

Chapter 27

Meaningfulness and Religious/Spiritual Meaning Systems at Work: A Multilevel Framework



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For many working adults today, work represents the life domain with the clearest and most impactful integrative potential for positive psychology and the psychology of religion and spirituality (R/S). The positive psychology literature offers a rich bounty of research and applications to organizational and working life. These are summarized in comprehensive works like the *Oxford Handbook of Positive Organizational Scholarship* (Cameron & Spreitzer, 2012) and *Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology and Work* (Linley et al., 2010)—not to mention myriad popular books, websites, and consulting offerings. The psychology of R/S has been slower to expand into the work domain. An edited volume exploring potential linkages (Hill & Dik, 2012) proposed promising directions, but now over a decade later, these areas remain underexplored. This is the case despite a growing, global faith and work movement actively exploring the intersection of R/S and work (Dik, 2020). In response, and in part to invite renewed scholarly attention to this intersection, this chapter explores points of convergence between positive psychology and R/S at multiple levels (e.g., individual, job, organizational, societal) within the work domain.

To inform this exercise, we begin by outlining the territory. Positive psychology broadly refers to the science and practice of well-being and human flourishing, addressing topics such as strengths, virtues, talents, pleasure, and meaning. A research domain within organizational behavior and management has targeted “workplace spirituality,” defined as “a framework of organizational values evidenced in the culture that promotes employees’ experience of transcendence through the work process, facilitating their sense of being connected to others in a way that provides feelings of completeness and joy” (Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2003, p. 13). Naturally, workplace spirituality focuses on experiences that unfold at work,

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especially within an organizational context. Workplace spirituality scholars are particularly interested in *eudaimonic* (e.g., meaning and growth-centered) aspects of well-being. Our chapter draws on workplace spirituality research but more specifically targets how positive psychology intersects with R/S. Religion can be understood as “ritual, institutional, or codified spirituality, which is culturally sanctioned;” spirituality is “a search for or relationship with the sacred” (Harris et al., 2018, p. 14). These definitions make clear that R/S both involve *the sacred*. The sacred connotes ideas of God, a higher power, transcendence, or other aspects of life considered sanctified, holy, or worthy of reverence. The sacred is arguably what makes R/S unique, distinct from (and not reducible to) other phenomena. R/S are multidimensional (e.g., substantive, functional) in nature and can be examined on multiple levels (e.g., individual, social, cultural; Harris et al., 2018).

A central integrative theme within the psychology of R/S is meaning making, especially the notion of religious meaning systems (Park & Van Tongeren, Chap. 6, this volume). Meaning systems include beliefs, values, and goals—essentially a worldview—that function to make sense of diverse experiences and tie them to a sense of purpose. They are evolutionarily fundamental, and they are complex, operating at both micro (e.g., sensory processes) and macro (e.g., construction of socially influenced cultural meanings) levels. Religious/spiritual meaning systems often frame daily experience in terms of a higher-order meaning that transcends the context of particular events. This can occur within any life domain, certainly including work (Park, 2012).

To facilitate our integrative summary, we adopt a meaning-systems approach. We will target the experience of *meaningful work*, defined as work that is perceived as personally significant and worthwhile (Lysova et al., 2019). This includes meaningfulness *in* work (which stems from what workers do within the work role) and meaningfulness *at* work (which is rooted in workers’ sense of being part of something bigger than themselves; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). Research on meaningful work notes that meaning operates on multiple levels. These levels were recently summarized in a model proposed by Lysova et al. (2019), which examines meaningfulness as a function of individual-, job-, organizational-, and societal-level factors. These factors provide the structure we use to organize this chapter (see Fig. 27.1).

Individual-Level Factors

Individual factors that may influence the intersection of positive psychology, R/S, and eudaimonic well-being at work include dispositional signatures, characteristic adaptations, and personal narratives (McAdams, 2015).

