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Meaningful Work and the Voices of Others in Frontline Occupations[1]

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ABSTRACT

This article explores meaningful work across two frontline occupations, bank advisors and schoolteachers. We build on narrative research focusing on the role of stories and storytelling in the sensemaking and identity construction processes related to work to explore the importance of others in the perception and construction of everyday work as meaningful. To study this, we examine the narrative construction of meaningful work in everyday work stories of self, work, others, and organizations as (ante)narrative identity construction processes. Our analysis shows that 'making a difference by helping others' is the predominant theme when sharing stories of everyday work situations perceived and constructed as meaningful. Three contributions are made. First, the narrative construction of meaningful work is collective and dynamic; second, others have a powerful voice in negotiating the meaningfulness of work; and third, negative public attention affects the possibility of assessing work as meaningful.

KEYWORDS

Antenarrative / frontline work / identity / meaningful work / narrative / work stories

Introduction

The topic of meaningful work has gained increased attention in recent years (Lysova et al. 2023; Yeoman et al. 2019), as researchers have linked meaningfulness to several positive outcomes such as mental health, motivation, job satisfaction, work-life balance, higher performing organizations (see e.g., Bailey et al. 2019; Martikainen et al. 2022; Michaelson et al. 2014) as well as serving as a buffer against stress and burnout (Meng & Lin 2023). For frontline, relational occupations, the beneficiaries of their work often play a central role in how and when work is perceived as meaningful (Martela 2023), the meaningfulness stemming from 'helping others' and 'making a difference'. This may be particularly central in the Nordic countries, where relational, knowledge work in the frontline – in both private and public sectors – is culturally valued, respected, and founded on trust (Holmberg & Rothstein 2020). Yet, the 'other' as a source of meaningfulness is fragile and contested in these lines of work, and everyday attempts to 'help others' are made in organizational contexts marked by reforms, restructuring, changes in professional roles and public scandals that complicate workers' ability to enact the meaningful aspects of their roles (Frandsen & Morsing 2022).

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Is work still meaningful if 'others' question the value of the help you provide or the difference you make?

Often, research conceptualizes meaningful work as inherent to certain job characteristics, as an individual experience, or as shaped by contextual/cultural forces (Broadfoot et al. 2008; Laaser & Karlsson 2022; Michaelson 2014). However, a few studies show that meaningfulness is socially constructed, relational, and tied to identity (Humle 2014; Mitra & Buzzanell 2017; Schabram & Maitlis 2017) and acknowledge the role of others but rarely examines closely *how* the voices, actions, and opinions of others shape the construction of meaningful work, which is particularly relevant in contexts where negative public narratives may challenge employees' ability to sustain the fragile constructions of meaningfulness.

In our research, we address this gap by asking: How is work constructed as meaningful, and what positions and voices are assigned to self and others in the narrative construction of meaningful work? We use a constructivist (ante)narrative approach to study stories of everyday work among employees working with relational work in the frontline and examine how multiple narrative positionings of 'self' and 'others' challenge employees' construction of work as meaningful. Empirically, our findings are based on two qualitative case studies of frontline work in the Nordics: public school teachers facing a public reformation of their work and bank advisors in a major Nordic bank subject to scandal-driven mistrust. Both occupations rely on trust, helping others, and sustaining positive professional relationships with pupils, and parents or customers. The two cases are unique, as exposure to and handling of negative public attention during fieldwork provided an interesting context in which to study the ongoing challenges of sustaining a sense of meaningfulness at work, and most importantly, the importance of others in the perception and construction of work as meaningful.

Meaningful work and the role of 'others'

Meaningful work generally refers to work experiences that are perceived as significant and positive (Bailey et al. 2019). The definitions of and approaches to the study of meaningful work are, however, numerous, and despite a lack of consensus on what fosters it (Laaser & Karlsson 2022; Lysova et al. 2023), there is agreement on the advantages of meaningful work for employees and their potential to thrive. Indeed, meaningful work is considered more important than any other occupational feature such as income, job security, or the opportunity for advancement (Cascio 2003). As a starting point, we adopt a broad definition of meaningful work as 'work that is personally significant and worthwhile' (Lysova et al. 2019, p. 375).

Traditionally, meaningful work has been studied in separate fields with a focus either on the individual worker's experience or on objective job characteristics of specific types of work (Laaser and Karlsson 2022; Michaelson 2014). For example, meaningful work has been defined as 'a job, a coherent set of tasks, or any endeavor requiring mental and/or physical exertion that an individual interprets as having a purpose' (Cheney et al. 2008, p. 144). Others have conceptualized meaningful work as an intrinsic experience, in which the individual worker interprets or perceives work as meaningful (Pratt & Ashforth 2003). Opposing the focus on either job characteristics or intrinsic experiences, some researchers accentuate contextual and cultural factors. For example,

Broadfoot et al. (2008) claim that the meaningfulness of work is shaped by complex historical, social, and economic forces, and Ciulla (2000) argues that the subjective interpretation of work partially stems from our position in the world, context, and culture. Similarly, Mejia (2023) highlights normative and cultural dimensions as important to the individual's ability to find meaning in life and work.

