

INTERPERSONAL SENSEMAKING AND THE MEANING OF WORK

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we present a model of interpersonal sensemaking and describe how this process contributes to the meaning that employees make of their work. The cues employees receive from others in the course of their jobs speak directly to the value ascribed by others to the job, role, and employee. We assert that these cues are crucial inputs in a dynamic process through which employees make meaning of their own jobs, roles, and selves at work. We describe the process through which interpersonal cues and the acts of others inform the meaning of work, and present examples from organizational research to illustrate this process. Interpersonal sensemaking at work as a route to work meaning contributes to theories of job attitudes and meaning of work by elaborating the role of relational cues and interpretive processes in the creation of job, role and self-meaning.

INTRODUCTION

Individuals are motivated to make meaning of the information and context around them (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002). Yet as organizational scholars, we do not yet understand a great deal about how the meaning of work in people's lives is created. We know quite a bit about job attitudes and other specific measures of reactions to work (Locke & Latham, 1990; Loscocco, 1989; Staw, Bell &

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Clausen, 1986; Withey & Cooper, 1989), but we know much less about how these concepts inform the meaning of work more generally, and how that meaning is created. This gap in understanding is significant, as the meaning people make of their work is tied to their attitudes about the work they do (e.g. Lodahl & Kejner, 1965; MOW, 1987; Roberson, 1990; Vecchio, 1980) and their overall well-being (Campbell, Converse & Rodgers, 1976). Indeed, insofar as meaning and satisfaction are linked (Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin & Schwartz, 1997), there may be individual performance implications of work meanings.

In this chapter, we present a model of interpersonal sensemaking around the social cues employees attend to at work to make the argument that the meaning of work is significantly affected by the interpersonal episodes that employees have with others on the job. We see this model as building upon and complementing earlier research on job attitudes, sensemaking, and the role of relationships in organizations by proposing a process model for understanding how meaning is composed and altered at work. Our theory of interpersonal sensemaking attempts to address a concern that models of individual behavior in work organizations do not do justice to the relational nature of experiences at work (e.g. Bradbury & Lichtenstein, 2000; Gersick, Bartunek & Dutton, 2000; Kahn, 1998; Sandelands & Boudens, 2000).

Indeed, most treatments of the meaning of work and job attitudes specify relationships of individual values (Nord, Brief, Atieh & Doherty, 1990), needs (Alderfer, 1972), and characteristics of the job (Hackman & Oldham, 1976, 1980) with commitment to (Loscocco, 1989; Meyer & Allen, 1997; Morrow & Wirth, 1989), satisfaction with (Arvey, Bouchard, Segal & Abraham, 1989; Judge, Thoresen, Bono & Patton, 2001), and engagement in (Kahn, 1990; Rothbard, 2001) the job and the organization. However, most often the role of other people on the job is ignored in favor of properly specifying the relationship between self and work. While understanding how individual-level meanings of work are constituted between the self and job is critical to our theories of work meaning, this only presents part of the picture. Most every person engaged in work is interacting with other people, whether they are coworkers, supervisors, subordinates, clients, customers, or others in the organizational environment. Indeed, relationships with others form the social fabric and context of a job (Baron & Pfeffer, 1994).

The role of others at work has been partially specified in Salancik and Pfeffer's (1978) influential work on social information processing, where their theory depicts coworkers as having influence over job attitudes through the information and cues they give about their feelings and thoughts about the tasks of the job. However, the cues deemed relevant are ones that convey information only about the task. This focus underspecifies the range of meaning discerned from interpersonal cues. As well, a social information processing perspective is mainly

concerned with the cue itself, and less able to explain how the meaning of the cue gets determined. Further, the impact of the full spectrum of interaction partners at work is not understood, especially with respect to the role they may play in employees' understanding of the meaning of their work. Thus, our field suffers from a shallow understanding of the role of others at work, one that this chapter attempts to deepen.

Another shortcoming of traditional research on job attitudes and the meaning of work is its emphasis on the relationship between predictors and outcomes, with relatively less attention paid to the *processes* through which job attitudes and meanings are created in real time at work. While recent research on work emotion has attempted to bridge this gap in understanding (e.g. Waldron, 2000), there are opportunities for exploring and understanding what lies in the black box between inputs and outcomes related to work meaning. Although it is difficult to specify the steps that employees travel through to come to an understanding of their work and how they think, feel, and behave in it, it is a worthy goal, for it brings more light to questions about how the same work and same contexts come to be experienced so differently across employees (e.g. Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). Thus, this paper takes as a starting point the assumption that the role of others in the construction of the meaning of work is an important one, and that others are key contributors to the process through which work meaning is created or destroyed.

Our recent work involves looking at how employees come to understand the meaning of their work as well as what the job consists of (e.g. Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). The ways employees craft their jobs and think about the role of work in their lives (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997) differs greatly both between and within jobs. We have studied the ways in which employees engage in their work, and the role of other people in the organization (defined broadly) in the course of the day's work. We discovered in this research the critical role played by others in the organization in the valuing and devaluing of the work that employees do, the roles employees hold, and the people employees are. Consistent with Bartel (2003), our research suggested that employees draw from a wide variety of different individuals in the organizational context to come to an understanding of who they are at work. We found that in the course of doing their jobs, employees are continuously exposed to cues that convey others' appraisals of their worth and the worth of their roles and jobs. This dynamic took the form of a process through which employees discerned and read the interpersonal cues sent by others that revealed others' evaluations of them. These evaluations, in turn, had a direct and indirect impact on the meaning employees made of their jobs, roles, and selves in the organization. In this chapter we describe and illustrate this process, and suggest how it influences employees' work meanings.

A Review of the Meaning of Work

The general meaning of work is derived from several sources, including features of the person as well as characteristics of the work itself (Arvey, Bouchard, Segal & Abraham, 1989; Hackman & Oldham, 1980; Kohn & Schooler, 1982; Staw et al., 1986; Staw & Ross, 1985). Most research on the meaning of work explores the centrality of the role of work (Debats, Drost & Hanson, 1995; Lodahl & Kejner, 1965; Paullay, Alliger & Stone-Romero, 1994) and the history of the role of work (see Brief & Nord, 1990 for a comprehensive review). Indirectly, the sociological literature on identity and roles (Stryker, 1994; Stryker & Serpe, 1994) has addressed the meaning of work by commenting on the relative salience of the work domain relative to other life domains. Finally, theories of identity and social processes in shaping identity suggest that identity is partially comprised of the set of group memberships one has (e.g. Roccas & Brewer, 2002). For those with many overlapping ingroups, more simplified identity structures are created. Likewise, when one's ingroup memberships do not overlap, identity becomes more complex and differentiated. Thus, the structure of identity groups to which one belongs has implications for the identity one creates in the work organization.

An ongoing debate in the meaning of work literature centers on whether work meaning is determined internally (i.e. within the individual) or externally (i.e. by the job and wider environment). In this paper, we take the perspective that work meaning results from both – the meaning of the job, the role, and the self in the job all constitute work meaning. We describe how work meaning is created based on cues derived from interactions with others. In addition, our view extends the debate by describing how employees take cues from others that help them discern the meaning of their job, role, and self, and use these cues to shape their interaction patterns with organization members and outsiders they encounter in the organizational context.

Some organizational scholars (e.g. Hackman & Oldham, 1980) have looked at job meaning in terms of how skill variety applied to the job, the level of control employees have over completion of the task (task identity), and the impact of the job on others (task significance) contribute to the meaning that employees give to the job (Hackman & Oldham, 1980). The meaning that is inferred from these job elements involves the overall value or worth of the job in the organizational context. In fact, job design researchers have argued that people implicitly seek to understand the meaningfulness of their work in terms of whether it is broadly worthwhile and valuable. Others have argued job meaning results from employees' comparative appraisals of their inputs to and outputs from the job relative to others (Adams, 1963). Finally, others have

argued that job meaning results from the influential information offered by other employees about their experience of the tasks that create the work (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978).

Because the meaning of work is largely constituted *at* work, with others, it becomes a living social account that employees make of their experience at work. This is in contrast to views of work meaning that are more fixed and based on objective judgments made about stable characteristics of the job (Hackman & Oldham, 1980) or views of stigmatized work that emphasize the role of others in the community in shaping work meaning (e.g. Perry, 1978). Thus, our view of meaning treats it as a socially constructed product that is dynamic and fluid.

The Importance of Others at Work

Our chapter also aims to elaborate the role of others at work in the construction of work meaning. The interaction space at work is vast, comprised of interactions, cues and signals that are both executed and interpreted by those on the scene. At work, employees attend to and interpret what others do to them and what they do to these others. This view of the importance of others at work is echoed by Hughes (1950), who stated that the others we encounter at work “do the most to make our life sweet or sour (p. 321).”

Research on the role of others in the creation of work meaning often paints employees as passive recipients of social cues from the work environment, as opposed to active interpreters of what qualifies as a cue and how each cue should be read. In contrast, our perspective assumes that employees actively compose work meaning by what they notice and how they interpret the actions of others at work. Our perspective also assumes that employees seek out social situations in which their view of the meaning of their job, role, and selves is reinforced by the cues they are likely to receive in those settings or interactions. Our perspective imbues employees with a greater sense of agency and proactivity in how they construct work meaning. This more active construction of how employees make meaning at work fits with perspectives of employees at work that see them as having some degree of control and power in how they shape their work worlds (e.g. Bartel, 2003; Black & Ashford, 1994; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). It also fits with other sensemaking approaches that portray employees as agentic, actively shaping the content and outcomes of the interpretive process (Drazin, Glynn & Kazanjian, 1999). Finally, such a view reinforces the idea that individuals are motivated to seek out interactions and interaction partners who reinforce their view of themselves (Swann, 1987); since an understanding of the place that one’s job and self holds in

an organizational context clearly involves aspects of identity, this creates a powerful dynamic for shaping the kinds of contexts employees compose for themselves at work.

