ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Examining the Role of Dignity in the Experience of Meaningfulness: a Process-Relational View on Meaningful Work

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Abstract

The objective of the present study is to examine the ethical grounding and process-relational nature of meaningful work through the relationship of dignity and meaningfulness. Adopting a practice lens, we show how a shift from methodological individualism to a process-relational worldview allows meaningful work to be understood through organizational activities rather than individual characteristics. Building on practice-based theorization, we present a process-relational model of meaningful work that 1) examines meaningfulness as a flow of experience in the stream of work activity events; 2) highlights how experiencing meaningfulness is embedded in social practices, distinguishing it as a social phenomenon that is defined by this embeddedness; 3) delineates situationality, historicity, and contextuality of meaningfulness; and 4) shows how meaningful work is grounded in the prioritization of dignity in the logic of practice. Accordingly, our model enables a more holistic understanding of how dignity functions as the ethical basis for the experience of meaningfulness in the context of work and organization.

Keywords Meaningful work · Dignity · Process · Relationality

Introduction

As the nature of work continues to change, the relations between work, its performers, and its providers shift accordingly. An increasing share of work is based on individual skills and capabilities and less on the fungible characteristics of employees; but to be able or willing to use their potential, people should also be able to find the work meaningful. Both humanistic management and business ethics studies have taken interest in meaningful work, sharing an interest in 'job characteristics as moral and motivational forces' (Michaelson et al. 2014, 85). Meaningful work is generally referred to as a 'positive subjective, individual experience' of work (Bailey et al. 2019b, 98), the positive outcomes of which for both individuals and organizations have been widely noted. These include, e.g., better

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engagement in organizational activities (May et al. 2004); organizational commitment and identification (Cardador et al. 2011); and even higher customer satisfaction (Leiter et al. 1998). Such benefits have encouraged organizations to engage in job design, focus on interpersonal relationships, and create supporting organizational missions and cultures (Rosso et al. 2010).

However, research in the humanities tradition on meaningful work has criticized the focus on the 'management of meaning', i.e., the notion that meaningful work results from external factors rather than from the experienced value of work goals or purposes (Lips-Wiersma and Morris 2009). On the other hand, individual-focused studies emphasizing subjective assessment of work experiences have been seen to omit the contextuality of that experience (Lepisto and Pratt 2017; Bailey and Madden 2017) and that meaningful work entails a degree of 'objective autonomy to pursue one's subjective aspirations' (Michaelson et al. 2014, 85–86). Extant studies have also noted that experience of meaningfulness derives from what is being valued (perceived value of work, role, and self: Wrzesniewski et al. 2003), not only by the individual, but also by the collective of which the individual is a part of, pointing towards individual's disposition to make meaning and meaningfulness together with others (Lips-Wiersma and Morris 2009).

Consequently, Bailey et al. (2019a) claim that the focus of meaningful work research has been mainly on individuals and therefore less attention has been given to meaningful work's processual and relational features, i.e., that the relation between the experience of an individual and the environment maintaining and giving form to the experiences has not been prioritized. The notion of meaningfulness combines both an 'objective' dimension (conditions) and the 'subjective' dimension (perception) (Ciulla 2000), and Bailey et al. (2019a) similarly suggest that meaningfulness could be seen to be defined by the tensions between the domains of 'self' and 'other'. Such tensions distill the subjective nature of meaningful work, which arises from self-fulfillment and self-actualization and manifests as a pervasive sense of the value of one's work. This totality of experiences is simultaneously structured and defined by the context in which the experiences occur.

Therefore, we can identify two gaps in the current understanding of meaningful work. First, given the prevailing positivist and unitarist models, the literature has thus far paid less attention to viewpoints that present meaningful work as a contextually and situationally emerging phenomenon (Bailey and Madden 2017). A process-relational perspective that would examine both ends of the tension as simultaneously existing is needed to better understand the conditions for the experience of meaningfulness and the way it emerges in work contexts. Second, as a result of this knowledge gap, the deeper ethical foundations of the experience of meaningfulness – what is being valued and acceptable in the work context and how that prioritization sets the condition for the experience -- have not been clarified, although the ethical and moral grounding of meaningful work has been recognized (Lips-Wiersma et al. 2020).

In this paper, we aim to theorize meaningful work through process-relational view and examine the ethical basis of meaningful work through the concept of *dignity*. Drawing on dignity as an inherent value that requires recognition, we examine meaningful work as relational, i.e., priority is given to the relations and activities of individuals and collectives that construe organizational entities (Cooper 2005; Chia 1995). We therefore focus on the tension between an individual and those environmental entities that maintain and give form to the individual and on individual experiences of meaningfulness. Drawing on practice perspective, we regard human existence always transpiring in a context, and each context and its entities and events mutually constitutive (Schatzki 2005). By focusing on the perceived value of work, role, and self (Wrzesniewski et al. 2003) and drawing theoretical inspiration

from Theodore Schatzki's site ontology and practice theory, we use the concept of tele-oaffective structure as a lens to examine those guiding values that provide the conditions for the experience of meaningfulness. As a result, we note that the expectations regarding one's role and oneself affecting one's work experiences are defined by the logic of practice, and present dignity as a property of practice that provides substance to the purpose and value systems underlying meaningfulness.

Our study builds on and contributes to the humanities tradition and process-relational studies within meaningful work research by providing a model that 1) examines meaningfulness as a flow of experience in the stream of work activity events; 2) characterizes meaning as in the processual and relational aspects or work by theorizing meaningfulness as embedded in social practices, distinguishing it as a social phenomenon that is defined by this embeddedness; 3) delineates situationality, historicity, and contextuality of meaningfulness as well as 4) the ethical basis of meaningful work by showing how meaningful work is grounded in the prioritization of dignity in the logic of practice.

Process-Relational Basis of Meaningful Work

When reviewing the inter- and multidisciplinary field of meaningful work, Bailey et al. (2019a) note that the approaches towards meaningful work have been polarized between psychology-oriented studies emphasizing the individual end and subjective assessment of work experiences; and the studies that emphasize the work and the objective dimension or external factors of meaningful work, drawing on political theory, philosophy, or social constructivist approaches. As Michaelson et al. (2014) point out, these dimensions mutually influence each other, as meeting objective conditions of meaningful work provides the opportunity for experiencing meaningfulness. After all, the worker's experience of the work is influenced by not only the work itself and the individual's interpretation of it, but also by the context in which the work is done. The experiences of meaningfulness of the same work may therefore differ between individuals and situations, depending upon the circumstances in which it is done, and with whom and for whom it is being done. Bailey et al. (2019a) concludes that in order to move the field forward, it would be important to gain a more holistic understanding of meaningful work and to adopt approaches that embrace complex and contradictory phenomena, facilitating a shift in scholarly focus to the relational and processual aspects of meaningful work.

Both subjective and objective viewpoints have also pointed towards the ethical dimension of meaningful work as a shared focus. Individual's relationship to and perception of their work as integral to identity and self-esteem; the role of autonomy to pursue one's aspirations; and the value of work that contributes to social well-being have been emphasized (Michaelson et al. 2014). On the other hand, in line with the objective dimension, organizations would then be responsible for providing such conditions and have the moral responsibility to ensure the realization of autonomy, dignity, and freedom through meaningful work (Bowie 1998; Wolf 2010). Meaningful work can, therefore, be considered a 'moral and institutional imperative (Bailey et al. 2019a, 483).

