Title: The Experience and Implications of Meaningless Work in the Public Sector

Running Head (Short Title): Meaningless Work in the Public Sector

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Abstract: Research suggests that the experience of meaningless work is prevalent in various occupations, and that it is destructive for organizations and individuals, making this an issue of major ethical importance. In this paper, we present the results of a qualitative study based on interviews with Canadian public servants who self-identified as experiencing meaninglessness at work. Our main goal is to better understand participants' responses to the experience of meaningless work and the broader implications their experiences had on the rest of their lives. We surface and explore the harms inflicted on participants through their experiences with meaningless work, and suggest that these harms may have been made worse by structural features of our study's public-sector setting. We contribute to organization studies literature by showing the intersection of meaningless work with three related concepts: bullshit jobs, empty labour, and functional stupidity, and argue that our empirical findings complement and complicate these frameworks by presenting the complex but hidden emotional experiences that can accompany outwardly observable workplace behaviours.

The public service is suffering significantly from this problem of meaning and meaninglessness. I see it when I hire people who are new, and they have the light in their eyes… When I see the light go out after a few years, then I know that it is really a big problem for the organization. Because they either turn off and just accept it as a job that gets them a paycheck, or they quit and leave. (P11)

Introduction

The opening quotation from a public servant suggests that meaninglessness at work can be harmful to those who experience it. In this telling, the metaphor of snuffing out "the light in [workers'] eyes" brings to mind a form of "spiritual violence" (Graeber, 2018: 67), or even "living death" (Bolchover, 2005; Paulsen, 2014: 128) in the workplace. Organizational ethicists have conceptualized meaningful work as a fundamental human need (Yeoman, 2014) and as something that organizations have an ethical obligation to provide (Bowie, 1998; Greenwood, 2013), but less emphasis has been placed on ethical considerations of the harms of meaningless work. Research suggests that meaningless work can be highly destructive for both organizations and individuals (Allan et al., 2019; Bailey et al., 2017; Kipfelsberger and Kark, 2018), making this an issue of ethical importance.

Prior research has shown that meaningless work is not limited to any one job type or region. Across professional settings, research has found that individuals can experience their work as meaningless even in prestigious occupations such as academia (Bailey and Madden, 2019), medicine (Hoeyer and Wadmann, 2020), and the public service (Tammelin and Mänttäri-van der Kuip, 2021). Meaningless work is also an international phenomenon, with related experiences having been documented in countries such as the US (DeHart-Davis and Pandey, 2005), the Netherlands (Tummers et al., 2015), Sweden (Paulsen, 2017), and Denmark (Hoeyer and Wadmann, 2020). There are therefore reasons to suspect that the harms of meaningless work may be widespread.

And yet meaningless work has gained far less scholarly attention than meaningful work (Yeoman et al., 2019), and much management research into the meaning of work has implicitly treated

meaninglessness as equivalent to low levels, or absence, of meaningful work (Allan et al., 2019; Chadi et al., 2017; Kipfelsberger and Kark, 2018). In addition, limited management research has explored the implications of meaningless work for workers' experiences, workers' responses to these experiences, and sector-specific contextual factors that may influence meaningless work (Oldham and Hackman, 2010). And while a few studies have attended to the nature of the experience of meaningless work and have begun to report on strategies to respond to it (e.g., Bailey and Madden, 2019), these studies have not foregrounded workers' coping mechanisms and the broader implications of their experiences.

To address this gap, in this paper we present the results of a qualitative study based on interviews with Canadian public servants who self-identified as experiencing meaninglessness at work. Our goal is to better understand these workers' responses to their experiences, both at work and in their broader lives, and to bring into explicit focus the ethical issues that are implicit in this phenomenon. Since our approach is based in the social sciences rather than normative philosophical inquiry, our approach to ethics is subjectivist and descriptive: subjectivist in that our analysis is rooted in our participants' lived experiences; and descriptive in that we are more focused on providing rich understanding of participants' experiences. Our research questions are: How do public servants experience and respond to meaningless work, and what are the ethical implications of these experiences?

Our study makes three main contributions to the literature. First, we contribute to the organizational ethics literature by surfacing and exploring the harms inflicted on participants through their experiences with meaningless work. We suggest that these harms may have been made worse by structural features of our study's public-sector setting, including tensions between many participants' desires to serve the public good through their work and their lived experience of the work itself. Second, we contribute to the literature on the meaning of work by presenting a detailed account of participants' responses to the experience of meaningless work and the broader implications their experiences had on

the rest of their lives. Third, we contribute to the management studies literature by showing the intersection of meaningless work with three related concepts: bullshit jobs, empty labour, and functional stupidity. We argue that our empirical findings complement and complicate these frameworks by presenting the complex but hidden emotional experiences that can accompany outwardly observable workplace behaviours.

In the next section, we begin with a review of the literature on the nature and ethical dimensions of meaningful and meaningless work to situate our study. We follow this with brief reviews of meaningful and meaningless work in the public-sector context, and of the related concepts of bullshit jobs, empty labour, and functional stupidity as they intersect with meaningful and meaningless work.

Literature Review

The ethics of meaningful and meaningless work

Ethical analyses of meaningful and meaningless work have tended to focus on the positive aspects of meaningful work. Meaningful work, for example, has been conceptualized as a fundamental human need (Yeoman, 2014), as something that organizations have an ethical obligation to provide (Bowie, 1998; Greenwood, 2013), and as something that may be normatively judged independent of workers' subjective experiences or societal agreements about what constitutes meaning (Michaelson, 2021). Scholars have also presented empirical evidence suggesting that meaningful work has positive effects on life in the workplace, including increased job satisfaction (Wang and Seifert, 2021), and outside the workplace, including life satisfaction, general health, and even greater perceptions of life meaning (Allan et al., 2015, 2019; Steger et al., 2012).

An emerging strand in contemporary organizational ethics scholarship has identified work's ultimate impact as an important constituent of meaningfulness. Silver (2023) conceptualizes meaningful

work through the "end user thesis," arguing that "the fundamental goal of the firm is to create products and services that provide a benefit to the people who ultimately use them," and that because work must benefit its end users in order to be meaningful, meaningful work "is not possible within [an organization] that seeks to maximize profits" (Silver, 2023: 825–6). In a similar vein, Martela (2023) argues that making a positive contribution is "a key axiological value that work can serve", and that "a key dimension of meaningful work is about whether that work contributes positively to the world beyond the individual in question" (Martela, 2023: 812, 815). Drawing on theories of alienation (e.g. Seeman, 1959), Martela further argues that work without a positive contribution can create "alienation through pointlessness," which "should be recognized as a type of alienation seriously harmful for the employee" (Martela, 2023: 817, 820).