Recent research bridges the gap between self and other in explaining the sources of work meaning. For example, Sandelands and Boudens (2000) argue that the job attitudes literature overvalues the role of job tasks and rewards at the expense of the ties between employees and others. In their reanalysis of work narratives collected by Terkel (1972), Garson (1975), and Hamper (1986), they conclude that, "While people occasionally talk about their desire for meaningful work, this desire is not, as theories of satisfaction would have it, born of a concern for personal growth or 'self-actualization' (Argyris, 1957; Maslow, 1954)" (p. 49). Rather, they argue that employees want meaning through connection to others. They study employees' work narratives, and offer the statement of one of Terkel's (1972) informants, an assistant professor of occupational therapy, on working with others:

Until recently, I wasn't sure how meaningful my work was. I had doubts.
A surgeon does a really beautiful job. That's meaningful to him immediately.
But it's not the kind of sustaining thing that makes a job meaningful. It must concern the relationship that you have with the people you work with (Terkel, 1972, p. 494).

The authors conclude that when people talk about their work, they talk primarily about other people (Sandelands & Boudens, 2000). This finding reinforces the importance of understanding the relational underpinnings of how others matter to the meaning employees make of their work.

While the role of others in self narratives of work meaning provides understanding of global work assessments, it ignores *how* micro-assessments done in the moment affect attitudes. Researchers are starting to fill this gap by considering the role of aggregated micro-level experiences in determining global work assessments (Côté & Moskowitz, 1998; Fisher, 2000). This research aims to understand how the whole set of experiences employees have unite to create the degree of satisfaction and fit they feel with their work.

This research complements arguments that coworkers and others matter for work meaning, but through different paths than interpersonal sensemaking. For example, earlier work has treated others at work as sources of fun (e.g. Roy, 1959), learning (e.g. Orr, 1996), or resources (e.g. Emerson, 1976), but has not focused on the active sensemaking of what the actions of others are saying about an employee's worth at work.

In this paper, we present a model that highlights the experience of employees in interaction with others at work in shaping the meaning of work. In particular, we pay attention to the interpersonal context and its role in helping individuals compose the meaning of their work and themselves in the organizational context.

THE NATURE OF WORK MEANING

Work meanings capture an important part of how employees understand their experience in organizations. We define work meaning as employees' understandings of *what* they do at work as well as the *significance* of what they do. Both aspects of work meaning are related to an employee's beliefs about the function work serves in life (Roberson, 1990), which is affected by the social context in which employees live (Brief & Nord, 1990). Our assumption is that employees are motivated to derive a sense of meaning from their endeavors (Frankl, 1963), including their work (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Shamir, 1991). Borrowing from symbolic interactionism, we assume that meaning is not fixed, but is an ongoing production that both reflects and shapes patterns of action (Blumer, 1966). We assume employees engage in continuous sensemaking to discern what meaning their work holds for them, and further, that they act upon their relational setting at work in a motivated fashion to shape the contact with others and the experiences they are likely to have (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001).

Traditionally, studies of work meaning have emphasized the contextual and motivational dimensions of sensemaking (Becker, 1970; Fine, 1996; Friedson, 1970). In organizational settings, individuals are more likely to engage in sensemaking when they encounter problematic experiences at work (Weick, 1995). Furthermore, this process is not a rational and linear one; it is motivated to achieve something, perhaps even redefining and altering the meaning of problematic features of work (Fine, 1996). For example, Fine (1996) demonstrated how restaurant chefs used occupational rhetorics to craft their work as an art form and themselves as artists, thereby constructing themselves as professionals and emphasizing the skilled aspects of work. As our illustration of the process of constructing of job- self- and work-meaning later in this paper demonstrates, interpersonal sensemaking is motivated by the desire to reclaim, for oneself and for others, the value in one's work, and by extension in one's personhood.

The Structure of Work Meaning

We focus on three major facets of the broad domain of work meaning: the meaning of one's job, one's role, and the self at work. Together, the understandings employees come to of how they matter in the work they do and the part they play in the organization combine to map the domain of meaning at work. In Table 1, we map the terrain of work meaning by considering the content and evaluation of job meaning, role meaning, and self meaning at work. Our assumption is that we can usefully describe job meaning, role meaning, and self meaning by looking

Table 1. Work Meaning.

	Job Meaning at Work	Role Meaning at Work	Self Meaning at Work
Content			
What is it?	Characteristics of tasks and activities that one does at work	Characteristics of one's role(s) at work	Characteristics one imputes to the self while at work
Evaluation			
What is the value of it?	Interpreted value of the job and its tasks/activities	Interpreted value of the role(s) at work	Interpreted value of self in the job

through two lenses: content of meaning and evaluation of meaning. Each of these lenses provides a snapshot of the socially constructed meaning of this facet of the work. For example, the content of job meaning refers to the specific tasks and activities that an employee believes compose the job. Thus, job content captures what an employee does and the characteristics ascribed to these activities and tasks by the employee. The evaluative component of job meaning addresses the question of the value of these activities and tasks that an employee believes compose the job. The content of role meaning addresses the perceived position in the social structure an employee holds in the organization (Ashforth, 2001), while the evaluative component of role meaning addresses the perceived value of this position in the organization. Finally, the content of self meaning at work addresses the question of "What are my qualities or characteristics as a person carrying out a particular job?" The evaluative component of self-meaning addresses the issue of the value or worth of the employee's personal qualities in the job.

Job Meaning

There are two kinds of meaning around jobs – the meaning of the tasks and activities themselves (i.e. content), and the meaning of the evaluation of those tasks and activities. While any job has a formal job description, all employees have discretion to craft a job to include or exclude certain tasks (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001), and to impute certain meanings to those tasks. As a result, job meaning is fluid and constructed in doing the work. For example, the task of cleaning a floor does not have an inherent meaning. It acquires meaning through the execution of the task, and the employee's interaction with others that imbue the task with meaning. As such, the cleaning of a floor can become a dirty, devalued, degrading task, or it can become an important, valued task that highlights the criticality of one's job for the achievement of the organization's mission. Thus, the meaning of any job is not fixed.

We propose that two aspects of job meaning are composed in the course of any workday. First, through work, employees discern a sense of what the content of their job is, and understand the tasks and activities that they do as part of the work. For example, knowing that a teacher creates lessons, grades papers, and encourages students is all part of understanding the content of the job of teacher. Usually, job content is rather unambiguous to employees, though there may be liberties taken to alter the content of the job (Morrison, 1994; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Second, job meaning also refers to an employee's evaluation of the job. The worth of the job is affected by an employee's personal values, preferences and passions as well as by features of the social context. We focus on the latter category to explore how employees construct, read, interpret, and proactively create the social context in which they perform their work. This social context creates the backdrop against which job meaning (and work meaning in the aggregate) is born. In this paper, we focus on how the interpersonal cues that emerge from this backdrop affect the worth of the job as well as other facets of work meaning.

Role Meaning

Role meaning describes the understanding employees have of what their position in the formal social structure at work is (Ashforth, 2001), and how they evaluate that position. We define a role as Ashforth (2001) does, "a position in a social structure (p. 4)" but also note the impact of others' expectations and the fluid negotiations between employees and others in determining what form the role takes (Graen & Scandura, 1987; Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek & Rosenthal, 1964). Thus, our sense of roles includes both structural aspects of the position, and social aspects of the expectations others have of the employee in the position.

We propose that at least two aspects of role meaning are composed during the course of the work day. First, at work, employees get a sense of what the content of their roles are in the organization. For example, the content of an employee's role simply answers questions about whether they are a clerk, a CEO, a floor washer, or a teacher. Second, employees acquire a better understanding of the evaluation of their work role through their experiences at work. Such evaluations help them to understand the worth and value of their role – whether the worth of the role is positive (worthy and valuable), or negative (worthless and valueless). For example, many organizations have institutionalized the role of mentor as part of what defines the work of many different employees (e.g. Murrell, Crosby & Ely, 1999). In some organizations, this role includes many duties and obligations, and the way that the employee and others regard the role infuses it with significance and worth. In other organizations, this role has less responsibility associated with it and people in this role have limited formal or informal authority. In the latter case, role holders are likely to feel that the role has limited value. Of course,

whom one regularly interacts with at work will affect the kinds of cues, and meaning, one can impute to the role. For example, a mentor in an organization that gives the role little responsibility who spends a great deal of time and energy with mentees and receives cues that the mentoring work is valuable and worthy is likely to protect against decrements in role meaning.

Self Meaning

Self meaning at work describes the self-understanding that employees acquire about themselves when at work. Some researchers refer to self meaning as self identity, referring to the qualities that employees impute to themselves (Gecas, 1982; Schenkler, 1985), as well as the more elaborated self-narratives that describe who they are (Gergen & Gergen, 1988). Rosenberg (1979) took a broad view when he defined self-concept as “the totality of an employee’s thoughts and feelings that have reference to himself as an object” (Rosenberg, 1979, p. 7). There has been a flurry of interest in self meaning and identity at work over the last 15 years (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Hogg & Terry, 2000; Whetten & Godfrey, 1998). This research reminds us that that self is partially a social product of what happens to employees at work.

We propose that at least two aspects of self-meaning are work products. First, an employee comes to understand, at a very basic level, what the content of his or her self is on the job – am I someone who is careful, fast, and expert at work? Second, an employee acquires a self-understanding about evaluations of the self at work. This self at work may be infused with positive value and worth or with negative value and diminished worth. For example, Lynch (2000) studied women who suffered violence and abuse at home, but at work found new sources of personal meaning and significance for themselves as employees because of the way they were treated by others, and how they came to understand the value of their work to their employers.

The content and evaluation of the self involve negotiations of one’s identity in interactions with others (Swann, 1987). Employees’ self understandings grow from a process in which they present themselves, and through interacting, learn if their views of themselves are reinforced or validated by others (e.g. Bartel, 2003; Swann, 1987). Accordingly, how the self is evaluated and what the content of the self consists of is a somewhat fluid and socially constructed process. Later, we address how pressures for positive and consistent self-appraisals affect the interpersonal sensemaking process.