Here, we build on the ethical underpinnings as the shared aspect of subjective and objective approaches to meaningful work, and the mutual constitution of the domains of 'self' and 'other' between which the tensions arise (Lips-Wiersma and Wright 2012; Bailey et al. 2019a). In what follows, we adopt a process-relational perspective to produce a practice-based theorization of the meaningful work, connecting the experienced value of

work, role, and self to the dignity as an inherent value that provides the condition for the experience of meaningfulness and thus showing the ethical basis of meaningful work. First, we examine the ethical underpinnings of meaningful work research and focus on the identified connections between meaningful work, meaningfulness, and dignity. We then position our study in the humanities and process-oriented stream of research on meaningful work. Finally, we present a framework that shows how dignity functions as the ethical basis of meaningful work, enabling us to examine experience of meaningfulness as a result of practices that prioritize dignity as part of the logic of practice.

Ethical Underpinnings of Meaningful Work

Researchers have found common ground by defining meaningful work through *experiences*: it is generally agreed that meaningful work is regarded as a 'positive, subjective, individual experience' of work (Bailey et al. 2019b). More specifically, these experiences are connected to the perceived values of work, role, and self (Wrzesniewski et al. 2003). By connecting the values of work, role and self to meaningful work, previous studies have pinpointed the importance of the context of work and its ethical underpinnings, i.e., what is considered acceptable or unacceptable behavior in an organization, how these expectations regarding one's role and oneself affect one's work experiences, and how the relations between individual experiences and their social constituents enable an individual to live a good life (Yeoman 2014).

Early sociologists were primarily concerned with the anomie and alienation of employees that stemmed from a lack of meaning in industrial work (Lepisto and Pratt 2017; Michaelson et al. 2014). The proponents of scientific management were interested in developing more efficient and standardized working methods. Hence, salaries were increased, and incentive payments were introduced, yet employees were still regarded as little more than parts of well-functioning production machines (Bodrožić and Adler 2018). Simultaneously, those institutions that had traditionally provided meaning, such as religious organizations, were replaced by the formal rationality of bureaucratic systems (Tole 1993). Accordingly, early proponents of meaningful work scrutinized the effects of job characteristics and aimed to improve the objective features of work to mitigate the threat of alienation by giving industrial workers opportunities to exercise autonomy while expressing authenticity and self-efficacy (Lepisto and Pratt 2017). Subsequently, meaningful work researchers have focused on a variety of topics, including the ways meaningful work facilitates human flourishing, the moral duty of employers to provide a supportive context for meaningful work, and even whether the market system values the meaningfulness of work (Michaelson 2021). Specifically, the ethical responsibility of an employer to provide both objective and subjective aspects of meaningful work has become a permanent research topic (Lips-Wiersma et al. 2020; Michaelson et al. 2014; Yeoman 2014; Ciulla 2012; Lepisto and Pratt 2017; Bowie 1998).

The scholarly focus of meaningful work has often been on the characteristics of work and work environments, creating content-based conceptualizations of how subjective experiences of meaningfulness can be fostered. Lepisto and Pratt (2017) distinguish two research perspectives. First, *the realization perspective* focuses on the objective features of meaningful work and how employees are dominated and controlled within organizations. Here, one of the core problems is a lack of dignity, employee autonomy in self-expression and self-realization. One potential solution for absence is to improve working conditions via job design or enrichment by management (Lepisto and Pratt 2017). Consequently,

research has shown that facilitating employees' autonomy, skill variety, task identity, and task significance, as well as providing feedback, foster employees' experiences of meaningfulness (Hackman and Oldham 1976). More recent studies have supplemented these findings by paying attention to, for example, aligning work with personal preferences and desires (Berg et al. 2010) and ensuring person-job fit (Tim et al. 2016).

Second, *the justification perspective* focuses on subjective experiences of the value of one's work (Lepisto and Pratt 2017). If one's work lacks subjective or wider societal value, or if the sources of value are fuzzy, contested, or ambiguous, the work is not experienced as meaningful. Justification refers to the question of 'why is my work worth doing?', connecting meaningfulness to a wider social context. Mere job design or enrichment cannot answer this question; one's work needs to have a personal or a societal purpose (Lepisto and Pratt 2017). Consequently, ethical and humanities tradition of meaningful work research has focused on the importance of employees' moral aspirations and on their capacity to achieve these aspirations (Michaelson et al. 2014; Lips-Wiersma and Morris 2009). Studies have not only revealed connections between meaningfulness and normative structures outside of an immediate work environment, such as spirituality, religion, or dignity (Ahmad and Omar 2016; Adawiyah and Pramuka 2017; Bal 2017), but have also shed light on how experiences of meaningfulness arise from achieving shared goals and assisting or supporting colleagues (Colbert et al. 2016). Accordingly, the mere possibility of self-realization is insufficient; people also have the need to contribute toward something bigger or to the greater good.

Work that Supports Dignity—Or Vice Versa?

The question of how autonomy and freedom of an individual become respected in organizations, and how an individual can use this freedom to contribute towards something greater, lies in the core of meaningful work. The same question is also the one of *dignity*, the importance of which in work contexts, and the way work should always support the dignity of human beings, has been identified in the existing studies (Bowie 1998, 1085; Lips-Wiersma and Morris 2009; Yeoman 2014). Even though people are being used as tools towards organizational ends, they should be treated as mature, capable, and feeling human beings. *Autonomy*, the human capacity to exert free will and set our moral laws, is the source of the intrinsic equal worth that should not be violated in Kantian philosophy (Bal 2017; Rosen 2012; Dierksmeier 2015; Lucas 2015). All individuals should be considered equals and allowed to pursue their higher goals. Therefore, it is not a surprise that dignity has been at the heart of the humanities tradition in the field of meaningful work research, specifically, through the abovementioned realization perspective, which has been connected to aspects that highlight individual autonomy and control (Bailey et al. 2019b; Yeoman 2014; Lisp-Wiersma and Morris 2009; Bowie 1998). Dignity, when approached as a value, functions as a normative tool that aids understanding the social structuring of work through the interplay between an individual's personal values and their congruence with the value system of the surrounding community (Wiener 1988; Hogg and Terry 2000).

As a general category, dignity refers to anything that possesses intrinsic value; in business studies, it typically refers to an inherent, existential value that is attributed to humans (Pirson et al. 2016). Originally, this *human dignity* was given divine origins, but contemporary secular interpretations are essentially based on Kantian philosophy (Bal 2017; Rosen 2012; Dierksmeier 2015; Lucas 2015). According to Kant, all humans have an intrinsic equal worth that should not be violated. The source of this worth is *autonomy*, the human

capability of having free will and the capacity to set our own moral laws. As autonomous beings, people should never be subjugated and used as a means to an end (Rosen 2012; Bal 2017). Hence, the Kantian notion of human dignity is mainly focused on morality that is based on autonomy and equality: All individuals, regardless of their characteristics or deeds, should be considered equals and given the possibility to pursue their higher goals. In addition to this universal human dignity, i.e., *Würde*, Kant identified *Wert*, i.e., praise for the moral stature of those who live exemplar moral lives. Due to Wert, people are not free, from a moral point of view, to act as they please. Rather, they have duties of respect. Dignity is therefore a specific type of value that demands recognition from others (Rosen 2012). Furthermore, dignity represents the inherent or earned value imbued to us by social conventions; respect is how this value manifests through social actions (Rosen 2012; Bal 2017; Darwall 1977; Rogers and Ashforth 2014; Grover 2014).

