objects and people valuable and important to us takes time.

## The question of the meaning of work in the history of humanity

Knowing why I work and why I do the work I do, began to occupy a relevant place as an object of reflection for the existential psychology of work, from the changes generated by the imposition of the production model of industrial capitalism of the last century. Currently, the question of the meaning of work acquires a renewed force in post-industrial society, from the new forms of organization of work in the neoliberal production system, promoting great

transformations in labor relations. For Peralta, Porras Velásquez [15-25] it is clear that workers, as social subjects, construct their senses of life from the relationship between what is given objectively (what is experienced as external reality) and subjective meanings (what is experienced as something interior to the consciousness of the individual). In other words, the meaning of work is a social and collective construction that the subject embodies in his existential discourse and practice. According to Martínez [26], life and work acquire meaning if people manage to give direction to their lives, manage to have goals they seek to achieve, manage to perform an activity consistent with their personal values and manage to feel or experience the pleasure and joy of living or perform an activity that they are passionate about. Now, if we manage to connect reason, emotion and action, in the world of work, the sense of coherence and existential consistency will emerge.

### **The meaning of work as a set of meanings attributed and shared socially and collectively**

Bauman [27] proposes that the meaning of work should be sought by tracing the work ethic. For this author, the work ethic, in a nutshell, is a norm of life, with two explicit premises and two tacit presuppositions: the first premise says that, if you want to get what you need to live and be happy, you have to do something that others consider valuable and worthy of payment. Nothing is free: it is always a "I give something for you to give me", it is necessary to give first to receive later. The second premise states that it is wrong, that it is foolish and morally harmful, to settle for what has already been achieved and to keep less instead of looking for more; that it is absurd and irrational to stop striving after you have attained satisfaction; that it is not decorous to rest, except to gather strength and continue working. In other words: working is a value in itself, a noble and hierarchical activity. (p.25). As can be seen, in the previous quote, in this normative and moral context, working, working and working is the ethical principle regulating the behavior of individual and collective subjects. This type of behavior, in the contemporary world of work, is framed more in the obsessive and perhaps in the compulsive than in the rational. In this sense, "Work like crazy people and produce like crazy people". "Don't stop working." "Work and consume like crazy" is the new slogan of the commodification of human labor. For this reason, it is easy to make us believe as Bauman [27] points out, that working is good, not doing it is bad. Regardless of the conditions, consequences and effects of that compulsive act that commands us to "work to death." The mandate and moral imperative to work, first and foremost, implies that most people have a capacity for work that they must sell in order to earn a living, offering it to those who can buy it to get what they deserve in return. Labor as a commodity is offered in labor markets that self-regulate to supposedly make their commercial transactions fairer. However, we cannot forget that all that poor people possess is their ability to work and that they not only receive a reward or salary compensation for the work done, but also for being willing to continue working [27]. Blanch [28] starting from the assumption that work constitutes a central category of human, personal, social and collective existence and experience. Which, in addition, is an

activity that transcends the field of economics, proposes a model to identify the meaning or, rather, the meanings of work through a multidimensional construct, composed of the following three main semantic axes: a) The Centrality of work (importance and valuation of working as a vital role), b) Social norms on work (linked to the performance of the labor role) and c) The valued results of the fact of working and the establishment of the preferred work goals.

This model has served as a reference for many investigations in the field of the social psychology of work and productive organizations, showing its benefits for those who are interested in finding out about the processes of construction of shared meanings in organizational cultures. Zangaro [29], Currently, work and its meanings for young people is expanding and becoming increasingly complex within the framework of the culture of cyberspace and the more inclusive multicultural society, in which these meanings are produced. Although it is concretely reflected in these areas, the meanings built on work influence and condition both the decisions that people make in their lives and the behaviors and interactions in the social and collective groups that make up human communities and organizations. Thus, aspects of work relevant to psychological practice and research from a social approach to work activity would not be limited to the analysis of interaction and the study of individual or collective activities. Nor would they refer only to the socially shared meaning attributed to that reality in a given culture and at a certain time. On the contrary, it would cover a good number of complex phenomena related to the reality of work. In this way, unemployment, retirement or the relationship between the workplace and other areas of human life (free time, family, etc.) are relevant phenomena for a psychology of work from a social perspective [30]. As can be seen, in what has been said so far, in the performance of their work people find some references to build their identities and their subjective positions in front of others in the world of work. For this reason, it can be said that work can be both a source of personal fulfillment, a potential psychosocial emancipator, as well as a cause of discomfort, alienation and subjective suffering.

### **Conclusion**

Psychology can assume work as a space of production of meaning, in which the worker establishes a singular relationship with the world of work he inhabits and with the personal values of creation that he shares with others, in a dialectic process of giving and receiving. The process of reconnecting again, what we think, feel and do with the activities, circumstances, objects and people valuable and important to us requires time, effort and above all paying the price of becoming oneself at work and in all the existential relationships of our life. Finally, it is important to remember that meaninglessness at work, lived as an experience of existential emptiness or existential frustration are the most frequent cause of additions at work.

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