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Process of Meaning Making in International Aid Work: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

In the past decade, there has been increasing psychological research interest in both the experiences of international aid workers and in the relationship between meaning and work. However one of the unexplored research areas in occupational psychology is the process of meaning-making. There is also a lack of knowledge of the experience of meaning in aid work. A review of the literature suggests that meaning is a key motivational factor in work, particularly in international aid work, but how the experience of meaning is navigated over time is a neglected question. This study undertook to explore the process of meaning-making in international aid work, using an interpretative phenomenological analysis methodology. Written reflections were collected and semi-structured interviews were conducted with six Canadian aid workers. The transcripts were analyzed and coded, resulting in four superordinate content themes related to the experience meaningfulness in the lifecareer, and four superordinate process themes were identified. The four content themes were: being values-driven, having an impact, relationships and passion. The four process themes were: motivation, confirmation, renegotiation and re-evaluation. Implications for both aid workers and aid organizations were discussed and opportunities for further research were identified.

Keywords: international aid work, humanitarian aid, occupational psychology, existential psychology, meaning-making, meaning and work, meaningful work

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Process of Meaning Making in International Aid Work - A Phenomenological Study

Chapter One: Introduction

Meaning in work and *meaning in life* are pressing identity questions to the modern, middle class Westerner. Our sense of identity comes less from our being handed our social role and identity when we are born into a kinship group than it did in previous generations: “The ethic of individual self-fulfilment and achievement is the most powerful current in modern society. The choosing, deciding, shaping human being who aspires to be the author of his or her own life, the creator of an individual identity, is the central character of our time” (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. 3). We are now responsible for crafting our own identities and lives, what has been called the “do-it-yourself biography” (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. 3). It is the work of a lifetime, burdening us with its existential urgency: our choices, we are told, define who we are. In our postmodern culture, in which we are let loose into a sea of fragmented, free-floating individuals, one of the ways we seek out belonging, fulfilment, meaning and identity is through the work we do (Wrzesniewski, 2011). The question of finding meaningful work is one of the most pressing and keeps us awake, wondering, will I have made a difference? Will I have felt like I contributed in some significant way? Will I have enjoyed my life along the way?

For those for whom 'meaningful work' is defined as making a difference in the world, especially if combined with opportunities for excitement and adventure, there can be few careers perceived as more meaningful and exciting than international aid work. Aid workers, particularly humanitarian relief workers, have a special place in the popular imagination: heroic, free-spirited, courageous, compassionate and self-sacrificing (Macdonald, n.d.; Sweeney, 2014). This romantic vision is powerfully compelling and draws in many idealistic young aspirants, grasping after that ever-elusive experience of meaningfulness and adventure (Ambrose & Rigby, 2015;

Lenfer, 2016; Mendleson, 2008; Morealtitude, 2011; B. Rigby, 2013; T. Rigby, 2013; Stark, 2011; Yeoh, 2012).

Context of Aidland. Aid workers inhabit a particular socio-political space, called *Aidland* in literature. The term was originally coined by Apthorpe (2011) to convey a metaphorical space characterized by its own particular “mental topographies, languages of discourse, lore and customs, and approaches to organizational knowledge and learning,” distinct from the actual geo-cultural regions in which the work takes place (Apthorpe, 2011, p. 199; see also: Mosse, 2011; Roth, 2014). Aidland is a lifeworld of multiple “shared meanings”; it is in a sense its own cultural world (Hemingway, 2011, p. 4; see also: Hung & Stables, 2008). Aidland is “evidenced locally and temporarily by the co-presence of particular individuals”—like aid workers—“with their special set of projects,” (Ashworth, 2003, p. 146). Shared meanings (like the phrase ‘making a difference’) are how aid workers make sense of their expatriate status, their radical cultural differences, their relative privilege, their helping/modernizing projects, and the seeming limitlessness of the need that confronts them (Ager & Iacovou, 2014; Carr, McAuliffe, & MacLachlan, 1998; Eyben, 2012; Heron, 2007; Hor, 2017; Redfield, 2012; Shutt, 2006; Stirrat, 2008).

Roth (2015) places Aidland within a historical perspective, unequivocally linking the colonial enterprises of previous centuries, particularly past missionary efforts to ‘modernize’ and ‘educate’ the colonized, with the modern-day power relations between the Global North and South¹ which remain at the foundations of the structures of formal and informal power in Aidland. Aidland is the descendent of colonial and imperial machinations and its citizens are inheritors of a colonial legacy (Heron, 2007; Redfield, 2012). In later colonial periods the civilizing/conversion agenda evolved into a modernizing and educating one, a link in the chain of continuity to today’s development and empowerment agenda (Roth, 2015).

Aidland “is the trail [. . .] of where foreign aid comes from, where it goes, and what then. Stepping into Aidland is like stepping off one planet into another, a virtual another, not that this means that it is any the less real to those who work in or depend on or are affected by it in other

¹ ‘Global North’ and ‘Global South’ are the currently used terms for what was previously called the ‘First World’ and the ‘Third World,’ or the ‘developed world’ and the ‘developing world.’ While geographically most wealthy countries and former colonial powers are situated in the Northern hemisphere, the definition also includes such wealthy, culturally European countries as Australia (which as an important international aid presence) and New Zealand. Another vocabulary frequently used is ‘donor countries’ and ‘recipient’ or ‘beneficiary’ countries. Whichever terminology is used, they all tend to exclude middle-income countries that are not significant aid recipients (such as China, India and Brazil), even if they are “Official Development Assistance-eligible” countries, according to the OECD and wealthy, non-Western nations that don’t participate in international aid in a significant way, such as Saudi Arabia. The list of countries on either side of the binary is a fluid one, depending on the economic, political and cultural power dynamics to which one is referring.

ways" (Apthorpe, 2005, cited in Harrison, 2013, p. 263). The terms *Aidland* and *lifecareer*, convey the all-encompassing nature of the work, as well as the fact that it represents a world of its own with its own subcultures, social hierarchies, practices, rituals and language (Apthorpe, 2011; Mosse, 2011; Roth, 2014). Because Aidland's origins are traceable to the colonial era, its structures, dynamics and culture are founded in historically unequal power relations between professional 'helpers' from the Global North and 'beneficiaries' in the Global South (Heron, 2007). This continues to have an influence on relations at all levels. Verma (2008) argues that the lifestyles and professional lives of today's expatriate aid workers are not essentially different from their colonial forbears, noting the similarities in "codes of behaviour" and the surprising insularity of the "community in exile within its own social world fashioned in the image of home" (Verma, 2008, p. 80). These implicit behavioural codes and unspoken protocols seem to be common within Aidland, in the meanings and habits of expatriate life and social networks, in consumption and travel habits, and especially between expatriate and local employees within the organizations that deliver aid. Power relations in Aidland are drawn in highly complex ways along the historic race, class and gender divisions and driven by unconscious and largely unscrutinized neoliberal ideological convictions and politico-economic agendas of the 'donor countries' of the Global North (Heron, 2007; Kothari, 2005; S. White, 2002). This historical geopolitical and cultural power dynamic is the context within which aid workers from the Global North feel called to 'make a difference' in Aidland.

While aid workers are plugged into geopolitical dynamics by the very nature of their work, Aidland is paradoxically a relatively apolitical space because of its apartness (Mosse, 2003), rendered that way through the networks of relationships and through the technocratic language, a set of vocabulary and ways of understanding the world specific to this "spatially and

socially constructed community" (Heathershaw, 2016, p. 81). In Aidland, these shared vocabularies don't necessarily correspond with the lived reality of the culture of the 'local beneficiaries,' as there is always a gap in meanings between Aidland and the 'host' community (Fechter, 2012a; Shutt, 2006; Watson, 2013).

Stirrat (2008), Fechter (2016), Shutt (2012), and Roth (2015) all describe aid work as marked by dilemmas, contradictions, tensions and paradoxes, in which the residents of Aidland benefit from a number of privileges and immunities while living and working alongside the marginalized citizens of the developing world. Aid workers are somewhat conscious of the contradictions, but tend to focus on the benefits and positive experiences that also come to them: "Hate the feeling of inequality, being patronising, being seen as the rich white girl, etc. But like the feeling of being somewhere that matters. And meeting people – the basic human interaction with people across the world – love that" (cited in Arcaro, 2016a). In particular, Silke Roth's recently published *Paradoxes of Aid Work: Passionate Professionals* (Roth, 2015) is a comprehensive anthropological study of life in Aidland, drawn from semi-structured interviews with over thirty aid professionals. She argues that indeed, this life is characterized by paradoxes; the contradictions are inevitable and must be faced—and managed. Her research participants describe a lifecareer of privilege and precariousness, oriented towards social justice and empowerment of the marginalized, while driven by the powerful elite of the Global North. It is a gendered and racialised space, with "dissimilar consequences for men and women" and for those from the Global North versus those from the Global South, which "simultaneously undermines, challenges and perpetuates conventional" divisions of power (Roth, 2015, p. 13).

There are many kinds of workers in international aid, and each of these likely represents a different dimension between the expectation of meaningfulness and the lived reality, which

includes national/local employees, as well as international consultants, volunteers, students and researchers. The present research will look particularly at International Aid Professionals, in other words, the professional, expatriate class, sent by their organizations primarily on long-term deployments, which require extended absences from their countries of origin. These absences immerse the aid worker in the world of Aidland, which we recall, is distinct from the actual regions in which the work takes place.

Research in to the experiences of aid workers. Although the image of the heroic aid worker continues its hold on the popular imagination—saving children, building schools, protecting the victims of war and catastrophe—it's not a population that has been widely studied until recently, when we have begun to see peer-reviewed research into their experiences. There is a need for much more research into many dimensions of the lived realities of aid workers. In part this imperative is because of their numerical importance (there are likely hundreds of thousands of national and expatriate aid workers in developing countries at any given moment). It is also needed because of the important role the aid industry plays in the political and economic agendas of rich countries. But most importantly, it is needed precisely because of the knowledge gap between the romantic expectation and the lived experience; aid workers are a significant employment category of professionals in a helping field, but are significantly less studied than nurses, social workers, doctors, counselors, soldiers and other first responders. Yet they are so important precisely because of the completely immersive nature of their work and lives in the poorest and most dangerous places in the world. Two dozen or so empirical studies on aid workers and mental health have been published in the past fifteen years, although there have been many more critical essays, anthropological reflections, autobiographical accounts, commentaries, literature reviews and policy documents. There has been increasing attention

particularly to the issue of mental health and wellness of international aid workers and to the issue of ‘duty of care’ of the organizations that send them into developing countries (Merkelbach & Kemp, 2016).

Research into the experience of meaning in work. The second field of study to which this research will contribute is the domain of occupational psychology, particularly the extensive research into meaning *in* work and the meaning *of* work. There are numerous studies into the importance of meaning in relation to work, the factors that contribute to the meaningfulness of work, and even what meaning work *has* or *can have* for people, as well as the consequences when work is not meaningful in some way. There is a great deal of writing also about different orientations to work—jobs, careers and callings—and the nature of the meaning of each to the individual. A sub-field that has begun to emerge more recently is in the area of process of sense-making and meaning-making in relation to work. It is to this question of process that this research study turns its attention. It takes a particular interest in how meaning in work and meaning of work is navigated over the years of a career. A career evolves over time as people gain experience and as life intervenes in their decisions and choices. However, this evolving relationship to work, over a lifetime, and how meaning is made (and possibly), undone and remade—there is much less research into this question.

Purpose

We sometimes think of meaningful work—meaning ‘in’ work—as a unitary thing that must be sought and found, that it can be ‘got.’ In the popular imagination (and possibly in the minds of lifecareer entrants), *meaning*, when attributed to international aid work, is a simple thing, defined only in vague and romanticized terms (much in the way aid work itself is perceived). There has been no study that looks at the lifecareer-cycle of long-term aid

professionals and asks how the experience and articulation of meaningfulness changes over time and what are the key transition points that precipitate a renegotiation. Two recent studies—both doctoral dissertations—ask questions about the role of meaningfulness in regards to the psychological resilience of aid professionals (Montaiuti, 2013; Thomas, 2008). This is of relevance because while many aid workers manage to sustain this lifecareer for a long time, others leave, settle down, or suffer burnout (Arcaro & J. Sweeney, 2016; Secret aid worker, 2015; Young, 2015). And yet, empirical research into the long-term career dynamics of aid professionals is still missing from literature. The purpose of the present phenomenological study is to understand and describe the process of meaning-making, specifically in an international aid work lifecareer. It is not a longitudinal study, but rather asks long-term aid workers to reflect back on the process over time.

Audience

The intended audience of this study is wide but targets primarily occupational psychologists and aid workers themselves. The study could also be of interest to human resources policy makers and clinicians who take an interest in the mental health of this population (Harutyunyan, 2016; Korff, Balbo, Mills, Heyse, & Wittek, 2015; Loquercio, Hammersley, & Emmens, 2006). This study has ramifications for the occupational psychology research field, particularly at the confluence of meaning-making as a cognitive process, research into calling and vocation and existential psychology's interests in our 'will to meaning.' Theoretically speaking, this study will add nuance to our understanding of the experience of meaning in work as a process that needs active and effortful engagement over time.

Need for the Study

Studies confirm that aid workers are primarily and strongly motivated to choose this work by the desire to make a difference in the world, i.e., meaningful work (for example, Bjerneld, Lindmark, McSpadden, & Garrett, 2006; Dickmann, Parry, Emmens, & Williamson, 2010; Fechter, 2012a; Lawrence, 2011; Mangold, 2012; O'Dwyer & Woodhouse, 1996; Putman et al., 2009). There is a sense that this occupation has the characteristics of a *calling*: "a course of action in pursuit of pro-social intentions embodying the convergence of an individual's sense of what he or she would like to do, should do, and actually does" (Elangovan, Pinder, & McLean, 2010, p. 430). A lifecareer in international aid is a vocation, requiring a full-life commitment of frequent travel and moves, to (often) geo-politically unstable and insecure regions, requiring separation from family or placing demands on the mobility of families (Dik & Duffy, 2009). There are benefits—travel, adventure, discovery, generous pay in regions with low living costs leading to a comfortable lifestyle—but they are often significant trade-offs (Arcaro & J. Sweeney, 2016; Pigni, n.d.; Rabe, 2016c; Secret Aid Worker, 2016a; Young, 2015). Empirical research into these issues is very new, and there has as of yet been little cross-fertilization between the domains of ethnography, occupational psychology and existential theory. The present study aims to contribute to reducing that knowledge gap through the exploration of the experience of meaningfulness in international aid work.

Research Question

There is little literature on the stages of meaning making, from the worker's expectations, to the experience of meaning during assignments, to how the meaning of work shifts over time. What is the process of meaning-making in international aid work? What are the precipitating factors that produce change in an aid worker's relationship to that meaning and how do adapt to

it? The present study seeks to find out just how the experience of meaningfulness is sustained and/or changed over time.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

The Lifeworld of Aidland

In his article on the importance of the 'lifeworld' concept to phenomenological research, Ashworth (2016) explains that phenomenology seeks to reveal the "taken-for-granted meanings" that make up the experience/event under consideration (p. 20). While we are in the midst of it, it is simply lived through, rather than reflected upon, but phenomenological research takes an observing stance, and seeks to describe it from the outside looking into the experience—while still recognizing that it is impossible to stand completely outside an experience. Husserl brought the concept into phenomenology, out of concern about a scientific method which sought to overly quantify the world, to the neglect of the qualitative realities of the lived human experience of the world (Hemingway, 2011; Husserl, 1936/1970). "It is in this world that we ourselves live, in accord with our bodily [*leiblich*], personal way of being," not measurable or reducible by quantitative methods, "this actually intuited, actually experienced and experienceable world, in which practically our whole life takes place" (Husserl, 1936/1970, pp. 50-51). We are *beings-in-the-world*, in Heideggerian terms: "we cannot but be immersed in a lifeworld. So the exclusion of the lifeworld from the consideration of an experience is not possible, and all intentional objects are necessarily immersed in the lifeworld" (Ashworth, 2016, p. 23). The experience under study (the 'phenomenon' of phenomenology) takes place in the context of the person's life, of their situation as they experience it "from within" (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006, p. 117). This lifeworld cannot be fully 'bracketed,' or set aside artificially from the research situation, since it is the context within which the actors live, move, perceive and give meaning to their

experiences (Gallagher, 2012). It is important to attend to the many facets of the lifeworld within which the phenomenon under study takes place, because it is the whole subjective context for the individual experience of the phenomenon of interest (Ashworth, 2016, p. 21).

The lifeworld of aid workers and their shared meanings are an essential backdrop to a consideration of how they navigate the experience of meaningfulness in their life careers—it is the place where the project of sense-making and meaning-seeking unfolds (Finlay, 2011). It may be difficult for some to see how a space as geographically, culturally and professionally diverse as the world of aid work can be described in a singular way. But there is still enough in common within those experiences to be able to describe the basic characteristics of the space in which aid workers live and work (Wolff-Michael, 2004).

Motivation for taking up residence in Aidland. While ‘helping others’, or ‘making a difference’ in the world, is generally considered to be the primary motivation for entry into Aidland, both academic research and anecdotal accounts suggest that altruistic motivations are almost always mixed with other, more self-interested ones. Across all possible motivations, qualitative research has consistently demonstrated that the pro-social motivation—making a difference—is the most common driver, followed closely by the desire for adventure and travel (Ager & Iacovou, 2014; Arcaro & J. Sweeney, 2016; Fechter, 2011, 2012a; Harrison, 2013; Heron, 2007; Hudson & Inkson, 2006; Macdonald, n.d.; O’Dwyer & Woodhouse, 1996; Oberholster, 2011; Roth, 2014, 2015; Shutt, 2006; Stark, 2011; Thomas, 2008; P. White, 2015). In his dissertation on the motivations of employees of non-profit organizations for accepting international postings (n=129 to 164), Oberholster (2011) found that pro-social motivation—altruistic values—were the most important factors in the decision of NGO workers to accept international assignments. Employees with altruistic motives value making a difference and are

willing to sacrifice themselves in some way to further this goal; they are directed towards something "greater than themselves" (Oberholster, 2011, p. 30). Over 50 percent of the individuals in his study valued a combination of international travel and cross-cultural experience with pro-social motives to make a difference, with an equally important element of internal career orientation, such as building their professional skills (Oberholster, 2011).

Similarly, in their quantitative study, O'Dwyer and Woodhouse (1996) found that Irish volunteer development aid workers (n=245) were primarily motivated by altruism, but were equally strongly motivated by a desire to experience other places and cultures. P. White (2015) found three overall motivations among a population of Finnish aid workers (n=28): altruism ("doing good"), travel/adventure and professional development ("gaining work experience") (p. 99). Interestingly, O'Dwyer and Woodhouse (1996) found a key gender difference: the first ranked reason among the male respondents (n=118) was "to get away for a couple of years," and the first for females (n=127) was "to work for poor people" (p. 26). Overall, the respondents were inclined to more of a charitable and humanitarian motivation rather than a reflective, analytical and justice seeking one, which may help to explain the earlier suggestion that aid workers can detach their personal interest from the political aspects in Aidland (O'Dwyer & Woodhouse, 1996). Hudson and Inkson (2006) and Ager and Iacovou (2014) both also found that altruism, encounter with different cultures, along with search for meaning were the top-cited motivations among their research subjects. Ager and Iacovou (2014) described this as the "key motivational triad for humanitarian workers" (p. 9). One anonymous aid worker acknowledged these mixed motivations: "personally, my motivations have always been complex. Altruism is only one of many. I crave adventure and new experiences. At times I've wanted to escape my life

back home. I also take great pleasure from the feeling that my work has a positive impact on others and is about something more than just padding my wallet" (Secret Aid Worker, 2016d).

The professional career environments have changed significantly in the past generations in the Global North. Expectations of professional lives, and of the work environment have shifted in a rapidly changing world. Careers are now marked by mobility; they are "projectized" and "boundaryless" (Lips-Wiersma & McMorland, 2006; Roth, 2015; Tams & Arthur, 2010). Hall (2004) termed this new model the "protean career", which he describes as "a career orientation in which the person, not the organization is in charge, where the person's core values are driving career decisions, and where therein success criteria are subjective" (Hall, 2004, p. 1). The protean career allows for a great deal of personal autonomy and grounding in personal values, and requires the individual to be highly self-directed (Kopelman, Feldman, McDaniel, & Hall, 2012). This description fits a lifecareer in Aidland perfectly. Roth (2015) links the protean career concept to the way aid work is structured to require mobility and flexibility at the cost of stability. She calls the protean career in Aidland an "extreme case of a project-based search for meaning," in which "the course of the career seems to lie in the interests, drives and motivations of self-realizing individuals with an intrinsic work motivation" (Roth, 2015, p. 55). Rather than being simply a career, a lifecareer in Aidland is an orientation to work, a 'mode of being,' driven by one's values and motivated by self-realization (Yeoman, 2014).