In the next section, we describe a model of interpersonal sensemaking at work that specifies the role of interpersonal cues from others in helping employees make meaning of their jobs, roles, and selves at work. We begin to describe the model by focusing on cues employees notice on the job and how these cues are interpreted to have meaning for the work they do.

AN INTERPERSONAL SENSEMAKING MODEL OF WORK MEANING

Our model addresses how interpersonal cues generated and received on the job shape work meaning. The model assumes the centrality of interpersonal acts at work and how the traces from these acts shape understandings of work, role and self meaning. In terms of Weick's sensemaking framework (1995), our model focuses on the intrasubjective elements in the process. In short, we wish to describe how employees create their own realities at work through their sensemaking around the cues they receive, and their tendency to seek out certain kinds of cues in the construction of the meaning of their work. Since the intrasubjective elements of sensemaking are the foundation for intersubjective or collective sensemaking, our assumption is that this portrayal of interpersonal sensemaking is a good starting point for describing and understanding how this process shapes work meaning.

In Fig. 1 we present our conceptual model, which is built on the premise that employees attend to interpersonal cues generated by themselves and others on the job and engage in sensemaking to determine how others evaluate their job, their role, and them at work. The cues and the interactions that produce them give rise to a pattern of interpersonal sensemaking that creates and alters the meaning of work. The sensemaking process begins with an employee noticing another person's actions. It proceeds as the employee makes sense of the cues from these actions, and then imputes job, role and self meaning from this interpretive effort. We discuss the elements of this model in more detail below.

Interpersonal Cues

As shown in Fig. 1, the process of interpersonal sensemaking begins with an employee at work noticing some kind of action or behavior of another person or group. We call this noticed action an interpersonal cue. Cues can be direct or subtle. For example, an employee who is struggling to meet a deadline who is given helpful material from a coworker is likely to notice this as a rather direct interpersonal cue. Likewise, something as small as a glance between coworkers across a conference table during a work meeting is also a cue. Whether an interpersonal cue involves a direct interaction or a behavior that is only an interaction trace, it provides *cues* that are important to sensemaking. Interpersonal cues are defined as behaviors of an individual in context that are noticed by another person. Symbolic interaction researchers call these cues "lines of action" and argue that individuals "engage in constant interpretation of each other's ongoing lines of action" (Blumer, 1966, p. 538, cited in Prus, 1996, p. 69). Cues are meaningful chunks of other's behavior

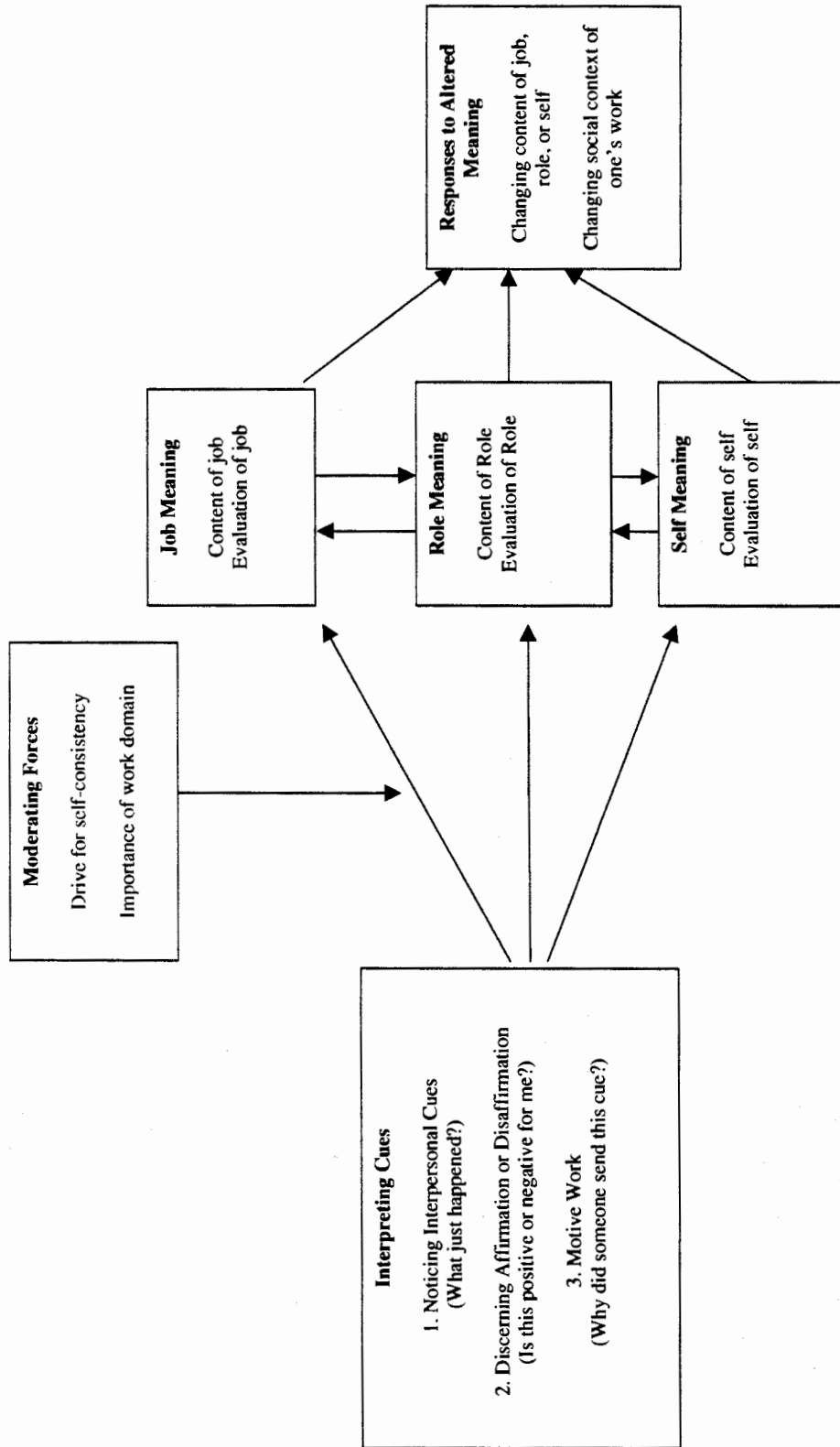


Fig. 1. Interpersonal Sensemaking in the Creation of Meaning at Work.

that carry signal value for understanding how others view us. They are the bits that compose what some researchers call reflected appraisals. From the original idea of a reflected self from William James (1890) to more contemporary developments of the idea of the looking glass self (elaborated by Cooley, 1902 and reviewed by Tice & Wallace, 2002), there is an important assertion that people appraise how others see them by reading cues. These cues vary in how diagnostic they are, meaning the “extent to which a cue gives information about conditions that can serve as a basis for a later judgment” (Dutton, Ashford, Lawrence & Miner-Rubino, 2002, p. 355).

In work organizations, interpersonal cues can be direct and explicit, such as a request made of an employee by another person on the job, or they can be subtle and indirect, such as non-verbal gestures. For example, in Tepper’s work on abusive bosses, he provides disturbing accounts about the directness with which some supervisors convey disdain to their subordinates: “What did I tell you the first day?” “Your thoughts are nothing.” “If you were in my toilet bowl I wouldn’t bother flushing it.” “My bath mat means more to me than you.” “You don’t like it here, leave” (Tepper, 2000, p. 178). But in many organizations, the interpersonal cues are much less direct, thus requiring employees to select which cues to read to interpret what the cue means. In a study of university staff’s experience of being valued and devalued at work, Beth, an administrative assistant, described a situation where she assembled a piece of work and asked her boss if he would like to check it over before she sent it out. She conveyed that her boss “did not check it because (he) was confident enough that (she) had done (the work) for so long” and trusted her work (Dutton, 2003). In this example, the boss’s cues were quite subtle. While he did not directly tell his subordinate, Beth, about his confidence in her, the granting of autonomy was a powerful cue that Beth experienced as affirmative and diagnostic of his belief that her job was important and that she was doing it competently.

In another example, the cue is even more indirect, and meaning is distilled from one small gesture. In this case, one employee leaves a sent fax in the office machine, and another takes it and returns it to the owner’s mailbox. When the employee finds the fax in his mailbox, if he knows that someone has gone through the effort to put it there, the gesture carries weight in how he thinks others regard him, his job and perhaps his role. This example illustrates how minute cues may be and yet still carry diagnostic weight in their impact on the meaning of work. Thus, while one employee may “pick up” a particular cue, another may fail to notice it at all.

A core argument is that employees engage in motivated sensemaking around interpersonal cues. Employees engage in a process of choosing which cues to attend to and interpret, and make sense of the cues in ways that may help to reinforce views of their job, their role, and their selves. A cue represents a behavior that is treated as meaningful by an employee. Whether or not others intend their

cues to be interpreted in a particular way is less relevant for discerning the effect of a cue on work meaning. Rather, what matters are the cues employees attend to and how these cues influence the kind of meaning that people make of their work. In this sense, once a cue has been picked up by an employee, the sensemaking process that ensues is an intrapsychic one, and while the employee attends to the social context in which the cue was received, its meaning is constructed alone. Of course, once this process occurs, employees may introduce social processes directly into the cue-receiving and interpreting process by engaging in interactions and with partners that may help to reinforce their desired meaning of the work they do. In the next section, we elaborate the details of the interpersonal sensemaking process.

The Process of Interpretation

Interactions at work produce cues that activate interpretation processes. As shown in Fig. 1, the interpretation process is composed of three elements: noticing, discerning affirmation or disaffirmation, and doing motive work. While we isolate each element and describe the interpretive process as a sequential flow, in most cases, this process happens quickly and with limited conscious thought. However, to understand how work meaning is affected by interpersonal sensemaking, exploring each element of the process affords a different insight. We discuss each element in the process in more detail below.