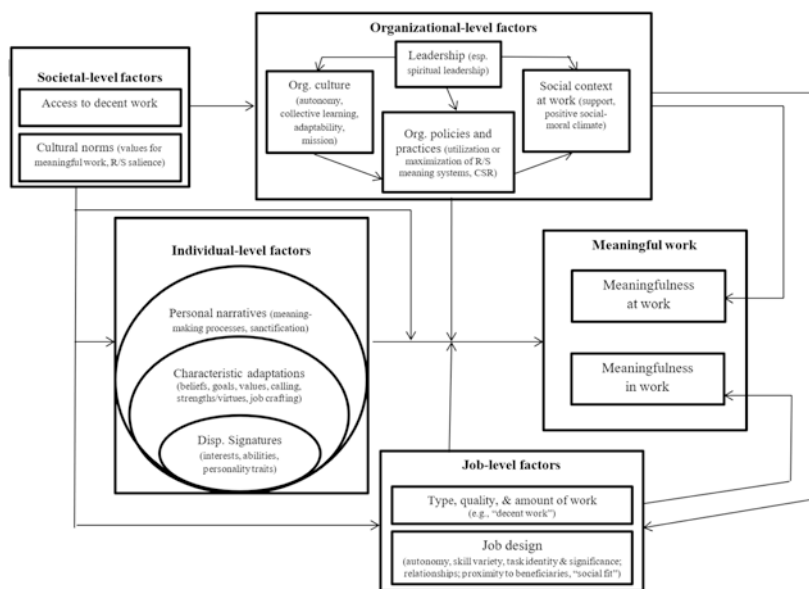


Fig. 27.1 A multilevel conceptual model of religiousness/spirituality and meaningful work. (Adapted from Lysova et al., 2019)

Note: This conceptual model is an integrative multilevel framework explaining factors that foster meaningful work and the integration of religious/spiritual meaning systems with work. It builds on the integrative model of meaningful work proposed by Lysova et al. (2019)

Dispositional Signatures

Dispositional signatures are stable characteristics and traits that reflect the uniqueness of an individual. Two key dispositional signatures are interests and personality. In vocational psychology, interests are described as what people habitually enjoy or the “motivations that determine life decisions” (Walsh, 1999, p. 373). Evidence suggests that interests are highly stable over time, more so even than personality traits (Low et al., 2005). Furthermore, when people enter environments congruent with their interests, they experience substantial job satisfaction and well-being (Dik & Hansen, 2008). Research has examined the links between the Big Five personality traits and the experience of meaningfulness at work. This research reveals moderate positive associations for openness, conscientiousness, and extraversion, as well as a weak inverse association with neuroticism (Frieder et al., 2018; Woods & Sofat, 2013). Diverse religious traditions describe individual differences in domains such as interests and personality as useful for identifying a person’s specific calling in the world of work (Dik et al., 2012b).

Characteristic Adaptations

Characteristic adaptations include goals and strivings. They offer perhaps the most direct application of a meaning systems approach when considering how religious/spiritual worldviews can influence work pursuits and the experience of meaningfulness. Notably, Park's (2012) meaning-making model posits that people are motivated to align their global meaning framework (i.e., beliefs, goals, values, sense of purpose) with their daily experiences and expressions of meaning. The more aligned these global and daily meanings are, the better the well-being outcomes and sense of coherence. Park (2012) proposed that R/S can play a major role in how this meaning-making process intersects with career behavior via four pathways: career choice and development, on-the-job conduct, work-related stress and coping, and work-related well-being. As Park (2012) summarized, "because work plays such a central role in most human lives, it follows that living a work life consistent with core religious or spiritual beliefs and facilitating progress on ultimate goals leads to higher levels of well-being" (p. 35). Park's model has not been directly tested within the work domain. However, it postulates an important role that the coherence between people's experiences of work and their religious/spiritual meaning systems can play in their overall experience of meaningfulness and both general and spiritual well-being.

