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Meaning in work – identity and learning in the elderly care

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Abstract

Meaning in work is considered essential for the quality of work and for the working environment. The meaningfulness of work is even included as one of the six core issues in international acknowledged questionnaires for assessing the psychosocial environment. However, theoretically, the concept of meaning in work is underdeveloped. In this paper we present a conception of meaning in work, which is related to 'work it-self' and to professional identity, and which take account of the contextual – and therefore dynamic - character of what is considered meaningful. In addition, we illustrate the process of creating meaning in the case of home care work; an area which has been subject to dramatic changes over the last ten years through New Public Management inspired reforms. We end up discussing if and how we by taking meaning in work as a point of departure can develop new insights on modern work and spark processes towards sustainable work.

Introduction

Meaning in work is considered essential in creating good working conditions. In the internationally used questionnaire for assessing and monitoring psychosocial working environment at workplaces, 'The Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire', meaning in work has recently been included and it is regarded as one of six core issues in establishing a good and healthy psychosocial working environment (Kristensen et al 2005).

But what how do we conceive of meaning in work? How is meaning established? How is meaning in work interrelated with learning and organizational change? What are opportunities and barriers for developing meaning and learning at the workplace? These are some of the questions that we will address here.

The issue of meaning in work has since Thorsrud and Emery (1970) played an important role in the discussion of how to create a good work and good working environment, pointing out e.g. autonomy in work and societal usefulness of the product as important characteristics of a meaningful work. Today the discussion of meaning in work is revitalized, but has changed its focus. As several authors point out identity at work is increasingly linked to its meaningfulness (e.g. Elgaard Jensen & Westenholz 2004). The increasing focus on identity at work is not surprising. As sociological observers of the modern or postmodern condition like Zygmunt Baumann and Ulrik Beck point out, we are facing a constant quest for constructing and reconstructing our identity.

While the discussion of the meaningful work in the 70ies and 80ies concentrated on developing characteristics of a good and meaningful work focussing on universals, we would argue, that we need to understand meaning in work in a more dynamic way in order to grasp the role meaning play in creating a good working environment. What is meaningful is not static but

continuously redefined and negotiated in accordance with changes in work, societal discourses and personal perspectives on work - the specific context. Secondly, what really makes meaning important in working environment is that meaning is constantly challenged by changes in work. Therefore it is necessary to focus on the processes where meaning in work is established and reproduced. Here we take inspiration from two streams of research. One is the Weick'ian perspective on sense-making in organizations, which points out that ascription of meaning should be seen as an ongoing process, where subjective enactment in a specific context plays an important role (Weick 1995). The other is the perspective of social learning, which conceives of meaning as a result of learning but also a prerequisite for learning (e.g. Wenger 1998; Lave and Wenger 1991). This perspective gives important input to the discussion of how these processes are enabled or hindered.

In the paper we will present results from our study on meaning in work within the elderly care. First we clarify and discuss our concept of meaning in work. We shortly present the classical approaches from motivational research, work psychology and the socio-technical tradition, and then put forward a concept of meaning in work, which focuses on processes of developing positive work identity, and which emphasizes possibilities for collective learning in communities of practise. Second, drawing on our case study of home care in a Danish municipality we will then consider how meaning is established in an interrelation between subjective and collective learning processes. We end up in discussing if and how taking meaning in work as a point of departure can develop new insights on modern work and spark processes towards sustainable work.

Meaning in work – from motivation and well-being to work identity

Meaning in work has been an issue of discussions of working life since the start of the 20th century. Historically, there have been different approaches to the study of meaning. At the start of the century meaning in work was primarily discussed in relation to motivation, the question being how to motivate workers in industrial mass production better? This research aimed at pointing out factors or values – intrinsic or extrinsic to work – that in general made work meaningful and thus workers more motivated. No need to say that these efforts were never really successful in scientific terms (see Brief and Nord (1990) for an overview).

