

DISSERTATION

IS MEANINGFUL WORK A LUXURY? AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL  
ANALYSIS ON LOWER SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS WORKERS' EXPERIENCE OF  
MEANINGFUL WORK

Submitted by

Yerin Shim

Department of Psychology

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Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

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Doctoral Committee:

Advisor: Bryan Dik  
Co-Advisor: Michael Steger

Lorann Stallones  
Sue Doe

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## ABSTRACT

### IS MEANINGFUL WORK A LUXURY? AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS ON THE EXPERIENCE OF MEANINGFUL WORK AMONG LOWER SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS WORKERS

The growing empirical literature on meaningful work suggests that experiencing meaningful work is associated with many psychological benefits to the individual. However, very little is known about how lower socioeconomic status (LSES) workers experience meaningful work due to the lack of research with this population and assumption that pursuing meaningful work is a luxury. The present study sought to explore the experience of meaningful work among LSES workers through an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight LSES workers. Seven domains were constructed as a result of the data analysis: definitions of meaningful work, perception and psychological experience of meaningful work, internal conditions of meaningful work, external conditions of meaningful work, personal impact of meaningful work, strategies to enhance meaningfulness in work, and perspective on the relationship between meaningful work and SES. Participants defined meaningful work as similar to previous conceptualizations, perceived and experienced their current work as meaningful in diverse ways, and appeared to be generally positively impacted through meaningful work. Participants also identified direct and indirect conditions that support or hinder meaningfulness in their work and suggested strategies to enhance meaningfulness in their work. Finally, participants viewed meaningful work as an attainable psychological resource for LSES workers despite barriers.

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It has been a long and non-linear journey since I have ambitiously proposed to conduct a qualitative study on the meaningful work experience of lower socioeconomic status workers. Although there were many obstacles in the process of undertaking this study which often seemed discouraging and hopeless, I was able to persevere through in debt of the support of many people I would like to acknowledge here.

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And finally, to God, who has called and gave me the strength to complete my Ph.D. through his unfailing love and presence.

## DEDICATION

To all lower socioeconomic status workers—  
who rightfully deserve to experience meaningful work.

*Meaning, for all.*

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

It is about a search, too, for daily meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash, for astonishment rather than torpor; in short, for a sort of life rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying.

- Studs Terkel (1972, p.xi), *Working*

### **Statement of the Problem**

Work is an essential part of life for most individuals. Among people 15 years of age or older in the United States, 44 percent of an average day is spent on working and work-related activities (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). For those who are employed, this percentage is even higher—a striking 68.8 percent of time during a typical weekday is spent working (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). It is clear that work occupies a significant portion of people’s lives, but how are people experiencing this substantial time of their lives? How would one’s life differ if they spent time at work perceiving it as meaningful, rather than dreading every second just to fill the time at work?

A burgeoning line of psychological research on meaningful work has recently started to examine this question. Although research on meaningful work typically has been conducted in the fields of organizational behavior and management due to its impact on work performance, the past several years have witnessed a rise of interest in meaningful work research by psychologists due to its potential for its psychological benefits to the individual. Initial empirical evidence suggests that experiencing meaningfulness in one’s work is associated with work-related and general well-being (Steger, Littman-Ovadia, Miller, Menger, & Rothmann, 2013). It appears that the benefits of meaningful work is not only limited to the domain of work, but it extends to an individual’s life in general.



Despite the increasing popularity of meaningful work research, there has been a significant problem in understanding the experience of meaningful work in the literature. Counseling and vocational psychologists have raised concerns about the bias of the study of work towards those with relative socioeconomic privilege, and the absence of representation of the work experience of lower socioeconomic status workers (Blustein, 2001; Richardson, 1993). Research on meaningful work is not an exception to this bias (Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010). Due to this lack of research on lower socioeconomic status (LSES) workers' meaningful work experience, pursuing meaningful work is often thought of as a luxury that is only relevant to the socioeconomically privileged (Brief & Nord, 1990). Some researchers have argued that LSES workers are less likely to pursue meaning and purpose in their work beyond its monetary value (e.g., Brief & Nord, 1995). This perspective is consistent with the well-known idea of Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, which assumes that a higher-order need such as self-actualization cannot be met unless the lower-order survival needs are fulfilled. However, some researchers suggest that this may not be necessarily true (e.g., Shim, Dik, Fitch-Martin, O'Donnell, & Steger, 2013; Steger, 2014).

Although the importance of financial rewards may be greater for LSES workers than their higher socioeconomic status counterparts, the motivation and ability to pursue meaningfulness in work may be an independent factor from the motivation to work for financial incentives. Moreover, perpetuating the assumption that it is difficult for LSES workers to experience meaningful work provides an unhelpful rationale to put them in a helpless position, which can be discouraging for workers (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2013) who are already working so hard with less resources and fewer advantages. In fact, existing research on the work experience of LSES workers mostly focuses on the external barriers and negative aspects of their career development

and work adjustment (Harris, Huang, Hannon, & Williams, 2011), neglecting the positive work experience they may encounter. The failure to include LSES workers in the discussion of meaningful work may act to further marginalize them in experiencing the psychological benefits of meaningful work (e.g., Dik & Steger, 2008; Dik, Steger, Fitch-Martin, & Onder, 2013). Perhaps it is also an “ethical obligation” (p. 233) for psychologists to advocate for and support the experience of meaningful work of LSES workers through research and practice (Steger, 2014), so they could also benefit from what meaningful work has to offer human life. Thus, perceiving meaningful work as a privileged experience that is only accessible to the affluent is a premature assumption which requires more empirical evidence.

Therefore, the present study aims to investigate the experience of meaningful work among LSES workers to give voice to this silent population in the literature of meaningful work. In the following sections, a review of the current literature on meaningful work, socioeconomic status, and the link between these two constructs will be provided.

### **Meaningful Work**

What is *meaningful work*? In this section, I will start with clarifying the meaning of meaningful work. This is a particularly important task in the study of meaningful work as there has been an inconsistent use of terms which has created considerable confusion in the literature (Dik, Byrne, & Steger, 2013). After discussing what constitutes meaningful work, I will present the existing definitions and theoretical perspectives of meaningful work suggested by researchers.

The first terminological distinction that should be made is between the meaning of “meaning” and “meaningfulness” in the context of work. Pratt and Ashforth (2003) first pointed out the importance of differentiating these two terms which was followed by other researchers

(Dik et al, 2013; Rosso, et al., 2010). The construct *meaning of work* typically refers to what work signifies to the individual such as perceiving work as a financial means or an expression of identity (Rosso et al., 2010). This often incorporates a broader perspective of the role of work in the society in terms of the norms, values, and traditions of work in the everyday life (Chalofsky, 2003). In contrast, meaningfulness indicates the amount or degree of meaning people experience, which usually implies a positive meaning (Rosso et al., 2010). Meaningfulness of work also has an experiential focus (Schnell, Höge, & Pollet, 2013), which supports the notion that meaningfulness is a subjective experience of the individual (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). In order to prevent further confounding of these concepts, Rosso and colleagues (2010) recommend the use of “meaningful” or “meaningfulness” in the line of research on the experience of positive meaning, significance, and purpose in work rather than “meaning.”

Meaningfulness in the work context can additionally be broken down to meaningfulness *in work* and *at work*. While *meaningfulness in work* indicates the sense of meaning people experience from doing the actual work, *meaningfulness at work* refers to when individuals experience meaningfulness in relation to the aspects of the organization or workplace.

(Chalofsky 2003; Dik et al., 2013; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). Steger and Dik (2010) argue that “fully meaningful work includes both components” (p.133) of meaningfulness in work and at work.

### **Definitional and Theoretical Perspectives of Meaningful Work**

Although the terms used to indicate meaningful work have been fragmented in the literature, the conceptual facets of meaningful work appear to be fairly consistent amongst various definitions provided by researchers. Below is a list of definitions that have been suggested by several researchers:

- Work and/or its context that is perceived as purposeful and significant. (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003)
- Work that “gives essence to what people do and brings a sense of fulfillment, and a pathway to express the meaning and purpose of their lives.” (Chalofsky, 2003, p.74)
- “The value of a work goal or purpose, judged to the individual’s own ideals or standards” (May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004, p.11)
- “Finding a purpose in work that is greater than the extrinsic outcomes of the work” (Arnold, Turner, Barling, Kelloway, & McKee, 2007, p. 195)
- “Work experienced as particularly significant and holding more positive meaning for individuals.” (Rosso et al., 2010, p.95)

The most common conceptual facets that these definitions of meaningful work include appear to be personal significance and a broader purpose in work. Steger, Dik, and Duffy (2012) suggested a multidimensional construct encompassing these two facets with an addition of the perception of one’s work to benefit the greater good.

Calling is commonly referred to as a form of meaningful work. While calling has been historically understood in a religious context, there are two recent conceptualizations that are used to embrace a more secular meaning of being called to one’s work. A *neoclassical* approach is closer to the classical notion in that it views work as a destiny and duty to society (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009), whereas a *modern* approach is more focused on deriving self-fulfillment and happiness through work (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). Examples of the latter approach such as Dobrow and Tosti-Kharas’ (2011) definition of calling as “consuming, meaningful passion people experience toward a domain” (p.1003) appear to be almost identical to the existing definitions of meaningful work (Steger, 2014), while neoclassical conceptualizations such as Dik

and Duffy's (2009) definition of calling also includes components such as "to approach a particular life role in a manner oriented toward demonstrating or deriving a sense of purpose or meaningfulness and that holds other-oriented values and goals as primary sources of motivation" (p. 427) which appear to be consistent with the previous conceptualizations of meaningful work.

Overall, meaningful work seems to encompass work that is experienced as significant and satisfying to the individual with a greater purpose that extends beyond the self to others and society. Now I move on from the discussion of *what* meaningful work is to that of *how* meaningful work occurs.

*Hackman & Oldham (1976)*. Hackman and Oldham (1976) presented the first theoretical model that explicitly named meaningfulness as one of the three critical psychological states workers should experience to derive beneficial personal and work-related outcomes from their work. In their Job Characteristics Model, *experienced meaningfulness* is defined as "the degree to which the individual experiences the job as one which is generally meaningful, valuable, and worthwhile" (Hackman & Oldham, 1976, p.256). The model identifies three job characteristics that additively determines one's experience of meaningfulness in work: (1) skill variety, (2) task identity, and (3) task significance. The authors suggest that workers experience their work as meaningful when a worker is able to use a variety of different skills in their job task, when the job allows one to be involved in the whole completion of their work, and when workers see the results of their work to have a significant impact to other people.

*Berg and colleagues (2013)*. While Hackman and Oldham's (1976) model viewed job characteristics as shaping the worker's experience of meaningfulness in work, Berg, Dutton, and Wrzesniewski (2013) suggest a "bottom-up, individualized approach" (p.85) where the worker

cultivates their own experience of meaningfulness through proactively making changes to boundaries of their job. *Job crafting* is defined as “the physical and cognitive changes individual make in the task or relational boundaries of their work” (Wrzesneiwski & Dutton, 2001, p. 179). Berg and colleagues (2013) present three ways of job crafting and specific strategies for each type that may derive meaningfulness in one’s job: (1) task crafting (e.g., adding, emphasizing, and redesigning tasks), (2) relational crafting (e.g., building, reframing, and adapting relationships), and (3) cognitive crafting (e.g., expanding, focusing, and linking perceptions). Additionally, the authors propose that when workers use these techniques to craft their jobs in a way that is consistent with their motives, strengths, and passions, they may experience more meaningfulness in their work (Berg et al., 2013).

*Chalofsky (2003)*. Based on a literature review conducted in the late 1990s including both quantitative and qualitative studies in the fields of business, psychology, sociology, and education, Chalofsky (2003) presented a tripartite model of meaningful work which includes three elements: (1) sense of self, (2) work itself, and (3) sense of balance. *Sense of self* involves bringing one’s whole self (i.e., mind, body, emotion, and spirit) to work, knowing one’s purpose in life and how work fits to that purpose, and constantly striving to reach one’s potential in work. *Work itself* involves viewing work as an opportunity to carry out one’s life purpose beyond performance, and experiencing challenge, creativity, learning, continuous growth, autonomy, and empowerment through work. Finally, *sense of balance* refers to the balance between work and other domains of life, acknowledging that work is one way people live their lives. Chalofsky (2003) argued that no single factor is more important than others and that meaningful work requires the interplay of these three elements which make up an *integrated wholeness*.

*Pratt and Ashforth (2003)*. In their chapter on meaningfulness in working and at work, Pratt and Ashforth (2003) depict the process of how meaningfulness can emerge based on previous identity theories (i.e., Stryker & Serpe, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The authors suggest that meaningfulness in the work context is created when a worker's identity is integrated with her or his work tasks/roles and membership. In other words, they view the path to meaningfulness as occurring through an alignment among these components. Other notable aspects of their perspective on meaningful work are that they (a) view the creation of meaningful work as a dynamic, ongoing process which may involve changes in these components, and (b) allow room for misalignment among these components at times. They also provide suggestions on how organizational practices can foster meaningfulness both in and at work.

*Steger and Dik (2010)*. Steger and Dik (2010) proposed a model of work as meaning that suggests that the sense of meaningful work arises from a bidirectional relationship between work *comprehension* and *purpose*. In this model, understanding one's self, organization, and the fit between self and organization is seen to develop people's comprehension about their work, which is a similar concept to the alignment as noted in Pratt and Ashforth's (2003) theory. The authors claim that this comprehension promotes a sense of purpose that comprises of a personal and organizational purpose which can be fostered through effective leadership. This model hypothesizes that when an individual can successfully pursue a purpose in their work, their comprehension will be deepened. Through these interactive processes, it is believed that people will be able to perceive their work as a source and expression of their meaning in life, which in turn helps them to transcend their work beyond themselves and toward the greater good.

*Rosso and colleagues (2010)*. Based on an extensive review of the literature on the meaning of work and mechanisms of meaningfulness, Rosso and colleagues (2010) proposed a

theoretical framework that illustrates the common pathways by which meaningful work can be created or maintained. The framework consists of two dimensions—*agency-communion* and *self-others*—which represent the motives and sources of meaningful work. Meaningful work is thought to be experienced at the intersections of these dimensions, which yields four pathways to meaningful work.

The four main pathways include individuation (agency-self), contribution (agency-others), self-connection (communion-self), and unification (communion-others) which are each described as the following by the authors: *Individuation* involves work that defines and distinguishes the self as valuable and worthy (e.g., control/autonomy, competence, and self-esteem); *contribution* refers to work that is perceived as significant and/or done in service of something greater than the self (e.g., perceived impact, significance, interconnectedness, and self-abnegation); *self-connection* reflects work that bring individuals closer into alignment with the way they see themselves (e.g., self-concordance, identity affirmation, and personal engagement); and *unification* indicates work that bring individuals into harmony with others or principles (e.g., value systems, social identification, and interpersonal connectedness).

Rosso et al. (2010) emphasize that these pathways are not mutually exclusive although they are conceptually distinct features. In fact, they hypothesize that these pathways may have additive or interactive effects when activated simultaneously which may results in a overall stronger sense of meaning. They also stress that a person's experience of meaningful work is ultimately generated through the self, regardless of the direction of the dimensions.

*Lips-Wiersma and Wright (2012)*. Based on an existential perspective on meaningful work, Lips-Wiersma and Wright (2012) proposed a multidimensional framework of meaningful work based on two qualitative studies they conducted. The framework includes both content



(i.e., developing the inner self, unity with others, service to others, and expressing full potential) and process dimensions (i.e., tension between being-doing, self-others, and inspiration-reality) of meaningful work. They suggest that the lack of balance among these dimensions may potentially cause meaninglessness in work and thus meaningful work is an ongoing search process towards coherence of these dimensions.

*Park (2012).* Park (2012) applied her theoretical framework of global and situational meaning (Park & Folkman, 1997) to the work context. She proposed a model of meaningful work by employing the influence of global meaning systems on various aspects of work life including career choice and development, on-the-job conduct (i.e. motivation and effort, decision making, relationships with supervisors, colleagues, and supervisees), work-related stress and coping, and work-related well-being. Through this model she explains how global meaning systems (e.g., religious and spiritual worldviews) are pervasive in guiding the way how people make situational work meaning, which echoes with the meaning in work-meaning in life connection suggested by other researchers (e.g., Steger & Dik, 2009)

*Schnell and colleagues (2013).* Most recently, Schnell and colleagues (2013) developed a conceptualization of meaningful work in analogy to their multidimensional definition of meaning in life which includes coherence, direction, significance, and belonging in life. In the context of work, *coherence* is understood as the fit between a person's self-concept and the assigned role at work; *direction* refers to values and norms of the organization that functions as a moral code; *significance* indicates the perceived consequences one's work as on an organizational, societal, or global level; and *belonging* indicates being part of a collegial community at work. The authors view that these elements of meaningful work exist in various

contextual levels including the person (i.e., significance), work-role fit (i.e., coherence), work tasks (i.e., significance), and the organization (i.e., belonging).

In sum, the existing theories of meaningful work tend to propose that meaningful work occurs in some sort of interplay between the person and work context, which moves towards alignment and integration, and expansion through an ongoing process.

### **Empirical Findings of Meaningful Work Research**

The theories of meaningful work suggest that meaningful work should foster something good for those who pursue it. Although the current state of empirical evidence on meaningful work is sparse compared to the theoretical developments, empirical findings including both direct and indirect measures of meaningful work support the idea that it is associated with many psychological benefits for individuals.

Based on studies which indirectly examined the advantages of meaningful work, Steger and Dik (2010) concluded that meaningful work is associated with individual benefits such as higher certainty and self-efficacy about career decisions, intrinsic motivation to work, work satisfaction, and meaning in life.

Studies on calling also have found beneficial psychological associations for individuals who perceive their work as calling. Research on calling has shown that adult employees who consider their work as a calling report less stress, lower levels of depression, and greater clarity of their self-concept (Treadgold, 1999); higher job/life satisfaction and greater health indicated by missing fewer days of work (Peterson, Park, Hall, & Seligman, 2009; Wrzesniewsk et al, 1997); greater career commitment and less withdrawal intentions (Duffy, Dik, & Steger, 2011). Even for college students who are still developing their careers, a sense of calling was associated with greater career decidedness, comfort with career choice, greater self-clarity (Duffy &

Sedlacek, 2007), greater career decision self-efficacy, a stronger sense of meaning in one's life (Dik, Sargent, & Steger, 2008; Dik & Steger, 2008), higher levels of life satisfaction, existential well-being, positive affect, and challenge and enjoyment in work (Steger, Pickering, Shin, & Dik, 2010), and academic satisfaction (Duffy, Allan, & Dik, 2011).

There are several studies which directly examined meaningful work. In a study using diverse samples and measures of meaningful work and well-being, Arnold and colleagues (2007) found that meaningful work was related to positive affective well-being and general mental health even after controlling for whether one thinks work should be meaningful or not. Meaningful work also has been positively associated with psychological engagement at work (May et al., 2004). In addition, meaningful work has been found to act as a moderator in the relationship between affective disposition and work engagement, indicating that when workers perceive their work as meaningful, their level of engagement in work did not differ between those with high and low affective disposition (Steger, et al., 2013). Even under stressful situations, meaningful work is related to greater confidence in dealing with stress, greater self-knowledge, personal growth, and increased resiliency (Britt, Adler, & Bartone, 2001).

In sum, previous empirical studies on meaningful work and calling suggest that meaningful work is associated with better mental health and psychological well-being in life and work for the individual. Next, conceptualizations of socioeconomic status and its impact on psychological health and well-being of individuals will be discussed.

### **Socioeconomic Status in Psychological Research**

Socioeconomic status is a fundamental determinant of health and well-being across the life span (American Psychological Association, Task Force on Socioeconomic Status, 2007). Despite its impact on human functioning, socioeconomic status has been poorly studied in

psychological research (Liu, Ali, Soleck, Hopps, Dunston, & Pickett Jr., 2004). In a content analysis of the use of socioeconomic status in three top-tier counseling psychology journals, it was revealed that socioeconomic status typically has been reported as one of several demographic variables or treated as a control variable, rather than a primary variable of interest (Liu et al., 2004). Accordingly, the convergence in the definition of socioeconomic status in psychology has yet to occur. However, effort toward a better understanding of socioeconomic status has been made by the Task Force on Socioeconomic Status of American Psychological Association (2007). In their report, three approaches to understand socioeconomic status are provided: (1) SES, (2) gradient approach, and (3) social class (APA, 2007). The SES approach involves an aggregation of traditional objective SES indicators; gradient approach refers to the subjective dimension of socioeconomic inequality; and social class encompasses the structural influences in one's SES. In this section, I will review these various conceptualizations of socioeconomic status to provide an understanding of how "LSES" is defined in this study.

### **Three Conceptualizations of Socioeconomic Status**

*SES.* SES is the most commonly used in the psychological literature (APA, 2007). Though there are various indicators to operationalize SES, it is typically described as a position within a socioeconomic hierarchy based on objective indices such as one's educational level, income, and occupational prestige (Diemer & Ali, 2009). Other indicators of SES that have been perceived as important includes housing characteristics (i.e., housing tenure, household conditions, and household amenities; Galobardes, Shaw, Lawlor, Lynch, & Davey Smith, 2006) and general wealth (Duncan, Daly, McDonough, & Williams, 2002). This way of understanding emphasizes the differential access to resources which may powerfully shape people's personal experiences and opportunities (APA, 2007). In addition, SES can be assessed in different levels

of analysis such as individual, household, and neighborhood levels (Krieger, Williams, & Moss, 1997).

*Subjective social status.* In the gradient framework, one's socioeconomic standing is considered on a continuous spectrum with a focus on a social group's subjective position in relation to other social groups (APA, 2007). The perception of one's SES and its gap between that of others' becomes most salient in this concept rather than the actual levels of socioeconomic inequality. The increased use of subjective measures of social status (e.g., Operario et al., 2004; Singh-Manoux, Adler, & Marmot, 2003; Wolff, Acevedo-Garcia, Subramanian, Weber, & Kawachi, 2010) reflects the value of this understanding. Several studies have found subjective social status to be a better predictor of health than objective indicators of SES (Adler, Epel, Castellazzo, & Ickovics, 2000; Singh-Manoux, Marmot, & Adler, 2005).

*Social class.* Social class is a more phenomenological framework which emphasizes how class influences an individual's view of one's own social class and the world, and how others view an individual because of their social class (Diemer & Ali, 2009). The two previous approaches of socioeconomic status are more focused on individual attributes and proximal causes of inequality in a micro level, whereas the social class approach addresses a broader view of socioeconomic status including the cultural, structural, and institutional causes of inequality among classes at a macro level (APA, 2007).

In their Social Class Worldview Model (SCWM), Liu and colleagues (2004) argue that individuals work toward congruency among beliefs, behaviors, and perceptions within their social class worldview to meet the perceived expectations of their economic culture. During this process, classism can be directed toward the out-group or in-group members who behave differently from their own economic culture (Liu et al., 2004). In this perspective, social class

inequality reflects a form of social and political dominance that allows some groups to prosper at the expense of others (APA, 2007).