Specific positive psychology topics that apply to experiences of purpose and meaning in work include positive emotions, flow, job crafting, calling, strengths, and gratitude (see Dik et al., 2015, for a review). Each of these constructs can be framed as characteristic adaptations. Strengths are "positive traits or skills that promote optimal functioning" (Owens et al., 2018, p. 266), and they are often a focus in career counseling. Peterson and Seligman (2004) described character strengths as moral traits (e.g., optimism, perseverance, appreciation of beauty) derived from six broader virtues (e.g., courage, justice, wisdom) identified through their study of religious traditions. Research reveals that when harnessed at work, strengths predict greater well-being, meaning in life, and sense of calling (Harzer & Ruch, 2012; Owens et al., 2018).

Calling may be especially relevant to the integration of R/S and work. In modern usage, calling is considered both a sacred and a secular concept (Steger et al., 2010), yet it has long been understood through a religious/spiritual lens. *Calling* has been defined as involving three dimensions: (a) a transcendent summons toward (b) purposeful work that is (c) carried out for the common good or well-being of others (Dik & Duffy, 2009). The transcendent summons dimension, a reference to the notion that a calling implies a "caller," is particularly relevant to individuals with religious/spiritual commitments. However, all three calling dimensions have been shown to have significant relationships with religiousness/spirituality (Ponton et al., 2014). Both having and living a calling have consistently been found to predict positive well-being (e.g., life satisfaction) and career development (e.g., self-clarity, career decidedness, occupational self-efficacy; Duffy et al., 2016) outcomes.

Religiously committed individuals who perceive a calling tend to invest greater time and energy into their work, experience emotions such as gratitude, and exhibit higher levels of work motivation (Bott et al., 2017). They may also engage in job crafting, a set of behaviors that involve modifying the tasks, relationships, and cognitive boundaries governing the work role. A goal of job crafting is to forge a closer connection between their work experience and their broader sense of purpose in life. Research has found that job crafting positively predicts job satisfaction and commitment (Leana et al., 2009). Overall, a calling can provide a strong connection between global meaning systems and meaning derived from work experiences, perhaps especially when it comes to religious/spiritual meaning systems.

Personal Narratives

Personal narratives are the stories people tell about their lives. Articulating a narrative provides the opportunity for people to construct meaning from their lives, including their working lives. Personal narratives are also useful for articulating unique career-related goals and purposes while concurrently identifying life patterns (Savickas, 1995). Narratives can help people explore their values and “make sense of their career and world” (Collin & Young, 1992, p. 2). Park’s meaning-making model can inform the process of exploring career themes within a personal narrative framework (Park, 2012). Specifically related to R/S, sanctification (i.e., viewing an aspect of life as possessing sacred significance) offers people an opportunity to view and construct their careers through a sacred lens (Hernandez & Mahoney, 2012). Research reveals that sanctification of work predicts positive work-related and general well-being outcomes, including job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and positive affect (Carroll et al., 2014; Walker et al., 2008). Also, sanctification of work is associated with lower inter-role work–family conflict among working mothers (Hall et al., 2012) and decreased job burnout among nurses (Ada et al., *in press*). Several qualitative studies of work-related calling have revealed that discerning a calling is a complex process that ties deeply to people’s sense of identity (Schabram & Maitlis, 2017) and faith perspective (Hernandez & Mahoney, 2012).

Job-Level Factors

Job-level factors refer to tasks, responsibilities, expectations, and benefits that characterize one’s job. Those factors can enable and/or impede workers’ ability to experience meaningfulness at work.

Type, Quality, and Amount of Work

Characteristics and conditions of one's work experiences can influence well-being and meaningfulness at work. Duffy et al.'s (2016) Psychology of Working Theory posits that work can potentially fulfill three needs fundamental to the human experience: (a) the need for survival and power, (b) the need for social connection, and (c) the need for self-determination. The lynchpin of Psychology of Working Theory is the attainment of *decent work*, which consists of (a) a safe environment free of physical, mental, or emotional abuse; (b) work hours that allow for adequate rest; (c) alignment of organizational and personal values; (d) adequate compensation; and (e) access to adequate health care. Attaining decent work is not only important for meeting the most fundamental needs people have from work but also for meeting self-determination needs and for developing a strong sense of meaning through work (Duffy et al., 2016).