In the 30ies the human relations movement however sparked another approach; and after the Second World War this approach was further developed by the socio-technical tradition; the aim being to reform capitalist working organization (see eg. Scheuer (1999), van Ejnatten 1993). They pointed at the necessity of developing a good and meaningful work in contrast to work under Taylorism. Consequently, the focus at extrinsic factors prevalent in the motivation research - such as wage and social relations to colleagues – was heavily criticized for taking attention away from the work it-self. In these discussions Thorsrud and Emery (1970) was very influential – and still are. They developed criteria for a good and meaningful work based on existing as well as their own research. Their criteria – termed 'psychological job demands'- consist of
- A content of work that requires more than mere endurance and include a minimum of variation
- Possibility of continuous learning in the job
- Ability to make decisions within a limited field in relation to own job
- Recognition and some human support and respect at the workplace
- A need to see coherence between work and outside world so that work can be considered useful and valuable
- A position/job that is consistent with aspirations for the future/a desirable future

In Scandinavia this research has been one of the important sources of inspiration in discussions of 'the good work' and later 'the developmental work' (Svenska Metallindustriarbetareförbundet 1985, Hvid 1990, Hvid & Møller 1992). Discussions of the good work aim at pointing out positive elements of work, elements that ought to be present in a job in order for humans not just to endure but to enjoy it, a 'decent work'. In stead of focusing on strains in work, as traditional research in occupational health and safety does, it highlights the desirable, positive characteristics of work.

The research in psychosocial work environment represents another approach, which gained momentum in the early 80ies. This approach has roots in motivation research, but also draws on insights from the socio-technical tradition (Graversen & Holt Larsen 2004). It is, however driven by an interest of establishing relations between characteristics of the job and psychosocial work environment. Recently, meaning in work has been introduced as a factor of psychosocial working environment. Based primarily on Karasek & Theorell's demand/control model (Karasek & Theorell 1990) researchers at National Research Centre for the Working Environment in Denmark have established an empirical connection between the appearance of stress and lack of meaning in work (Kristensen et al 2003). Thus meaning is considered a decisive factor in the assessment of working environment and healthy work. However the definition of meaning is rather unclear. It comprises both a societal perspective – the societal usefulness of the work – and an enterprise perspective, i.e. the usefulness of ones contribution on company and department level and in communities of practice. Furthermore meaning can both be regarded as attributes to the specific work, attributes that are objective and measurable and as connected to the individual and his or her capacity to create meaningfulness.

Also other empirical studies of the psychosocial working environment have sparked the discussion on meaning in work (see e.g. Sørensen et al 2008). One of the problems in modern work, they pinpoint, is that employees lack possibilities to concentrate on what they consider 'the core of the work', i.e. work tasks that they find the most central and meaningful and where they can use their professional skills. This urge for time to focus on the core tasks reflects several developments in modern work. First, fast and continuous changes in organizations transform the work tasks and the core of work, often implying that professions and their assessments are challenged. Second, demands for documentation are increasing both in private and public sector. Consequently these kinds of administrative work fill up a good part of the working day, leaving less space for 'the core of the work'.

In our study of meaning in work we take departure in these observations; that meaning in work should be conceived of as closely related to what is perceived as 'the core of work' and thus to professional or work identity. A perception of work as meaningful must be based in understanding of what is important in work and why, and what represent a good performance of the task.

But we also take into account the critiques of the traditional approached to meaning in work, described above. The critique of these approaches has focussed at two issues. First, they have been criticized for regarding meaning in work as independent of social and cultural context. And even though some of the research approaches underline that the factors should not been seen as static, they are often in practice interpreted in that way. Societal norms of the good or valuable work are however changing, for example we now upgrade certain aspects of work, such as change, development, creativity or self-realization; while loyalty and punctuality are deeds of the past. These norms – it could be argued – influence what is perceived as a good and meaningful job. The second critique is that the subjective perspective is absent. The individual is depicted as rather passive. And we could ask how the individuals - with their experiences, worldview and expectations – contribute to the construction of meaning. In consequence we search for a more dynamic conception of meaning in work that includes both the (changing) societal structuring and the subjective perspective.

