TO WORK OR NOT TO WORK: CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING OF WORK AND MAKING WORK CHOICES

Abstract: Meaning of work as explored in this study refers to the function that organizational paid employment serves for people. Is work a means of fulfilling social and economic expectations? Or is it an opportunity for people to express and apply their talents and expertise? The intent of this research was to explore how the predominant meaning of work gets constructed before people start working and how that affects their work choices. It was seen that social expectations and metaphors related to work influenced the meaning of work and work choices. A process theory of the construction of meaning of work was developed inductively. The theoretical and managerial implications of the findings and limitations are also discussed.

Keywords: Meaning of work, social construction, grounded theory

INTRODUCTION

In organizational literature the relationship between meaning and work has been studied using different lenses. These studies can broadly be clubbed under three significant research categories. The first set of researchers looked at 'what' work means to people. They define meaning as *sensus* (Morin, 2008) and focus on the non-economic connotations that work has for people, its significance in an individual's life vis a vis other aspects and the function of work in general for people. This definition of meaning of work has been used by studies looking at the financial and non-financial functions of work in an individual's life. These studies are popularly referred to as the *lottery question* studies (Harpaz & Fu, 2002; Harpaz, 2002; Morse and Weiss, 1955;

Vecchio, 1980), the *Meaning of Working* studies (MoW studies, 1981, 1987) and the *work orientations* literature (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Wrzesniewski, Dutton, & Debebe, 2003).

The second stream of work meaning literature tries to answer the question 'why is work meaningful' or 'when will people say that their work is meaningful?' These studies focus on the content of the work one does and ones perception of its significance, purpose and coherence with his/her personal values. Morin (2008) uses the terms *Sumo*- a person's direction and orientation in the work, what one is seeking in work and the purposes that guide ones actions (Iskasen, 2000; Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009; Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010). Studies looking at the sources of work meaning define meaning in terms of *sumo* and the person-environment fit theorists define meaning in terms of coherence (Spreitzer, 1995).

The third stream of literature tries to address the question, 'how does work come to be meaningful?' The prominent theories addressing this question are the *job characteristics model a*nd more recently the *job crafting* studies.

This evident multiplicity in the way meaning of work is defined, poses a huge challenge to the development of any systematic knowledge in this area. Moreover little is known about how judgments about meaning of work in everyday life are formed (Wrzesniewski, Dutton & Debebe, 2003). Do people's personal attributes determine the meaning of work or do social institutions influence the meaning of work? Knowledge of these aspects of work is extremely relevant for career counselors and organizational recruiters. When assessing an individual's eligibility for work, it's as important to know the background factors that influence a person's behavior as it is to know his/her present competencies. It's important because the future behavior of the

individual at work is based on the meanings of work they bring with them when they join organizations.

In the present study an attempt has been made to address the above mentioned research gap. The findings presented here are part of a larger study that explored the process through which the meaning of work is constructed and reconstructed over a life time of working within organizations. In the present paper the discussion is restricted to the possible meanings that work can hold for individuals even before they join formal employment and the process through which this meaning comes to be attributed to work. The main assumption being made therefore is that the meaning of work gets gradually constructed in the minds of people through an interactive effect of their social and personal circumstances.

METHOD

The grounded theory approach to qualitative research was used in this study and semi structured interviews were used as tools for data collection. The work related experiences of 44 employees from Indian public sector banks were analyzed. For the purpose of this study the meaning of work has been defined as the function that work performs for the individual. It basically answers the question, "Why do people work?" "What is the predominant reason?"Work has been defined as 'organizational paid employment'. Triangulation through the use of theoretical sampling and multiple experiences by different people (Pokinghorne, 2005), was used to strengthen the understanding of the phenomenon of the construction of meaning of work. Though a study of construction of meaning of work could be carried out with any sample, the reason for choosing public sector bank employees was based on the fact that the status and meaning of public sector

bank employment has undergone a distinct change over the years. This sample allowed for comparison of meaning of work between the older employees for whom public sector employment was a highly sought after profession and the younger employees whose social milieu did not consider it prestigious. Therefore the effect of personal values as well as social influences on the construction of meaning of work could be captured using data from the same industry/profession. Once the interviews were transcribed the process of theoretical coding was followed in analyzing the data in this study (Saldana, 2005).

CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING OF WORK

The work narratives of the participants in the study suggested that the meaning that they ascribed to their work was in many cases influenced by the social norms and expectations regarding work. The section below discusses a part of these findings and looks at how people hold certain meanings towards work even before they start working. The intention here is to delineate the process through which a predominant meaning was ascribed to work. These findings have implications for academicians and managers alike as it gives us a glimpse of how people make career and work choices. Knowing this would be useful in making important managerial decisions like hiring and retention.

Meaning of Work

It was seen that people held multiple meanings of work at the same time. However one meaning usually seemed to predominate at a given point in time. To be able to see how meaning of work gets constructed overtime it was important to categorize people depending upon the predominant meaning of work for them. Two categorizations were made here, based on the experiences of the

participants. When the predominant meaning/function of work was to fulfill the social and economic expectations held largely by their family members and the relevant community, the meaning of work was said to be 'social'. When the predominant meaning/function of work was to fulfill an individual's personal needs, aspirations and interests, work was said to have a 'personal' meaning. As already stated these categories are not exclusive of each other, an individual could hold both the meanings at any given point in time. The process of how one meaning comes to dominate the other is what is being explored here.

The Social Meaning of Work

An in depth analysis of the narratives of the participants showed that the meaning of work especially before they started to work was defined to a large extent by the society.

People were driven by various social and economic motivations for engaging in organizational employment. For some it was simply an economic decision- they joined the work that paid more. At times an individual had a choice of not working yet chose to do so. In this case the social meaning of work was driven by the need to be a 'good son' or a 'good daughter'. A third reason most common amongst the working population is that it is 'natural' for an adult to work. The three drivers of course are not completely exclusive. An individual at times stated all the three reasons for joining work.

Societies value 'work' and see 'work as a natural consequence of growing up- as a natural process through which an individual progresses from being dependent on the resources of the family and the society to actively contributing to it' (Gisbert, 1972). The expectations and norms regarding work seemed to be highly implicit in most of the narratives. It seemed but natural to

start working after a socially and culturally prescribed stage in life. One participant replied rather nonchalantly to my query about his views on work before he started working by saying, *"I had to work after I completed my post graduation, I got paid for it, so I worked."*

The matter of fact manner in which this participant answered was not typical only of him, many people couldn't think of an answer to this question. Work was natural.

Almost all the participants thought of working as a natural part of their growing up whether they had financial constraints or not. One may ask 'why is it natural to work?' Are human beings driven by a biological urge to work and be productive? Or are they driven by the socially created expectations to work? It is quite possible that both the factors could contribute to people's 'need' to work.

The data suggests that the need to work was propelled to a large extent by the social norms regarding work. Some of the interviews brought out the attitude that people –society and family members, have towards idleness. This strong social distaste for idleness could actually help throw light on what the society prefers instead. The excerpts of two individuals, whose experiences suggest that they were driven to work largely because of social devaluation of idleness, are provided below:

> It's been three years after my B. Tech degree......I am supposed to join some organization it won't look nice if you be idle for three years. So I was forced to join in this bank.

> It was a…..this is a personal story……..what I am going to tell you ….why I joined banks…..my father retired in 1989 as a gazetted officer with Indian audit

and accounts survey …..he was a senior audit officer …...at those times in the university the session used to be late by two years three years like that….I was a student…I was unemployed …..so one day it so happened that my father got a stroke …..so doctors told that he has something in his mind he is worried about that is why his blood pressure has shot up and he fell ill and had a stroke……so I asked my father in the hospital why you are worried about all these things…..he told that how can I not be worried …..you are unemployed…your younger brother is also unemployed…..now I am a retired person….although I am getting a handsome amount of pension even then being a father I should be worried…..then I thought these things are worrying my father and he is becoming sick …so I thought that I will have to do something in a hurry……so that he can get relief….at that time I did not have my results of the bachelors degree with me …..I asked my father what you would like …..that what type of job I should choose……he thought that being a father …..you should at least get a salary that is more than my pension….and at that time of what I calculated that the pension he was getting it was more than lot number of posts being offered in the market…either by the government or by the private institutions……so I had only two options….either to join UPSC (Union Public Service Commission) or to join as a probationary officer in any bank….I had no thought about becoming a clerk or any other thing or doing a staff selection commission or anything else……only I had two aims…either to join UPSC or to join banks.