Martela (2023)'s emphasis on harm is particularly relevant in the context of this study. While scholars have described how jobs can harm workers, including through "emotional and cognitive job-related harm" (May et al., 2014: 654) and low work meaningfulness (e.g., Kipfelsberger and Kark, 2018), this literature has still tended to focus on the desirability of meaningful work. Hence, in our work, we focus on meaningless work and its attendant harms on those who experience it as well as any potential ethical implications of this experience. Taking meaningful work as the unit of analysis leads naturally to ethical discussions about promoting this good, including, for example, whether workers or managers have moral obligations to undertake or offer meaningful work (Michaelson et al., 2014). By taking meaningless work as the unit of analysis, we hope to stimulate a complementary set of discussions about this harmful state of affairs and explore the experience of meaningless work. We believe that a subjectivist empirical approach is appropriate here, since it enables us to highlight individuals' lived experiences with the phenomenon of meaningless work and the nuances of the harms and other effects, if any, that they experienced.

Meaning(lessness) in public sector work

There are conceptual and empirical reasons to think that the public sector is fertile ground for studying meaningless work and its attendant harms. Public-sector organizations tend to be characterized by bureaucratic elements – described by Max Weber as involving, among others, written rules, specialized departments, and an ordered and integrated hierarchical system – that, scholars have argued, tend to differ from private sector organizations (Hodson et al., 2013). For example, feelings of meaninglessness have been found to be associated with burdensome formal rules and procedures which reduce workers' autonomy, or "red tape" (DeHart-Davis and Pandey, 2005), and meaninglessness and related experiences have been documented in a variety of departments across countries such as the US (DeHart-Davis and Pandey, 2005), the Netherlands (Tummers et al., 2015), Sweden (Paulsen, 2017), and Denmark (Hoeyer and Wadmann, 2020), showing this to be a widespread experience.

Researchers have shown that meaningful public-sector work can have positive effects in other areas of workers' lives (Zheng et al., 2020), but less attention has been given to the negative spill-over effects and responses to meaningless work (Bullock et al., 2015; Noesgaard and Hansen, 2018; Vigoda-Gadot et al., 2013; Zheng et al., 2020). These negative experiences may be particularly impactful for workers in the public sector, who often show a higher level of community-service motivation than private sector employees (Baarspul and Wilderom, 2011), and who may also tend to show a high level of public service motivation, an orientation "to act in the public domain for the purpose of doing good for others and society" (Perry et al., 2010: 687), either through disposition or socialization (Vandenabeele et al., 2014). Serving others is a value associated with public sector work, and experiencing meaningless work may therefore create significant value strain and pose specific harms to this population.

Meaningless work and work dysfunction

A related strand of research has critically examined how work often does not work, so to speak, in ways that may relate to meaninglessness. For example, research into "bullshit jobs" has explored the phenomenon of people who believe that their jobs are "so completely pointless that even the person who has to perform it every day cannot convince himself [sic] there's a good reason for him [sic] to be doing it" (Graeber, 2018: 3). Note, however, that according to this definition, having a bullshit job is distinct from the emotional experience of doing the job. This raises the possibility, which we explore further below, that there may be a nuanced relationship between the emotional experience of meaningless work and the state of affairs of having a bullshit job as defined by Graeber.

A related strand of critical sociological research has examined "empty labour," or "everything you do at work that is not your work" (Paulsen, 2014: 4). Paulsen categorizes empty labour along two dimensions, according to whether the job itself has low or high "potential output"—the amount of work one could reasonably do—and whether the worker feels internally strong or weak "work obligations"— taken here to mean "obligation to work *for the firm*" (Paulsen, 2014: 62, emphasis in original). Paulsen's primary focus is on workers with low work obligations, but he does discuss those who endure low work demands paired with high work obligations, in a state of what might be called "boreout" (Paulsen, 2014: 128), and those who cope with high work demands and high work obligation (Paulsen, 2014). As will be discussed below, our study participants generally expressed a sense of high work obligation, but could experience meaninglessness in the face of high or low potential output.

A third and related concept is "functional stupidity," a non-reflective mode of workplace compliance (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012, 2016; Butler, 2016; Paulsen, 2017). Alvesson and Spicer (2012) describe functional stupidity as having three components: "an inability or unwillingness to question knowledge claims and norms", which they label "lack of reflexivity" (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012: 1119);

"not demanding or providing reasons and explanation", which they label "lack of justification" (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012: 1119); and "focus[ing] on the efficient achievement of a given end, and ignorance of the broader substantive questions about what the end actually is", which they label "lack of substantive reasoning" (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012: 1200). Functional stupidity, as so defined, consists of the presence and absence of observable behaviours—completing work goals efficiently without asking questions or giving reasons—and unobservable internal cognitive states—inability or unwillingness to ask certain questions, and a lack of substantive reasoning about work goals and context. Since this definition involves cognitive states and behaviours but makes no explicit reference to emotions or experiences, it appears to be distinct from the experience of meaningless work.

The three concepts just outlined—bullshit jobs, empty labour, and functional stupidity—seem intuitively linked to meaningless work, but precise nature of this relationship has not been elucidated. Our study is therefore informed by and contributes to this literature stream on work dysfunction. We ask: How do public servants experience and respond to meaningless work, and what are the broader ethical implications of these experiences?

Methods

Research Approach and Context

Our research goal is to explore how public servants experience and respond to meaningless work and the broader ethical implications of these experiences, and so we use a qualitative research approach based on in-depth interviews with public-sector employees. We take an interpretive stance, which gives precedence to participants' experiences and the meanings that participants bring to the phenomenon under study (Hennink et al., 2020). We focused on Canadian public sector employees. Canada's federal government and thirteen provincial/territorial governments are each staffed with a non-partisan public service tasked with developing and implementing government policies and services. These governments

have similar hierarchical structures and are highly professionalized. We use the term *Canadian public servant* or *public service employee* to refer to anyone employed by a federal, provincial, or territorial government in Canada.

Data Collection and Analysis

We recruited purposively from the winter of 2020 until the autumn of 2021, seeking individuals who met our inclusion criteria of working for a federal, provincial, or territorial government in Canada in a back-office role like policy, finance, or program administration, and who self-identified as experiencing work meaninglessness. We restricted our study to individuals in these roles because they all worked in bureaucratic office settings, and in non-partisan rather than political roles, to ensure a degree of consistency across settings. Participants worked for a range of government departments and organizations with responsibility for a variety of policy areas including education, healthcare, social services, and the environment. We recruited via an announcement that we were seeking participants for our study in a university alumni newsletter; public posts on social media sites Twitter, LinkedIn, and Reddit; a public web site created for the purpose of this study; a LinkedIn ad directing public servants working in Canada to the study website; and researchers' professional networks. All recruitment methods described our inclusion criteria using the same text. We also invited participants to share study materials with their peers. We interviewed the first twenty-five public servants who contacted us and who met our criteria.

Participants' time in the public sector ranged from 11 months to 35 years, job positions ranged from entry-level to mid-executive, and typical job titles were "Policy Analyst," "Senior Policy Advisor," and "Manager." Eighteen participants worked for the federal government, and seven worked for provincial governments. Participants' ages ranged from their 20s to their 60s. We asked open-ended questions about gender and ethnicity. Twenty participants self-reported their ethnicity as White or

Caucasian, three as Chinese or Asian-Canadian, one as a member of a Visible Minority, and one as Canadian. Table 1 summarizes additional self-reported participant characteristics.