Meaning – a processual approach.

As mentioned above we do not regard it as possible to derive meaning in work – in a universal sense - from characteristics of the work itself. To us meaning in work is a result of complex process of negotiation in a specific context, where both the subjective interpretation and societal structuring play a role. And here we primarily focus at collective subjectivity.

One of our inspirations in developing a processual approach has been Karl Weick's understanding of sensemaking (Weick 1995). Sense-making is for Weick what enables us to master our life and engage in it. Sensemaking helps reduce complexity and thereby increase understanding of events e.g. at the workplace. It helps navigate in daily work and takes place continuously. At the same time meaning is part of our identity construction. When we define and interpret the work we do and the workplace we belong to, we simultaneously define our-self.

So, meaning relates to a practical lived reality, but meaning is not just an interpretation of a given 'text'. With the concept of enactment Weick refers to how we actively create concepts and categories which enables us to understand situations and events in a new way. We try to make sense of the incident by transforming it into a problem that is comprehensible and that we can act upon. We make sense of what initially did not make sense and thereby strengthen our ability to cope and act in daily work. Thus the enactment process is not solely a cognitive process, it includes action.

These concepts and categories are however not constructed in a vacuum. Actors are social; they draw on different frames of interpretation. Frames of interpretation may very well be translated to institutions, scripts or discourses. In the case of work in home care - presented in the next section - the rationalities of New Public Management may be conceived of as such a frame; just like different professional understandings of care or narratives based on practical experiences in a work group may act as an interpretative frame.

The former description could indicate that sensemaking is a harmonious process. However this is not the case. On the contrary Weick emphasizes that there is a kind of sorting process taking place; not all categories are considered legitimate and are allowed to survive. And which ones that does is (among other things) a question of power. Consequently, sense-making is a process of negotiation.

When we study meaning in work, we consequently examine how meaning and identity is negotiated in a specific context, and how established meaning and identity is challenged. And we study which new professional identities are sought established and stabilised.

In understanding how this process could be facilitated (or hindered) we have found inspiration in research on social learning. Prominent figures within this tradition like Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998), famous for their communities of practise approach to learning, actually also address the process of establishing meaning. They see learning and meaning as intertwined processes; meaning is a prerequisite for learning; just like learning results in meaning. Moreover, they emphasize, how learning results in new identities. In that way they are very much in line with the processual understanding of meaning that Weick represents. Wenger also underline that meaning is negotiated and this negotiation can involve language and interaction with other human beings but not necessarily. Unspoken and even bodily adjustments to prevailing understandings etc can form the negotiation.

But as other researchers within the fields of workplace learning points out, the community of practise approach tends to display learning as reproduction of a social order, as it is concerned with how learning - as peripheral participation in communities of practise - leads to inclusion. Helms Jørgensen (1999) - with reference to Argyris and Schön (1996) - points out that more radical change in meaning, learning and identity not only demands reflection in-action, but also reflection-on-action. This kind implies a discursive formulation of a certain practise, and reflection over this formulation. Others, such as Bottrup (2001) how these opportunities or 'learning spaces' in fact are structured spaces reflecting qualities of the contexts. She points at how the organisational, technical, political, social and cultural elements in the environment affects the opportunities for learning, what can be learnt, how learning takes place. Accordingly, when considering possibilities for establishing meaning in work related to a positive work identity, we should focus on opportunities for (collective) reflection and experimentation in daily work, and on the qualities of the learning space of the work place.

We will use these insights in our analysis of how meaning in work in the elderly care is reconstructed. The analysis we present in the next section is however a preliminary analysis. Here we identify different perspectives on meaning in work, supporting different new identities that are at stake in home care work transformed by NPM. Furthermore we point out dilemmas and difficulties in actually making these perspectives stabile sources of meaningfulness in work. This is work in progress, and the analysis and development of learning spaces that can support the development of meaning in work will be carried out in the next phases of the project.