### **Impact of Socioeconomic Status on Psychological Health and Well-being**

As seen in the conceptualizations of socioeconomic status, the inequality among different socioeconomic groups becomes the focal point that deserves attention. Whether it is differential access to resources, perception of the gap among other socioeconomic groups, or the socio-cultural impact of different socioeconomic status, there seems to be a clear disadvantage to being in the lower range of the socioeconomic spectrum. Most research regarding socioeconomic status has been focused on physical health or psychological distress and relatively little is known about its impact on psychological well-being (Kaplan, Shema, & Leite, 2008). Studies that have examined the relationship between socioeconomic status and psychological health and well-being reveal mixed results.

There is evidence that lower socioeconomic status is negatively associated with psychological health and well-being. For example, lower socioeconomic status has been found to be related to lower self-esteem (Twenge & Campbell, 2002), higher prevalence of depression (Lorant, Deliège, Eaton, Robert, Philippot, & Ansseau, 2003; Murphy, Olivier, Monson, & Sobol, 1991), lower sense of control (Lachman & Weaver, 1998), less personal satisfaction, worse self-concepts, and lower career adaptability (Blustein et al., 2002). In contrast, higher socioeconomic status has been linked to better psychological well-being, including components such as self-acceptance, purpose in life, environmental mastery, and personal growth (Kaplan et al., 2008; Ryff, Magee, Kling, & Wing, 1999), higher levels of subjective well-being (SWB) (Pinquart & Sörensen, 2000), and greater career decision self-efficacy (Thompson & Subich, 2006).

However, other studies suggest that a linear relationship does not exist between SES and psychological health and well-being. It has been found that while the absence of income is extremely stressful for individuals, once people can afford everyday necessities the increase of affluence seem to matter surprisingly little, suggesting a curvilinear relationship (Myers & Diener, 1995). Research on lottery winners also has shown that the elevation of happiness due to winning a fortune does not have a lasting effect and can even reduce the pleasure of mundane events (Brickman, Coates, & Janoff-Bulman, 1978). Other studies have found that increases in income or monetary wealth are not related to subjective well-being or happiness (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999), or the income effect on well-being or happiness was reduced after controlling for individual effects (Ferrer-i-Carbonell, 2005). A recent study examined the role of positive affect in the relationship between income and meaning in life. The findings indicate that income and meaning in life has a positive correlation only when people experience low levels of positive affect, and has no relationship when high in positive affect (Ward & King, 2016). This finding was also supported by people's forecast of a financially poor future being perceived as more meaningful when one expects it to be happy (Ward & King, 2016).

Regarding sense of control, substantial within-group variability was found in the lower-income group indicating that some individuals with lower incomes showed higher levels of sense of mastery and lower perceived external constraints, characteristics that resembled their high income counterparts more than their own income group (Lachman & Weaver, 1998). One study on career-related variables showed that no differences were found in career indecision among disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged adolescents (Rojewski, 1994).

## Meaningful Work and Socioeconomic Status

Several studies suggest that lower socioeconomic status can overlap with the experience of meaningful work. Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) argued that the stigma of “dirty work” fosters development of a strong occupational or workgroup culture, which promotes construction of a positive identity through reframing and selective social comparisons. In a qualitative study on people who engage in repetitive work, 75% of participants indicated that they experienced meaning in their work, which led Isaksen (2000) to argue “meaning in work is not fully determined by working conditions (p. 84).” In a qualitative study with poor working-class urban adolescents, the participants expressed a strong sense of meaning from work, and also indicated they would work even if they did not need the money (Chaves et al., 2004). Finally, in another qualitative study on low-wage home care workers, participants identified the constraints they experience in their work but also appeared to draw meaning from their willingness to engage in difficult work in order to enhance others’ lives (Stacey, 2005).

Research on calling suggests similar results. In Wrzesniewski et al.’s (1997) study on people’s orientation to work, it was found that people who perceive their work as calling had significantly higher income, education, and prestige of occupation. However, when the results of 24 administrative assistants who were similar in age, income, and education were analyzed, there was an equal distribution of job (i.e., mean to acquire material rewards), career (i.e., way to achieve advancement within the occupational structure), and calling (i.e., work for fulfillment, inseparable from life) orientations indicating that the sense of calling is not necessarily restricted to a certain socioeconomic status, but more dependent on the self-perception of an individual’s work. Davidson and Caddell’s (1994) study with a religious sample also presented that people in higher social class were more likely to view their work as a calling than a career, and more as a



career than job. The tendency to view their work as calling also increased as educational level and family income increased. However, though a lesser percentage than middle or upper class, 11% of the people in the working class still perceived their work as a calling rather than a career or job.

A more recent study conducted by Allan, Autin, and Duffy (2014) examined the relationship between social class and the experience of meaningful work with working adult samples. In this study, it was found that although higher social class participants reported higher meaning in work, the relationship between social class and meaningful work was generally small and was mediated by the perceived sense of choice in career (Allan et al., 2014), which may indicate that social class itself may not be a determining factor of the experience of meaningful work. Participants also reported similar sources of meaning despite social class (Allan et al., 2014). Another study conducted by these researchers found that higher social class was related to greater extrinsic motivation and lack of motivation (Allan, Autin, & Duffy, 2016) which may suggest that more resources do not necessarily link to more meaningful work and vice versa.

In sum, although there seems to be some truth to the view that LSES workers may have more barriers to experiencing meaningful work, a small but significant proportion of people lower on the socioeconomic continuum appear to experience meaningful work.

### **Purpose of the Present Study**

The purpose of the present study is to explore the experience of meaningful work of LSES workers through qualitative inquiry. This study aims to identify various aspects of the meaningful work experience described by LSES workers as a form of empowerment and to provide insight on how to foster meaningful work for those who struggle to experience their work as meaningful. For this purpose, this study does not use a particular existing theory of

meaningful work to guide the research and rather take a more inductive approach to capture the conceptualizations and processes of meaningful work of lower socioeconomic status workers. Also, participants of the present study will be delimited to those who meet criteria for LSES as defined in this study and English-speaking residents of the state of Colorado in the United States due to the nature of the data collection.

The present study was guided by the central research question, “What is the meaningful work experience of LSES workers?” Creswell (2007) recommends a qualitative researcher to generate one overarching central question and several subquestions which covers the main research problem. The following were subquestions that targeted this central research question that emerged throughout the research process:

1. How is meaningful work defined and experienced by LSES workers?
2. What makes the work of LSES workers meaningful or meaningless?
3. How does experiencing meaningful work influence LSES workers?
4. What are the strategies to enhance meaningfulness in LSES workers’ work?
5. How do LSES workers view the relationship between socioeconomic status and meaningful work?

## CHAPTER TWO: METHOD

### Methodology

#### Research Design

The present study utilizes a qualitative research design to examine the experience of meaningful work among LSES workers. According to the *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, qualitative research is defined as an “interpretative, naturalistic approach to the world,” in which researchers “study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p.3). More specifically, Creswell (2007) identified several common characteristics among different qualitative research approaches which include: (a) the use of an emergent rather than a tightly fixed research design, (b) data collection in a natural setting that allows close interaction with participants, (c) inductive data analysis focused on participants’ perspectives and meanings, (d) interpretive inquiry that involves reflexivity of the researcher, and (e) framing study within a particular cultural context or a theoretical lens. These characteristics make qualitative research useful when there is a need to explore a complex and detailed understanding of an issue or its context, to empower marginalized individuals’ to share their stories so they can be heard, and to challenge existing theories or develop new hypotheses (Creswell, 2007). Though quantitative research methods have dominated the field of counseling psychology, there has been a call for counseling psychology researchers to broaden their perspectives by utilizing qualitative research methods (Ponterotto, 2005). Blustein (2001) specifically noted the importance of the use of discovery-oriented qualitative approaches for understanding the work experience of individuals without socioeconomic privilege which has been largely understudied.

Considering this nature of qualitative research, it seems appropriate to use a qualitative research design to explore how LSES workers experience meaningfulness in their work without the constraints of the existing measures of meaningful work.

### **Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)**

Among various approaches of qualitative inquiry, the present study chose Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) for its methodological approach. IPA is a qualitative research method that aims to understand how people make sense out of their particular experiences in life (Smith & Osborn, 2003). This approach was developed in the mid-1990s as a qualitative research method centered in psychology, and began to gain its popularity in applied psychology areas such as health psychology, clinical and counseling psychology, and educational psychology (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). What makes IPA particularly attractive to applied psychologists is that it allows researchers to link participants' unique accounts of their experience to existing theoretical frameworks in psychology (Smith et al., 2009). The theoretical and philosophical foundations of IPA presented below (i.e., phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography) further explains this connection between IPA and psychology (Smith et al., 2009).

IPA is a phenomenological approach in that its central concern is to explore the individuals' personal experience of a phenomenon and the subjective meanings they attach to it, rather than an objective statement of the subject matter (Smith & Osborn, 2003). However, IPA also recognizes that it is impossible to have direct access to the participants' experience, and therefore the attempt to explore the participants' personal experience will always be an interpretation of the researcher (Willig, 2001). Thus, IPA is a dynamic process which involves a "double hermeneutic"—the researcher seeks to make sense of how the participant makes sense of their experience (Shaw, 2010). This emphasis on attempting to understand the mental

processes of individuals has a strong alignment with what general psychology aspires (Smith & Osborn, 2003). IPA also has a unique aspect which is consistent with the concern of counseling psychology. IPA's idiographic focus strives to provide "a detailed analysis of divergence and convergence across cases, capturing the texture and richness of each particular individual examined (p. 200, Smith et al., 2009)." This focus on the particular differs with general phenomenological approaches that are more concerned with exploring the commonalities of the essence of the experience (Creswell, 2007; Smith et al., 2009). Considering counseling psychology's multicultural focus on increasing awareness of the diversity in individuals' worldviews and cultural contexts (Vera & Spreight, 2003), it is reasonable to use IPA as a research method to examine the various ways LSES workers experience meaning in their work which may have practical implications for counseling. In addition, Smith (1996) argues that IPA has the potential to enrich the literature of a research topic in which exclusively has been researched quantitatively. With its phenomenological, hermeneutic, and idiographic emphasis, an IPA study on the meaningful work among LSES workers will contribute to the knowledge of the depth of the meaningful work literature.

## **Participants and Procedures**

### **Sampling Method**

The sampling method of a research study should be selected based on its consistency with the overarching theoretical paradigm (Smith et al., 2009). Purposeful sampling is a sampling method typically used in qualitative research, which selects "information-rich cases" that can provide in-depth information to answer the main research question (Patton, 1990). Among the various strategies of purposeful sampling suggested by Patton (1990), the present study mainly utilized theory-based (or operational construct) sampling. Theory-based sampling is a sampling

strategy that selects a sample that represents a theoretically defined construct of interest (Patton, 1990). In this study, participants were selected based on their socioeconomic position defined by objective indicators of SES such as education, income, and occupational status. Initially in a pilot study that was conducted to seek feedback about the data collection methods, participants' perceived subjective social status was heavily considered rather than the objective indicators mentioned above, based on previous research that subjective social status is a better indicator of health than objective indicators of SES as reviewed in the previous chapter. However, because the majority of the participants of the pilot study resulted in reporting relatively higher levels of education and income despite their perceived lower subjective social status, it was not clear that the participants were accurately representing the perspective of LSES workers. Thus, in the main study, the inclusion criteria was based solely on the indicators of objective SES. The subjective social status of the participants was still inquired to examine how objectively LSES workers subjectively view their social status.

The criteria of sense of meaning in work was another main construct that was originally included in the pilot study. The pilot study initially utilized a nomination process, in which participants were selected based on the nomination from their managers as viewed as experiencing meaning in their work. However, it was not clear which standard each manager was referring to when nominating the candidates, and it was found that one pilot participant who was recommended did not self-perceive as experiencing meaning in their work. Therefore, the selection process was revised to recruit participants who self-identify as experiencing meaning in their work. However, as the recruitment process evolved, it was recognized that meaning is a construct that may not be easily understood by participants at first and may confuse them to

whether they fit criteria or not. Thus, the criteria of perceived sense of meaning in work was eliminated as the final inclusion criteria and was rather examined through interview questions.

In addition to the theoretical sampling approach, maximum variation sampling was sought to examine the common experiences of LSES workers' meaningful work that cuts across different types of occupations and other demographic variables such as age, gender, race/ethnicity, and religion. Maximum variation sampling is used to identify the main characteristics of a phenomenon of interest that can be found across various cases (Patton, 1990). The goal of this sampling strategy was not to randomly select participants that represent each of these categories, but to strive to select as diverse a sample as possible to ensure that the experience of meaningful work is not limited to a particular job characteristic or demographic group.

In terms of sample size, IPA prefers a small number of participants that are purposively selected based on their ability to share their perspective on the phenomena of interest (Smith et al., 2009). The primary aim of IPA is not to generalize the results of the sample to a larger population, but rather to provide a detailed and in-depth understanding of a phenomenon from a particular perspective (Smith et al., 2009). Therefore, a small number of participants who had similar SES backgrounds and could share their perspective on their experience of meaning in their work were purposefully selected for this study. Smith and colleagues (2009) do not prescribe a certain number for a sample size, but generally suggests between three to six participants as a reasonable number for a student project using IPA.

## **Recruitment**

Recruitment was conducted intermittently from August 2012 to March, 2015. Recruitment strategies should be reviewed as they progress and researchers should expand the

inclusion criteria if they experience difficulty recruiting a particular group (Smith et al., 2009). Originally, a stricter inclusion criteria was applied in the pilot study, but as recruitment was challenged by many factors, the inclusion criteria was revised and expanded throughout the process.

In the pilot study, a list of occupations was drawn from Job Zones 1 and 2 in the U.S. Department of Labor's occupational information network (O\*NET), a job title classification system, which indicate jobs that require an education level of equal to or less than a high school diploma or GED certificate. Among those occupations, target occupations were limited to those that showed statistical reports of median annual wages in Colorado below \$34,890, which was the median annual wage estimate of the city pilot study participants were recruited (United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011). Occupations that had a Standard Occupation Classification (SOC) code starting with a 1 or 2, which indicates a supervisory role, were also excluded to represent lower SES. Among these occupations, six were selected based on their primary interest code (Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, Conventional) provided by the O\*NET to recruit participants evenly across diverse job characteristics. If recruitment was not successful, another set of occupations were selected based on their primary interest codes. After selecting target occupations, relevant work sites in Northern Colorado were identified. Upon obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Colorado State University, selected work sites were contacted via phone or recruitment emails, or visited to obtain cooperation for the study. A letter of cooperation was collected from the organizations via email or hardcopy document to confirm their understanding of the study and protection of their participants. Once the work site was approved of recruitment from the IRB, participants were recruited through nomination from managers of the selected



work sites as experiencing a sense of meaning and purpose in their current work. Participants were also expected to work full-time, and be at least 18 years old who speak English.

Participants received \$2.00 for participating in the survey, and received \$40.00 for completing the interview through a grant fund. A total of four pilot participants were recruited through this procedure.

The pilot study recruitment procedure resulted in some participants who did not necessarily match the criteria for the study which called a need for revision in the recruitment procedure.

After seeking advice from several qualitative experts, the recruitment procedure was modified to identify non-profit/profit organizations which serve low-income population rather than targeting individual occupations to ensure criteria of lower SES. Low-income organizations within a small city in a Colorado were identified and contacted via email or phone or visited in-person to obtain partnership in recruiting participants. The same procedures for obtaining approval for recruitment as the pilot study were applied. After approval of the IRB, organizations were asked to put up flyers or distribute recruitment letters and emails so that candidates could voluntarily participate in the study. However, this method was faced with a unique challenge of organizations acting as gatekeepers being reluctant to pass information to the participants due to concern of their clients being identified as lower SES, and even with organizations that approved recruitment, there was a lack of response from participants.

Due to this challenge, the recruitment procedure was again revised to recruit participants via acquaintances. Based on the recommendation of a colleague who has worked in a rural region in Colorado that has prominent low-income population, the author visited the area for one week to recruit participants. With the help of the director of a non-profit organization supporting individuals who are in need of food assistance, participants were recruited through field

recruitment at various workplaces within the area. The workplaces were informed of the purpose of the study and inclusion criteria, and this information was passed along to employees who then self-selected into the study. The inclusion criteria used to identify lower SES utilized in the final recruitment was: (a) at least age 18 years or older, (b) currently employed either part-time or full-time, (c) no more education than an associate degree, (d) eligible for low-income services or approximate annual household income below \$23,540 (which was equivalent to 200% federal poverty level in the western state), and (e) non-managerial position. Job characteristics were still considered and effort was made to diversify the types of occupations, but I did not attempt to recruit an even number of each interest code, based on the experience from the pilot study that many lower SES occupations were distributed mostly in the Realistic or Conventional codes and less in the Investigative or Artistic codes. Six participants were recruited through this procedure who worked in four different occupations. Finally, two more participants were recruited in a fast food restaurant in the same small city in the western state that pilot study participants were recruited, which was named as one of the workplaces that may be difficult to find their work meaningful by one of the participants that was interviewed. Main study participants received \$30.00 for their full participation upon completion of the final stage of data collection.

## **Participants**

The participants of the main study were eight LSES workers who were recruited from five different workplaces in the state of Colorado. Workplaces where participants were recruited included a thrift store, local coffee shop, community health food store, farm, and a fast food restaurant. Participants' age ranged from 20 to 56 years old. Three participants identified as White, Non-Hispanic, four participants identified as Latino/a, and one participant identified as multi-racial. Three participants were either a high school graduate or received a GED, three

participants received some college education with no degree, and one participant received an associate’s degree. The annual household income of the participants ranged from \$8,580 to \$21,000. However, the range of the income is not as large when considering the number of household members. Three participants reported working part-time at their current workplace, and the rest of the participants reported working full-time. A summary of the demographics of participants are presented below in Table 1. Pseudonyms were used for all participants to mask identifiable information.

Table 1

*Demographic Summary of Main Study Participants*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Race/ Ethnicity</b>	<b>Level of Education</b>	<b>Number of household members</b>	<b>Annual Household Income (approx.)</b>	<b>Work Status</b>	<b>Current Occupation/ Position/Org anization</b>
Doug	38	White, Non-Hispanic	High school graduate	1	\$9,600	Part-time	Thrift store employee
Ralph	56	White, Non-Hispanic	Some college, No degree	1	\$14,640	Part-time	Thrift store employee
Evelyn	51	Latina	High school graduate	3	\$19,258	Full-time	Assistant cook at coffee shop
Cassidy	22	White, Non-Hispanic	Associate’s degree	1	\$12,000	Full-time	Cashier at community health food store
Matt	23	Multiracial	Some college, No degree	2	\$10,500	Full-time	Sales associate at community health food store
Andrea	30	Latina	Some college, No degree	2	\$21,000	Full-time	Caretaker, video editor, small farm operator, musician
Sofia	20	Latina	GED	1	\$8,580	Part-time	Cashier at fast food restaurant

Daniel	26	Latino	High school graduate	2	\$18,000	Full-time	Crew leader at fast food restaurant
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### **Data Collection**

The primary data collection method for the present study was semi-structured interviews. IPA requires to produce an in-depth and detailed data set from a small number of participants who can provide more than one perspective on a chosen phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009). Semi-structured interviews have been suggested as an exemplary method for IPA due to its flexibility in allowing the researcher to ask questions of interest as well as giving participants the opportunity to express their stories that enable the generation of rich and novel information (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

A written consent form was reviewed and signed by the participants prior to data collection to provide detailed information about the study procedures and to obtain permission for audio recording. Following the consent procedure and prior to the interview, participants were first asked to complete a brief survey including measures of meaningful work, subjective SES, and demographic information (i.e., age, gender, religious orientation/importance, educational level, income level, current occupation, length of employment).

### **Pre-Interview Survey Measures**

The purpose of the pre-interview survey was to provide supplemental background information about the participant. The measures conducted in this survey are presented below. The results of these measures will be presented in the participants' particular context section in the next chapter.

*Work and Meaning Inventory (WAMI).* The Work and Meaning Inventory (WAMI) developed by Steger, Dik, and Duffy (2012) was included in the survey to measure participants' level of meaning and to compare its results to participants' report in the interview. The total Meaningful Work scale (MW) is consisted of three subscales of Positive Meaning (PM), Meaning-Making through Work (MM), and Greater Good Motivations (GG). Items on the WAMI are rated from 1 (*absolutely untrue*) to 5 (*absolutely true*) in a Likert-type scale. In a sample of 370 employees, the total scale and the three subscale scores showed high internal consistency with alpha coefficients of .93, .89, .82, and .83, respectively (Steger et al., 2012). Initial evidence supports construct and incremental validity in which the total and subscale scores on the WAMI correlated in expected ways with work-related and general well-being and uniquely predicted these outcomes beyond other common predictors (Steger et al., 2012). The scale is presented in Appendix B.

*Subjective social status.* The MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status (2007) was used to measure the participants' subjective perception of their socioeconomic position. This measure is a self-anchoring scale in the form of a 10-rung ladder which captures how people locate themselves in a theoretical social ladder. It is made in a pictorial format, which asks individuals to place an "X" on the rung on that best depicts where they feel they stand. The SES ladder (i.e., traditional SES indicators) was used in the present study (See Appendix B) to compare this with their objective indicators of SES as collected from the demographics survey.

### **Development of Interview Schedule**

The pilot interview schedule consisted of nine interview questions constructed to address three initial research questions. The initial interview schedule was tested through a pilot study with four interviewees and was modified based on their feedback and discussion with other

researchers who have expertise in meaningful work. The major changes of the protocol were expanding the questions to include both meaningful and meaningless experiences in work, as the inclusion criteria of meaning was excluded in the main study. In addition, the order of questions were changed based on client's difficulty answering the question regarding definition of meaningful work in the beginning of the interview. The final interview schedule questions consisted of nine questions with possible prompts to offer in the case participants may have difficulty answering the interview questions (See Appendix C).

### **Interview Procedure**

Questions from the interview protocol were provided to the interviewees in advance via email to allow time to prepare for responses if chosen by the participant. On the day of the scheduled interview, an in-person interview was conducted in workplaces or homes of the participants. All locations were ensured to have privacy and minimal disturbance during the interview. A semi-structured interview was conducted by the researcher guided by the interview schedule. Unscripted additional questions were asked as appropriate to help participants elaborate on details if needed. All interviews were fully audio-recorded with the permission of participants. The length of the interviews ranged from approximately 30 to 90 minutes. After each interview, a brief research memo was written to record initial impressions and reflections of the interview.

### **Transcription Procedure**

All interview recordings were fully transcribed by verbatim by two undergraduate research assistants. A transcription guide was presented to ensure consistency in format. All interview transcripts were reviewed and checked for accuracy by the researcher. The researcher listened to the entire recording and compared it to the full transcription. In this process,

interview transcripts were revised to correct any errors or to eliminate insignificant filler words or false starts in order to enhance readability of the transcript. Portions of the interview that were not related to the interview questions such as interruptions were noted in the transcript in brackets ([ ]). This procedure is considered to be appropriate when the purpose is to aid participants in focusing on their contributions rather than being distracted or embarrassed in reading parts where they may go off topic (Carlson, 2010). These changes were made minimally so that it does not change the nature of the interview.

