Because work dominates our psyches and social lives, we must attempt to understand the forces it generates, shaping society and channeling individual behavior.

Frederick Gamst

As demonstrated by the quotes above, work can be a source of pain, drudgery, and boredom, or a source of joy, energy, and fulfillment, or a complex mix of all of these elements. That work plays some significant role in nearly everyone’s life is clear. Whether work has a starring role, is a bit player, or is the hero or villain in one’s life largely depends on the dynamic interplay between the individual, the organization, and the work itself.

In this chapter, I take up the call issued above by Gamst to explore the reasons work plays such varied roles in people’s lives, and offer a proactive perspective on work that creates possibilities for finding deeper meaning in work. As well, I describe the benefits of finding meaning in work for individuals, workgroups, and organizations. My perspective on meaning and work assumes that it is not so much the kind of work that matters as it is the relationship to the work (e.g., Is it just a job, or something that is inherently important?), which creates possibility for individuals and organizations. A view of the experience of work that carefully considers the ways in which people come to view their work as more meaningful, satisfying, and necessary for the functioning of their organizations and of the wider world is thus complementary to the positive organizational scholarship (POS) perspective on organizational life and its possibilities. However, while the effects of finding deeper meaning in work may intuitively seem unilaterally positive, I explore both the positive outcomes and the surprising potential drawbacks to the pursuit of meaning in work.

A NOTE ON THE MEANING OF WORK

The concept of work meanings is one that is often studied (Colby, Sippola, & Phelps, 2002; Chapter 20 in this volume) but not as often defined. The meaning of work, and, for the purposes of this volume, positive meanings of work, are often left to the imagination of the reader, or to the interpretation of the research respondent. For example, respondents in a recent study on work meanings reported that they saw the following kinds of meaning in their work: contributing to the economic maintenance of one’s family, the job as allowing one to have a positive impact on the organization, work as self-expression (among others) (Colby, Sippola, & Phelps, 2002). In this volume, Pratt and Ashforth define meaning as a subjective kind of sense that people make of their work. Other scholars define meaning differently;
in the research area of positive psychology, positive meaning is defined as the connection between two different entities or things that create a non-physical reality accessible to humans (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002).

More specifically, scholars note that meaning is a tool used by individuals for imposing stability on life (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002). As a work life (or any domain of life) unfolds, individuals strive to fulfill needs for purpose, values, efficacy, and self-worth (Baumeister, 1991). While the shape of the elements that satisfy these needs may differ (e.g., making money, helping others, doing religious work), the basic tenet remains that people everywhere need to find some way of interpreting the deeper purpose, or meaning, of what they do. In this chapter, I make the argument that the domain of work is a rich area for inquiry about the different kinds of meanings that get created around work. As well, the kinds of meaning people derive from their work have implications for a POS perspective on work and organizations.

DETERMINANTS OF THE MEANING OF WORK

For most adults, work represents nearly half of waking life (Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997). The majority of us must work to support ourselves and our families, making work a necessity. What is striking to scholars of work is that this compulsory domain of life represents such a range of experience, from a distasteful necessity to a source of joy. In their efforts to determine the sources of such varied experience, scholars of work have historically focused their efforts on finding either individual determinants of the experience of work (Dubin, 1956; Lodahl & Kejner, 1965; Roberson, 1990) such as expectations or values, or external characteristics of the job itself (Griffin, 1987; Hackman & Oldham, 1976, 1980), such as work tasks or social interaction at work. A brief tour through the research history of the concept of work meaning is helpful in understanding the approaches that have been taken to understanding how people relate to their work.

In their pursuit of measuring the meaning of work, researchers have created a number of constructs, including work centrality (Dubin, 1956; MOW, 1987), work commitment (Losocco, 1989), job involvement (Lodahl & Kejner, 1965), work involvement (Kanungo, 1982), intrinsic/extrinsic motivation (Kanungo, 1981; Kanungo & Hartwick, 1987; Roberson, 1990), and work values (Nord, Brief, Atch, & Doherty, 1990). Work centrality is typically defined in terms of how relatively important work is in comparison with other domains of life, like leisure and family (Dubin, 1956), while work commitment is defined as “the relative importance work has to people’s sense of self” (Losocco, 1989: 370). Kanungo (1982: 342) defines job involvement as attachment to work, while work involvement denotes a normative belief about the importance of work in life. While these constructs aim to identify the relative salience of work in life, others have focused on the nature of the importance of work itself.