There were also instances where participants suggested that they started working because they had a lot of time in hand and not because of any economic need to do so. Most often their family members influenced their decision to start working instead of being idle. One example is provided below:

> In those days all these classes used to take place in the evening …so whole day I have nothing to do …. My father was working in Life Insurance Corporation of India so he said that why don't you join LIC…you can join … undergraduates are allowed.

Why did the participant feel that *"it wouldn't look nice to be idle for three years"*? How could unemployment of his sons be such a big concern for a father despite the fact that there was no financial need for worry? Why did people choose to work instead of sitting idle when they had time to do so? These excerpts point towards the fact that idleness is not socially valued. If that were true, it brings us to the antithesis that work is socially valued. But how did work come to be valued more than idleness? The answer to this question cannot be directly derived from the responses of the participants, as most of the times the propelling forces dictating meanings act unconsciously and become an unquestioned part of the repertoire of individuals (Baumeister, 1991, Frankl, 2004). The participants were not even aware of the social processes underlying the valuation of work. To understand these underlying processes it becomes imperative to look at literature relating to work.

The huge value placed on work and disdain of idleness by cultures was not always present, according to the western theorists. Early societies everywhere viewed working as distasteful and

a violation to the human spirit. It was only with the advent of Calvinism and the protestant work ethic that work started being valued and the working individual was eulogized as being virtuous (Baumeister, 1991; Terkel, 1972; De 1984 as cited in Tripathi, 1990). The protestant work ethic claimed that work was a means to salvation and lauded work for its own sake.

The national culture of India however was insulated from the influence of Calvinism when the notion of the protestant work ethic rose to prominence (Tripathi, 1990). Nonetheless work was valued, not necessarily as a means to salvation but as a means to the end of fulfilling one's duty towards one's family. Therefore duties and not rights are the guiding forces in cultures like India (Sinha, 1997 as cited in Narayanan & Krishnan, 2003). The significance of work as a means to enact one's duties could possibly have been socially constructed like the way in which work took on a social meaning through the protestant work ethic in the west. The significance of duty orientation is evident in the Hindu traditional social system which provides a stage wise prescription of the expected behavior at various ages for people. The stage called the *Grihastha asharama* is for people between the ages of 19 to 54 approximately. This is a phase when one enacts the *dharma* and tries to fulfill one's duties towards one's family as well as society. *Dharma* (duty towards family and society) and *artha* (acquiring wealth) is the main aim of life at this stage. Gainful labor becomes a means through which the duties can be fulfilled (Koller, 2002, pp 44-53; Menon, 2007, pp 1300-1313). Interestingly according to the Indian philosophy, salvation comes only after one gives up the phase of active work. Work is valued because it is a means through which one enacts one's duties and idleness is not respected because it was seen as reluctance to take up one's social roles and responsibilities.

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Therefore the argument being made here is that people might not be actively aware of the social forces that influence their decision to work, however there is a constant subtext of social creation underlying the notions of work and its value, which eventually influences the behavior of people. The life stages prescribed by the Hindu texts and the value of duty orientation prescribed by collectivistic cultures (Fouad, Kantamneni, Smothers, Chen, Fitzpatrick & Terry, 2008) could be the possible influences on the positive value placed on work for an Indian employee. This view of work as being a means to enact one's social roles and responsibilities also emerged as a significant theme in the narratives.

For some people the jobs they took up were *"just an employment opportunity"* in their own words. However it cannot be ignored that even this simple economic decision was also driven by a motive to play out a social role- to act as a 'provider' to their family unit. They were driven by their personal sense of responsibility as part of the family. Work therefore was also a means through which they could become valued members of the family unit.

Personal Meaning of Work

There were also instances when social expectations and fulfilling role responsibilities were not the main determinants of the meaning of work. Even before joining, work for some people was seen as a means to express one's personal abilities and interests. This has been called the 'personal' meaning of work because work was seen as a means to fulfill personal needs more than as a means to fulfill social role responsibilities. What could work provide beyond social recognition and economic sustenance?

Many young employees felt that work could provide them with on the job learning, which will help them increase their expertise and develop a niche for themselves. The reason provided by one participant for working represents this perspective.