Job Design

The oft-cited Job Characteristics Model (Hackman & Oldham, 1976) suggests that jobs offering autonomy, skill variety, task identity, and task significance are linked to the experience of work meaningfulness. Similarly, jobs that are structured in ways that promote a sense of purpose and are focused on having a positive impact on others are related to greater experiences of meaningful work (Grant, 2007). Many employees possess little personal control over the design of their job, and it is important to acknowledge the boundary conditions of these concepts. Yet when possible, successful job crafting (e.g., of the job's tasks, relationships, and social function) can often result in job modifications that foster meaningfulness (Berg et al., 2013). For example, a hospital custodian might craft the job into one that is defined less by its list of required tasks and more by its social interactions and contributions to the hospital's mission of providing high-quality healthcare (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). The extent to which such changes are possible varies as a function of the job itself, depending on factors such as how close workers are to the people who benefit from their work—a key notion underlying the concept of a job's "social fit" (Dik et al., 2012a).

Organization-Level Factors

Most working adults have careers that unfold within organizations. Organizations therefore represent a key environment where people can experience meaningfulness, including that which may come from support for expressing a religious/

spiritual meaning system. Organizations are also highly complex. Here, we briefly examine four organization-level influences: leadership, organizational culture, policies and procedures, and social context.

Leadership

In theory, one of the primary ways a leader can help enhance workers' experiences of meaningfulness and well-being is by creating structures that facilitate stronger connections between employees' daily experience of their job and a broader sense of purpose. This sense of purpose may include their religious/spiritual commitments (Lysova et al., 2019). There are several pathways through which this may be achieved. One way is to reinforce recurrently the ultimate aspirations of the company and to invite employees to align that organizational mission with their own values while also articulating how their job duties support these broader purposes (Allan, 2017). Leaders who can articulate their own sense of meaningfulness and how it links to the organization's mission may be especially effective at inspiring employees to do the same.

Leadership styles such as transformational leadership (Wolumbwa et al., 2013) and empowering leadership (Lee et al., 2017) have demonstrated positive relationships with meaningful work and can serve to support positive integrative thinking among workers with religious/spiritual meaning systems. Meaning-sensitive leaders may also act as an architect of sorts, providing a blueprint that maps connections between employee tasks and the organization's ultimate aspirations (e.g., focusing on a single ultimate aspiration, shifting attention from an ultimate aspiration to a concrete purpose, setting milestones for achieving this purpose, and articulating the link between the ultimate aspiration and concrete purpose; Carton, 2017). Especially germane to the question of how leadership style intersects with R/S is spiritual leadership (Fry et al., 2017), a style in which a clear vision and the moral values of faith, hope, and love are instilled within the workplace by an authentic leader with a vibrant inner life or mindful practice. (These values were introduced as broadly relevant across diverse religious traditions, but clearly draw from the Christian New Testament [1 Corinthians 13:13]; see Long & VanderWeele, Chapter 25, this volume). The values of hope and faith catalyze leader and team effort toward organizational goals. Altruistic love fosters ethical and kind behavior among workers, as well as a sense of membership. A compelling vision supports a calling and meaningfulness with respect to the work. Finally, a calling and sense of membership together evoke organizational commitment, productivity, and life satisfaction. Research on the spiritual leadership model remains nascent but is generally supportive of its propositions (Fry et al., 2017).