Noticing Interpersonal Cues

While employees' behaviors generate continuous sensemaking material, only a subset of cues gets noticed, and even fewer are interpreted as meaningful. Noticing an interpersonal cue involves attending to and bounding some chunk of social life at work. As Weick (1995) suggests, it is often swift and automatic, with people barely aware that they have actually sliced or extracted some cue for further notice. For example, Chris Low, a long-time staff member in the legal department at a local pharmaceutical firm, tells of a recent encounter in which the cue interpretation was both swift and powerful. Her company's vice-president had come in to talk to her boss for a quick briefing on a legal issue that was essential to a merger deal that was being negotiated. Chris had met the company vice president on several occasions and had done several small assignments for the Vice President's assistant. Chris and her boss were standing side by side in the law library when the Vice President came to see Chris's boss. The Vice President interrupted them without apology and proceeded to grill her boss with questions. He never acknowledged Chris, nor apologized for the interruption. Chris explained that while she did not think

her boss had noticed this encounter, the Vice President's actions left an indelible impression on her.

We assume that interpersonal cues at work are noticed in routine or non-routine situations. Routine noticing happens when, through planned and recurring interactions, individuals are regularly exposed to bounded bits of interpersonal behavior. There are many routine situations in organizations that promote interactions. Some of these situations are formal, such as meetings, or report-in sessions. Other situations, such as impromptu coffee breaks, are informal. Taken-for-granted norms and behavioral expectations that are automatically observed govern each of these situations with very little reflection (Garfinkel, 1967). If behavior is consistent with taken-for-granted expectations, it is not noticed. For example, at the start of a meeting, it is often customary for participants to chat about how things are going and use the few minutes before the meeting begins for a casual catch-up period in which bonds are informally renewed. Behavior that is consistent with these expectations is not noticed, while behavior departing from expectations, even if it is subtle, such as avoiding the initiation or return of greetings, is noticed. This behavior would then activate the interpersonal sensemaking process.

Non-routine cues are likely to be noticed because they are vivid, surprising, or extreme in some way (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Unexpected events or actions taken by others command attention and become important inputs for further interpretation, and can occur in the midst of routine or non-routine events. For example, in Randy Hodson's (1991) work on experiencing dignity at work, he singles out a quote from Ruth Cavendish's (1982) participant observer study of women in an electronics factory to show how coworkers can create alternative realities that allow people to survive and thrive in harsh work conditions. One of the women she studied described what it was like to receive an unexpected cue from a coworker: "I was talking to Anna after returning from a two-week sick leave without pay, when she stuffed a ten pound note in my trouser pocket so quickly that I wasn't even sure what it was. She was giving it to me because I would be short, having lost two week's wages" (Cavendish, 1982, p. 67).

In this example, the direct cue from Ruth's coworker Anna stands out as an unexpected and generous gesture, thus capturing Ruth's attention. In our theory of interpersonal sensemaking at work, this act is noticeable because it is non-routine, thus becoming a catalyst to sensemaking about what this act means, and providing one among several threads of understanding that form the weave of the meaning of work.

Discerning Affirmation and Disaffirmation

After noticing a cue, the second step in the interpersonal sensemaking process involves an employee's interpretation of whether a cue is affirming or disaffirming.

The basic question that one answers when determining if a cue is affirming or disaffirming is whether a cue conveyed by the other is positive or negative. Interpretation that a cue is positive implies a person believes the noticed behavior communicates regard, care, competence, worth or any attribute that implies that the act confirms the employee's existence and endows the employee with some form of significance. Interpretation that a cue is negative registers disconfirmation of an employee's significance as it says the noticed behavior conveys disregard, lack of caring or value, incompetence or some other derogatory attribute.

The idea that employees interpret interpersonal cues as affirming or disaffirming fits the assumption that people appraise situations using a coarse-grained judgment of whether a situation is positive, negative or neutral (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This appraisal functions to help organisms survive in the environment; to the extent that an appraisal is automatic and helps one decide how to act, it has adaptive value for survival (Lazarus, 1991). In social settings individuals have learned to make quick judgments about whether someone is friend or foe, dangerous or not dangerous, helpful or not helpful. A remnant of this basic appraisal is that clues that come to us from others' actions are assessed with a very simple logic – does this affirm or disaffirm who I am as a person? In a work setting, this affirmation and disaffirmation interpretation often implicates others' judgments about the job, the role or the self at work. For example, Konner (1987) describes the general sense of disaffirmation he felt when, in his medical residency training, his supervising resident would use his on-call room in the middle of the night to dictate, for hours, her discharge notes. The on-call room was the only place where he could sleep, and he experienced the practice as abusive, noting that, "She made certain that I would not get any sleep unless she did, too" (Konner, 1987, p. 271).

A wide range of interpersonal cues at work registers affirmation and disaffirmation. Beyond signaling presence, cues that affirm may include interpersonal acts where someone enables an employee's performance at work through providing resources, offering emotional support, simply listening, being polite, conveying trust, including them in group activities, or offering help. All of the acts have in common the idea that they communicate that the employee exists and is significant in some way (Dutton, 2003). Cues that disaffirm, of course, do the opposite. They are read as disaffirming an employee's significance, and may include cues that deny their existence, withhold assistance or support, or actions that harm their efforts at work. At work, interpersonal acts of this kind are common. For example, studies of incivility at work provide some startling findings: 90% of respondents in a recent poll believed that incivility at work is a serious problem, while more than half of respondents in front-line positions surveyed in another poll indicated that they had experienced acts of mistreatment at work during the past three years.

Finally, one-third of more than 600 nurses surveyed experienced verbal abuse during their previous five days of work (Pearson, Andersson & Porath, 2000).

Work on social cognition suggests that people at work may be more influenced by negative or disaffirming cues rather than positive or affirming cues (e.g. Peeters & Czapinski, 1990). There are several logics that explain the importance of disaffirming cues; they are sometimes seen as a result of expectancy violations (Olson, Roese & Zanna, 1996), and other times depicted as due to our systems' hard-wiring to be more vigilant about negative than positive stimuli (e.g. Pratto & John, 1991). Both imply individuals at work might be more attentive to disaffirming than affirming cues. However, if one considers the hedonic principle and people's basic desire to seek pleasure, this would suggest an explicit bias in the search for and attention to affirming cues at work. Thus, psychology gives us competing arguments about whether affirming or disaffirming cues would be more important in affecting work meaning. However, whether any cue shapes meaning depends on inferences about the intentions of those who authored the act or made the move. Borrowing from Mills (1940), we call this part of interpersonal sensemaking "motive work." Such work involves, among other things, a process of discerning others' motives, and is the last step of our proposed model.

Doing Motive Work

The final step in the process of interpretation involves making sense of why someone acted the way that they did. When people notice others' cues, it is in part because they depart from a set of expectations they have for interaction, which creates the need to come up with a plausible explanation for the cue. Motive work in the context of interpersonal sensemaking answers a simple question: did the person or group who authored the act or made the move intend to do what they did? We propose that the answer to this question either increases or decreases the effect of the affirmation/disaffirmation judgment on the meaning of work. Figuring out someone's motives helps people know whether a behavior, move, or act is diagnostic of another's beliefs and feelings and whether the act is likely to be repeated.

Our assertion that attributions of intent or motive work is part of interpersonal sensemaking fits with work that has been done on meaning making in close relationships. For example, Bradbury and Fincham (1990) present evidence suggesting that individuals first code interaction events as either positive or negative, then engage in motive work that serves to increase or decrease the impact of the event. Thus, the positive or negative nature of the cue is primary in the process, but the impact of the cue can change as a result of the motives that are attributed. For example, if an employee is accustomed to having a coworker bring back an extra cup of coffee for her after a regular work break and, one day, this gesture

is not made, the initial reaction would likely be that this is a disaffirming act (i.e. "Why didn't my coworker bring coffee, as is our routine?"). However, motive work suggests that the impact of this cue can change as a result of the motives attributed to the sender. If the employee knows that the coffee was forgotten because the coworker is overloaded and stressed, the cue's impact is minimized.

For example, in the story of Chris described above, the meaning of the interpersonal cue from the vice president would have been quite different if Chris felt that the vice president was completely overwhelmed by the merger situation, and so was "forgetting himself" in the way he was acting toward others. This interpretation could have resulted in Chris having no reaction to the cue, or feeling sympathy for the vice president. However, because Chris seemed to feel as though the cue was unnecessary and volitional, her sensemaking resulted in feeling devalued.

Attribution theory supports the importance of motive work in interpersonal sensemaking by assuming that people try to interpret the world in order to control it (Kelly, 1955). Our model of interpersonal sensemaking assumes employees are effortful thinkers about the motives for others' acts, and that the outcomes of motive work provide information that allows employees to understand and predict others' future behavior, and to act more effectively (Swann, 1984).

However, while motivation to infer motives is strong in close relationships (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990), it is less clear that employees would want to engage in motive work around every noticed cue that deviated from their expectations. In fact, the degree to which a cue is noticed, coded as affirming or disaffirming, and interpreted through the imputed motives of others is likely to vary across employee and situation. Motivation to attend to others (that is, to notice and code their cues as affirming or disaffirming) and to infer motives for their actions depends on a number of factors. For example, cues are embedded in organizational structures, which inevitably involve power relations and situated knowledge of the relationship, all of which makes a cue more or less noticeable and diagnostic. Thus, the structural positions of the cue sender and the cue receiver should influence cue interpretation, as structural position is also associated with status (Fiske, 1992). Research has supported the notion that those with more power attend less to others and are more likely to engage in stereotyping (Fiske & Depret, 1996; Keltner, Gruenfeld & Anderson, 2003; Lee & Tiedens, 2001). This suggests that in the interpersonal sensemaking process, the positions of the players involved matter for how motivated each will be to notice cues in the first place, and engage in motive work around them.

