

Meaning/ful Work and Organizational Communication: Questioning Boundaries, Positionalities, and Engagements

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As organizational communication scholars, we routinely orient ourselves to organizations as places of work while often ignoring the diverse forms of communicative work and communication about our working lives that underpin such locales. In this essay, we consider how the study of meaningful work problematizes the boundaries of organizational communication. Specifically, we reflect on how definitions of meaningful work are very much caught up in our contemporary milieu. Organizational communication scholars, then, must be willing and able to work within and across traditional boundaries, perhaps redefining them in the process. We illustrate these claims in three parts. In the first part, we consider the rise of communication work and how it calls into question common notions of meaningful work. In our second section, we argue that what counts as meaningful work often stems from the raced, classed, and gendered assumptions guiding our practice. Finally, in part three, and with these elements of our milieu in mind, we describe ways in which scholars can begin to investigate meaningful work by examining tensions between description and prescription and microlevels and macrolevels of discourse and experience to uncover the strategies and tactics available to individuals as they craft meaningful working lives.

Studying Work and Organizational Communication: Questioning Boundaries

Studying the meanings and meaningfulness of work requires careful consideration of the possibilities and limitations offered by the subdiscipline of organizational communication. On one hand, organizational communication seems a natural home for examining the meaning of work because so many organizational communication scholars orient themselves to places of work and considerations of symbolism and meaningfulness therein. Yet, the contemporary context of work compels us to move beyond formal organizational boundaries and study the diverse ways in which people communicatively create and organize meaning about, through, and for their work and working lives. How can organizational communication scholars examine the ways in which particular processes of organizing and communicating make specific forms of bounded work meaningful (Messersmith & Keyton, 2007)? As Medved (2008) proposes, perhaps scholars need to ask the question “What is work?”

In the course of our seminar conversations, two formal definitions of work were discussed and debated. The first definition is from Hannah Arendt (1958), who claims that work fabricates objects that endure and possess use value, giving “the human artifice the stability and solidity without which it could not be relied upon to house the unstable and mortal creature which is man” (p. 136). Dussel (1988), in the second definition of work, echoes Arendt: “Work is the human activity set in motion in order to bring into existence some useful object that was previously non-existent or otherwise not at hand” (p. 114). We take from these definitions a pragmatic meaning of work and a rather ecumenical view of where work might be found; for example, work need not be paid (Medved, 2007). Yet, neither definition provides insight into the communicative performances of work, and both privilege a durable product or object as a result of work (as opposed to something more transitory and intangible such as an emotion or empathy).

A communicative definition of work preserves dimensions of practicality (Craig, 1999) while capturing the impermanent and intangible products and consequences of communicative work. A communicative definition of work also acknowledges the many sites and accomplishments of “talk”—mundane and extraordinary, fleeting and enduring—and includes processes of organizing (e.g., Putnam & Cooren, 2004), creativity (e.g., Thrift, 2006), and relating (e.g., Pearce, 2007), among others. In short, a communicative definition of work implies that social organizing is a necessary prerequisite for the possibility of any understanding of work; all work is a result of collaborative efforts between individuals conducted across (not just within) bounded spheres of life. Such a definition of work requires students of the meanings and meaningfulness of work to engage not only their colleagues in organizational communication, but also rhetoric, family communication, and language and social interaction, to name a few.

A communicative definition of work also pushes scholars of organizational communication to expand their own understandings of what objects/ subjects of study count as meaningful. For example, the concepts of communicative labor (Carlone, in press; Greene 2004) and communication work (Aakhus, 2007; Aakhus & Jackson, 2005), although not synonymous, register the rising awareness of and concern for kinds of work where the object is to craft or shape communication, such as the work of group facilitators and customer service representatives. Concepts of communication labor and work shape interaction and meaning and, thus, the basic ways people engage each other in society. Those who work with or on communication in this way wield influence over how public and private matters are understood, pursued, and accomplished. It is in these arenas that communication practice and technologies are developed and diffused. Finally, concepts of communication labor and work draw on communication as an already vital sociocultural phenomenon for inspiration and insight. In other words, communication labor and work reference, to an extent, sites and sources of communication in its “original” social context. Such a focus on forms of productive work would dethrone the usually more privileged focus on reproductive labor favored by organizational communication scholars.