Herzberg, Mausner, and Snyderman (1959) were the first to identify the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations for working. In their original model, intrinsic motivations for working included opportunities for advancement, achievement, and recognition, while more recent definitions have focused on interesting work, creativity, and fulfillment (Kanungo & Hartwick, 1987). Extrinsic motivations for working include pay, working conditions, and job security. The research that has followed this model of work motivation has supported the notion that different elements of work have the ability to motivate and challenge individuals (Amabile, Hill, Hennessey, & Tighe, 1994).

All of the constructs above share in common their relation either to the importance or salience of work in the context of the rest of life, or to the specific aims, goals, or reasons people have for working. For decades, they have been used to chart the importance of work in life, and the reasons work matters to us. While research in the 1950s showed that most people are likely to agree that they would continue with their work without pay if they had all the money they would need (Morse & Weiss, 1955), this trend decreased in later decades (Vecchio, 1980). However, the most recent evidence suggests that money is losing its power as a central motivator, in part because the general population is realizing, in greater numbers, that above a minimum level necessary for survival, money adds little to their subjective well-being (Seligman, 2002). In an age in which people have come to define themselves and be socially defined by their work (Casey, 1995), understanding alternative sources of meaning and motivation in work becomes a central aim of scholars of work. From a POS perspective (see Chapters 1 and 20), the existence of alternative sources of meaning in work is a natural outgrowth of organizational systems that value human thriving, contribution to the greater good, and a celebration of human agency in the workplace to make improvements to the organization.

The presence of alternative meanings of work in life raises the question of how the meaning of work is shaped, and what effects it has in people’s lives. The ongoing debate in the literature over whether the meaning of work is determined internally (i.e., within the individual) or externally (i.e., by the job and wider environment) has yielded results that support both views. According to the latter perspective, the jobs people have exert strong influences on their work commitment (Kohn et al., 1983). In this
AN ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVE ON THE MEANING OF WORK

This third perspective on the meaning of work constitutes the main focus of this chapter. It is presented with the intention of orienting readers who are new to the fields of POS and positive psychology to a different theory of the meaning of work. The general assumption on which this research is based is that people can derive different kinds of meaning from most any job or occupation. This work is based on recent research on the meaning of work that suggests that people tend to frame their relationship to work in different ways. More specifically, sociologists (Bellah et al., 1985) and psychologists (Baumeister, 1991; Schwartz, 1986, 1994; Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997) have argued for a tripartite model of people's orientations to their work. These general orientations help to determine our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors toward work. The orientations offer a window into the ways in which people see their work, and, more importantly, how they craft their jobs (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001) in order to realize their orientations toward the work. As such, work orientation can be thought of as the interplay between the person and the work.
port that work was an end in itself, as opposed to a means to some other end, and that they would continue to work without pay if financially secure. In addition, those with Callings were expected to report that their work contributed to making the world a better place.

In this first study, participants were surprisingly unambiguous in reporting that they experienced their work as Job, Career, or Calling. The sample was nearly evenly divided into thirds, with each third feeling that their work was a Job, Career, or Calling. What was more intriguing was that within the sample, there was a group of twenty-four administrative assistants who worked in the same organization, with similar levels of pay, education, and tenure. In this subsample, as in the full sample, each work orientation was represented by a third of the administrative assistants such that they were nearly evenly divided into the three work orientations. This suggests that even in the same job done in the same organization, there are significant differences in how people make meaning of their work.

Overall, it appears that those with Calling orientations have a stronger and more rewarding relationship to their work, which is associated with spending more time at work, and gaining more enjoyment and satisfaction from it (Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997). While this initial study was not longitudinal, thus making it impossible to posit causal relationships (i.e., Does the experience of the work produce the orientation, or does the orientation shape the experience of the work?), later longitudinal research revealed that those with Calling orientations sought out work that fulfilled their need for meaning in this domain (Wrzesniewski, 1999). This finding supports the view that individuals are proactive in seeking out, and, as will be described below, shaping their work so that it has meaning and significance in their lives (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001).