Further, challenging traditional approaches there is a small but growing interest in studying the processes by which work is perceived as meaningful and in adopting qualitative, constructivist approaches (Bailey et al. 2019; Lysova et al. 2023). Qualitative research studies meaningful work as constituted in processes of social interactions, work practices, emotions, identity, and sensemaking, and emphasizes the tensions and temporal aspects of meaningful work (e.g., Harding 2019; Mitra & Buzzannell 2017; Schabram & Maitlis 2017). The temporal aspect has been demonstrated by, for example, Bailey and Madden (2017) who show how meaningfulness occurs in moments where work is perceived as meaningful (Bailey & Madden 2017). Similarly, Carton's (2018) study challenges the assumption that meaningfulness is a permanent state by showing how, for example, the diverse conduct of leaders may affect the perceived meaningfulness of work for employees. Related to this research, there is a growing interest in identity as a pathway to the study of meaningful work (see Fontana et al. 2023; Scott 2022, Selkälä 2022). Harding (2019) argues that meaningful work is pleasurable for the self *and* makes a contribution to others. By adding that work is meaningless unless it contributes to the flourishing of self and others, Harding (2019) makes a link between meaningful work and identity ´(…) the answer to the question, "Who are you?" posed to someone at points in the day where they experience their work as meaningful may become: I am someone who flourishes through participating in the flourishing of others´ (p. 135).

Building on research pointing to the significance of relational and contextual factors, we argue that the processes of sensemaking and identity construction that render work meaningful are embedded in social interaction and dialogue (Boje 2001; Gergen & Gergen 1988). As such, these processes cannot be adequately described as purely intrinsic, individual experiences or as inherent in specific types of work. The importance of other people and a sense of contributing to others in shaping the meaningfulness of work has been demonstrated by several scholars (Bailey et al. 2017; Martela 2023). However, we need more knowledge on how 'others' affect our ability to perceive work as meaningful and more nuanced insight into the influence of 'others' in the ongoing processes through which everyday work is perceived, constructed, and enacted as meaningful (Weick 1995).

This is particularly relevant for employees in frontline occupations where 'others' have an important position in affirming or denying what is meaningful (Nielsen & Falch 2023). Further, this type of work is characterized by numerous daily interactions with other people (customers, pupils, parents, and collaborators) and largely depends on employees' ability to engage with people in ways that foster relationships characterized by mutual trust. Furthermore, this work is immaterial knowledge work, in the sense that both its input and output largely rely on employees' competencies and knowledge. Research shows that this type of work is both potentially meaningful and highly demanding, and associated with ambivalent emotions, tensions, complex daily interactions, and a close connection between work and identity (Frandsen et al. 2025; Mallett & Wapshott 2012).

To advance knowledge on how 'others' influence the way individuals construct work as meaningful, we adopt an antenarrative theoretical and analytical approach, as it allows us to explore the processes of negotiating identity and meaning in relation to everyday work life (Boje 2001; Humle & Frandsen 2017) and the role and importance of 'others' in these processes. We pose the research question: 'How is work constructed as meaningful, and what positions and voices are assigned to self and others in the narrative construction of meaningful work?' This question is answered through narrative analysis of everyday work stories to explore thematic, structural, and performative aspects, followed by a reflexive discussion of the work-life implications grounded in the analysis.

Meaningful work; processes of narrative sensemaking and identity construction

To explore the role and importance of 'others', we adopt a narrative lens because of its utility in exploring the complexities and negotiations related to and constitutive of work-life phenomena such as the meaningfulness of work (Rhodes & Brown 2005). Within work-life and organizational studies, narratives have gained considerable influence as a theoretical lens and method when studying, for example, change, identity, and power (e.g., Czarniawska 2004; Rhodes & Brown 2005). We build on narrative research focusing on the storytelling of organizational members as they ascribe and negotiate the meaning of work (Boje 2001, 2011; Driver 2017) and research accentuating the importance of stories and narratives in identity construction processes (Brown 2015; He & Brown 2013; Linde 2009; Mikkelsen & Humle 2020; Rostron 2022).

The theoretical framework of this study combines antenarrative sensemaking (Boje 2001; Frandsen et al. 2024) with narrative identity research, to acknowledge that a large part of making sense of everyday work life is related to answering the questions of 'who am I?' and 'who are we?' (as individuals, organizations, groups, or professions) (Humle 2014; Linde 2009). Within critical organizational research, there is an emergent consensus that meaning and identity are constituted in collective processes of becoming rather than inner, permanent states of being (Brown 2015; He & Brown 2013). The concept of narrative identity work (Humle 2014; Nourkova & Gofman 2023; Rostron 2022) allows for an analytical exploration of how identity and meaning is constructed in relation to work not only as constructions of self but also by presenting different possible versions of others, work, and organizational life (Humle 2014; Rostron 2022). Stories of self are highly dynamic and contested performances situated in social interactions (Gergen & Gergen 1988; Humle 2014; Nordbäck et al. 2022; Singh & Frandsen 2022). Thus, the term narrative identity work insinuates that a lot of work goes into the ongoing struggles of individuals as they construct and live out different possible stories of self and others.