One of the defining characteristics of life in Aidland is the lack of boundary between private and professional lives (Roth, 2015). Heathershaw (2016) calls this space a "liminal" one because of its in-betweenness, where the usual boundaries and rules of a life-career are suspended "by freedom from the constraints of stable relationships, personal and professional," (p. 81). In Aidland, work and personal lives are intermingled in an intense way such that the life

cannot be separated from the career: hence the *lifecareer* (Fechter, 2012b). Aid workers are expected to lead highly mobile and flexible careers, but this mobility also leads to less of a division between their personal and professional lives in ways that are quite different from a typical career (Nowicka, 2012; Redfield, 2012). Their lives are often characterized by fluidity, frequent travel, "living-apart-together" relationships, and career interruptions, and by work that is fluid, project-based, precarious and uncertain, but with great potential for meaningful experiences (Roth, 2015, pp. 56-57).

Mental Health in Aidland

Work in Aidland is generally characterized as all-consuming, and "cumulative stress" is a significant problem that is attracting increasing attention by human resource professionals within the industry (Pigni, n.d.; Stark, 2011). A few recent studies have found consistently high rates of psychological distress among international aid workers, including depression, anxiety, burnout and trauma (Eriksson et al., 2009; Eriksson et al., 2013; Eriksson, Vande Kemp, Gorsuch, Hoke, & Foy, 2001; Jones, Muller, & Maercker, 2006; Lopes Cardozo et al., 2012; McFarlane, 2004; Musa & Hamid, 2008; Putman et al., 2009). The data sets, however, are limited, likely because it is a very difficult population to study: transient, overworked and scattered geographically. These studies have also found that risk and resilience factors associated with an international posting to a developing country or conflict zone include: pre-existing psychological distress (trauma, burnout or anxiety); level of organizational preparation & support; exposure to trauma and cumulative stress; ill health; cultural and physical context; poor coping strategies and self-care; and expectations of the work (Bjernereld, Lindmark, Diskett, & Garrett, 2004; Blanchetiere, 2006; Comoretto, 2007; Ehrenreich & Elliott, 2004; McCormack, Joseph, & Hagger, 2009; McFarlane, 2004; Montaiuti, 2013; Roth, 2014). Burnout and related syndromes, such as cumulative stress

and compassion fatigue, have been found to be a significant problem for humanitarian workers due to cumulative exposure to traumatic events and traumatized populations, compounded by the physical, cultural and social isolation, excessive workload and unrealistic expectations (Lopes Cardozo et al., 2012; MacGregor, 2008; Saner, 1990; S. A. Shah, Garland, & Katz, 2007; Thomas, 2008). Eriksson (2001) found that 30 percent of returning expatriate humanitarian workers self-reported significant PTSD symptoms, from both direct and secondary exposure to trauma events and their effects. That study found an important buffering effect of social support for those with high levels of trauma exposure (Eriksson et al., 2001, p. 211). Overall, studies find that humanitarian aid workers are at increased risk for depression and emotional exhaustion as well as reduced life satisfaction, as well as an increased risk for anxiety and burnout depersonalization (Eriksson et al., 2009; Jones et al., 2006; Lopes Cardozo et al., 2012). Previous trauma exposure increased the risk, particularly for burnout depersonalization, which is also a habitual trauma coping pattern (Levine, 2010; Van der Kolk, 2014). Strong social support networks were important protective factors. Marriage had a mixed impact, suggesting higher levels of overall happiness, but added stress because of family responsibilities (Lopes Cardozo et al., 2012). For both Musa and Hamid (2008) and Cardozo et al. (2005), age seems to have a moderating influence, suggesting that younger expatriate staff are more likely to develop psychological issues.

In its report on mental health and psychosocial support for staff, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR & Welton-Mitchell, 2013) identified the top six stressors which were almost identical to a similar survey undertaken by UNICEF among its staff, including: "feeling undervalued," "family concerns," and organizational issues such as relationships with supervisors and colleagues and feelings of disempowerment created by

hierarchies and bureaucracy (UNHCR & Welton-Mitchell, 2013, p. 53). One study notes that the long-term postings abroad may actually result in a reduced availability of social support and resources for aid workers, as typically these services are available in home countries rather than in duty stations (Jones et al., 2006).

Meaning and Work

Definitions

We begin our review of the occupational psychology literature with considering the definitions of certain key terms. First, it may be helpful to differentiate between *meaning* and *meaningful*. Vuori, San, and Kira (2012) define *meaning* as the connections we make between concepts and their signifiers, such that the "place in the world" of the "focal concept" is signified (p. 232). Meaning is the connection between concepts, without necessarily an evaluation of their positive or negative aspects, but which might convey a sense of one's belief in their social usefulness (Montaiuti, 2013; Vuori et al., 2012). Thus *work* can mean how you earn money to support your family ("a job") or it can mean how you achieve success in the world ("a career"), or how you realize your fullest human potential ("a calling") (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985/2007). On the other hand, something is *meaningful* when it is evaluated as positive or important. Continuing with Vuori's (2012) subjective conceptualization, when the meanings ascribed to an experience are generally positive, then it is generally meaningful (Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010).

Another way the concept of meaning can be understood is by differentiating between a broad and specific usage, as in Yalom's 'cosmic' (broad) or 'terrestrial' (specific) meanings (George & Park, 2014, p. 43). Along the lines of a broad meaning, Montaiuti (2013) draws on Bering's (2003) 'existential meaning', which comprises our subconscious beliefs about the world

and our relation to it, to ourselves and to others. This is the domain of the "subjective, narrative self" (Bering, 2003, p. 101). Termed 'global meaning' in Park's (2010) construct, it is the sense of the self in temporal continuity to which experiences occur and in which significance is attributed via "cognitive representations" (Montaiuti, 2013, p. 18). Analogous to Yalom's 'terrestrial' term, what Park (2010) calls 'situational meaning' is understood as the interpretive response to experiences, the conscious effort to make sense of an event that threatens one's global meaning—in other words sense-making (Rosso et al., 2010).

The ability to make sense out of a challenging experience, and the associated flexibility of global meanings which permit one to do so, are critical to resilience (Montaiuti, 2013). Having an existential or global sense of meaningfulness means that one has a sense of purpose, of direction—a sense of mission or a life project—having a coherent sense of self in the world (George & Park, 2014).

The distinction between meaning and meaningfulness is important in considering the 'meaning of work', because the meaning an individual ascribes to a job or to their career can be different from the significance they attribute to a particular professional experience, in other words, the meaningfulness of it (Rosso et al., 2010). Meaningful work has variously been defined as: having a sense of purposefulness, having a valued direction to follow, having a place in the world, having a sense of the significance of one's life in the world and control over one's efforts (George & Park, 2014). Bailey and Madden (2016) define meaningful work as "arising when an individual perceives an authentic connection between work and a broader transcendent life purpose beyond the self" (p. 55). Thus, as we saw above, the *meaning of work* for an individual can equate to a job, a career, or a calling (Bellah et al., 1985/2007). In contrast, *meaningful work* would be defined as work that takes on a particular positive significance at a

more situational level, coherent with one's global sense of the meaning of work. Research has clearly demonstrated that meaningfulness is a central element in work and life satisfaction (Montaiuti, 2013). This differentiation between meaning and meaningfulness, along with the distinction between global and situational meanings will further assist in evaluating how meaning is navigated over time by the research participants.

Existential Psychology and Meaningful Work

Existential psychologist Viktor Frankl asserted that all of us have a "will to meaning," an innate motivation to find purpose in our lives and to make sense of our existential experiences, and that in this striving, we find a more durable kind of happiness (Frankl, 1959; George & Park, 2014). Frankl links this will to meaning to the requirement for active engagement, taking responsibility for one's life and its struggles, reflecting and making deliberate choices about how to respond to the circumstances in which we find ourselves (Yeoman, 2014). We are by nature inclined towards self-transcendence, seeking to understand ("believing that there is coherence and order in the world") and to hand ourselves over to a passionate purpose that contributes something to the world (Wong, 2014, pp. 155-156). This orientation towards self-transcendence—which Wong (2014) calls "other-oriented values and goals"—is a fundamental spiritual need (p. 159). Meaning-seeking is a "specifically human" quest, with an innately moral-spiritual dimension, which reveals our own values, providing both the orientation and the compass (Frankl, 1959, p. 105). Our purpose "is to give meaning to life through interpreting it within a bigger context" (Buhler, 1965, p. 54). This interpreting is an active and intentional practice of valuing, creating, and reflecting on what gives meaning (Buhler, 1965).

Occupational psychologists view this "will to meaning" as a fundamental human need. Some authors call it "purposefulness" (Clausen & Borg, 2011) or a need to have a mission in life,

a “moral purpose or a reason for being,” the sense that our efforts have a direction towards a goal that is important to us (Cardador & Rupp, 2010, p. 6). Others speak of the need to be “guided by that which is personally meaningful” and want to contribute to something meaningful that transcends us (Holbeche & Springett, 2004; Quigley & Tymon, 2006, p. 534; Rosso et al., 2010). The pursuit must feel socially useful in some way, that it matters (Quigley & Tymon, 2006).

Another existential psychologist, Irving Yalom argued that the need for meaning is based in two motives: 1) the need for coherence and sense-making, and 2) the need for "guiding values or principles" (cited in George & Park, 2014, p. 43). We desire to feel that our lives have made a difference, that we have "mattered" (George & Park, 2014). Meaningful work is a significant contributor to meaning in life, to a sense of fulfillment (Chalofsky, 2003, pp. 73-74; Yeoman, 2014). It is about finding a sense of *alignment* between our purpose, our values and how we want to spend our lives (Chalofsky, 2003). Schnell (2011) defines meaningfulness as "a fundamental sense of meaning, based on an appraisal of one's life as coherent, significant, directed, and belonging" (p. 669). Here we find drawn together four essential strands that are found in the literature on meaningfulness and work: *significance*, in the sense of having importance (Cardador & Rupp, 2010); *directedness*, in the sense of intentionality or purpose (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009); *coherence*, in the sense of alignment with one's values and congruence with one's identity (Holbeche & Springett, 2004; Solomon, 2004); and *belonging*, in the relational sense (Rosso et al., 2010). When all of these four qualities are present to a sufficient degree, one can feel engaged with work that is meaningful and fulfilling (Holbeche & Springett, 2004; Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009).

Sources of Meaning

Rosso et al. (2010), in their inquiry into what makes work meaningful, provide a useful structure for reviewing the sources of meaning at work. They divide these sources into four categories: 1) the self, 2) others, 3) the work context and 4) spirituality.

Self. Our work is a central aspect of our personal identity; here, our fundamental psychological and social needs are at play (Clausen & Borg, 2011). We express our own selves through it, hence the importance of congruence with our personal values and beliefs (Clausen & Borg, 2011).

The literature on motivation distinguishes between extrinsic (such as rewards) and intrinsic (such as personal satisfaction) sources of motivation, with the latter being more associated with availability to the experience of *meaningfulness* at work, given the important link to self-concept (Rosso et al., 2010). Intrinsic motivation, which include identity factors, is an important determining factor in work engagement (Chalofsky & Krishna, 2009), job and life satisfaction (Chalofsky, 2003), and overall well-being (Rosso et al., 2010).

Some research suggests that employees find work meaningful to the extent that they are exercising their full potential, agency, creativity, and mastery, the ability to have an impact and change something (Kopelman et al., 2012; Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009). Control needs, in their variety of manifestations, such as autonomy, self-determination, self-efficacy or competence, are all central to the experience of meaningfulness at work (Cardador & Rupp, 2010; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Grant, 2007; Holbeche & Springett, 2004; Oberholster, 2011; Rosso et al., 2010).

Grant (2007) found that the mobilization of a “pro-social identity,” was a significant motivator of workplace engagement (p. 403). This identity is the sense of oneself as helpful and

able to make a difference: “when it is activated, people experience their identities as oriented toward positively affecting others” (p. 403). They need to feel that what they are doing both *has value* and *is valued* and that their roles are recognized by our colleagues and employers (Wrzesniewski, Dutton, & Debebe, 2003; Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997). Grant (2007) argues for the “relational architecture” of an organization and a job, which “connects employees to the impact of their actions on other people” (p. 396), emphasizing both the elements of contact with beneficiaries and a worker’s direct experience of job impact on those beneficiaries. “Employees seek meaningful tasks and meaningful relationships,” he concludes (Grant, 2007, p. 398).

Values and work. Our values and beliefs are core to our identity and sense of self and play a particular importance in our work lives. Values are both a source of work meaning and a mechanism for making meaning while at work (Rosso et al., 2010). They are a source of motivation, engagement and commitment to organizations (Grant, 2007; Oberholster, 2011). In the protean career orientation, values are a driver of one’s choices and affiliations (Quigley & Tymon, 2006). When tasks/jobs and organizations are in alignment with our core values, we are more likely to experience them as meaningful: “meaningful work is not just about the meaning of the paid work we perform; it is about the way we live our lives. It is the alignment of purpose, values, and the relationships and activities we pursue in life. It is about living our lives and performing our work with integrity” (Chalofsky, 2003, p. 197). Knoop (1994) posited that value-rich work is linked to effective stress management, and found that *meaningfulness* was one of the most important values in this dynamic, along other self-needs we have discussed previously, such as relatedness and competence/autonomy. Cardador and Rupp (2010) noted that the perception of organizational justice, another key personal value, is important to work

engagement and experienced meaningfulness, justice in the sense of *fairness* and *transparency*. The degree of alignment or congruence between personal values and organizational values as they are actually practiced is essential to finding work meaningful (Chalofsky & Krishna, 2009, p. 198; Holbeche & Springett, 2004). Jobs are most meaningful when we feel that we are connected with each other and with a higher purpose, one with moral relevance to the broader community (Holbeche & Springett, 2004; Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009). Organization leadership is the primary shaper of organizational values, which we will see are critical to the experience of congruence necessary for the experience of meaningfulness.

Others as a source of meaning. Rosso et al. (2010) identifies *belonging* needs as another source of meaning in the workplace. Overall, the literature emphasizes the importance of having a sense of membership in a community, or affiliation with others as a way to experience meaningfulness, “by helping them experience a positive sense of shared common identity, fate, or humanity with others” (Rosso et al., 2010, p. 111). This identification with one’s social group and experience of interpersonal connectedness can provide an experience of meaningfulness, even in the most mundane job categories (Clausen & Borg, 2011; Rosso et al., 2010). Work-related groups and communities are essential to the experience of belonging, but also to the needed experience of being of service to others, to making a difference, in other words, seeing one’s impact directly on beneficiaries (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009). A study by Holbeche and Springett (2004) on meaningfulness at work found that, along with having a sense of purpose and congruence between personal and organizational values, enabling connection with others was a defining characteristic of the most highly valued workplaces.

Vuori et al. (2012) also suggested that connection with others was essential to the experience of meaning in work and added that employee meaningfulness-making strategies

included looking to others for interpretive cues to assist in the process. Wrzesniewski, Dutton and Debebe (2003) call this “interpersonal sensemaking:” we look to our coworkers for opportunities to express and reinforce valued identities at work, as well as for cues for how to make sense of experiences.

Work Context. Rosso et al. (2010) identifies five aspects of the work context that are important sources of meaning: 1) job design (including the relational context), 2) organizational mission (“psychological contracts”), 3) financial circumstances, 4) non-work domains (including identity-affirming congruence of values) and 5) national culture (p. 104). Organizational culture shapes the meanings available to individuals to help them interpret their experiences in the workplace. And different organizational cultures help meet different needs, whether bureaucratic, innovative, market-oriented, or supportive (Cardador & Rupp, 2010). We have considered alignment with organizational mission previously. We have also discussed previously the importance of how our fundamental psychological needs are met in the workplace (Cardador & Rupp, 2010). But it is also suggested that a realignment of life priorities, such as financially or family, can have an impact on the perceived meaningfulness of one’s work.

Sources of Meaninglessness

Sources of meaninglessness generally are considered only indirectly in the literature. It is generally assumed that when the qualities that make work meaningful are not present, meaninglessness must be the result. However, Bailey and Madden (2016) and Bjerneld et al. (2006) both identify that it is primarily organizational circumstances that lead to experienced meaninglessness, or at least to situations which require the engagement of a meaning-making or sense-making process.

Bjerneld et al. (2006) speak about Herzberg's "satisfiers and dissatisfiers" in their work on motivation among Scandinavian humanitarian volunteers. Work satisfiers, according to Herzberg, include achievement, recognition, work content, responsibility, and advancement. Dissatisfiers are related to the work situation, the absence of which can lead to dissatisfaction, including organizational policy, supervision, interpersonal relations, working conditions, and pay (Bjerneld et al., 2006, p. 50). Similarly, Bailey and Madden (2016) found that factors that contribute to meaninglessness are not necessarily mapped one-to-one against the factors that make work meaningful. They suggest meaninglessness seems more linked to organizational factors (like leadership, values and job design), while meaningfulness to something we find for ourselves, something more intrinsic and identity-based. They identify "seven deadly sins" of workplaces that contribute to experiences of meaninglessness include: feeling disconnected from personal values, not feeling valued or recognized, pointless/futile bureaucracy, organizational unfairness and injustice, disempowerment and silencing, isolation and marginalization, and overall insecurity or risk of unnecessary harm (Bailey & Madden, 2016, pp. 56-58). Boyatzis, McKee, and Goleman (2002) also identify similar characteristics in their article on loss of passion at work.

Jobs, Careers, Calling

In a highly influential sociological treatise on modern individualist American society, Bellah et al. (1985/2007) described three difference work orientations that provide a useful construct: jobs, careers and callings. Baumeister (1991) takes up these three categories in his book on meaning in the primary life domains, including in work. A *job* orientation is one in which one's work is viewed instrumentally, without "great personal involvement or satisfaction" (Baumeister, 1991, p. 119). A *career* orientation, on the other hand, is one in which one may

invest a great deal of one's identity needs, such as in pursuit of advancement, success and recognition. A career orientation is a self-orientation, "for the careerist, work is a means of creating, defining, expressing, proving and glorifying the self" (Baumeister, 1991, p. 122). Some meaning is derived from the work, but in this orientation, the importance relates more to personal accomplishment and success measures. That can be more than enough for many people to feel they have a fulfilling worklife, and many individuals with a career orientation can be found in Aidland.

Finally, a *calling* looks more like a "career with heart" (Kopelman et al., 2012, p. 163). The term 'calling' itself has religious roots but is generally used in more secularized spiritual sense in the literature on work psychology (Hall & Chandler, 2005; Rosso et al., 2010). The engagement with work experienced by someone with a sense of calling is quite different from those who have jobs or even careers (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). Rather than being driven by instrumental needs, or by personal accomplishment motives, someone with a calling can be driven more by passion and a "sense of personal obligation, duty, or destiny" (Baumeister, 1991, p. 119). Another—more modern—way of describing this is being driven by a need to express one's purpose or mission in life (Duffy & Dik, 2013; Hagmaier & Abele, 2012; Wrzesniewski, 2011). It is an expression of one's connection with the transcendent moral dimension, to the larger human community and to the public good (Bellah et al., 1985/2007), an "enactment of personally significant beliefs through work" (Wrzesniewski, 2011, p. 46), recalling our earlier discussion of Frankl. Hagmaier and Abele (2012) propose five core categories to define the construct of calling: 1) an awareness of transcendence, 2) identification and engagement with one's work, 3) fit between the person, their preferences and skills and the environment/circumstances, 4) feeling of sense and meaningfulness, or purpose and mission, and

5) value-driven behaviour, such as a pro-social orientation (p. 44). A person with a calling orientation may be seeking an experience of congruence—of alignment between how they use their personal resources and their values and beliefs: “for such individuals, work is either a source of purpose in life, or serves as a life domain that allows an expression of a sense of purpose” (Duffy & Dik, 2013, p. 429). Most importantly, those with calling orientations are more likely to experience work as meaningful (Wrzesniewski, 2011).