The three work orientations reflect different types of relationships to work. These relationships are likely to vary in their intrinsic and instrumental focus and in their implications for the other domains of life. Those with Jobs are not likely to have a deep connection with their work, as the work primarily represents a means to an end. Those with Careers may be more deeply engaged with their work, as the work is a source of achievement in the rewards, positions, and power it yields. Only for those with Callings is work a wholly enriching and meaningful activity. In our pursuit to understand how people may find deeper meaning in their work, it is this group for whom work is a Calling that is worthy of deeper study.

The findings described above raise the question of how people with Callings come to have them, and how others without Callings may find theirs. One factor that seems to contribute to a Calling orientation is good psychological health. Traits such as optimism (Gilham, Shatte, Reivich, & Seligman, 2001), mastery (Rawsthorne & Elliott, 1999), and conscientious-

ness (McCrae & Costa, 1999) may be associated with having a Calling. But do people with these traits tend to enter a line of work they view as a Calling, or is any line of work likely to be viewed as a Calling? Staw, Bell, and Clausen (1986) have shown that job attitudes are highly stable over time and over different kinds of jobs (see also Arvey, Bouchard, Segal, & Abraham, 1989, for evidence of a heritable component to job attitudes). Thus, it may be that a Calling orientation is a portable benefit of those who tend to have a generally more positive outlook on life. However, this view of work orientation is rather static, and suggests that those with Callings are predisposed to view any kind of work positively, and are a select group, one that cannot be joined by others who view their work differently.

**THE CREATION OF MEANING IN WORK**

Earlier, I described research findings that suggest that in all kinds of jobs, people can view the work as a Job, a Career, or a Calling. Thus it is not the design of the work itself that seems to determine the experience of the work. This promising possibility raises the question of how people with Callings may do their work differently in ways that allow them to experience it as a source of joy and meaning in their lives. Recent research on the practice of “job crafting” (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001) by individuals offers insight into how people with different orientations toward their work may actually structure their work differently in ways that help to create or undermine meaning in work.

Job crafting is defined as “the physical and cognitive changes individuals make in the task or relational boundaries of their work. Thus, job crafting is an action, and those who undertake it are job crafters; making job crafting both a verb and a noun” (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001: 179). By crafting their jobs, people are able to change the way they approach the tasks in their work, increase or decrease the number and kinds of tasks they do as part of their job, and change the number and nature of the relationships they have with others they encounter in their work. For example, we can imagine someone who cleans offices for a living who works within the job description, and leaves at the end of the day, satisfied that the offices are clean, the trash is emptied, and the floors are vacuumed.

However, we can also imagine someone doing the same job who, in addition to tackling all of the tasks in the job description, is also attuned to the state of the offices she cleans. This cleaner, let us call her Maria, has chosen to focus on knowing when people are away on vacations or sick leave, and takes over the care of their office plants while they are gone. In addition, she takes plants that are discarded by members of the organization.
and nurses them back to health, reporting them and placing them in other offices to brighten up the space.

While this may seem to be a rather small instance of extra-role behavior, it is actually a powerful example of job crafting in action. The attention to and care of the plants represents the addition of other tasks to her job, but changes too the way in which she cleans offices, by requiring her to be aware of which offices have dying plants, which offices could benefit from new plants, and proactively handling these movements of the plants to brighten all of the offices.

In addition to changing the task boundary of her job, Maria is also changing the relational boundary of her job by constructing her relationship with members of the organization as both cleaner and decorator, and procuring flowers and plants when she realizes that someone is going through a hard time or has been working long hours for many days in a row. By engaging in this different form of relationship with members of the organization, Maria becomes a more integral part of the organizational community, and in turn views her own role as caretaker of the organization's space and members. Clearly, the meaning of the work that Maria does is different for her than for the cleaner who stays within tighter task and relational boundaries.

In job crafting, new possibilities open for the meaning of work by allowing for the creation of meaning in any job by the way in which it is constructed by the individual. Through job crafting, one can realize a Calling orientation by reshaping the task and relational boundaries of the job in ways that allow one to view the work as making a bigger contribution to the wider world. Through this proactive perspective on the creation of meaning in work we can see the impact of the third perspective described earlier in this chapter. This perspective suggests the possibilities that arise from viewing the meaning of work as a dynamic interplay between the individual and the work, and opens the relationship between the person and the work to include the organization as well (see Chapter 20).