The extant literature also identifies *dignity as identity* and *dignity as merit*, which have implications for business studies (Nordenfelt and Edgar 2005). Dignity as identity refers to the personhood with a unique history and future; dignity as merit is tied to the recognition of the intrinsic value of the formal position one might occupy. The dignity of each person, therefore, can be understood through a position (merit); it can be earned by expressing a certain kind of behavior (identity or moral stature); and in its broadest sense, dignity can refer to the value we possess as human beings (human dignity). These distinctions between different types of dignity and the tensions they might cause can easily be experienced in an organizational context. People are usually hired to fill a specific position (merit) due to the individual instrumental value they provide (identity), but at the same time, all employees should be equally respected as human beings (Sayer 2007).

In an organizational context, recognizing and respecting dignity facilitates various outcomes that are considered crucial for experiencing meaningfulness. Recognizing oneself and others as valuable builds an employee's understanding of self and others in organizations, linking different aspects of respect with organizational self-esteem, organizational and role identification and psychological safety (Rogers and Ashforth 2014). In addition, respecting employees as individuals through both their personhood and merits while acknowledging their equal status can result in higher work engagement and improved employee investment in an organization (Grover 2014). Consequently, dignity is the guiding value that provides substance to the purpose and value systems underlying meaningfulness, i.e., dignity makes work worth doing (Bal 2017).

From Content-Based Conceptualizations to a Process-Relational Worldview of Meaningful Work

While extant studies acknowledge the importance of everyday work tasks for experiencing meaningfulness and social relations (e.g., Colbert et al. 2016; Berg et al. 2010; Tim et al. 2016; Wrzesniewski et al. 2003), the focus has often been on individual characteristics or activities, which undermines the relational and processual aspects of meaningful work and meaningfulness (Bailey et al. 2019a; Bailey and Madden 2017). Such content-based studies rely on methodological individualism to claim that social phenomena result from the deliberate intentionality of entities (Chia and Holt 2006; Tsoukas and Chia 2002). Primacy is therefore given to individuals and the rationality of actors, ignoring the socio-ontological basis of meaningful work and meaningfulness while addressing complex phenomena in static terms.

In a relational worldview, priority is given to the relations and activities of individuals and collectives that construe organizational entities (Cooper 2005; Chia 1995). Hence, it focuses on the tension between an individual and those environmental entities that maintain and give form to the individual (Cooper 2005) and on individual experiences of meaningfulness. Organizational context is not based on self-bound separate entities but is constantly formed by entwined relations. From the process-relational perspective, meaningful work and meaningfulness are not static, prescriptive elements ('things') with fixed meanings or entities, but phenomena that are contested, evolved, clash, and merge in relation to one another through people's everyday work activities (Emirbayer 1997).

Examining a phenomenon that is ever-changing and based on individual experiences, i.e., highly contextual and situational, in static terms does not provide us with an understanding of the contexts for experiencing meaningfulness and, therefore, what constitutes meaningful work. Amid ongoing digitalization and the growing importance of knowledge work, the contents, contexts, and methods of work change continuously. No day or given moment in time is the same, and experiences cannot be detached from events that are taking place. Following the logic of the Heraclitan individual-river relation, we cannot execute the same work activities twice. A worker is constituted by his or her experiences, and work is one of these constitutive processes (Farmer 1997, 65; Langley and Tsoukas 2017).

The humanities tradition in meaningful work and meaningfulness research (Bailey et al. 2019b; Lips-Wiersma and Morris 2009; Yeoman 2014) has moved beyond the idea of the 'management of meaning' to address how meaningfulness is constructed. An organization is considered a context for enacting and living through meanings, a place where people create meaningfulness together, rather than an environment where meanings are provided by a manager. A stream of literature adopting a sensemaking approach to meaningful work (e.g. Aguinis and Glavas 2019; Dutton et al. 2016; Vuori et al. 2012; Wrzesniewski et al. 2003) has addressed how meanings are enacted through everyday activities in social interactions. As people interact with one another, they observe and communicate subtle cues to 'make sense' of the meaning of a given situation. Through this process, employees come to understand the value of job, role and self in work is (Wrzesniewski et al. 2003). Here, individuals and their psychological processes are still the loci of analysis, but the construction of meaning is an ongoing process. Adding to this perspective of the humanities tradition, it is in human nature to strive for meaning and build understanding with others. It thus becomes the task of an organization to provide a suitable environment for people to create meaningfulness together. The role of an organization is therefore to support its members in their cocreation of meaningfulness by providing objective features of meaningful work. Moreover, the organizational environment needs to be built to respect dignity: When the values of work, role and self are aligned with dignity, work is experienced as meaningful (Bowie 1998; Lips-Wiersma and Morris 2009; Yeoman 2014; Bal 2017).

Building on the humanistic tradition and sensemaking literature on meaningful work, we wish to promote the viewpoint of enactment and relationality. We therefore suggest an approach that focuses on how experiences emerge from the enactment of everyday work practices rather than emphasizing individuals as loci of the analysis. Building on the nascent processual notion of meaningful work, we aim to develop our understanding of how the underlying norms, rules, and conventions that provide the basis for shared understanding in a given situation structure the work activities. In the following subsections we, first, discuss the connections between dignity and meaningful work and then, present their entwinement through the logic of practice. Adopting a social practice perspective with process-relational worldview, the experience is understood to be construed in social contexts

and cannot be detached from the events occurring in a given time and place (Reckwitz 2002).

Outlining the Process-Relational Framework of Meaningful Work

In the following paragraphs, we describe the key concepts used to study the construction of meaningful work and the connections between meaningful work, meaningfulness and dignity that have been identified by researchers. We present these in terms of the self-others duality described by the existing literature (Lips-Wiersma and Morris 2009; Yeoman 2014; Bailey et al. 2019a; Michaelson 2021); being nevertheless aware of the different streams of literature from which they arise and the different assumptions they hold. In the following section, we examine these contextual relations through a practice lens and introduce a process-relational model of the emergence of meaningful work. Our initial framework is described in Fig. 1 below.

Based on the existing studies, we can identify a connection between the three aspects of dignity, i.e., human dignity, dignity as merit, and dignity as identity (Rosen 2012; Bal 2017; Nordenfelt 2004; Nordenfelt and Edgar 2005), and the perceived values of work, role, and self (Wrzesniewski et al. 2003). First, human dignity is respected when employees can exercise autonomy in deciding how to do their work (Bal 2017). Paid work tends to entail formal job descriptions that provide a preliminary understanding of what kinds of tasks and activities such work involves. Starting from this initial position, employees can use their own volition to modify and alter the content of their work to better express themselves. Others in the workplace then approve or disapprove of these modifications, providing or denying respect and recognition of work (Wrzesniewski et al. 2003). Second, dignity as merit reflects the intrinsic value and meaning of a role. Each organizational role, whether clerk, CEO or cleaner, has its own dignity that is based on one's position, which manifests as certain expectations regarding one's behavior and treatment. As others recognize or deny these inherent values of the position they occupy, employees gain validation and acceptance for their professional choices. Finally, dignity as identity reflects the individualization of self-meaning. Employees have their own identities that are accompanied by personalities,
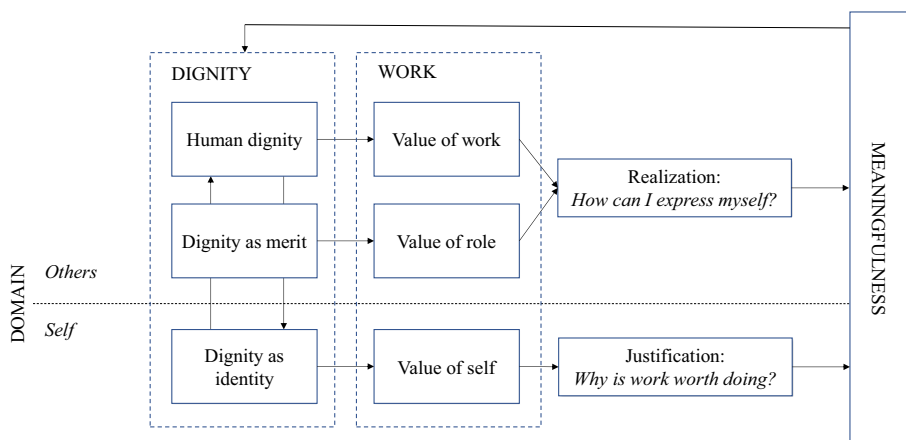