### Data Analysis

In IPA, there are no fixed steps but general principles that guide a set of processes of data analysis (Smith et al., 2009). Therefore the data analysis procedure of the present study was drawn from suggestions from multiple researchers including Shaw (2010), Smith et al. (2009), and Willig (2001). Data analysis was largely conducted in two phases: (1) individual case analysis and (2) cross-case analysis (See Figure 1). The data analysis was conducted using no particular qualitative data analysis software other than Microsoft Word.

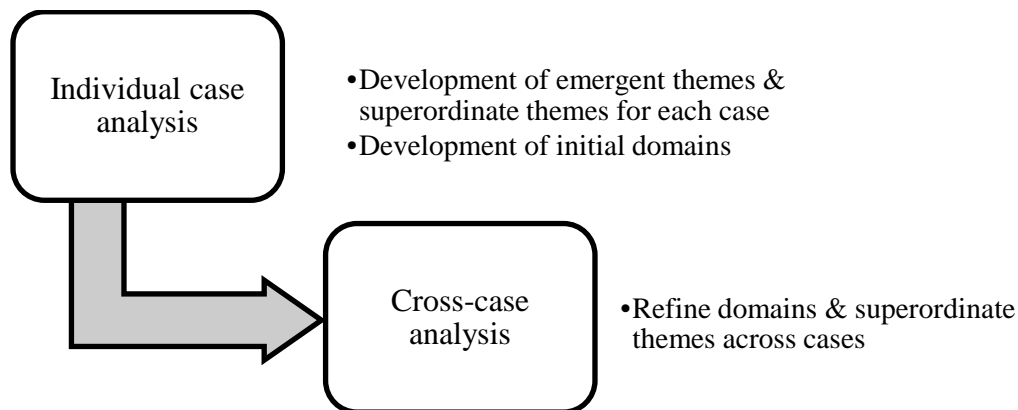


Figure 1. IPA Data Analysis Procedure

A template was created for individual case analysis which contained a table consisted of three columns including the transcript, exploratory comments, and emergent themes from the left

to the right. On the top of the table, space was left to include participant demographics to consider the context while analyzing the data. Below the demographics, space was left for the initial summary of the gist of the interview which will be explained below.

Based on IPA's commitment to idiography, each individual case was analyzed on its own terms (Smith et al., 2009). However, as suggested by one of the auditors of the present study, a structure of the emergent themes was generated after the first case analysis, and was tested and revised as it was applied to the next case. However, the subsequent individual case analysis was not limited to this structure to allow new themes to emerge for each case.

The following is a summary of the data analysis procedures the researcher used in the present study.

**Step 1:** In the beginning of each individual case analysis, the researcher familiarized herself with the data by skimming the whole transcript and writing a brief initial summary to capture the gist of the interview (Shaw, 2010). This was done to record the researcher's first impressions of the transcript in order to help bracket them off and focus on the participant (Smith et al., 2009).

**Step 2:** On the second time reading the transcript, the researcher read line by line for a more detailed and close analysis, and started writing descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments (Smith et al., 2009) on the second column. Descriptive comments included a descriptive summary of the explicit content of the participants' account. After writing a descriptive comment of each segment of analysis, an initial interpretation of the participants' experience was made using a tentative and interrogative form. The specific use of verbal and non-verbal language was also noted when seemed relevant to the interpretation. Both these conceptual and linguistic comments were italicized.



**Step 3:** The next step involved constructing emergent themes from the exploratory comments developed in the previous step. The researcher aimed to capture the essence of the participants' experience in a concise phrase (Smith et al., 2009). Psychological terms were used as appropriate (Willig, 2001). These emergent themes were recorded in the third column.

**Step 4:** Once all emergent themes were developed from each case, the emergent themes were copied and pasted into a separate page of the document into a list. As the researcher reviewed the list, the emergent themes were rearranged to group themes that seem to be related with each other. Super-ordinate themes of the emergent themes was constructed to develop a new label for each group of the clustered emergent themes in a higher level of abstraction (Smith et al., 2009).

**Step 5:** Until this step, all steps of data analysis were conducted inductively. After the first individual case analysis, a structure of domains that encompasses the super-ordinate themes was developed. These domains were developed based on the research questions of the study. After Step 4 of each individual case analysis, a deductive data analysis approach was taken to test whether the data fit the structure of domains that was developed. The domains were elaborated through this process to ensure new themes were incorporated. Themes that did not fit with the existing domains or those that seem irrelevant with the research question was classified under the "other" domain. A summary table containing domains, and nested super-ordinate themes and emergent themes were presented.

**Step 6:** After the completion of the individual case analysis of all cases, the researcher created a Microsoft Word document for each domain, and copied and pasted all super-ordinate and emergent themes that belong to that domain for all participants. The researcher conducted a process similar to Step 4 by looking for patterns across cases and grouping them together. Each

participant was assigned a color so that the researcher could identify to whom each super-ordinate and emergent themes belong. A new cross-case super-ordinate theme label was created that represent the original super-ordinate themes created in individual cases.

**Step 7:** A color was assigned for each domain as well to identify parts of the transcripts that belong to each domain. This was to ensure that the domains and the new cross-case super-ordinate themes accurately represent the original data (Willig, 2001). The researcher reviewed each transcript again and revisions were made by reassigning the some of the emergent themes that fit better with different domains/cross-case super-ordinate themes as appropriate based on the original transcript. Throughout this process, the cross-case super-ordinate themes were also refined in a cyclical manner. Some emergent themes were further excluded in this process that seem to represent marginal data.

**Step 8:** To narrow down the super-ordinate themes to include in the write-up, a Microsoft Excel sheet was created to check the recurrence of cross-case super-ordinate themes across cases. The researcher listed all cross-case super-ordinate themes under each domain on the left column and listed participants on the top row. An 'X' was marked in each cell where the participant endorsed the designated cross-case super-ordinate theme. Recurrent cross-case super-ordinate themes were defined as those present in at least half of the sample (Smith et al., 2009), which is four participants in the present study. However, the final cross-case super-ordinate themes that are presented in the results section were not only based on the recurrence, but also included those that were seen to provide a unique, but important perspective relevant to the research questions. This reflects IPA's constant negotiation between the common and the individual (Smith et al., 2009).

**Step 9:** In IPA, there is not a clear distinction between the data analysis and the write-up (Smith et al., 2009). Initially, the researcher attempted to create a master table of domains, recurrent cross-case super-ordinate themes, and selected representative verbatim extracts from each participant. However, it was difficult to tell how the participants' quotes will flow with each other in the narrative, and thus the researcher decided to select quotes that represent the super-ordinate themes during the process of writing. The emergent themes that represent the selected quotes were underlined in the Microsoft Word document to ensure that there was equal representation among participants in the text.

### **Strategies for Validation**

Validation in qualitative research has been a topic of considerable discussion given the dissatisfaction of evaluating qualitative research through criteria established for quantitative research (Smith et al., 2009). There are various perspectives on what validation means in qualitative research, yet there is a general consensus that qualitative researchers need to demonstrate the credibility of their research studies (Creswell & Miller, 2000). In the present study, validation was defined as a process to evaluate how accurately the findings describe the researcher's representation of the participants' experience based on Creswell's (2007) perspective on qualitative validation.

A number of validation strategies were used in the present study to establish credibility. The following sections describe how each strategy was used within the various stages of the study. Detailed descriptions of what each of these strategies entail were not included as it is not part of the scope of this section (see Creswell & Miller, 2000, for a review).

## **Researcher reflexivity**

In the beginning of the research process prior to data collection, the researcher reflected on her own background, values, and assumptions about the phenomenon of interest as an effort to reduce the extent they may impact the research procedures and findings. Throughout the research process, I also kept notes of any changes in these thoughts that occurred as the research progressed. The following is a summary of this reflection in order to provide the researcher's position and how they may have shaped the interpretation of the participants' accounts (Creswell, 2007; Creswell & Miller, 2000):

*I am a South Korean native woman who is pursuing a counseling psychology doctorate degree in the U.S. I was raised in a middle-class household that valued education and spirituality over materialistic values. My father was the sole earner of the family of four, and he had adequate income to support our family while I grew up. I was brought up with high career aspirations, especially by my father who stressed that I become a professional so that I will not have to depend on my husband in the future. I also attended a private women's university with the financial support of my father. During my graduate studies, I have mostly supported myself either through a scholarship or an assistantship.*

*Because I do not come from a lower socioeconomic background, I may not know the real socioeconomic challenges that LSES workers may experience in their work and life. This may influence my own assumptions about meaningful work and socioeconomic status, and interpretations of participants' accounts. While I acknowledge there are real financial concerns for many people, I personally believe that anyone in any condition has the capability and right to experience meaningfulness in their work. Additionally, I strongly identify with values of diversity, inclusion, and social justice. Therefore, I believe not including LSES individuals in the*

*area of meaningful work research may be doing an injustice to this population by having poorer expectations towards them in how they experience their work.*

### **Triangulation**

Triangulation is a validation procedure using multiple and different types of sources of information to provide corroborating evidence for a theme or finding (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Although this was not a primary strategy used for validation purposes in this study, measures of meaningful work and subjective social status, and demographics including objective indicators of SES, were collected through a brief questionnaire in order to check for convergence with what participants described in the interview.

### **Audit**

An audit was conducted on two stages of the data analysis procedure by two auditors. The first auditor was an internal auditor who is the researcher's advisor, an associate professor in counseling psychology who specializes in meaningful work research. The second auditor was an external auditor who is an emeritus professor in Education and has expertise in qualitative research. Both auditors reviewed each individual case analysis independently to ensure that the emergent themes and the structure of themes are accurately representative of the data. It is important to note that the goal of the audit process in qualitative inquiry is not to reach consensus, but to confirm that the data analysis is conducted in a systematic and transparent manner (Smith et al., 2009). Emergent themes were revised based on the auditors' comments before subjecting it to the member checking procedure. The final write-up of the cross-case analysis was reviewed by the internal auditor to ensure that emergent themes of the individual case analysis were accurately represented.

## **Member check**

A member check is considered as the “most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The member check procedures were informed by suggestions from Koelsch (2013) and Carlson (2010). Koelsch (2013) suggests conducting member checks through an interview format in order to not only verify the accuracy of the content of data analysis, but to also inquire reactions from participants of the findings. Carlson (2010) also suggests that the researcher should (a) offer choices for how participants would like to receive the material for review, (b) notify participants how transcriptions were generated, (c) prepare them for common reactions when reading own transcript, (d) provide clear directions for what participants should be expected to do, and (e) inform participants of how their quotes will be used in the final report of the study.

Following these suggestions, a follow-up interview was conducted for member checking purposes after the completion of the individual case analysis and audit. Creswell (2014) suggests that member checking be done with “polished” products such as themes rather than the raw transcripts. Therefore, the researcher contacted the participants after the revised version of the individual case analysis was completed to invite them to schedule a follow-up phone interview. Five out of the eight participants responded to this invitation. Once they have accepted the invitation, the researcher reminded the participants about the recording, and informed them of what they could expect to happen in the follow-up interview. Before the follow-up interview, the researcher sent the participant’s original transcript with the emergent themes and the table of super-ordinate and emergent themes for participants’ review via the method of choice of the participants (e.g., hardcopy, email). They were informed about the common reactions when reading their own interview transcript (e.g., embarrassment, consciousness, etc.) and were asked

to focus on whether the researcher's interpretations make sense to them or any critical information is was not captured by the emergent themes rather than focusing on proofreading. In the beginning of the follow-up interview, the researcher asked the participant's reaction to reviewing the transcript and researcher's interpretation.

Then, the researcher asked questions to clarify any responses of participants, and the participant was asked to bring up any corrections, or new information they would like to add. The purpose of this interview was to achieve mutual understanding between the researcher and the participant. Finally, the researcher expressed gratitude for their participation and contribution to the study and was informed of a final opportunity to review how their quotes will be represented in the write-up. A letter was sent following this follow-up interview which included a check for compensation for their participation of the study, a record of payment with a business reply envelope, and a reminder that they will be contacted one more time after the completion of the write-up.

### **Thick description**

In order to enable the readers to determine the applicability of findings to other settings (Creswell & Miller, 2000), the researcher attempted to describe the context of the participants, workplaces, and the findings in as much detail as possible. This is specifically described in a separate section in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER THREE: RESULTS

This chapter will describe the findings of the present study as related to the research questions. First, a summary of each participant's background information based on the survey and interview will be presented to provide the particular context of each participant. Next, the common themes that were constructed from the data analysis across cases will be presented, supported by individual participants' quotes and the researcher's interpretation of the themes.

### **Summary of Participants' Particular Context**

This section consists of a summary of each participant's demographics, characteristics of current workplace and residential area, relevant personal and vocational history, impressions during the interview, and their results on the measures of meaningful work and subjective social status will be presented. Pseudonyms were assigned for each participant and all identifiable information was masked to ensure confidentiality.

#### **Doug**

Doug is a 38-year-old, White, divorced, male who works part-time (30 hours per week) at a local non-profit thrift store which supports a homeless shelter. His current work consists of greeting donors, sorting clothes, and doing pickups and deliveries for donations. He is a high school graduate, and earns approximately \$9,600 per year himself with no dependents. He placed himself in the fourth rung of the subjective social status ladder, indicating that he does not make as much money as most Americans, but since he has a job and a "roof over [his] head," he sees himself as "doing better than some people." He has previously worked at a retail electronics corporation as a night crew in a big city where he earned three times more income than now. However, he moved out from the city after getting laid off from his previous job to pursue a



“simple life” in a small, rural town. He was unemployed for one year before obtaining his current job. He describes his current job as the “best gig ever.” He was very upbeat during the interview. His total score on the WAMI is 50, which is the highest score possible on the WAMI.

### **Ralph**

Ralph is a 56-year-old, White, single, male who identifies as an Evangelical Christian which he noted as an extremely important identity for him. He works part-time (22 hours per week) at the same workplace as Doug, where he was placed through a low-income assistance program from the government. His tasks at work include receiving and classifying donations, and managing the shoe department. He has had some college education, but does not hold a degree. He earns approximately \$14,640 per year which includes income generated through his current job and occasional work in truck driving for farmers. He placed himself in the sixth rung of the subjective social status ladder, indicating that he is “happy with his life and [his] bank rating is very high.” He previously worked as a licensed truck driver in ranches and road construction dealing with heavy equipment out of state which he described as a “good paying job.” However, he had to quit this job due to a serious back injury while riding which limited his mobility and expenses. He returned to his hometown to take care of his parents and decided to quit taking painkillers and applied for the program to work again. He teared up during the interview when talking about what his organization does for the community. His total score on the WAMI is 48. He rated all questions at its highest rating except one item in the Positive Meaning subscale, which was “I have found a meaningful career.”

### **Evelyn**

Evelyn is a 51-year-old, Latina, divorced, female who is a full-time (40-45 hours per week) assistant cook at a local coffee shop. Her job tasks consist of assisting with baking,

cooking, cleaning, and serving. She is a high school graduate and earns approximately \$19,258 per year. She provides for her daughter and son without any support from her ex-husband. She placed herself in the second rung of the subjective social status ladder indicating that she feels she does not have much education and does not make much money. She recently relocated from a big city due to difficulty finding a job after being laid off from her previous job. She previously worked at a packaging company and at a retail grocery store out of state. She describes her current work as “hard, but good.” Her total score on the WAMI is 36, her average rating to the items being 3-4. The subscale she ranked the highest was Greater Good (12 out of 15).

### **Cassidy**

Cassidy is a 22-year-old, White, single, female who holds an associate’s degree in Holistic Health. She is a full-time cashier at a community health food store. Her role in her job includes cashiering, customer service, processing trucks, and creating a website. Her annual income is approximately \$12,000. She placed herself in the fifth rung of the subjective social status ladder. She sees herself as being “nowhere in near the top, but not at the bottom either.” She reported not born in a wealthy nor poor household, and feels like she makes decent money and saves it well. She has previously worked as a hostess and dishwasher, but her current job is the first job as an adult, and she is still exploring her career path. Health food is an important value of hers influenced by her mother and her previous workplaces. Her total score on the WAMI is 36, her average rating to items being 3-4. She had two items out of three ranked as a 3 (*neither true nor untrue*) on the Meaning Making through Work subscale.

## **Matt**

Matt is a 23-year-old multi-racial, partnered, male, who received some college education in Political Science. His religious view is Druidism, which he views as extremely important. He currently works full-time as a sales associate at the same community health food store as Cassidy. His annual household income is approximately \$10,500. He placed himself in the tenth rung in the subjective social status ladder indicating that he feels he is at the top because he believes that “money doesn’t create happiness.” He also identifies his current occupation as a “student of life,” and his role as “to help others in any way [he] can.” He was very interested in the research topic and was excited to learn about results. He has previously worked as a carpenter’s assistant as part of his family business in construction and comes from family background of small farmers. His total score on the WAMI is 44, with the *Greater Good* subscale indicating the max score. He views his work as being in the “front line of change.”

## **Andrea**

Andrea is a 30-year-old, partnered, Latina, female who has received eight years of college education in a community college and university in Cosmetology, Business, Art/Architecture/Drafting, but did not complete a degree. She identifies as Jewish and indicates that this is an extremely important part of her identity. She works full-time at home holding multiple jobs including a small farm operation and caretaking, video editing, and working as a musician in a band. Her household income is approximately \$21,000 including her fiancé’s income. She placed herself in the sixth rung in the subjective social status ladder indicating that she is “not the best off yet but [is] working at feeling like [she] is better off or best off.” She previously worked as a barista at two coffee shops. She changed her lifestyle completely two

years ago to be able to “save the world.” Her total score on the WAMI is 50 which is the max score. She describes her work as “one big project” and her “life’s mission.”

### **Sofia**

Sofia is a 20-year-old, Latina, single, female who is temporarily living with her father. She holds a GED and received vocational training in culinary arts through a low-income program but was not able to complete the certification due to personal circumstances. She currently works part-time as a cashier at a franchise fast food restaurant and earns \$8.25 per hour. She previously worked at the same restaurant in a different branch out of state, but moved back to her home state due to difficulty supporting herself. She places herself on the fifth rung in the subjective social status ladder indicating that she is “neither the person who makes more or less money” because to her, “money isn’t the most important thing in a job,” which she describes as her motto. Her total score on the WAMI is 43, and has relatively higher ratings on the items that measure *Positive Meaning* and *Meaning Making through Work*. She aspires to be the “best employee anybody has ever seen.”

### **Daniel**

Daniel is a 26-year-old, Latino, partnered, male who is a high school graduate. He is a full-time employee at the same fast food restaurant as Sofia. He has previously worked in car wash. His annual household income is approximately \$18,000. He places himself in the third rung of the subjective social status ladder because he sees what he does “do not provide a lot of money but helps [him] survive.” His total score on the WAMI is 46, with average ratings of 4-5, except one item “I have found a meaningful career” which he rated as 3. He does his best at his work as a way to work against racial discrimination, but does not see himself making a career out of his current line of work.

## **Constructed Domains and Themes**

Seven domains were constructed from the data analysis: (1) Definitions of Meaningful Work, (2) Perception and Psychological Experience of Meaningful Work, (3) Internal Conditions of Meaningful Work, (4) External Conditions of Meaningful Work, (5) Personal Impact of Meaningful Work, (6) Strategies to Enhance Meaningful Work, and (7) Perspective on Relationship between Lower SES and Meaningful Work. Each domain consist of several nested super-ordinate themes constructed from the cross-case analysis of the emergent themes generated from each individual case analysis. The super-ordinate themes under each domain and their prevalence across cases are presented in Table 2. Each theme is supported by selected extracts from the participants' transcripts.

### **Domain 1: Definitions of Meaningful Work**

This domain summarizes how participants in this study define meaningful work. At the end of each interview, participants were asked how they would define meaningful work in their own words. It was this researcher's hope that the responses to this question would reflect participants' unique understanding of meaningful work based on their own experience, and not what they think meaningful work should be. There were some commonalities among the definitions of meaningful work provided by the participants, and also unique definitions that did not overlap. The common definitions of meaningful work that were found in more than half of the participants are captured in the following super-ordinate themes: 1) intrinsically motivating work, 2) beneficial work for self and others, and 3) positive emotion-evoking work. Less common definitions of meaningful work will also be presented. Because the focus of this domain is on presenting how participants defined meaningful work, how participants actually experienced each individual component of meaningful work will not be examined in depth in this

Table 2

*Domains and Super-ordinate Themes across Cases*

<b>Domains</b>	<b>Super-ordinate Themes</b>	<b>Doug</b>	<b>Ralph</b>	<b>Evelyn</b>	<b>Cassidy</b>	<b>Matt</b>	<b>Andrea</b>	<b>Sofia</b>	<b>Daniel</b>
Definitions of Meaningful Work	Intrinsically motivating work*	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
	Beneficial work to self and others*	✓			✓	✓	✓		✓
	Positive emotion-evoking work*	✓			✓		✓		✓
	Relationally rewarding work						✓	✓	
	Work that provides sense of identity and satisfaction							✓	
	Work that provides awareness of progress and outcome			✓					
Perception and Psychological Experience of Meaningful Work	Perception of meaningfulness in current work*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Positive emotional experiences in meaningful work *	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Other experiential aspects of meaningful work	✓			✓		✓		
Internal Conditions of Meaningful Work	High self-efficacy and competence in work *	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Fit between personal values and work*	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Positive social interactions and support*	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Benefitting and being a positive influence to others*	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

	Recognition of value and utilization of own work by others*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	Effective use of time*	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓
	Means for financial stability*	✓	✓	✓				✓
	Opportunity to learn							✓
External Conditions of Meaningful Work	Access to resources and opportunities*	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Family and social support*	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓
	Local community and culture*	✓		✓			✓	✓
	Developmental stage*				✓		✓	✓
	Personal crisis			✓			✓	✓
	Role of faith			✓		✓		
	Personality				✓			
Personal Impact of Meaningful Work	Increase in well-being and quality of life*	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓
	Change in values, perspective, and behaviors in work and life*	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Strategies to Enhance Meaningfulness in Work	Being proactive in the search for and creation of meaningful work*	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
	Viewing income as secondary gain of work*	✓				✓	✓	✓
	Connecting work to a broader purpose*	✓	✓					✓
	Stress management and self-regulation*		✓	✓	✓			✓

	Understanding of and active engagement in work		✓		✓			✓
	Putting in extra effort		✓					✓
	Being optimistic toward challenges*	✓	✓				✓	✓
	Being patient and having hope for the future*		✓				✓	✓
Perspective on Relationship Between Meaningful Work and Lower SES	Importance of minimal resources but leveling off*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Access to experience meaningful work regardless of SES*	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓

*Note.* \* indicates recurrent super-ordinate themes that was endorsed in more than half of the sample. ( $n \geq 4$ )



section, and rather be further explored in other sections as they emerge. It is also important to note that these definitions may or may not correspond with the participants' actual experience in their work.