Processes of Meaning-making

There is a dearth of literature on the process of meaning-making. But one useful approach to processes of meaning-making was recently developed by Park (2010), in her synthesis of the relevant literature. Park’s model distinguishes between the presence of global (existential) and situational meanings, and meaning-making as a specific process of renegotiation in response to stressful situations. Global meaning is one’s general orienting and motivating framework, consisting of one’s worldview, sense of self in the world (subjectivity), beliefs, values and expectations; in other words, these are our core interpretive schema (Park, 2010). Park’s model provides a useful analytical lens because it captures the key elements of both sense-making processes and existential meaning as foundational, as well as the relationship between them over time (See Figure 1). It proposes situational meaning-making processes as precipitated by experiences of a discrepancy between *appraised meaning* and global meaning and the efforts to return to a sense of purposeful, worthwhile lives and a world that makes sense (Park, 2010). The process of meaning-making is one in which people become engaged both cognitively and emotionally in order to reduce the felt dissonance between global meaning and immediate lived experience—to *make sense* out of the circumstances (Rosso et al., 2010).

Park’s (2010) Meaning-making model

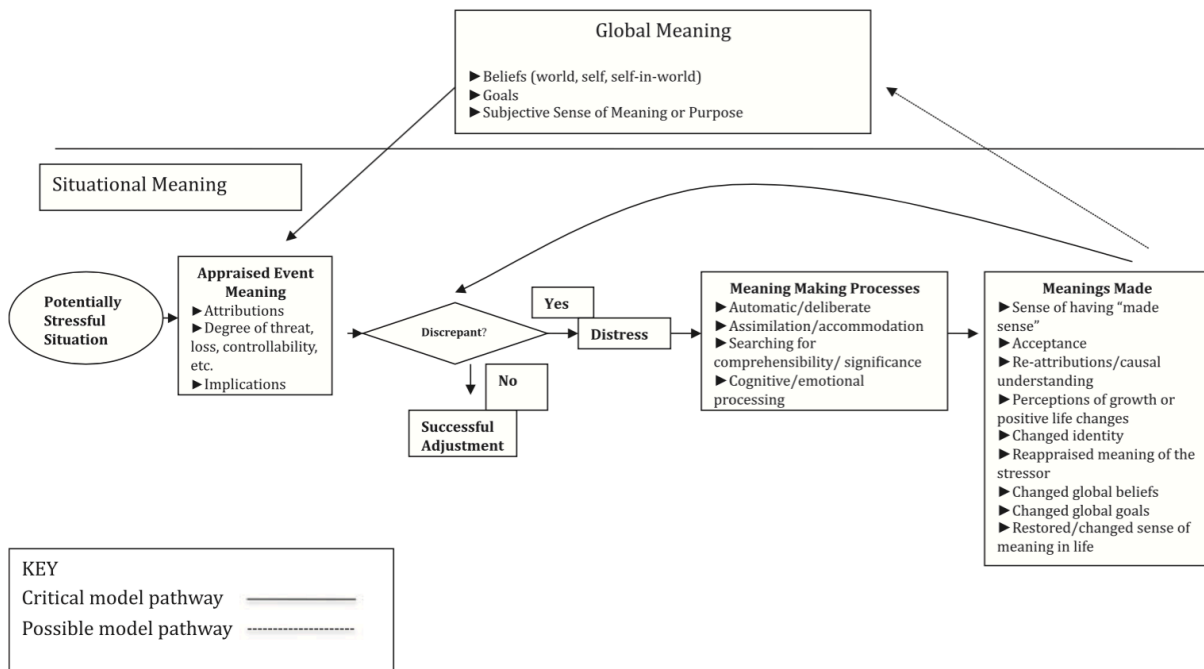


Figure 1. The meaning-making model.

(Park, 2010, p. 258)

In the workplace context, the experiences of meaningfulness, meaninglessness and loss of meaning occur in relation with others (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). Wrzesniewski et al. (2003) suggest that sense-making is a dynamic relational process, “a living social account” of our experiences at work (p. 97). Furthermore, they see the exercise of agency in how we construct that work meaning, how we seek out others who reinforce the particular self-image or meaning we seek to affirm (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). Relationships, they argue, are the “social fabric and context of the job” (p. 94). They argue that we exercise agency in the way that we engage interpersonally in the construction of meanings in our workplaces; we learn the "worth and value" of our respective roles through others (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003, p. 101). The perception of the meaningfulness of a job is a function of the individual's own values, preferences and beliefs, but also of the interpersonal context, the cues the individual receives from others.

Vuori et al. (2012) write about sense-making as a process of extracting cues from the work environment and adopting strategies to maximize positive cues. They explain that it's the experience of a lack of meaningfulness that triggers these sense-making strategies and they identify three kinds of tactics: 1) cognitively/consciously emphasizing positive work qualities, 2) developing competencies and knowledge that will transform the situation, and 3) influencing the work content (Vuori et al., 2012, p. 232). One anonymous aid worker spoke about their own process this way:

In those dark times when I'm struggling I don't admit there might be something wrong. Instead I play the game of rationalising. I tell myself that I'm learning new skills by working in difficult – or near impossible – operational contexts; and that I'm simply “focused on my career” on those days I wish I was out with friends. We all do it, but why? Perhaps it's because surrendering to the unhappiness of those moments would lead us to questioning our entire lifestyle and choice of career – and that is too scary. (Secret Aid Worker, 2016c)

Meaningfulness and Aid work

A small number of studies looking at the relationship between meaningfulness and international aid work are available. Lovell (1997) found that aid workers, overall, showed greater trust in the meaningfulness of the world (80-90 percent) and in their role in it than a control group of non-aid workers (9-19 percent). Oberholster (2011) found that meaning-seeking was one of the prime motivators of international non-profit organization employees. Montaiuti (2013) looked at meaning-making's effect on resilience in international aid workers. Among her study participants (n=10), she found that “helping others, having direct contact with beneficiaries, and maintaining social sustenance” were the most important contributors of

meaning to aid workers (Montaiuti, 2013, p. 3). Thomas (2008) found that when meaning was present, aid workers were more likely to be psychologically resilient to the challenges they faced and to think their work and lives worthwhile. One of the most important element of Thomas' (2008) work is the link between meaningfulness and the individual's sense of their capacity to cope and their sense of competence and control. Thomas' (2008) research into resilience also emphasized the importance of alignment between an individual humanitarian worker's personal values and goals and their organization's values and principles. Several of Thomas' (2008) participants also linked their sense of meaningfulness with their relational connection with the beneficiary communities.

Regarding meaning-making as a process, Montaiuti (2013) speculates that a strain in sense of meaningfulness can arise for aid workers when they are confronted by the "contrast between what aid workers believe life should be and the realities of their occupational experiences that threaten their previously held belief systems, creating a crisis of beliefs" (p. 82). McCormack (2009), in her case study of a single long-term aid professional, found that meaning-making was an ongoing process for him, one that never concluded, as he persisted in the renegotiations necessary to sustain a positive sense of identity, constantly engaging in a process of redefining his "existential worldview" (p. 116).

Summary

This chapter has brought together theoretical and research literature from a number of domains: anthropological, ethnographic and first-person descriptions of the lifeworld of Aidland, theoretical work from existential psychology on the relationship between meaning and work, empirical research into the psychology and mental health of aid workers, and empirical and theoretical research from the field of occupational psychology into the sources and mechanisms

of meaning-making through work. The review of literature showed an emerging interest in the psychological health of international aid workers facing high-stress environments, but which neglects long-term development workers. It also shows a much better established body of theoretical and empirical literature on meaning in work. There are a small number of studies (three PhD dissertations) beginning to bridge the gap between these two fields (Montaiuti, 2013; Oberholster, 2011; Thomas, 2008). Yet there remains a gap in understanding the process of how individuals navigate meaningfulness over the long term in their careers.

The literature describes aid workers as driven by a search for meaning and international adventure, but life in Aidland as challenging and varied, full of paradoxes and contradictions. Work in Aidland can strain aid workers' mental health, but the experience of meaningfulness can strengthen their resilience against the stressors of life in the world's poorest and most violent regions. The chapter also looked into theoretical and research literature from the fields of existential and occupational psychology to deepen understanding of the importance of meaning and meaningfulness in work. The will to meaning, it is suggested, is an innate human striving to connect with a transcendent purpose, a mission in life to be part of something beyond our own narrow self-interest. The factors that contribute to work meaning, the sources of meaningfulness and meaninglessness have been considered, as well as the three different orientations to work: job, career or calling. The literature suggests a connection between how well our work meets self and relational needs and our valuation of the meaningfulness of our work. It suggests that experiencing a congruence between personal and organizational values is essential and that this is undermined when organizations don't value their people as much as their own processes and hierarchies. There is a much more limited body of literature on processes of meaning-making, including work in interpersonal sense-making in the workplace. However, the definitive (to date)

model of the process of meaning-making to date was developed recently by Park (2010). Park's model differentiates global meaning from situational meaning, and suggests that we are frequently engaged in situational sense-making processes in challenging contexts, but that this process becomes more engaged and vital when global meaning is at risk. While the literature suggests that the sources of meaningfulness in work are numerous and varied, and linked to intrinsic sources of motivation, the sources of meaninglessness seem to consistently point to one particular domain: the organizational context, including job design, colleague relationships, organizational culture and management styles. There remains a research gap, however, between the extensive literature on meaning in work, and on meaning-making and the emerging research into aid worker mental health. Of the three previously cited studies into meaning and aid work, none of these addressed the process of meaning-making over time. Oberholster (2011) contributed to our understanding of the motivations of a sub-population of aid workers, of which "making a difference" was a significant source. Thomas (2008) and Montaiuti (2013) both asked how meaning in work contributes to the resilience of aid workers. Montaiuti (2013) drew on Park's (2010) model of meaning-making, demonstrating its contribution to understanding how aid workers might navigate their experiences, but used the model in order to investigate factors that contributed to resilience. This research study aims to bring together these disparate fields of research and contribute both to a more nuanced portrait of the lives of international aid professionals and a more process-oriented understanding of meaning-making in work.

Chapter Three: Methodology

This chapter will describe the objectives and design of the study (the methods and methodology) and begins with setting the research approach within the context of phenomenological theory.

Thesis Objective

The objective of this study was to explore the lived experience of navigating meaning in a lifecareer in international aid work, wondering about how the expectation of meaningfulness bore up against the lived reality over time. To meet this objective, this study attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the expectation of meaning that aid workers have as they enter the life career?
2. How do aid workers navigate experiences of meaning and meaninglessness?
3. Does the meaning of the work stay consistent over time?
4. How do their experiences of meaning-making impact their lifecareer engagement?

Research Methodology: Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

Phenomenology's origins are found in the works of late nineteenth-century German philosopher Edmund Husserl and his student Martin Heidegger. The starting point in phenomenological enquiry is "lack of knowledge" (van Deurzen & Kenward, 2011, p. 154) and the focus of the inquiry is "the way in which the world appears (shows itself) to human beings in and through subjectivity (consciousness)" (Bullington, 2013, p. 19). It is a descriptive method, approaching data without prior theory or opinion, exploring each individual's experience of their own "being-in-the-world" and the meanings they inscribe on it (van Deurzen & Kenward, 2011, p. 155). This is in contrast to the "objectivist" view which assumes an objective and observable reality that is completely knowable and describable (Bullington, 2013). Phenomenology denies such subject-object dualism (Koch, 1999). Phenomenology is interested in the "experiential processes" of the phenomenon, the situation, its meanings and how they are lived without relying on or resorting to pre-existing categories (LeVasseur, 2003; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; Wertz, 2005, p. 169). It is a science of how humans live, move, and understand their world, thus

ideally suited for a study into lived experience. The term *lebenswelt*, or ‘lifeworld,’ expresses the truth that human experience always occurs within a particular context, that interpretation itself is how we navigate the world (Flood, 2010).

The present research employs an interpretive phenomenological approach, an increasingly popular qualitative method, which looks for individuals’ subjective meanings (Creswell, 2013; Flood, 2010). In Heidegger’s interpretive phenomenological approach, the focus is on subjective meanings and the individual’s responses to them, and does not assume there is an essential world available for description (Flood, 2010). Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) draws on Heidegger’s affirmation of the interpretive and on Merleau-Ponty’s insistence on the irreducible, embodied subjectivity of both participant and researcher: “we can never share entirely the other’s experience” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 19).

This perspective also acknowledges that the researcher has some potentially useful expert knowledge to bring to bear to the enquiry. Phenomenology expects and requires an awareness of “preconceptions, theories, bias and prejudice” to enquire into the essential lived experience of persons (van Deurzen & Kenward, 2011, p. 155). Interpretive phenomenology’s hermeneutic position is that we are as much in the world as the world is in us and that bracketing one’s own experience, understanding and knowledge is not possible (Koch, 1999). What is possible is to engage fully, with self-awareness, in the process of interpretation. Listening to the research participant’s story invites them to construct meanings based on the interview questions. The act of listening and dialoguing within the informal structure of the interview facilitates a co-construction of interpretations and understandings—this is what philosopher Gadamer called the “hermeneutic circle” (cited in Koch, 1999, p. 31). The research findings are in effect “the literal creation of the inquiry process” (Koch, 1999, p. 25). To Gadamer, we cannot ‘bracket’ our own

selves when approaching a ‘text’; our experiences, values and judgments are the “fore-structure” of which we must be aware, but which we cannot put aside (Koch, 1999). Rather than bracketing our own experiential knowledge (Husserl), we incorporate our own understanding into the interpretations we develop (Heidegger and Gadamer) (Koch, 1999). Rather, meanings are co-constituted by the participant and the researcher’s respective understandings, experiences and ideas: “the art of interpretation is always bounded by the separate, intersecting horizons of researcher and participants” (Flood, 2010, p. 10). IPA recognizes there is a “double hermeneutic” as the researcher makes meaning out of the meanings offered by the participants, drawing out potentially unconscious meanings (Langdrige, 2007, p. 108; Smith & Osborn, 2010). In other words, IPA is the result of the encounter between the researcher and the participant through which, the researcher becomes part of the world being described while trying to make sense out of the participant’s sense-making efforts (Larkin et al., 2006; Smith et al., 2009).

Larkin et al. (2006) explains that IPA’s double hermeneutic begins with the intention to portray the “participants’ concerns and cares—their orientation toward the world—in the form of the experiences that they claim for themselves” while it also situates these claims within their contextual environment and then tries to make sense of the meanings they have proposed (Larkin et al., 2006, p. 117). The IPA approach is idiographic—focused on each case individually before moving on to generalizations (Langdrige, 2007; Wertz, 2005). The perspective is a personal, particular one and is as interested in commonalities as in the differences between accounts (Creswell, 2013; Eatough & Smith, 2008).

Rationale for Research Methodology

The objective of this study was to understand the subjective lived experience of meaning-making in international aid work, how the experience of meaningfulness changes over time, from

initial expectations and motivations for choosing the career, to actual experiences of meaningfulness and meaninglessness and how those are negotiated, to a reflection on the overall arch of the lifecareer and whether the participants experienced a sense of calling. A qualitative research approach was chosen in order to allow for in-depth narrative accounts—to hear the aid workers' own stories, and their own interpretations of what their work has meant to them—to answer the question rather than quantify the response. This is an exploratory study, seeking to discover more about the subjective experience of this population, particularly inclusive of longer-term development workers, a sub-population neglected by the research community.

Study Design

The qualitative, phenomenological approach was chosen in order to allow the research participants' own stories to lead. It is an exploratory study that places the reflections and meanings offered by the research participants at the forefront, while also offering interpretations of those meanings that strive to remain faithful to the lived experiences of the data sources.

Ethical Considerations

This study was approved by the Saint Paul University Research Ethics Board prior to recruitment and interviews. The participants were required to give informed and active consent to their participation at the beginning, first by reading and signing a consent form (see Appendix IV for examples of the Consent and Information forms), which also informed them of the study's confidentiality protocols. They were also informed that they were free to withdraw their participation at any time. At the beginning of the interview, the researcher informed the participant of the study's objectives once again, explained the confidentiality protocols and gave opportunities for any further questions. Once verbal consent was given by the participant, the researcher initiated the recording. Anonymity was retained throughout the study, with the

participants being given pseudonyms and identifying information being deleted from the transcripts when being shared with the supervisor or the colleague assisting with reliability.

Data Collection

Participant selection

The recruitment strategy sought to select participants who had significant professional experience in Aidland, including having worked in the field. Recruitment was conducted both through word of mouth, through electronic invitations sent out through the researcher's own informal professional network, and through professional aid worker networks of which the researcher is a member, including on LinkedIn groups ("Humanitarian Professionals" and "International Humanitarian and Development Professionals"). Five of the six participants responded through an email notice sent through one particular network, the Canadian Association of International Development Professionals (CAIDP), resulting in a participant profile that was primarily Canadian longer-term development professionals, rather than humanitarian aid workers. The sixth participant (Marcel) was recruited through word of mouth, through the researcher's professional contacts, in an effort to seek out a more balanced gender representation. This individual had coincidentally worked primarily in the humanitarian sector, which added another element of balance.

Data Collection Method.

IPA allows for a wide variety of data collection methods to gather the participants' perspectives. The open-ended, semi-structured interview is generally the preferred method, as it allows for a conversational style of reflection that in turn allows space for the narrative to emerge according to the interviewee's own thought processes—it allows the researcher the most potential to enter the "psychological and social world" of the participant (Smith & Osborn, 2010,

p. 59). The semi-structured interview is seen as the ideal data collection method in IPA because it “facilitates rapport/empathy, allows a greater flexibility of coverage and allows the interview to go into novel areas, and it tends to produce richer data” (Smith & Osborn, 2010, p. 59). On the other hand, it also poses a potential problem because the researcher has less control over the flow of the conversation, rendering data collection and analysis more difficult (Smith & Osborn, 2010). But the dialogical interactive approach to data collection allows for the person being interviewed to determine the meanings and directions that unfold (Eatough & Smith, 2008).

However, in order to prompt some thinking in advance by the interviewees, they were also asked to send a written reflection on the question “Why did you get into this lifecareer? What were you looking for, if anything?” This reflection was intended to elicit information on the participants’ original motivations for choosing the lifecareer. The initial reflection question and then the interview questions were designed to prompt reflection on the meaning-making process from a variety of perspectives over time.

Interview Process

An important step in the interview process was building rapport and trust with the participants, which needed to be accelerated, given the single interview design of the study. Pitts and Miller-Day (2007) highlighted the importance of the establishment of rapport in naturalistic research, because the trust between researcher and participant “may be a necessary condition to ensure validity or trustworthiness” (p. 178). The researcher provided some insight into her own professional background in Aidland, as well as the reasons for her return to graduate studies in psychotherapy and her particular interest in the research topic. Although for ethical reasons, a deliberate choice was made not to accept research volunteers with whom the researcher had had professional or personal contact in the past, it sometimes came out during the interviews that we

had acquaintances in common, or had worked for the same organizations, or on related programs or projects. It is the researcher's view that this helped to build rapport and the researcher's credibility, rather than undermine the reliability of the data collected in the interviews.

Data analysis

The data analysis consisted of transcribing the videos of the interviews, followed by several readings of the interview transcripts, first for accuracy and then in order to consolidate a complete picture of the interview and to have a "sense of the whole" (Wertz, 2005, p. 170). The video recording of the Skype/Facetime² conversation was played during the first review in order to recapture the overall sense of the interview. Then the transcript was reviewed to identify general potential meaning units without coding. Finally, the transcript was read again in order to confirm and code the meaning units according to potential emerging themes. Then the researcher set aside the whole transcripts and worked only with the meaning units and potential themes, in order to begin the analysis and interpretation of the overall thematic structure. Only the most significant meaning units were retained, those that seemed to illustrate a strongly repeated them, or important aspects of the process of meaning-making. Each individual transcript was analysed in this way, one at a time, before moving onto the next transcript. Only when all six transcripts had been reviewed and coded, were the principal themes for each transcript extracted and then combined for an overall analysis. It is part of the nature of qualitative research that repeated readings of the transcripts, and multiple interactions with the coding were needed to arrive at a

² Ecamm Software's Call Recorder for Skype and Facetime was used (<http://www.ecamm.com/mac/>). The recording was initiated when the research participant verbally consented to be recorded. The video files were secured by password, in compliance with the ethics protocols outlined in Appendix I.

fair and holistic representation of the significant themes (Eatough & Smith, 2008). The identification of themes and sub-themes out of the meaning units identified was repeated twice, in order to ensure accuracy.