Similarly, narratives are an important part of sensemaking (Boje 1991; Weick 1995) and, according to Weick (1995), particularly interesting in times of crises, where breakdowns in meaning may disturb collective processes of sensemaking and agreed-upon narratives. We adopt Boje's (2001, 2011) concept of antenarrative storytelling, referring to the '(...) fragmented, non-linear, incoherent, collective, unplotted,

and pre-narrative speculation, a bet' (Boje 2001, p. 1). Boje (2011) uses the term 'living story networking' to describe how 'A person's story denotes or implies (between the lines) relationships to other stories' (2011, p. 14). People in and around organizations are always 'chasing' multiple storylines in ongoing collective processes of making and negotiating sense by asking, 'What is going on here?' (Boje 2001). From this perspective, making sense of organizational life and life in general is a collective endeavor. All stories and story fragments are part of the ongoing conversations among organizational members and external stakeholders (e.g., customers, pupils, parents, collaborators).

The antenarrative approach allows us to study meaningfulness not as something which is 'there' and can be provoked to 'occur'. The (ante)narrative identity work of individuals as they attempt to explain and understand 'what is going on', while creating possible and preferably positive presentations of self (Goffman 1959), is constituted in collective processes of negotiating meaning and identity. For example, previous research shows that dominant stories performed by management, or the press strongly affect the story work of individuals and groups (Humle & Frandsen 2017). Thus, examining how we (as individuals, groups, and organizations) construct and negotiate meaning and identity through stories can provide insights into how we make sense of both demanding (e.g., opposing agendas) and positive aspects (e.g., meaningfulness) of everyday work.

Context, methods, and analysis

Empirical contexts

The empirical material is based on case studies of two different organizational contexts in the same Nordic country: public schools in one municipality (first author) and a large bank (first and second author in collaboration). The first case is situated in the broader context of the reform of the public school system. The reform triggered widespread societal debate and media coverage, in which schoolteachers, their professional roles, and daily practices became subjects of intense scrutiny by politicians, journalists, and the public. The context of the empirical material was a reform-initiated training program during the first year of the reform. The focus of the analysis is nine in-depth interviews with teachers lasting between one and two hours. The second case investigates financial advisors working at a large bank. At this point, the bank had been exposed for taking part in several scandals, including money laundering, and was experiencing massive negative media coverage and public attention. The research is based on a 24-month longitudinal case study conducted across 14 different national locations. The focus of analysis in this article is 41 interviews with financial advisors conducted during the final two rounds of interviews, each lasting 40–90 minutes.

Methods

Both case studies combine interviews and ethnographic fieldwork (Van Maanen 1988). The analysis in this article is based on material from narrative interviews (Søderberg

2006; Whitehead & Halsall 2017) with a focus on the sensemaking and identity construction processes of the interviewees (Søderberg 2006). However, spending time in and around the organizations to observe everyday work played an important role in contextualizing and strengthening the interviews and the analysis.

The questions are inspired by the critical incident technique (CIT; Czarniawska 2004; Flanagan 1954) to elicit sharing of work experiences. The questions include topics related to the specific focus of the study, for example, in the study of the bank, questions addressed trust, ethics, scandals, management, and customer relations. The teachers were asked questions about the training program and the reform. In addition, both occupations were asked questions about their work life, such as: 'Do you enjoy your work?', 'What aspects of your work do you find most interesting?', and 'Less interesting?'. Inspired by CIT, the interviewees were asked to elaborate by describing concrete situations and examples. Interviews were conducted using interview guides, but interviewers allowed flexibility to follow '(…) what the narrator themselves selected for their plot construction in order to make sense of their own world' (Søderberg 2006, p. 404). Many teachers talked about the reform process, changes, and ongoing public debates surrounding their profession. Similarly, many of the bank advisors frequently returned to the media's critical scrutiny of the bank's endeavors and the reactions of friends, family, and customers.

Narrative analysis of everyday work stories

Stories of everyday work can provide insights into the complex ways in which we make sense of our work life and how we perceive the circumstances and demands of everyday work (Driver 2017; Humle & Pedersen 2015). Adopting an antenarrative approach to explore how meaningfulness is constructed across storytelling episodes, three analytical approaches are applied to examine what is being told (the themes), how the telling unfolds (structural), and who, how, where, and why it is being told (the performative aspects) (Riessman 2008). The fruitfulness of combining these three and how they, in combination, can shed light on the sensemaking and identity construction processes of organizational members and the importance of 'others', for example, external stakeholders, has been shown in previous research (Humle & Frandsen 2017; Vaara 2002).

The analysis presented is the result of an explorative process (Latusek & Vlaar 2015) of going back and forth between theory, analytical concepts, and the empirical material. In their iterative reading, Latusek and Vlaar (2015) discovered that their three sets of interviews from different cases contained comparable metaphorical language. Similarly, our initial analysis originated from a growing curiosity while working with the material for other articles. We were intrigued by how stories of 'making a difference by helping others' emerged as the most interesting and enjoyable aspects of work. Stories of helping customers and pupils were told when answering questions directed at the positive valence of work, such as 'what attracted you to this type of work?', 'do you enjoy your work?', or when spontaneously reflecting upon aspects of work that they especially enjoyed, found interesting, fun, or fulfilling. At the same time, our attention was captured by the frustration and sadness conveyed in stories about negative public attention, and how these circumstances seemed to lurk as

fragments of storylines hard to suppress or ignore, for example, depicting teachers as not working hard or portraying the bank and its advisors as unethical.