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Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, first in-person and later via videoconferencing or telephone, at times and places participants chose. Interviews began with questions about participants' backgrounds and roles, followed by questions about their experiences and understandings of meaning and meaninglessness in the workplace. Participants were asked to describe day-to-day and notable "peak" experiences with meaning and meaninglessness at work, how those experiences affected them, and how they dealt with experiences of work meaninglessness. Interviews lasted from 56 to 125 minutes (and averaged 80 minutes) and were recorded, transcribed, anonymized, and read carefully to allow immersion in and understanding of each participant's experience and its context.

Data analysis followed mostly an inductive approach, and included later comparison with the literature (Hennink et al., 2020; Miles et al., 2020). Earlier steps involved an inductive identification of themes associated with the experience of meaningless work using terms that approximated closely those of the participants. This yielded an extensive number of first-order codes (Miles et al., 2020). We used NVivo to code data and retrieve quotations.

Through a process of constant comparison (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), and by iterating within interviews and across them, we grouped first-order codes under second-order themes. This entailed going back and forth multiple times between the emerging themes and the data, revising our analysis to establish a fit between the two. We then aggregated our themes into three categories through processes of zooming in to identify details and zooming out to identify more abstract categories (Hennink et al., 2020; Miles et al., 2020). We later compared our findings with the literature to further theorization.

We designated our three abstract categories as *the nature of the experience*, *implications of the experience,* and *responses.* The *nature of the experience* refers to the core defining elements of participants' experiences with meaningless work and consists of a sense of *uselessness*, *powerlessness* and *senselessness,* which we present in Table 2. The *implications of the experience* category captures the *inner turmoil* of participants, who described how meaningless work created a range of negative emotional, psychological, and social implications. The major components of this inner turmoil are *bleak emotions, self-doubt,* and *isolation*. The *responses* category designates how participants dealt with experiences of meaningless work. These responses consist of *crafting tasks, checking out, forging connections,* and *shifting values*. Table 3 provides our abstract categories and themes with representative quotations. We realize that some themes are not mutually exclusive, and this will become clear as we present our findings; however, to facilitate presentation, we separate the themes in the table.

Establishing Quality of the Study

We took several steps to establish the quality and credibility of the study (Miles et al., 2020; Patton, 2014). The first step involves taking into account and discussing inquirer perspective (Patton, 2014). The first author had worked in the Canadian public sector for five years after completing his doctoral studies, and had first-hand experience with the topic of the study. While a connection to a research topic can be a source of insight, there is a need to ensure that the researcher brackets personal experiences and takes an impartial stance when reporting on findings from participants (Miles et al., 2020; Patton, 2014). To ensure that this was the case, the second and third authors read transcripts of early interviews and provided feedback aimed at ensuring that a neutral stance was maintained during interviews. We designed the interview protocol to follow a "neutral" process as recommended by Patton (2014), balancing questions about meaning and meaninglessness. Further, the second and third authors maintained an outsider stance during the analysis, playing devil's advocates and critiquing the first

author's interpretations. All three authors read interviews throughout data collection, and worked

together very closely during the analysis to identify themes, going back to the data when interpretations

diverged. Finally, we sought member checks to ensure that the findings were deemed credible by those

who shared their perspectives with us (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Patton, 2014). To this end, we sent draft

copies of the Findings section to all 25 participants for their review and comment. Of the fourteen who

responded, two offered neutral responses of "no comment" and twelve endorsed the findings. Two

participants also asked for minor changes, which we made, to better contextualize a quotation from their

interviews. Finally, to help the reader follow our analysis, we provide extensive quotations (including

their context) in the Findings section and additional quotations in Tables 2 and 3.

Findings

The Nature of the Experience

The experience of meaningless work had three main themes: uselessness, powerlessness, and

senselessness. We discuss each here briefly to set the context for a more in-depth discussion of their

implications.

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Uselessness.

Many participants described feelings of uselessness as central to the experience of

meaninglessness, especially with work that they viewed as of low impact or unnecessary. Some of the

lowest-perceived impacts involved canceled projects: "Certainly the most meaningless would be when...

you've tried and contributed something to add your value to it and it ends up going nowhere" (P09).

Many participants with low-impact work felt easily replaceable and described themselves using

mechanistic metaphors, including "cogs" in machines and "hamsters" on wheels. Many participants

described uselessness through excessive levels of underwork. Sometimes work levels ebbed and flowed, for example with election cycles, but some participants described extended periods of low or no work demands: "My first two years in government were spent being incredibly underutilized. There were a lot of days where I would just read a book all day, and not for lack of expressing my interest" (P24). Underwork also afforded participants ample time to reflect on their feelings of meaninglessness, which P25 described as "very depressing."

Powerlessness.

All participants described feelings of powerlessness, the inability to bring about some desired change in their work. Many participants described feeling powerless through a lack of workplace autonomy created by organizational hierarchies. Participants often felt powerless when looking "up" the hierarchy, and this lack of control made it difficult to invest emotionally in work: "No matter how much you love and care about something, once it's at the Cabinet level then it's completely out of your hands… that's a really big factor in meaninglessness at work" (P09). Participants with management roles sometimes also described feeling powerless when looking "down" the hierarchy, at the whim of those with more authority yet struggling to exercise authority of their own. Many participants described meaninglessness using physical metaphors of confinement, "like being trapped in a room," (P05) or "like being rooted in place and not being able to go forward" (P04). For many participants, powerlessness was deeply intertwined with uselessness.

Senselessness.

All participants associated meaninglessness with senselessness, the inability to make sense of decisions, of their own role and of organizational processes. This created tension between their beliefs about the civil service as a rational evidence-based bureaucracy, and their lived experience with how it worked in practice. Senseless processes were a common source of meaninglessness, as when P08's

single expense form caused "a 300-chain email, just a classic bureaucratic stuck-in-the-machine waste of time," or when P10 had to fill out eight redundant forms to complete the same process they had been hired to streamline. Sometimes otherwise justifiable processes could be rendered senseless on account of their content, like thoroughly reviewing documents consisting of "effectively high-level gibberish, really just entire documents full of key words strung together into sentences" (P05), or writing new documents that sounded bold but made no tangible commitments.

Tasks could seem especially senseless when repeated with no substantial variation, like re-editing a perfectly fine document, or re-writing a briefing note annually for new executives. The effects could be cumulative: "I've really felt that sense of meaning ebb. I've felt a sense that the work I'm doing is the same work, I've done the same projects and had the same discussions and arguments over and over again" (P04). More than one participant spontaneously described these onerous repetitive tasks as "Sisyphean," calling to mind the immortal Sisyphus condemned to roll a boulder up a hill each day only to see it roll back each night.

When participants were centrally embedded in senseless processes they could experience role senselessness, an inability to make sense of their own roles and actions. In extreme cases, participants suggested that their roles should not exist at all, and three participants made spontaneous and unprompted reference to Graeber (2018): "I remember reading David Graeber's book, *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory*, while bored at work, and it was like the entire book was written about me. There's no meaning to my job at all" (P03).