*Theme 1-1: Intrinsically motivating work*

Six participants defined meaningful work as work that is intrinsically motivating. Doug defines meaningful work as work that is meaningful “even though you’re not getting paid for it.” In this brief quote, he implies that his understanding of meaningful work is work one would engage in even when financial rewards are not provided.

He also defines meaningful work as work that gets one up in the morning. As he says:

Meaningful work.. something that you don't even need an alarm clock to get up for in the morning. ... You know, it's like, you've got your equilibrium telling you, 'Hey, the sun's about up, or whatever, the sun is up, it's time to get out of bed, we gotta do this, that, and the other thing,' (Doug)

Similarly, Cassidy defines meaningful work as “doing something that you are passionate about” and “feeling like, ‘Okay, I’m gonna to get up and I’m gonna just go and have this day and I’m gonna do this and this and this.’” Andrea mentions that “if it's something you get up in the morning and think about, and you want to do when you have to wait to do it than that's meaningful.” It appears that meaningful work is understood as work that provokes a strong drive for the individual to do the work without an extrinsic reason.

Meaningful work was also defined as inherently enjoyable work by participants. For example, Daniel defined meaningful work as “something that you would enjoy,” and Evelyn defined it as “liking what you do.” Sofia explains that meaningful work to her is when someone is doing their job because they really like it:

... meaningful work to me means the, the actual reason why, you want a job. 'Cause you know anybody can say, 'I like my job,' like I can say it, but I really mean it because I really do like my job. (Sofia)

Likewise, Cassidy stated that meaningful work is about “not really feeling like you’re at work ... because you would be enjoying yourself.” It is interesting that Cassidy differentiates the meanings of “meaningful work” and “work” in her quote. It seems that she is using the word “work” here to signify work-as-usual which may be understood as a task or job that needs to be done.

*Theme 1-2: Beneficial work for self and others*

Another common definition of meaningful work that was endorsed by five participants was work that is beneficial for self and others. Matt eloquently describes this definition of meaningful work in the following quote:

Uh, if somebody were to ask me what is meaningful work, I would say you kind of have to take a step back and look at who it benefits and if it benefits. If it benefits you that’s great, if it benefits other people it’s even better. If you’re benefitting the world around you than that’s probably the most excellent work you could ever do. If it harms nobody then that’s probably the best thing you can do. That’s what I think meaningful work is, not coming home with a huge paycheck, I mean if you can do something that benefits everybody and you have a big paycheck, then that’s great too, but if it benefits those around you and it benefits the quality of life for yourself and your own soul, then that’s meaningful. So that’s really powerful medicine there, so. Yeah, that’s my answer for that. (Matt)

It seems that meaningful work is understood as work that derives benefits, whether it is to the self, others, or the world, or at least doing no harm. Matt notes here that the benefit is not a financial benefit, but rather a psychological benefit such as enhancing the quality of life of either the self, other people, or the larger community.

This idea is supported by several other participants as well. For example, Daniel defines meaningful work as “something you can learn off of, something that can make you a better person, something that could help you progress in life,” and “something that makes you feel good about yourself,” indicating that meaningful work is work that not only helps someone grow in terms of skills, but also as a person which enhances their self-esteem. For Cassidy, “it’s benefitting something, it’s contributing for something that I really want or something that I

need.” She appears to view meaningful work as work that benefits others through doing that is satisfying for the self. Finally, Andrea defines meaningful work as work that “empower others, in some way, yourself or others in some way.” She goes on and describes meaningful work as work that is “good” for self and others:

... but really it comes down to is, is it good, is it good for you, is it good, does it feel good, does it look, the end result look good for other people, are you seeing a result that’s coming back and it’s feeling good, you know. (Andrea)

### *Theme 1-3: Positive emotion-evoking work*

As noted in the last quote of Andrea’s definition of meaningful work, she describes that meaningful work should “feel good” as a result of doing it. The third common definition of meaningful work found among half of the participants was work that derives positive emotions to the individual. Participants defined meaningful work as “doing something that makes you happy” (Cassidy), “something that could make you feel good about what you do” (Daniel), and “butterflies in your stomach after doing something good” (Doug). It appears participants see meaningful work as work that accompanies some sort of positive emotion that is evoked by engaging in the work.

There were also several other common definitions of meaningful work provided by less than half of the participants. First, three participants defined meaningful work as work that is *relationally rewarding*. For example, Evelyn states that meaningful work is “liking the people around you.” Two participants defined meaningful work as work that is *personally significant* to the individual. As Andrea describes, “it’s meaningful if it’s important to you.”

Particular definitions of meaningful work provided by one participant each include work that provides a *sense of ownership and satisfaction* (Sofia) and the *awareness of progress and outcome* (Ralph). In the following quote, Sofia describes meaningful work as having a sense of ownership in her work and being satisfied with it:

... it means being truly happy with your life, because like anybody could go to work, anybody can get a job, but I think it's the realization of, the meaning of 'Okay, this is my job. This is what I do every day.' (Sofia)

She seems to define meaningful work as work that she feels is her own and feels satisfied with overall. For Ralph, meaningful work is “knowing that you can see the progress and the ending outcome.” It appears that his personal definition of meaningful work encompasses a sense of control and accomplishment.

Although there were several common definitions of meaningful work provided by participants, Andrea points out that meaningful work may be “different for everybody,” suggesting that meaningful work is a subjective phenomenon.

## **Domain 2: Perceptions and Psychological Experience of Meaningful Work**

This domain covers participants' descriptions of their perception of meaningfulness in their work and the various psychological experiences they encounter during a meaningful work experience. If the previous domain was about how participants' understand and conceptualize what meaningful work is, this domain reveals how participants of this study were actually perceiving and experiencing meaningful work. The super-ordinate themes included in this domain include 1) perception of meaningfulness in current work, 2) positive emotional experiences in meaningful work, and 3) other experiential aspects of meaningful work.

### *Theme 2-1: Perception of meaningfulness in current work*

Although varied in levels, all participants of the present study seemed to perceive their current work as meaningful to some extent. Several participants particularly expressed a strong sense of meaning in their current work. As Doug mentions what his organization does for the community in his interview, he states, “it really doesn't get more meaningful than that,” and later adds, “I don't really think there could be much more besides, going down to Haiti or something.”

If there is a maximum amount of meaning one can experience in work, Doug appears to perceive his work as having the most meaning, or at least closest to the highest level of meaning possible.

Andrea was also one of the participants who seemed to perceive her work as highly meaningful. She states that her current work has “absolute meaning” to her regardless of what others think:

... we didn't have to justify or explain why we were doing this, that we had absolute meaning to what we were doing, so anytime anybody came in and was, you know, what's your 401k, or what do you make a year, what's your gross income, and we just said that doesn't matter, because this is what we're doing, and we know why we're doing it finally. (Andrea)

If Doug perceives his high level of meaningfulness in work in terms of quantity, Andrea appears to perceive it through its frequency. When asked about a time when she finds her work as meaningful, she did not hesitate to answer and jumped in right away by saying, “Oh gosh, yeah, there's a lot of moments like that are really full of meaning!” She also states, “this happens like all the time and I just don't even know how I lived before not having, you know, not feeling like fulfilled by what you're doing.” It seems that she experiences meaningful moments so frequently to the extent that she cannot even remember when her work was not meaningful.

On the other hand, some participants viewed their current work as meaningful, but not quite to the extent of other participants like Doug and Andrea. For Cassidy, the level of meaningfulness in her current work seems to fluctuate day by day:

I mean for the most part, like I said there's days that are really meaningful when I'm telling people all this stuff, and some days that I'm like, 'I don't know why I'm here,' you know, but a lot of the time it is really positive, and I would say yeah it's, it's meaningful to me to help people out. (Cassidy)

As noted in this quote, her perception of meaningfulness in her current work appears to depend on whether she gets to do the task she finds meaningful on a given day.

Among all of the participants of this study, Daniel appeared to be the most uncertain about the meaningfulness of his current work and initially struggles to apply the word,

“meaningful” to his work. When asked whether he has ever experienced his work as meaningful, he says:

Yeah like.. I don't know, good and bad days, but where I work, meaningful.. I just like my job, you know, I like to do, working with people like you were saying this, you like to work with people, it's my thing, too, is to work with people. I don't really know how to explain it though, I really don't ... (Daniel)

It was uncertain from this quote whether Daniel perceives his work as meaningful or not, but he seems to perceive his work as positive. It may be the case that the abstract nature of the word “meaningful” is getting in the way. In the latter part of the interview I ask him again to clarify this, and he acknowledges that his work is meaningful:

Interviewer: Well, so you, you described the times when it's happier and when it's not, if you would say in general would you say that your work is pretty meaningful for you?

Daniel: Yeah, I like it. I really do.

This is interesting because this was right after he talked about interacting with this customers which seems to be a core source of meaningful work for him, and this may have influenced his perception of meaningfulness of his work.

Another way that participants appeared to perceive meaningful work is by comparing the perceived meaningfulness in their current work with previous jobs and workplaces, other organizations, and other employees. For example, while Doug finds the utmost meaningfulness in his current work at the thrift store, when asked about his previous higher-paying job at a retail corporation, he says: “I couldn't find any meaning. No.” Similarly, unlike his current meaningful work experience, Matt talks about how he disliked his previous job as a carpenter's assistant and did not experience it as meaningful: “I actually, really hated that job. If it wasn't for the money, I would've quit.” Daniel also mentions that the way he engages in his current job is different from others jobs he had in the past. As he says: “... back then I worked different

multiple places before, and wasn't really interested of, just working, just to work, but this one I work because I like to work."

Matt compares his current workplace to other organizations and indicates that his work would not be meaningful if he worked in a typical grocery store:

In general, if this was just another grocery store, you know, ordering from the typical grocery store warehouses like RETAIL GROCERY STORE does or maybe even GROCERY STORE CHAIN, it would feel kind of meaningless to me but I really believe in what we're doing here. (Matt)

It appears that it is the organizational mission of his current workplace what makes his current work meaningful. Cassidy also states that "if I was working anywhere else for the same amount of money or even a little bit more, I don't think I would be as happy," indicating that her current workplace provides sources of meaningfulness in work for her.

Cassidy also perceives her current work as meaningful by comparing her experience of meaningful work to other employees at her workplace:

... 'cause I know some people here, they're just kind of here because it's like a job, and some days, they're not as excited as I am, and they have to ask for help more often or whatever and it's just not as fun. (Cassidy)

Although she previously indicated that the level of meaningfulness in her work fluctuates, she appears to perceive her work as more meaningful than some of the other employees at her workplace. Relatively, she seems to see her work as more than a job, and experiences positive emotions in work.

For Evelyn, she does not appear to only perceive her current work as meaningful, but also her previous jobs as meaningful as well. When asked if there were any times she did not experience her work as meaningful, she states: "I like working. I mean, I haven't had too many jobs, but when I, you know, I like, I like to work. I like to do things." She appears to experience

meaningfulness in her work regardless of what job she has, through liking the process of working itself.

Overall, participants seem to perceive their current work as meaningful by identifying its quantity, frequency, sources, and by comparisons. Participants seem to be able to identify the reasons why their current work is meaningful, which may point to the sources or conditions that make work meaningful. This will be discussed in depth in the next domain.

### *Theme 2-2. Positive emotional experiences in meaningful work*

All participants reported experiencing some type of positive emotional experience at times when their work is perceived as meaningful. The common positive emotions experienced by participants include happiness, excitement, gratitude, pride, confidence, enjoyment, and fun.

Matt describes his emotional experience of meaningfulness as the “best feeling in the world”:

Well, just seeing the happiness in people’s faces, it almost makes me want to cry. But uh, it’s nice to be the person that caused happiness. It’s a great feeling. Probably the best feeling in the world is uh, making other people happy. (Matt)

Daniel describes a similar emotional experience in two parts of his interview when he feels like he’s made his customer’s day:

I don’t know how to explain it, it’s, it’s a good overwhelming feeling like, you’re doing, you made that person’s day just by talking to ’em or saying “Thank you, and you have a good afternoon,” and you make their day... and it brightens up their day and makes them happy, like it really does and it makes you feel happy as well ... (Daniel)

... it’s just, a real bubbly feeling like, I don’t know it just makes you, I really don’t know how to explain it thought, just makes me hap—, brightens up my day you know, like it’s cool. (Daniel)

Although Daniel finds it hard to explain how he feels in those moments, he describes his emotional experience as a “good overwhelming” and “bubbly” feeling. It appears that participants feel happy and excited when experiencing meaningfulness in their work, especially through seeing how they have made an impact on others.



Participants also reported feeling grateful and lucky about their meaningful work. For instance, Evelyn says, “Just, glad I found this job because, it’s good.” She seems to be feeling fortunate as she was able to find a job which she experiences as meaningful by the supportive people while also being able to support her daughter. Similarly, Cassidy says, “I’m lucky to work at this job because it does make a difference in the community.” Likewise, Andrea states, “I’m lucky, I feel like I’m really lucky to have that kind of...” as she discusses how she gets recognition of her work through direct feedback which makes her work meaningful. Finally, Matt also says that he is “extremely grateful for” for the change his work has made in his life.

Several participants experience a sense of pride when they perceive their work as meaningful. Although Ralph doesn’t seem too excited about his daily tasks at work as he describes them as stressful at times, he notes that “since I learned about the whole organization and what everything this place covers, it made me more proud.” Sofia appears to experience pride more prominently by stating multiple instances in her interview about her feelings of pride in her work. In the following quote, she discusses how her pride in her work extends to the work that her branch and the fast food restaurant does as an organization:

I think my FAST FOOD RESTAURANT on BRANCH 2 is the cleanest one I’ve seen, honestly the environment, to the people, to the food that’s being made. I’ve never tasted a FAST FOOD RESTAURANT sandwich that tastes so good ... I guess you could say a little bit more pride in ourselves for delivering such good food, I mean ’cause personally, I think FAST FOOD RESTAURANT is great. (Sofia)

Despite the common spread negative stereotypes of the work experience of a fast food restaurant, Sofia seems to show here that working at a fast food restaurant could be meaningful through the environment, people, and the food they produce; she even feels proud about it.

### *Theme 2-3. Other experiential aspects of meaningful work*

Three participants reported an experience similar to a psychological construct, flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) in meaningful work. As Doug says:

... it's just like a moment where you can tell, you know. It's just.. you just know it. It's the feeling in your gut that you know you did the right thing. And even if you didn't, you have to go away, talk to the boss, and say, "Hey, could So and So have this 'cause they're down on their luck, or whatever, it's just like, 'I'm gonna make the exec decision and hand this over and send them on their way.' And it's just ... You know, you just know that you're doing right when you do it, I guess. (Doug)

In this experience, Doug seems to have an immediate awareness of what he is doing is right which he describes as a "gut" feeling, and feels confident to make decisions autonomously.

There also seems to be a co-occurrence of awareness and action where he jumps into action without hesitation because of the strong sense of confidence he feels. Andrea describes a similar experience in her work:

... when I feel like that kind of sense of you're on the right track, that like deja vu sense of you're on the right track ... it just kind of comes together at different little moments like that one, everything, you just know you're doing the right thing and there's nothing else you could be doing 'cause you just know that you changed something, you made a difference, you know. (Andrea)

Her "sense of you're on the right track" appears to give a sense of conviction in her work. Later in the interview, she also describes her experience of meaningfulness in her work as an "energy":

When things feel most meaningful is when I'm really just the most motivated and the most filled with faith and hope that it's gonna work out, because it's just this like, this certain energy that you, and it's not necessarily how many people you help or what good you do, it's more like I guess for us it's like why, why we're doing it, and when we're doing it are we feeling this energy, that actual job is more important than the outcome or the profit from it. The meaning is in what you're doing or what we're doing. And the feeling of yeah, super motivated, like really excited about it, ideas ... (Andrea)

It appears that when Andrea experiences her work as meaningful, it is a combination of various experiences including high intrinsic motivation, sense of faith and hope, sense of purpose, and creativity.

Cassidy also reports that she experiences "time passing by" when she has a meaningful day in work. It appears when she engages in meaningful work, she has an altered sense of time.

Finally, Andrea experiences meaningfulness in her work as a *sense of coherence*:

Yeah, it looks like, it's like, it's almost like a movie scene where everybody's in their place, everything is in its place, and there's a realization in place that lets you know that had this not occurred this wouldn't be this happy little movie scene or whatever it is ... (Andrea)

Andrea appears to not only experience meaningfulness in her work through individual moments, but appears to have this experience of meta-cognition that helps her perceive her work as meaningful as a whole.

Participants seem to experience meaningfulness in similar yet unique ways, depending on the source of meaning they encounter at the moment, and also through reflection on those individual moments of meaningful work.

### **Domain 3: Internal Conditions of Meaningful Work**

This domain encompasses the essence of the conditions participants identified as making their work meaningful, or meaningless when those conditions are absent or rare. By *internal* conditions, I refer to the conditions that are directly related to the work, workplace, or organization that may influence the experience of meaningful work.

#### *Theme 3-1. High self-efficacy, and competence in work*

This super-ordinate theme describes how participants' sense of control, high self-efficacy, and competence in work enables the experience of meaningful work. This was the most frequent theme endorsed by all participants.

In this quote, Andrea describes how her change in self-efficacy have enabled her to do the work she wants:

... about two years ago I guess I woke up, in a way and realized that I could do all these other things and I had all these skills and I could just go for it. And, so that's what we did, you know, we found ways to... (Andrea)

Sofia explains how her high self-efficacy has given her more motivation to continue her work: "And when I started working at FAST FOOD RESTAURANT, I saw myself becoming manager, wearing the ties, the striped shirts, and seeing it early on gave me more drive, more

motivation to get to that point.” Other participants also mention how being able to do a task well make their work meaningful. For example, Doug indicates that even though his previous work was not very meaningful, he found meaning in doing a good job at the task he was assigned to:

... (laughs) Well, you gotta take everything you can get uh... to get you by. And for me, doing a good job at what I was assigned to do was meaningful, you know. They had a thing called TASK and I had to have the whole [ ] department TASK every morning by the time the managers came in. So that was meaningful to be able to, you know, screw some of the joint up a little bit ...  
(Doug)

The belief that participants are capable of doing their work and feeling competent seems to make work that may typically feel less meaningful more meaningful.

### *Theme 3-2. Fit between personal values and work*

This super-ordinate theme captures how participants’ perceived fit between their personal values and their work can contribute to their meaningfulness in work. This theme was found in seven participants.

For several participants, this fit between work and their personal values seem to have been what drew them to the work initially. Matt perceives his current work as “meant to be” for him. As he says, “I really believe in what we’re doing here. I consider myself a really COMMUNITY HEALTH FOOD STORE-oriented person.” His perception of this strong fit seems to be based on his personal connection with the core values of his organization such as being eco-friendly and supporting the local community in the context that his family used to be small farm operators. He not only sees his workplace as a good fit for him, but sees himself as a worker who fits well with the organization.

In the beginning of the interview, Cassidy says that she wanted to work at her community health food store because “health food’s important” to her. Although her current job is not the ultimate job to which she aspires, she appears to have chosen to work at her current workplace because it aligns with her personal value on health food which in turn provides some significance

for her work. However, she seems to hope to be working in a job that has an even better fit which may make her work more meaningful. She says, “health food is just really important, that’s what I want to do with my life. So yeah, my job is important, but I could be doing something that’s a lot more important to me.”

Unlike Matt and Cassidy, Ralph did not initially choose his workplace based on his personal values. However, he seems to strongly identify with the mission of his organization after learning about it:

Well it helps the community. And uh.. (tears up) I get tearful after, (chuckles) because I didn’t know what all it did, but it helps the homeless. Like the other day they brought a homeless family and they supplied them with everything. A house, sheets, you name it. They supplied it with them. And that’s what this stuff does that we sell here (chuckles). ... (crying) Oh, God fearing man, I’m sorry. (chuckles) (Ralph)

His organization’s mission seems to deeply touch Ralph which reflects that his work is quite meaningful for him because of this purpose. He seems to feel strongly about his organization’s mission of helping people in need because he himself has gone through a difficult time. He goes, “Yeah. If you’ve lived it, you know it.”

For Andrea, every task she does seem to be all interconnected based on the value of sustainability. She says, “everything I’m doing, that we’re doing is based around this life’s purpose.” She also cooperates with other organizations who shares her value at times. She seems to experience a sense of fulfillment by having her work and life fully integrated. As she says, “So it’s very, in a different way it’s very fulfilling, something you don’t get if the two are separate.”

In contrast, participants seem to experience work that does not fit with their personal values as less meaningful. For example, Daniel does not seem to see himself making a career out of his current work at the fast food restaurant because it does not provide what is important for him:

It's just not for me, though. I'm being real honest like it's not for me though, it's because something I would not, everybody's different, because there's people that have been there for 20 years, you know, 25 years. Only first job they had and only job they had they had never even gone to an interview before, I was like "What?" and she was like, "Yeah I don't even know what an interview or an orientation would be like," she's like, she's never been to one, and like that's them, they want to do that, that okay but I can't, I can't work fast food forever, you know what I am saying? (Daniel)

He appears to view that making a career out of a fast food restaurant is possible, but acknowledges that it is not what he wants.

Likewise, Andrea indicates that "I spent a lot of years doing something that I didn't like," and interestingly interprets the reason why some LSES workers may have difficulty experiencing meaning in their work as working in a job that does not fit their personalities:

Yeah, I could see why they think that because you know, in a lot of cases people that have a low-income job are doing something they hate. They're doing, they're in a service position and they're not a service type person, you know I think everybody's like, there's different personality types, some like to heal, some like to serve, some like to be analytical, I could see why they would think ... (Andrea)

It seems the meaningfulness of work is enhanced when the nature of the work and/or organizational mission fits with the LSES worker's personal value or interest.

### *Theme 3-3. Positive social interactions and support*

This super-ordinate theme depicts the social interactions and support that provides meaningful experiences at work to participants. The interpersonal relationships relevant to the meaningful work experience include the relationship with co-workers, boss/managers, and customers. This theme was one of the most prevalent among all supportive conditions of meaningful work across participants and was endorsed by seven participants.

Evelyn views people as a central source of experiencing meaning in her work. She describes her current workplace as feeling like "home" and her co-workers and boss as like "a little family" to her. In her first month at work at the coffee shop when she did not know how to do things yet, her boss broke her hip and was on leave for a month. Evelyn indicates that

“everybody made [her] feel good” by working together and supporting her at this time, which made this time very meaningful to her which could have otherwise been a very challenging period. Although she likes cooking, it seems that the people at her work is what makes her work most meaningful as noted in the following quote:

Well like, here it's more the people, I think. Even though I like cooking and stuff, I think the people mean more to me. ... And I think it was like that in my other jobs, too, I think it's more the people, than the job. I mean, I like getting paid, but, I think the people mean more to me than, you know, the job. (Evelyn)

This seems true for not only her current work but the previous jobs she had. She mentions that she had a lot of friends in her previous job at the shipping company which made her work fun. In multiple occasions in the interview, Evelyn refers to her current and previous work as “hard, but good” work. Perhaps the people at work is what makes it easy for Evelyn to experience meaning in any type of work, even when it is hard.