After having identified the two empirical themes of 'Making a difference by helping others' and 'negative public attention', an initial thematic reading of the interview material was conducted to identify related stories, storylines and story fragments. Then, we conducted an integrated analysis of structural and performative aspects of the accumulated stories, storylines and story fragments within each of the two themes. Traditionally, structural analysis zooms in on the micro-level constructions of narratives to analyze isolated stories. Instead, we explore structural and performative aspects horizontally (Riessman 2008) across interviews and story performances to be able to analyze collective aspects of how, when and why the stories are constructed.

Together, the three approaches facilitate analytical insights into the importance of 'others' by exploring the voices and positions ascribed to self and others in the narrative identity work of teachers and advisors. The structural and performative approaches complement the thematic by addressing how the stories are constructed and performed (Riessman 2008), for example, the positions, intentions, and roles ascribed to self and others, preferred plot structures, moments of evaluation, language, and metaphors. Furthermore, we explore meanings and emotions attached to the stories as a form of social performance (Gergen & Gergen 1988), and the ways stories are sometimes only hinted at or performed as terse storytelling (Boje 1991), leaving it to the listener (or researcher) to activate contextual knowledge obtained through ethnographic field work to make the stories, meanings and intertextuality comprehensible.

Findings

Table 1 Findings

Main themes	Stories, storylines, and story fragments	Summary: Structural and performative aspects
Meaningful work; making a difference by helping 'others'	Concerns: - Being thorough, trustworthy, and committed. - Doing something extra and special (e.g., bringing extra food or asking about a customer's grandchild). - Giving something of oneself and building trust in relationships. - Asking questions Examples: - Teacher: 'A child that evolves or understands something' - Teacher: 'For some of these children, you are almost their primary grown-up'. Advisor: 'Helping people fulfil their dreams'	- Work is experienced as meaningful when teachers and advisors can make a difference by helping others. - Generalized story fragments (e.g., a child understanding something or a customer leaving satisfied) coexist with more epic, fully developed stories - Narrators position themselves as dedicated, caring, competent and hardworking, everyday heroes. - Collective understandings of 'helping others' as the essence of meaningful work coexists with tensions of everyday work.

(Continued)

Table 1 *(Continued)*

Main themes	Stories, storylines, and story fragments	Summary: Structural and performative aspects
Negative public attention; the powerful voices of 'others'	Concerns: - Feeling misrepresented - Affecting private and work-life - Teachers: loss of motivation and enthusiasm. - Advisors: Distance themselves from the bank's scandals and describe positive customer relations. Examples: - Teacher: 'It's like people don't think teachers work hard enough'. - Advisor: 'We are not the ones who have done something illegal'. - Advisor: 'It is very burdensome as a private person (…) everyone has an opinion about it from the media'.	- Both professions experience that their work and sense of who they are as professionals are challenged by negative public and media attention. - The preferred position of self and others is affected and changed from being everyday heroes to skepticism toward their profession and work. - Strong negative emotions are attached to the stories - Story performances reveal persistence in allowing negative and positive storylines to coexist. - Differences in narrative identity work; teachers express strong emotions of sadness and resignation. Advisors adopt narrative strategies of distancing, using collective storylines and humorous metaphors.

Meaningful work; making a difference by helping others

Collective stories

The horizontal thematic analysis across interviews shows that 'making a difference by helping others' is the most predominant theme when sharing stories of everyday work situations perceived and constructed as meaningful. Advisors and teachers share many stories of situations and moments where they are positioned as hardworking and dedicated in the quest to help customers and pupils. When asked, 'What is a good workday to you?' a teacher answers: 'It can be many things. A child who develops or understands something. That is super cool, if they have had difficulties with something and then suddenly, they realize what it is about'. Another teacher says:

Teacher: For some of these children, you are almost their primary grown-up. And I really like that. I like the social aspect of the work as well; I like that a lot.

Interviewer: Do you have an example of a situation with the children and the social aspect?

Teacher: Well, at one point, I had a kid who was bilingual, and his parents never attended meetings at the school, so I had to go to their house and talk to them. To see them and meet them there.

Interviewer: Okay, and then you went to their home after work?

Teacher: Yes (…) Or, well, another time I had a boy who rarely had any lunch with him at school. Then, I started bringing some extra food to make sure he and others had something to eat. Small things like that.

Similarly, advisors talk about interacting with and helping customers as the most valued and interesting part of their everyday work:

> Advisor: I am very preoccupied with helping people fulfil their dreams, and that may be the dream of having their budget account balanced. It can be simple things, but just me helping them move on and walking out of here with a good feeling.
>
> Advisor: It's not always the details of the investment that are the most interesting part, but meeting people is, and they all have a story and their own way of being. I find that interesting. The human aspect makes my work interesting, meeting someone who builds ships or boats, how they started in that line of work, and things like that. It's also about giving something of yourself. In all honesty, I think that is where I am quite good at my job, giving something of myself, asking questions, and building trust to move forward with helping the customer.