While the job-crafting perspective concentrates on the things people do to change the boundaries of their jobs, it also offers an organizational lens on the meaning of work. In the example above, Maria is likely to find her actions to be noticed and responded to, whether they be celebrated, punished, or altered in some way. As well, the organizational setting in which she finds herself is more or less likely to invite the possibility of engaging in job crafting (see Chapter 20). Thus, while crafting is most often observed on the individual level, it grows from an organizational context, and expresses itself within a community that will respond to crafting actions in ways that can create more positive possibilities in the work (which is the aim of the POS perspective) or can inhibit such actions from occurring in the future.

WORK AS A CALLING: BENEFITS, COSTS, AND CORRELATES

In this section, the effects of a Calling orientation for the individual, workgroup, and organization are examined. As well, the contrasts between those with Callings and those with Careers in a number of different work domains are considered. By combining research findings on the role of work orientation at each level of organizational life, a more comprehensive picture emerges of the profound effects of different meanings of work.

Individual Effects

For the individual, a Calling orientation toward work has behavioral, attitudinal, and emotional effects that differ from those experienced by people with Jobs or Careers. For example, people with Callings tend to put more time in at work (Wrzesniewski, MaCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997), whether or not this time is compensated. As well, those with Callings report higher job and life satisfaction than those with Jobs or Careers (Wrzesniewski, MaCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997). They also derive more satisfaction from the domain of work than the domain of leisure and hobbies. While this may seem to paint a bleak picture for those with Jobs and Careers, it may only mean that the sources of meaning and satisfaction differ for these groups. People with Jobs and Careers rank the satisfaction they get from their leisure time (i.e., hobbies and friends) as higher than the satisfaction they get from work. The differences between those with Callings and the other two groups are significant on each dimension. Clearly, for those with Callings, work is one's main focus, whereas for those with Jobs and Careers, the deeper satisfactions are found in leisure or in relationships outside of the workplace.

Work Group Effects

The role of work orientation in work group functioning is another area in which work meanings can have profound effects on groups and organizations. In a study designed to assess the role of work orientation in the context of work groups, I sought to examine the general and combinatorial effects of work orientation on the group level. A survey that included the measures of work orientation described earlier, in addition to measures of
work group functioning, was given to 425 respondents. Each respondent was part of a real work group in an organization, and each group met the criteria for an interdependent team (Hackman, 1990). A total of ninety-four complete work groups were represented in the data, from organizations ranging from travel agencies to investment banking teams.

The picture that emerged from the data supported the notion that work orientation is related to the manner in which individuals approach their work. Individual respondents with Calling orientations toward their work reported higher job satisfaction (\( r = 0.63, p < 0.0001 \)), confirming findings from earlier studies of work orientation. However, the focus of this study was on the effects of work orientation to work group functioning. In order to assess group-level outcomes, measures of team identification (Bhattacharya, 2001), group process (Taylor & Bowers, 1972), faith and trust in management (Cook & Wall, 1980), conflict, and team commitment (Mowday, Steers, & Porter, 1979) were included. After a check was done to ensure that members of the groups were largely in agreement about these outcome variables (i.e., the variance within groups was less than variance between groups, signifying agreement among group members), the outcome variables were aggregated at the group level.

The results paint a compelling picture. In workgroups in which the proportion of members with Calling orientations is higher, groups report stronger overall identification with the team (\( r = 0.31, p < 0.002 \)), less conflict (\( r = -0.24, p < 0.02 \)), more faith and trust in management (\( r = 0.34, p < 0.001 \)), more commitment to the team itself (\( r = 0.47, p < 0.0001 \)), and healthier group process (e.g., more communication, less conflict) (\( r = 0.42, p < 0.0001 \)). Clearly, having more group members with Callings yields benefits for all members of the group. In addition to playing a positive role in group-level outcomes, individual members of those Calling-majority groups report more satisfaction with their coworkers (\( r = 0.36, p < 0.0001 \)) and with the work itself (\( r = 0.56, p < 0.0001 \)).