Similarly, Sofia believes that “it's the people that make FAST FOOD RESTAURANT worth it.” Daniel, who works at the same fast food restaurant, indicates that a “sociable environment” is what makes his work meaningful to him. He likes working at the front because he gets to socialize with people and not “just do [his] work.” He finds it interesting that he meets customers with “different personalities” and likes that he gets to converse with regular customers. Cassidy also mentions this part as a meaningful aspect of her work:

... 'cause that's another really fun thing is being here for so long and the type of community it is, there's lots of people that come in on a regular basis that are really friendly, and we talk about, “How is your day going,” and you actually know them ... (Cassidy)

It seems this interaction with customers in a deeper level is what makes it particularly meaningful for her. Matt also notes that the quality of the interaction with people matters in the experience of meaningfulness in his work:

Because I interacted with people at that job, too, it's just I was more or less like, you know a lot of time you're a nuisance, I mean the work has to get done, but you're in the way of their life. But

here, you get to interact with people a little bit differently, you get to ask them how things are going, it's just a different kind of interaction, I guess. It's hard to explain, it's more of a helpful interaction than the interaction that was at that job. (Matt)

He points out here that the interaction with people is a core aspect of what makes his current work meaningful compared to his previous job where this was considered a barrier to work.

Daniel also appreciates the “team effort,” that his co-workers are willing to help each other out at busy times. One unique aspect about his current organization is the opportunities to socialize with co-workers outside of work. He states, “it's cool like you get to know that person a little more a little better so, at others jobs I never did this at a job, never, never.” It appears these opportunities may make his relationship with his co-workers stronger which may contribute to a stronger sense of meaningfulness in his work. Doug also appreciates this part of this work indicating that “we got a pretty good crew here and everybody gets along, so there's really no Days of Our Lives drama.”

The importance of this condition to the experience of meaning in work is reflected by several participants indicating that their work is less meaningful when there is a negative social interaction or absence of social opportunities at work. Daniel, a Latino male, indicates that the only thing he dislikes about his job is when he gets discriminated by some customers based on his race:

... the only thing I don't like about my job is the people that are discriminating, that's the only thing I don't like about my job, 'cause I can be the nicest person and outgoing person as well, but then you get these customers in there just 'cause I, you know, just the way I look or something? Like for instance the other day, I was handing out food and I didn't say nothing, there was another employee next to me, and this dude goes and says, I said “Your order is so and so,” I go and hand him his food and next thing I know, I said “Alright you have a good afternoon,” he's like, “Hold on.” And then I said, “Hold on? Okay.” He goes “Yes, asshole,” and straight calling me asshole and my employee said, “What? What happened?” I said, “I don't even know, you see that?” Or I'll get somebody that's having a bad day and I even try to say “You have a good afternoon,” and then they'll say “F—,” I'm not trying to curse but they, just because the way I look and I can present myself to them the nicest person but, they don't like the way I look, that's the only thing that messes my job up or makes me ... (Daniel)



Similarly, Doug discusses here how his previous workplace lacked respect for lower status positions:

... you can only do so much physically, and then if you keep doing that, they will expect a little bit more out of you so you just can only do so much, and I really don't think, I think it's just a lose-lose situation working for retail America like that 'cause uh... they'd rather get rid of a full-time associate, and get two part-time associates just 'cause it's less taxes and less insurance and all that stuff that they have to pay, so that's always in the back of your mind when you're full-time or working for retail America that, they'll just try to get you in trouble so you go away and they'll get two part-timers to fill your position. (Doug)

He indicates that it was “impossible” to make this job meaningful because if he worked well he may get taken advantage of, and felt like he did not get appreciated as a worker and was rather viewed as an expensive position. Doug was actually later laid off from this position, which appears to make this a critical condition of meaningful work for him.

Sofia mentions that the only time her work is not meaningful is when she does not get to have the opportunity to communicate with her customers which is a source of meaning in work for her:

And I think the only time for it not to be not meaningful is if they never came in, is if I've never seen 'em. Just like the fact, I like the vibe I get from them, the communication I get, I mean 'cause there's old men that come in and crack wise jokes, you know, old people jokes, you know me being my young self, I think it's funny... (Sofia)

In sum, positive interpersonal interactions and support that makes participants' work meaningful seem to be the quality interaction with customers, working as a team, and receiving support from boss and co-workers.

#### *Theme 3-4: Benefitting and being a positive influence to others*

Another super-ordinate theme that the majority of participants endorsed was benefitting and being a positive influence to others through their work.

Doug and Ralph, who both work at a non-profit organization experiences their work as meaningful through the fact that it benefits people in need. Doug finds this particularly meaningful as in his previous work, it was the people with privilege who benefitted from the

profit. He says, “It’s pretty rewarding for the fact of that it’s going to some place besides the chairmans and CEOs.” It makes his current work more meaningful that what he does at work gives him a sense of contribution to the society as he indicates, “My work gives me self-worth because it makes me feel a part of the society, contributing.” Being aware of who benefits from the profit also seems to be an important source of meaning for Ralph as well. He says, “The main thing is just knowing where the money goes, recycling back into the public. That’s the main thing.” Cassidy also indicates that she chose to work at her current community health food store because the profit benefits the local community unlike other large corporations. As workers who do not have socioeconomic privilege, benefitting people who are in similar or worse financial situations may make this part of their work more meaningful to them.

Being a positive influence to others came up as what makes work meaningful several times across participants. For Daniel, being aware that he made a customer’s day makes his work meaningful:

Especially when they’re in a bad mood and [I] try to say something dumb to them or like I’ll say some dumb things to somebody like, they’ll be all mean muggin’ or somethin’ and then I’ll just say something off the wall, something like, “Alright you’re total’s,” it could be like a \$1.07, and I will be like “total’s \$18.99” and they’re about to give me the money, and they’re like “What?” “Oh, I was just playing man, I was just trying to see if your awake,” or “I’m trying to see if you’re going to give me a big tip,” and I’ll just playing around and they start, you see a smile on their face, they will be mad or something at first when they come in or, just anything like, I’ll talk about the weather like, “You got a nice car out today with the sun top roof,” and they’ll be looking all hard like sitting in the car and be like “Yeah, yeah, it is,” just made a smile on their face and the same it also made you feel good just by socializing with them. (Daniel)

Matt takes this into a larger scale and views his work as being in the “front line of change”:

... it just feels like, I’m kind of on the front line of the change that’s coming, switching from greed to, you know, and the necessity to abundance, and stuff like that. ... So that’s really how I feel about it. I’m right here on the front lines of change. (Matt)

He makes sure that his customers know about his organization’s mission so they can make informed choices when purchasing food. It seems that he views his work as influencing people to eat healthier.

This part of the work seems to be the main source of meaning for Cassidy. She experiences her work as meaningful when she recognizes that she might have made an impact on someone's life:

So I just feel excited that maybe I've made some sort of change in their life to where they're like, "Oh my gosh, this is something that I'm gonna look into this and this and this and this, 'cause my doctor only said this but she just told me that this helps that, too and this and that," whatever. So yeah I guess it's just excitement that I'm just helping more people realize they don't need to go to the doctor for every little thing or if they go to a doctor it's maybe more of an alternative doctor or something like that, somebody who at least, even if they prescribe over the counter stuff or anything like that maybe that they're also like, they'll make the choice to go to somebody who also sees the alternative healing side and everything... (Cassidy)

It seems that educating customers about health food and seeing subsequent changes that her work might make in a person's life provides meaning for her.

*Theme 3-5. Recognition of value and utilization of own work by others*

As much as participants experience meaning in their work through benefitting others, they seem to experience their work as meaningful when their work gets valued and made use of by others. Six participants endorsed this super-ordinate theme in their interviews.

Sofia experiences her work as meaningful when her work gets recognized by her boss and co-workers. She describes how a compliment from her boss could make her work meaningful here: "... you have no idea how good it feels for your general manager to say 'Good job, you did a good job today.' For me, I think that's the greatest feeling in the world when someone compliments you like that." She also mentions how her co-workers appreciating her help in work makes her work meaningful:

I get a lot of respect from my employees when I help them, instead of sitting around and doing nothing, and I like how they say "Thank you," when I hand them their food out the window or how they say "Can you help me do this or do that," I like that, I like that feeling of wanting to help, but wanting to be asked for help, especially from employees that you work with because it's really really hard to get good relationships with your employees ... (Sofia)

She appears experiencing her work as meaningful when others see it as valuable as well. She states, “I think sometimes people are kind of sad when I’m off shift, when I have to go home” due to her passion for her work.

Matt describes how he experiences his work as meaningful when he gets his work recognized by his customers:

Probably when somebody comes in and they’re like, “Hey, this was recommended to me by an herbalist,” or “I looked this up online, I have some sort of illness or disease caused by this, is there anything that could alleviate it?” and I find them either the supplement, or a food choice, or a diet type plan that they could use, and they come back maybe two weeks later, and they’re like, “Yeah, it totally changed my life. I’m always going to be using this, I’m never taking pharmaceutical drugs again,” just stuff like that... (Matt)

When customers comes back to let him know that they have found his recommendations useful, he experiences meaningfulness in his work.

Andrea talks about how working without knowing the impact of her work can be difficult at times:

... sometimes, you know sometimes it catches me real hard when, I do something and I’m working everyday on this so hard on this video and I don’t ever get any feedback and then, and then I get feedback. And I just, and it’s positive and it’s like something that says somebody like, you helped them or they were inspired or, they’re gonna go try it, you know? I feel like I’m really lucky in that sense ’cause I don’t know that everybody really gets that kind of recognition for when, or even sparsely they might never get recognized for doing something that’s meaningful to them? It’s like putting your heart out on the line and then having like thirty thousand people be like, “I was thinking that, too,” or like “I’ve been wanting to know how to do that for myself and now I’m gonna do it,” and then they like send you all their pictures, and it’s like, or they’re saying, just saying nice things about, how inspired they were or whatever you know, ’cause we do the how-to videos so it’s, I’m lucky I feel like I’m really lucky to have that kind of... (Andrea)

So when she receives positive feedback about her work as being valued by others, this provides meaningfulness in what she does.

Doug reports that the reason he puts time in his work is because even though he does not get to directly see the person who is benefitting from his work, he knows that his work is being appreciated by others:

... I'm putting time in here just to help somebody else out down the road, and even though I don't get to see that other person, receiving whatever it is that they're receiving from me putting my time in, that I know that's out there because there's just so many thank you notes and this and that, going to the manager where we're helping people out. (Doug)

In the following quote, Cassidy discusses that when she does not get appreciated for the work she does, she questions the meaningfulness of her work:

So I mean those are the kind of days when I can tell I'm trying really hard for somebody and they're just not appreciating how polite I'm being, or how much I'm helping them or something like that, they just don't appreciate it, and then I'm like, 'Well, why am I here?' (Cassidy)

For Ralph, it appears being able to immediately see the effect of his work makes his work meaningful:

... I can take the shoes out and a box of 'em, set 'em out on the shelf and before I go back and get another one, half that box that I put on that shelf's gone. People's taking 'em just that fast. That's when I'm going, "Yeah!" Because instead of me bundlin' 'em and shippin' 'em off to STATE 3, that's what I like, I like it when I can see the progress that I've done for that. Now somebody's getting their use out of it for a cheap price. (laughs) ... Well, it makes me happy to see that somebody else is getting use out of what I just said how. Instead of having to bundle it or throw it away. (Ralph)

Whether you get verbally recognized, see an immediate effect, or indirectly receive appreciation, it seems that being able to know how one's hard work is being valued and used makes their work meaningful.

### *Theme 3-6. Effective use of time*

Half of the participants mentioned that effective use of time at work makes the experience of work more meaningful. All of these participants stated that they prefer being busy than not having much work to do. For instance, Daniel describes in this quote how the busyness of his workdays fluctuates:

Hectic, sometimes. It's, it gets real busy at certain times or sometimes it'll be nothing to do, but it's interesting because, just the employees and customers as well, I like to stay busy I don't like to not do nothin', so when we do get busy I like that adrenal rush get though the day faster you know? It makes the time fly by so you're not just standing around looking at the clock but, other than though, yeah I like fast-paced not slow-paced but, yeah. (Daniel)

Although he uses the word “hectic” here, this does not seem to be have a negative connotation.

Ralph also uses the word “hectic” to describe a fast-paced day which he prefers:

... I'd rather have be a hectic day because the day goes by so fast. Then, because you're not sitting around, you're always busy. And to me it does, I'd rather be busy, and get it done fast than be sitting around going, (negative facial expression) ... (Ralph)

This particularly seems to be an important condition for Ralph as he views meaningful work as work that does not go out of use and seeing the progress and outcome of the work.

Similarly, Cassidy indicates that “a typical good day would just be like just being crazy busy and running everywhere.” On the other hand, she describes a meaningless day as the following:

Days that, days that I'm just sitting, like days that we don't have a lot of people come in, it's just kind of like, 'Cool, I'm here,' getting paid to just kind of chill out, I'm not really doing anything for anybody or even myself? (Cassidy)

However, there seems to be an extent to which the busyness of work can be meaningful.

Ralph notes that he believes there are many things he can do to makes his work more meaningful, “but there's so much to do on my own, that I don't have time.”

### *Theme 3-7. Means for financial stability*

This super-ordinate theme was noted in half of the participants' interview as being an important source of meaningfulness in work. Evelyn, who is solely responsible for supporting her young daughter, seems to experience her work as more meaningful because it provides for her and her children:

I just got my own apartment. ... And my daughter, and now my son came to live with me, I have my own money, I have a bank account, so that feels good. ... And you know, I can get my daughter some stuff, she got her own room. (Evelyn)

For Doug, it appears that being able to generate some income through his work makes his current work very meaningful after having been unemployed for a while: “... just being able to

have some income, this job is everything for me. I've never made minimum wage before my life, but it actually gives me a reason to go to work, man."

Daniel also indicates that his work is meaningful because it helps him pay for his everyday necessities: "Yeah, I do find meaning in my work though because I do make enough to survive you know, I make enough to pay my rent and it's just hard, TOWN is pretty high cost for living anyways."

In sum, participants seem to perceive their work as not limited to a means for financial stability but as necessary but not sufficient condition for meaningfulness in work.

A theme that was endorsed by one participant that seems to be worth noting for internal conditions that enable meaningful work is an *opportunity to learn*. Daniel appears to experience his work as meaningful because he views his work as an opportunity to learn and grow:

It's good for me to learn and experience, it's helping me learn and experience what other people are like, what I'm looking forward to, or it's helping me for sure, learn myself as well like, ... like for instance when that dude goes and says asshole, I didn't say nothing foul back to him, I didn't instigate or progress the situation to escalate in no type of way, I sorry apologized, and "Sorry about that you have a good afternoon," and walks away, drives away again and says "Asshole," okay, you know what I am saying? And just, it just helps me learn myself more, because nobody should be talking to nobody like that, it's disrespectful in my eyes and especially if they didn't do that kind of stand and fight, did something foul or wrong to him, but I didn't do nothing to him, but it helps you learn more people's personalities well because so many different personalities come in through there, like so many different, and they're not all the same, and you just learn different people, it really does help you into, help you like, learn or progress, more progress about learning people for yourself as well because it's just, a lot of different things you can learn from this teamwork and people skills, just different, majority things, and when it comes at that time then you're like 'Okay, well I just learned something new today,' you know what I'm saying, but yeah. Just different things you can learn.

#### **Domain 4: External Conditions of Meaningful Work**

This domain describes the contextual conditions that support or discourage the meaningful work experience. I use the word *external* to refer to the individual differences, social or environmental circumstances that may influence the experience of meaningful work of the participants. The external conditions endorsed by more than half of the participants include 1)

access to resources and opportunities, 2) family and close social relationships, 3) local community and culture, and 4) developmental stage.

*Theme 4-1: Access to resources and opportunities*

The most frequently endorsed external condition that influences the participants' experience of meaningful work was not surprisingly, access to resources and opportunities. Seven participants reported this as a relevant condition for experiencing meaningful work.

Several participants reported experiences with unemployment and difficulty obtaining a job as a LSES individual. Doug was unemployed for a year before he obtained his current job. He says, "Yeah... anytime a person goes from not having a job to having a job, they're pretty happy no matter what, I guess." Evelyn also mentions that "it's always hard for me to get a job." She was unemployed for seven months and had to move frequently as she was not successful in obtaining a job. She reports that "when I wasn't working, I was going crazy, I was so bored and, you know, I needed money." It appears that participants have struggled to obtain a job due to their SES which may limit the opportunity to even work, let alone experiencing meaningful work.

Due to this experience, Evelyn seems to feel the need to work in order to support her daughter regardless of what type of work it is: "I mean I feel like I have to do what I have to do, because I have to take care of my daughter. (Pause.) And even though things are hard sometimes to me, I still have to do it..." Sofia indicates that her job is too important for her to risk it: "I won't jeopardize it in any way, I mean if there is jeopardy I will try to squash it so I don't lose my job." Because it is so difficult to find a job for many LSES individuals, it seems that they are compelled to keep a job when they have the opportunity. Although none of the participants reported currently engaging in work that they cannot experience as meaningful due to these



situations, it may be the case that the need to keep a job for financial support may limit the choice to pursue more meaningful work.

Some participants also discussed experiences of limited access to resources that would have otherwise led them to desired career opportunities. Cassidy reported that she was unable to pursue her career in massage due to financial constraints: “I thought of doing massage as a profession, but it costs a lot of money to take the test to get registered. I couldn’t lose 300 dollars.” However, she appears to have benefitted from the education she received while she was pursuing her associate’s degree in holistic health which is relevant to her current work. Sofia also wanted to be a chef and attended a vocational training program, but was not able to complete the certificate due to her circumstances. However, she indicates that “it definitely opened my eyes to how much opportunity the world can give you.” It seems clear that attaining education allows individuals to have more career opportunities that could potentially link to more experience of meaningful work. Based on this values of education, Matt believes that “education should be free.” He discusses his view on how the society has made it difficult to pursue meaningful work because it requires a diploma:

I think to an extent you are able to choose what you want to do but after that certain point you run into complications with our democracy and everything like that, it just won’t allow you to do some things because there’s all kinds of legal red tape, repercussions that might happen. You know in ancient times a doctor would have been somebody who just knows the lore and the medicinal use of herbs, and they didn’t have a diploma. If it worked, it worked and that’s basically it. I mean if it works, it works is my view, if you know how to do something you should be allowed to do it and at least learn how to do it for free. But we just don’t work that way. (Matt)

Andrea claims that the accessibility to educational resources has changed with technology:

... but now we have the internet, you know anybody can learn anything, and we found that out. We find things out that engineers don’t, they’re like, “How do you know that?” and it’s like, “Well, I watched it on a VIDEO SHARING WEBSITE video,” you know? And not all of it’s true but you can definitely have more access to these things, and in a way that there’s so many everybody can do it in their own way, and now that we’re realizing that there isn’t one way for everybody to learn and there’s not one way for everybody to become successful in their own way ... (Andrea)

She also seems to emphasize that there is no single way to learn or be successful nowadays.

Although there are some real challenges that participants have dealt with due to socioeconomic constraints, they seem to have been able to navigate their way to experience meaningful work in their current jobs.

*Theme 4-2: Family and close social relationships*

Five participants reported that family members and other loved ones had an influence on their pursuit of meaningful work. Both Doug and Andrea left their previous job to pursue a lower income but more meaningful job. Doug describes how seeing his grandparents live with less resources in a rural area prompted him to choose a similar lifestyle: "... my great grandparents did it up in RURAL STATE and I can probably do it out here." Although it may have been otherwise a daunting choice, it seems having a role model in his family gave him confidence to shift his lifestyle towards a more meaningful life. He also indicates that his mother helped him out financially when he transitioned from the city to his current rural town to get him settled.

This seems to be the case for Andrea as well. She stated that she reached out for help to her father when she realized that the career path she is taking is not meaningful for her: "I decided I didn't want to work downtown in a big building when I got my degrees or certificates and I called my dad and I said I don't want to be here and I'm gonna come home." Her father seems to have provided her with both financial and emotional support which enabled her to quit her previous career path to pursue more meaningful work. She also indicates that her partner has played a significant role in her pursuit of meaningful work: "LEE was my catalyst to just realizing that the work for me is I have to be doing something I love doing." It seems her father

laid the basic foundation to change her lifestyle, and her partner influenced her to actually view the importance of pursuing meaningful work.

Sofia seems to have been encouraged to aspire for a meaningful career without limitations from family and friends since young:

I've never, I've been told just from friends and family stuff like that, I was the only one that had to tell myself I'm gonna be something. And my mom told me that, too. She goes, "Even if you're not rich, you're gonna be someone in this life. (Sofia)

It seems that despite the lack of educational or financial resources, she was not discouraged to aspire for a career that is meaningful and desirable for her.

Cassidy stresses the importance of her loved ones caring about the work that is meaningful for her: "I just want everybody, including the people I love, care about, to see the importance of what I do here, I guess so." Perhaps when important people in her life outside of work sees the significance of her work, it helps her to maintain the meaningfulness of her work or even adds more meaning to her work.

Having dependents to support seems to be a double-edged sword. Doug views this as a barrier to pursuing meaningful work:

... yeah, but some people can't quit a job and wait for the right one to show up either, so they're supporting their family, they're supporting their kids, so if they don't have meaning in their job, they're almost gonna have to... you know, try to kid themselves and find some meaning or something just for the fact of putting food on the table for the kids, new pair of backpack or whatever for school, 'cause it's not about you then it'd be about the kids. So, who cares if you're not getting meaning in your job, as long as your kids are going to school and wearing clean clothes and stuff, that's all that really matters, so when you're a parent, it's way different than me being a bachelor, where even if I'm not happy, I can probably kid myself I am, instead of looking at these little desperate faces wondering when they're next meal is, that would... I couldn't imagine, man, so I'm just thankful that I've never had children. (Doug)

Evelyn is a single mother who has to provide for her daughter herself. However, for Evelyn, having to support her daughter seems to be an additional source of meaningful work:

... I have to take care of my daughter, so I mean she means everything to me, so I have to take care of her. And, can't explain it, it's like... I don't know. Just, glad I found this job because, it's

good. ... And this the first time I got my own place, I was always living with somebody. And, it's like, she's so happy that we've got our place, and I feel like I did this, for her. (Evelyn)

It appears being a mother adds meaning to her current work because it fulfills the source of meaning in her life.

#### *Theme 4-3: Local community and culture*

Five participants also reported that the local community they reside in and culture influence their experience of meaningful work. In the following quote, Doug describes how living in his current rural town has been conducive to experiencing his lower income job as meaningful:

You better believe it, yeah, I'm getting less than half than what I was before, and I'm not even getting 40 hours here, so therefore I'm probably making a third of what I was, and I'm way happier for the fact of breathing better air, eating better food, less chance of getting shot on the way to work, you know, everything. So really I'm so much happier making way less than I was up at the RETAILER, but there's nicer people here I mean, the list doesn't end, where CITY, you can't trust anybody to even watch your dog for a weekend, 'cause the dog will probably be gone by the time you get back, you know. (Doug)

It seems that the residential area he currently lives in is impacting his overall satisfaction in his life, which in turn seems to impact his experience in his work.