It is at this level of overall analysis that the researcher's interpretative lens was used to order the themes in a way that seemed to make sense; as we saw from the preceding chapter, sense-making itself is an important part of the meaning-making process. And it is undeniably an interpretative act. A summary synthesizing statement was drafted and the entire draft results chapter was sent to the participants for their review and validation.

Coding was done manually (Cohen, Kahn, & Steeves, 2000), using highlighters, coloured pens, and then eventually cutting chunks of text – meaning units – into slices of paper (colour coded by participant) and grouping them into related thematic groups (using envelopes). And then working through each envelope at a time, going back to the data sets to ensure the context was appropriate to the thematic category. The second time, the same process was done electronically, using tables onto which meaning units were extracted. A variety of iterations of mind maps and tables were developed, to see how the codes might fit together into thematic structures, and these were further refined during the writing process, with a further step to validate their links to the original narratives (Eatough & Smith, 2008).

Reliability and Validity

In order to ensure the reliability of coding, given the potential for researcher bias in particular, an intercoder reliability test was undertaken by a former colleague of the researcher's. A former aid worker was chosen, in part because of the importance of understanding the lifeworld context of the researcher participants. One full transcript was selected for the intercoder reliability. All details that could identify the research participant was removed from the transcript

before being shared. The section was chosen as it had the highest potential for biased interpretation according to the primary researcher. The transcript in question represented almost 20 percent of the total interview data, which well surpassed the recommended 10 percent for intercoder reliability validation (Mouter & Vonk Noordegraaf, 2012). The primary researcher and the thesis advisor both explained the analytical methodology to the research associate. The first reliability level, before negotiation, was 50 percent, but after discussion it was understood that the research associate had coded content for meaningfulness themes, but not for the process of meaning-making. Therefore the analysis protocol needed to be clarified. Following that, there was a 90 percent pre-negotiation consensus regarding the four content-related superordinate themes, along with their associated sub-themes; after negotiation that increased to 95 percent. However, there were two primarily process-related superordinate themes and associated sub-themes, that the second researcher had not identified and coded. After negotiation, the agreement had increased on those themes to 60 percent. Thus the overall agreement was 80 percent after negotiation, which meets the minimum recommendation of 70 percent (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, & Bracken, 2002).

Chapter Four: Results

Introduction

As explained in the previous chapter, open-ended, semi-structured interviews were conducted, which generated rich reflections from each participant of their lived experience of meaningfulness in their work. This chapter will present the results from that analysis. The intent of any phenomenological inquiry is not to present generalizable findings, but rather rich, in-depth analysis of the experiences of this particular group of individuals—their commonalities and their differences (Dravitzki, 2015). The results were structured into two separate groups of

superordinate themes. The first grouping of four themes refer to the sources of meaningfulness. The second grouping of themes represents the process of meaning-making that emerged. Each theme is also broken down into multiple sub-themes. The researcher developed several iterations of these groupings of themes and sub-themes, which is indicative of the difficulty of arriving at a single interpretation of subjective experience (Dravitzki, 2015). The interpretation as presented is a best effort at offering the reader a glimpse into the depth and richness of the lived experience of meaning-making in Aidland.

Biographical Description of Participants

The participants were given pseudonyms and any identifying information has been removed in order to protect their confidentiality.

Shauny. Shauny is a Canadian-born woman in her late-50s. She is single and does not have children. She has returned to university a number of times throughout her career, beginning with agricultural economics, then later pursuing degrees in international law, and then even later, taking a degree in urban environmental design. Most of her career has been in multilateral headquarters in North American/European capitals, although she also worked in Canada during different key transition periods and has undertaken research in developing countries. She presently works primarily in International Trade Law but also stays involved in food security issues. She indicates that she is near retirement.

Yeti. Yeti is an eastern European-born Canadian man in his late-60s. He came to Canada with his family at the age of nine as a refugee. Yeti is married; his wife is from an Asian country which has been his primary country of expertise. They have two adult children. He has lived overseas for long periods, as well as travelled quite extensively with his consulting work. Yeti is based in Canada now and is semi-retired, working primarily in consulting. He worked for a

number of years managing university international development projects, primarily in Asia.

While he has done some humanitarian (emergency response) aid work, his career has primarily been in longer-term development work.

Catherine. Catherine is a Canadian woman in her 50s. She has fairly recently married a man she met in the African country she is living in. Catherine does not have children. While her career started in field work for NGOs, she also worked for a long time for a large aid agency. She left that agency while on posting in southern Africa and is now working for an INGO in women's reproductive health in that region. While Catherine and the researcher did not know each other previously, through the interview it became clear that we had worked in similar contexts and knew some people in common.

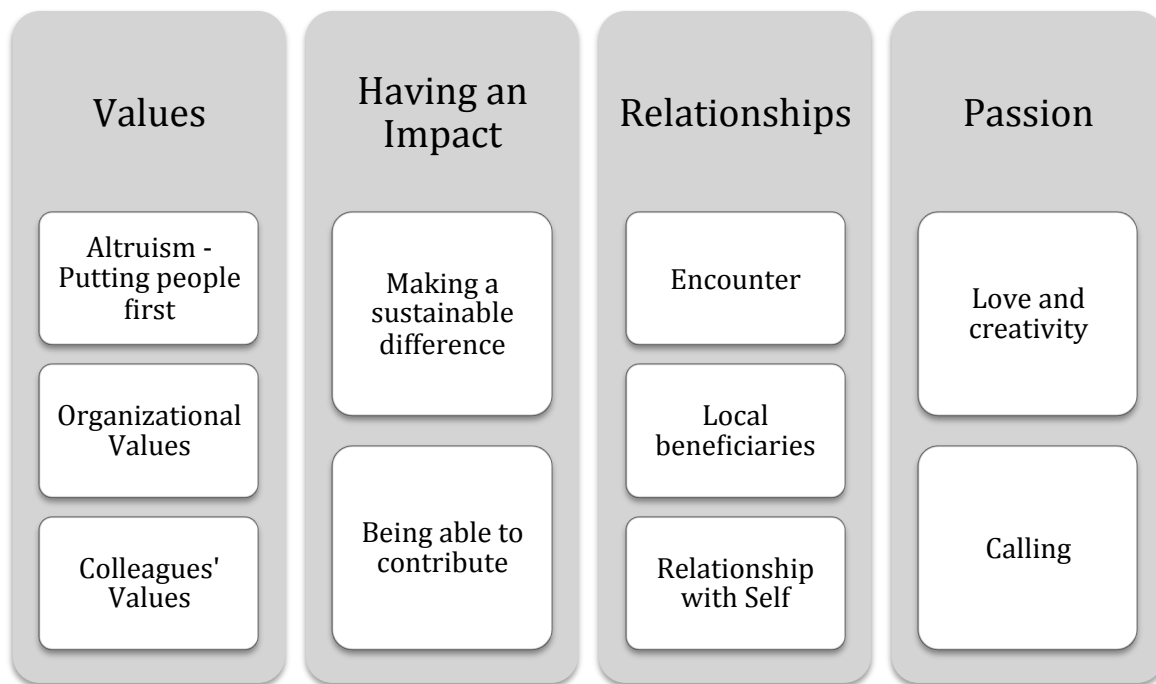
Susan. Susan is a Canadian woman, also in her late-50s. She was married for a time to her first husband in her 20s and divorced in her early 30s. She met her second and current husband early in her international development career and they do not have children. She is working and living in Central America in agriculture/sustainable economic development, but indicates she is near retirement. All of Susan's career has been for INGOs, primarily Canadian ones, in a number of regions, including Asia and the West Indies. She has occasionally worked for headquarters in Canada during transition stages, but most of her career has been in "the field".

Samira. Samira is Canadian a woman in her early 40s. She is not married and does not have children. She is currently working in an academic institution in her native Canadian city. Samira previously worked in a variety of NGOs, as well as for multilateral agencies in the field. For a longer period she worked for a major aid agency headquarters. In recent years, Samira was laid off from a very intensive field job that had great significance to her and this had an impact

on her reflections, as will be discussed below. After that job loss, she worked additional contracts for other aid organizations, but now is no longer working directly in development (although she stays involved through voluntary work).

Marcel. Marcel is a Canadian man in his mid-30s. He is married, with two young children and currently lives in Canada, in a leadership position with a humanitarian-sector NGO. He is the only one of interviewees working primarily in the humanitarian sector. He is leaving his current employment soon, voluntarily, and is thinking about leaving the sector entirely. Marcel's career has recently been headquarters-based, at the beginning of his career he lived in a number of countries, including three years of international development work in eastern Africa.

Emerging Meaningfulness Themes



The four thematic categories related to sources of meaningfulness are analyzed first before returning to the process themes of motivation, confirmation, re-negotiation and re-evaluation. The sources of meaningfulness have been organized into four superordinate themes: 1) being driven by values, 2) having an impact, 3) relationships and 4) passion

Values-driven: Making a difference in the world

The theme of *being driven by values* emerged from all six interviews. The alignment between their personal values and their work was a primary source of meaningfulness.

Altruism. Their deepest personal value for their work was *altruism*, which the Oxford English Dictionary defines as “disinterested and selfless concern for the well-being of others” (“Altruism,” n.d.). They all spoke in some way about being driven by a desire to help the poor or marginalized in developing countries. This altruism was the test against which all of their professional activities were assessed: ‘is this prioritizing helping to make a difference in the world?’ Their work was experienced as most meaningful when people—the beneficiaries—were prioritized.

One area of concern that emerged was the ethico-political implications of pursuing altruistic work on a global scale. Some of the participants articulated some degree of what we may describe as an anxiety of somehow inadvertently participating in a neo-colonial enterprise, called by Shauny, with an uneasy self-mockery, the “great white saviour” dynamic. In a discussion of the link between meaningfulness and personal ethical dilemmas, she shared this reflection on the ambiguous utility and effectiveness of aid work:

I felt sometimes that, ‘is this really’ ...you don’t want to use the ‘do-gooder’ word in the sense... but you *do*. You want to do good in the world. Most of us who are motivated in this line of work is because you want to be a good person. You want to feel you are a good person and then that meaningfulness is undermined if you feel that perhaps what you are engaging in is inconsistent with your own personal ethics. Not in a corrupt kind of way but you think there isn’t really any other choice here.

In another example, Catherine shared her concerns about desiring to avoid perpetuating an attitude of Western superiority; humility in the face of cultural difference was a key value for her. Not all the aid workers interviewed experienced this ethical questioning at a deep level, but they all felt there was a link between their own personal altruistic values, their ability to see these values aligned in their work, and their sense of the meaningfulness of their work.

Sharing values with the organization. It was very important to the participants to work in organizations—and with colleagues—that shared those values and set the same priorities. The strongest and most consistent examples of meaninglessness that they shared were related to experiences of misalignment of these values. In particular, the participants reserved their strongest criticism for *bureaucracy* (distorted organizational priorities) and *careerism* (misaligned values of colleagues).

Bureaucracy is the term used by the participants for those aspects of organizations—and of project work—that challenge and interfere with the meaningfulness of the work—the system getting in the way of programming and process being prioritized over people. This is why this sub-theme was placed within the superordinate theme of *values*. Bureaucracy is that space in which systems, rules, and processes get in the way of making a difference for people in developing countries—it interrupts the altruistic imperative. The primary effect of excessive

bureaucracy is waste, resulting at best in wasted financial and personal resources, and at worst, in actual harm to the intended beneficiaries. Catherine, for example, described her accomplishment in a large aid bureaucracy this way: “So I felt the meaningful thing I did and I hoped that I was doing was preventing money being wasted and possibly one hoped being directed to more productive things.” Each person seemed to have their own threshold beyond which their motivation and sense of meaningfulness diminished. They talked about having to tolerate certain levels of “garbage and nonsense” (Susan) in any job, but occasions in which the waste of effort and resources became intolerable. There is a point, then, beyond which bureaucratic waste becomes an ethical issue.

Sometimes they felt that their own organizations were undermining their efforts at making a difference, for example, when there was a disconnect between the organization’s (hidden) agenda and their own beliefs about the purpose of a particular project. For some of the aid workers, this is felt at a personal level as an affront to their own deeply-held values, which caused them to question whether in fact they were contributing to harm or outright corruption. At other times, the organization seemed to place itself as the primary value, over its people. For example, in the immediate aftermath of the violent death of a local project staff member, Samira’s colleague was required to write a lengthy and thorough report on the potential political/reputational and legal ramifications for the organization: “I remember we had one project where one of the principle investigators was killed. It happened twice actually and the officer responsible had to not only deal with the loss of the person, the colleague, but then they had to report on it and tell [headquarters] like, what impact and what risk [the organization was] facing.” She commented on how little the organization seemed to care about the personal impact of that event on the individual employees.

Susan's experience of misaligned organizational values came while working on a contract for a for-profit multinational firm that also occasionally takes on government-funded development projects. While initially she was very excited about the opportunity to play an important role in a very interesting project, it soon soured:

That exercise basically was like watching a train wreck because what they were seeing is that this project that I was so excited about, that I was so enamoured of and felt that it was just a really great experience, they were seeing it as a loss leader because it was only ten million dollars. [...] So it was one of those things where they didn't put any real — their efforts into it were simply to go and find another big dam or find another landfill or whatever it was, so that one just came to an end.

Sharing values with colleagues. Positive relationships with colleagues were important elements of the experience of meaningful work. The aspects of these relationships that emerged as important include a mutual respect for one another's competency and a basic grounding in fieldwork from early in one's career. But the most important of all is shared values, such as valuing the needs of the beneficiaries over bureaucracy or over personal ambitions, valuing those with long-term field experience over those with an academic mastery of international development discourse, valuing demonstrations of humility and respect in intercultural encounters with developing country cultures, and above all valuing commitment and engagement—to the work, to long-term engagement, to learning and to relationship-building. To the participants, sharing values with colleagues is almost as important as knowing their organization's values are aligned with their own.

This value was often expressed as criticism of those who seemed to prioritize career advancement or other measures of success over making a difference in the world; these were the

‘careerists’. For Susan, a job in Southeast Asia that had initially felt very meaningful soured once she realized that her headquarters colleagues did not view the project in the same way she did: “I finally clued in after a couple of years that the HQ people, like the [donor] directors that I had been spending all this huge amount of time making them look really good were basically only in it for the per diems that they could get for travelling all over the planet [...] and so there I was waiting on weekends to write speeches so that they could go and get a new wardrobe.” She also spoke about the experience of meaningfulness in another job arising as a result of the combination of working closely with community-based groups, as well as feeling a sense of shared values and engagement with her colleagues: “when things really started to feel like I had some degree of connection again to the work that I was doing[, it was] because I was starting to work with various community based groups [...] and] I had a great team of people around me that were just like extended family after a while.”

The portrait of the careerist that emerged in the interviews is of people who know how to get noticed by the organizational hierarchy, but don’t have the patience or experience to understand how things really happen in the field. Those who had spent time working in headquarters-based positions, and therefore more distant from the beneficiaries—Catherine, Susan, Shauny, Marcel and Samira—expressed how much more difficult it was to stay connected with a sense of meaningfulness, and how important travel to the field was in that case. They also spoke about the importance of the workplace culture in such contexts, particularly in having good working relationships with colleagues and supervisors who share their values and levels of engagement. For Catherine, working closely with a team of equally committed colleagues was one of her highest values, and she expressed strong frustration from watching her less qualified

colleagues—the careerists—advancing because they were more effective at promotional processes:

The bureaucrats often get appreciated because they can write the perfect memo and spit stuff out and for the promotions they can memorize. [... they can cite] the [organization's] six gender equality objectives, but they aren't necessarily the best development workers. That I found also frustrating was the whole promotion process, and the way [the organization] would interview was not getting at really the people who were the best development workers. It was the people who could spit out the best answers.

Yeti directed his sharpest criticism towards those who did not share his values and priorities about the level of commitment needed to do good development work. He described an occasion when he was managing an economic development project in the region of a country that was hit by a natural disaster and how he reoriented his organization's efforts to supporting disaster relief. But he was frustrated by those staff from humanitarian aid organizations who flew into the country *en masse*, to coordinate the global response, but who showed little real interest or commitment to engaging with the local communities:

I went to the weekly [humanitarian response coordination] meetings and a lot of people there with really good intentions to work, but they were parachuted in from a dozen or more different countries that had never been there before but all of a sudden they were in positions of power and [they were] working with organization[s] that [didn't] appreciate [that] there's a lot of talent locally that was not used. [...] You know we had these large committee meetings and of course it was 99 percent in English and some didn't understand about it enough and then everybody commiserated about what's happened, 'we have to do this and that' and then made some plans for the next meeting and then

retreated to the five-star café for a latte and to further discuss how we can help these poor people out there.

Having an Impact: Contributing to sustainable change



Making a sustainable difference. Threaded throughout all six narratives is the one value that is central in any discourse of international development: *sustainability*. In any conversation with two or more aid workers on their work, the concept of sustainability will inevitably be brought up, as it was with all six of the participants. Essentially sustainability means that the outcomes of the development projects are likely to have a positive impact on the targeted problem in an enduring way, which will effect a change that will last beyond the life of the project activities. At first glance, it may be difficult to see how the concept of sustainable development is so linked to the more personal question of the meaningfulness of international aid work. But the participants each demonstrated in a variety of ways that work that is not ultimately sustainable is not meaningful to them. Their accounts of meaningfulness were about making sustainable change and so, too, the converse: their accounts of meaninglessness were often about discovering that their efforts were not sustainable. Shauny, for example, specifically chose a career that was aimed at solving the underlying roots of global hunger, saying “took it to heart this idea of working myself out of a job.” For Yeti, on the other hand, throughout the decades of

his career, while he still works with sustainability in mind, he has come to realize that his expectations must be modest and that fundamental social change is the work of a lifetime, not just a three-year project.

Being able to contribute. Work was most meaningful to the participants when they felt that they were making use of their skills and competence to have a tangible and sustainable impact on the world's disadvantaged. They found their work most meaningful when it was linked to experiences of accomplishment, where they were able to feel that their skills and talents—their competence—were put to use most effectively by a project or by their organization.

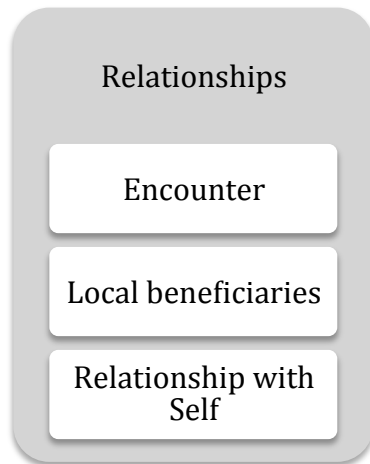
Being able to see or point to tangible positive results was essential for the participants. Samira explains: “I think if you [...] can see program results, I think that's the meaningful part. I think that's the thing that drives a lot of people who are interested in international development. I think that's the thing that drives people and motivates people. [It's] personal and I think it's the results right? They can say, ‘Oh I did that. I did that. I did that.’” Samira spoke with great pride about a very meaningful job in which she contributed directly to a large-scale national vaccination campaign that resulted in a significant reduction in cases of the disease—a tangible indicator of progress, of making a difference. Susan explained that she finds value in seeing the impact she has on the lives of those marginalized people who have few opportunities to change their own lives. She spoke passionately about her joy in helping small local women's organizations secure funding, and of the importance of being able to see and connect with the communities directly:

What made me feel like I was delivering was when we could actually get to those houses, when I could generate another five million bucks to put more money into the hands of these farmers to give them what they needed and stuff. That actually started to feel right.

[...] It just became clear that where I did find value, where I did find meaning was when I could actually see the impact that it was having on the lives of people and you know we went through two floods, massacres and all sorts of other stuff but in every case I was able to step up. After one of the floods we were able to distribute 122,000 chickens or chicks to farmers and people who had been into growing small flocks, of 10-15 chickens, and just restarting them in their entire business and just the sense of accomplishment that you are actually getting it done. That was great.

Marcel too found a sense of accomplishment in the midst of a time of chaos and crisis, describing how an African national government's persecution of its critics, which included local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), provided the opportunity for him to play an important role in the coming together of the international NGOs in that country: "It was really born out of this crucible of, like election violence, 'protect ourselves, barriers up, protect the gains we've made.' It was very meaningful. It was great. We ended up doing a lot of different things through there because we discovered that by pooling our resources there was a lot of other things we could do."