The issue of status and attention in organizations works both ways, however. Research on stigmatized work has suggested that in the face of the threats implied by doing "dirty work" (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999), employees may protect themselves by selectively attending to outsiders who are providing cues about the

worth and meaning of their work. Thus, the weight, attention, and processing given to interpersonal cues may depend on the motivation of employees to moderate the impact of the stigma or status of their work on the meaning of what they do.

Another factor that is likely to affect motive work is the relationship of the interaction partner to the employee. For example, if the interaction partner is from one's occupational group or department, it is possible that the motive work will be done with a motivation towards giving a more forgiving interpretation to a negative cue. Weber (1994) has demonstrated that people tend to make kinder attributions for the motives and intentions of members of their own groups relative to members of other groups, attributing negative behavior to external or temporary causes when a group member is the target of motive work. Thus, both the *presence* and the *kind* of motive work that employees engage in are likely to differ depending on the source of the cue.

In short, motive work allows employees to conclude if an interpersonal cue is strongly or weakly affirming or disaffirming. The final link in the process reveals how this affirmation or disaffirmation affects work meaning.

Linking Interpersonal Sensemaking to Work Meaning

The last step in the process specifies how interpreting a cue as affirming or disaffirming translates into changes in work meaning. While we have specified the broad domain of work meaning at the outset of this chapter, interpersonal sensemaking has its major impact on how employees evaluate their jobs, roles and selves at work in light of the imputed evaluations of others. Specifically, the motive work that occurs around the cues others send at work acts to translate a bounded bit or pattern of behavior into relevant information about what others think about one's worth. This is a motivated process, in which employees strive to understand the behavior of others in light of their power relative to them, and the presence or absence of a common group membership with them. The impact of employees' motivated processing and interpretation of cues on the outcome of the sensemaking cannot be underemphasized, for it shapes their understanding of their work context and their place in it, but also acts as a guide for their future behavior in interactions with others, as we will describe later.

The cues that are interpreted at work are sources of information that speak directly to others' evaluation of the value or significance of an employee's job, role, and self in the organization. Specifically, the cues employees receive at work carry in them others' evaluations of the worth and competence that an employee exhibits at work. Thus, interpersonal cues at work register at the level of evaluation of job, role and self in the model we have proposed. The relationship between work meaning and the three sources of meaning that comprise it is a simple one; each source of meaning contributes directly to work meaning, and each affects the

other (see Fig. 1). For example, receiving evaluative information via interpersonal cues about the worth of one's job in the organization is likely to have an impact on more than just job meaning. The job is subordinated into a larger role one plays in the organization, and the role is subordinated into the self, creating a nesting of the meanings that are affected by interpersonal cues. Chief among the three meanings that comprise work meaning is self-meaning, for it strikes at the very heart of one's identity and worth as a human being. Thus, self meaning is a repository for job and role meaning, as the information conveyed about job and role ultimately has an impact upon the self. In Fig. 1, the boldfaced arrows indicate this nesting of meaning.

Because individual meaning is derived in part from a need for a sense of self-worth (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002) and self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1979), information from others that speaks *directly* to their evaluation of the worth and competence of what an employee does or who an employee is at work may be relevant as an input to the meaning making process. Indeed, Gecas (1982) argues that worth and competence are essential parts of how individuals evaluate themselves (e.g. Gecas, 1971). We build from the assumptions that people have a strong desire to view their self-definitions in positive terms (Turner & Tajfel, 1986), and that employees assess their worth and competence through the reflected appraisals of others. Given that the cues employees read from others are often diagnostic about worth, competence and other indicators of value, the role of interpersonal cues in the creation of work meaning is likely to be significant.

Our view is consistent with a symbolic interactionist perspective on the self, in which who we are and what we do (and, we would argue, the meaning we make of who we are and what we do) is co-constituted in interaction with others (Cooley, 1902). Through interpersonal cues, employees are granted or denied "a manifest sense of confirmed worth as a human being" (Margolis, 1999, p. 27). Thus, a cue from another that is interpreted to carry weight and have significance will have an impact on the meaning one makes of the job, role, and self at work. It is through this process of reading, interpreting, and incorporating cues about others' assessments of one's value at work that the very evaluation employees make of themselves is affected.

When the process of interpersonal sensemaking strikes at the very heart of the evaluation of job, role, and self meaning, it has the potential to shape the content of these elements as well. Employees can begin to alter the content of the job, the role, and the self at work after integrating others' statements about the value of each into the meaning they make of these elements. For example, in Konner's (1987) story of the abusive head medical resident, the repeated nature of her disaffirming cues eventually led him to approach her, stating, "Look . . . I am trying to pass the course. That means I need a grade of Satisfactory. So why don't

you tell me exactly what I have to do to get a grade of Satisfactory? Because I don't intend to do any more than that" (Konner, 1987, p. 270). Konner explained, "What I intended and in fact carried out was minimalism in relation to (her) hazing" (p. 271). What Konner truly carried out was a curtailing of the content of his job, his role, and the characteristics of himself that he brought to his medical internship.

The evaluations others make of the worth of one's job, role, and self help employees to shape the content of all three in response. The interactions that produce cues are the source of affirming or disaffirming evaluations that carry significance for employees. As in the example described above, the impact of interpersonal cues on the meaning employees make of their jobs, roles, and selves can lead employees to change the content of what they do and who they are in the work context. This effect of interpersonal sensemaking speaks directly to the dynamic nature of the model we have proposed. In the next section, we consider how the content of what one does at work can be shaped by the interpersonal sensemaking process, and how employees shape contexts at work to affect the kinds of interactions they are likely to have.

Creating Content and Contexts

The experience of receiving evaluative information about the worth of one's job, role, or self is powerful. Its impact strikes at the core of the self and its worth in the organization. We assume that employees need a secure and stable sense of self-meaning (Erez & Earley, 1993; Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock, 1996), and desire to see themselves in a positive light (Jones, 1973). It is through interpersonal episodes at work that employees come to know the content of who they are. As Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) state: "Through social interaction and internalization of collective values, meanings and standards, individuals come to see themselves somewhat through the eyes of others and construct more or less stable self-definitions" (p. 417).

Employees have the ability to affect how they compose the tasks of their jobs, as well as who they come into contact with on the job (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Thus, it is possible to shape the content of what one does in response to the messages one receives about one's worth to bring the two into line to create a coherent experience. For example, if employees get the message that others see certain elements of their job as more worthwhile and valuable than others, a pressure is exerted on the employees to engage in more of this activity, or to emphasize these aspects of the job or role in their interactions with others. This desire for positive regard may lead employees to two different ways of altering the work context. First, as mentioned in the example above, employees may begin to engage in tasks, role behaviors, and presentation of aspects of themselves that have been positively evaluated by others in the past. Second, employees may learn to seek out contexts in which the interactions they have with others reinforce the valued aspects of their

jobs, roles, and selves. Thus, through a dual process of shaping how they do their work and building the social context in which they work, employees have at least some ability to influence the context from which they receive interpersonal cues.

However, there are several factors that are likely to affect whether employees are motivated to reshape the content and context of their work in order to win positive evaluations from others. First, while employees are motivated to hold positive images of themselves (Jones, 1973), employees are also motivated to see their reflected selves as consistent with their own understanding of themselves in order to achieve a coherent sense of self (e.g. Swann, 1990, 1999; Swann, Rentfrow & Guinn, 2002). This drive for self-consistency can lead people to prefer that others see them as they see themselves, even when this means that the view will be negative (Swann et al., 2002). Thus, motivation to create and seek out opportunities for receiving affirming interpersonal cues is likely to be moderated by the need for self-consistency.

Second, the drive to receive affirming cues may be influenced by the relationship between the employee and the work. The model we have proposed addresses the domain of work to the exclusion of interpersonal sensemaking in other life domains. While we have made the argument that all employees will attend to and be influenced by interpersonal cues at work, the power of these cues will vary according to the significance of the domain of work for the employee. Not all individuals imbue their work lives with the same significance (Wrzesniewski, et al., 1997), and may not derive the full measure of their self worth from that context. As Crocker and Park (2003) note, people have contingencies of self worth, or domains in which they have staked their self-esteem, so that their worth depends on their perceived successes or failures in those domains. The domain of work is not a focus of self worth for all employees, thus, the centrality and significance of work will affect the impact of cues on the meaning made of the work, as well as the effort made to seek opportunities for receiving affirming cues.

In the next section, we consider the impact of interpersonal cues on the work meanings of employees in a specific context: that of cleaning in hospitals. We describe how the cues cleaners received were noticed, interpreted as affirming or disaffirming, and finally, how their interpretations of the cues altered both their evaluation and the content of their work.

INTERPERSONAL SENSEMAKING IN ACTION: THE CASE OF HOSPITAL CLEANERS

Our insights about interpersonal sensemaking were shaped by a study we did of the work experiences of cleaners in a large Midwestern hospital setting. The study

involved face-to-face interviews with a randomly selected sample of 29 cleaners from the population of 237 cleaners in the department. We interviewed cleaners from different shifts and units, who had different levels of contact with nurses, doctors, patients and visitors. We used random sampling to secure a representative group of cleaners from different shifts, departments, and type of cleaning job (e.g. patient rooms, public areas). The interviews explored a number of themes, including the nature of a cleaner's job, how they perform their job, their relationships with others in the workplace, and whether and how these others facilitate or hinder the performance of their job.

The cleaners told three types of stories that illustrate how interpersonal cues contribute to the meanings that employees make about their jobs, roles, and selves. The first type of story pertained to interactions that they interpreted as conveying affirmation for them and for the work they performed. The second story type pertained to interactions that they interpreted as conveying disaffirmation through an expressed lack of appreciation or even disgust for the job the cleaner performs, the role the cleaner has in the hospital and for the cleaner as a person. The third story type depicted interactions where others' cues were equivocal and contained elements of affirmation and disaffirmation. We provide examples of each story type to illustrate the model of interpersonal sensemaking. Despite the different meanings that result from these story types, the interpersonal sensemaking employed in all three situations revealed a basic similarity in process elements. The key elements of the model are related to these stories in Table 2.