Similarly, Evelyn relocated from a big city to the same rural town as Doug after being laid off from her previous job. She not only got a job here with the help of her relative, but she seems to prefer her current town due to the friendliness of the people in the community:

Evelyn: I love it here, I love it here.

Interviewer: How is it different from—

Evelyn: Everybody says, "How could you come over here? You were in BIG STATE and BIG CITY, then here." I love it here.

Interviewer: What do you love about it?

Evelyn: Everybody's so friendly. Everybody's friendly, everybody makes you feel, like you're part, of here. My son came last week, he moved over here. And, he can't believe how friendly everybody is here, he's like, "Everybody says hi, everybody." Yeah it's, I like it here.

She seems to experience a sense of belonging in the community which may contribute to her meaningfulness in her work in her workplace that serves the community.

Doug also recognizes that the thrift store he works at is able to operate because of the amount of community support they receive:

So it's amazing how much people donate to the cause and we couldn't keep our doors open if people didn't bombard us with all this stuff every day, all day long, so it's amazing that the community supports us like that. We don't even take donations on Thursdays 'cause we're all out in the town picking things up and dropping things off, that's our only day to catch up on the week's bombardment of donations. So yeah, we actually gotta tell 'em no donations on Thursdays. It's amazing. (Doug)

He seems to acknowledge the donations made by people in the community makes it possible for him to engage in meaningful work.

Other participants discussed how their work-related values have been influenced by the societal values and cultural context they lie in. In her interview, Andrea talks about how her parents got “ridiculed” by the community for choosing a self-sustaining lifestyle in the past which made them conform to the “consumerism” society. She states that because of this, it was not easy for her to change her lifestyle to pursue meaningful work: “Cause I thought that if I stepped out and was different, then I would be alone.” Although she was able to later pursue a meaningful lifestyle with the support of her partner and father, she seems to have struggled to do this for a long time due to the societal pressure and values that has been reinforced.

Similarly, Daniel seems to have internalized a cultural message of the importance of achieving a higher SES, which appears to impact his meaningfulness in his work:

FAST FOOD RESTAURANT is not, any fast-food, OTHER FAST FOOD RESTARUANTS, it's not a career somebody wants to make out of it, it really isn't, it don't even sound professional like, to me, I've always been taught to make sure you're on top ... (Daniel)

#### *Theme 4-4: Developmental stage*

Five participants endorsed that their developmental stage is relevant to their experience of meaningful work. Andrea states that before she changed her lifestyle to pursue a meaningful work and life, she was too young to know:

I didn't realize that there was more to life, I was still kind of growing up you know, I was in my twenties and stuff and I was not in a space where I was ready to step out and be different.  
(Andrea)

Likewise, Daniel indicates that in the past he worked “just to work” but as he has matured, he seems to work more purposefully: “I was younger at the time, so I really don't, I really think I'm more mature and more older now, so I realize more wiser about what I'm doing and where I'm at ...” Sofia also seems to view her maturity as contributing to her attitude towards her work: “... my thought process is so much different now, I'm more of, I'm more mature, more of an adult, I have more of a, adult thinking process.”

On the other hand, Cassidy's current work is her first job and she is still exploring her career path:

Well I've, I kinda wanted to go to school to be a nutritionist for a while, and I'm still not quite sure about that. Just, I don't quite know what it is, I want to go for nutritional cooking, so I don't know exactly what I want my job title to be in the future but something to do with nutrition and helping people heal their bodies with eating right and taking good, good medicine instead of bad medicine that, the pharmaceuticals and stuff like that. (Cassidy)

This uncertainty of her career path may be impacting her level of meaningfulness she experiences in her current work.

Other themes that were noted by less than half of the participants include *personal crisis* (Ralph, Andrea, Sofia), *role of faith* (Ralph, Matt), and *personality* (Evelyn).

#### **Domain 5: Personal Impact of Meaningful Work**

This domain captures how the experience of meaningful work has impacted the participants personally in their work and life.

*Theme 5-1: Increase in well-being and satisfaction in life*

The most frequent theme that was constructed among half of the sample was the increase in well-being and quality of life due to meaningful work. Several participants reported that meaningful work has enhanced their self-esteem. One of the key words Doug used multiple times in his interview was “self-worth.” Due to his frequent use of this word, I asked him to clarify what he means by self-worth in the member check interview. He reported that his work gives him self-worth because “it makes me feel a part of the society, contributing.” It appears that this sense of contribution his work provides makes him feel that he is a person of worth because he is doing something of value in the world. For Sofia, being an employee of her organization makes her feel more confident and good about herself:

And being at FAST FOOD RESTAURANT, I feel like really confident walking in my FAST FOOD RESTAURANT uniform you know, like I honestly, I feel confident walking up to the counter and taking orders, it makes me feel good about myself, it makes me feel good about being a people person because I never was. (Sofia)

It appears that working in a uniform of a workplace she feels proud of gives her confidence in who she is and feels good about herself by being able to interact with people in a way that she was not able to in the past. Evelyn also indicates that her work “makes me feel good about myself,” and later talks about how she has been able to provide for her children. It seems that participants feel more positively toward themselves through obtaining the sources of meaning they experience in their work.

Participants also reported feeling generally happy and content with their life despite financial constraints. Matt states that he has a better quality of life despite receiving less income than his previous job: “I mean I definitely don’t get as much money here as I did doing that, but the quality of life is better.” Similarly, Andrea indicates that despite less money, she feels more abundance in her life now: “... so you know I had, I had almost no money this year and I was

better off, I had more food and more things, and more time to do stuff to help myself than I did most years.” Later in the interview, she uses the word “bountiful” to describe her life. She also talks about how the absence of meaningful work has impacted her well-being negatively in the past:

So I was living like that life where you're just trying to do something because it's reasonable and responsible. So you pick a major because it's the reasonable one it's not the one you really want, it's the one that's reasonable and that makes you feel like I was just trying to be an upstanding citizen and fit in with society. But I didn't really understand that society's, it wasn't quite right, you know, it was, they were, society was unhealthy, too. It wasn't just me. The whole lifestyle was unhealthy but I was trying to keep up with that, so I was basically a consumer. I tried to, you know and I envied people that had nicer things and I tried to keep up and stuff, keeping up with the Joneses and I was miserable for it, and I was trying to always be this certain type of person, on top of I was eating really unhealthy and which kind of, part of it was because what I was choosing and the other part of it because the cheap food is the carb food, you know, it's like the bread and stuff, so it was not healthy. And, I was also emotional unhealthy but I was emotional unhealthy because I thought that life was this, this whole kind of like ideology or whatever of the society, and you know the American dream and you're like an upstanding citizen if you do this, you know, file your taxes, and even down to the little things like oh, the people that filed taxes on April 14, there the like slack-offs, right? So I would even take that to heart like, everything, everything I was doing was to please someone else or this other idea ... I just lived in that life and thought this was miserable and I had, I grew a tumor, you know at the age of 18 and it was a big one and it was the kind you get from being miserable and unhealthy. There's no other explanation except for unhealth is connected to it... (Andrea)

It appears that not pursuing meaningful work was not only impacting her psychological health but her physical health.

#### *Theme 5-2: Change in perspective, values, and behaviors in work and life*

Five participants discussed that experiencing meaningful work has changed their perspective and values in work and life. For instance, Ralph indicates that “I just thought, well I'd just, making the money and doing whatever with it, but they recycle it back into the community.” Knowing about his organizational mission appears to have changed his perspective about his work, from merely a means to make money to a means to do something meaningful for the community. When asked how this has impacted him in general, he states that “it makes me want to be more open and helping, to the public, more than what I already am and what I have



been because I know what it does around here.” It seems that he is a prosocial-oriented person to begin with, but his work has made him want to do even more to help others. This impact does not seem to end in change in perspective and values about his work and life, but has prompted him to actually change his behaviors: “I’ve worked, made my work ethic a little stricter on account of what I am and what I know about this place.” He also notes that his work has made him more aware of how he spends money in his personal life:

I used to be if I needed it I go to town and buy it. Instead of now, how often do you think I’ll use it, instead of using it once and then setting it down and letting sit there and rot, I won’t buy it no more, I won’t buy it. I gotta look at it, ‘Will I use it more than just once?’ (Ralph)

Matt indicates that his meaningful work experience has made him live more in accordance to his personal values:

Well before I was working here I was still, I was in the religious path that I’m in now, but didn’t quite have a good understanding of a lot of the things in my life, I was kind of a selfish person. I didn’t really recycle, I believed in it, but I never did it you know, I always thought, ‘Well somebody else is doing it.’ But having worked here, and definitely a lot of the staff members here have become like family to me, and have helped me in certain ways, and just kind of opened my eyes to more than just like, I would say like what’s on TV, you know, who’s walking down the red carpet, maybe what Kim Kardashian’s wearing, stuff like that. There is so much more importance out there, and working here really brought me into that type of lifestyle. So it’s, it uh, this job has fundamentally changed my life, which I’m extremely grateful for. (Matt)

Similarly to Ralph, Matt seems to have held the same values prior to his experience in meaningful work. However, he indicates that there was a discrepancy in his actions, and through experiencing meaning in his work he now has a better understanding of his values and thus is actually living out his values in his personal life. It appears that meaningful work has impacted participants to re-evaluate their personal behaviors based on what they do at work which has motivated them to make it more consistent.

Cassidy not only tries to live in accordance to her values at her workplace, but also in her life by promoting them to her personal relationships:

I mean I try and get all my friends and everybody like that, I don’t know if that’s part of what you are asking, to see how good like eating organic, like how important it is even if you’re spending

more money and things like that, I guess I try and get my friends that are younger to see that ... I mean 'cause it's important to me and like when my friends make dinner for me and they don't use organic chicken or organic vegetables or whatever I just want to yell at them ... (Cassidy)

It seems the experiencing meaningfulness in her work may have increased the salience of her values which in turn prompted her to promote them in her non-work life domains as well.

While most participants discussed a positive impact of meaningful work, one participant notes a possible negative impact of pursuing meaningful work. Sofia talks in her interview about how she got into trouble at work for engaging in work that is personally meaningful for her. She describes a time when she tries to help other co-workers in the drive-thru and was yelled at her manager for not staying at her assigned position:

I think uh one of the general managers was there working, and she got mad at me 'cause I was helping one of the drive thru girls, right? And there was a customer at the counter, and I told him, "I'll be with you in one second, okay?" and he smiles at me and says "Okay," right? And as I was walking back from to counter from the drive thru, my manger yells, she goes, "Don't ignore him like that!" and I was like, "I didn't, I asked him, I told him that I'd be right with him," and he said "Okay." I think that's the only time I really felt like, obviously you're not seeing me do my job, or you're not here enough to see me do my job, because you're the only one who has done that to me, the only one. I mean they tell me, "Front counter, front counter, front counter," because I'm always trying to help drive thru. (Sofia)

In another instance in her previous job, she discusses how she got in trouble by making something for the customer that is not on the menu. She states that, "policy at FAST FOOD RESTAURANT you can't do that, because their food, they're franchise, you can get in trouble." It appears that when one's passion in work may interfere with the organizational need, the workers may receive consequences.

## **Domain 6: Strategies to Enhance Meaningfulness in Work**

This domain summarizes participants' words of wisdom and strategies for enhancing meaning in work for LSES workers who struggle to experience meaningful work. Eight super-ordinate themes were generated in this domain.

*Theme 6-1: Being proactive in the search for and creation of meaningful work*

Six participants reported that being proactive is key in enhancing meaning in work. Doug says, “You gotta look for the meaning.” This seems to imply that the experience of meaningful work may not be something that just emerges, but something that may require one’s proactive search. Doug additionally suggests that if one is struggling to find their work meaningful, they have to make effort through searching for alternative sources of meaning:

Yeah, but if you’re not happy in your job, you gotta make yourself at least feel like you’re happy, or the meaningful of keeping your kids’ bellies full fit or somethin’ that would be enough if you’re not happy personally about the position you’re in. You gotta look at all sort of, let’s see what else is the positives instead of the negatives out there in the gig they’re doing, I guess.  
(Doug)

Several participants did not end in merely searching for meaning in their work to experience meaningfulness, but actively participated in creating the meaningful conditions at work. Cassidy applies to this case. Although Cassidy’s current work may not be the most meaningful work she can do, because it is important to keep her job to support herself financially, she tries to make the work meaningful: “I try and make it meaningful and happy so that I want to come here.” Daniel and Sofia share how they engage in creating meaningful conditions in their current work. For Daniel, staying busy is an important condition for meaningful work. He explains in the following quote how he goes about creating this condition for himself when the environment does not allow it:

I said I like to keep busy ... So I will wipe down something even if I don’t have to or I will go stock something or I will go help out another employee if they’re lookin’ like they’re busy and I’m not doing nothing even though it’s not my job but, I would just constantly keep finding something to do you know, just always even grab a mop or scrub the floors with a toothbrush, just I do something to keep constantly busy, yeah. (Daniel)

Sofia also provides an example of how she is proactive in creating the condition of meaningful work for her, which one of them is interacting with customers:

... like, we like when you eat here. And me, I’m more of the person to where, like you know how when you go to the counter and they say, “For here, or to go?” I say “For here,” more often.

Because for me, I think when you eat in a restaurant and you like the environment, you're gonna want to come back and sit and eat more, you know what I mean? (Sofia)

It appears participants engage in various ways to craft their work to make it more meaningful.

However, several participants who previously worked in a job that was difficult to experience meaningfulness chose to pursue different work that makes it easier to experience meaningfulness. Andrea says, "You don't wait for something to come to you, you go get it."

She provides the following advice to pursue meaningful work for LSES workers who are unable to experience meaning in their current work:

Well if you can't, I mean that's the unfortunate part is if you can't find meaning in the job you're in, you might want to question if it's the right job for you. And don't expect that to just come all at once but make plans. Like I've started planning for this in 2008 and I didn't quit my job until this year. So I've been planning for this and changing, but the advice would be to start moving in the direction you want to go in... (Andrea)

She suggests to first reflect on the level of meaning one experiences in their current work, and then start planning and make changes progressively to move to the direction one desires. She also shares her experience that she did not quit her job until she was ready, which appears to be able to reduce the risk of losing financial means that one may need to survive. Similarly, Matt encourages LSES workers that are currently working in a meaningless job to reflect on their interests and to pursue them as long as they are harmless to others:

I would say to a person, you know who was working a meaningless job to kind of do a little bit of soul searching and find what really makes them tick, what they're most interested in, what they love doing, and if it doesn't hurt anybody else then go ahead and go for it. You can't think of what other people might say, I know in my case, you know I'm constantly thinking what would my parents think of me doing this, but your parents lived their lives and you've got to live yours, everybody's got to live their own life. You can't find a life, you can't buy a life, you can't pick your life, you just have to live it. (Matt)

He believes that each person has to live their own lives, not what others expect of them.

Andrea further notes the importance of taking action in this process:

But if you're not moving to where you want to be you're never gonna get there. Like my grandpa used to say, if you don't get the seed in the ground nothing's gonna grow, that's most people's problem. Farmers, they don't, and I've done it, they don't get their seed in the ground, all you got

to do is plant, it's like the most mundane, easy thing you could ever do, and if you don't do it nothing will grow. If you worry about getting it just right or if you worry about I have to get out there and weed and do this, don't worry about any of that, just get the one seed in the ground, take one step in the direction you want to take, and then keep going from there, I guess, would be my advice. (Andrea)

She emphasizes here that making little steps towards pursuing meaningful work and not getting caught up in worrying is critical to make it possible.

With this change, however, there seems to be some changes that are needed to be made in one's lifestyle as well. Andrea reported that her pursuit of meaningful work was possible despite limited resources because she adjusted her expenses: "and I just cut down on like, I have like almost no living expenses you know, we're buying the basics and that's all we have..."

Similarly, Doug also provides advice on the need to change one's lifestyle if one is not experiencing meaning in their current work:

... you gotta change your path, quit hanging out, people you're hanging out with, ditch some friends, I don't know. I went through a divorce and everything like that and it's just like, "Man, if you're not happy, you got yourself to blame." And if you keep making the same mistakes that you were making, you're probably gonna still not be happy further in the future, so. (Doug)

This may imply the intertwined nature of experience in meaningful work and other life circumstances which then requires some change in both areas.

#### *Theme 6-2: Viewing income as secondary gain of work*

Four participants reported viewing income as a secondary gain of work rather than the primary reason for work as a way to experience their work as more meaningful. Matt argues that happiness is what people should strive for, not the money in their work: "I mean it's all about being happy that's like the, like the ultimate goal that we should be striving for, not having five cars and a huge house in Beverly Hills, it should be happiness."

Sofia suggests that working for money could act as a barrier to experiencing work as meaningful:

... It's like, for a job, if you're doing it for the money you're taking the whole motivation of the job, the whole thing, its selfishness, is why you have that job. And, yeah if you're going to work in a selfish mood, you're not going to like your job, you're only there for the money. That's cool you know, if that's you, that's you. But my advice to you would be think about it a little bit more, think about why you get up, think about what you do at your job that makes it worth sitting there all day, in the office or whatever. (Sofia)

She emphasizes here that rather than focusing on the income they are earning, thinking about the inherent value of work that gives motivation and purpose in their work can help one to experience meaningful work. Likewise, Andrea shares how focusing on benefitting self and others than making profit was what helped her to pursue meaningful work:

...that's where most people fail when they try to step out on the kind of the limb we're stepping out on which is where, we're not so focused on profiting as we are on making a difference and having like a positive impact on ourselves and everybody else... (Andrea)

Sofia also shares an example of how she used her own "thought process" to focus on the work environment she likes rather than the money she earns to experience meaningfulness in her work:

If it were for the [paycheck], I would have quit. 'Cause, two hundred fifty bucks really ain't nothing, like at my other FAST FOOD RESTAURANT, I was making five hundred to six hundred dollars because of the part-time, minimum wage and stuff. Because at STATE1 I was making \$10.50, and here I'm only making \$8.25. It's not that big of a difference, but if you're really about money, it is. And you're not gonna like it. And, you know, when I got paid the other day, 'cause I lost my wallet, I didn't get paid for a couple of days, you know. So when I got my card working, it was only like two fifty or two forty or something like that, I got mad I was like, 'Man, that it?' but see, my thought process, it wasn't about the money, it was the fact that when I see how much I was making, and to how much I was making before, the difference was because of the environment, for me. ... Here, I don't care, I really don't care, you can give me eighty bucks, its eighty bucks, I don't care, I'm making it every two weeks so I'll have one sixty by the end of the month, and if I save that up you can almost have five hundred bucks in a month. So, it's your thought process... (Sofia)

Participants seem to use this cognitive strategy of putting less value on money and focusing on other sources of meaning to experience meaningful work in a lower income job.

### *Theme 6-3: Connecting work to a broader purpose*

Four participants reported that connecting their work to a broader purpose is helpful in enhancing meaningfulness in their work. Several participants connect their job tasks with their organizational mission to experience meaningful work. For example, Ralph, indicates that

“pretty much anything around here is meaningful for what you get done.” He appears to experience his work as meaningful regardless of the tasks he does by perceiving what he does as contributing to the broader organizational mission which is meaningful to him.

Doug, who works at the same store extends his work role from just sorting clothes and delivery, to being a “role model” for the children his organization serves and to engaging in conversations with customers who are in difficult financial situations to “hype ‘em up.” It seems that Doug engages in expanding his tasks to fit his work with the prosocial mission of his organization.

Other participants connect their current work with a personal life purpose. For Daniel, his work is not just customer service, but fighting against racism:

... because when I do something I like to make sure I will like, ‘This dude, he can’t do this work,’ I like to prove myself to show people like me can still work they’re not just lazy or nothing you know... (Daniel)

By serving his customers with the best attitude, he is not just simply being a good employee, but challenging stereotypes against Latino workers. He appears to be able to experience his work as meaningful due to this broader purpose for his work.

Andrea is currently working on multiple jobs at home. However, she does not perceive these as separate work, but all interwoven with each other within a broader purpose. She states in this quote that she and her partner has found a way to do this after identifying her life’s mission:

I feel really good, I feel really good about it because we found ways to make what we love to do work, so that’s the, and it all works together, the music, the music is like about cultivation, and like the world, and the videos are about sustainability and self-empowerment, and just everything we do just kind of goes together so it all feels, it’s a lot, but it all feels good and it’s all one, one big project, really. (Andrea)

Later in the member check interview, she talks about the “vesica piscis,” a shape that is created by two intersecting circles, which she views as a representation of her life. She states that she

uses this as a symbol for her work as she sees her work as a collaboration between different types of work and other people. She says, “the good thing is you can add multiple circles,” implying that she plans to continue to expand her work towards her broader purpose in life.

#### *Theme 6-4: Stress management and self-regulation*

Another theme that was found in half of the participants was strategies related to stress management and self-regulation. Even meaningful work can be stressful at times. Although Ralph sometimes gets overwhelmed at work, he does not seem to be too affected by it as reflected in this quote: “To me a day’s a day, good or bad, you gotta live with them no matter what.” Similarly, Evelyn says, “Take it easy, it’s, I mean, life is hard and, you just have to, I don’t know, go with it.” By taking a relaxed attitude and accepting that stressful days can happen, the everyday hassles seem to have less impact to the participants due to the overall meaningfulness of the work.

In her interview, Sofia suggests various strategies she engages in for managing stress and self-regulation at work. They include the “ten factor” which she describes as taking a deep breath, and counting from ten to one to control her emotions. She also indicates that “if I notice anything bad, if I feel any negative energy, I try to overwhelm myself with positiveness, because I don’t want to go to work like that.” This is similar to how Evelyn and Ralph both do not dwell on negative experiences at work.

Sofia also recommends having a “motto” for work which can be used to keep oneself motivated for their work. She reports that she frequently engages in positive self-talk and inspirational thoughts to cope with difficulties at work as noted in the following quote: “I had to motivate myself a lot, I had to tell myself a lot of things, inspirational thoughts to myself that are



going to help me get through things.” Cassidy also engages in self-regulatory behaviors on days that are less meaningful for her:

I guess just, like on my less meaningful days, just push myself into doing something more productive because it’s very easy here to just kind of sit when we don’t have anything to do, so I guess maybe if I pushed myself into doing more on days when I’m just sitting around, like that might make it a little bit more meaningful and I might feel a little bit more like, ‘Hey, I’m here for a purpose.’ (Cassidy)

By “pushing” herself to do things when there is not much to do, she seems to be able to experience her work as more meaningful. These strategies appear to be an indirect approach to enhance meaningfulness in work by preventing work from becoming meaningless.