Inner Turmoil

Participants described how their experiences with meaninglessness at work created a range of emotional, psychological, and social harms, which we termed *inner turmoil*. The major components of this inner turmoil, discussed below, were bleak emotions, self-doubt, and isolation.

Bleak Emotions.

Participants described meaninglessness at work as being highly upsetting, and their stories were steeped in a range of negative emotions. These emotions could seem all-consuming and destructive; in P11's words, "meaninglessness… it's something that eats away at you." The most prevalent bleak emotions were sadness, guilt and shame, and feeling life is meaningless, or what we call "generalized ennui."

Many participants described experiencing profound *sadness* related to meaningless work, often linked to a sense of wasted effort and missed opportunities: "It's grief for opportunities lost, wishing you were making a greater contribution… profound disappointment that there's a meaninglessness that doesn't seem to have an end" (P21). When participants linked sadness to uselessness, they sometimes reflected on the broader life potential they felt they lost: "I can't help but think, oh, what could I be doing instead of this pointless activity? Or this nothingness?" (P03). While many participants found their situation "depressing," some also described themselves as experiencing or bordering on serious clinical depression: "It was depression. Periods where I really felt unhappy in my job, I didn't feel a sense of meaningfulness in the work I did" (P04). Depression was only ever invoked reluctantly, but sadness, grief, and loss were omnipresent.

Participants facing underwork often described experiencing *guilt and shame*. Sometimes participants felt that their perceived uselessness was something embarrassing that needed to be hidden from coworkers: "If I feel like what I'm doing as an individual is meaningless… I feel ashamed and embarrassed about not being part of something more important" (P12). Others felt guilty for occupying what they saw as structurally advantaged, if upsetting, positions: "Feeling guilty about it. There's lots of people who work very hard for low wages. Why am I being paid to do nothing?" (P03). Relatedly, participants could feel guilt for violating what they saw as norms of fair exchange by receiving a salary

despite offering, in their view, little of value in return. These feelings could be made worse if, facing underwork, participants occupied themselves with other tasks at work—which, as we will discuss in a later section, many participants felt forced to do—because now participants were, in their view, being paid to do *non*-work tasks, and they frequently used ethically laden terms like "skiving" or "stealing" to describe their behavior. But even those with full schedules could feel this kind of shame if they viewed their work as useless: "[If] they don't take your advice, you're basically taking money for nothing. So you kind of feel like you're a thief" (P16). These ethical concerns could be made worse by participants' sense of powerlessness, which left them unable to resolve the tension between their ideals and their actions.

Finally, many described how meaninglessness crossed the boundaries between work and non-work, leading them to feel that *life in general was meaningless*. Participants commonly described how meaninglessness at work would insidiously "bleed" or "creep" into home life:

> Sometimes the meaninglessness I feel at work creeps into me not enjoying the time when I'm not at work… if I go home and that miserableness is creeping into time where I want to play with my dog and go for hikes with my girlfriend, then I'm like, well what the fuck is happening? (P02)

This broader sense of meaninglessness could have negative effects on relationships with spouses, children, and friends: "It's not like home loses its meaning, but it [meaninglessness] takes up space in your meaningful spaces" (P01). In extreme cases, meaninglessness was felt to expand and fill all aspects of participants' existence: "When I felt meaninglessness in my work, I felt meaninglessness all day every day" (P08).

Self-Doubt.

Many participants indicated that their experiences related to meaninglessness led them to doubt themselves and their career choices, something they found profoundly unsettling. *Career doubt* was common, where participants had trouble reconciling their meaningless present with the effort it had taken to get there: "Why did I go to school for so long if no one actually wants me to think any more?

…what was the point?" (P01). Career doubt was often tinged with guilt, as some participants, given the unionized and salaried nature of their work, worried that their concerns amounted to "privileged complaining" (P11). Those who were deeply unhappy often doubted they would be able to meet their material requirements anywhere else, and described a tension: "The expression is 'the golden handcuffs'... I've got some health issues, my wife has some health issues, so [my work-provided insurance] benefits are necessary." (P09)

Many participants also experienced a broader sense of *existential self-doubt* and asked what they often termed "existential questions" about their identity, their purpose in life, and their values. Participants often described joining the public service out of a desire to do good and to improve society. Reflecting on the public service as a whole, P17 observed that: "Most people, I think, come into the public service wanting to effect change, wanting to make a difference" (P17); and reflecting on the implications of meaningless work, P10 volunteered that "my core values of service to public, duty to public, still remain, and I still want to contribute" (P10). But in this context, meaningless work presented a serious challenge to participants' identities as public servants and more broadly: "If I'm not doing anything meaningful here, then what am I good for? And what is the rest of my life? And what matters?" (P12). As we saw above with bleak emotions, self-doubt also often crossed the work-life boundary, making participants' existential questions more acute: "Your life is your workday. And that can be emotionally difficult to value. You start asking, 'What am I doing with my life? Why am I here?'" (P01). Many participants also worried that their meaningless present would extend indefinitely, which led to further existential ruminations. P07, for example, mused, "When I'm feeling meaningless, I do wonder… will I sit here for the rest of my life and do this? Is this just going to be the rest of my life and that's it?" (P07). Self-doubt and existential questions emerged across interviews, and participants were consistently unable to answer them to their satisfaction.

Isolation.

All participants found that meaninglessness led to some level of isolation. Many participants felt they had to *hide their experiences* of meaningless work for fear of how others would perceive them. As a new employee experiencing meaninglessness, for example, P02 described how, "The first month and a half I didn't talk to anyone about it. That's isolating for sure. You're just trying to figure out whether other people feel the same way." But even once social bonds had been established, participants could still find it difficult to speak openly about their experiences. P03 described circumspect discussions: "My old boss, for example, we're personal friends so we would hint at each other that we have nothing to do, without explicitly saying it." In some cases, participants were unwilling to discuss meaninglessness with co-workers in any context. Concerns about stigma or "taboo" were common: "I'm maybe worried about 'outing' myself as not being productive, not being as contributing, and I don't want to convey those feelings of frustration or emptiness" (P12). Hiding these experiences could be emotionally difficult, compounding participants' bleak emotions: "It's hard keeping that pain inside… It's empty, lonely" (P14). Interestingly, some participants described both a desire to hide these feelings and an urge to share them as a coping mechanism to manage experiences of meaninglessness. As we will see in a later section, like-minded colleagues can provide opportunities for self-validation through discussions of common experiences.

Going beyond simply hiding, some participants described having to actively "*fake good*," or act out a positive persona in front of others:

> One of the worst parts… is this sense of having to fake it, and how much energy it takes… I don't want to run into somebody at the water cooler or the elevator, because they're going to ask me what I'm working on, and it's like, nothing. (P08)

Many participants explained that they felt they were engaging in role play, or acting out a part of a productive employee to hide the experience of meaninglessness. The image of wearing a mask as a

way to regulate their public behavior at work was recurrent: "When I was in these meetings… I would often feel like I had to have a mask up…. I could sit there and feel angry, and feel disengaged, and feel really resentful and personally vindictive towards folks" (P04).