An Affirming Story

Our first story describes an interaction that conveys affirmation of and appreciation for the cleaner and his job. After providing a brief description of the story, we analyze it in light of the elements of our theoretical model. The quote below describes positive interactions between Jason and the patients whose rooms he cleans daily.

Usually every morning I have to knock on the door. If the patient is able to speak, I say "housekeeping" and a few of them can't speak cause of Ortho and so I'll just say "housekeeping, is it okay if I clean your room?" . . . and if they can talk they say "yes" and I'll just talk to some of them that want to talk. Just somebody to talk to. They've been sitting there, or if they don't get a visitor. (They may say) "How ya doing today?" "Is it nice out?" "Is it cold?" (We have) just (a) normal conversation. Every now and then one might say, "Well I'm glad to see your smiling face." It depends on who we are . . . how you carry yourself. (Some patients cannot respond but even in this situation) you just don't bust in nobody's room. You knock and knock. Then I'll announce, "Housekeeping" and every now and then I can tell "Err err err," you know cause they can't say, "Hey, come on in" or nothing.

Table 2. Illustrations of the Interpersonal Sensemaking Process.

Interpersonal Sensemaking	Affirming Stories	Disaffirming Stories	Ambivalent Stories
Interaction	The exchange between cleaners and patients when the cleaner is cleaning the patient's room	Doctors and nurses making messes that they do not clean up	Patient's visitor who accuses cleaner of not cleaning a room
Noticing	Assessing a patient's ability and desire to talk by the things he or she says	Doctors and nurses "throw something on the floor and just . . . look at it" passively as if they did not have a responsibility for picking up what they dropped	Visitor's son, the patient, was in a coma and paralyzed after fighting with a black man. The visitor was anxious over his son's condition
Motive work	Patients who wished to talk, did so because they wished to have social interaction	"Taking advantage" of the cleaner's job as "housekeeper" Cleaning messes was below them	The father may have been angry at black men in general, because of his son's experience
Job meaning	Patients are interested in what the cleaner does	"I don't think they (doctors and nurses) value our jobs . . . like they should"	Visitor's reactions did not convey meaning about how he viewed Luke's job
Role meaning	Patients' interest and appreciation for what the cleaner does at the hospital	Sense that doctors and nurses do not value cleaners' position	Visitor's reactions did not convey meaning about how he viewed Luke's role
Self meaning	Patients' interest and appreciation for a job well done makes the cleaner feel "right"	They (the doctors and nurses) do not really respect us	Visitor's reactions did not convey meaning about how he viewed Luke

This story aptly illustrates how the meaning cleaners make of their interactions with patients are colored by the cleaner's belief that the patient's responses to them are motivated by their desire for social interaction. Thus, Jason described how patients typically want to talk and will say affirming things to him in the course of his day (e.g. "Well I'm glad to see your smiling face"). He then described the possible motives of the patients in starting up conversations by reasoning "they've been sitting there," or because they may be lonely "if they don't get a visitor." Jason pointed out that he assesses the patient's motives by paying attention to the cues provided. Specifically, he notices those actions or gestures that tell him about a patient's condition, and why they may or may not want to engage in conversation.

For instance, he points out that he tries to ascertain whether a patient can speak as well as whether the patient shows an interest in talking by offering a greeting once he is in the room. Although he did not explicitly state what this interpersonal interaction meant for the meaning of his job, his role, and himself, this next quote from Hudson describes the meaning of his interactions with patients. Many cleaners described similar meanings made from cues picked up in interactions with patients.

With patients . . . they really like you to sit and talk with them and just be social. I like that. I think everybody likes to be social . . . I haven't met one (patient that) is bad, and the visitors too. They're interested in what you do, even though it is just housekeeping. They're interested. I guess you appreciate that. Makes you feel alright. And they say thank you a lot.

In this excerpt, Hudson describes the work meaning that results from his interactions with patients and the affirming cues he receives from them. Hudson points out that his job is appreciated by patients who convey an interest in what he does as well as offer gratitude for a job well done. The cues he notices are positive, and his motive work (i.e. "I think everybody likes to be social") suggests a reason for the cues that does not diminish their impact. The cues he receives speak directly to the patients' evaluation of the worth and competence of his job and role in the hospital. Hudson's comment, that the interaction "makes you feel alright," suggests that with respect to self meaning, he feels that he is valued by patients who express thanks. According to our model of interpersonal sensemaking, we would not be surprised to find that he goes out of his way to interact with patients in the course of the work day, thus shaping the content of his job (i.e. the tasks he focuses on) and the social context in which he does his work.

A Disaffirming Story

In contrast to the affirming stories, cleaners also told disaffirming stories. One such story was about how others' actions made a cleaner's job more difficult. In the excerpt below, Bertie describes the problem of others making "messes" that they do not clean up themselves.

I don't think they (doctors and nurses) value our jobs as much as they should. They take advantage of, you know, our jobs as being housekeepers and (expect us to) pick up after them. I've sat there and watched doctors and nurses throw something on the floor and just, you know, look at it, like 'She'll pick that up.' You know, the housekeeper or somebody will pick it up. (They're) too lazy to pick up after themselves, they leave trash all over the place. So one of the things that I would say about nurses and doctors, is that they don't really respect us. It's in keeping their own environment clean. I'm not going to be sitting in this mess. (Since) they gotta sit in it, I would think they would want to clean it up, but they don't. I think they're pretty messy people – for professional people.

While cleaners appeared to forgive patients and visitors who did not pick up after themselves, nurses and doctors were judged by a different standard. When others do not clean up and leave a mess, many cleaners spoke of this as a negative event or cue. However, the impact of the cue varied greatly, and depended upon who made the mess, and their capacity for cleaning it. For example, cleaners often did motive work that excused patients and visitors for making more work for the cleaner. Cleaners often cited health or emotional reasons as an explanation for why a patient or visitor might leave a mess. In contrast, nurses and doctors were held to a different standard, as is clear from Bertie's story. The cues given by nurses and doctors who left messes were similarly negative, but acquired more of a negative impact in light of motive work. Because they are viewed as able-bodied and responsible for their own messes, when nurses and doctors left work for a cleaner, it was interpreted as a more negative cue. The underlying motive imputed for this behavior was one of "taking advantage" of the cleaner's job as "housekeeper." Bertie considered the possibility that professional staff acted this way because of the assumptions they had about cleaners. That is, "doctors and nurses throw something on the floor, and just, you know, look at it, like 'She'll (the cleaner) pick that up.'" Their "just looking at it," conveyed an assumption that cleaning was for the cleaner and was beneath them. Bertie's attention to the behavior of nurses and doctors, and her motive work around their cues is consistent with research findings that those with relatively less power will attend more to the actions of others and will work to actively process their meaning (Keltner et al., 2003).

These acts sent very strong messages and had a negative impact on work meaning. The evaluation of worth that is carried in the cues that doctors and nurses send in these interactions strike directly at the meaning that Bertie makes of her job, role, and self. As she points out, "I don't think they (doctors and nurses) value our jobs like they should." This suggests that the meaning of both her job and her role, or position in the hospital, is viewed as having little worth. While Bertie does not articulate her view of the worth of her job and role, her statement suggests that the cues of others have an impact on her. This impact moves to the level of self meaning as well, as evidenced by her statement that the doctors and nurses "don't really respect us."

An Ambivalent Story

Luke is an African-American man who had been a cleaner at the hospital for 15 years when he told a story about how he handled an accusation that he had not cleaned a patient's room. The interview excerpt below describes a negative story, but the work meaning that is constructed cannot be described as wholly negative,

but is rather ambivalent, or mixed. In his interpretation of the cues he received, Luke takes into account mitigating factors that shape his motive work around the story. His motive work alters his interpretation of the other's negative act and thereby leads Luke to construct an ambivalent work meaning.

Luke: "And there was this other guy who snapped at me. I kind of knew the situation about his son. His son had been here for a long time and . . . from what I hear, his son had got into a fight and he was paralyzed. That's why he got there, and he was in a coma and he wasn't coming out of the coma . . . and I heard how he got that way. He had got into a fight with a black guy and the black guy really, well, you know, because he was here. Well, I guess his father felt a little angry toward blacks and I went and cleaned his room. His father would stay here every day, all day, but he smoked cigarettes. So, he had went out to smoke a cigarette and after I cleaned the room, he came back up to the room. I ran into him in the hall, and he just freaked out . . . telling me I didn't do it. I didn't clean the room and all this stuff. And at first, I got on the defensive, and I was going to argue with him. But I don't know. Something caught me and I said, 'I'm sorry. I'll go clean the room.'"

Interviewer: "And you cleaned it again?"

Luke: "Yeah, I cleaned it so that he could see me clean it . . . I can understand how he could be. It was like six months that his son was here. He'd be a little frustrated, and so I cleaned it again. But I wasn't angry with him. I guess I could understand."

In the above excerpt, Luke discerned a negative, disaffirming cue in the accusation by the father that he did not clean the room. The cue was so negative, in fact, that Luke considered arguing with him in order to stand his ground. However, it was motive work that led Luke to interpret the cue differently, and reverse the course of the interpersonal sensemaking process. Specifically, Luke interpreted the father's accusation against a backdrop of motive work that considered the fact that the patient's condition was the result of a fight with another black man. Given these factors, Luke did not view the father's cues as being directed at him or his work. Instead, he reasoned that the father's reaction towards him had more to do with the fact that Luke was also black. Based on this motive work, Luke did not impute a negative evaluation of the meaning of his job, his role, or himself. Instead, he pointed out that he was not angry with the father, but instead could understand his accusation. While Luke does not explicitly describe a change in the meaning of his job, role, or self as a result of this interaction, one senses from the story that the meaning he makes of his work more generally is unchanged after this interaction. Using an interpersonal sensemaking process lens to interpret the story, we can understand how and why this interaction would likely have little impact, even though it is quite negative in tone.