*Theme 6-5: Understanding of and active engagement in work*

Three participants discussed learning more about their work and being actively engaged has helped them experience their work as more meaningful. Cassidy suggests that getting more acquainted with the work, workplace, and people as a strategy to experience meaningfulness for those who struggle to experience their work as meaningful:

I’d probably tell them if they didn’t know a lot about the products or something like that, to maybe start researching about that and learning about things so that , ’cause I know some people here, they’re just kind of here because it’s like a job, and some days, they’re not as excited as I am, and they have to ask for help more often or whatever and it’s just not as fun. So, I’d tell them to start researching the products we have here more, getting more acquainted with the store, the customers ... so I’d tell people to kind of get more acquainted to the customers and instead of a customer to, employee faces or whatever to just kind of be more friendly with people, because a lot of the people around here do want to be, they wanna know you really well and know what you’re into and everything like that. So I guess I’d just tell them to dive more into it. (Cassidy)

When people are more familiar with their work environment, it appears to give them more flexibility to enjoy the work and not feel overwhelmed. Sofia also provides an example of how knowing more about the organization can help experience meaningful work:

Some people happen to work at FAST FOOD RESTAURANT for a very, long, time and those are the general managers, or those are the people who own FAST FOOD RESTAURANT, you know. And they, working there for so long, I think they see FAST FOOD RESTAURANT for what it really is, being a general manager. And, being an employee you don’t really know yet. (Sofia)

It seems that learning more about the job and the work environment leads to a deeper understanding of their work which may lead to help LSES workers recognize the true value of their work. As Ralph puts it, “the most stupidest question there is the one that’s not asked.”

*Theme 6-6: Putting in extra effort*

Two participants mentioned that putting in extra effort in work may also be a way to enhance meaningfulness. “Repetition teaches everything. Doing it over and over teaches anything and everything. The more you learn it the better off you, the faster you can do it,” Ralph says. Based on his definition of meaningful work, he seems to believe that practice will make one see the progress and eventually make it possible to experience meaning in their work.

Sofia, who experiences meaningful work through customers states that “it takes more” to have customers come back to the restaurant:

I think because our, our FAST FOOD RESTAURANT, every FAST FOOD RESTAURANT is hands on, we give more of our, more of our food quality when it’s being made than when it is just being handed out, ’cause anybody can say, “Have a good day, have a nice day,” but saying it and really meaning it to somebody, and they feel it, they’re gonna want to come back. Like me when I was doing drive thru we have to say certain words and I don’t do it, like I put, I say my own things like, I always liked, I’m like “Hi thank you for choosing us, how may I help you today?” and as they drive away, I say thank you, and as they came up to the counter, and take their money and take their food I say “Have a wonderful day” and then they come back the next day. (Sofia)

It appears that going the extra mile may lead to creating the conditions of meaningfulness in one’s work.

*Theme 6-7: Being optimistic toward challenges*

Another theme that was captured in two of the participants’ interviews was having an optimistic attitude toward challenges they experience while pursuing meaningful work. Andrea describes the difficulties she experienced while pursuing meaningful work as “echoes”:

... it’s always positive impacts because your living for your dreams but then you have the echoes which are like bad things that come back around and make most people believe that ‘everybody else was right, this is a crazy idea it’s not gonna work,’ but it’s just an echo coming around to test how you’re gonna deal with that. And so we have those happen where it feels like were not progressing, were not moving, the energy has become stagnant, you know. And now that we are

stronger and know that that's what's going on and we can kind of rise above those echoes and say this is not proof that this is the wrong path, this is just life's at it's best, a test to let you know that there is a, that your either maybe you're doing the right thing but the direction needs to be altered a little bit or you know, it's always different, each echo is different. Most of the time it's letting us know that we're getting in a stagnant pattern of whatever it is, you know, which is never beneficial to anybody,... (Andrea)

She describes that it is easy to fall back when you experience a challenge while trying to change a path to do work that is meaningful for you. However, she believes that an “echo” is merely a test, not a failure. It is interesting that she uses the word, “echo” here as it also means reflection. It appears that perceiving the challenges as an opportunity to reflect and grow rather than be discouraged seems to be important in order to pursue more meaningful work. Sofia also reports a similar attitude toward challenges. She says what matters is “how much you're willing to go through to get that point in your life.” She demonstrates the willingness to overcome challenges in pursuing meaningful work as a LSES worker.

Another interesting commonality between these two participants were that they appeared to expect that these challenges would come from the start. Andrea says, “there's gonna be that big long moment where it seems like nothing's happening, and then all of a sudden it is.” Sofia reports a similar experience at her work:

... I think there's one though, there's one girl when I first started working there, because my FAST FOOD RESTAURANT is Spanish-oriented, everyone in that store speaks Spanish, everyone. And I'm the only one that doesn't and I think when I first started working there, some of them did kind of look at me like, you know, I don't like her because she doesn't speak Spanish or whatever. And from vibes that for me, I get vibes off of people, and that's exactly what I felt when I first started working there, there was so much tension because I didn't speak, and that ended right away, I mean, they'd talk to me in Spanish, I would reply in English. So like it works now, just like when I started working there, because I was a newbie they looked at me like, okay like 'Who is she, how's she gonna work, how is she gonna help us in our environment, is she a good worker, is she this,' you know what I mean? So it was expected .. not to be like, I knew it was gonna be like that. And now, I don't have problems with anybody, no body at all. I get along with everybody. I love my manager, she's great. She makes me laugh... (Sofia)

Both of these participants seem to expect that challenges will come, and view them as a process rather than being stuck with it, which may in turn make it easier to experience their current work as meaningful.

*Theme 6-8. Being patient and having hope for the future*

Finally, three participants endorsed being patient and having hope towards a positive future as a strategy to be able to experience meaningful work. For those who may struggle to experience meaning in their current work, participants advise them to be patient and have hope for the future. Sofia states that LSES workers may be able to experience their work as meaningful by viewing that their current work will contribute as a gateway to future work path: “And FAST FOOD RESTAURANT isn’t the greatest job in the world, but it will give you a start to what you want to do.” She encourages LSES workers to have future aspirations for a desired work, but not dread the current work: “Because then you’re gonna waste all of your time trying to find the perfect job, when all you got to do is stick this one out, and you can get a better one on the way.”

Andrea acknowledges that “faith” is difficult, but important in pursuing meaningful work:

Yeah, faith is tough. Yeah, 'cause if you don't have faith then you're putting yourself in a position where your convincing yourself that won't happen and sometimes you cause it not to happen or maybe you just do all these things that make it not possible for yourself when it's totally possible. And I mean I'm finding this out every day with new things, there's a lot of things that I still believe are not possible, that I have to prove to myself, you know? I almost like to go into it like it's a battle, it's like, well if I come out denied and rejected and ruined, it doesn't matter because if I don't, I'm just right here. I know the path, here. I know where I'm at, I want to go somewhere else. So just go into it like, I'm gonna take every step I can until there's no step to take, and then I'll see ... (Andrea)

She later shares a story of getting a mercury filling by connections she made while pursuing her meaningful work, which otherwise may have been impossible to do due to financial constraints.

Participants seem to urge LSES workers to not give up the possibility of experiencing meaningful work.

Other unique strategies suggested by one participant include: *focusing on the process than outcome of work* (Andrea), *cultivating self-efficacy* (Sofia), and *use of humor* (Sofia).

### **Domain 7: Perspective on Relationship Between Meaningful Work and Lower SES**

This domain captures participants' perspective on the relationship between meaningful work and lower SES. Participants were asked about their thoughts on the assumption that meaningful work is difficult to experience for LSES workers. The next two themes describe participants' perspective on this assumption.

#### *Theme 7-1: Importance of minimal resources but leveling off*

As noted in Domain 4, there seems to be a general consensus on participants' perception of importance of having a job and income. Participants seem to clearly acknowledge that having a job to support them financially is important. It appears that when lacking the necessities, the importance of being employed and income becomes more salient. For example, although Sofia had mentioned that money is not the most important thing for her in work, she acknowledges that money was more important when she was homeless: "I was homeless, which is why my job was so important, so why money was more important at that time..."

However, participants also noted that once they have a job that could provide them with some income to survive, SES do not seem to matter much for experiencing meaningfulness in their work. Evelyn discusses here about how having a higher education and income may be nice, but not critical for her happiness in herself and at work:

Well, I think if I had a really good education and you know, I think I could make probably a lot of money, and uh, but I don't think it makes me less happier, the way I am now, I mean. I'm pretty happy, I feel good about myself working, and yeah, I wish I could make more money, I mean. But I'm fine. (Evelyn)

She goes on to say that income is not everything in a job: “Yeah, ‘cause I know people that are rich, they ain’t that happy, they ain’t, you know, money ain’t everything.”

Doug seems to have experienced this for himself, where he previously worked in a job that paid him much better but less meaningful:

...that was really, that whole retail America thing was pretty delittling with, I mean, I made like thirty somethin’ thousand dollars just putting stuff away in the middle of the night at the RETAILER, you know. But that was, I just couldn’t wait for the end of the work shift and drug feet gettin’ to work. (Doug)

Even though he earned more income, he does not seem to experience his work as meaningful due to not seeing his work benefitting the society. It seems that it is more about the work itself than the SES it is associated with that determines the experience of meaningful work. Cassidy shares her perspective about this relationship between lower SES and meaningful work:

... I see a lot of people just working at RETAIL DEPARTMENT STORE and unless you’re super into working for RETAIL DEPARTMENT STORE or FAST FOOD RESTAURANT 1 or wherever, if that’s your passion that’s cool, but you know a lot of people are just doing it to get by, and the days that I have to drag myself to work and just so that I’m like I need this paycheck, there isn’t a lot of meaning. So there are a lot of other people in low paying jobs I think that do have a really hard time seeing meaning, and joy, and fun in their work because they are doing it because they didn’t want to go to college or whatever and now they have a family to feed or just themselves to keep their head out of the water, you know? So, I mean it’s sad to say that I do think that it’s kind of correct assumption but, I’m lucky to work at this job because it does make a difference in the community and everything whereas working at FAST FOOD RESTAURANT 1 or FAST FOOD RESTAURANT 2, I know a lot of people don’t see, to me that’s hurting the community and hurting everyone. (Cassidy)

She acknowledges that it may be difficult to experience meaning when people are working in a low SES job just to survive. It seems to be the subjective experience in the work which makes work meaningful or meaningless to an individual rather than the actual income.

*Theme 7-2: Access to experience meaningful work regardless of SES*

Like this, the majority of the participants appeared to see meaningful work as accessible to LSES workers. Andrea says that “work can be meaningful no matter what you’re doing, that could be in the biggest of jobs and like the smallest of jobs there can be immense meaning.” She

encourages LSES workers “to know that it’s, even if you don’t have the money, even if you don’t have the means, that it’s possible, you just have to start cultivating it.” In contrast to the common assumption, LSES workers seem to view that meaningful work can be experienced in a lower SES job, and it depends on the person. As Doug says:

I can’t say about Farmer Joe’s helper that doesn’t make much money if he doesn’t have meaning in his life, that’s on him, I guess. You gotta look for the meaning, whether you’re a high school grad or college grad. I mean, it’s up to you to be happy, nobody can make yourself happy besides you, and if you’re not happy it’s your own self to blame, I guess... (Doug)

Similarly, Ralph states that it is the individual’s responsibility to seek meaning in their work regardless of their education:

Well a person makes his own life how he wants it. If he makes it hard, he makes it hard. That’s his own dealing, from the get go, once they hand him his high school diploma it’s his life from then on. How you make it is your dealing. You can’t blame nobody but yourself. If you’re a smoker you can’t blame mom and dad, they didn’t tell you to light that thing. (Ralph)

Sofia says that it is only the person that can make the work meaningful and accept the opportunities that are available:

... if you want to accept it, I mean ’cause there’s a lot of people that say “Life doesn’t give you anything”, “Life is cruel,” and life is cruel, very cruel, it will tear you down any way it can, but you’re the only one that can build it up, you’re the only one that can pick those pieces up and build your life back together like it was before. (Sofia)

It appears that regardless of the SES of the individual, it seems to be the person’s determination whether work can be a meaningful experience or not.

### **Summary of Findings**

The interpretative phenomenological analysis of the data collected from eight participants yielded a total of seven domains and twenty nine super-ordinate themes illustrating the experience of meaningful work among LSES workers. The majority of participants perceived their current work as meaningful, and identified various conditions that facilitate or hinder their meaningfulness in work. Participants witnessed a positive personal change through experiencing

meaningful work and suggest their own strategies to enhance meaningfulness in work for other LSES workers. Participants viewed meaningful work as an accessible resource for LSES workers.



## CHAPTER FOUR: DISCUSSION

The present study explored the experience of meaningful work of eight LSES workers. This chapter will discuss the findings of the present study in relation to the existing literature, and present limitations, implications for research and practice, and suggestions for future research. Finally, a conclusion of this dissertation will be presented.

### **Review of Main Findings**

In this section, the main findings of the present study are presented based on the research questions that guided this qualitative inquiry and discussed by situating them with the meaningful work literature.

#### **1. How is meaningful work defined and experienced by LSES workers?**

This research question was posed to examine the unique understanding and experiential aspects of meaningful work of LSES workers.

*Similar definition of meaningful work.* In the present study, participants were asked to define meaningful work in their own words. Previous researchers have raised the need to think about the possible “classed” (p.7) assumptions of existing definitions of meaningful work (Broadfoot, Carolne, Medved, Aakhus, Gabor, & Taylor, 2008) and suggested that the definition of meaningful work should be left open for all workers (Steger, 2014).

The findings from Domain 1 (Definitions of Meaningful Work) indicate that LSES workers’ definitions of meaningful work were fairly consistent with previous definitions provided by researchers. For example, participants of the present study perceived meaningful work as intrinsically motivating work that gets them up in the morning, and would enjoy doing even without financial rewards. Other researchers have also used intrinsic motivation as part of

their definition by defining meaningful work as “finding a purpose in work that is greater than the extrinsic outcomes of the work” (Arnold et al., 2007, p.195) and as a “deeper level of intrinsic motivation” (Chalofsky & Krishna, 2009, p.191). Another common definition of meaningful work provided by participants was work that is beneficial to the self and others. Self-others has been used as a core structure for conceptualizing meaningful work in previous theories of meaningful work (e.g., Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012; Rosso et al., 2010; Steger et al., 2012). It seems that participants perceive work as meaningful when it not only is making them a better person, but when it does some good to others and the community. The final definition of meaningful work suggested by participants was work that evokes positive emotions. Meaningful work has primarily been understood as a cognitive-motivational construct (Steger & Dik, 2010), and recently the importance of considering the role of affect in the experience of meaningful work has been raised (Rosso et al., 2010). There is already a considerable amount of research evidence on the role of positive affect in the experience of meaning in life (e.g., Hicks & King, 2007; Hicks, Trent, Davis, & King, 2012; King, Hicks, Krull & Del Gaiso, 2006) which supports this definition of meaningful work.

Overall, the definitions of meaningful work provided by the participants of this study did not largely depart from the previous conceptualizations of meaningful work with the exception of the affective definition of meaningful work. This finding suggests that it should not be assumed that LSES workers have a vastly different understanding of what meaningful work may mean for them to previous middle-to-upper SES notions of meaningful work, while acknowledging that an affective conceptualization of meaningful work may exist. It should also be noted that there was some variability as well as commonality among participants’ definitions

of meaningful work which supports the idea of meaningful work as a subjective experience (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003).

*Perception of current work as meaningful.* Contrary to the common assumption that it may be difficult for lower SES individuals to experience meaningfulness in their work due to economic constraints (Brief & Nord, 1990), all participants of the present study appeared to experience a sense of meaningfulness in their current work. It should be noted that having a sense of meaning in work was no longer an inclusion criteria for the participants in the present study. However, there were a varied level of meaningfulness in work among participants. As described in the theme, *perception of meaningfulness in current work*, some participants appeared to have an overall strong sense of meaningfulness in their work (e.g., Doug, Andrea), while some participants' meaningfulness in their work seem to fluctuate (e.g., Cassidy, Daniel). This finding suggests that meaningfulness in work may not necessarily be a constant perception, but may be a judgment of a moment which may vary from job to job, day to day, and even task to task in the same job.

*Various ways of perceiving meaningfulness.* Participants perceived their current work as meaningful through various ways such as quantity, frequency, availability of sources, and through comparison with less meaningful work. The various ways participants perceive their meaningfulness in work suggest that there may be no singular way to compare the meaningfulness LSES workers experience in their work. Nonetheless, several participants appeared to use social comparison processes such as downward social comparison (i.e., comparing themselves to others that are worse off) with their previous jobs, other organizations that are in the same industry, or other employees in their workplace as a way to perceive meaningfulness in their work. Although there is no direct research that has examined this link so

far, previous research has found that downward social comparisons at work are significantly associated with job satisfaction (Brown, Ferris, Heller, & Keeping, 2007).

*Positive emotions and flow-like experiences.* Consistent with how participants defined meaningful work, all participants of the present study reported a variety of positive emotions when they experience meaningful work. Common positive emotions elicited by participants were happiness, enjoyment, gratitude, excitement, fun, and pride. This finding is especially encouraging for LSES workers as experiencing positive emotions in or at work may lead to even more positive emotions which could lead them to build psychological resources and better overall well-being (Fredrickson, 2001).

One notable experiential component identified by three participants (i.e., Doug, Andrea, and Cassidy) was a flow-like state described as “feeling in the gut that you know you did the right thing,” “sense of you’re on the right track,” and “time passing by.” Research using a measure of Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) characteristics of flow has found that flow and meaning are positively associated, but distinct experiences (Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005). It appears that flow is not a necessary component of the experience of meaningful work, but a possible experience that could be part of a meaningful work experience for some LSES workers.

Finally, meaningfulness in work may also be experienced as a whole in a higher level. One participant (i.e., Andrea) noted a sense of coherence of the many meaningful moments she has experienced through her work. She appears to have experienced a higher-order meaningfulness which connects the individual experiences of meaning together into an integrated whole. This seems to align with the more holistic perspective of the experience of meaningful work such as Chalofsky (2003), Lips-Wiersma and Wright (2012), and Park (2012).

## **2. What makes the work of LSES workers meaningful or meaningless?**

Domain 3 and 4 depict the internal and external conditions of meaningful work described by the participants of the present study. The internal conditions of meaningful work presented in Domain 3 can be understood as sources of meaningfulness in and at work for participants.

*Feeling competent and in control.* The most frequently mentioned theme among all internal conditions of meaningful work was *high self-efficacy and competence*. Participants seemed to experience their work as meaningful when they believe in their ability to do their work and do it well, whereas they experience their work as meaningless when they are faced with a situation where they feel like they have no control over and does not feel like they are able to do their work. Self-efficacy has been pointed to as a main mechanism of meaningfulness in work through its enhancement in sense of control, competence, and perceived impact on others (Rosso et al., 2010). Empirical research has also supported competence as a basic psychological need that needs to be satisfied in the context of a workplace (Baard, Deci, & Ryan, 2004). This condition may particularly be an important source of meaningfulness in work for LSES workers who may typically have less control and educational privilege which may present more unique challenges in feeling competent.

*It's all about fit.* Participants of the present study also commonly indicated that their work is meaningful when their work and organizational mission fits with their personal value. In contrast, when the organizational values did not fit with them they appeared to have difficulty finding their work as meaningful and even led them to quit their job despite better pay. The importance of congruence between a person's values and workplace in job satisfaction has long been supported by person-environment fit models (e.g., Dawis & Lofquist, 1984) which appear to have the potential to be applied in meaningful work research as well (Hansen, 2013).

*Other people matter.* It is noteworthy that three out of seven super-ordinate themes of internal conditions for meaningful work involve other people. First, the majority of the participants of the present study reported that they experience their work as meaningful when they have a quality positive relationship with their co-workers, boss/managers, and customers. In a recent empirical study, an open, appreciative, collaborative, and supportive social climate at the workplace was found to be a significant predictor of meaningful work (Schnell et al., 2013). Due to this importance of the impact of positive interactions with people at work on meaningfulness, it appears that when there is a negative interaction, participants perceived their work as meaningless. Wrzesniewski, Dutton, and Debebe (2003) suggested that workers find meaning in their work through interpersonal cues in work through an interpersonal sensemaking process. It may be that LSES workers perceive their work as meaningful through engaging in this process.

Participants of the present study also seem to experience their work as meaningful when they feel like they have benefitted others and made a positive impact through their work. Research has shown that there is a strong association between measures of prosocial desire and other aspects of meaningful work, indicating that benefitting others is understood as a core component of meaningful work for many people (Steger, 2014). Several participants especially found that knowing that their work benefits people in need rather than giving advantage to the rich as what makes their work particularly meaningful. It may be the case that participants experience this as meaningful because of their identification with the economically disadvantaged group, which is contrary to research indicating that individuals of lower SES may automatically devalue their in-group (Rudman, Feinberg, & Fairchild, 2002). Perceived social impact has also found to be a mechanism for increased awareness in the actual positive outcome

of work (Grant, 2008), which may in turn allow the individual to perceive her or his work as meaningful. In addition, having a positive impact on other lives may also act as an empowerment for the participants who may not usually be in a highly recognized role.

*Financial means can be meaningful, too.* Although less common than other sources of meaningfulness in work, half of the sample reported that their work providing a means for financial stability adds meaningfulness to their work. This does not mean that this is the only reason participants do their work, but it appears that an income generated by their work can be perceived as a meaningful source in work especially for LSES workers whom the financial need may be greater. It should also be noted that none of the participants reported that this as a sole condition for meaningful work that was present in their current work, indicating alternate source of meaningful work is available for LSES workers.

Overall, psychological conditions appear to be more commonly endorsed among participants than physical conditions that make their work meaningful which may provide LSES workers with more room to enhance meaningfulness in their work.

The super-ordinate themes of Domain 4 address the contextual conditions that may support or hinder the experience of meaningful work.

*Context matters for meaningful work.* The external conditions may not be directly related to the work and immediate work context of individuals, but seem critical in influencing the overall meaningfulness in work of LSES workers. Although the conditions of meaningful work may be available in lower SES jobs, LSES workers appear to deal with the real challenge of actually obtaining a job that will allow them to experience meaningfulness in it. Participants discuss the challenges of unemployment, the need to maintain a meaningless job for financial support, and lack of resources to pursue meaningful work. These are all actual barriers to the

experience of meaningful work that should be seriously considered. However, participants of the study appeared to be not discouraged or be helpless by this but sought creative ways to pursue meaningful work. It appears with adequate support from family and close relationships, and the local community and culture may make this possible. For instance, researchers suggest that relationships with others outside of work, especially families can have an impact on how an individual perceives their work meaning (Brief & Nord, 1990). A recent empirical study supports this idea through finding that one's work orientation is developed through socialization processes with parents during adolescence (Dekas & Baker, 2014). It appears that family and close relationships may influence the value of experiencing meaningful work. However, the majority of the participants of the present study reported positive influences of parents, partners, and friends, in their experience of meaningful work through having a role model, providing financial and emotional support, encouraging the pursuit of meaningful work, and adding meaning to work. This seems to be consistent with the theoretical perspective of work-family enrichment, which views that a positive experience in the family domain may improve the quality of life in the work domain, and vice versa. (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). While the contextual factors may be viewed as a constraint to pursuing meaningful work, it appears that it may also provide LSES workers with resources to cultivate meaningfulness in their work (Wrzesniewski, LoBuglio, Dutton, & Berg, 2013).