The structural analysis shows that stories of 'making a difference by helping others' are sometimes constructed as fully told narratives describing specific situations and taking on an almost epic form. Stories and story fragments of helping are also often presented as generalized examples: 'A child that develops or understands something' or 'giving something of yourself' and 'asking questions' to build trust. Similarities across interviews indicate a collectively shared understanding that this type of work is meaningful because it offers opportunities to make a genuine difference in the lives of others. Related storylines appear, including being 'thorough' and 'trustworthy' when bank advisors stress the importance of advising on the best possible solution for the customer, or 'doing something extra and special' a storyline also performed by teachers as in the examples narrated above about bringing an extra lunch to ensure a child has something to eat or going to a family's house after work.

The performative and structural analysis shows that 'making a difference by helping others' is a well-established shared understanding and institutionalized way of talking about how, why, and when this type of work is meaningful and rewarding. The helpful frontline employee position indicates meaningful work (i.e., being able to help others) both by being decent and dedicated in everyday interactions, and sometimes through extraordinary efforts and commitment in more extreme situations. In these stories and story fragments, a positive correspondence between self, others, and work is easily performed, positioning the advisors and teachers as everyday heroes who work hard to help customers and pupils.

Dynamic and contested constructions

The strong collective understanding that this type of work is meaningful because 'it is possible to make a difference' is, however, not an uncontested construction. In the interviews, it is often intertwined with and challenged by other possible storylines, for example, when teachers share stories of being exposed to reforms, changes, and limited resources. As one teacher says, after talking about how much she enjoys working with the children: 'You need to be human to be a teacher and be authentic. There is a little less room for being yourself, and new things are introduced all the time, like student plans,

week schedules, and things like that, presented as "This is a good idea"' or when bank advisors share stories of being exposed to changes, different management initiatives, and especially the experiences of being members of a scandal-ridden organization.

The preferred and collectively shared plot structure of helping customers and pupils and the position of self as everyday heroes coexist with parallel and sometimes opposing storylines of work-life circumstances and opposing agendas:

> Interviewer: Do you like your job?
> Teacher: Yes, I like my work. There are periods where you think to yourself, 'work is hard'. But I am happy being a teacher, and I am happy working with the children. Most of the time. Of course, there are things you would like to be without, sometimes.
> Interviewer: Do you have an example?
> Teacher: Well, episodes with the children, and there are days with a lot of work pressure and a lot of preparations, and it feels like you are hanging on by a thin thread and you go into the classroom without being properly prepared. That is not cool, it eats away at your strength and energy. (…) I think you can sense there is more teaching now (due to the reform). And there are more demands, some of which make it easier, and, in some areas, it brings more work.

In this short storytelling episode, the storyline of work as something that makes the teacher 'happy working with the children' coexists with work as something that 'eats away at your strength and energy'. Demands and changes are introduced not as either good or bad; some 'make it easier' and some 'bring more work'. Similarly, bank advisors' positive storylines about helping customers coexist with more negative ones, for example, of changes or angry customers questioning the ethics of the bank. Talking about the wrongdoings of the bank and the negative media coverage, an advisor describes work in negative terms as 'very burdensome', but simultaneously states: 'I really like my job, and I like my customers':

> Advisor: What goes on up there at the top of the organization is so far away from my work. So yes, I think it is very burdensome in relation to my daily work. I think it is very burdensome as a private person because I really don't want to open that dialogue in my private life, about working for this bank, because everyone has an opinion about it from the media. I think it has gone very far now, the things we stand on target for as employees in combination with having to work more efficiently. I also feel the workload is higher than ever. This is not a cool situation. (…) Even though my husband, time and time again, thinks I am a fool that I keep on going and don't just find another job. But I don't think I will (…) I really like my job, and I like my customers and the relationship I have built with them.

Later in the interview, the same advisor talks about the workload and the negative media coverage:

> Advisor: So, I think it is a bit heavy at this point, but I also think management has changed. They are much more accommodating and treat us more as their

> equals. And they also inform us if there is new media coverage, so we can prepare. This is new, previously, we found out at the same time as the customers, which was hard.

The construction of work as meaningful when making a difference and providing 'good counseling' is intertwined with stories of tensions in interactions with customers, collaborators, and management. For example, in the quote above, the position, role, and intentions of management shift from something the advisor tries to distance herself from, 'what is going on up there at the top of the organization', to a more positive storyline of management having changed to be 'much more accommodating'. The difficulties described, 'it has gone very far now, the things we stand on target for' and the strong emotions performed 'very burdensome' are often reflected in stories of the negative attention explored in the next section.

Negative public attention; the powerful voices of 'others'

During fieldwork, both teachers and advisors found their work, profession, and sector at the center of negative public attention, and the experiences of being subjected to public skepticism emerged as a central theme across the accounts of both occupations.