Writing Context Back In

Our treatment of the interpersonal sensemaking process has been largely silent about the role of context in the creation of work meaning. However, we recognize the critical role that contextual factors play in the process. In fact, while context is often treated as a direct input (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) or moderator (Dutton et al., 2002; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001) of sensemaking processes at work, context can be theorized as an input, moderator, and outcome of the process we have described. Thus, we see three different ways that organizational context can be written back into our model of interpersonal sensemaking at work.

The ubiquitous role that context plays in shaping the interpersonal sensemaking process is apparent. Earlier, we described how contextual factors such as position or status in the organizational structure, power, stigma of the job, and shared group membership with the interaction partner all influence the likelihood that a cue will be processed, and the amount of motive work that will be done to make sense of the cue. However, the outcomes of sensemaking have implications for the content and social context employees create at work. These actions have the potential to shape the context of the entire organization. For example, if employees receive cues that convey affirmation and worth when they engage in particular parts of their jobs or aspects of their roles, they may be more likely to seek out these situations. Carried out over time, this could potentially mean engaging more often with certain occupational groups in the organization, or in more visible job tasks. Interdependencies and social ties that may have been unintended could result as employees craft the task and relational boundaries of their jobs and create new social structures and norms for behavior in the workplace. For example, in the cleaning study described earlier, it was understood in the interviews that management was not aware of cleaners' relationships with patients and visitors, even as cleaners took significant steps to alter their work days to engage in the often affirming interactions they had with these groups.

Indeed, it is the relational context of the organization that gets created through interpersonal sensemaking processes, which in turn feeds how employees make sense of what is happening to them in their work interactions. This view represents an addition to traditional views of context that focus more on structural features and their impact on the organization. Just as structural position, group membership, and power influence the interpersonal sensemaking process, the relational landscape more generally acts as an important contextual force that also shapes the process. As Emmons (2003) notes, an organization's culture, norms, and shared values about interpersonal treatment affect which acts people notice and how they make sense of them. For example, organizations that repeatedly make salient the enabling actions of others in helping employees to carry out their work

are likely to promote heightened attention to noticing how others help each other at work (e.g. Hoffer Gittell, 2003). In Hoffer Gittell's (2003) study of Southwest Airlines, she finds that in a culture in which a lot of attention is paid to noting how everyone is dependent on everyone else to meet organizational objectives, and power is given to people to reward each other for task enabling, a positive spiral results. At Southwest, employees are more likely to notice enabling, affirming acts, which then creates a sense of gratitude, which then encourages prosocial behavior and positive emotion, creating a positive interpersonal dynamic, and reinforcing the organizational culture, as well as the relational landscape at work.

Norms for interpersonal treatment are a powerful contextual variable to specifically illustrate how context can operate in our model. Interpersonal sensemaking around the cues of others at work takes place against the backdrop of the organizational context. While there are myriad variables that capture context (e.g. departmental structure, culture, nature of work task), we focus our attention on norms for interpersonal treatment at work, for it represents a baseline condition that people use in work settings to form expectations about how they are likely to be treated by others (Bies & Moag, 1986). Norms exist for how employees treat each other in the workplace (Robinson & O'Leary-Kelly, 1998). Thus, norms for interpersonal treatment function as input, moderator, and outcome of the interpersonal sensemaking process at work. For example, interpersonal treatment norms function as an input condition insofar as they create a set of preconditions regarding what will demand notice. When an employee discerns that a norm for treatment has been violated, the cue is more likely to be noticed for its discrepancy with how people are normally treated in a setting (Peeters & Czapinski, 1990). In addition, norms for interpersonal treatment may be used as a standard that shapes how affirming or disaffirming a cue is interpreted to be. For example, if a work context treats exchange of casual greetings between employees who meet in the halls as a norm, then departing from this norm (whether it be in the form of a bear hug or a cold stare) is interpreted as affirming (or not) and motivated (or not), more or less strongly as a result of the norms that exist. Through both these means, norms for interpersonal treatment shape work meaning by how they affect noticing and interpreting cues.

Finally, the way employees read interpersonal cues, and the resulting changes in the meaning and content of their jobs, roles, selves at work, affects the context as well. If employees interpret the cues they receive at work as affirming, increasing the sense of significance and value of the work, this has implications for the norms of interpersonal treatment. If employees experience enhanced work meaning through more affirmative interpersonal sensemaking, then the norm for interpersonal treatment may create a higher shared standard for how respectful and other-regarding interpersonal treatment is expected to be. The ironic twist in

this development is that if people do not change their behavior in accord with this norm, people may experience more disaffirmation in interpersonal sensemaking. Thus, employees constitute, in part, the context they find themselves in (Cappelli & Scherer, 1991). How they create that context, particularly around treatment norms, is an outcome of and input to the sensemaking process.

DISCUSSION

In this paper, we articulated a theoretical framework of interpersonal sensemaking. Our goal was to elucidate the interpersonal foundations of the process of constructing work meaning. This theoretical framework is built on the premise that employees at work attend to the interpersonal cues generated by others on the job and engage in a process of sensemaking to determine how others evaluate their job, their role, and themselves at work. In previous sections we described how the sensemaking process begins with an employee noticing another person's actions. It proceeds as the employee makes sense of the cues from these actions by discerning affirmation or disaffirmation and contemplating the motivations for the other's actions. In this process, the employee imputes significance to the other's actions and constructs job, role, and self meaning. These meanings, in turn, help to shape the content of the job, role and self as well as the context that the employee creates at work, creating opportunities for repeated engagement in situations and with interaction partners that yield affirming cues that convey worth.

Our theory contributes to three areas of the organizational studies literature. These are the job attitudes, sensemaking, and relationships at work literatures. In particular, the interpersonal sensemaking framework enriches the job attitudes literature by illuminating the interpretive process involved in arriving at global assessments of one's work. Attending to this interpretive process enables us to recognize the zone of variability in job attitudes. Specifically, it allows us to understand how individual job attitudes vary by interaction through a process of discerning affirmation and disaffirmation of interpersonal cues. With respect to the sensemaking literature, the interpersonal sensemaking framework elaborates the intrapersonal process of sensemaking. This gives us insight into how positive, negative, or ambivalent work meanings arise. Further, the theory suggests how these intrapersonal processes give rise to interpersonal outcomes by shaping the social contexts employees seek out and create in the face of affirming and disaffirming cues. Finally, our theory elaborates the relationships at work literature enabling us to see how meaning is shaped through much more than intended actions and by many more means than have been previously considered. Each of these contributions is elaborated below.

Elaborating the Job Attitudes Literature

The interpersonal sensemaking model enriches the job attitudes literature by highlighting the social and interpretive process involved in creating work meaning. By describing this process, we learn how interactions shape job attitudes. Attending to these processes brings into view dynamics that are important in the construction of job meaning and also raises new questions about approaches that may promote positive job attitudes in organizations.

The interpretive process involved in constructing work meaning is implicit in the job enlargement, job enrichment, and job characteristics perspectives, all of which are important lenses on job attitudes. Each of these perspectives, however, relegate this process to the background and treat as foreground the objective features of a job and how these affect global measures of job attitudes. The job enlargement perspective is concerned with increasing the number of tasks an employee performs as part of his or her job while maintaining the level of difficulty and responsibility of the tasks (Griffin, 1982; Griffin & McMahan, 1995). Job enrichment involves increasing the level of responsibility and control that employees have over their jobs by assigning tasks involving greater responsibility and difficulty (Griffin, 1982). The job characteristics perspective focuses on articulating the core dimensions or characteristics of tasks that make a job intrinsically motivating (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). In all these perspectives, the goal is to increase employee intrinsic motivation with the hope that this will produce positive thoughts and feelings about work and translate into better performance, and lower absenteeism and turnover. An important assumption in these perspectives is that if organizations were to manipulate objective features of the job, then positive thoughts and feelings about the job, measured by employees' global assessments of their jobs, and high motivation will follow. These, in turn, would translate into important organizational outcomes such as high performance, low absenteeism, and low turnover.

However, in their model of social information processing, Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) argued that another important factor shaping job attitudes is social information. Of the three perspectives on job attitudes discussed above, Hackman and Oldham (1976) also raise, but do not elaborate, this issue. These scholars argue that employees who perceive their jobs as having the core dimensions that make a job intrinsically motivating experience a psychological state of meaningfulness of their work. The social information processing perspective goes further to suggest that employees' perceptions and responses to their jobs are shaped by social information, that is, information about their jobs from others on the job.

At its core, the social information processing perspective on work meaning focuses on the evaluations employees make about the tasks they do on the

job. Other employees become important in their expression of views about work tasks, which become direct inputs to the attitudes that the employee will have toward the task. While the social information processing perspective does address the importance of others for understanding job attitudes, the interpersonal sensemaking model departs from this research vein in several important respects.

First, rather than focus on task information, our model privileges the centrality of social interactions around a wide variety of information, ranging from the degree to which an employee is respected, to whether the employee is included in social interactions at work or is viewed as a valuable member of the organizational enterprise. Such a broad relational focus moves beyond a simple task focus in understanding how others matter for the meaning made of work. As well, a social information processing perspective treats cues as unambiguous and clear, without need for interpretation or motivated cognitive processing. This is likely a result of the model's bounded nature in focusing primarily on the tasks involved in the work.

Second, our model focuses explicitly on the judgment of the motives of individuals who send cues to employees, while social information processing treats cues as unproblematic. In such a view, the cue is divorced from the relationship between sender and employee; thus, the manner in which the cue is delivered, who delivered it, and how is immaterial. In contrast, our model assumes that the relationship between a cue sender and an employee creates an important part of the context against which the cue is interpreted. Our perspective considers such relational concerns as pivotal in understanding the impact of others' cues on the meaning of work.