> I write stories and novels in Hindi….so when I thought of what I had to do….I wanted to be in a kind of service that provided me the opportunity to have day to day interactions with people…so that I can gain experience …meet people…..meet new people….the PO's job in the bank has a mandatory rural posting…so that was a charm for me that I could get in touch with rural India…which might not be possible in other services…that's why I tried in the bank and I got a job here

Work was also seen as a means to make a difference to the lives of others and this meaning generally crystallized after some event made the social influence aspect of an occupation or job salient within the person. This fact is evident in the excerpt provided below.

> First motivation (to join this job) was instigated during the last year of my graduation when I had gone with my friend….my friend's father was an ex-staff in the state government….so we had to get some work done related to the pension of his father…we had gone to the collectors office….That was the first time I met a collector….that gave me some idea about the power he has….the attraction (towards a government job) started then itself…..because of the power and control it provides….but the motivation became stronger when I was associated with an NGO…then I met a Chief Executive Officer of a Zilla Parishad (district) …. then

> I saw what a positive person he is and along with that if there is power how much change can be brought about (in the society)…Then I got motivated that if I need to do some work I need to work directly in a government job.

In organizational literature the studies on 'work values' and its differentiation of values as intrinsic and extrinsic work values have similarities with the concept of meaning of work. Work values have been defined as the outcomes people desire and feel they should attain through work (Singh, Bhandarker, Rai & Jain, 2011; Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman, & Lance, 2010). However, work values refer to what an individual ideally desires from work. The present study is looking at the actual function that work comes to perform for people through their own experiences, irrespective of what people would ideally desire. The meaning of work might be driven by work values but the two concepts are not one and the same.

The next question that arises is: "What are the forces that determine the predominant function that people will ascribe to work and what are the motivations that drive people to seek organizational employment?" An exploration of the narratives suggested that what the meaning of work will be before one started working was determined by two factors: the presence of choice and the awareness of personal interests and values. These two factors are discussed in detail in the following section.

Mechanisms: Determinants of meaning of work

     i.   *Presence of Choice*

Presence of 'choice' emerged as one of the important influencing factors on the meaning of work. Choice can be understood in two ways. Firstly, is working optional for the person? And secondly, how wide is the array of alternatives available to an individual at a given point in time?

An attempt to answer the question of whether work is optional for individuals, led to the discovery that choice is determined to some extent by the social expectations from an individual with respect to his/her gender and age. The society specifies age and gender relevant behaviors related to work. Unfortunately the manner in which studies related to work values and factors affecting them have been done till date, are not very helpful in revealing the underlying dynamics influencing the meaning of work. Previous studies simply stated that demographic factors like gender, age and ethnic groups affect work values. What was not considered was that these demographic characteristics might only be surrogates for a deeper influence of social role expectations (Hirschi, 2010; Mottaz, 1986; Sagie, Elizur, & Koslowsky, 1996; Sharma, 2011). For example expectations' regarding working was seen to be a deep rooted socially prescribed gender role for men (Mannheim, 1993).

That is the reason why an attempt has been made here in this study, to move beyond the apparent influences of demographics to understand how demographics actually determine the 'choice' available to an individual when it comes to working. The gender role expectations for example are actually instrumental in determining the meaning of work for a person because it was seen that when work is not a social compulsion, people tend work because of personal interest and intrinsic motives.

For many women for example, working was a personal choice. (Though some women stated economic compulsion and providing for family as the reason for working.) When work was optional for some women, the reason for working was to express oneself and be independent. Work was not a socio economic compulsion for them. It instead held a personal meaning. These social roles and expectations however are not constant but are ever changing, affecting people differently across different time periods. For example, working for women today has come to hold as central a position in life as it is for men. Many women of the present generation consider work as a natural life choice. One lady for example, when asked why she chose to work retorted by saying, "This question (of why one is working) is irrelevant in today's world….you work because you have to be financially independent."

Choice (emanating from gender role expectations for example) therefore is a function of the social and economic norms prevalent at any given point in time for an individual. Therefore generalizations cannot be made about choice for an entire generation or cohort. The only generalization that can be made from the findings in this study is that, when people have a choice they tend to search for personal meanings in work. Work then becomes a source of self expression.