Meaning in the elderly care – lost in transition?

Change of work in the elderly care

The elderly care is one of the fields most profoundly affected by NPM reforms in the public sector (Dahl & Rask Eriksen 2005). Especially the home care has been rationalized in such a way that several researched use this sector as a prominent example of neo-taylorism in modern service work, thus indicating that work is increasingly being drained for meaning (Rasmussen 2004, Szebehely 2006). Structurally the splitting up in economically self-sufficient production chains - the BUM model – implies that the assessment of the need for care is divided from the delivering of care, in an attempt to establish an economic relation between to two parts of the organization. The work of delivering care standardised, so that time – in minutes - is equated with a certain element of service, e.g. tooth-brushing. And the assistants[i] use of time is continuously registered by small personal computers, PDAs. Work as an assistant was formerly – say ten years ago - dominated by tasks that resembled the ones of a house wife – cleaning, shopping, cooking and laundry. In general the assistants had three or four visits per day at that time. Many of these tasks are now outsourced to private firms, and to day the visits are generally short - from 10 to 40 minutes - and 10 visits a day in quite normal. Moreover, the health state of the elderly is generally worsened, and consequently the tasks have changed.

However, new management principles have also been introduced. Some of them are quite in line with the economic rationality underlying NPM; management has been professionalized, and documentation of productivity and costs play an important role. But, introducing NPM has not been unproblematic. Sick absence and problems with recruiting and retaining qualified personnel have been major issues. In consequence, also softer elements of Human Resource Management have been introduced. For example in the case described below, participation in training courses has been strongly encouraged, and the current problems or events are discussion at joint meeting on a daily basis. So, even though the work in home care may be depicted as tayloristic, there are also counter-currents.

The case study

In this study we take departure in the processual approach to establishing meaning, and examine how the assistants may ascribe meaning to a work, that is dramatically changing. Moreover, we look into the dilemmas and difficulties in establishing a positive work identity.

The case chosen is a home care unity in a big municipality, which has been one of the front-runners in developing and implementing principles of new public management. This implies splitting up allocation of services from delivering them, changing principles of allocation, standardization of services, and restructuring and rethinking management. Accordingly, management, organization and the work that the assistants actually carry out, has constantly been changing.

The study is based on different qualitative methods. Observations, where we followed three assistant a whole working day each, three semi- structured individual interviews, and two focus group interviews with three and five participants. In addition interviews were carried out with managers in the home care at different levels, the safety representative and the shop steward.

Different horizons - Meaning in work

Work is still meaningful.

The assistants generally perceive work as meaningful, even if their contact with the elderly is diminished dramatically, and the role their relation to the elderly is changed. A common feature in their stories is, that they present the time when the practical care was dominant and there were more time for talking with the elderly, as a distant past - as time that will never come back. And this past is not pictured as entirely rosy. They often draw the attention to the impossibility of actually filling out the social vacuum for the elderly - to be in the role as a daughter or sister - and the dilemmas which it posed. Moreover, they point out that the close relationship might imply that they were conceived of as servants, and consequently were expected to do what the elderly accidentally considered necessary, such as polishing silverware. They conclude that the role they played in relation to the elderly was not as simple as it is often described. Many of the assistants highlights that we now have a more competent discussion of the relationship between assistant and citizen. This, in their judgment, supports the development of a professional work role.

Finally, they point out that the elderly now have a much worse health situation; more suffers from e.g. dementia disorders or addiction problems. This has changed the job. The tasks have become more complex, often requiring larger and more specialized knowledge and it means that the relationship to the elderly have more focus on addressing specific problems rather than on social interaction.

The assistants are establishing new understandings of professional pride and meaning of work. We outline below four different types. They are not in conflict with each other, and some of them are overlapping. And it is not such that we can divide the assistants into four groups depending on what they find most meaningful in the work – the best way to describe how they feel competent, what makes them proud of their job, what they think they should receive recognition for. Most of the assistants belong to several categories, but puts different emphasis on them.