Overall, participants' accounts of isolation were characterized by having to engage in impression management behaviors as an attempt to hide negative and distressing inner experiences from coworkers.

Responses

Finally, all participants reported significant responses to their experiences with meaninglessness, including self-driven efforts to redesign their work through crafting tasks, mentally or sometimes physically escaping work, forging connections with others, and shifting values.

Crafting Tasks.

One common response was reshaping work tasks in ways that generally aligned with participants' and their employer's interests, such as initiating new activities, reallocating effort, or delegating responsibilities, which we collectively refer to as *crafting tasks*. Participants who used this approach described surmounting a sense of powerlessness and reclaiming agency in a way that they felt would reduce their sense of uselessness.

Some participants described *taking initiative* to change ongoing projects or start new ones. Sometimes participants took initiative to make improvements to existing projects, as when P01 advocated to ensure a policy analysis considered the impacts on marginalized groups. Other participants, especially when facing underwork, described how starting new workplace initiatives provided a sense of agency and meaning. For example, several participants started work-related reading groups in their offices:

> I started an initiative where we review journal or news articles once every two weeks… I found that really meaningful because it brought together a lot of people in the department who had curiosity and a lot of really good interest and insight. (P05)

Not all participants were successful; P2, for example, had tried but abandoned this strategy: "When I first started, I would take some initiative and just start doing things that I knew needed to get done… But things just don't go anywhere." In general, participants only found taking initiative to be a helpful coping mechanism if their initiatives succeeded.

Some participants who were not able to start or influence ongoing projects were still able to *shift their duties* to cope with meaninglessness. Some participants structured their workdays to mitigate their sense of meaninglessness**:** "I would alternate during the day, I would do one of the tasks that was meaningless, and then, okay, let's spend the next couple of hours on something that's meaningful, then come back to the meaningless task" (P10). Other participants would allocate more effort on the parts of work that felt the least meaningless: "I would really focus on the parts that I did find rewarding, which was helping to improve the program, and everything else it was a real struggle just to do the minimum on it" (P09). This strategy has limits, as P09 went on to explain, since if taken too far it risks treading close to underperformance on de-emphasized duties.

Finally, participants with direct reports sometimes described redesigning their work by *delegating* meaningless aspects of their job to others: "I try to avoid that which is meaningless. So when the latest flavor of the day comes across my desk, I look at it quickly and I give it to somebody else" (P20). Participants recognized that not all tasks could be redistributed down the hierarchy to relieve their own experience of meaninglessness.

Checking Out.

Many participants described "checking out" in response to meaningless work. Some forms of checking out were short-term "numbing" reactions, like disconnecting from work mentally or

emotionally ("zoning out"). Other forms involved reclaiming time to pursue personal activities at work, or, as a last resort, quitting.

Z*oning out* was the simplest form of disconnecting, and was often described when participants had few work tasks but were prevented from leaving or obviously doing other things. Participants often zoned out during meetings, although this was not without risks: "I completely checked out about halfway through. Then my manager would be like, 'What do you think?' ...but I have no idea what they're talking about" (P02). Participants also responded to meaninglessness by *depersonalizing,* or disconnecting emotionally from work. This could be a short-term response of "grinning and bearing it" or using "dark humor" to process negative emotions. But many participants also described a longer-term process of emotional detachment:

> What happens when you don't really have meaning or purpose is you kind of check out (laughs)... I don't feel connected to the work. I don't feel connected to the place. I don't feel connected to the people, really. It's just a paycheck at that point. (P09)

Some respondents actively tried to de-couple their emotions and self-concepts from their work: "My one major learning in how to deal with meaninglessness, is to try to depersonalize... not to take things personally, and to realize that I am just one part of a bigger hierarchy" (P11). Depersonalizing was often seen as an aspirational goal and was a constant struggle for some participants, but when it worked, it could feel liberating. By accepting oneself as powerless, instead of struggling or languishing, some participants were able to find a measure of peace.

Many participants, especially those facing underwork, responded to meaninglessness by *reclaiming time* for personal projects during empty work hours. For example, P01 explained that "when there's nothing to do... I do a lot of the things that my personal life doesn't really afford time for otherwise. Registering your kids for library, school programs... I get tons of personal stuff done at work." Often participants described feeling forced to adopt this tactic: "It's like a Dilbert cartoon: there's simply

nothing I can do about it, except to find something that's directly useful to myself to do" (P03). But rather than feeling fun or at least justified, reclaiming time often carried an emotional cost of guilt and anxiety: "If you're not going to give me work, I'm going to do my own thing… But that doesn't feel good either" (P15). This could, counter-productively, exacerbate participants' meaninglessness and the bleak emotions discussed earlier.

The most extreme form of checking out was *quitting*, including changing roles within government in a repeated cycle of meaninglessness. Some participants described this as a pragmatic and successful strategy: "The only way to get out of meaningless work is you have to move on, you have to find someplace else that doesn't have meaningless work" (P21). Others found changing jobs less helpful, as P01 noted with a laugh: "I'm four departments in three years." Those with management experience, as P11 points out in the epigraphic quote, also described seeing the "churn" of the public sector play out as a predictable cycle, where new hires confronted with repeated experiences of meaninglessness lose their enthusiasm for the work and either quit or remain as shells of their former selves. Our study only included current public servants, but several participants described watching coworkers leave government entirely to escape meaninglessness, and one described announcing their retirement as a liberatory experience: "I was so surprised at how I felt, like this burden, the shackles have come off… Because I had come to a point in my career where things were actually quite meaningless" (P10).

Forging Connections.

Nearly all participants described responding to meaninglessness by forging connections with others at work to seek validation or respite. However, although social connections could help participants find validation or temporary respite, they did not usually improve the conditions that participants saw as giving rise to meaninglessness.

Many participants described *seeking validation* through sharing their feelings and experiences with like-minded others, finding it helpful to "realize that I'm not alone" (P23). In a serious but positive tone, P07 said: "it feels validating because I'm not crazy, and someone else feels the same way I do." Laughing with others brought participants' meaninglessness and bleak emotions from individual experiences to a shared group experience, breaking their isolation and creating a sense of solidarity: "At least you can make fun of it… you feel like you're all in on a joke" (P12). However, over-discussing meaninglessness could lead participants to feel worse, "Because then you end up wallowing in it, and that also doesn't help the situation" (P11). Sharing these feelings could also invite reflection on structural problems: "I also share with other people at work who I know feel the same way… But it certainly doesn't make me feel better that everyone's miserable and that the place is a disaster" (P02).

In some cases, participants described forging connections with friends and coworkers to *seek respite* from meaninglessness with trusted confidants outside of their work unit, since this helped to escape the work context giving rise to meaninglessness. P08 described a daily phone call with a non-work friend during a period of meaninglessness as a lifeline: "I would literally call her every single day at lunch for like an hour and a half, and I just didn't want to hang up the phone. I don't want to go back to the cubicle. Into the abyss." P08's metaphor is stark: connecting with a friend gave only temporary relief from the sorrow that ended as soon as the call was over.