The second possibility for variations in choice across individuals arises from the availability of jobs. When there are fewer jobs in the market individuals have fewer choices and this was seen to affect the meaning they ascribed to work. The interviewees in this study comprised people across generations and therefore were embedded in different socio-economic scenarios. If the cohort that started working 30 years ago is considered, for them work was either a means to fulfill their social expectations or to act as a provider to their families. Work was simply a

means of livelihood. Almost all of them said that their decision to join the jobs was *"not thought through."*

> Definitely like anybody I also had a very prospective career plan……but in those days when I did my graduation …avenues were not like what are available today……those were restricted…

If one were to compare that cohort with the more recent entrants who have a number of job alternatives both in the private and public sectors in India, one wonders what could work possibly mean to them? The reasons cited by the younger employees for joining the jobs in their organizations however were not very different from that of their older counterparts. Good salary and a good brand name was what everyone was looking for in a job irrespective of the time. Nevertheless most of them expressed having *"thought through"* their decision to join a bank. The reasons for making the decisions varied from learning and acquiring skills, to being able to make a difference. Security became a less important concern while deciding on employment.

The idea of choice however as already stated, cannot be bound within the boundaries of age or cohort. There were a number of participants who expressed a lack of choice even in the younger generation. This choicelessness was led by various reasons, like lack of job opportunities due to economic recession or because of fewer organizations coming to their institute for placements etc. An excerpt showing this 'choicelessness' in a young employee is given below:

> When I joined in the MBA institute I thought I would be passing out with a hefty package and a good brand name. But unfortunately that didn't happen, because being the first batch we didn't get the scope of getting so many number of

companies in the campus. So unfortunately I had to join this bank. One compulsion was there that I had to pursue my career in finance domain. So I had no option but to join this bank. Now I am trying to switch to other private banks or other financial companies.

These individuals expressed a lack of choice in work alternatives. In such a scenario these people looked at work simply as a means of financial security. This shows that the environment and the kind of opportunities present in the job market determined the construction of meaning of work at any given point in time.

In a recent study done in India, Singh et al (2011) found that with increase in education people were found to give less emphasis to security and greater emphasis to personal growth. Personal growth here refers to an orientation towards continuous self development and enhancement of personal skills. Increase in education implies availability of greater options of work and therefore wider choice. This is exactly what was seen in the meanings that people in this study ascribed to work. When jobs were easy to find people started thinking beyond its economic function and tried to explore what kind of work would match their personal values and provide them with opportunities for personal growth.

These findings suggest that choice- in the kind of work you'd want to do and whether you'd want to work at all or not, is a social construction too. A lot of this could be a result of the gender role expectations in society with respect to work and socio economic factors like job availability, education etc.

Choice alone however was not a determining factor for the meaning ascribed to work before an individual started working. Even when people had the choice and flexibility to work/choose the kind of work they'd want to do, it became crucial for them to know what their personal interests and values were, for work to hold any personal meaning. Awareness of personal interests and values therefore was the second factor influencing the meaning of work.

ii.   Awareness of Personal Interests

Participants who were aware of their personal preferences ascribed a personal meaning to work, before they started working. Work became a source of self expression for them. The interview excerpt below provides support for this contention.

> I knew I could join a private sector organization and get a better salary but the only reason I joined a public sector organization is being a lady there are so many restrictions, career is always one option, but you have other things also that take you along. So working in a bank it may not be as comfortable as being a school teacher where you get so much of holidays and all, but being in a public sector organization its that, our people who have humanity norms where they will be considering you when you have some requirement (like transfers) and all, and the work environment is comfortable."

In the absence of such awareness people invariably turned towards the social connotations of work. They worked because it was an economic necessity or an unavoidable social role responsibility. Like one participant pointed out, *"(I) appeared for all the MBA entrance*

examinations, everyone does that after graduation if he/she has nothing specific on his / her mind".

Interactive effect of Choice and Awareness

However, merely stating that having choice and being aware of one's interests will influence the meaning of work is not enough. These two factors were not independent of each other. Choice and Self Awareness interacted with each other in more complex ways to determine the meaning of work for an individual before he/she joined work. For work to have a personal meaning both the factors had to be present- one needed to know what one wants and also have the option of making relevant choices with respect to work. Therefore one factor became a qualifier for the other. Just having choice but not knowing what one wants and vice versa, only led individuals to ascribe largely social meanings to work. This becomes evident in the narratives of many participants who suggested that they were aware of their interest but had little choice to take up those activities as an employment

> I also dreamt of power flying because I did my student pilot training in gliding and other things. But I couldn't continue that also because that required quite a lot of money. Power flying is very costly. So I thought maybe I could earn something and then go in for that later on. Actually I had to get into it (banking) so that the family would be a little better off……I had to support the family. I should stick on. So that was one of the reasons why I had to come to the bank.