Organizational Culture

Organizational culture is linked to workers' experience of meaningfulness and refers to the shared values, meanings, and assumptions that govern everyday life within an organization (Schein, 2010). Evidence suggests that highly controlling hierarchical cultures decrease employees' sense of their work as meaningful over time (Lee et al., 2017). Also, perceptions that an organizational culture enables collective learning are positively associated with scores on a measure of workplace spirituality dimensions (inner life, meaningful work, sense of community; Sorakraikitikul & Siengthai, 2014). Other emerging evidence suggests that the organizational culture traits of adaptability and mission are more closely associated with workplace spirituality dimensions than are other organizational traits (e.g., consistency/stability; Alas & Mousa, 2016). Rich conceptual explorations of how organizational cultures intersect with R/S (Demerath et al., 1998) and meaningful work (Cardador & Rupp, 2011) offer promising directions for extending its currently limited empirical base.

Social Context at Work

The type and quality of interactions with other people within an organization are critical to employees' experiences of work as meaningful. This is the case because of how workers rely on social cues and social support to inform their perceptions of meaningfulness (e.g., Colbert et al., 2016). (Social context overlaps with organizational culture, but the former refers specifically to the nature of interpersonal relationships at work. In contrast the latter refers to an organization's values and norms for how work is carried out.) Positive relationships elicit a sense of belonging and social identity (Rosso et al., 2010). They also foster a common purpose, which contributes to meaningful work (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009) and often is a fundamental aspect of religious/spiritual meaning systems. Positive social-moral climates can evoke these types of relationships and are characterized by an atmosphere of trust, respect, support, cooperation, and a self-transcendent orientation. All of these enable the experience of meaningfulness at work (Schnell et al., 2013).

Organizational Policies and Procedures

There are several ways an organization's policies and procedures can support workers' well-being, experience of meaningfulness, and integration of religious/spiritual meaning systems. For example, establishing structures that invite personal and professional development can stimulate personal role engagement and enhance one's experience of work as meaningful (Fletcher, 2016). Specifically pertaining to

support for employees with religious/spiritual commitments, Bennett (2008) described four levels of organizational action. The first focuses simply on compliance with laws that protect employees' rights to express their religion. The second entails normalization strategies that intentionally promote a culture of tolerance for religious expression (e.g., support for employee-led Bible study or meditation groups). "Utilization" describes the third level, in which employees are encouraged to draw from their religious/spiritual meaning systems to inform organizational procedures and goals. The fourth is maximization, which occurs when the organization draws from religious/spiritual meaning systems to inform the broader organizational mission and ultimate aspirations. Although not necessarily linked to religious/spiritual meaning systems, corporate social responsibility initiatives have been found to predict employees' experiences of meaningful work (Glavas & Kelley, 2014). So have corporate volunteering programs (Rodell, 2013), although authenticity is required to achieve these effects (Bailey et al., 2017).

Societal-Level Factors

The job-level factor of decent work, described earlier, functions on a societal level as well, given the public policy and economic environments in which decent work is possible and expected. A large proportion of the global population, for example, live in developing countries where decent work is often difficult to obtain. The International Labor Organization (ILO, 2016) has proposed that decent work is a fundamental human right and advocates national policies to ensure the realization of that right. Workers with decent work have a way to meet their survival, social connection, and self-determination needs; this theoretically frees up their psychological resources to more fully leverage their global meaning systems in the work role. Of course, although decent work is a key precursor to meaningful work, it is possible to experience meaningfulness in its absence. Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) and others have demonstrated this in their research on so-called "dirty" work (i.e., stigmatized work that is widely viewed as unpleasant, distasteful, thankless, or morally dubious). Cultural values for meaningful work also differ across geographic region (e.g., Schwartz, 1999) and time. So does the salience of R/S and the norms for integrating religious/spiritual meaning systems with various life domains.