When they were not able to see tangible results, then the meaningfulness of the work became harder to grasp. Susan spoke about a particular crisis in meaningfulness in terms of losing her connection to her work, of losing a sense of the value of her work, while working in headquarters, at "desk jobs" writing grant proposals that may or may not "go somewhere": "all I was doing was pushing out proposals one after another like a little slot machine and there was no reinforcement of the fact that this stuff was even on the ground. I was basically stuck behind a desk for two years and it was valueless."

Relationships: Meaningful Encounters

Encounter. The superordinate theme of *Relationships* came through in the participants' accounts of the most meaningful moments in their careers—as well as in their moments of meaninglessness. These stories had a common thread of personal encounters with local beneficiaries or colleagues—with the real people that they were trying to help. It is those personal connections that hold the most emotional valence for them, more than the level of intellectual stimulation provided by a specific job. Being able to see the impact of one's efforts is very important to all of the participants—and this is a relational experience. It's about the relationships of mutual respect and learning that have been created across different cultures. It was the personal relationships with local colleagues that helped them feel “connected” (Susan) to their work, even when the job itself was unsatisfying. And it was the negative relationships with colleagues or superiors (or even fellow aid workers) that could very quickly drain a particular job of its meaning.

Connection with local beneficiaries. All participants spoke about the importance of working and engaging directly with project beneficiaries, how it is an important source of motivation. Yeti spoke about this strongly and frequently, about how much he valued the experience of bringing people together to build friendship and understanding, of cultivating and

maintaining strong friendships and good networks of professional relationships across significant cultural differences. Yeti seems to derive his internal sense of meaningfulness from the experience of constantly learning, of really coming to deeply understand a cultural context in which he has been asked to work:

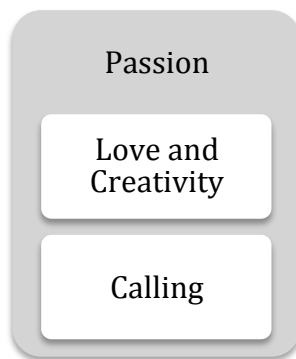
I mean I get motivation working in a different culture[, it] just excites me and I like the need for searching for understanding and when I find something, find out how it works, that part excites me. [...] I work with diverse cultures. It helps me better understand the world. I work with different religions. I feel I have to be a reasonably useful go between religions and cultural conflicts. It also makes me feel good.

Others spoke about moments of seeing people with whom they had been working closely become excited about the results of their (joint) efforts. Shauny, for example, became emotional while recounting an experience with community organizers in Asia, after teaching a new participatory community development process, called Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD): “And they loved it. They loved it and when I’m interviewing them about this [for a documentary video] and the one woman, she says something like, ‘I’m now an ABCD fanatic,’ or, ‘I’ve just embraced this so much.’ All of a sudden my heart leapt and I thought, ‘It’s all been worth it. It’s all been worth it.’ [gets tearful] You know?”

Relationship with self. Others add the element of self-discovery to this experience, which occurs within that experience of intercultural learning, of adapting to different realities and ways of working. In a sense this aspect is one that unfolds most gradually, as the participants discover their talents and their preferences in work, and as they successfully navigate challenging experiences. They encounter themselves, their own potential and their own talents and limits:

You grow up in a house of five kids, kind of thing, you're always feeling a little cramped but it wasn't until I went out into the world that I actually became my own person that I actually had a self-identity as opposed to an identity as a middle child, kind of routine. I'm not sure how much psychology you want to throw into that but it was almost as if I had grown into a human being or grown into a full person the farther away I went from my family and this kind of small world that I lived in. (Susan)

Passion: “This is my Lifeblood”



Love and creativity. The final superordinate theme on the question of what the participants found meaningful came through in powerful imagery in every interview, whether they spoke about this work as their ‘passion’ (Samira and Catherine), ‘love’ (Susan), ‘lifeblood’ (Yeti), their ‘heart’s desire’ (Shauny), or the ‘flame in their hearts’ (Marcel). There seems to be at times a transcendent element in the participants’ narratives of highly meaningful work experiences, when the stars seem to align and they find a strong sense of accomplishment, having made a lasting contribution to human progress. They spoke of deep love for the work, particularly the connections made with people—the relational dimension. At its best, the work is energizing, the participants feel “engaged” and “connected” (Susan, Shauny); they find themselves completely immersed and joyful, in the midst of intensive but rewarding projects (Marcel, Catherine and Samira). Creativity is also an important element they identify, which

combines autonomy, mastery, engagement, and artistry, along with a sense of freedom or lack of constraint to bring their skill and accumulated wisdom to the problem at hand. For example, Marcel, who spoke about his desire and passion for being a builder, calling it the “flame in my heart,” which he experienced most when “trying something new, pushing the boundaries,” building something from nothing, then passing it on. In this sense, his creativity is fed when he is involved in actually *creating* something new (and hopefully lasting), particularly a new way for people and organizations to work together. Yeti, too, hinted at this transcendent passion in his work in conflict resolution at the community level:

When you're dealing with countries that are somehow offending other countries, religions offending other religions and so on, until you can get the people together and helping each one to understand the other, I think these issues and altercations will continue. And so I would say that yeah, my passion is, I've been excited by having been with people whom others have labeled, like the North Koreans as devils, and even some Taliban in Pakistan, and with Maoists in Nepal, and Sandinistas in Nicaragua, and so on. And I find that one can find the humanity in everybody. One has to understand the reasons why people are behaving in a certain way, even if it's a militant way. And often there are very valid reasons because there are groups of people that reach a certain psychological threshold beyond which they don't see any future for themselves, their children or their grandchildren – they can't see the regime changing. But I have seen people being able to open up and take me as a friend and vice versa and seeing how we're all the same, we're from the same root. It excites me and drives me to try to do more of that so I understand more and they understand that people from the West can be as sensitive as they are.

Shauny recounted an experience of being asked to develop a course in her field of primary interest (although not her current area of work), and feeling that profound sense of love and passion for her work:

Again, when I was working through this, ‘I love this. I love this. This is what it would’ve been like for me if only the universe had complied. If I would’ve had that chance to work at what I really wanted.’ I thought, ‘This is what it must be like for the people who do get that job, do get what really, really their hearts desire is.’

Calling. The participants were invited to reflect on whether they considered this lifecareer their “calling, vocation or life’s purpose.” Their answers—unanimously preferring the term *calling* over the other terms—suggested that, whatever one’s motivation in choosing this lifecareer might have been, calling is something that develops over time, through testing and refinement, recognized more in retrospect over the course of years of career decisions. The specific elements to which each felt “called” varied, ranging from: the kinds of relationships they needed to work in, such as Catherine’s passion for working “at the grassroots,” or Yeti’s pride in his lasting professional friendships and his experiences of mutual recognition across cultures; to working in a specific sector, like Shauny’s “ever-elusive promised land” of global food security; to a more general kind of experience, not tied to a specific sector, like Samira’s ecumenical involvement in a wide variety of sectors, all in the interest of sustainable development, or Marcel’s sense of call to “community-building,” which is not specific to international work.

Many of the participants responded that they felt in some way “compelled” to this lifecareer. For example, Susan agreed that it was a calling, tying it to her lifelong thirst to travel and expand her horizons, and then while seeking out that meaningfulness in the “vast world”, coming upon the contribution she discovered she could make, in the process discovering her self

and “be[coming my] own person,” and then declaring “I needed to do it.” Catherine felt that she had found her calling “in spite of the frustrations,” that she “can’t imagine doing anything else.” In a decades-long lifecareer, Yeti has come to the realization that one’s ability to “make a dent” is minimal, and yet, he still “feels compelled to try” to make a difference, in any small way he can:

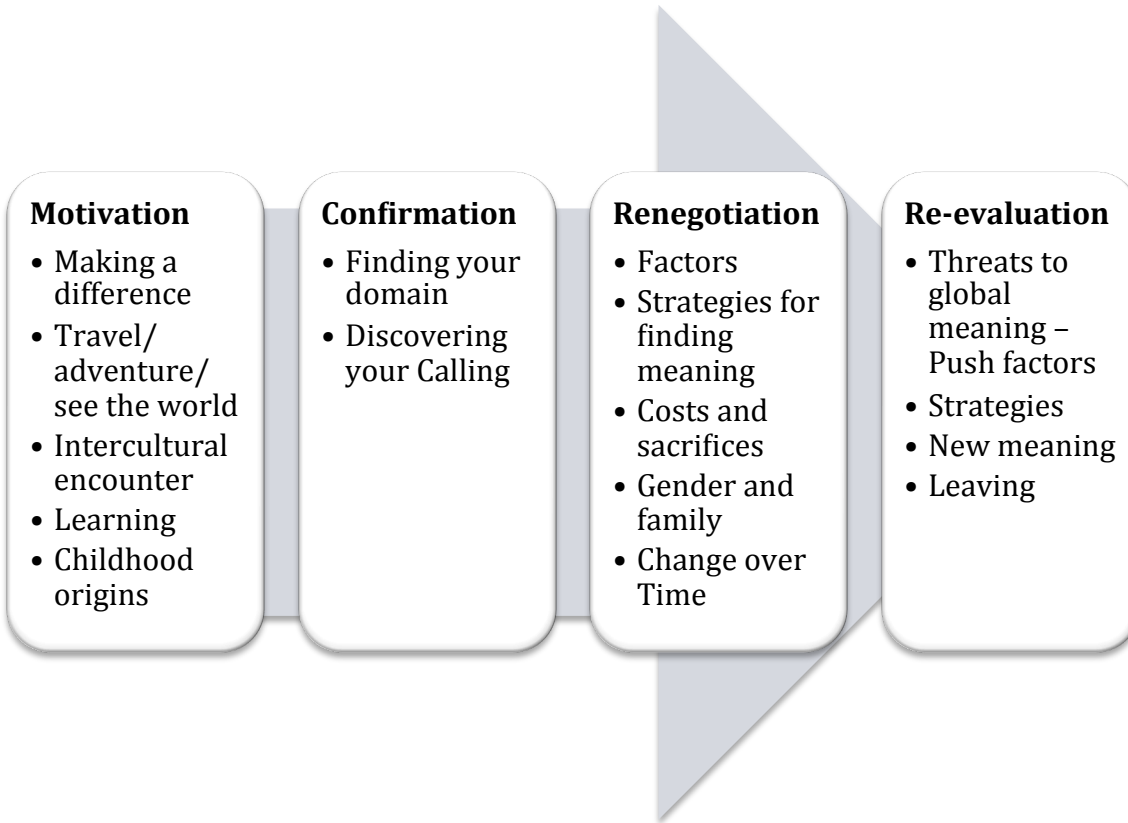
Because of the context, because of the difficulties, because of the contributing factors to the issues that I may want to help with it’s very difficult but I always keep Mother Theresa’s edict in mind that were it not for many drops, you wouldn’t get the ocean. [...] So you have to try and do your part and that’s the best you can do.

Samira also felt a certain compulsion, declaring that “it’s absolutely the right thing for me to do,” that it was “in my family DNA,” describing her satisfaction in having discovered a lifecareer in which she is able to experience passion, use her talents, and develop her skills.

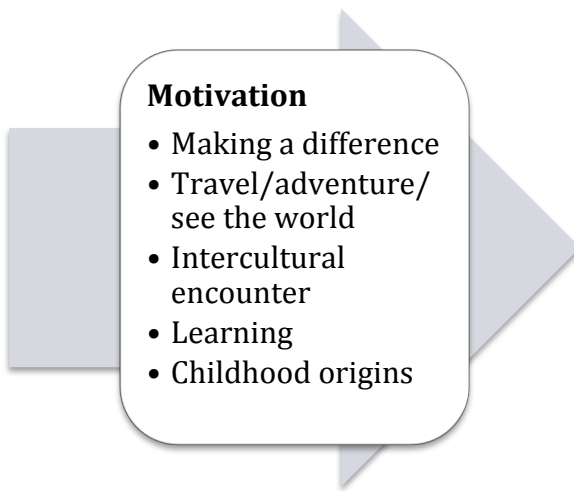
While all agreed that they did feel it was a calling of sorts, there was some caution or ambivalence in the extent to which some of them felt comfortable with the term, depending perhaps on their own personal definition of and relationship to it. The participants’ embrace of the term “calling” was moderated by a certain caution that came from their own experiences. They were cautious not to idealize or romanticize that sense of calling, emphasizing too the costs and frustrations of the lifecareer. Yeti hesitated at the use of the term, taking care to differentiate himself from those he perceived as feeling a calling but not necessarily bringing anything more than goodwill and ambition to the work. His reflection seems to imply that ‘if those careerists can claim to have a sense of calling, too, then I don’t want to be associated with that:’ “So people [may feel they] have that as an obligation or a calling to help without having a good understanding—without maybe an attempt or not having the time perhaps to better understand—the work is negated.” Calling is not enough, he feels; you need understanding, humility and skill,

as well as the willingness to immerse yourself and form relationships with the local community you are trying to help.

Emerging Process Themes



Motivation: “Why did I choose this lifecareer?”



When asked about their motivation for choosing this lifecareer, all spoke in some way about wanting to make a difference, to have a positive impact on the world's problems. All informants except one (Shauny) also spoke in some way about having the thirst to desire for adventure and intercultural encounter through travel and immersion. For some participants, like Shauny, Catherine and Samira, making a difference was the first motivation, and the desire for travel and intercultural encounter followed from that. When a participant spoke about the love of travel, it was always in the context of intercultural encounter and discovery of difference; they often described the motivation as being one of learning and encounter, rather than escape. However, Susan admitted that escape from the constraints of a typical Canadian middle-class family life were an important early driver of her interest in international travel. For others, the motivation to make a positive difference in the world was discovered through the work itself, as with Yeti, Marcel and, to a certain extent, Susan. Marcel describes himself as having a deep thirst for learning and discovery about other cultures, from which followed a desire for a more meaningful experience of encounter, after having worked as a tour guide in Europe, saying "it really left me feeling empty. I didn't feel like I was building anything or contributing to anything other than building my own self-worth, I suppose, and so I started to look for ways that I could travel but do something much more meaningful as I continued to travel."

Many of them placed the origins of this interest in their childhoods, often becoming interested in this work because of influences from their family. Samira traces her interest to her grandfather's stories about his career with the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization in the 1960s. Some of the participants contrasted their choice of international development with what could have been, with the other domestic options available to them when they were choosing career paths in their youth, such as banking, or medicine. Catherine spoke about

wanting to work with people "where there is hope to make a difference," a call she felt from a young age: "As a little girl I always knew that I wanted to do something that would make a difference. My grandfather was like, 'You should go into banking.' It's like I knew never, never. I can't do that."

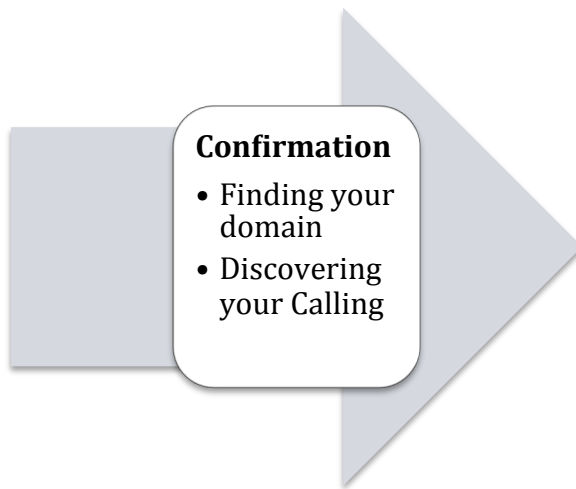
In other cases, the participants did not feel that their motivation was completely clear to themselves. But Susan suggested that her desire for discovery of the world mirrored her drive to self-discovery. She went out into the world seeking adventure and travel, with less certainty of "what she was looking for," only knowing that she wanted to explore, and then she discovered the meaningfulness of "making a difference" along the way:

I always felt that there was something to find and to see and to seek and to learn and I couldn't do that here in these comfortable little walls that we Canadians put around us. It wasn't really until I went overseas and started seeing through very different eyes what the needs are out there that I felt like I had come to a sort of rationale for doing what I was doing and needed to continue doing it because if for no other reason I could do it or I could generate the money so other people could do it.

Yeti does not describe a childhood interest in 'making a difference in the world,' but describes his arrival in Canada as a refugee from Eastern Europe as his introduction to global politics. After a first career working as a sports coach, he travelled to Asia: "I stayed with a friend from university who was a missionary there and he arranged that I could help out at his school. This further expanded my horizons leading me to try and focus more on international issues and to somehow help improve humanity."

So their expectation of meaningfulness at the beginning of their lifecareers was a combined element of making a difference in the world and of seeking intercultural encounter.

Confirmation: “This is why I chose this! This is what I’m meant to do!”

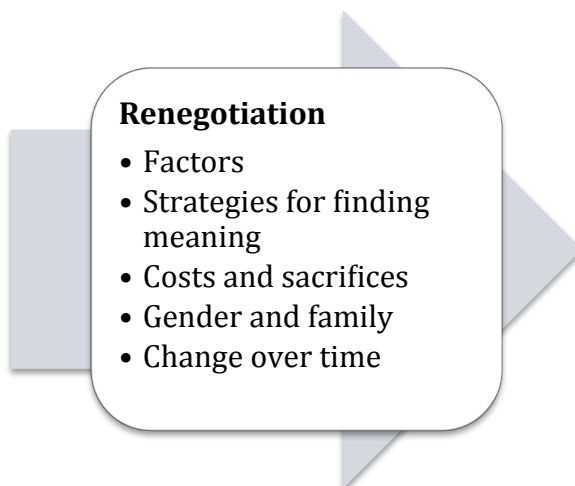


After the initial motivation for entering aid work, the second superordinate process theme that arose is the experience of confirmation of the meaningfulness of the work and the place the participants established for themselves in Aidland. Each of the participants shared experiences that confirmed the meaningfulness of this lifecareer, both in their encounters with people whose lives were improved by their work, and in experiences of feeling they were able to use their professional skills to actually contribute to meaningful change in specific subject areas. The participants described work that satisfied them in imagery and verbs that connoted action: promoting (social justice or reconciliation), fixing (the root of the problem), building (community or bridges), empowering (women, local colleagues), learning (from other cultures), contributing (to change), making (a difference), preventing (conflict or disease), expanding (horizons, opportunities). They were interested and engaged in the socio-economic or cultural challenges they were working to alleviate. In some cases they came, through experience or affinity, to specific judgments about what sector of work would have the most meaning for them. Shauny, for example, longed to work in sustainable urban food production and sought opportunities to support global food security. Susan eventually concluded, after years of working

on subsistence-level programming with the poorest of the poor, that in fact working with small-scale farmers and improving access to markets would have more impact. Yeti preferred working in community development and conflict prevention/reconciliation at the community level.

Marcel realized that he preferred working in coordination of humanitarian aid because he had concluded that longer-term development programming was ultimately holding countries back from forging their own paths to progress. Catherine realized that what was most important to her was working as close to the “grass roots” as possible, to empower local communities, especially women, after years of working at a bureaucratic distance in a major aid funding agency. Samira came to learn that she wanted to work for organizations that were committed to making large-scale change, but also that the organization’s ethical practices and values were equally as important to her.

Renegotiation: “How do I find meaning here?”



The third superordinate process theme reflects the numerous re-negotiations that the participants undertook throughout their lifecareers, at stages during which they were invited by circumstances to ask ‘how do I find/make meaning here?’

Factors. When their life and work circumstances were in alignment or in balance, they described themselves as engaged, motivated, and connected to their work. When that balance was thrown off, either because of boredom with a job that was no longer meeting their needs, by changes in their personal relationships or family circumstances, by a discovery of a misalignment of values with organizations or colleagues, or by extraordinary events, they entered into a process of reflection, questioning and introspection. For the participants, the circumstances that seemed most likely to prompt a need for such renegotiation were related specifically to their personal needs not being met within the organization, or by the realization of a misalignment of values with their employers. One of the most common factors that triggered a renegotiation of meaningfulness arose when the participants found themselves distant from the ultimate beneficiaries of their work, such as when they were working for a time in headquarters offices, far from the field. Another trigger of renegotiation strategies was bureaucracy and feeling mired in process at the expense of those same beneficiaries. Some of the participants also described factors related to stress, burnout and trauma and inadequate structural supports within their organizations.