The discussion of influencing factors suggests that to understand the process of construction of meaning of work, one needs to view an individual as possessing personal values and preferences

but also embedded within a socio-economic context that constrains and influences the meanings one ascribes to organizational paid employment. Gottfredson (Gottfredson, 1981 as cited in Poole & Cooney, 1985) calls this the social-environmental constraints theory. A social-environmental constraint theory suggests that work decisions (and consequently its meaning) are constrained by the socio-economic environment and the gender role expectations for an individual (Poole & Cooney, 1985).

Till this point the explication of factors and meaning of work has been carried out as though these factors are fixed entities. The active construction of meaning of work by the individual can only be understood if the processes underlying them are examined. The discussion below aims to clarify the process through which people make work choices and ascribe certain meanings to work even before they start working. It was seen that when people knew what they want and had a choice to engage in those activities, work took on a personal meaning. When both or either of the two influencing factors was absent, people tended to turn to social cues to make work choices. What were the social cues? And how did they get conveyed to the people? The processes through which the social cues were formed and conveyed to people are discussed below.

Making Work Choices: Turning to Social Cues

Do people take up any kind of employment or is there a conscious or unconscious analysis of the job alternatives available to them before they start working? The data here suggests that people in fact analyze their alternatives of work. This analysis however was at times very explicit and consciously done and at times was a simple and straightforward imitation of employment choices

made by members of similar socio-economic background. In the second case the work choices were aided by the existing metaphors about work.

> ***Social Cues: Social Creation of Metaphors for Work – 'White Collared Job' 'Respectable Job' 'Being an MBA!'***

The social value of work was seen to have got communicated to individuals by the family and the social community through the use of metaphors. These metaphors are usually so deeply entrenched in the social repertoire that many a times they influence work choices at a sub conscious level (Morgan, 1980). When people were unaware of these social influences on their behavior, their work choices became passive responses to social cues, instead of being actively thought through. Social scientists suggest that metaphors have the ability to shape the reality for people (Morgan 1980) and are also instrumental in the formation of identities (of organizations and individuals) (Fiol, 2002; Gioia, Thomas, Clark & Chittipeddi, 1994). The influence of metaphors was clearly visible on the study participants as well.

'*White collared job*' and *'respectable job'* were the metaphors that were most prominent in influencing work choices among the participants of this study. The purpose of metaphors is to create a mental image for its users that clearly distinguish one object or concept form others. The metaphor *'white collared'*, for instance was used to denote administrative or office work. It provided an image of work that involves the use of intellect and contrasted it with the opposite of *'blue collared'* jobs that require physical labor in difficult work situations.

How do these metaphors get created in the society? The metaphors of valued work seem to get created between the spaces of the existing socio-economic environment as well as the preexisting

cultural views of work. In the Indian tradition for example, as in most other societies across the globe, manual work was considered to be inferior to mental work, and was associated with the people lower in the caste hierarchy (Sinha, 1990; Gisbert, 1972). It was also seen that people in more collectivistic cultures base their career choices on criteria such as prestige and status (Fouad, Kantamneni, Smothers, Chen, Fitzpatrick & Terry, 2008) which came from engaging in intellectual work. Such enduring cultural valuation of intellectual work and devaluation of manual work was seen to be relayed in the form of metaphors across generations through the family and other social entities like educational institutions, social communities etc. The metaphors became part of the everyday language of people in a given community. It should however be noted that the metaphors that denote and convey the value of work were not constant across time. The construction of metaphors for value of work and changes in them overtime are discussed below using the example of the social evaluation of the public sector bank job in India.

The work narratives of the participants in this study show how the economic condition of the nation and the policies of the government shaped the perceptions about the kind of work people valued and aspired for. Analyzing the alternatives available in the job market was the typical way through which a job choice began. It is interesting to see that even these alternatives were socially created to a large extent. When there were fewer jobs in the market due to the economic situation of the nation, jobs which ensured security and a promise of a good life were not only considered viable economically but also took on social connotations. Even out of the few alternatives that were available, some jobs took on a more respectable connotation because of what they provided- security at a time of an economic slump. In society, security started being respected and these jobs providing security became sought after. Therefore eventually, financial

security and social recognition became intertwined, providing the job incumbents a special space in the society.