Fig. 1 Ethical basis of meaningful work

histories, beliefs, values, and aspirations, which are affirmed or denied through interpersonal cues. These cues can relate not only to our own work identity but also to what our work personally signifies to us. If our identity is recognized at work, we feel esteemed and respected. Thus, maintaining dignity as a guiding value that provides the ethical and normative framework for organizational activities enables meaningfulness to emerge.

The existing literature has also presented meaningful work as a prerequisite for human dignity. The possibility to perform work that is subjectively meaningful for an individual is part of human dignity: One cannot have dignity if one is forced to perform meaningless work (Ciulla 2012). However, when examining the connections between different aspects of dignity in a work context, dignity can also be a prerequisite for meaningful work through the respect for autonomy and control, as indicated by the *realization perspective* (Lepisto and Pratt 2017). In contrast, the *justification perspective* highlights the importance of the reasons for performing work in the first place. That is, meaningfulness cannot be assessed by simply observing how people perform their work; it rests in the very reason they choose to do that particular work in the first place, which is tied to individual identity. This reason needs to hold an intrinsic value for an employee for them to be able to experience meaningfulness.

Finally, the dignity and meaning of work constantly interact with societal values and beliefs (Bailey et al. 2019a; Bal 2017). Dignity should be regarded as an overarching consideration of employees in an organization that is enacted through the respect, protection, and promotion of who they are as human beings, organization members, and individuals. Workplaces have traditionally been considered difficult environments for dignity to be respected in due to the inherent tensions between the instrumental roles of employees and the social distance caused by organizational hierarchies (Hodson 1996, 2001). Consequently, humanistic management scholars have investigated how dignity can be maintained and promoted through actions that express recognition and respect (Hicks and Waddock 2017; Goodpaster 2017; Melé 2003; Pirson et al. 2016).

To better understand how dignity functions as the basis of experiencing meaningfulness, it is useful look for a more social perspective of how meaningful work manifests in organizations, i.e., to focus on actions and contexts that would bring the concepts in real-life practices. When the experience of meaningfulness is examined through the logic of practice: the activity at hand and the practices that are being drawn, defining the tasks, ends and the 'ought-to-do' of that activity, we can understand meaningfulness as situationally and contextually informed. As discussed above, we present dignity as this inherent value and the source of experienced value of work, role, or self which, when examined from this perspective, is not a property of an individual, but a property of practice. In the following section, we thus aim to deepen our understanding of the role of dignity in meaningful work by examining these entwined concepts through process-relational philosophy and social practice-based theorization, embracing historical and social contexts as the basis for meaningful work in practice.

Meaningful Work and Dignity: A Practice Approach

To examine the role of dignity in meaningfulness, we need to somehow make both concepts commensurable, i.e., to examine them through a lens that can simultaneously capture both aspects of the phenomenon. Thus, adopting a process-relational view, we focus on the 'flow' of experiencing meaningfulness and how dignity as underlying value that demand recognition structures this experience in time. Instead of focusing solely on the processual

aspects, however, we emphasize the relationality of meaningfulness and scrutinize the different elements through which the experience manifests.

To illustrate and refine concepts within this practice-based framework, we use real-world examples of software development work. Accordingly, we follow conceptual papers that have utilized real-world examples to clarify reasoning and argumentation (e.g., Michaelson 2021). Software industry reflects a typical context for future employment that relies heavily on knowledge work. The examples highlight how experiencing meaningfulness is highly contextual and situational, even when the type of professional work general allows people to express their personal interests and capabilities. In this kind of work, social context becomes a key issue since the objective features of meaningful work are expected to be 'in place'. Finally, our aim is not to verify theorized connections or create theory based on empirical analysis but to highlight how experiencing meaningfulness is contextual, situational, and constantly evolving.

Construction of Meaningful Work in Practice

We draw from Theodore Schatzki's practice theory (Schatzki 2002, 2005) and use his concept of a *teleoaffective structure* as a lens to examine the relations between individuals, work, and contexts, as well as their ethical underpinnings, through the concept of dignity. The practice view enables us to focus on the underlying logic of doings and sayings of individuals, i.e., what people do in their everyday work settings, what these settings are, and how they guide the activities of workers. Accordingly, meaningfulness always emerges in a context that is constituted by a nexus of practices and their material arrangements between the individual ('self') and the social ('others').

According to Schatzki (2013, 34), a practice can be defined as an 'organized, open-ended manifold of activities spread out across objective time and space'. A practice is composed of four different types of elements: 1) a *practical understanding* of physical activities to be performed to achieve specific goals; 2) explicit *rules* regarding activities; 3) a *teleoaffective structure* containing a normativized hierarchy of prescribed or acceptable ends, projects, tasks, actions, or even moods and emotions, which participants should or may utilize in practice; and 4) a *general understanding* of matters regarding the enactment of a given practice (Schatzki 2002, 2005, 2013).

While all elements can be seen to contribute towards dignity at work as well as meaningful work, we consider teleoaffective structure as the most relevant one as it contains the normativized hierarchy of the ends, projects, or tasks participants ought to or is acceptable to realize (Schatzki 2002, 80). As such, hierarchy represent deeper undercurrents for work activities, and sets the general tone to what extent different the ends related to the work need to be considered in the activity. The other practice elements are concerned with how those things prioritized by teleoaffective structure manifest. Practical understanding of physical activities concerns concrete activities such as typing with a keyboard when implementing software (Schatzki 2002, 78). Explicit rules involve formulations and principles that combine activities, such as what kind of a coding convention a developer should use when implementing software (Schatzki 2002, 79). General understanding relates to matters germane to the practice, such as culturally informed right ways of expressing politeness and tact when addressing others (Schatzki 2002, 134–135; 2010, 51; Loscher et al. 2019, 5).

Therefore, we focus on a teleoaffective structure, a normativized hierarchy that governs what people are expected and allowed to do ('ought-to-do') when pursuing

organizational ends (Schatzki 2002, 80). Thus, the normative meaning of dignity as a value that demands recognition through actions is located in a teleoaffective structure. Dignity is not something that employees *have* (as in individualistic theorizing), but a guiding principle of how different projects, activities, emotions, and moods should be prioritized when enacting practices. Consequently, employees carry out activities that convey human dignity, dignity as merit, and dignity as identity. Activities are then used in constructing meaning and value of work, position, and self (Wrzesniewski et al. 2003).