'It is like people don't think teachers work hard enough'

For teachers, negative media coverage and political rhetoric have reshaped how their profession is publicly discussed. A recurring storyline shared by teachers is the experience of being misrepresented in the collective public stories of their profession and work. What is described as most hurtful isn't necessarily the actual changes in the school system, but the way those changes were communicated and how teachers were spoken about publicly. Teachers express feelings of sadness, frustration, and disappointment related to being portrayed in negative terms:

> Teacher: For me, it is not so much the changes themselves that's the problem. People (teachers) feel run over and overheard. I think that is what takes center stage now and that is really hard, the frustration of something important having changed (…) and the way it is now acceptable to speak about the work of teachers.
>
> Interviewer: For whom is it acceptable, do you think?
>
> Teacher: Well, I think the politicians started out with a seriously damaging tone about teachers not having worked hard enough.
>
> Teacher: I have been very sad about the ways in which this has been talked about politically: "Now we're going to have an exciting school!" I've been a teacher for many years. We have always worked across disciplines. We have always tried to see how we could orient our teaching towards goals. That is not new.
>
> Teacher: (…) it comes down to, you can say, all the negative talk about teachers and the mistrust in the work we do. It's like people don't think teachers work hard enough.

In these story performances, the politicians are positioned as the 'villains', having a 'seriously damaging tone', making negative statements about the schools and the work of teachers. The political 'tone' is described as 'spreading', making it acceptable to speak negatively about the work of teachers. The press and media are also positioned as opponents, as one teacher says: 'the way we were treated by the press, as if we were lazy and not doing our job well', another explains:

> Teacher: It was later that I realized how badly the press had treated teachers. All that negative media coverage about us not having done our job well enough. All that made me very, very disappointed. Being a teacher, all that about what did people think, right? (…) It made me very disappointed and sad.

In these stories and story fragments, politicians and the press are constructed as opponents responsible for creating an atmosphere of skepticism around teachers and their work, negatively affecting 'the way it is now acceptable to speak about the work of teachers'. Strong emotions are attached to the stories, 'very disappointed and sad', and 'really hard' and moments of evaluation 'people (teachers) feel run over and overheard' are performed and saturated with meaning, establishing the seriousness of the situation.

The preferred position of self and others, as presented in the previous section, is affected and changed from teachers being everyday heroes helping pupils to a skepticism toward their profession and work. When teachers talk about the negative attention, the storytelling is often fragmented and terse, in the sense that it is not very clearly narrated, leaving it up to the listener (interviewer) to fill in the blanks of what is referred to in dramatic statements and metaphors such as 'run over and overheard'. The frustrations expressed are not necessarily related to specific situations but to a diffuse sense of 'people' or 'others' being skeptical toward teachers and their work, 'all that about what did people think', including parents:

> Teacher: It's completely insane, and there is just such a mistrust related to whether we do our job well enough. And in some cases, you can see that it has rubbed off on the parents as well. There have been all these TV programs about how parents talk to their children's teachers at school and about the children's teachers at home in front of the children, and things like that.

Teachers describe the situation as damaging their sense of purpose and display difficulties in narratively constructing a positive correspondence between self, work, and the perceptions of others. The thought of 'others' not valuing their contribution to society is described as having damaging effects on the motivation of teachers: 'I think the teachers' enthusiasm and the fiery souls, there will be fewer of those. I think that is such a shame'. One teacher describes how this has also affected her privately:

> Teacher: When I am out and being asked, 'So, what do you do?' Then I just don't feel like answering at all (…) I have never felt like that before, ever. I just don't want to have to explain, 'you have a long summer holiday?' and 'you get off at 12 every day'. You just don't want to. And it's all like… yes, being completely smeared in public.

Story performances like these are thematically related to the construction of work as meaningful when 'making a difference by helping others' presented in the previous section. The positioning of teachers as everyday heroes working hard to make a difference in the lives of pupils is challenged when reflecting upon the 'negative gaze' and 'mistrust' having 'rubbed off on the parents' and leaving some teachers more reluctant to talk about their profession in private-life settings.

'They should be allowed to throw up'

The bank advisors describe how exhausting and frustrating it is to constantly deal with negative media coverage about their organization and how it has affected their everyday work with customers. A storyline often performed by advisors is about angry or skeptical customers who question the bank's ethics – sometimes directly in an angry tone and sometimes jokingly, for example, about hanging 'laundry out to dry'. One advisor shares a metaphor for this kind of meeting:

> Advisor: It's clear there are some (customers). I wouldn't say it's many, it's a few, who are directly angry and irritated, and think it's a disgrace and so on (…) When you start such a meeting, if there are some who... I usually use the expression, if you are sitting with someone who needs to throw up well, then they should be allowed to throw up, (…) and then you have to go that way and help with that, if you can put it like that. It's a bit macabre.

As in this example, metaphors and metaphorical language are infused with meaning and the exaggeration, irony, or humor of comparing the criticism of customers with vomiting is used to dismantle the seriousness of the situation and talk about something unpleasant in a less harmful way. The construction of customers as angry subjects 'throwing up' seems to directly oppose the preferred positioning of advisors as everyday heroes making a difference by helping customers. However, as in this example, the advisors often use humorous metaphors to allow the opposing storylines to coexist. The sentence 'I usually use the expression' indicates that this metaphor is used repeatedly and across interviews; metaphors are often used in collective narrative strategies to preserve the preferred stories of unique and important relationships between advisors and their customers.