Cross-Level Interactions

In their multilevel, integrative model, Lysova et al. (2019) emphasized the complex interactions within and across levels in their framework that govern behavior as it unfolds. For example, individual-level factors interact with job-, organization-, and society-level factors such that meaningfulness is more likely to occur when an individual's motivations, values, and goals align with those of their environment at each

level (job, organization, society). To illustrate, a computer programmer with a sense of calling to help people learn will likely experience meaningfulness when developing educational products in an organization with prosocial values and a strong learning culture in a region that prioritizes funding for education. This same programmer will probably experience less meaningfulness developing fast-food delivery software for a company that prioritizes efficiency in an economically struggling region. Similarly, organizational- and job-level factors interact, such as when leaders influence organizational cultures and policies in ways that shape job design within an organization. For example, a CEO for a company that touts a value for flexibility and work-life balance may institute a policy that permits employees to work remotely rather than endure long daily commutes. Societal-level factors such as economic growth rate can also influence all other levels, such as when an economic recession or global pandemic creates severe constraints that shift organizational cultures, job descriptions, and individual-level values simultaneously—but not always in the same direction. The number and varied types of factors reviewed in Lysova et al.'s (2019) model mean that such interactions are many and multifaceted. Thus, the model offers several key pathways for future research and theorizing to follow in pursuit of increased clarity. In practice, the point is that the factors do not operate in isolation; understanding individual attitudes and behavior regarding religious/spiritual meaning systems and meaningful work requires being mindful of this reality.

Implications for Research and Practice

In their landmark review of research on meaningful work, Rosso et al. (2010) suggested that “systematic examinations of the mechanisms through which spiritual life impacts the meaning of work” (p. 107) would represent an important contribution to the literature. Unfortunately, that suggestion has gone relatively unheeded in the intervening years, but it still represents a fruitful avenue for research and theory that seeks to explore points at which positive psychology and R/S converge within the human experience of work. In this chapter, we used Lysova et al.'s (2019) multilevel framework to explore factors on the individual, job, organizational, and societal levels that can support meaningful work that may arise from integrating religious/spiritual meaning systems. We close by highlighting the next steps for this area of research and offer some applications for counselors, human resource professionals, and organizational leaders as well.

The multiple levels in the model raise issues that have been explored elsewhere (e.g., Hill et al., 2013), such as the concern about conceptual distinctions and measurement focus across different levels of analysis. Testing the full model presented here, given its complexity, would indeed be challenging. A good starting point, echoing recommendations by Lysova et al. (2019), is for researchers to test model segments that align closest with their interests using appropriate statistical strategies such as multilevel modeling. Multilevel modeling allows researchers to examine workers embedded within jobs, organizations, and/or regional contexts, isolating

sources of variance predicting meaningful work on different levels while accounting for the other levels. This technique has infrequently been used in the meaningful work or psychology of R/S literatures, but it offers a relatively nuanced way to examine elements of the model, including its interactions. As this work proceeds, the model can be adjusted and potentially developed into a formal theory. Parallel to this type of quantitative work, narrative research approaches may also provide a useful window into how people connect their global meaning systems with their day-to-day experience at work, within the context of a particular job, organization, and culture.

As research continues and theoretical advances are made, applications to practice come into sharper focus. Career counselors can collaborate with clients to explore how their religious/spiritual frameworks can inform their career decision-making, with the goal of achieving alignment. Within organizations, human resource professionals and organizational leaders might collaborate to deploy Bennet's (2008) "utilization" strategy. Planning sessions in which employees deliberately appeal to their meaning systems (including religious/spiritual meaning systems) to shape organizational goals and objectives are an example of this. Corporate social responsibility initiatives offer a good starting point for encouraging employees' own personal meaning-making processes, guided by a clearly (and genuinely) articulated organizational mission or ultimate aspiration (Carton, 2017) to serve as a scaffold. For individuals who struggle with this process, a starting point may be reflecting on the direct or indirect social impact of their work (Dik et al., 2012a, b). Ultimately, our sincere hope is that as research grows and theory improves, innovative applications will offer meaningful benefits to workers who contribute to the collective acts of mutual service that define a healthy society.

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