To illustrate this view, we present a real-life example from a software development meeting below (Vignette 1). In a meeting, people gather with a shared goal in a given time and place and share an understanding of what the meeting is about, who is participating, what each person's role is, and what participants are expected or allowed to discuss and when.

In a biweekly planning meeting of a software development organization, the product management representative provides a prioritized list of tasks for developers and is present to answer questions that the developers might have. The product owner, however, is not expected to otherwise participate in the discussion. During the meeting, the developers estimate how many items from the list they can implement and discuss possible preliminary implementation solutions. The goal of the meeting is to provide a list of tasks that the developers commit to implementing over the next two weeks.

When the planning has been completed, the scrum master, after scrolling back and forth through the task list, points out that the team seems to be committed to too many tasks for the next two weeks. His argument is that based on earlier estimates, the next two weeks seem to have almost 50% extra work in their backlog. The software architect seems to agree with this notion and suggests that one of the items be removed from the list and implemented later.

'And, you can always bring it back if we manage to do things faster than expected', one developer points out.

The architect nods and looks at the scrum master: 'Is Jill joining the team during the next two weeks?'

'Most likely, but we cannot rely on that', the scrum master answers, while moving a few more items out of the backlog. 'Ok, now it looks good to me. What do you think, is it realistic or optimistic?'

The developer who was participating in the discussion earlier agrees that the plan looks realistic. Everyone else is silent. After thinking about it, the architect agrees: 'I think this is a good plan to start with'.

The participants prepare to close the planning meeting.

Suddenly, another developer opens his mouth: 'Sorry, but I still want to discuss the task about databases. I don't agree that it is as simple as people seem to think'. The developer and architect start digging into the technical details of the task and discuss how it could and should be divided into smaller tasks. After listening to the technical discussion for a while the scrum master sighs and agrees that one large task is not justified; the task needs to be broken down into smaller pieces. After another round of estimating the workload with smaller tasks, the process finally comes to an end. The scrum master looks at the product owner, the product management representative in the meeting.

The product owner seems satisfied and nods: 'Thank you. Let's get to work!'. With these words, planning ends, and the product owner leaves the room.

Vignette 1. Software development meeting.

The doings and sayings in this example are embedded in a practice of a software development meeting through the four organizing principles discussed above. Practical understanding contains the know-how relating to physical activities and operating in and with the material world, such as how to gather in a meeting, to operate digital or audiovisual tools, or to sit on a chair. While software development process 'scrum' (Rising and Janoff 2000) provides the explicit prescriptions, procedures and principles of proceeding, like rules relating to the roles of participants. General understanding entails culturally appropriate ways to understand individual's roles and recognize those roles. In the vignette, the scrum master gracefully handles the situation in which the team has committed themselves to too many tasks. Neither Scrum nor the teleoaffective structure of the practice at hand provide any explicit rules of how to handle the situation. Instead, the scrum master relies on the general understanding of what is a tactful way of handling the situation in line with the prioritization of ends present in the teleoaffective structure. A similar delicate handling of the situation is seen at the end of the vignette when the developer wants to continue the discussion about the database task. The developer feels able to speak up about an issue even though the cues about ending the meeting have already been presented. According to the rules provided by scrum as well as general understanding of him being an expert in this field, this right is contained in his role and expert position. Moreover, the 'ought-to' of the given situation defined by the teleoaffective structure guides him to speak up, as the end goals of the meeting involve information sharing and future planning, and the teleoaffective structure also entails the kinds of actions that are prioritized or acceptable when pursuing the end goals. Out of the organizing principles, the teleoaffective structure is the one through which people come to share an understanding of the set of ends that meeting participants should pursue, and which defines whether one is allowed or expected to speak up in a given situation. The vignette provides an example of the *realization* of meaningfulness (De Boeck et al. 2019; Lepisto and Pratt 2017) through the occurrence of activities as the developers, the scrum master and the architect are discussing and planning their work together. The product owner provides priorities regarding the tasks, but the others must determine how to implement the tasks, who implements what, and how many tasks they agree to execute. In organizations where work practices prioritize employee autonomy, freedom, and rationality, thus allowing people to make decisions regarding their own work, a teleoaffective structure may prioritize *human dignity*. This freedom makes it possible for employees to seek meaningfulness through self-realization and self-actualization. Experiencing meaningfulness therefore flows from everyday interactions and draws from these practices. This view is in line with the sensemaking perspective and Wresniewski et al.'s (Wrzesniewski et al. 2003) suggestion that employees use interpersonal cues to assess the values of work, role, and self. In addition to the *realization* of meaningfulness, the vignette also provides an example of how the *justification* of work is construed by context. That is, the software industry is a knowledge-intensive industry that typically requires years of dedication to education and training. To be able to work in this field entails certain kinds of prestige and expectations. Consequently, all participants present in the meeting hold a role they have worked to attain. Developers are there to design and implement software; architects ensure that different software components work together; scrum masters facilitate the work of developers, architects, and testers; and product owners lay out the general plan of what needs to be done to publish a specific feature or software. Each of these roles has a specific area of expertise that should be recognized and respected. The developer expresses autonomy as a developer when he or she challenges the current estimates of the database task. It is part of his or

her role as a developer to do so, and the others should respect him or her for this. Thus, this incorporates *dignity as merit* into the sensemaking process of an employee's role in an organization. When this role is valued, the person occupying that role feels respected, highlighting how meaningfulness based on dignity as merit is construed through collective sensemaking.

Finally, employees also participate in the meeting through their identities, not just as generic humans to be respected or through their organizational roles. The comments and developmental ideas they provide are based on their unique work histories, personalities, and expertise. In the vignette, the developer who highlighted the database issue had previous work experience with databases, which made it possible for him or her to discuss technical challenges with the architect. When the teleoaffective structure prioritizes dignity as identity, employees are able to participate in the meeting through their own identities, making it possible for the employees to draw on their individual reasons for 'why the work is worth doing'.

Figure 2 depicts the process-relational model of meaningful work in which dignity is seen through the practice lens as a normative principle located within the teleoaffective structure and entwined with the experience of meaningfulness.

The arrow in the middle of Fig. 2 represents a stream of work activities that transpire through everyday work practices. As a teleoaffective structure prioritizes different types of dignity, whether merit, identity or human dignity, employees can be and are even encouraged to sense meaning in their work. This teleoaffective prioritization thus manifests as a flow of experiences regarding the values of the role, self, and work, facilitating the emergence of meaningfulness. The implications of this relationality of meaningful work are discussed below.
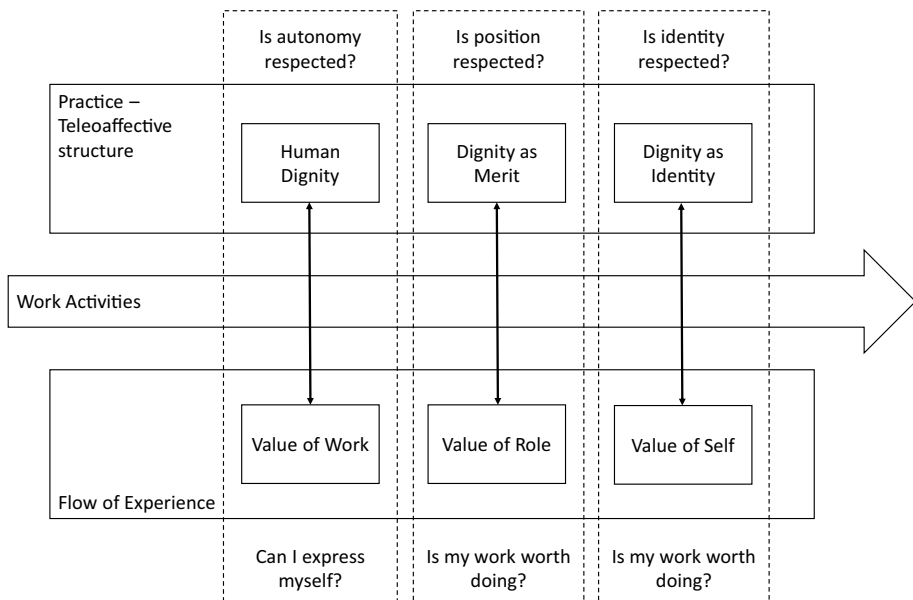