Another narrative strategy used by advisors is to distance themselves from the wrongdoings of the bank: 'The counselling we provide down here in this branch is the same as it would have been if this had not happened', and 'We just need to keep on going. We are not the ones who have done something (illegal)'. While the teachers often describe a strong sense of loss, sadness, and associated resignation, the bank advisors more often narratively attempt to handle the negative pressure by making a distinction between the 'here and now', and the 'there and then' of the scandals, 'down here' and 'not us'. Simultaneously, across interviews, advisors uphold the storyline of customers being both satisfied with their advisors and able to distinguish between the unethical actions of the bank and the everyday work of advisors:

> Advisor: I think, for the most part, that the customers we interact with are very happy to talk to us. And they can probably differentiate a bit and say, 'Okay, there are some cases and so on and some things might be blown up in the media'.

> Advisor: I can read all the feedback I get from my customers. Almost all of them write, 'the morals and ethics of the bank are bad, and we are unable to vouch for that; we don't agree with that, but I really like my advisor, and I get good counselling'.
>
> Advisor: When my customers think of this bank, they think of me, and then of course, they hear some things in the media, and then they still say, 'but our counsellor she is extremely friendly, she is not like that'. It has also helped that it is now clear that we are not the only bank (…) the customers experience that this bank is not the only one that has made mistakes.

To reduce the importance of the criticism, some advisors accentuate the misconduct and scandals of other banks, 'we are not the only bank'. As in the quotes above, many bank advisors present a strong collective storyline of customers still appreciating their efforts and work as coexisting with storylines of the negative attention. However, the often-fragmented story work, frustrations expressed, and negative emotions attached reflect the difficulties in handling the perception that the value, ethics, and worth of their work and of themselves as frontline employees are constantly questioned: 'It is sad, it's really, really a pity (…) it is really sad and then you open up a newspaper and then this is happening and then this'. Although customers are often described as being able to separate the wrongdoings of the bank from the everyday counseling of advisors, many advisors are still annoyed with the situation, describing how they are 'exposed to a lot' and 'taking the hits'. The media are often positioned as the villains and held responsible for the constant reactivation of the negative rhetoric and perceptions of the bank: 'Sometimes you can feel desperate, wondering if journalists and the media are even aware of how much influence they can have on certain things, and I think that if they were aware of it and were a little bit more humble, they might sometimes approach things a bit differently'.

The negative media coverage is a recurring theme in the narrative identity work of advisors, often performed in quite strong and emotional language, 'I just think you can really feel that kind of (sigh) almost a sort of hopelessness in some people, you know?'. Some advisors also accentuate how it has not only affected their daily work but also privately: 'it is very burdensome as a private person because I really don't want to open that dialogue in my private life about working for this bank, because everyone has an opinion about it from the media'. When advisors mention being confronted with the wrongdoings of the bank and the negative stories from the media in their private lives, 'loyalty' is often performed as a way of narratively handling the negative gaze of others. Some advisors perform humorous storylines and metaphorical language, for example, comparing the bank to a friend or mother, 'if you have a friend who makes a mistake, you can't just separate all the good from it and say, now she's done this, now she should just be scrapped (…) and it's the same with this bank', or 'I'm happy to be at the bank (…) I can say that my mom is stupid, but others aren't allowed to say that my mom is stupid'.

Discussion

Previous studies highlight the importance of 'others' in shaping the meaningfulness of work (Harding 2019; Martella 2023; Nielsen & Falch 2023). We aim to contribute

further knowledge on the role and importance of 'others' and explore the research question: 'How is work constructed as meaningful, and what positions and voices are assigned to self and others in the narrative construction of meaningful work?' The analysis points to the importance of 'others' in three ways. First, it shows that the understandings of meaningful work are both collectively constructed and negotiated in dynamic narrative performances; second, 'others' have a powerful role and voice influencing the possibilities of constructing work as meaningful; and third, the negative public attention towards an occupation, profession, organization, or sector can significantly impact the possibility of assessing one's work as meaningful, and thus the well-being of individuals.

First, we extend research on the importance of relational and contextual factors (Harding 2019; Schabram & Maitlis 2017), by showing how 'self' and 'others' are narratively positioned within collective storylines of the meaningfulness of work. Adopting an antenarrative approach, we build on and contribute to research on identity as a path to study meaningful work (Fontana et al. 2023; Harding 2019; Scott 2022, Selkälä 2022). The analysis shows that the meaningfulness of work is a highly collective construct and simultaneously negotiated in dynamic narrative performances. The predominant theme around which meaningful work is constructed, 'making a difference by helping others', offers a strong collective plot structure of why and when this type of work is meaningful and rewarding. This plot structure and the associated positions of self as an everyday hero and of pupils or customers as those being helped are consistently reflected in and affect the narrative identity work of individuals: Offering on the one hand a meaningful and positive presentation of self and others, but at the same time entailing immanent tensions and difficulties in sustaining the preferred narrative construction of meaningful work when confronted with realities of everyday work (Driver 2017).

Second, we extend previous research showing that work is not consistently regarded as either meaningful or meaningless (Bailey & Madden 2017; Martikainen et al. 2022; Mitra & Buzzannell 2017); instead, the narrative construction of meaningfulness is fragile and often challenged by the role and voice of 'others'. In frontline occupations, others have an important position to affirm what is meaningful (Nielsen & Falch 2023), particularly in a Nordic context where relational knowledge work, in the frontline of public and private organizations, takes place amid opposing storylines and diverse agendas. Our analysis shows that as teachers and advisors perform stories of everyday work, many potential and often opposing storylines of 'others' (pupils, customers, management, politicians, the media, etc.) are presented, affecting the construction of self, others, and everyday work. Thus, although we, as individuals, strive to construct work as meaningful and perform positive constructions of self (Goffman 1959) in relation to our work-life, this is not always easy. Many considerations and tensions are present and, perhaps most importantly, the voices of 'others' are hard to ignore.