Strategies. The participants described employing a variety of strategies for retrieving the sense of their work's meaningfulness. These included seeking meaningfulness in other ways, such as by finding other learning opportunities, by changing their perspective on what they could meaningfully contribute to a particular job such as focusing their efforts on fighting against bureaucratic waste, or by engaging in volunteer work.

Given the importance of having ongoing contact with local beneficiaries and colleagues, it is no surprise that some of the participants found it more challenging to retain a sense of the meaning of the work while working at headquarters in first world countries, and especially when

they had leadership responsibilities. Marcel, who has been working from the headquarters of the humanitarian aid organization for a number of years, and who has started a family in that time, has been travelling less, which makes it even more difficult to remember the *why* of his work. Without that regular infusion of nourishment from the field, he finds his source of meaning in higher principles:

I don't doubt the meaningfulness of my work but there are now many layers between me and the people that are being helped and it just means that I need to find time to remind myself. It's more about the distance. It's the working in headquarters kind of space versus being in the field. [...] Yeah but the meaningfulness is still there and again, humanitarianism is so easy to be impassioned about. I mean people's lives are in danger.

Other participants who found their work in headquarters less meaningful adopted a strategy of finding meaning in fighting against the bureaucracy, cutting through the systemic waste, which was explained in the following way by Catherine:

I was going to say in the reflection of being [in a large aid agency headquarters] I sort of remembered even when I came to the field would sit with this one consultant and say, 'What is it that they're going to put on my tombstone? What is it that I did?' I was more the type that would not accept wasted money and I think that was my biggest contribution. I shut down a program. It went all the way up to the [head of the organization] and I said, 'Dear [head of organization], this is a complete waste of money. It's not going anywhere,' and she agreed.

Yeti and Samira both shared similar stories of accomplishment from fighting waste or ineffective projects. Additionally, Yeti explained that he was able to find meaning in virtually any circumstance because of his belief that there is always something to be learned.

When working in jobs that felt meaningless, Susan, Samira and Shauny spoke about adopting strategies of engaging in ‘extra-curricular’ work that they found more meaningful. For example, Shauny continues to make efforts to stay engaged with her dream of working in food security by designing and delivering a training course in her spare time, outside of her day job of international trade law. Susan, during one field job that she no longer felt engaged in, described using her skills by volunteering to help small local organizations write funding proposals: “These people were poor, poor, poor, poor and that would be in comparison and contrast to these highly privileged and greedy people that I was working with in the other group.”

At times, they used previous experiences of their values and priorities being in alignment to help remind them to recognize a misalignment further down the road. Susan took one such experience as the touchstone for discerning job fit in the future, which she called “the Kumari test.” This experience came about when she was working with small community organizations in the West Indies on subsistence and basic livelihoods among the poorest of the poor, “the usual kind of program.” She recounts that she began to question whether she was having an impact on what was important and what would bring people out of poverty over the long term. During this time of questioning, a colleague named Kumari from a very small local women’s organization secured a very small amount of funding for a community-based domestic violence prevention project, as a result of Susan’s support in teaching them how to apply for funding. This was a moment of deep meaningfulness for Susan, because “they had done it for themselves.” This became her litmus test for discerning whether there was meaningfulness in her work “through all the garbage and nonsense you put up with.”

Costs and Sacrifices. Shauny, Susan, Marcel, and Samira all made specific statements that this is a career that asks immense sacrifices from people. Marcel, speaking about the

humanitarian sector, which often asks people to respond at short notice for high intensity emergencies: “I think we ask people to sacrifice too much to join our sectors and our causes and sometimes we end up with the wrong people.” In commenting on the importance of the present study, Susan recounted a conversation she had with a niece, who had expressed interest in an international development career, in which she (Susan) gave the following advice:

[I told my niece:] ‘This is what it’s going to mean. This is what it’s going to mean for kids. This is what it’s going to mean for your husband. Is that what you want?’ She chose to go a different route, so what you’re doing [with this research] is helping to demystify, deglamourize this and put some perspective around it because sometimes it really sucks and it’s really hard. [...] It takes from you your mental health to some degree. It takes from you your physical health. [...] There’s just a whole bunch of things that happen to you. It takes greatly from your family and your relationships with your family. [...] You know, there’s just these huge, huge sacrifices [...] And it’s taken from my husband as well, a good portion of his health and he can’t get that back.

Susan and Samira both expressed ambivalence about whether the costs and sacrifices were worth it in the long term; interestingly, they are also the two informants who spoke of direct impacts on their physical and mental health.

Some of the informants also spoke about financial sacrifices. Although Yeti was almost uniformly positive and optimistic in his accounts of the meaningfulness of his work, he did concede that there were times when he accepted work more out of financial necessity than out of intrinsic motivation. In a different way, Catherine and Marcel spoke about points in their career when they had been willing to accept lower paid work because of the meaningfulness to them of the projects. Susan spoke about staying in a job that she no longer found meaningful for financial

reasons—until she could find better work in another country. Catherine did not speak directly about the sacrifices that this career may have asked from her, but in her narrative she does appear to suggest that there have been times when she has chosen to sacrifice pay and promotional opportunities for meaningfulness, suggesting that it was a matter of her personal values.

Gender and family life. Some of the women acknowledged having wrestled with the question of marriage and children, and witnessing female friends/colleagues struggle with trying to find a balance between meaningful work and other life priorities. None of the four women reported having children; both men did. Two of the women were married/partnered; Catherine mentioned having married recently. Susan, who is married for the second time, indicates that she and her husband made a deliberate choice not to have children because it would not have been compatible with the lifestyle and demands of her career. For others like Shauny, it was less of a deliberate choice and more a consequence of the timing and life circumstances never quite lining up. Shauny speaks now about having made her peace with the fact that the “dream of family didn’t materialize” for her. Samira acknowledged that family life considerations were an important factor for her and a number of her female colleagues, insisting that women aid workers in particular need to “have an exit plan”.

Interestingly, unlike the four women interviewed, neither man expressed anxieties about their abilities to find meaningful work for themselves, nor did they express moments of self-doubt, in terms of having something to contribute, or concerns around not being recognized for that contribution. They both expressed confidence that such work would come and find them. Yeti, for example, stood out for his (self-reported) lack of grappling with the questions and compromises and choices the others faced. Yeti did not convey a sense of having struggled and sacrificed throughout his career, nor ever having struggled with a loss of meaning. Yeti is the

only participant who did not feel that this career had required any sacrifices from him, suggesting that it never was an issue with his spouse or his children. He did not seem to have had to make any significant compromises between family and meaningful work. He explained his reaction to the term “sacrifice” this way:

Well once in a five star hotel I didn't have a good breakfast. That was a sacrifice. [laughs] [...] Well fortunately my dear wife is from [South Asian country] so she very much understands the context in that part of the world. In [another South Asian country] she was there. We have family there. When I was running programs from the university she couldn't come but then I was away for just short periods. [...] No I never felt that I was doing it with a sacrifice.

For Yeti, having family does not seem to have impacted his choices around work, but for Marcel who is of a younger generation, it has. He spoke about compromising job prospects overseas for his wife's career, but he also spoke about having reduced the frequency of his travel because of parenting responsibilities. This has had an effect on the meaningfulness of the work based in a Canadian NGO headquarters, distant from the local beneficiaries, and it is a compromise that he wrestled with. But he ultimately concluding that family life and his involvement in his Canadian community brought him a great deal of reward and meaning:

It remains difficult for me, but in my job, and not having changed jobs for some time, we've had two kids now and the oldest is five. We've adapted to what that is. [...] I found this painful initially, this sense that I was giving up freedom to travel and make decisions on a whim but I think I've mourned that and passed on. I think the family takes so much room and is so rewarding in and of itself. That's less of an issue. I feel less so that I'm missing out. I mean I do have those moments. Occasional sleeplessness like, 'Aww I wish

I could go there. I wish I could do that,' but the reward of family life in and of itself is certainly nothing I would ever give up, or feel that is a sacrifice.

Change over time. What may have initially been a romantic or idealist motivation changed over time for the research participants, into something more realistic. They spoke about having started out wanting to 'make a difference' in the world and ending up with a more limited expectation of the part they can play, using the more modest and less individualistic word: "contribute." This was articulated especially by the four late-career informants. The participants look back at the initially "rosey-hued" (Susan) expectations of their career entry and realize that at the beginning they did not necessarily have the right skills to actually contribute meaningfully to the hoped-for difference. It is only over time that they learn for themselves where their talents lie, where their strengths reside and what motivates and interests them. Catherine explained that "experience changes what you think you can bring to the table," in comparison with her early career: "I mean when I was young I just thought the very fact that I was going, had been chosen to go into the field that I could somehow make a difference with the community." Shauny speaks about choosing to be realistic about whether making a fourth major career change is worth the effort:

[Early in my career] I wanted something where I felt it was actually making a change, making a shift. So now given where I am in my career and I'm almost 60 [...] I think, 'Well that's still true.' I'm still driven towards things and it's partly because I mean it really would be more difficult to make that shift [...] that rather than trying to recreate myself at this point, it's much more efficient in a lot of ways to use the skills I already have and in doing that I still think that my meaning is derived from still trying to make that little bit of a shift whatever that may be.

Marcel and Yeti—who have both worked on humanitarian programming—also spoke of the naïveté of thinking that “goodwill is enough” (Marcel) to make a difference in global inequity. Both spoke of the need to have real professional skills and commitment to contributing. There is a sense that the idealism of youth is polished, pared down and reshaped by the reality of the complexity of the world’s problems and the challenges of effecting meaningful, lasting change, particularly as outsiders in the cultures they are engaging with. While the core of what is meaningful remains—helping out with the world’s problems—the experience of that shifts and narrows, becomes less dependent on grand outcomes. The participants generally agreed that, with respect to one’s sense of meaningfulness in work, “the core is the same over time, [but] what fulfills that” (Shauny) changes, becomes more complex and more realistic over time.

The stories the participants told about experiencing having made a meaningful difference were personal stories of contributing to change on a small scale, “shifting the needle one iota” (Shauny) and forming relationships with local partners and beneficiaries. When asked of any particular memorable experiences of meaningfulness in her work, Shauny, who was initially motivated by wanting to help end global hunger, spoke with emotion about an experience she had while doing research into urban community development in Southeast Asia. She had an encounter with one of the women she was training, a local community organizer who became excited about what Shauny was sharing: “All of a sudden my heart leapt and I thought, ‘It’s all been worth it. It’s all been worth it.’ [Becomes tearful] You know? It was that moment where I thought you know, ‘If I’ve done nothing else, I’ve done this.’ Well it was that sense that I’ve maybe made a shift for one person.” For his part, Yeti expresses detachment from the outcomes of his efforts, that he doubts his own ability to *see* the change, and yet insists that he still feels compelled to try.

The two relatively younger participants shared slightly different perspectives. Marcel's experience of meaningfulness has shifted over time in the sense that he discovered that what he finds most meaningful is not bound necessarily to the work of international development. Rather, his sense of meaningfulness was derived from the experience of building something new and bringing people together around that project—in other words, from the creativity of building community. He identifies himself more as a builder, doing something ground-breaking and new, pushing boundaries. He did not speak in the language of small shifts, small iotas of change, he is more of a visionary and a community builder. His focus is more and more towards his home community in Canada and towards his family, than outwards to foreign cultures.

Samira also did not speak about learning to accept small-scale change, although she did speak about the importance of personal connections with local beneficiaries of the work in order to really see the impact. The most meaningful experience that she reported was working on a multi-million dollar disease prevention project that had tangible and important results at a national level. But then, it was after this experience that she was laid off involuntarily by her employer during a wave of budget cuts and she lost her job. It appears as though losing her job right at the peak of her experience of meaningfulness may have compounded the sense of betrayal—and exhaustion—that runs through her narrative. Trying to make such an impact on a grand scale may be intense and deeply meaningful, but it also seems to be personally unsustainable over the long term; it was Samira who also spoke about the long-term personal collapse from which she was still recovering. Samira, still in mid-career, but also transitioning out of the field of international development, insisted that meaningfulness is dependent very much on personal context, having learned that even highly meaningful work can be

unsustainable on a personal level, and suggesting that that meaningfulness changes according to life and professional circumstances.

Re-evaluation: “What is important to me now?”



Sometimes for the aid workers in this study, the misalignment of their lifecareer priorities became so severe that re-negotiation was not sufficient; they were pushed to a more complete re-evaluation. Samira listed what she called the “push factors” for such a re-evaluation, including “the ethical nature of your work. Maybe it’s a tragic event. Maybe it’s an organizational change or it’s a health change.” Another factor was family reasons, including wanting to get married and have children.

Sometimes ethical concerns were articulated in terms of the overall unsustainability of counterproductive development efforts, as in Marcel’s case. He revealed with some hesitation, that, aside from exhaustion, the other part of the reason he chose to leave his work in [Africa] was a “principled decision” based on having come to the conclusion that his work in development was counter-productive on a global scale:

There were many factors that led me to leave [Africa] and that led me to end up in humanitarian work versus development. I really did struggle with the development as I

saw it in [that country]. [...] I have tremendous respect and applaud the work done and the impact it has on people's lives throughout development programs throughout the world and I've seen those impacts, [that] have made huge differences in people's lives: children saved, families that are better off, I've seen it all... but at the macro level for [the country], I actually [think] the development industry is holding that country back. The reality is if there was no development aid, they would figure it out 'à la China,' you know? And not the ways we would do it but they would and they would probably figure it out a whole lot faster. [...] I'm looking at this and I really struggled [...] I kept making the argument, 'We gotta do this,' but it was started feel forced and I was starting to find that in fact my own view was changing. [...] Well there's actually a fear that we're in the long-term expanding or giving greater life to the problems that we're trying to resolve. [...] I'm not sure that development really is the solution.

Marcel's own personal values brought him to turning point in his career. From his perspective, the benefits of humanitarian aid work are—perhaps—less ambiguous. For him, he resolved this misalignment by devoting himself to working in the humanitarian sector:

Where I don't have any debate about this, in internal qualms whatsoever, it's humanitarian assistance. My view is: people's lives are in danger. I mean how dare you ask a question about whether we should do something? So that clarity has been very helpful for me [in my current humanitarian work]... the meaningfulness is still there [...], humanitarianism is so easy to be impassioned about. I mean people's lives are in danger.

In this way, the experienced ethical disconnect can at times become so significant and urgent as to compel a person to leave the job. Samira experienced this through repeated misalignments with organizational values:

The other thing is like after I [was laid off by the large aid agency] I went to [a private foundation] and they tried to do things that are unimaginable and out of the realm of possibility. They still do a lot of the stuff that they do but at an imaginable pace and there's lots of mistakes along the way and unethical activities along the way. That's another thing. When you see that kind of stuff you're just like, 'Okay, I'm done now'.

Collapse. When discussing moments of meaninglessness, some of the participants spoke about leaving field jobs that had started out highly meaningful but left them exhausted, traumatized or burned out. They spoke about the costs to their personal health, mental or physical, including burnout and trauma. Samira talked about the “programs that break you.” She, Susan and Marcel all spoke about needing at certain points to come back home to recover mentally or physically from the stresses of field work. While only two of the participants—Samira and Marcel—spoke about fatigue and only one—Susan—spoke about trauma, these are important issues that bear fulsome consideration.

Samira used the language of “collapse,” “adrenal fatigue” and “exhaustion.” Susan spoke specifically about “trauma” and “PTSD.” Marcel suggested that his work and life were no longer in balance (including his increasing doubts about international aid in general) and he was exhausted. In the literature, the kinds of exhaustion mentioned in these three interviews are usually termed *burnout* or *cumulative stress*, which includes emotional exhaustion (which seems predominant in Samira's and Susan's narratives), depersonalization (detached cynicism; heard in Susan's narrative) and diminished sense of personal accomplishment (heard in Marcel's narrative) (Maslach, 1982; Rothschild & Rand, 2006; Schaufeli, Leiter, & Maslach, 2010). All three participants who spoke of experiences of fatigue that led them to leaving a field job had also spoken of those particular field experiences as being initially highly meaningful. Field work

can be very personally demanding, and the three spoke of coming to a point when they needed to take a break, return home, rest and re-evaluate.

For example, Susan's trauma happened as a result of the murders of the family of a close friend and colleague. Immediately after the intense crisis itself had stabilized, she described feeling disconnected from her work, not being able to find the same sense of value and relevance she had previously:

At that point in time quite frankly the work was completely irrelevant. It became of no value whatsoever. Massive questions about what on God's green earth are we doing here in a country that would do this kind of thing? I mean there are five bodies and whatever. So you come through something like that and to get re-engaged in the work, you really, really have to be loving it.

Susan's struggle with the meaningfulness of her work at this point seemed to be at the existential level (does this work have meaning for me?), not simply at the situational level (does this job have meaning for me?):

I don't think I ever found that same joy in the work after that because every time you started on something on a positive push up the hill, something else would happen in a period of almost six to eight months after that. There was two more massacres, 23 dead bodies piled up. You just get to the point where it's hammering you so badly at home and mentally that it's just not really worth it. [...] I needed to get out. At a certain point when you've gone through the trauma of going through that and I was able to get enough counselling so I recognized basically how bad [the country] was for me. It became one of those things where I knew I needed to get out of [the country] in order just to get some balance back because it was affecting my sleep patterns and all that kind of wonderful

stuff as PTSD does in any event right? That was definitely a move back to Canada. I just needed to go home for a while and just regroup.

It took her a long time to recover from that trauma, and to recover her sense of the meaningfulness of her work; she then made a deliberate decision not to accept postings to countries with similar security risks. Still today she expresses ambivalence about whether it was “worth it.”

Samira, for her part, spoke about “the programs that break you” and her work in a high-conflict field posting, in a very high intensity job—a characteristic of humanitarian work. She describes the physiological/immune system collapse that resulted from chronic stress and her experience of being laid off from the organization during a period of budget cuts, which compounded the stress. There is an undertone in her narrative of feeling betrayed by her organization, of having learned that the organization would not help her, would not look after her, even while it had sent her into a very dangerous and demanding environment. She has indicated that while her current work in Canada is not in the international development field, nor does it feel particularly meaningful, but she explained that her higher priority—more meaningful to her now—is recovering from her physical/immune system collapse and re-integrating into a more balanced home life. She seems to speak about her aid work with both cynicism and longing.

For Marcel, the fatigue was linked to his very heavy workload, but also to the fact that he did not have robust organizational support for the various frustrations and logistical challenges of life for expatriates in some developing countries:

It was just too much. I had no help and it was just getting like...it just never ended. My phone would never stop. I'd always have a problem because at home nothing would ever

work so you'd have to solve this, solve that and my car that wouldn't start. I mean it was just all the time and as much as I loved that country, I needed out. I needed a break and I'd been overseas for seven years [...] so I came home and not knowing what my plan was going to be.

Later in the interview, Marcel added that his growing doubts about the long-term effectiveness of international development aid were also an important factor in his need to come home and re-evaluate.

New Meaning. The participants spoke about changing how they evaluated what was important to them in choosing future work opportunities as a result of their collapse experiences. For example, Samira chose to come back to Canada and re-establish herself in her home community and prioritize caring for her own health as well as reconnecting with her support network. But in other cases the re-evaluations come for other reasons, including an opportunity to change jobs, such as when Catherine quit a permanent job with a large aid agency in order to “get back to the grassroots” of field work, which she found more meaningful, or when Marcel moved into the humanitarian sector because its helpfulness was less ambiguous. That new meaning could also be described as a “paradigm shift,” in which the aid worker chose an entirely different subsector of intervention, in the search for a more sustainable approach to meaningful change, such as international trade law (Shauny), or access to markets (Susan).

Late career. Having learned about themselves and what is important to them—this career, they explained, is after all a journey of self-discovery as much as it is a journey of discovery of the other—the participants seemed reflective about their current stages. The four older participants were looking towards the end of their work; the two younger participants were both in critical phases of career transition. After decades in this work, the participants articulated

that their priorities had changed. For example, they may have become less concerned with advancement, and more with interesting, meaningful opportunities. To Susan, as she (and her friends in the same work) gets older, “what’s important changes”:

I think most aid workers... when I look around, so many of my friends who are more or less in the same age gap are getting to exactly the same spot I am, which is they really want to do something different for the last number of years of their career and they don't want to be doing the same thing they've been doing for the last fifteen. It gets old. Yes you can do it but 'give me something fun. I've only got five years left, you know' or something like that. [...] I think at one stage [...] I was really keen on being top of the pile, the representative and the diplomat and being the project director of this and the project director of that. It's just not that important anymore. Give me a job where I can go home at five o'clock or six o'clock and get to the gym with some hope maybe I'll live until I'm 75. There you go.