Fig. 2 Process-relational model of meaningful work

Relationality of Meaningful Work

When examined through a process-relational lens, meaningful work and meaningfulness are not static, prescriptive elements (entities or 'things') with fixed meanings, but a phenomena that are contested, evolve, clash, and merge in relation to one another through people's everyday work activities (Emirbayer 1997). In the relational view, individuals are 'carriers' of practices, and when they interact with others, this historically and situationally embedded intelligibility manifests in activities that iteratively constitute actors who enact practices. Accordingly, meaningfulness exists only to the extent that it manifests through the activities that constitute employees and work in the first place. These activities are guided by the teleoaffective structure that provides the 'ought-to-do' when aiming towards different organizational ends. For example, the organizational goal of increasing shareholder value can be met in multiple ways. Toward this end of shareholder value, organizations can try to make employees more productive through increased control or by improving employee work motivation through a better working environment. Both are legitimate ways to achieve the same goal but convey very different meanings about what is to be an employee, whether employee dignity matters, and what the possibilities for experiencing meaningfulness are.

As an example of the relationality of the perceived values of work, role, and self, we present Vignette 2 to illustrate the confusion of a software developer who is trying to understand why one of his junior colleagues perceives the developer's confidence in his own abilities to be detrimental to the value of the junior colleague's work.

> *A software developer who had been working for a software contracting firm for a long time faced a confusing situation when one of his junior colleagues suddenly felt hurt by an old inside joke. The software developer had gained a reputation as a highly skilled and experienced generalist who, due to his work history, was used to adapting to different situations and technical requirements faced in development projects. Since he had been working for the firm for a long time, an inside joke revolved around his remarkable ability to respond to different customer requirements; whenever the salespeople asked him whether he would be able to master a certain technology, the joke went: 'Never heard of it, but I can definitely handle it'. However, it had come to his attention that the joke now seemed to have hurt another, more junior expert's feelings, and thus he explained his confusion:*
>
> *'I cannot understand why one cannot blindly state that they can handle different technologies without some junior developer getting offended? They say it hurts their professional esteem. That you should not be "too good". Of course, you are not as good as someone who truly knows the technology, even though you have the confidence to learn it. In addition, this is the old running gag that we have with one of the salesguys: "Hey Joe, can you handle technology X?" "Never heard of it, but definitely can handle it". If you feel your competence is being undermined, then maybe you should complete some training? When I first joined my previous workplace, they told me that if you cannot handle new technologies, you can leave.'*

Vignette 2. Incident with a junior colleague.

This example illustrates an interplay between two different meanings of 'expert' that are embedded in disparate practices and shows how they collide in this organizational setting. One type of an expert is a generalist who has the ability to learn new

technologies in addition to his more general technical abilities and to switch between different technologies. Specialists, on the other hand, have deep-level expertise in a certain technology, and their tasks focus on utilizing this specific technology. The senior software developer has been claiming that he can learn to use any technology required by customers. This type of expert represents the dignity as identity that is tied to the work history of a developer. In contrast, a junior developer, whose dignity as merit is linked to specialized expertise and, therefore, to an understanding of what is required by the work, differs from the senior developer's view. When he observes how the senior developed is respected by the work community, he therefore feels threatened or disregarded by such expertise.

This example underscores the situational importance and relation between *dignity as merit* and *identity* within a teleoaffective structure. A certain situation, such as joking among colleagues, may cause a temporal breakdown of one's understanding of a role and how others recognize this role through actions. These breakdowns enable intentional renegotiations and modifications of a teleoaffective structure (Schatzki 2002, 83–84). Specifically, a developer's role is (partly) based on his or her competence and field expertise. In many cases, a developer is 'the back-end guy', 'UI guy' or 'platform guy', roles that are closely connected to the developer's dignity as merit. When someone else claims that they can do the same without even knowing what a task entails, it undermines an individual's understanding of their role and the relevant dignity that stems from its specific technological expertise. Thus, in this instance, joking reduces the perceived *values of role, self, and work*.

Furthermore, joking partly informs how the senior developer builds his own role as a developer and generalist. For him, being an expert means that he can dive headfirst into all kinds of different situations. From a generalist perspective, being a specialist is like a being a tool that can be taken off a shelf and used when a customer requires its specific technology. This conflicts with the understanding of the junior developer, who can be identified as an expert in a specific technology when that technical expertise is observed to be greater than others' expertise. These different meanings are latent and embedded in our activities. When the 'sales guy' and the senior developer enact customer sales practices that involve boasting about generalist expertise and draw on a specific meaning of what an expert is, the meanings and underlying prioritizations of different types of dignity within the teleoaffective structure collide and contest between the junior and the senior developer.

As a result of these contestations and breakdowns of practices, bragging is deemed inappropriate in the firm. From the perspective of practices and the teleoaffective structure, 'ought-to-do' now follows the perspectives of junior developer. Dignity as merit is prioritized over dignity as identity whenever these clashes. Moreover, the shared norms and rules relating to both sales practices and development practices change, implying changes in how the senior developer makes sense of the values of his work, role, and self in the organization. The vignette therefore also illustrates the processual nature of dignity prioritization within teleoaffective structures, which impacts how employees may or should experience meaningfulness. Experiences are continuous flows, and despite this instance of a sudden breakdown in how the junior developer experiences meaning and meaningfulness in relation to his or her colleague, the junior developer may still experience meaningfulness through the totality of their work. This specific, limited experience does not necessarily entail a change in the overall assessment of meaningfulness. When the shared understanding of what is being valued changes, the more long-term tendency (the process, or 'trajectory') to experience situations in a certain way, i.e., the totality of the experience of meaningfulness that these events produce, also changes.

Wider Connections of Experiencing Meaningfulness

For work to be truly meaningful, it must be connected to something beyond one's immediate work activities (Lepisto and Pratt 2017). From a practice perspective, this means connecting local, small-scale organizational practices with larger socio-ethical practices that provide meaningfulness, such as ethical, spiritual, religious, or political systems (eg. Ahmad and Omar 2016; Adawiyah and Pramuka 2017). These meaningfulness-providing large practices extend sideways across a network of relationships, rather than vertically above smaller practices, to become macrolevel social phenomena. Both smaller and larger practices come together in different ways and in different contexts for activities ('sites' of the social), contributing to the phenomena under study (Seidl and Whittington 2014; Schatzki 2016). To the extent small local practices recognize and respect *dignity as identity* enables employees to draw meaningfulness from larger socio-ethical practices that they perceive important for their lives. In Vignette 3 below, a developer observes meaningfulness that arises from the wider context of immediate, everyday software development activities. In this case, these concern the organizational nature of the cooperative:

> *It feels somehow meaningful that most of the employees are members in this cooperative. It is almost like a small company, where everyone is an owner. Others might not realize this yet, but there is this kind of indirect connection. We are not working to make profits for shareholders. Instead, we are really working for the cooperative members, which most of us are ourselves. So, a cooperative has this nice positive character in it. […] It does not matter if you are a subcontractor or an in-house employee; most of us are members of the same cooperative and this makes us equals in a sense. […] It does not show up in everyday work, and I think the reason is that people think we are working for just another company. But, people should keep in mind that we are working for the benefit of the owners of the cooperative. […] In a joint-stock company, owners are not connected with the actual work their organization does or the utility it provides, except through money transfers. But, here, those are the same; it makes a huge difference that those who gain benefits are the ones who also participate in the everyday work.*

Vignette 3. Meaningfulness arising from the cooperative form.