Third, a social information processing perspective focuses on the task attitude outcomes of the interaction, rather than considering implications of employees coming to view the work they do as relatively impoverished, motivating, exciting, valuable, or any number of other things. Our model of interpersonal sensemaking addresses the potential consequences for individual meaning of receiving information about work tasks, but also about the role one holds and the self one occupies at work. Thus, while social information processing details the meaning of the task, our perspective includes that as well as the deeper work and self meanings that imbue the work.

Fourth, our model offers an important insight concerning the variability of job meaning. Although there is some stability in job attitudes shaped by individual differences (Staw & Ross, 1985), employees operate within a zone within which variation is possible. That is, employees' job attitudes vary within their personal zones as they encounter different types of interactions in the flow of a work day. While social information processing largely treats the employee as a passive reader of direct task cues, our model reveals the dynamic process through which

employees enact their social context at work to receive cues that contribute to work meaning.

Elaborating the Sensemaking Literature

As indicated above, our model elaborates the elements of the process of intrapersonal sensemaking. The noticing of interpersonal cues gives rise to a process of intrapersonal sensemaking wherein the employee attempts to assign meaning to an equivocal situation. This process involves discerning the affirmation or disaffirmation of a cue and doing motive work. The interpersonal sensemaking framework shows that meaning arising from this process is not neutral. In particular, through the processes of affirmation, disaffirmation, and motive work, the interpersonal sensemaking model gives us insight into how positive, negative, or ambivalent meanings arise from a process of intrapersonal sensemaking. As our illustrations from the accounts of cleaners show, positive meanings arise when others' actions are seen as affirming one's self, job, and role and when others' motives support this interpretation. Negative meaning arises when others' actions disaffirm one's self, role, and job and when others' motives support this interpretation. Finally, ambivalent meaning arises in situations where others' motives counteract the disaffirmation or affirmation of a given act. The meaning employees make of the cues they receive, and the impact the cues have, are influenced by a number of contextual and relational factors shown in Fig. 1, and have the potential to reshape the content that employees include in their jobs, roles, and selves at work as well as the contexts they are motivated to create for themselves to sustain viable work meaning in the eyes of others encountered on the job.

In particular, employees may be motivated to make sense of their work in patterned ways. For example, employees in low status jobs (Meara, 1974; Riemer, 1979) may be especially motivated to impute value to their work and selves. Indeed, this was the case with the hospital cleaners, who often encountered interpersonal cues that challenged the worth of their jobs and themselves. While the process of constructing work meaning occurs at all status levels, its prevalence in low status jobs are likely to yield different motivations and work meanings.

Elaborating the Role of Others at Work

An interpersonal sensemaking lens reveals the importance of others for understanding how employees construct the meaning of their job, their role, and themselves at

work. The model offers several insights into understanding the relational context of employees at work.

First, the model reminds organizational researchers that employees shape others' meaning through more than intended actions. The importance of noticing cues in the interpersonal sensemaking process is that it filters in and filters out intended and unintended actions of others that in turn shape how people interpret their work. Thus, organizational researchers need to consider how the intended and unintended actions of structurally linked colleagues at work (bosses, subordinates, unit colleagues, customers) as well as chosen colleagues (e.g. friends of customers, co-located colleagues from different organizations) all play a role in composing work meaning by offering (intentionally or not) cues that are treated as signals of affirmation or disaffirmation. Theories of work meaning need to reflect this situated relational view (Eide, 2000). Where organizational scholars are interested in the meaning of work for predicting employees' actions, their health, their effectiveness or any other outcome, our model suggests that they need to consider a wider set of players on the relational scene at work that play an often invisible role in composing work meaning.

Second, an interpersonal sensemaking lens suggests others at work make both positive and negative contributions to work meaning, through means that organizational scholars usually do not consider. In particular, it suggests that, through small and seemingly insignificant actions, others can alter the meaning that employees make of the work (as job, role and self-at-work). Rather than seeing others as dispensers of material resources (e.g. in the mentoring or developmental relationships literature (e.g. Kram, 1985)), as nodes in structural networks (e.g. Baker, 2000), or as models to imitate (e.g. Ibarra, 1999), interpersonal sensemaking depicts others as providers of symbolic moves that are the raw materials in creating work meaning.

Elaborating the Meaning of Work

An interpersonal sensemaking perspective aligns with theories of job design that argue others at work help to determine the experienced meaningfulness of jobs (Hackman & Oldham, 1976) and that other people provide social and informational cues about the task that shape how people view their jobs (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978; White & Mitchell, 1979). However, our perspective suggests that the interpersonal cues that shape work meaning may be much more explicitly social or interaction-based than those implied by a social information processing perspective on job design. Rather than seeing others at work providing cues that job incumbents passively receive and interpret, we argue that employees actively

notice, interpret, and seek out cues in the course of daily interaction that convey evaluation and worth. An interpersonal sensemaking perspective suggests that a wider group of individuals play a role in providing social cues about jobs than research has yet considered. Further, it suggests that employees actively interpret and remember what people do or do not do towards them in their jobs. Most importantly, an interpersonal sensemaking perspective suggests that there is a close coupling between the way others make employees feel about the value of their work and how they feel valued as individuals. Thus the design of jobs, and the interactions it implies, shape the meaning of the work. Meaning of work scholars must attend to this dynamic, interactional process that helps to determine work meaning (Brief & Nord, 1990).

The addition of an interpersonal sensemaking perspective to understanding the meaning of work makes at least two contributions to this literature. First, our perspective changes the focus of determinants of the meaning of work from elements within the employee or within the job to the social interplay between employees and others encountered on the job. Thus, research that aims to understand work meaning must attend to the social context in which the work is carried out to fully understand the elements that directly contribute to work meaning.

Second, our perspective suggests that the evaluation and content of work meaning as well as the social context employees create are altered through work interactions. The implications of this process are serious, for we suggest that employees can change the content of their jobs, roles, and selves (e.g. Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001) as a result of interpersonal sensemaking at work. Thus, while work meaning has been viewed as a static state to be measured, our view treats work meanings as dynamic. At the extreme, our model suggests that the creation, alteration, and destruction of meaning at work occur in concert with others on a daily basis.

Looking to the Future

An interpersonal sensemaking perspective on work meaning affords many opportunities for future research. We have described the micro-processes that create work meaning through interaction traces. This theoretical advance lays bare the essence of what happens between individuals at work to affect the evaluation, worth, and content of jobs, roles, and selves. However, we have largely portrayed the process of interpersonal cue interpretation and its effect on work meaning as an individual phenomenon, describing how employees notice, interpret, and make meaning of the cues they receive from others. Our hope is that the process we describe opens new territory in research on work meaning, sensemaking, and the role of others at

work, and will be useful to elaborating our current theories and research in these areas. While we are describing a social dynamic, the model we have elaborated is not fully social; that is, we take social cues of others into our model, but then describe an individual-level process that unfolds as a result, and offer predictions about how individuals will create and engage their social context at work as a result. As such, we have elaborated one side of the social phenomenon through which work meanings are created. We would encourage organizational behavior theorists to elaborate and test the dynamics that unfold between people at work in situ.

For example, researchers cannot observe and interpret cues themselves, but can use observational and interview techniques to surface employees' reactions to the cues they read from others in the course of their work day. Coding of cues (e.g. "Did you notice anything in the interaction?" "Was that (dis)affirming?" "What do you make of it?"), paired with changes in preferences for or behavioral patterns in interacting with categories of others (e.g. those from higher structural or power positions, those from outside of one's ingroup) may yield evidence for the dynamic unfolding of the shaping of interaction and task patterns on the job as a result of the cues employees read and interpret.

Another fruitful direction for future research would be to consider the impact of interpersonal cues as they combine from a variety of sources to inform an employee of others' evaluations of the job, role, and self. Our model considers the individual impact of each cue, but patterns of cues are likely to be an important consideration as well. For example, if employees are flooded with affirming cues from one set of interaction partners while being ignored or disaffirmed by another group, what is the overall effect of the cue pattern? Future research into these patterns would be valuable for learning if cues are simply aggregated or are chunked in different ways. Exciting possibilities abound with respect to experience sampling methods (Larson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1983), in which individuals report their interactions, affective states, and actions in real time, so that a flow of their activities and responses can be established. By determining who employees encounter on the job and the typical cues they receive in such interactions (ranging from whether the employee was acknowledged by a glance or not, to whether the exchange was respectful and validating), researchers can begin to determine the weight given to such cues and their effects for shaping meaning and experienced worth.

Finally, we have not considered the role of time in the interpersonal sensemaking process. The cues that employees receive early in their organizational and occupational tenure carry greater weight in the creation of work meaning. Also, the length of time an employee has been with a particular workgroup or department may change the effect of interpersonal cues (Polzer, Milton & Swann, 2002). Repeated measures designs, whether in interviews or surveys, can reveal the role that the passage of time plays in the kinds of cues and interaction partners that are attended

to, and the kinds of motive work that is (or is not) done on their behalf. Thus, the unfolding of the meaning-making process over time is a rich future area for study.

CONCLUSION

This chapter offers an interpersonal sensemaking perspective on the meaning of work. We argue that the meaning of work is composed, in part, of the evaluations conveyed by a diverse set of people encountered at work. The interpersonal dynamics that unfold between people at work create a powerful context in which work meanings are composed. Our ability to understand the process through which this happens gives us access to the deeper meaning of the lived experience of employees at work. Thus, in this chapter, work meaning is treated as an emergent feature of the social scene at work. We have attempted to reveal the rich relational underpinnings of what have long been treated as individual processes. While this process model celebrates the role of others at work, it also celebrates the role of employees themselves for the active part they play in creating work meaning through interpersonal sensemaking. This characterization of the social context creates rich opportunities for understanding the role of others at work in ways that have not been previously considered.

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