It was common for participants to express conflicting desires both to share their experiences with others and, as we saw earlier, to hide their feelings due to fear of stigma. As noted by P22, such discussions could be limited to a select group of trusted confidants: "the few peers that I found that I can trust… It's not always a big list of people." Many participants felt this kind of tension between their desires for validation and their concerns about privacy or career implications if their feelings were widely known.

Shifting Values.

Finally, participants described ways their experiences with meaninglessness had led to changes in their values, either by refocusing on new values to move towards new goals, or by rejecting old values to move away from previous goals.

Many participants remained committed to the public service and its ideals, but found that their experiences led them to *refine* their work-related values. For example, P11, who held a management position, described gradually assigning less value to outcomes like policy or program changes, and more to developing staff abilities through coaching and mentoring:

> I think the traditional view would be that meaning is about fulfilling organizational purpose. But I've been starting to think about whether trying to find meaning in an organization and work should be tied somehow to this personal professional development of individual abilities and capabilities. (P11)

Through this reframing, participants attempted to construct a notion of meaning at work that seemed achievable given their work environments and the powerlessness we discussed earlier.

Some participants described *refocusing* from work-centered values like success, praise, and promotions to other values in their lives outside of work. Many participants described coping with their negative work experiences by searching for meaning through volunteering in activities as varied as not-for-profit governance and coaching youth sports: "I have in the past sought out some volunteer experiences to add more meaning to my existence, to counterbalance the meaninglessness at work" (P06). Many participants also described how meaninglessness at work led them to put more emphasis on family- and relationship-centered values. This could range from spending more time with friends to profound shifts like deciding to have children: "My wife and I have recently decided to have a child. We've been putting that off... The meaninglessness that I've been feeling has triggered me to push out and look at other sources of meaning" (P04). Participants were generally clear that these new values were in place of, not in addition to, their previous values, and in some cases workplace values like career

advancement seemed to have lost their allure entirely: "Being called a Director or Senior Director and all

that, to me that really means nothing anymore" (P23).

Most participants described changing at least some of their values in response to

meaninglessness after other attempts to create meaning at work had failed. These value changes were

almost always described as ongoing processes, undertaken reluctantly in response to internal tensions.

As P09 said, "I'm looking outside of work to find the meaning that I'm missing in work, and it took me a

while to get to this point." These shifts were not comfortable experiences, and were the result of deep

changes in how participants thought. And as described above, in cases of larger changes, participants

could experience profound shifts in their normative evaluations of what really mattered at work and in

life—shifts, in other words, of their own ethical conceptions of their work and themselves.

Discussion

The Harms and Implications of Meaningless Work

Our findings contribute to the organizational ethics literature by describing the serious harms of

meaningless work, including deep emotional turmoil, existential self-doubt, and isolation. We also saw

how these implications extended beyond the confines of the workday, often negatively affecting

participants' entire lives—and even, in the more extreme cases we encountered, immiserating them. To

put it plainly, we found that participants were harmed by meaningless work, sometimes greatly. These

findings echo research from occupational health psychology showing that sustained exposure to

circumstances that impede personal growth and inhibit goal achievement at work can severely damage

workers' psychological and physical health (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017). Challenging work

circumstances, such as those described by our participants can, over time, lead to ill health, especially

burnout. Moreover, the spillover of melancholy from work to home life amplifies the negative impact of

work stressors on health (Sonnentag, 2018). Overall, it is clear that our participants experienced suffering due to meaningless work.

In addition to being straightforwardly harmful, experiencing meaningless work could also create other tensions and have conflicting implications for participants. As we saw, for example, some participants felt reluctantly compelled to change their values or venture into other ways of life to escape or mitigate the harms of meaningless work. In some cases, participants found these new experiences valuable: increasing volunteer work, starting or focusing more on a family and relationships, or pursuing hobbies. The refocusing of time and attention away from punishing work experiences and toward more fulfilling relationships and activities outside of work can be seen as an attempt to emerge from the adversity created by meaningless work (Lazazzara et al., 2020). Since our study recruited only people still experiencing meaninglessness, these responses had not overcome participants' experiences of meaninglessness, nor did they justify or rationalize these experiences; and yet participants often found value in the new experiences that meaningless work had pushed them towards.

Some of these harms were shaped by the public-sector context of highly bureaucratic and hierarchical environments, often with rigid workplace customs and etiquette. For example, much of the powerlessness we described above was related to being forced to follow rules and to respect hierarchies, two key features of the Weberian model of bureaucracy (Hodson et al., 2013). Much of the senselessness participants experienced was also related to following orders and rules, either formal or informal, that they saw as useless or counterproductive. And much of the uselessness participants experienced, either through endless corporate-compliance tasks or because, somehow, there was no clear process or reason for them to be assigned many or any tasks at all, was also linked to the bureaucracy and hierarchy of their public-sector context.

The public-sector context also shaped participants' own negative ethical self-judgements. Our participants cared a great deal about their work and contributing to the greater good. They often relayed this unprompted, consistent with empirical research demonstrating that public sector employees often show high levels of community service motivation (Baarspul and Wilderom, 2011) and Perry and Wise's (1990) notion of public-sector motivation "to act in the public domain for the purpose of doing good for others and society" (Perry et al., 2010: 687). But while Zheng et al. (2020) hypothesized that public-sector motivation may help individuals to "actively engage in a sense-making process and assign meaningfulness to their work when they have low autonomy in determining and performing their jobs to serve the public" (Zheng et al., 2020: 585), our findings suggest that the opposite can sometimes be the case. For many of our participants, the conflict between their self-images and ideals versus their lived experience of performing meaningless work led to a range of emotional and ethical inner turmoil. As we saw, participants often felt guilt about not living up to—or even acting against—their public-service ideals, but at the same time felt that their work structures provided no viable alternatives.

This last point about structures is worth stressing, because the harms our participants experienced can reasonably be described as structural. Participants described experiencing harms, but did not identify any specific source of those harms; in our interpretation of participants' telling, the harms seemed almost to be a natural consequence of the work environment. But the work environment is not a pre-ordained fact of nature, and if someone is harmed then it is natural to ask *who is responsible for that harm.* Several strands in management studies, including critical and ethical approaches, argue that organizations have a range of obligations towards their employees, including ethical obligations (Delbridge and Keenoy, 2010; Greenwood, 2002, 2013), and even the obligation to provide employees with meaningful work (Bowie, 1998). Our findings suggest that not only are employees' needs not being met, but that employees are being actively harmed by meaningless work.

Meaninglessness and Work Dysfunction

Our findings relate to Graeber's (2018) concept of bullshit jobs: as described above, three participants drew spontaneous and unprompted parallels between their experiences and Graeber's (1998) book on the subject. Our findings therefore demonstrate that there are people in the public service who self-identify as having bullshit jobs, and also the profound meaninglessness, harms, and isolation that can come with these jobs. For those involved, it does seem to be, in Graeber's words, "a terrible psychic wound… that no one ever seemed to talk about" (Graeber, 2018: xv–xvi). At the same time, however, most of our participants did not self-identify as having bullshit jobs, and it is not clear that they would agree with the proposition if it were presented to them; recall that many participants associated meaninglessness with routine or uncreative work, or senseless decisions from management, which is not the same as believing one's job to be useless. Echoing Martela (2023)'s notion of "alienation through pointlessness," this may suggest that having a bullshit job is one path to meaningless work, but not the only one.