As the developer points out in the example, it is difficult to deduce whether an organization is a cooperative by observing everyday activities. Employee's plan, design, and implement software like in any other company. Nevertheless, the form of cooperative impacts how this particular developer makes sense of his work, role, and self in an organization. He points out that the cooperative nature of the organization blurs the divisions between employees, owners, and customers; the people who create the financial services software are also the owners of the organization and the end users of their own services. This aligns well with the developer's own understanding of self and identity as a member of a cooperative who is concerned about power and wealth asymmetries in organizing. Thus, the developer experiences meaningfulness as local organizational practices come together with larger cooperative practices to recognize his *dignity as identity* as contributor to a wider global movement that challenges traditional and narrow forms of shareholder-centric capitalism.

In sum, by following a practice perspective and drawing on a process-relational ontology, we are able to examine how experiencing meaningfulness is at once situated

in ongoing streams of everyday work activities and flows from ethical basis that inform the wider contexts of people's lives. This approach shows how a business organization's practices prioritize different values, norms, and rules. In terms of meaningful work, this also means choosing whether to treat people as tools for work purposes or to respect human dignity. In work organizations where practices prioritize dignity, people can exercise autonomy and experience self-actualization and self-fulfillment, regardless of the actual content of their work activities. Moreover, when evaluating experiencing meaningfulness in processual terms, meaningfulness cannot be detached from context but is experienced as a part of a given event. As such, these experiences are constantly evolving, and only the long-term trajectories that these events comprise can facilitate a general understanding of meaningful work (Bailey and Madden 2017).

Discussion

The motivation for this study was to understand how humanistic management could address both the situational and contextual embeddedness of the experience of meaningfulness, and the way the context also entails the ethical and moral dimension of meaningful work. Our aim was to theorize meaningful work through a process-relational view and, through that, examine the ethical basis of meaningful work by drawing on the concept of dignity. The presented theorization explores meaningfulness as an open-ended social phenomenon that becomes constituted in interactions between members of a community (Pirson 2017; Melé 2012) and that is based on and contributes to whether dignity is respected in organizations. By using real-life examples to describe software developers' experiences of meaningfulness in a business organization, we highlight, first, how experiencing meaningfulness can be construed in events, i.e., in the continuous stream of the situated, historically and culturally informed and contextually embedded everyday work activities that prioritize dignity. Second, we describe how such experiences can be construed in relation to contexts and dependent how the understanding of dignity as role and identity is respected or violated in work settings. Third, we underline how the experience of meaningfulness during a given event can be seen to be connected to wider social practices, which helps explain why meaningfulness results from complex interconnected sources of meaning that might not be immediately enacted in a given work setting. As a result, we suggest a process-relational model of meaningful work to show meaningful work as constituted in relation between the enactment of dignity and the flow of experience of the value of work, role, and self. The model and its process-relational framework provide several theoretical implications.

First, our model presents dignity as a value located in a teleoaffective structure of a practice, the enactment of which then provides the condition for the experience of meaningfulness. Humanistic management research has sought to shift the perception of individuals away from the traditional 'homo economicus' and organizations as settings for individuals to come together in terms of economic contracts (Pirson 2017; Melé 2012). Instead, the aim has been to support a "different normative paradigm of business practice… drawing on the notion of human rights and protection of human dignity" (Pirson et al. 2016, 471) and to understand organizations as communities concerned with their members' wellbeing (Pirson 2017; Melé 2012). Our study contributes towards this same end by showing how the enactment of dignity provides employees the condition for experiencing value of work, role, and self.

Moreover, the model highlights the practical relevance of the ethical principle of human dignity in organizational settings. Dignity as a concept has been difficult to operationalize within humanistic management and organization studies due to the field's often-adopted acontextual, normative philosophical stance and individualist or structuralist ontological perspectives, in which dignity is seen as an essential value located in the individual. A few studies have identified the need for a process-relational approach, such as Mitchell's (2017) characterization of dignity as processually negotiated, or Bal's (2017, 108) description of dignity as an 'eternal work in progress'. Building on this nascent processual view on dignity, by understanding dignity as continuously enacted in the everyday life of organizations, we move away from seeing dignity from an objective stance, located in individuals and therefore as something to be denied or respected, violated or protected (Pirson 2017, 2019). It is therefore possible to better understand how to *promote* dignity in organizational settings.

Second, the process-relational view addresses the different ends of the dualisms inherent in meaningful work (Bailey et al. 2019a) as co-existing. The model provides a frame in which the different ends can be seen through the logic of collective action. In a similar way that Bailey et al. (2019a) discusses the role of recognition as one of the primary processes that provide a sense of self and self-worth to individuals: that individuals can only develop a sense of self-relationship through interactions with others who recognize their needs, rights, and dignity (Honneth 1995). The meaning and knowledge of our surroundings, and even of the self, exist only to the extent that enacted practices make them intelligible. This type of relational socio-ontology abandons traditional economic thinking based on methodological individualism, where 'self' and 'other' are constructs with clear-cut boundaries separating them from their environments (Emirbayer 1997; Aspers and Kohl 2013). Observing individuals and organizations as relatively stabilized and independent 'research objects' with an ontological priority and status in the research process (Chia 1995; Chia 1999) produces findings that are individually understandable but apparently contradictory when juxtaposed, i.e., paradoxes (see Bailey et al. 2019a). In the model presented, recognition is prioritized within the teleoaffective structure that guides everyday activities. When the dignity of employees is prioritized, people's sense of self-worth and social esteem, which are needed for self-fulfillment and self-actualization, are supported by the community they are part of.

Third, our model sheds light on the interplay between the subjective and objective features of meaningful work and situations where despite objective criteria regarding meaningful work, such as autonomy and freedom, work still fails to be subjectively meaningful for individuals (Bailey et al. 2019a). Human dignity (autonomy and freedom; Rosen 2012; Bal 2017), even when prioritized in the teleoaffective structure of work practices and therefore representing a practical 'ought-to-do', does not directly instantiate an experience of meaningfulness. Furthermore, it is relatively easy to imagine situations where employees experience meaningfulness at work even when dignity is violated. For example, a nurse working in palliative care can experience meaningfulness due to their personal history, values, and interests (practices prioritize *dignity as identity*) while being abused by their supervisor (practices do not prioritize *human dignity*). Human dignity as a guiding organizing principle of the community allows individuals to search for meaningfulness in their work while making others responsible for supporting them in this process. Teleoaffective structure prioritizing dignity as merit, i.e., the recognition of the social ranks and formal positions that one can occupy (Nordenfelt and Edgar 2005), facilitates, for example, validating career choices and understanding the value of people's roles in organizations (Wrzesniewski et al. 2003). Similarly,

prioritization of dignity as identity relates to the recognition and valuing of one's subjective self within an organization and the possibility completing work that has personal value (Nordenfelt and Edgar 2005). Each employee has a unique personality, history, beliefs, values, and aspirations that are also present in their work community. How others accept and support these different aspects of self-identity influences meaningfulness (Wrzesniewski et al. 2003). In the context of meaningful work, we cannot separate work and personal life. They need to be studied as parts of the same phenomenon to show how the practices adopted from different contexts come together in a given event and either support or weaken an individual's experience of meaningfulness, even in challenging situations (Florian et al. 2019; Toraldo et al. 2019; Cohen et al. 2019).