The public sector bank job in India is a good example of how overtime the job came to be considered a respectable job denoted by terms like it was a 'white collared job'. Many participants suggested that they took up this job because it was a 'white collared job' and was highly respected in society.

> See ultimately we have to earn. After completion (of education) we have to earn. I have to support my family. What are the avenues? Banking those days was a white collar job. Bank means yes it is one of the best jobs, those days. Then I thought yes lets go to bank.

These guiding metaphors however were not constant, but kept changing with changes in the social and economic conditions. When the economic conditions of the country improved and the availability of jobs stopped being a concern for people, the source of respect shifted from simply gaining financial security to getting high pay. Status started being attached to jobs in posh corporate offices with fat paychecks (Chakrabarti, 2010). When the younger generation employees were asked about what their criteria for a job search were, they generally said that they were looking for high pay and a good brand name. Like one person said, "*I thought I would be passing out (of the MBA institute) with a hefty package and a good brand name*". Though people aspired for similar things even 30 years back, the standards of good pay and status associated with public sector organizations have changed in India. This change is visible through the changes in the use of metaphors. None of the younger participants in the study mentioned

'white collared job' or *'respectable job'* as being the reason for taking up a banking job. Instead *'being an MBA'* emerged as a common term used by them. The term is being referred to as a metaphor here, because the participants using it did not find it necessary to explain the connotations or expectations of work they thought were attached to *'being an MBA'*. It was assumed that people understood the social connotations of the term.

> I was expecting at least minimum infrastructure frankly, that was not here, computers are out dated, printers are not running, dot matrix printers are still used, when I came here to join, first day, I was like, where did I come? When you see all this you can't imagine, being an MBA you can't imagine a place where you are working.

Various studies have found generational differences in the centrality of work and what people value at work (Cennamo & Gardner, 2008; Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman, Brian & Lance, 2010), but the question is how do these differences emerge?

A study done in India on the expectations of employees from their workplaces, found that education shapes the expectations people have from the workplace (Singh, Bhandarker, Rai & Jain, 2011), this was especially true for MBA students. Research has found that 60 % of work values are environmentally based and 40% have a genetic basis (Sagie, Elizur, & Koslowsky, 1996). How does the environment shape the meaning of work and determine what people value in work (work values)? What really happens in the society that ensures the homogenization of a group of people and makes them expect and value similar things from work?

The work narratives here suggest that the creation and use of metaphors relating to work act as a significant medium through which the meaning of work gets socially constructed and conveyed to individuals. Metaphors go beyond the literal understanding of the expression and bring together a set of images that are closer to the experience of the phenomenon (Pokinghorne, 2005) which in turn affect meaning of work and work choices made by individuals.

Relaying Social Metaphors of Work

The participants in this study indicated that their decision of job choice and ultimately what they desired out of work was shaped by the popular trends in their societies. The family, social community and educational institutions became the means through which the broader culture and values of the community got transferred to the person. Some excerpts supporting this finding are presented below.

> I didn't like this government sector. I wanted to join a private company, work in the private sector. But then here, job security and perks and good salary, these things made it attractive to my family. So I continued. My mother she said, no no bank job is government job, you will get good salary, those days it was considered very good to work in a bank.

> Bank PO (probationary officer) exam is considered as a good opportunity to be in a public sector bank especially from the place we belong, Bihar (An Indian state). You mostly find POs from Bihar only.

These findings support previous studies which also found that what people expect from work was learnt through family, parents, teachers, peers, significant others (Inkson, 2004; Sagie,

Elizur, & Koslowsky, 1996, Stafford & Jackson, 1983, Poole & Cooney, 1985) the national culture, the relevant sub cultures (Kakar, 1971; Sengupta & Sinha, 2005) and the dominant social institutions (Parboteeah & Cullen, 2003) at any given point in time.

The influencing factors and the underlying processes through which the meaning of work gets constructed even before people start working has been depicted in Diagram 1 in the form of a flow chart for easy comprehension.