Third, our analysis shows that negative public attention has a strong impact on the possibilities of perceiving and constructing work as meaningful. The findings illustrate that the negative attention challenges the preferred construction of work as meaningful when helping others and the position of advisors and teachers as qualified and trustworthy everyday heroes working hard to help customers and pupils. Simultaneously, the analysis points to interesting differences in how this affects the narrative identity work. The teachers express strong emotions of sadness and resignation when talking about the critical gaze of 'others', whereas advisors more often adopt narrative strategies of distancing, using collective storylines and humorous metaphors. Studies show that

humor is often used as a form of resistance (Bolton 2004) or as a way of minimizing undesired positioning of others and to allow negative storylines to coexist with highly valued, positive, and collective stories (Mikkelsen & Humle 2020). One explanation of the difference may be that, as a profession, the advisors are more accustomed to negative media coverage and have, to a greater extent than the teachers, developed collective storytelling practices to handle this. Further, the negative attention toward teachers is more often directly about their everyday work, whereas bank advisors are exposed to angry opinions about the bank or the sector. These possible differences call for further research into how negative public attention affects the narrative construction of meaningful work across different frontline occupations at different points in time.

Implications for work-life

Our study provides insights into the ways in which collective stories and perceptions of others (groups, professions, organizations, or society at large) are presented and contested in the (ante)narrative identity work of individuals. At the same time, interesting aspects of the power and importance of collective understandings of meaningful work are presented. Managers and others interested in the well-being of frontline employees may benefit from the knowledge provided on the importance and role of 'others', and the impact of collective stories of meaningful work on individuals. We know from previous research that dominant collective stories (Mikkelsen & Humle 2020) influence perceived possibilities, actions, and well-being of individuals. Our study shows that the strong collective construction of work being meaningful when helping 'others' is intertwined with and challenged by tensions, contradicting expectations, and negative storylines presented by 'others'. Individuals (and groups) struggle to creatively handle these tensions, and it seems that the collective stories of meaningful work are often 'idealized' constructions challenged by the realities of everyday work (Driver 2017), perhaps even adding to the pressures of modern work life.

The three contributions are useful to managers and others interested in the dynamics of everyday work as they attempt to navigate the multiplicity of storylines surrounding any organization, not only when interacting with external stakeholders but also in leading and supporting employees. In today's interconnected world, the organizational frontline, managers, and employees, operate within a landscape where their decisions and conduct are subject to intense scrutiny by a diverse array of external audiences, including media, customers, politicians, and advocacy groups (Frandsen & Morsing 2022). As leaders of individuals who directly engage external stakeholders, frontline managers find themselves in a position that is responsible not only for the operational efficiency but also for navigating the intricate intersection between external gaze and meaningfulness. Negative media coverage and public perceptions of work are likely to impact the frontline employees' construction of their work as meaningful, especially if they feel misunderstood and undervalued. Studying how external audiences impact the construction of meaningful work offers valuable insights for supporting employee well-being, job satisfaction, and motivation for both researchers and practitioners. Managers need insight into the power of strong collective narratives among organizational members and knowledge on how to navigate negative attention and critical external voices as a collective challenge to the meaningfulness of work.

This poses important questions for future exploration. First, we need more research on the importance of the diffuse and powerful voice of the public for the well-being of organizational members. Second, we need to build knowledge on how employees, managers, and organizations can handle negative attention and its potential consequences. How do we take into consideration the ever-present and potentially threatening voices of others as an increasingly important aspect of everyday work life in relation to topics such as meaningful work, motivation, retention, or well-being of organizational members? And how are the voices of others negotiated and constructed differently in diverse organizational contexts as they intertwine with existing identity stories and storytelling practices of groups, professions, and organizations?

Conclusion

This study is one of the few qualitative, constructivist studies of meaningful work. Building on narrative theory and analysis, three contributions are made: first, the narrative construction of what is perceived as meaningful is dynamic and collective; second, others have a powerful role and voice; and third, the negative public attention toward an occupation, profession, organization, or sector can significantly impact the possibility of assessing one's work as meaningful, and thus on the well-being of individuals. Prior research shows, that meaningfulness at work is extremely important to the well-being of employees and linked to factors such as mental health, motivation, and job satisfaction (Bailey et al. 2019; Cascio 2003; Martikainen et al. 2022; Michaelson et al. 2014). We examine what happens to frontline workers' ability to construct work as meaningful when their profession, sector, and/or organization are subject to extensive negative attention. The risk of experiencing negative public attention directed toward professions, organizations, and sectors is a new condition of modern work life. New technologies and social media have transformed the conditions of public conversations, as public attention is easily mobilized, and stories and opinions spread quickly. Our study shows that this new dynamic may have serious consequences on the everyday work life and the well-being of employees, especially frontline workers in contact with many people in their daily work.

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