However, the process-relational view on meaningful work also shows how the objective and subjective aspects are mutually constitutive and co-evolving. The individual's experience always transpires in context. The respect shown to, and experienced by, some people may also have effects on the others, pointing towards the possibilities for experiencing the same conditions differently, as was highlighted by the incident between a senior and junior developer in Vignette 2. While the organization as a community was providing the conditions for the experience of meaningfulness to one (i.e., the joke as a veiled sign of respect towards the abilities of the developer), it failed to do so with the other and even made him felt his identity and merit to be neglected. By aiming to improve the situation by making the bragging unacceptable did not change the setting, since only the tables were turned: now the senior felt his identity been neglected. The process-relational view also increases our understanding on the limits of developing any stable solutions for protecting meaningfulness, but rather points towards understanding the different ways meaningful work can be promoted in organizational settings (Pirson 2017).

Furthermore, as a fourth point, the construction of meaningfulness takes place in a wider context of societal organizing, as pointed out by Lepisto and Pratt (2017), who note that broader social and cultural factors influence how people experience work meaningful. In a related observation, Michaelson (2021) notes that work can lack meaningfulness even when subjective and social features of meaningful work are fostered. People are fallible in their beliefs, and social pressures from peers can push us to strive toward hedonistic goals that are not meaningful from a normative perspective (e.g., working in a financial industry, where accumulating wealth for wealth's sake can become a central goal). Instead of being subjective or social, Michaelson (2021) proposes that meaningful work could be understood as normative and based on wisdom that is instilled over generations, i.e., as something that we intuitively know when we encounter it, even if we cannot describe its underlying truth. This is aligned with our conceptualization of meaningful work that is built on the prioritization of dignity. Dignity structures the hierarchy of activities, emotions and even moods of practices through a teleoaffective structure towards more eudaimonic long term human flourishing (Pirson 2017). When understood as part of a practice, dignity is not seen as a property of individual, but becomes a normative rule that provides an 'ought-to-do' (Schatzki 2002) and a sense of what to do in a given event, even if an individual does not necessarily understand why. These practices and the underlying teleoaffective structure not only result from work community through peer interactions but also are embedded in our wider culturally and historically informed lifeworlds, guiding us to make sense of the world and our lives (Reckwitz 2002; Sandberg and Dall'Alba 2009). Moreover, the idea of dignity and of the respect of human life are globally recognized (Dierksmeier 2015). While there are cultural and regional variations in how dignity manifests as an ultimate value (*general understanding* of the practice), the underlying truth of the inviolability of human existence is common (dignity prioritized in *teleoaffective structure* of practice).

Thus, dignity, while it cannot be expressed explicitly as a policy or controlled in a top-down fashion, nevertheless functions as a value on which meaningful work is founded (Bal 2017).

And fifth, previous research has suggested that elements of work can be both meaning-less and meaningful as episodical and temporal phenomena (Bailey and Madden 2017). Our process-relational model is based on the notion that practices are open-ended pro-cesses that are indeterminate before they are enacted. From this perspective, meaning-ful work and meaningfulness are both understood in processual terms and exist only as long as the practices that prioritize dignity and other sources of meaningfulness are repro-duced. While the present research considers temporality linked to individual and local phenomena (Bailey and Madden 2017; De Boeck et al. 2019), applying a practice-based and process-relational approach broadens the scope of analysis. In this broader scope distinguishing between small and large practices (Schatzki 2016) is critical. Many of the large practices that spread horizontally over a wide area are not easily changed or modi-fied through the enactment of everyday work practices (e.g., practices related to coop-eratives, market practices, or capitalism), while some small, local organizational practices are more easily transformed. By focusing on smaller local practices organizations can challenge or emphasize larger practices transpiring in organizational context. The vignette 3 described a developer who experience meaningfulness by being a part of a cooperative. He can maintain this sense of meaningfulness until those practices that relate to coopera-tives are no longer enacted (if, for instance, the cooperative ceases its operation; or the organization changes operations in a way that it violates the principles of cooperatives; or the individual changes the workplace). However, if the source of meaningfulness com-prises smaller work practices and, for example, enactments of understanding expertise (the joking event in Vignette 2), an individual's experience of meaningfulness will evolve alongside local sales processes. According to practice and process-relational view, organi-zations are not 'economic dopes' (following Garfinkel's cultural dope view of humans), mindlessly following higher-level economic structures. Similarly, employees are not pas-sive objects of managerial actors, but co-creators of their work environment. Thus, our work also helps scholars to go beyond top-down oriented bureaucratic paternalism (Pirson 2017) and management of meaning (Lips-Wiersma and Morris 2009) towards humanism and promotion of human well-being within organizations. Both organizations and employ-ees have agency within the network of practices, how those practices are enacted by the community and what kind of prioritization the teleoaffective structure contain. Thus, this approach provides scholars with tools to better understand how small, local practices can be utilized to support or challenge large, reified practices when fostering meaningfulness in everyday work.

Conclusions

Our study focuses on the ethical basis of meaningful work and the processes through which meaningfulness is experienced in business organizations. In this paper, we introduce a process-ethical model of meaningful work that 1) examines meaningfulness as a flow of experience in the stream of work activity events; 2) highlights how experiencing mean-ingfulness is embedded in social practices, distinguishing it as a social phenomenon that is defined by this embeddedness; 3) delineates situationality, historicity, and contextuality

of meaningfulness; and 4) shows how meaningful work is grounded in the prioritization of dignity in the logic of practice.

Our study provides several implications for theory and future research. Building on earlier discussions of the role of dignity in meaningful work (Yeoman 2014; Lips-Wiersma and Morris 2009; Bowie 1998), the approach presented here highlights the ethical basis of meaningful work. It thus identifies dignity and its subjective and social aspects as conditions for meaningfulness and demonstrates that dignity is realized when individuals find their work to be meaningful. Second, we argue that this relationship, as well as its manifestations in organizational reality, can be better understood in process-relational terms. We therefore present a process-relational model of meaningful work. Examining meaningful work through this approach facilitates an acknowledgement of the subjective natures of experiencing meaningfulness and dignity and how these experiences nevertheless depend on the social settings where they occur.

Our study also offers several practical implications for managers and other organizational actors. While recognizing the importance of whether people are perceived as human beings in an organization, our study also indicates the difficulty of capturing norms and values in policy statements; respect for dignity is instantiated in the everyday activities that are governed by a bundle of practices that vary according to any given situation. Similarly, the 'management of meaning', i.e., controlling how experiences of meaningfulness manifest, is bound to be limited. However, our study shows that paying attention primarily to the respect of dignity and its prioritization in everyday activities functions as the basis for the other conditions that foster meaningfulness.

Declarations

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