Surprisingly, the results are exactly the opposite for workgroups with a majority of Career-oriented members. These groups report weaker identification with the team (\( r = -0.36, p < 0.0001 \)), more conflict (\( r = 0.30, p < 0.003 \)), less commitment to the team itself (\( r = -0.49, p < 0.001 \)), and more negative group process (\( r = -0.51, p < 0.0001 \)). In this case, when members of the team have Careers, their interaction with group members appears to leave much to be desired. The data on satisfaction support this; members of Career-majority groups report less satisfaction with their coworkers (\( r = -0.30, p < 0.003 \)) and with the work itself (\( r = -0.43, p < 0.0001 \)). While the data do not address the performance levels of the groups, it seems likely that groups composed of less happy, more individually focused members would be less likely to exceed performance expectations.

**Organizational Effects**

The benefits of Calling orientations to organizations are promising. In a study of work orientation in the nursing profession, Wrzesniewski and Landman (2000) attempted to assess performance as an outcome. However, only a subset of participants consented to the release of their performance data; all had Callings, and all were at the ceiling of top performance in the organization. This example is only suggestive, of course, but seems to point to the likelihood that those with Callings may be top performers in their organizations. More evidence comes from the strong relationship between job satisfaction and having a Calling. In a definitive meta-analysis designed to help settle the debate over whether or not job satisfaction and job performance are linked, Judge, Thoresen, Bono, and Patton (2001) determined that the mean true correlation between job satisfaction and performance was 0.30. Thus, one can indirectly make the argument that if Callings orientations are linked to high job satisfaction, and job satisfaction is linked to work performance, then it is likely that the best performers in organizations tend to see their work as a Calling.

**IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

In all, the results presented here combine to suggest a powerful and optimistic set of points about the meaning of work. First, it appears that the way in which people see their work is highly predictive of their own individual thriving, and has positive implications for the groups and organizations of which they find themselves a part. In particular, people with Calling orientations toward their work engage with the domain of work in qualitatively different ways than those who have Jobs or Careers. What is perhaps most exciting about this finding is that it is found across different kinds of jobs and occupations (Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997). Thus, from a POS perspective, it raises additional questions for research that are likely to bear fruit for understanding what can make work and organizations more positive life domains. For example, this research raises additional questions about how managers and coworkers can help to create social and organizational contexts in which Callings can be expressed, and in which job crafting in service of finding deeper meaning in work is encouraged. It also suggests that the available frames we have for the meaning of work could be expanded to create the potential for deeper meaning in nearly any job.

One potential area for inquiry is the dynamic interplay between organizational context and individual behavior. In this chapter, I have made the argument that people take proactive positions in creating meaning in their
work, and have suggested that organizational contexts can be more or less supportive of these initiatives. Systematic study of the differences between more and less encouraging organizational contexts in the expression of job-crafting behaviors and the presence of Calling-oriented employees would be a valuable direction for future research. From a POS perspective, the kinds of organizational structures and cultures that celebrate and welcome job crafting in service of finding deeper meaning in work should be identified and studied.

Second, while some research evidence supports the notion that these orientations are traitlike and stable, an alternative is presented here that opens the door to the possibility of deeper positive meaning in work for people doing all kinds of different work. By crafting the task and relational boundaries of their jobs, employees in most any job have the opportunity to recast their job as it is objectively described (Oldham & Hackman, 1981) into work that is freed from any one static set of descriptors. This possibility raises research questions that open new streams of research, including inquiries into who engages in crafting and when (Zhou & George, 2001), as well as what effects such behavior has on others in the organization. Might an active job crafter spark positive, proactive action among other employees? Or is job crafting a personal endeavor? The group-level data summarized earlier suggest that the approach taken to one’s work can have powerful and positive effects on interdependent others.

Finally, the work described in this chapter contributes to an alternative view of individuals and their work. It takes as its starting point the rich tradition of research in job attitudes and work meanings, and builds upon them to suggest how the relationships forged between individuals and their work helps to recast the domain of work in a variety of ways. Ultimately, it celebrates the benefits of proactively finding deeper meaning in work in ways that enable individuals to decide for themselves what role to cast work into on the stage of their lives.

NOTES
1. I gratefully acknowledge the research assistance of Jessica Scheidt in compiling and entering these study data.
2. All outcome variables were run through a one-way ANOVA analysis. In each case, the F values were significant at the 0.0001 level.