Our findings are also related to the concept of empty labour. Many of our participants described situations similar to Paulsen's (2014: 128) definition of "'enduring' employees… who have little to do despite a strong sense of work obligation." These participants felt a desire to serve the public good but had few or no work tasks to do, yet were situated in a moral context where serving the public is virtuous and value to the public is a moral good. Our findings can perhaps illuminate some of Paulsen's puzzlement with enduring workers, whom he noted had an apparent "inability to engage in alternative activities during the empty hours," and who "seemed to be suffering from a lack of personal initiative" (Paulsen, 2014: 137). In contrast to Paulsen's observations, we found that many enduring participants had tried to "fill" their empty labour, either by crafting work-related tasks or reclaiming time for themselves, but had been unable to do so in a sustainable way without also creating significant tension with external social norms and internal ethical norms.

Finally, our findings also intersect with Alvesson and Spicer's (2012) notion of functional stupidity in ways that can help to nuance their conceptual framework. Functional stupidity, as Alvesson and Spicer (2012) define it, is a mix of observable behaviours and unobservable internal cognitive states, and Paulsen (2017) has helpfully clarified that it may not be a long-term or exclusive state, but can be a temporary mode of compliance one can slip into and out of, and reflect on after the fact. The experiences our participants described did not fit the internal cognitive requirements for functional stupidity; overall, participants were very willing to question workplace knowledge claims and norms (reflexivity), were frustrated by the lack of reasons and explanation (justification), and often asked substantive questions about the purpose of their work (substantive reasoning). However, we also saw that they frequently hid these concerns and continued to work, which could compound their experiences of meaninglessness and attendant inner turmoil. And yet in many cases, participants did describe acting in ways that met the behavioural components of functional stupidity: they generally completed work tasks even when they saw them as meaningless, and they generally abided by the hierarchical bureaucratic norms and were not outwardly or overly critical of decisions from higher up the hierarchy. But in everyday life, these behavioural components of functional stupidity could be described as baseline expectations for having and keeping a job. Even in a unionized public-sector environment to do otherwise would be a career-limiting move. Our findings suggest that people can act in ways that may outwardly appear to meet the behavioural criteria for functional stupidity without the internal cognitive criteria, and while simultaneously experiencing meaninglessness and complex hidden negative emotions.

To summarize, our findings complement and nuance prior work on bullshit jobs, empty labour, and functional stupidity by demonstrating how these concepts intersect with the experience of meaningless work and its attendant emotional harms.

An Alternative Interpretation: The Paradoxes of Meaninglessness

In this section we wish to consider an alternative view – the paradox(es) of meaninglessness, or meaning from meaninglessness – suggested to us by two reviewers. One might ask—why is the lack of meaningful work harmful? Counterintuitively, could it be a good thing? Could experiencing our work as meaningless actually be a positive experience, either by helping us to grasp essential truths about the meaninglessness of life or work or the universe and our place within it, or by pushing us towards more meaningful experiences outside of the workplace? Is a life without meaninglessness possible, or even desirable? Perhaps the expectation of meaning without meaninglessness is misguided, as Camus noted in his treatise on absurdity and meaninglessness: "There is no sun without shadow, and it is essential to know the night" (Camus, 1991: 123) . Or relatedly, perhaps our continued daily resistance against meaninglessness is what we should ask for or expect as a source of true meaning. As Camus concludes: "The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy" (Camus, 1991: 123).

We believe these considerations are important and constitute a valid way of conceptualizing meaning and meaninglessness, but that they provide an uneasy fit for our participants' self-described lived experiences. Some of our participants did describe ways that their experiences with meaningless work resulted in shifts to their values that changed their estimations of what was meaningful. However, others did not. And because of our deliberate subjectivist stance, we decline Camus' invitation to imagine Sisyphus one way or the other—certainly, when our participants spontaneously referenced Sisyphus, they did not imagine him happy.

The notion that meaning and meaninglessness must also constitute a duality—that one cannot exist without the other—is also worth taking very seriously. However, recall that our participants' experiences were complex, and that meaningless work was generally *not* described as work that was

merely not particularly meaningful, but was described as work that was actively meaningless. Considering merely not-particularly-meaningful work, participants also described many daily activities that were routine or boring but that did not instil a sense of meaninglessness.

In sum, we find these considerations an uneasy fit for our empirical findings but acknowledge that they may resonate with certain readers or in certain situations: experiences with meaningless work may propel one towards experiences of greater meaning; the struggle against meaninglessness may itself be a source of meaning; a lack of meaning may be unavoidable in some contexts; and harmful experiences of meaninglessness may help to highlight subsequent feelings of meaning. We believe that these considerations are worth exploring, both through conceptual elaboration and as potential frames for future empirical studies of workers' experiences.

Implications for practice

In this section we discuss some potential implications for practitioners who wish to reduce or mitigate the harms of meaningless work on themselves or others. Participants in our study generally saw the workplace-specific factors giving rise to meaningless work as large and structural. For individuals with staff-level and managerial positions, two of the more positive adaptive responses were shifting values away from work in favor of other aspects of life, and forging connections with other employees. Placing more value on life outside the workplace allowed participants to experience satisfaction and development in spheres where they had more control, and forging solidarity with similarly situated people in the workplace sometimes helped to reduce stigma and isolation. Participants also had some success with changing their workplace environment through crafting tasks, for example when they were able to stand up an approved activity like a reading group that could occupy a niche somewhat detached from the otherwise negative workplace dynamics. Finally, some participants described leaving

meaningless jobs to move within government, although as we saw in our discussion of the "cycle of meaninglessness," the results could be ambivalent.

For public servants with managerial responsibilities, we make two additional recommendations for effecting positive system change within their sphere of control. The first recommendation is that managers acknowledge that some of their direct reports may be experiencing meaninglessness, along with the inner turmoil and responses we described above, which may help to mitigate the isolation and self-doubt we found associated with meaningless work. The second recommendation to managers is to attempt to mitigate structural elements under their control leading to uselessness, powerlessness, and/or senselessness. For example, it may be possible to mitigate uselessness by helping people understand how their work contributes to worthy goals, to mitigate powerlessness by delegating meaningful responsibility or creating space for workers to engage in crafting tasks, and to mitigate senselessness by giving clear reasons for decisions. And if managers are unable to explain away senselessness, an open and good-humoured acknowledgement may help to diffuse it, create a sense of community, and reduce isolation and stigma.

Boundary conditions and directions for future research

Our qualitative research focused on the experiences of workers in a Canadian public-service setting and these findings cannot be generalized at large, nor do we have data about how prevalent or widespread these experiences are within the public sector. However, we provided extensive data on the context (e.g., bureaucratic structures and processes) within which these experiences occur allowing transferability of our findings to similar contexts (Miles et al., 2020). Indeed, other studies have found that public servants experience meaninglessness or related feelings at work in other nations, including Sweden (Paulsen, 2017) and Finland (Tammelin and Mänttäri-van der Kuip, 2021), and there is also evidence that this experience exists with other types of employees as well, including business school

academics (Knights and Clarke, 2014) and physicians (Hoeyer and Wadmann, 2020). Future research could explore differences and similarities in the experience of meaningless work in different settings, including private-sector settings. Several private-sector workers contacted us unbidden during recruitment for the present study, suggesting that this topic has resonance outside of the public sector.