Being 'Professional'.

Many of the assistants underline their professionalism as a source of pride and sense of meaning in work. Being 'professional' is understood as mastering the art of establishing a good

relation to all (or most) people. This relationship is a working relationship. This implies that they are not supposed to develop personal friendships with the elderly, or use the elderly to give vent to their own personal frustrations and problems. Establishing this relationship is about competence. Communications skills are considered important in dealing with relationships. Many talk about the specific experience of 'going into a home'. The specific way you enter the citizen's homes will have an impact on, whether you can develop good relationship with the citizens. As they say: 'Should I whisper or shout; be serious or ready to laugh? We must be many different people during one day.'

To master the relations with citizens is highlighted as a core competency, which is achieved through experience and built up through collegial coaching - but they stress that not everyone will be able to learn it, not everyone has a personality as a way suited to the job. This competence is a prerequisite for that work can proceed in a way so that the elderly are satisfied with the work, but it is also necessary for the assistants to have a satisfactory working day. This involves a significant personal flexibility.

Being a professional is seen as a protection against what one might call 'self-intensification', i.e. spending more time than actually allocated, for example by making additional services for the elderly. It is generally accepted that one should not do this, the argument being that it puts pressure on other colleagues to provide the same additional services. Insisting on that working environment legislation should be respected, e.g. about the use of lifting aids, is also part of being professional. The homes of the elderly should be regarded as a work place. So professionalism is also a protection against accepting bad working conditions in the homes of the elderly.

However, there are also dilemmas associated with developing a good relationship with the citizens. In care-work empathy for the elderly and their life circumstances play an important role. And the 'minutes tyranny', as it is called, when all tasks are measured in minutes, means that the contact with the elderly may be experienced as instrumental. Many describe how they operate with a dual awareness in the relation with the elderly. On the one hand, by experience the assistants know how long time they have been in the home and when they should leave, and they have a constant attention on timing, so that they can be in time at the next citizen. On the other hand, they must maintain a conversation with the elderly as if they have every time in the world. They must learn to reach an appropriate conclusion to the talk with the elderly so as leaving does not seem insensitive and hurtful. The assistants have to handle this dilemma and it may lead to frustration, which can corrode the sense of meaning in work.

Being observant
To be the one who keeps track of situation of the elderly and their homes is another source of pride and meaning in work. It is a complex task, and it demands a breadth of view. The assistants observe if there are changes in people's condition both socially, mentally and physically. This may involve the citizen's relationship with friends and family, or be about emerging problems with dementia. It may also involve the functioning of the home: To observe if there are sufficient supplies of the food and drink in the house and if the elderly eats and drinks sufficiently; or to keep track on the general hygiene, and state of the home more generally. An important part of this work is to report back on any issues to the 'office' and may have suggestions for what should be done.

Doing this properly requires that the assistants know the elderly and come regularly at their homes. This is actually also the case, although there are differences between the day and the night shift. The professional pride in the work is linked to being independent, and being responsible for observing, assessing and (possibly along with others) to find solutions. Also, in the morning when the assistants edit their work lists, the assistants use their knowledge of their citizens, for instance, scheduling an early morning visit at citizens who need it.

It is, however not always that this autonomy and capacity for assessment is recognized in practice. Particularly the interplay between visitation – the body which order and allocate time for care service - and home care is giving problems. The visitation does not recognize the need for regular contact with citizens in their allocation. So, there are often conflicts on getting allocations, which allows regular contact, which according to the assistant's assessment is necessary for a sound and meaningful home care. The visitation system is thus sometimes perceived as too square, reflecting lack of knowledge about 'the practical reality'. The assistants point out that they are 'those who know what is going on around the home,' and they want their competence recognized, for example in situations where the visitation visit the citizens in their homes in order to change allocations. This lack of recognition and opportunity to develop capabilities may weaken the meaning in work.