*Meaningful work comes with maturity.* Several participants of the present study mentioned that meaningful work is in part a function of their age and where they are at in the career developmental process. This process supported through research on meaning in life. Empirical research indicates that people in later life report higher levels of presence of meaning, while younger adults report higher levels of search for meaning (Steger, Oishi, & Kashdan,



2009). Although there are many sources and conditions of meaningful work that may be created by the individual or organization, or together, there also seems to be a general maturity that comes with time.

### **3. How does meaningful work influence LSES workers?**

Earlier, it was suggested that meaningful work is a beneficial psychological resource for the individual. This research questions was sought to explore whether experiencing meaningful work has similar benefits to LSES workers.

*Meaningful work is good, for the most part.* The findings presented in Domain 5 suggest that meaningful work mostly has a positive influence on LSES workers. Participants report increases in self-esteem, general well-being, and satisfaction in life through their meaningful work experience. Links between meaningful work and better psychological health and life satisfaction has been supported through previous empirical studies on meaningful work and calling (e.g., Arnold et al., 2007; Steger et al., 2010). However, one participant (i.e., Sofia) noted that there may be a possible negative impact of meaningful work. This is consistent with the double-edged aspects of job-crafting (Berg et al., 2010), which suggest that individuals engagement in job crafting may unintentionally go awry when it counters the organization's goals.

*Meaningful work spills over.* Participants also reported a change in their values, perspective, and even behaviors through the experience of meaningful work in Domain 5. Researchers have suggested that when an individual engages in work and non-work domains in a way that is consistent with their identities, there could be a positive spillover effect that generates synergy between those domains and enriches both work and life (Thompson & Bunderson, 2001). It appears that participants' experience of meaningfulness in their work has a positive

spillover effect to their personal life which resulted in a change in what is important in, and how they view life, and also motivate them to change their behaviors accordingly. This appears to reflect the powerful value the experience of meaningful work may have in a LSES worker's life which may act as an empowering resource.

#### **4. What are the strategies to enhance meaningfulness in LSES workers' work?**

Participants of the present study suggested a variety of strategies they personally use or would like to suggest to other LSES workers who struggle to experience their work as meaningful to enhance meaningful work in Domain 6.

*Proactive creators of meaningful work.* The most common and effective strategy participants utilized to enhance meaningfulness in their work was *being proactive and taking action*. Participants not only actively searched for sources of meaningfulness in their work, but participated in actively creating conditions of meaningful work for themselves in their workplace. For those who appeared to have difficulty accessing conditions that make their work meaningful, participants suggested strategies such as self-reflection of current level of meaningfulness in work, planning and making changes gradually and persistently despite barriers, and changing one's lifestyle to enable meaningful work, to pursue a different work that may be easier to access those conditions. This portrayal of LSES workers as a proactive and agentic pursuers of meaningful work seem to be consistent with the views on workers from job crafting (e.g., Wrzesniewski et al., 2013) and protean career orientation (e.g., Hall et al., 2013). These theories view workers as the managers of meaningful work rather than passively relying on what the job or organization offers.

*Utilization of various strategies.* Participants suggested a variety of cognitive, attitudinal/emotional, and behavioral strategies to enhance meaningfulness in their work.

Examples of cognitive strategies include perceiving income as a secondary gain than the primary reason for work and connecting work to a broader purpose; attitudinal/emotional strategies include stress management, being optimistic towards challenges, and being patient and having hope for the future. Behavioral strategies discussed by participants include being proactive and taking action, understanding and active engagement in work, and putting in extra effort. Participants appeared to use various ways to enhance meaningfulness in their work, whether that is changing their perception, managing their emotions, or actively being engaged.

Some of these strategies were more active in their approach to enhance meaningfulness in work. For example, there were some strategies similar to the job crafting techniques suggested by Berg et al. (2013) as a way to enhance meaningful work. Participants suggested connecting their job tasks and role with a broader purpose to experience meaningful work, which is a way of crafting work through expanding perceptions. Another strategy that uses a more active meaning-making approach is to have a better understanding of the organization by learning about the mission or tasks. This strategy particularly seems to use comprehension as a mechanism to promote purpose as suggested by Steger and Dik (2010). On the other hand, strategies such as stress management and being patient and having hope for the future appear to be more passive but preventative approach to maintain/enhance meaningfulness in work.

*Effectiveness of strategies may depend.* It should be noted that depending on what strategy is used, the effect it has on one's meaningfulness may differ. For example, Cassidy's perceived level of meaningfulness appear to fluctuate because her strategy to enhance meaningful work is to engage in a particular task that is meaningful for her. Whereas for Ralph, how he experiences his work as meaningful through the overarching mission of his organization regardless of the actual daily tasks may help him perceive his work as meaningful more

consistently. These two processes have been identified by Pratt and Ashforth (2003) as organizational practices that foster meaningfulness by enriching tasks and membership. There seem to be different ways the strategies impact the experience of meaningful work.

Overall, despite the assumption that LSES workers may be restricted in ways they can experience their work as meaningful, they appeared to engage in diverse ways to make their work meaningful. This is consistent with a finding from a previous qualitative study on job crafting which found that low-ranking employees appeared to feel that they have more autonomy to craft their jobs compared to their higher-ranking employees (Berg, Wrzesniewski, & Dutton, 2010). It may be that LSES workers are more motivated to craft their work to make it meaningful in order to cope with their disadvantaged circumstances (Hall, Feldman, & Kim, 2013).

### **5. How do LSES workers view the relationship between socioeconomic status and meaningful work?**

Many researchers have hypothesized this relationship between socioeconomic status and meaningful work, but what do LSES workers actually think? Themes included in Domain 7 captured participants' view on this.

*Relevant, but to an extent.* Participants of the present study appeared to view the relationship as relevant to an extent. They discussed how the importance of income may become more important than pursuing meaningful work if one is struggling to survive. However, participants note that once one has a job and has income—even though it may be minimal—the importance of income becomes much less impactful to one's experience of meaningfulness in their work. This is consistent with the results of previous studies of the relationship between income and well-being (e.g., Brickman, et al., 1978).

*Meaningful work is attainable to all.* Participants also indicate that it is possible to attain meaningful work regardless of SES. Some participants even say that is the individual's responsibility to seek meaningful work. However, this finding is not to blame LSES workers who may struggle to experience meaningful work. As Ashforth and Kreiner (2013) puts it, "meaningfulness does not include defensive tactics that enable individuals to merely cope with the stigmatized features of the work or the stigma itself" (p.131). Therefore, this finding should be interpreted with caution not to perpetuate the classism in the opposite way as intended. LSES workers who may struggle to experience meaningful work may simply not know how to make their work meaningful due to lack of the sources of meaningfulness in work as described by the participants of this study. This finding then points to the need of a more societal level of co-creating supportive conditions for meaningful work (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2013; Rosso et al., 2010).

### **Implications**

The present study contributes to the meaningful work literature by providing a detailed description of LSES workers' meaningful work experience. Many researchers have called for the need to actively recruit participants who represent lower SES in the study of meaningful work (Allan et al., 2013; Rosso et al., 2010) yet with very little empirical action. This study is the first known study to fully focus on the experience of meaningful work of LSES workers, which facilitated a capture of LSES workers' own understanding of their meaningful work experience, rather than imposing a set concept or idea of meaningful work generated by researchers that may or may not fit with them. Previous studies of meaningful work have mainly focused on the intraindividual level processes of meaningful work (Rosso et al., 2010). However, the present study expanded knowledge about how the socioeconomic context may

influence the experience of meaningful work of an individual. In addition, it presents unique contexts of diverse participants who were recruited through the community, which enriches the understanding of how meaningful work is experienced by each LSES individual who may lay in various circumstances.

The findings of the present study can inform future development of a more inclusive theory of meaningful work and research by incorporating the perspective of LSES workers. Existing meaningful work theories appear to partially, but not fully capture the processes and mechanisms of the meaningful work experience for LSES workers. Similarly to what previous theories suggest, LSES workers appear to experience meaningfulness in work through various sources that enhance themselves and others (e.g., Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012; Rosso et al., 2010), when work is consistent with who they are and what they value (e.g., e.g., Park, 2012; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Schnell et al., 2013; Steger & Dik, 2010, Hackman & Oldham, 1976), and when it is harmonious with their life in general (e.g. Chalofsky, 2003). However, LSES workers also appear to experience meaningfulness in work through unique mechanisms which may be applied in further theoretical development. For example, one of the definitions and experiential components of meaningful work that was reported by LSES workers was the salience of positive emotions. It may be that the affective component of meaningful work is an important way of conceptualizing and perceiving work as meaningful to LSES workers that may be added to existing conceptualizations of meaningful work. Also, several structural and contextual factors that influence meaningful work such as access to resources and local community and culture were identified in this study. Since these factors seem to particularly have a significant impact on LSES workers' experience of meaningful work, it appears that theories of meaningful work may be more useful if they place the existing mechanisms in the

context of these factors. Lips-Wiersma and Wright's (2012) concept of inspiration and reality appear to capture this aspect, which can be further developed into the LSES workers' particular context. Lent (2013) also incorporates environmental supports, resources, and obstacles in his social-contingent model of work satisfaction which can be applied in other theories of meaningful work. In addition, because LSES workers may have less flexibility in choosing work that is meaningful for them due to lack of resources or financial constraints, bottom-up theories such as Berg and colleagues' (2013) job crafting model may provide the most potential in suggesting ways to enhance meaningfulness in LSES workers' work. Finally, the diverse ways participants identify meaningfulness in their work (e.g., frequency, availability of task that provides meaning, etc.) provides insight about how meaningful work should be measured in quantitative research. Previous research has mostly conceptualized meaningfulness in terms of the amount of meaning (Dik et al., 2013) and meaningful work has been measured through a perception at a single time point of one's sense that their work as a whole is meaningful, which may not be an accurate way to capture complexities in participants' experience of meaningfulness in their work.

The findings of the present study also provide ingredients for the development of meaningful work interventions for LSES workers who may struggle to experience their work as meaningful. Because the strategies to enhance meaningful work come directly from participants who identify as LSES workers, it may have more ecological value in that the findings may be more transferable to other LSES workers. In addition, the sources of the experience of meaningful work demonstrated by LSES workers point to the places where interventions should be focused. For instance, linking the financial meaning of work may not be against the pursuit of meaningful work among LSES workers and rather be used as a source to promote more meaningfulness in their work. It is important to note that since meaningful work

is an inherently subjective experience (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003), these should be considered as guidelines, not necessarily a prescription for meaningful work for this population.

Finally, the present study also has implications for organizations and policy. Although this study focused on how LSES workers can make their own work more meaningful as an individual, it also depicted the unique structural challenges LSES workers have to navigate in experiencing meaningful work. Sociocultural context play a significant role in forming the understanding of meaningful work of an individual as well as the society as a whole, which may in turn influence the sociocultural conditions that can facilitate or hinder the experience of meaningful work of an individual (Broadfoot et al., 2008). Thus, organizational leaders and policy makers should consider the findings in developing ways to support LSES workers to reduce barriers and increase facilitative conditions of meaningful work for the benefit of the individual.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

There are several limitations to consider when applying these findings. First, although the participants were not recruited based on their perceived sense of meaningfulness in work, having them complete a survey on meaningful work prior to the interview may have influenced the participants' responses in the interview. It is suggested that future studies that plan to incorporate a mixed method study conduct questionnaires at the end of the interview instead to minimize a possible priming effect.

Second, the present study's data collection was conducted in only two time points—one main interview and a follow-up member check interview—which may not capture the actual day-to-day experiences of meaningful work of LSES workers, relying on retrospection. Considering that meaningful work is not a static, and rather a dynamic process-oriented



construct, it may be important to capture the experiences of meaningful work in various time points through other data collection methods such as ethnography or daily diary methods

Third, not all participants of the study were able to validate their findings through the member check process due to attrition. Although attrition is inevitable in any type of research, the impact may be especially large in qualitative research methods such as IPA, which usually requires a small sample. Therefore, future studies should take precautions to prevent as much as attrition as possible.

Another limitation of this study is that the findings were presented mostly based on the frequency of the themes. However, it is unknown whether the frequency of the themes corresponds with the importance of the themes for participants. For example, although sense of control, high self-efficacy, and competence was the most common internal condition mentioned by participants, it could be the case that positive social interactions and support be the most important in their experience of meaningful work. Therefore, future studies should examine the salience of each condition of meaningful work for participants.

Due to the nature of qualitative research, the findings of this study cannot be used to infer causal links to the mechanisms that were identified by the participants. While more qualitative studies are needed to capture the subjective experience of meaningful work and particular context of LSES workers that may impact their meaningful work experience, quantitative studies are also needed to test the links between the sources of meaningfulness, strategies to enhance meaningfulness, and the personal impact of meaningful work. In addition, experimental and longitudinal studies should be conducted in conjunction with more qualitative studies so that each research approach can benefit from one another to further expand the knowledge of the meaningful work experience of LSES workers. This is also true for applying the findings of this

study in interventions. In order to generalize the results of this study, randomized controlled trial (RCT) studies may be conducted to test the effectiveness for the general lower SES population, and in other sub-samples as well. In addition, future quantitative research may also examine if there is an interaction or additive effect of these strategies in enhancing meaningfulness in work. It is suggested by research that more than one pathway could contribute to strong perception of meaningfulness (Rosso et al., 2010).

For future qualitative studies, it may be important to consider that one of the participants (i.e., Daniel) initially struggled to identify meaningfulness in his work perhaps due to the abstract nature of the word, “meaningful.” This was also experienced with one of the pilot study participants who identified components of meaningful work as indicated by previous research but had trouble with using the word, “meaningful” and preferred to use “being happy at work” instead. It may be important to ensure that the participant and researcher share the understanding of the term that is being used during the interview and use the participant’s language if possible to enable them to fully describe their experience.

It is also suggested that future research further examine how meaningfulness in non-work domains impact LSES workers. This study specifically investigated the experience of meaningfulness within the work domain, and its influence on meaning in life as a whole. However, it did not examine the experience of meaning within other domains of living (e.g., partner, parent, citizen, volunteer, leisurite) and how that may influence the overall meaningfulness in work. Considering the importance of contextual factors in the experience of meaningful work for LSES workers, it seems critical to see work and life as a whole rather than separate life domains.

## **Summary and Conclusion**

This study aimed to explore how LSES workers understand and describe their own experience of meaningful work through an interpretative phenomenological analysis approach. LSES workers appeared to navigate through the challenges of working and living as a lower socioeconomic status individual by perceiving, experiencing, and cultivating meaningfulness in their work in their own unique and diverse ways. Meaningful work appears to have potential as a positive psychological resource and mechanism for social justice for improving the life of LSES workers.

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APPENDIX A

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

## **Consent to Participate in a Research Study Colorado State University**

**TITLE OF STUDY:** Experiences in Work among LSES Workers

**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:** Bryan Dik, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Department of Psychology, bryan.dik@colostate.edu

**CO-PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:** Yerin Shim, M.A., Graduate Student, Department of Psychology yerin.shim@colostate.edu; Michael Steger, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Department of Psychology, michael.f.steger@colostate.edu

**WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH?** You are invited to participate in this study because you have been identified as someone who is at least 18 years old or older, is currently employed, has equivalent or less education than an associate's degree, and is eligible for low-income services.

**WHO IS DOING THE STUDY?** The researchers conducting this study are Bryan Dik, Ph.D., Yerin Shim, M.A., and Michael Steger, Ph.D. in the Department of Psychology at Colorado State University.

**WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?** The purpose of this study is to explore experiences in work among lower socioeconomic status workers.

**WHERE IS THE STUDY GOING TO TAKE PLACE AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST?** This study will take place in your preferred location (e.g., your workplace, your home, or the research institution: Clark Building C-73 at Colorado State University) or online via Skype. The total amount of time of your participation in this study will be approximately 100 minutes spread out in a phone screening procedure, survey, and two in-person interviews.

**WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO?** If you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to complete a brief questionnaire which includes questions about your experiences in work, perception of your socioeconomic status, and general demographic information at the time of the first interview. The first interview will be conducted by the co-PI for approximately 1 hour. The interview will consist of several questions on your personal experiences in your work, which will be provided in advance. With your permission, the interviewer will audiotape the interview in order to accurately record your comments. You will be contacted after the first interview for a brief second interview to clarify your information and validate our analysis of your data. The time commitment for this follow-up interview would be no more than 30 minutes.

**ARE THERE REASONS WHY I SHOULD NOT TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?** You may not participate in the study if any of the following conditions apply to you: You (a) are under 18 years of age; (b) have completed more than an associate degree; (3) are not currently employed; or (4) are not eligible for low-income services.

**WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS?** There are no known risks to participating in this study. However, possible discomfort may occur during the interview in discussing personal feelings and/ or ideas concerning work while being recorded. It is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures, but the researchers have taken reasonable safeguards to minimize any known and potential unforeseen risks.

**ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?** While there may be no direct benefit to you for participating in this research, possible benefits associated with this study may include feeling empowered by discussing your positive experiences at work, where applicable. Gaining a better

understanding of the experience of work among lower socioeconomic status workers could lead to future enhancement of work experiences within this population.

**DO I HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY?** Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

**WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION THAT I GIVE?** We will keep private all research records that identify you, to the extent allowed by law.

Your information will be combined with information from other people taking part in the study. When we write about the study to share it with other researchers, we will write about the combined information we have gathered. You will not be identified in these written materials. We may publish the results of this study; however, we will keep your name and other identifying information private.

Any identifiable information will be masked by using a code (ex: ID number or random initials) and a linked list will be kept in a password protected file and destroyed within 6 months from the completion of the project.

We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information, or what that information is. For example, your name will be kept separate from your research records and these two things will be stored in different places under lock and key.

**WILL I RECEIVE ANY COMPENSATION FOR TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?** You will be paid \$30.00 for your participation upon completion of the follow-up session.

Your identity/record of receiving compensation (NOT your data) may be made available to CSU officials for financial audits.

**WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?** Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. Later, if you have questions about the study, you can contact the investigator, Yerin Shim at 970-633-0486. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the CSU IRB at: [RICRO\\_IRB@mail.colostate.edu](mailto:RICRO_IRB@mail.colostate.edu); 970-491-1553. We will give you a copy of this consent form to take with you.

Your signature acknowledges that you have read the information stated and willingly sign this consent form. Your signature also acknowledges that you have received, on the date signed, a copy of this document containing 2 pages.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of person agreeing to take part in the study

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed name of person agreeing to take part in the study

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of person providing information to participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Research Staff

## APPENDIX B

### PRE-INTERVIEW SURVEY



Participant ID: \_\_\_\_\_

**Q1.**

**Work can mean a lot of different things to different people. The following items ask about how you see the role of work in your own life. Please honestly indicate how true each statement is for you and your work.**

	<i>Absolutely Untrue</i>	<i>Mostly Untrue</i>	<i>Neither True Nor Untrue</i>	<i>Mostly True</i>	<i>Absolutely True</i>
I have found a meaningful career.	1	2	3	4	5
I view my work as contributing to my personal growth.	1	2	3	4	5
My work really makes no difference to the world.	1	2	3	4	5
I understand how my work contributes to my life's meaning.	1	2	3	4	5
I have a good sense of what makes my job meaningful.	1	2	3	4	5
I know my work makes a positive difference in the world.	1	2	3	4	5
My work helps me better understand myself.	1	2	3	4	5
I have discovered work that has a satisfying purpose.	1	2	3	4	5
My work helps me make sense of the world around me.	1	2	3	4	5
The work I do serves a greater purpose.	1	2	3	4	5

**Q2.**

**Think of this ladder as representing where people stand in the United States.**

At the top of ladder are the people who are the best off—those who have the most money, the most education, and the most respected jobs. At the bottom are the people who are the worst off—who have the least money, least education, and the least respected jobs or no job. The higher up you are in this ladder, the closer you are to the people at the very top; the lower you are, the closer you are at the very bottom.

**Where would you place yourself in this ladder?**

Please place a large “X” on the rung where you think you stand at this time of your life, relative to other people in the United States.



**Please explain why you placed yourself in the position you marked:**

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## Demographic Survey

1) What is your age? \_\_\_\_\_ years old

2) What is your gender?  M  F

3) What is your race/ethnicity?

White, Non-Hispanic

Black/African American

Hispanic/Latino(a)

American Indian/Alaska Native

Asian

Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander

Other

Multiracial

4) What is the highest level of education you have completed?

Less than High School

High School/GED

Some College, No Degree

Associate's Degree (2-year)

Bachelor's Degree (4-year)

Advanced Degree (Master's/Doctoral)

5) Please indicate your current occupation and position(role):

Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_

Position (role): \_\_\_\_\_

5-1) What is your current employment status in this occupation?

Full-time

Part-time

Honorary/Volunteer

5-2) How many hours do you work per week in your current job?

\_\_\_\_\_ hours per week

5-3) How long have you been employed in your current occupation?

Less than 3 months

3 months-1 year

1-4 years

4-7 years

7-10 years

More than 10 years

6) Please indicate any occupations and positions (roles) you held in the past.

6-1) Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_

Position (role): \_\_\_\_\_

Employment period: \_\_\_\_\_

6-2) Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_

Position (role): \_\_\_\_\_

Employment period: \_\_\_\_\_

6-3) Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_

Position (role): \_\_\_\_\_

Employment period: \_\_\_\_\_

7) What is your estimated total annual household income? Please add up the income of all family members in your household. (Exclude noncash benefits such as food stamps and housing subsidies.)

\$\_\_\_\_\_ /per year

6-1) Number of members in your family/household: \_\_\_\_\_ persons

8) What religion are you most affiliated with at the present time, if any? Please be as specific as possible.

Protestant

Evangelical Christian

Catholic

Jewish

Muslim

Buddhist

Hindu

Native American

Atheist

Agnostic

Other (Please indicate: \_\_\_\_\_)

8-1) How important is religion to you?

*Not at all*

*Not very much*

*Moderately*

*Quite a bit*

*Extremely*

1

2

3

4

5

**Thank you for your participation!**

## APPENDIX C

### INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

## Interview Schedule

1. Please tell me about your current work.  
*Possible prompts:* What is your role in your work? Describe your typical workday. How do you feel about your work? How important is your work to you?
2. Have you ever experienced your work as meaningful to you? When? Please describe a time when you experienced meaning in your work.  
*Possible prompts:* How about in your previous jobs? (Follow-up with Question 1, using past job as the reference point.)  
*If participant reports experiencing meaning in work, continue with Question 3. If participant reports no experience in experiencing meaning in work (including current and past jobs), skip Question 3 and proceed to Question 4.*
3. What is it like when you experience meaning in your work?  
*Possible prompts:* What thoughts and feelings arise when you experience meaning in your work? How is it different than times when your work is not meaningful?
4. When you experience your work as (meaningful/meaningless), what do you think makes it particularly (meaningful/meaningless)? Where do you think meaning comes from?
5. In what way has experiencing your work as (meaningful/meaningless) influenced you and your life in general?
6. It is often assumed that it is difficult for people who have less income, education, and lower occupational status than others to experience meaning in their work. What are your thoughts about this?
7. If you could make your work more meaningful, please tell me what you would do. What advice would you want to give to another person who has similar education, income, and job as you but is struggling to find meaning in their work, if any?
8. If you would define “meaningful work” in your own words, what would it be?
9. Is there anything you would like to add?