Reconsidering how individuals communicatively constitute what work is and what kinds of work are meaningful forces scholars to also consider diverse sites of communication labor and work such as the home, house of worship, backyard studio, and playground. Communication scholars know that activities long deemed “leisure,” such as sports, parties, festivals, and hobbies, accomplish considerable interpersonal and communal communication labor and work. Organizations do, too. Googlers, for example, are praised for blurring the distinctions between work and leisure, combining work and fun in ways that seem to satisfy seemingly contradictory desires (Vise & Malseed, 2005). And as Richardson (2007) notes, in New Zealand, the “best places to work” competition involves criteria that would once have been deemed personal. What people may communicatively constitute as meaningful work now knows no occupational or corporate boundaries and as a result, intersects in interesting ways with the structures and experiences of gender, race, and class in contemporary times.

Structuring and Experiencing Meanings of Work: The Impact of Gender, Race, and Class

We cannot forget that contemporary forms of capitalism infuse present-day studies of organizational communication, whether one studies the social construction of larger meanings of organizing and work or rather focuses on individual interactions occurring within or about an individual workplace. Inherent in the discipline of organizational communication are both discourses about economic life and discursive interactions between and among individuals variously participating in economic tasks, roles, and/or identities. Economic discourses and everyday discursive interactions and material realities cannot be disentangled from issues of race-ethnicity, gender, class, and to lesser extents, religion and sexuality (Amott & Matthaai, 2004). Acknowledged or not, what we purport to study as organizational communication scholars is inherently raced, classed, and gendered. We are certainly not the first scholars in our discipline to point out this interdependency (e.g., Allen, 2004a, 2004b, 2007; Ashcraft & Allen, 2003; Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004; Medved & Kirby, 2005; Nadesan, 1997; Parker, 2003). Yet, we believe that the present discussion of meaningful work cannot be had without recognizing the centrality of these three pervasive discourses, structures, and experiences.

Although a full theoretical treatment of the intersectionality among race, class, and gender is beyond the scope of this essay, we briefly draw attention to some current theorizing as it informs our thinking on meaningful work. Spelman (1988) aptly describes studies of race, class, and gender as often resembling “pop beads” on a necklace; that is, we mistakenly think each of these categories somehow can be disconnected and separated for analysis. In line with Spelman, we argue that various meanings of work cannot be easily partitioned or separated (see Ferree, Lorber, & Hess, 2004). The social construction of domination or subordination based on these categorical distinctions does not occur independently, neither analytically nor experientially. Rather, how gender is fundamentally experienced for, let’s say, an African American executive is also fundamentally an experience of race and class (Parker, 2003; see also Lucas & Buzzanell, 2004). Furthermore, acknowledged or not, discourses of work (paid or unpaid) for

White women are also imbued with raced and classed language (Medved & Kirby, 2005). To be clear: We are not recommending surface or incautious attention to race, class, and/or gender in studies of meaningful work but consideration that is nuanced, detailed, and reflexive. It is not the responsibility of women or scholars of color or from working-class backgrounds to pay attention to these intersectionalities; we are all accountable for the analyses we produce and, in so doing, the biases we reproduce (see Allen, 2007). In fact, critical organizational communication scholars might view dominant, often Eurocentric meanings of work as forms of oppression, requiring illumination and transformation.

In striving for sophisticated treatments of gender, race, and class in the study of meaningful work (regardless of any particular scholar’s ideological commitments), we must also be aware of how our personal standpoint shapes not only how we analyze language and social interaction but also what we choose to study as meaningful work. In fact, we might wonder if the preoccupation with meaningful work evidenced in this essay and forum is a reflection of our Western, industrialized national personality. The question now becomes, “meaningful to whom?” Is it possible, for example, that some cultures never question the meaningfulness of work and/or would value work’s meaning to society or family as more important than its value to the individual worker?

As discussed earlier in relation to concepts of communication labor and work, our views and practices of communication construct fundamental ways we experience the world. As communication scholars, we need to dig deep into social construction as the generative force underlying the categories of race, class, and gender as important political concepts. How does communication contribute to the interpretation, contestation, and/or creation of these ostensible distinctions in the personal, organizational, and political arenas and understandings of meaningful work? And as scholars, how do our language practices and social interactions contribute to processes of domination and/or free expression around such understandings? Where does our work start? Where does it end?