Catherine and Yeti both seem to share this energy. Yeti's interest at this late stage appears to be pursuing interesting opportunities to strengthen already built relationships, and sharing his acquired wisdom with younger generations. He expresses confidence and satisfaction that he has done his best throughout his career, and wherever it was possible, he achieved modest but real results. Catherine describes herself, at this “last phase of my career,” as knowing herself better and so deliberately choosing to commit to an organization in which she feels she can contribute to something meaningful, in spite of the relatively low pay: “I would say absolutely: know thyself! And I think I do know myself and that's why kind of as I enter into the last phase of my career [...] now it's really starting to move into the meaningful domain, I'm prepared to do it

[being paid less].” She describes this phase as one in which she brings more experience and skills to the grassroots level.

Shauny’s lifelong ambivalence about her work carried into this late phase of her career. On the one hand, she expresses an ongoing longing for the ‘elusive dream’ (of working in food security) and sorrow at the ‘doors that did not open for her,’ but on the other, similarly to Yeti, she expresses passion and motivation about this phase, and excitement about sharing her experience and skills with younger generations: “I feel more committed, more passionate than ever about my mission in life, even though my heart still breaks and I go weak in the knees every time I see the [dreamed-of organization] logo.” She uses vivid imagery in speaking about this late career phase and her ability to contribute meaningfully – “second wind,” “getting to the finish line,” a passion “refined and focused,” “weaving a richer tapestry” – but also acknowledges that the “what could have been?” question remains in the background.

Leaving the lifecareer. The participants had various responses to the question of whether they would consider leaving the lifecareer. Their answers were linked to the discussion around the sacrifices that this lifecareer asks of them. Susan and Samira, who spoke of the physical and mental health costs, accepted that there would be an end to the career, or at least to the extensive international travel and overseas postings in developing countries. For Marcel, whose wife’s career necessitated a compromise on his part, he arrived at a definition of his calling that was broader than his international work, which permitted him to consider the possibility of leaving behind international aid in particular, and finding opportunities for community building in Canada. Catherine and Shauny were each at critical stages of looking forward to future exciting and meaningful career directions and were not presently at the point of considering leaving/retiring, although both had contemplated it during difficult career transitions when

satisfying work seemed elusive. The three participants who are in their 50s, and so approaching the horizon of retirement, each spoke with some excitement of wanting to take on interesting projects that made the most of their talents and interests before leaving the lifecareer behind. On the one hand, there is Catherine and Shauny's excitement at feeling a surge of energy and excitement about their current stages in their career: "I'm thinking the horse is going for the finish line. I know I have a short amount of time now and I really want to hunker down and I want to really focus. I have so much that I need to do" (Shauny). On the other hand, Susan is also enjoying her current work, but speaks about the end of her career in terms of the increasing challenges that come with aging: "Basically the reality is that you can't be a development worker for all of your life, not unless you're perfectly healthy and life allows that. So yeah, would I leave it? Yeah, give me another five years and I'm done. I mean I just think I don't really want to travel anymore.. [...] There's many a time now where it's kind of like, 'Do I really want to put up with this?'"

Yeti, the participant who described the fewest compromises (particularly in terms of family) and who struggled the least with these questions, was continuing to pursue interesting projects even after his retirement and explained that he had never considered leaving the work, speaking about the extended networks of professional friendships he maintains in a number of countries, which hold a great deal of value for him.

Chapter Five: Discussion

Narrative Summary of Themes

Meaningfulness is both a motivation and an experience; it is in both what undergirds the life careers of international aid workers and provides the rewards that come along the way. The work is meaningful when personal values and organizational values are in alignment, when the

ultimate beneficiaries of one's work are in sight, and when creativity and talent/skills are at play, as well as when one's personal life and work life are in balance. Work becomes meaningless, or the meaning is harder to discern, when the beneficiaries are too distant to be tangible, when bureaucracy takes precedence over development objectives, when colleagues and superiors do not share the same values, or when they demonstrate incompetence, when staff feel unrecognized and when they feel that their work is undermining the ultimate good they are working towards—when it no longer seems to be *sustainable*. People can make meaning out of imperfect circumstances, such as by cutting through bureaucratic waste or volunteering with small local community groups, or using their access to decision-makers to ensure appropriate decisions are taken, or prioritizing self-care or family when necessary. There are costs; it is a rewarding career, but not without sacrifices. Sometimes the costs can become too high.

As their careers progressed, the research participants had encountered the real complexity of the world's socio-economic challenges, and came to believe that large-scale change is difficult to see and measure in the time spans of their involvement in any given project. They learned to look rather to small-scale changes for signs of their effectiveness, or to tangible and visible evidence of results, such as in encounters with individual beneficiaries. While the core meaning stays the same for most aid workers, over time the scope of their expectations and ambitions become more focused, limited, and realistic. They come to know their own areas of competence and so have a good sense of what they can contribute. Sometimes that acquired self-knowledge—what is important to them, and what they can contribute—takes them out of international aid work completely.

Most of the participants identified moments throughout their careers when they had to pause and reflect on their situations, on their values and priorities, and to wonder whether it was

still worth it or still meaningful to them. As they made decisions about their next steps, they asked themselves what would still bring them meaningfulness. They compromised; they settled; they started again; they kept searching; they decided that other life priorities had become more important; they left. Either way, for all the participants but one (Yeti), there's a sense of moments of reflection or grappling with the question of meaningfulness at key transition points. What may be common between all participants is the importance of discovering where their talent lies, not only where their passion is aroused, and how those can best meet what the world needs—as well as where the opportunities are. It seems as though the difference they want to make, the change to which they want to contribute, has specific definitional features. Thus part of the process of negotiating the meaningfulness is discerning 'what the world needs from you'. This is an important element of 'making a difference' because all participants shared how their intellectual development over the course of their careers came in learning what kind of impact were actually possible for them to contribute to.

Meaning-Making Process

How does this meaning-making process that our research participants have spoken about connect with the literature discussed previously? Our findings suggest that, for these six aid workers, meaning-making is a process which requires ongoing engagement over time and any meanings that are found must be renegotiated as circumstances and priorities shift and change. This is consistent with theoretical work from occupational psychology which suggests that meanings are made, not found, that they are "patched together" over the course of moving through life experiences (Bailey & Madden, 2016; Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009; Yeoman, 2014, p. 243). Our participants suggested that the process requires self-awareness and introspection in order to make sense out of challenging experiences. Weiss, Skelley, Haughey,

and Hall (2003) call these skills of self-awareness and adaptability are “career meta-competencies” (p. 182). They are made through an “introspective, partially conscious, process of making sense of life’s events” (Montaiuti, 2013, p. 11). This iterative process is also a relational one as meanings are co-constructed in dialogue with others (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003).

Motivation. The motivations for choosing the lifecareer of international aid worker were indeed consistent with previous research which suggested that aid workers are motivated equally by a desire to make a difference in the world and an interest in a combination of travel/adventure/discovery. Roth’s (2015) respondents spoke about entering Aidland in search of meaningful work and seeking to escape the changing working conditions such as “professionalization and bureaucratization” of their careers in their home countries (p. 34), which “can undermine self-development and well-being” (p. 51). When speaking about their motivations, aid workers from wealthier countries contrasted “normal life” and life in Aidland, which was more attractive by far; a lifecareer in Aidland is perceived as more meaningful. Roth (2015) argues that “Aidland provides opportunities for educated middle classes, global professionals who are pursuing self-realization as well as personal and professional ambitions with the aim of making ‘a difference’ and contributing to social change” (p. 46). Whether grounded in a passion for promoting social justice or a more charitable impulse, aid workers are driven by values, by wanting to help, by wanting to make a difference in the world. There are comforts in the lifestyle of most professional aid workers, but there are also many risks, a great deal of unpredictability, and because of the project-based work, frequent employment changes.

Confirmation. Once embarked on this lifecareer, there were experiences along the way that validated and strengthened their choices, and helped steer them in the direction of their areas of values and competence. In a sense, they discovered themselves along the way, much in the

way that Rosso et al. (2010) identified the Self as a source of meaning at work. The experience of meaningful work can affirm and reinforce our sense of identity, self-concept or confidence in our innate worth. In this regard, it is our values, motivations and beliefs about the meaning of work that provide an enduring source of meaningfulness. Since work, for many of us, is a primary location for expression and definition of our individual identities, the satisfaction of our basic psychological and social needs through our work “entails an affirmation of central aspects of individual identity” (Clausen & Borg, 2011, p. 667).

All six of the aid workers interviewed linked the discovery of their areas of competence with the experience of meaningfulness in their work. This is consistent with the extensive literature on meaningful work and human needs, which universally identify competence/efficacy as fundamental (Cardador & Rupp, 2010; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Deci & Ryan, 2014; Holbeche & Springett, 2004; Oberholster, 2011; Rosso et al., 2010). Rosso et al. (2010) explains the self-efficacy concept as “individuals’ beliefs that they have the power and ability to produce an intended effect or to make a difference” (p. 109). Holbeche and Springett (2004) also found that the search for meaning at work was about needing “to make one’s mark on the world” and that roles which offered the opportunity effect an impact were as a result evaluated as more meaningful. It is one of the primary mechanisms through which we experience work as meaningful, in the experiences of autonomy, agency, competence and perceived effectiveness.

Bakker and Demerouti (2008) and Grant (2007) insist on perceived impact on beneficiaries as likely to drive pro-social work motivation. Proximity to beneficiaries and positive relationships with local colleagues were strong sources of meaningful experiences for our research participants. This is consistent with Oberholster (2011), who found that international non-profit organization employees were at risk of becoming disillusioned or alienated (loss of

meaning) when their job design kept them from regular contact with beneficiaries and the experience of perceiving their impact.

Renegotiation – Situational Meaning. When their work was at its most meaningful, their lifecareers were in balance; the research participants experienced alignment between their priorities, values, competencies and personal capacities. They were able to cope and even succeed in highly demanding work in extremely stressful situations. Montaiuti (2013) suggests that meaning may play an instrumental role in psychological health among aid workers, helping them to manage highly stressful situations: "meaning prompts decisions, enhances values, triggers thoughts, and encourages actions that are measurable, and thus meaning can be operationalized in the behavioral sciences from a cognitive behavioral perspective as a regulator of emotions" (p. 68). But when the aid workers in this study encountered situations in which their sense of the meaningfulness of their work was challenged, they had to engage in a process of re-negotiation in order to ensure a realignment of what was not in place.

One of the most important sources of threat to situational meaningfulness, as we saw, was the experience of working in organizations that did not share the aid worker's values, particularly organizations that prioritized process, systems and rules over good development results for local beneficiaries. Bureaucratic organizational cultures are a particularly difficult reality of working in Aidland. It is in the nature of the work, where funding for aid projects comes primarily from governments (even if channeled through large quasi-governmental multilateral organizations like UN agencies), and where the multi-billion dollar aid industry has had to organize itself to manage and account for how the funds are used, in a way completely unlike in the private sector (see, for example, www.aidflows.org, a website offered by the World Bank on disbursements of international aid globally). Funds are usually transferred within contractual frameworks and are

usually project-based, rather than providing unconditional funding to the core business of a particular organization (de Haan, 2009). The governing agreements generally require detailed tracking and reporting on finances and results, resulting in a heavy management, administration and monitoring infrastructure (A. Shah, 2014).

In his influential article on excessive bureaucratization, Caiden (1985) described a bureaucratic J-curve of diminishing productivity returns as control imperatives and mechanistic job design come to trump human autonomy and relationality and organizational flexibility. At its most dysfunctional, he terms it *bureaupathology*: “the functional elements of bureaucracy—specialization, hierarchy, rules, managerial direction, impersonality, and professionalization—if overdone can turn dysfunctional and eventually unproductive. In combination the various dysfunctions not only alienate clients but also members/employees” (Caiden, 1985, p. 22). In such contexts, administrative generalists and careerists are more successful than line specialists—those with a special expertise or commitment to the subject-matter, or with a deep investment in the organization’s mission. He explains that credentials can become more valued than experience and “uncertain, inexperienced, untutored administrators” may come to have inordinate influence (Caiden, 1985, p. 30). Mission-driven staff can start to feel that there is a disconnect between their personal values, and the organization’s practices—a tension we saw in the critiques of our research participants, who considered themselves primarily oriented towards beneficiaries rather than organizations and contrasted themselves with the “careerists” in strong terms.

It is not surprising, then, that bureaucracy is a primary complaint of aid workers (Fechter & Hindman, 2011). At its worst, bureaucracy in Aidland subordinates the beneficiaries to the process and that process in turn disempowers the practitioners as much as the beneficiaries

(Easterly, 2002). A recent anonymous article in *The Guardian* lamented: “Any humanity has long disappeared from the aid and development sectors. Somewhere along the way, with our technical jargon, sophisticated statistical evaluation methods, and a knowing but resigned pragmatism, we’ve forgotten that the people who we serve are humans” (Secret aid worker, 2017). An overly bureaucratized work culture disrupts relationships and the centrality of workplace communities to meeting belonging needs (Chowdhari Tremblay, 1999). Grant (2007) insisted on the importance of a relational architecture of job design for those employees motivated by a pro-social orientation, to ensure both the belonging/community needs are met as well as the validation of other key identity needs through consistent contact with beneficiaries to confirm the positive impact of employee efforts. Overly bureaucratized organizations lose touch with this overall aspect of the mission and values that people need to engage with.

Beyond the relatively common challenge to meaningfulness posed by bureaucracy, at times our participants even seemed to feel betrayed by their organizations when they failed to engage in effective practices that demonstrated that their staff were valued, as with Susan’s and Samira’s difficult experiences, or Catherine’s feeling that commitment and skill in development were less valued than commitment and skill in navigating the bureaucracy itself.

Aside from bureaucracy, other organizational stressors identified in the literature review certainly resonated with our own interviewees. In fact, lack of staff care by organizations is a significant problem in this sector (UNHCR & Welton-Mitchell, 2013). A small number of studies have been emerging that looked at psychological stresses in humanitarian aid workers and their experiences of support (and its failure) by their sending organizations (Ager, Flapper, van Pieterse, & Simon, 2002; Bjerneld et al., 2004; Ehrenreich & Elliott, 2004; Hearn & Deeny, 2007; Jones et al., 2006; McCall & Salama, 1999; Moresky, Eliades, Bhimani, Bunney, &

VanRooyen, 2001; Musa & Hamid, 2008; Omidian, 2001; Putman et al., 2009). These studies have found inconsistent approaches of staff care by aid organizations and repeatedly recommend improved screening, training and mental health care regimes (McCall & Salama, 1999), better pre-deployment training and aftercare upon return (Ehrenreich & Elliott, 2004), more standardization of training (Moresky et al., 2001) and better acknowledgement by organizations of the traumatic experiences faced by staff in the line of duty (Jones et al., 2006). Our three research participants who spoke about their own experiences with burnout, cumulative stress and trauma all identified lack of organizational support as contributing significantly to their decisions ultimately to leave their jobs.

Re-evaluation

Park (2010) defines meaning-making as “the restoration of meaning in the context of highly stressful situations” (p. 257). Situational meaning is found in the specific circumstances, demands and consequences, in relation to one’s global meaning framework. It is changes to both situational and global meanings which prompt re-negotiation for the former and re-evaluation for the latter, that are of particular interest in this study. When the meaning of a given situation is undermined, then an individual engages a wide variety of strategies to make sense out of the circumstances, and retrieve or form meaning from it, such as in the process we have termed ‘re-negotiation.’ The process of re-evaluating one’s global meanings can often result in changes to identity, “basic beliefs, value systems, and [...] the hierarchy of life goals” (Halama, 2014, p. 243). For example, Samira’s experience of personal collapse as a result of cumulative stress lead her to walk away from the lifecareer. Susan’s traumatic experience also lead to re-evaluation of the kinds of work she was willing to accept. Marcel’s growing skepticism about the effectiveness of development aid, along with his young family’s need to stay in Canada may also be

considered a re-evaluation of global meaning; he re-evaluated his priorities, placing his family first, and found for himself another way he could make a difference in the world, at a more local level. From another perspective, the results of this study may be framed as showing us ways in which situational meaning-making efforts impact global meaning within the lifecareer of aid work.

Collapse of Meaning. Sometimes the situations were too challenging and they overwhelmed individual coping resources, much in the way Janoff-Bulman (1992) portray traumatic/critical life events as "shattering" of one's assumptions of self and world and prompting a "process of adjustment" through engagement in meaning-making, whether unconsciously or deliberately (in Montaiuti, 2013, p. 70). There is a great volume of first person accounts by aid workers speaking about their disillusionment with the aid industry and their desire to leave it, to find a more permanent home and stable career for themselves. It is a common topic in the aid worker professional social networks of which the researcher is a member. Pigni (n.d.), Sweeney (2014) and Stark (2011) all acknowledge the potential for loss of meaning and disillusionment in their advice to potential aid workers. The extensive survey work conducted by Arcaro and Sweeney (2016) also suggests that this is a common preoccupation of aid workers: "This is a sector filled with people who need to believe in their work and believe that they are accomplishing something (not necessarily 'saving the world', but at least doing something productive and that they feel is worthwhile)" (Arcaro, 2016b). For our own aid workers, as for Roth's (2015), meaninglessness arises when "energy, involvement and efficacy are missing" (p. 59). Aidwork is frequently intense, consuming and exhausting, leading to feeling exploited and burned out, rather than "fulfilled" (Roth, 2015). There may come a time when the reasons for staying are stripped away, when one's beliefs and assumptions about the world of

Aidland and one's place in it are strained or shattered (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). The worldview that requires one to believe that one is contributing to lasting change is so foundational to a lifecareer in Aidland—its basic global meaning—that when an aid worker no longer “believes in” their ability to effect sustainable positive change, they will consider leaving; the sacrifices will no longer be worth it. Value conflicts are inevitable. Many aid workers come a point where they feel compelled to ask whether it is worth it to persist (Secret Aid Worker, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c; Sweeney, 2014). In a series of popular articles on a development industry web site, one long-term aid worker wrote about his disillusionment and attempts to leave the industry behind (Rabe, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c). He concluded his reflections:

There was no one dramatic incident that caused me to reassess. Neither was there for many of the people who contributed to this article. When I asked a friend who still works in the U.N. for his thoughts, he exclaimed, “Aid is like a cult! It’s hard to get out.” As those who do manage to escape cults or North Korea will tell you, it is the accumulation over many years of small doubts about the party line that cause the pressure to build to the point where an exit is the only honest option. So it is with aid. These and many other indignities — incompetent bosses, inconsistent application of rules, political power plays, the lack of evidence to back up hubristic claims, corporatization, even sexual offenses and graft — are by no means unique to NGOs or the U.N. In observing the careers of my aid worker peers, those fabled crossroads appear exactly at the point when field work is no longer a viable option. Critical decisions have to be made for or against love, for or against health, for or against excitement, for or against stability. A few smart ones see the future for what it is and exit without too much angst. A decade of hard scrabble field work can be leveraged in any number of ways, especially if you still have a reservoir of

energy and imagination to pursue other things. Most people, however, including me, opt to stay in and try their hand at management, or fancy they have what it takes to be “advisers” of one sort or another. They tell themselves they are willing to be “aid lifers” as long as they can still travel (no more than 25 percent of their time, please) and do something worthwhile (Rabe, 2016c).

Layers of meaningfulness

Meaningfulness, then, is highly context-dependent, “there isn’t one big meaning that exists. There are different meanings. The circumstances change. The context changes and things intersect” (Samira). Meaning is not singular, but rather plural—there are multiple kinds of meanings the participants give to their experiences at work, and multiple levels of meaningfulness in the experiences they recount. The participants suggested that there are layers to the experience of meaningfulness in the work; meaningfulness changes as one’s personal context changes. Work can feel meaningful in different ways, for example the difference between a job that is deeply intellectually stimulating and a job that (also) brings a profound emotional satisfaction. We would propose here to characterize it as three separate but related layers of meaningfulness: 1) the intellectual dimension, 2) the relational dimension, and 3) the spiritual or depth dimension. These levels of meaning are not necessarily linear but they suggest the elements that seemed to be important to all of the participants, in terms of curiosity and openness to learning (1. Intellectual); the importance of relationships in general and of taking the time to invest in relationship-building with individuals from the local culture (2. Relational); and the necessity of being able to feel passionately connected to one’s work and to find it meaningful (3. Spiritual/depth). And at all three levels, the participants identified values that were important to

them, such as curiosity/openness, humility, commitment, respect for difference, justice, sustainability, patience.