Our study recruitment criteria place some limitations on our findings, since we explicitly sought individuals who experienced meaninglessness. As a result, there may be individuals in similar circumstances to our participants who do experience meaning but did not participate in our study; in particular, there may be those who experience meaning through a process of justification even when they have low autonomy (Zheng et al., 2020). In addition, our study did not include individuals who have left the public sector due to experiences of meaningless work. Some participants in our study made references to such individuals. Further, our study does not reflect the full diversity of Canada's public service. For example, none of our participants self-identified as Black or Indigenous, and people in these groups may have experiences not reflected in our findings (Ozturk and Berber, 2022). Future research can be designed in such a way as to sample participants more broadly in order to provide better understanding of the experience of meaningful work through justification in the case of low job autonomy; whether and how departure from the public sector mitigates the experience of meaningless work; and how different cultural groups account for their experiences of work meaning(lessness).

We stress that this paper is focused on the experience of meaningless work and is not intended to provide a full description of the experience of work in the public sector. The experience of meaningful work is important, and we omit fuller discussion of it in this paper only because our research is focused on the less-studied experience of meaningless work. In our interviews, participants were asked to describe their experiences of meaningful work in the public service. While some participants struggled to find meaning in any part of their work, others did find meaning in at least some parts at least sometimes, and a few found their work largely meaningful with notable instances of meaninglessness.

Common sources of meaning included learning new tasks and subject areas, developing strong social bonds with colleagues, and feeling that one's work contributed to positive change. The balance between meaning and meaninglessness could also change over time. Future research could adopt a longitudinal approach that would shed light on the temporality and processes associated with experiences of meaningful and meaningless work.

Finally, since we have argued that workers may be harmed by meaningless work, this study also suggests important avenues for future conceptual and empirical research. Normative philosophical inquiry could, for example, explore the nature of this harm and what ethical implications or obligations, if any, it may have for workers, organizations, and society. Further empirical work could study the experience of meaningless work in other settings outside of the public sector, but more ambitiously could also explore the above-mentioned "paradoxes of meaninglessness," including a focus on later-career workers' retroactive subjective judgements of how experiences with meaningless work did or did not affect the trajectories of their careers and their lives. The temporal nature of the coexistence of meaning and meaninglessness would be particularly worthy of future research to understand how these experiences can ebb and flow across weeks, months or even years of one's career. We hope that our study provides a stepping-stone to research and discussions on this important topic.

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Appendix A: Tables

Table 1: Self-reported participant characteristics.

Characteristic	Count (n=25)
Gender	
Female	15
Male	9
Non-binary / Transgender	1
Age Range	
20-29	5
30-39	6
40-49	5
50-59	8
60-69	1
Level of Government	
Federal	18
Provincial	7
Years in Public Sector	
<2	2
2-5	5
6-10	2
11-15	8
16-20	2
20-30	4
30+	2
Job Level	
Analyst/Advisor	10
Senior Analyst/Advisor	6
Team Lead	2
Manager	4
Director/Director General	3

Table 2: The Nature of the Experience of Meaninglessness

Dimension of Meaninglessness	Representative Quotations
Uselessness	• P20: Meaninglessness comes down to futility and pointlessness. • P25: That's pretty meaningless, when you're going to go to the office and not have very much to do.
Powerlessness	• P15: Yeah, I think if I could sum that meaningless work up, it was a lack of autonomy. • P18: Meaninglessness means just being trapped. Like just not being able to move forward. Being confined.
Senselessness	• P03: I honestly felt this job probably shouldn't exist… it's very meaningless to inhabit a job that you think shouldn't exist. • P13: The meaninglessness is when a lot of the things we're being asked to get done, it's the umpteenth time, it's having to go through extremely long processes of approvals and long periods of time.

Table 3: Categories and themes and illustrative quotations.

Aggregate Dimensions	Second-Order Themes	First-Order Concepts	Representative Quotations
Inner Turmoil	Bleak Emotions	Sadness	P15: I'm here, I'm available, and I want to work. I told you I don't have enough work… It's a bit soul destroying.
		Guilt and shame	P23: It makes you feel guilty… you're getting paid to do this work, but is it really value-added?
		Generalized Ennui	P01: I find meaninglessness at work bleeds into a sense of meaninglessness in life.
	Self-Doubt	Existential Doubt	P16: So meaninglessness is like asking yourself, why? Why am I doing this? What's the purpose? …maybe I shouldn't even try.
		Career Doubt	P15: I chose to join the public service and it wasn't meaningful… I felt like I was wasting my life, I felt like I was confused.
	Isolation	Hiding Experiences of Meaninglessness	P24: I would never voice these profound feelings of meaninglessness to managers or to people I work with. And the reason for that is partly a fear of stigma.
		Faking Good	P03: I think at work everyone pretends that they're very busy, but I don't really think anyone is… But no one talks about it.
Responses	Crafting Tasks	Taking Initiative	P19: I need to take control… to find things that I can do within my job that are more interesting.
		Shifting Duties	P13: I started to curb back my effort… in those areas, and started to put it so I could more directly be involved and support where I could find resolutions.
		Delegating	P10: So that, for me, was extremely meaningless… what I would tend to do, is delegate it to someone.
	Checking Out	"Zoning Out"	P17: I've definitely had points with,,, that sense of meaninglessness, where I just wasn't present. Like if I was at work, I didn't feel present.
		Depersonalizing	P19: I get great performance reviews, but I just don't take it so seriously. At the end of the day, we're just writing some things and putting them on the internet… let's have some perspective over here.
		Reclaiming Time	P25: When I'm dealing with meaninglessness I read, I just read books. I look for another job. I chat with my colleagues.
		Quitting	P23: The young generation…they're more vocal if they're not happy with their job that they're going to move. And I've seen a lot of, "I'm going to look for another job," and they just move around because they're trying to find something that can motivate them.
	Forging Connections	Seeking Validation	P04: It felt very much like peer support, so people saying, "Yes, we're all in agreement, this is not very meaningful, we have to do this work, it feels like bureaucracy, it doesn't feel like it'll change." And you shared your experiences and generally felt better.
		Seeking Respite	P15: I had regular coffee walks with a couple of colleagues who didn't work in my area so that there would be a reason to go somewhere and do something… the main way that I personally dealt with meaninglessness is trying to stay connected.
	Shifting Values	Refining Values	P24: My experience with meaning and meaninglessness means that I am very willing to sacrifice a lot to pursue a career that I think will get me that meaning… it's by far the overriding factor in what I'm looking for in my career.
		Refocusing Values	P25: Sometimes when I'm feeling incredible meaninglessness, I will do even more volunteer work in my personal life… I want to be useful.