Can public services create meaningful work?

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Meaningfulness and Mutuality

• Design principles for organisations and systems (forthcoming, Routledge, 2019)

Is this Meaningful Work?

I am making a stack of paper....and I feel good!

Joanne Ciulla defines meaningful work as ‘morally worthy work in a morally worthy organisation’
The Challenge for Global Public Sectors

Supply
- Work intensification
- Reduced resources/fragmentation
- New technologies

Demand
- Population aging
- Negative effects of austerity regimes
- Vulnerable groups
Barnet Graph of Doom

The ‘Graph of Doom’
Global Trends in Public Service Delivery

‘The combination of technological change and globalisation is reshaping the notion of work, human purpose and livelihoods’
(Global Trends, 2018. OECD Observatory of Public Service Delivery)

- Development of identity based programmes
- Adoption of systems approaches to complex problems
- Innovating to meet SDGs aimed at inclusiveness and vulnerable populations
What are public services?
The ‘publicness’ of public goods

Publicness in consultation
Available and accessible
Equitable goods and services

Publicness of Benefits
Acceptable quality, safe, preventative and promotive

Publicness in Decision-Making
Democratic and informed

Transformative Integration?

Advanced human needs

Common goods = expressive life services

Complex work & life capabilities
Meaningfulness is a moral value distinct from welfare or duty (Wolf, 2010). ‘Meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness’, where the experience of meaningfulness is more likely to occur when a person becomes actively connected to a morally valuable object, (something or someone of value) such that they are ‘gripped, excited, involved by it’ (Wolf, 2010).
1. Objective/moral-ethical dimension of meaningfulness
Meaningfulness depends upon our capability to contribute to the well-being or 'good' of something (person, animal, object, activity, place, organisation etc.) which has independent moral value. *Independent value* includes being worthwhile, significant, important, relevant.

2. Subjective/cognitive-emotional dimension of meaningfulness
An activity promoting the well-being of a valuable person, animal, object is meaningful when we experience an emotional connection (e.g. satisfaction or fulfilment) to the object. *Satisfaction* is related to self-expression, self-realisation, growth, happiness, wholeness, integration, empowerment and self-esteem. *Fulfilment* is related to achieving one's aims.

3. Integrative Social Processes
Combining Objective and Subjective Dimensions
'subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness' (Wolf 2010)
Purposing, Judging, Appraising, Evaluating, Interpreting, Feeling Sensing

4. Content of Action/Goods of Meaningfulness
Action structured by the goods of meaningfulness (autonomy, freedom and dignity) enables integrative social processes.
Such action is goal-directed (combining larger purposes and local/individual goals) and/or values-driven (combining collective and personal values)

Public Meaningfulness
(Diverse sources of meanings)

Governance Institutions
(Principles of democratic deliberation)

Being a meaning-maker
Status
Capabilities

Society of Meaning makers
(Civic Work)

Evaluative Horizons
(Ethical, natural, social)

Institutional Infrastructure
Private Enterprise, Public Services, Civic Associations

Meaningfulness in a life of ethical care

‘Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfil the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual’ (Frankl, 1984: 98).

‘Human behaviour is really human to the extent to which it means acting into the world. This, in turn, implies being motivated by the world. In fact, the world toward which a human being transcends itself is a world replete with meanings that constitute reasons to act and full as well of other human beings to love’ (Frankl, 2004: 93).
Finding something to care about

“locating the source of meaning in the activity of loving renders opportunities for meaningful life much more readily accessible”

(Frankfurt, 1988)
Growing interest in meaningful work limits to employee engagement? crisis of meaning?

In Appalachian coal country, Bit Source trains displaced coal miners in Web and software development.

In a BBC radio interview, Professor Burns argues that the remedy is ‘to tackle the social, environmental and economic dislocation felt by people’, but he adds that this requires ‘all the public sector to work together to help people regain a sense of purpose and meaning in life’, including innovations in social cohesion which move away from ‘doing things to people, rather than doing things with people’ (Inside Health. BBC Radio 4)
Mutuality and Meaningfulness
Organisational Practices

Practices
- Values
- Justice
- Ownership
- Stakeholder voice
- Distributed leadership
- Relationships
- Climate and culture
- Work design

Purposing
- Morally worthy
- Emotionally engaging

Becoming a meaning-maker

Status Capabilities

Sources of positive meanings/values

Identity formation

Outcomes
- Knowledge sharing/learning
- Creativity
- Emotional intelligence
- Affective commitment
- Organisational identification
- Pro-social behaviour
- Positive work attitudes
- Intrinsic motivation
- Well-being

Adapted from Bailey, Yeoman, Madden, Thompson & Kerridge. A Narrative Evidence Synthesis of Meaningful Work. Academy of Management Conference 2016
Meaningfulness and Mutuality
Values-based approach to organisation design

Meaningfulness -> values
Voice
value

values

Mutuality
Work in creating public goods

**Ethical work**
translates moral and ethical values into organisational practices

**Relational work**
orchestrates joint efforts by building trusting, mutually interdependent relationships

**Voice work**
having a share of decision-making power

**Complexity work**
uses knowledge and technology to generate innovations in operating practices
Core organisational practices for meaningful work

- purposing
- ownership
- values
- voice
- leadership
- justice
- membership
‘[…] the chief worth of civilisation is just that it makes the means of living more complex; that it calls for great and combined intellectual efforts, instead of simple, uncoordinated ones, in order that the crowd may be fed and clothed and housed and moved from place to place. Because more complex and intense intellectual efforts means a fuller richer life. They mean more life. Life is an end itself, and the only question as to whether it is worth living is whether you have enough of it’.

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