Like a nurse
Several assistants suggest that what really is meaningful and exciting at work, the tasks that are have weight, it is about nursing. It may, for example, be tasks in relation to the care of wounds, or blood pressure measurements etc, but it can also be related to dementia, or nutrition and diets. This is tasks where these assistants see possibilities for development and learning, where they experience that their skills are improving. And there they can see an effect of what they are doing. These types of tasks require the often lengthy visit. This is also of importance, when the assistants assess them as more interesting. The all too brief visits, they judge, they are not challenging, there not much in it.
 So, this is a kind of professional pride associated with nursing and medical skills and knowledge. In this municipality formal courses within some of these fields are available, and many of the assistants have attended these courses.

However, there are several problems with the development of this kind professional identity. First, these courses are based on traditional forms of learning, so the out-put in terms of learning is often quite poor. So, more practice-oriented teaching - learning on the job could be a solution. Second, it is difficult to be allowed to develop and apply this knowledge in practice. There sharp – and well-guarded - professional boundaries between nurses and assistants field in home care; however, some experiments have been carried out in this field, to improve cooperation between assistants and nurses, and allow for mutual learning.

The social care worker
Finally, some assistants point to that maintaining a relationship with elderly people is what is meaningful and they where they want to develop their competences. Here the continuity of the relationship of course plays a role. But, it is not perceived as a problem that they visit many citizens every day. On the contrary this aspect contributes to a perception of their work as characterized by much freedom and variation. The work offers the opportunity to meet many people who have had exciting life.

The important and engaging part of work is – in their view -to activate the life stories of the elderly, to talk to elderly people about the life they had, and for example look at the photo-albums together with them. Thus, the assistants - interestingly enough – use some of the same tools and methods often used in elderly homes. To talk to the elderly about their lives, may be part of the daily routine, but often requires more time than is allotted. So creating space for the kind of work, demands a good deal of juggling with time. The assistants then assess in each case who they may allot less time, e.g. because the citizen already herself has accomplished the task; i.e. has prepared the bed or made her food. Then they can spend more time with an individual who needs a chat. It's obviously not always about former life experiences. The elderly citizen may be sad and need a talk, for example because they have lost a close friend. So it is also about nourishing the life desire of the elderly.

This strong emphasis on the contact with the elderly in the construction of the meaning in work inevitably clash with the current rationalization of care work. The assistants often

experience problems and ambiguities in relation to make their working day consistent with the way the visitation system organize their work. Generally they accept the temporal framework that the system constructs – and within that frame they succeed to organize their work so that is experienced as meaningful. But, this identity also invites to ethical discussions; to questions of what is a right or a wrong treatment of the elderly. In the current system, the norm is that it is the family and not the assistants, which can and should ensure that elderly people have a satisfactory life. But, what about those who have no family, the assistants ask? Many of the assistants find that a different practice should be possible, for those who have no relatives.

Concluding discussion.

In this study we have demonstrated how different perspectives of meaning are negotiated and sought established in the field of care work. So, the approach to meaning in work, which we have developed, allow us to identify how people actually make sense of work and try to establish a positive identity in work, even when it has changed fundamentally. The four different perspectives on meaning of work are not institutionalised, and it is obvious that they may have different potentials for being so. The first two ('being professional' and 'being observant') are to some extent recognized in the organization; while the two others meet more difficulties. In particular the social care perspective may be conceived of as subversive, and is often muted in discussions at the workplace. An interesting observation is that the four perspectives all – in different ways- are based on a personal autonomy in the sense that they claim competences and professionalism and consequently allow for some discretion in work.

This approach to meaning thus gives insights in the more complex process of creating meaning and identity, pointing out the diversity of possible directions this process might take. But it also gives valuable in-put to a discussion of how work in home care could be developed in order to create a more meaningful and in that sense sustainable work.

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[i] The employees delivering the daily home care are either *social and health care helpers or –
assistants*, dependent of the length of their formal training. In this paper they are referred to
as assistants.