Engaging the Study of Meaningful Work Empirically: Deconstructing Individual Meanings and Societal Meaningfulness

Our discursive and material struggles over work are struggles over, and for, worth, identity, dignity, and status. With increasing numbers and kinds of workplaces moving to more “flexible” working arrangements across time and geographical space and our growing intimacy with machines as coworkers, exploring the communicative and organizing processes that underpin meaningful working lives compels scholars to “stay with the people” (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2006; Friedman, 2005; Gray, 2002; Haraway, 1999; Rifkin, 1995).

Work is accomplished through, by, for, on, and around individuals and particular organizing and communicative practices. Thus, at the individual or microlevel, scholars might consider the ways in which individuals create meaning out of work or act to make work meaningful for them. Empirical questions at this level may consider how individual identities get defined, empowered, or constrained communicatively and organizationally as particular forms of work are prioritized and begin to justify their meaningfulness over others. Gabor (2007), for example, addresses the ways in which professional musicians, trained since childhood, face a barrage of messages denouncing their artistry as a hobby or craft and not a “real career,” constructing

particular economic consequences as musicians must constantly legitimate the value of the services they provide in order to be paid.

At the larger, more macro, societal level of communicative and organizing practices, scholars (as demonstrated later in this forum) may consider the discursive forces that determine what kinds of work/worker becomes “meaningful/meaningless” and how these forms of work and workers have changed over time, influencing our understandings of meaningful work. For example, Kirby (2007) explores how a mandatory wellness program at one health care organization encouraged “good workers” to be “fit workers” by charging a penalty if they maintained “unhealthy” indicators such as a high body mass index. Obese workers now had to account for their “lack of health” as the organization defined and controlled what kinds of workers were now deemed meaningful. Workers’ meaningfulness within a discourse of economic health costs now renders workers’ bodies meaningful within new calculi of value.

Although both macroapproaches and microapproaches to the exploration of meaningful work are valuable in their own right, the consequential nature of discourse lies in the interaction between these societal and individual uses of language to determine what kinds of work and workers are made meaningful. At this meso or interaction level of organizing and communicative practices, scholars ask how macrolevel meanings of work and working life ground themselves in the language of individuals as they adopt diverse strategies and tactics to craft meaning in, through, and around the work they do and the workers they are. This is particularly important as forms of work change to include diverse practices such as virtual offices (see Ramgolam & Ballard, 2007, for a discussion of the ways in which time gets constructed by and through such labor). Scholars may also ask how diverse positionalities and identities work together (or not) to reflect, craft, and sustain diverse forms of meaning for work over time. For example, Blue and Taylor (2007) describe how interviewees frame their return to New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina as “work needed me.” Such examinations of meaningful work prompt scholars to consider the ways in which the return to New Orleans could not be defended through alternative discourses of need—for example, through attachments to family or community—and in so doing, reveal a hierarchy of values and activities that give life meaning.

Such a symmetrical treatment of macrolevels and microlevels of discourses provides insight into the ways in which cultural or societal constructions of meaningful work are articulated, negotiated, and deployed to organize and pursue practical interests as well as reproduce relatively stable and often sedimented resources for social interaction (Broadfoot, Deetz, & Anderson, 2004). Holding macromoments and micromoments of discourse in dialogue and productive tension with each other also allows scholars to explore the communicative and organizing practices through which meaningful work comes into and out of being, and is always subject to shifts in discursive and material conditions (Weick, 1979).

In Conclusion: Communicating Working Lives

For most people, the challenge is not work but how to make their lives work (Ciulla, 2001). The recovery of work as a meaningful concept in organizational communication scholarship forces scholars to take more seriously the organizing and communicative labor or work that underpins people’s working lives and constructs them as meaningful in diverse ways and degrees. The 2007 National Communication Association preconference in Chicago on the meaning of work crystallized the knowledge that the meaningfulness of work continues to be communicatively shaped by a complicated dynamic of historical, social, and economic forces more or less artificially. In this article, we have begun to explore how diverse definitions of work trouble the boundaries of organizational communication and ask us to reflect on the ways in which definitions of meaningful work are very likely to be caught up in the raced, classed, and gendered assumptions guiding our practice. We have also outlined ways in which scholars can begin to investigate meaningful work by working tensions between description and prescription and microlevels and macrolevels of discourse to uncover the strategies and tactics available to individuals as they craft meaningful working lives through organizing and communicative practices. Such a project compels scholars of organizational communication to focus holistically on working lives and begins to trouble the artificial intellectual boundaries currently claimed in the field of communication.

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