CONCLUSION

Managerial Implications

For any research one important question that needs to be addressed is: 'so what?' Will knowing the process through which meaning of work is constructed be of any use to anyone?

The findings of this research can have implications for the training, recruitment, job design and leadership development efforts in all organizations. The most important insight from this study that could be useful for practitioners is that metaphors influence the meanings people attribute to their work, these metaphors get conveyed through the medium of family members, friends, co-workers, customers etc. As a HR professional one needs to understand these metaphors and use them as guides for implementing any policy or if possible try and influence the existing metaphors by creating new ones. For instance the public sector banks in India today are encountering the challenge of high attrition among the new joinees, especially those who have been recruited from MBA institutes and a large number of employees will be retiring in the next five years (Khandelwal Report, 2010). There are many human resource policy changes that have been suggested to deal with these issues, but would changing policies and practices be enough to

bring about a bottom up change in the system? It is suggested here that it might not be completely effective even though it is possible to bring some change through policy decisions. The interview data points out a change in the way work is perceived overtime. Any policy change cannot be brought about without considering these changes in the meaning of work. Therefore it is important to look at what the new employees expect out of work. There is a change in the dominant metaphors associated with 'prestigious work' in the middle class Indian society. *'White collared job'* is no more the guiding metaphor for choosing between jobs; instead *'being an MBA'* emerged as a dominant metaphor mentioned by the new entrants. It might be helpful for practioners to know what *'being an MBA'* signifies for the younger population. It seemed that 'being an MBA' carried with it a connotation of possessing specialized knowledge and skill sets. The solution could lie in creating new metaphors for public sector bank work and discarding the prevalent ones. Organizations need to know what their strengths are and more importantly what could be their strengths from the perspective of a young MBA graduate whom one might want to recruit. Can new metaphors be created around those aspects and work practices changed to match the metaphors? Paying attention to these issues could be a deeper and more thorough way of dealing with recruitment and attrition problems being faced by the banks today.

Limitations

The one prominent limitation of this study is that the theory was built on the recollected experiences of the participants. Therefore the findings could have been confounded by the fact that the data was based on the reconstruction of past experiences instead of live experiences. To

counteract this limitation triangulation using the experiences of various participants was used as a way to strengthen the process theory developed from the interviews in this study.

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Diagram 1: Flow chart indicating the process of construction of meaning of work before joining organizational employment

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┌──────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│  ┌─────────────────────────────────┐   ┌──────────────────────────────────┐   │
│  │ Social Meaning of Work          │   │ Personal Meaning of work         │   │
│  │ -Meeting Social Expectations    │   │ - Taste of independence          │   │
│  │ - Fulfilling Social Role        │   │ - Self expression/Make a         │   │
│  │   Responsibilities              │   │   difference                     │   │
│  │ - Financial Security            │   │ -Learning and Personal Growth    │   │
│  └─────────────────────────────────┘   └──────────────────────────────────┘   │
└──────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
                                         │
                                         ▼
              ┌───────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
              │ Evaluation of alternatives (Do I have a Choice?    │
              │ : To work and to choose the kind of work I want    │
              │ to do)                                             │
              └───────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
                        │                              │
                        ▼                              ▼
                   ┌─────────┐                    ┌─────────┐
                   │  YES    │                    │   NO    │
                   └─────────┘                    └─────────┘
                        │                              │
                        ▼                              ▼
           ┌───────────────────────┐        ┌──────────────────────┐
           │ Do I know what I want? │        │ Turn to Social       │
           └───────────────────────┘        │ Cues (Language,      │
                 │           │               │ Metaphors;           │
                 ▼           ▼               │ Community,           │
              ┌──────┐   ┌──────┐   ──────▶  │ Family)              │
              │ YES  │   │  NO  │            └──────────────────────┘
              └──────┘   └──────┘                     │
                 │                                    ▼
                 ▼                           ┌──────────────────────┐
        ┌──────────────────┐                 │ Financial Security & │
        │ Turn to Personal │                 │ Social Recognition   │
        │ Values & Interests│                │ primary meaning      │
        └──────────────────┘                 │ of work              │
                 │                            └──────────────────────┘
                 ▼
        ┌──────────────────────┐
        │ Self Expression      │
        │ primary meaning of   │
        │ work                 │
        └──────────────────────┘
```


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