Shauny was one participant who spoke in this way about levels of meaningfulness. She described coming to understand that there was a difference between rare but profound experiences of a deep emotional resonance with her work, and the more commonly felt intellectual understanding of and satisfaction with the notion that she was contributing to something worthwhile. After recounting an experience with a local community organizer that was very meaningful (cited in previous chapter), she explained: “this [example] was the strongest one in the sense of the emotion. Intellectually, I can talk about a lot of the work that I have done and how it does make a contribution but it’s much more a brain thing. It’s more of an analysis that I would describe for you.”

The spiritual dimension: A path with heart. Regarding the third dimension, which we are calling spiritual, we use the term not in its religious/theistic usage, but in its more secular sense, to mean that which breathes life into one’s being—this is the soul dimension (Rolheiser, 1999). Spirituality as we are using the term here is not necessarily connected to any notion of the supernatural, of divinity, or of organized religion. Instead, we are using the term in its fully secular usage, as in one’s connection with the source of “ultimate concern” (Cohen, 2003, p. 196). As we saw in the previous chapter, all six participants spoke about a love or a passion for this work. The language of heart (Shauny), blood (Yeti), and the fire or flame of passion (Catherine), thirst and hunger, pleasure and joy, of connection and engagement (Susan), creativity (Marcel) is a thread through their narratives. This dimension emerged in all six of the respondents, but in different ways and at different depths.

Recalling the earlier discussion on Frankl's existential theory and his notion of the spiritual as that which makes us fully human, it should then be evident that spirituality is an important source of meaningfulness at work. Our systems of values and beliefs about life, about our purpose and about what gives meaning are part of this spiritual frame, but spirituality is not reducible to these; there is also a transcendent dimension (Elkins, Hedstrom, Hughes, Leaf, & Saunders, 1988). Another secular definition of spirituality suggests that it comprises the following dimensions: unifying interconnectedness, innerness or inner resources, purpose and meaning in life, and transcendence (Howden, 1992). Spirituality as we are conceptualizing it here is the source of energy, passion, engagement and creative power that was expressed by each of the aid workers who participated in this study. When circumstances are aligned to permit a deep engagement with the work, then the spiritual plane is accessed. It is the energetic depth that we experience in our faculties of willing, thinking and feeling; a potentiality and draw towards self-transcendence. Rolheiser (1999) has provided a simple but apt definition: "spirituality is about what we do with the fire inside of us" (p. 11). Chiu, Emblen, Hofwegen, Sawatzky, and Meyerhoff (2004) connect the spiritual dimension with creativity and motivation—other concepts that have emerged from the data. At our best and most transcendent, we can act on and shape our world, making possible a great depth of existence and transcendence of self-concern, in our intellectual and emotional curiosity and growth, our aesthetic sense, our drive to form community and relationships, and in our quest for the good (Macquarrie, 2000). One writer on the theme of the spiritual dimension of international humanitarian aid fittingly calls it "soul work" (McKay, 2010).

Some of the literature on meaningful work characterizes the most fulfilling career experience as one "with heart" (Kopelman et al., 2012, p. 162). This is a path that is self-directed

and aligned with one's values, brings pleasure ("joy and subjective vitality" to Wrzesniewski (2011, p. 47)), and is compatible with one's overall life priorities (Kopelman et al., 2012). The subjects in a study of psychological success by Hall and Chandler (2005) describe being imbued with a sense of urgency, and feeling compelled by a sense of calling, similarly to many of our own research participants. This combination of pleasure, strong intrinsic motivation, heartfulness, and creative energy can be summarized by one word which emerged from the interviews: passion. Vallerand, Houlfort, and Forest (2014) define passion as "a strong inclination toward a self-defining activity that one loves, finds important and meaningful, and in which one invests a significant amount of time and energy," exerting a powerful impact on one's sense of self-identity (p. 86). This may be experienced as a feeling of deep engagement with one's work, and congruence at the identity level with one's highest values. It changes how we experience our selves in the world (Conklin, 2012).

Jobs, Careers, Callings

While not all six participants were comfortable taking on the idea of their lifecareers representing a calling, neither would they likely have been comfortable accepting the more limited notion of a career, given how strongly they criticized their colleagues for lacking a commitment to the values of sustainable development. So while imperfect, 'calling' seems the most appropriate term to describe their work orientations; it is the closest descriptor of how compelled, principled and values-driven is their orientation to their work. At its most meaningful, this calling seems best to be understood as manifesting at the intersection of what the world needs, what brings a sense of passion, and what skill they have to offer.

Wolf (2010), an existential philosopher who theorizes about meaningfulness and the good life, made an important distinction between meaningfulness and the two usual categories that we

typically include in the concept: happiness and morality. Meaning is rather a "third sort of value a life can possess" (Wolf, 2010, p. 3). Wolf theorizes that a meaningful life is best regarded as one that has found "fitting fulfillment" (Wolf, 2010, p. xii). By this she means that there is both a subjective and an objective element to meaningfulness. One must be subjectively attracted to a pursuit, meaning that one must enjoy it, find pleasure or love in it. But the pursuit must also be considered objectively worthy, in the sense that others must, as a general rule, agree that the pursuit is worthy and meaningful. The pursuit must require an "active, productive engagement" with some valued pursuit beyond the subject (Wolf, 2010, p. xii). "Meaning arises from loving objects worthy of love and engaging with them in a positive way," she argues (Wolf, 2010, p. 8). One's life is meaningful to the extent that one is "lovingly engaged in projects of worth" (Wolf, 2010, p. 35). Thus a meaningful life contains qualities of love, engagement in something positive, productive and recognized as worthy, in which one finds joy or pleasure—a fitting description for international aid work, at its best.

In her paper entitled, "Conceptualising meaningful work as a fundamental human need," (Yeoman, 2014) draws on Wolf's proposal in building her normative argument. We need "ground projects" (Yeoman, 2014, p. 244), which she describes as "projects which help us to answer the question 'what reasons do we have for living?'" (Yeoman, 2014, p. 244). The meaningfulness of ground projects comes from their long-lasting nature and can be seen as appropriate orientations (Yeoman, 2014, p. 244). Work, she argues, is a "basic mode of being," of our creative and humanizing engagement (our "vital commitments") with the world (Yeoman, 2014, p. 236). Meaningful work helps to fulfill our fundamental needs for "a sense of purpose; a sense of efficacy; being able to view oneself as having positive value or being morally justified; and a sense of positive self-worth" (Baumeister, 1991, cited in Yeoman, 2014, p. 240). At its best and

most meaningful, for the aid workers interviewed work is a way that they exercise their creative energy in the world, and the way they act on their relationship with the world and with each other (Yeoman, 2014). This notion that work is a mode of being-in-the world, even of loving the world, fits with the way the aid workers in this study often spoke about their orientation to their own lifecareers. Yeoman (2014) agrees that work has an existential purpose, that it is the mode through which we become fully human-in-the-world. Meaning is made, not found or received (Yeoman, 2014). Furthermore, meaning is made in relationship; it is a social pursuit. The meaningfulness of our pursuits is confirmed or challenged within our social situation. Fabry (1970), calls meaning-fulfilling work "beloved work" (p. 40).

For Further Study: Gender Differences and Family Considerations

It is in the domain of romantic relationships and family that the reality of the costs of this lifecareer becomes most clear. A career that requires living in difficult geographic regions and frequent travel places an enormous strain on a conventional committed family life; it is one of the ways that *life* cannot be separated from *career* in Aidland (Sweeney, 2014). Generally one of the spouse's careers will determine the extent to which living together in Aidland is possible over the long term. Reconciling the competing demands of family and career is a constant challenge in Aidland. "Is aid work for the childless and unattached? Maybe," concludes another Secret Aid Worker (2016a). Many aid workers speak about coming to a time when they must decide whether to continue with the peripatetic lifestyle or seek out more stable, long-term postings that are more conducive to establishing a family. There seems to be an important gender divide among our six respondents. The four women seem to have sacrificed more, or at least experienced more of a struggle in terms of competing priorities between desire for a family and

pursuit of career advancement. It is interesting to note that the four women did not have children and the two men did. This would be a topic for further research.

Clinical Implications and Recommendations

There are a number of implications of this study for aid workers themselves, for their organizations, and for occupational psychology in general. One of the strongest findings that emerged was the importance for aid workers of living and working in circumstances aligned with their personal values. They are willing to expend great effort and energy for work that they believe will have a sustainable impact on inequality and poverty in their subject-matter areas of interest. They are willing to hand their whole lifecareers over to that mission, even at the expense of long-term stability, family, and financial security. But that principle of *sustainability* is the pivot on which their entire commitment, on which their experience of meaningfulness rests. If they come to doubt the sustainability of their efforts, then the meaning is lost and they become disengaged.

The other factor that contributes to experiences of meaninglessness and aid worker disengagement is the importance of sharing values with colleagues. The participants in this study directed their bitterest criticisms towards those colleagues in whom they did not recognize the same level of commitment and engagement in sustainable development, or, in Marcel's case, the same level of professionalism and commitment to the principles of good humanitarian action. They trusted neither the careerists, those who seem to value career advancement over passionate engagement and sacrifice, nor the Aidland tourists—those who fly into a country or a situation for short-term visits, taking little interest in what effective, sustainable aid requires, which is long-term, slow, locally-lead change efforts over decades, rather than the one to five year time horizons of most organizational attention-spans. Because of the intensity and intimacy that often

occurs between colleagues in fieldwork, it is important for aid workers themselves to consider their potential colleagues and organizations as much as the geographic location or the subject-matter of the project/job when seeking opportunities.

The other implication, for both aid workers and organizations, is the centrality of aid beneficiaries to the meaning of the work. Proximity to, and regular opportunities for encounter with local colleagues and beneficiaries is essential to ensuring employee engagement. The most meaningful experiences that the research participants shared came from opportunities they had to work closely with and connect with people in the local communities, to see the real results of their skill and effort. Relational job design (Grant, 2007) which structures these opportunities for encounter is likely to strengthen employee engagement and long-term commitment to an organization. This is of particular interest for jobs that are based in organization headquarters, distance from the local beneficiary communities.

The other implication of the accounts of personal collapse and trauma are the importance of organizations taking staff care seriously, throughout the lifecycle of a deployment. Staff must be well-screened, well-prepared, well-accompanied, well-debriefed and well-cared for after their return. Highly intensive deployments should have time limits, after which the worker should be offered an equally meaningful but less challenging work opportunity. Aid workers are passionately committed to the work they do, which means that cumulative stress and trauma is always a risk that must be managed, both by the aid workers themselves, but more importantly by the organizations.

Samira's insistence that aid workers—especially women—need to have an “exit plan” resonates with the sense of betrayal she seems to have experienced when she was laid off during a wave of budget cuts, while she was in the midst of a highly meaningful deployment. She

wanted female aid workers especially to remember the frequently precarious nature of employment in Aidland and to have their own long-term plan. Going back to one's home country is difficult; leaving Aidland is even more difficult in part because both the professional and personal experiences are not understood by non-aid workers ("civilians"—Samira) and by potential employers in the local workforce. This exit plan might include financial savings or a plan to return to school to adjust one's skill set, but especially deliberate efforts to maintain personal and professional networks in one's home community. Younger aid workers will eventually arrive at a point in their lifecareers when they must make a decision about whether starting a family is an important priority and whether any lifestyle adjustments will be needed in order to do that. These lifestyle adjustments may mean choosing less meaningful work in the bureaucracy of headquarters, with less contact with local beneficiaries, or it may mean a difficult transition period of trying to find equally valuable work outside of the international aid industry.

Discovering their talents, or professional skill-set, the area in which they have something to contribute, seems to have been an important part of the meaning-making process to the participants. But that discovery only comes with time and experience; it was after several years or decades of working in this lifecareer that the aid workers were able to speak with confidence and energy about what kind of work would be most meaningful to them and what areas in which they felt they had something to contribute. It may have been this discovery and personal development over time that also contributed to the increasingly modest expectations of the kind of impact they needed to be able to make to be satisfied with the meaningfulness of their work and the worthiness of their efforts.

Three areas of findings emerge in which further research may be needed in order to fully understand the implications. First, as discussed previously, there seemed to be important

differences between the narratives of the men and women in this study. The women seemed to have had more of a sense of struggle over the costs and sacrifices of their lifecareers, both in terms of balancing work and family priorities and in terms of their own advancement and confidence in securing interesting job opportunities. Marcel seems to have been the only one of the six who sacrificed a long-term lifecareer in Aidland for the sake of a family, but he also indicated that he felt called more broadly to community building, rather than to international work. But, many of the women, however, sacrificed having families and children for the sake of their lifecareers. It seems significant that the four women did not have children and the two men did and that the women's narratives contained more stories of emotional and psychological strain and distress than did the men's. However, six aid workers is not a sufficiently large sample to understand the precise nature of the gendered differences that are suggested.

The other area of potential research interest, particularly to existential psychology, is the suggestion that there are levels or layers of meaning in work, from intellectual engagement, to emotional investment to spiritual meaning, even in a secular sense. Meaning and meaningfulness are only known through the lived experience of them, and this nuanced way that the research participants described that experience confirms the multiplicity of meanings that people may seek out.

A final area of potential research interest for occupational and existential psychology is related to the dynamics of callings and how they are lived. One way to read the narratives and compare the various responses on whether they consider their lifecareers 'callings' is to wonder to what extent the stronger the sense of calling one has for a particular subject, the more of a sense of struggle there might be along the way. For example, those three participants who seemed to have had the strongest sense of calling from their childhoods—Shauny, Catherine and

Samira—also seem to have struggled the most with finding the right path that complemented their skills, interests and passions. Further research into the dynamics of calling in long-term professional careers should focus on how the sense of that calling interacts over time with what is rarely a linear career progression.

Limitations

There may be limitations to this study that arose as a result of sampling issues. The researcher was unable to secure the participation of any non-Canadian international workers, nor was there an equal representation of humanitarian workers, which would have permitted a better contrast of the two domains of work. It proved to be difficult to recruit humanitarian workers through the networks to which the researcher belonged, in part possibly because the intense nature of their work makes it difficult to elicit their interest in participating in academic research. Previous empirical studies recruited humanitarian workers primarily through working with their sending organizations. The second male participant was referred through a colleague in order to even out the gender imbalance somewhat, but of his five years of experience working overseas, two of those had been as a tour guide, whereas the requirement had looked for four years of professional overseas experience. Much of the rest of his professional humanitarian work had been based out of a headquarters office in Canada, with significant travel to developing countries. However, he suited the sample by providing balance in other ways: he was a second male, he was the only one working exclusively in the humanitarian domain, and he was mid-career and considering leaving the sector completely, all elements that were under-represented in the rest of the sample.

Another limitation may have arisen as a result of the interview questions. In reviewing the transcripts, it became evident that each of the participants had their own implicit definitions

of what the terms ‘meaning’ and ‘calling’ meant to them. It was a deliberate choice on the researcher’s part not to define the terms in advance, in order to ensure that the meanings came from the participants themselves, which is consistent with the phenomenological approach. But it might have assisted in the comparison between transcripts if the participants had been asked how they defined these relatively abstract concepts. For example, Yeti seemed reluctant to use the word ‘calling’, suggesting that while in his youth he might have felt comfortable using it to describe his work, in his semi-retirement he felt the term didn’t encompass the level of skill and expertise he brought to the job and the way in which he felt obligated to do this work. Yet in the researcher’s interpretation of the concept, Yeti’s orientation to his work was undeniably a calling; he described it as his “lifeblood,” how “compelled” he felt to respond to requests for his expertise and how much enjoyment he still experienced from his work.

Another surprising aspect of the formulation of the interview questions was the participants’ difficulty with questions about experiences of work losing its meaning, and of the kinds of sacrifices that the lifecareer might have asked of them. The responses to these questions came more indirectly and less promptly than the question of remembered times when the work was highly meaningful. Where the questions about meaningful experiences prompted stories, often about relationships with local colleagues and beneficiaries, the questions about meaninglessness and sacrifices elicited instead *contexts* and *types of situations* (often about excessive bureaucracy), and the more detailed pictures only emerged over the course of the whole conversation.

In addition, the concept of transcendence was hinted at in the interviews, particularly indirectly in the discussions on *calling*. However, no specific direct question about transcendent

experiences, spirituality or belief in a transcendent power were asked, in connection with meaningfulness. This presents a compelling opportunity for further study.

One difficulty that arose during coding, which resulted in going through several iterations, was how to represent the process of meaning-making, particularly with datasets from only single points in time offering retrospective reflections. All the guidance and examples on conducting IPA research that was accessible used examples of content, rather than process coding and it was difficult to know how to represent the participants' experiences in a way that was not overly structured (e.g., presenting fixed stages), but also not reading too much into the data. This was also a challenge during the inter-coder reliability exercise, when the secondary researcher's first attempt focused exclusively on content of meaningfulness, rather than on process.

Researcher bias and reflexivity. One of the more potentially significant limitations arose from the always present potential for bias on my own part as the researcher, due to my own history of having worked in that sector and struggled with questions of meaninglessness, as well as due to my lack of experience in empirical research. In the first interview, I spent a great deal of time at the beginning orienting my interviewee to my research objectives, my interests and my thoughts, in terms of what I was looking for, but upon reviewing the transcript and video recording, it seemed as if it was unnecessary and risked biasing the participants to try and offer reflections specifically on the areas that I was wondering about (this is in fact the transcript I selected for review by the secondary researcher for intercoder reliability validation, in part for this reason). I noticed it also in some transcripts where probing questions around meaninglessness almost redirected the conversation towards my particular personal interest in the ethico-political aspects of the aid industry, the power dynamics between expatriate and

national staff, the privileges granted to expatriates and the many related problems with the aid industry as a whole. It was evident, though, that while most of the participants had reflected on some aspect of these questions—particularly the racialized dynamics of being white “experts” from the Global North—except for Marcel, none of them had found those concerns to be significant issues that impacted their relationships to the meaningfulness of their work. And for Marcel, those reflections did not seem to be turned towards himself and his own role in that dynamic, but towards the industry as a whole. As a result, I was more cautious about that bias in latter interviews, and made deliberate efforts throughout the iterations of coding and re-coding to not over-emphasize this element too strongly. In fact, it was in struggling against this bias and deliberately deciding to set aside this question (except for in the cases where it seemed to be important to the participants), a more superordinate theme emerged that became central to the findings: that of personal and professional *values*. This was not an element of bias that was flagged during the intercoder reliability exercise, so I feel that I was moderately successful, although my interest in ethics and power dynamics might still come through, as it likely does in the literature review.

As explained previously, the phenomenological semi-structured interview approach is undeniably relational – the meanings that the participants constructed in our conversation were meanings we in effect constructed together through the back and forth of our dialogue, my probing questions, my steering the conversation in certain directions and not others, my own attempts to understand their narratives but also my own attempts to answer some of my own questions. As an inexperienced researcher it took some time to find the balance between offering what the conversation needed and not directing too strongly.

However, as was discussed previously, my own previous experience in the aid industry is also an advantage in this study, because of my ability to understand the language and meanings from within the lifeworld of Aidland. One of the defining experiences that many aid workers have once they take up residence in Aidland is that of being viewed with a certain amount of un-earned awe, admiration and deference by “civilians” (Samira)—those at home who don’t work in the industry, and/or who have not travelled extensively but want to. It likely would have been much more difficult to elicit the kinds of reflections that I did in the interviews if I wasn’t able to share some glimpse of my own experiences in turn; aid workers are wary of the romanticizing gaze to which they are often subject by those who have never experienced Aidland.

Conclusions

So how then do the participants navigate the process of meaning-making in their work? Through reflection/introspection and discernment. Discovering what factors must be in place for work to be meaningful is a process of discernment, the ability to exercise sound judgment, clear understanding. They sought work about which they could feel passionate and engaged; this seemed to be aligned with work that also used their talents effectively. Sometimes this discernment was experiential, and at others it was more deliberated and thoughtful. It is a developmental process of self-discovery, guided by personal values of social service (contributing) and sustainability (making a lasting difference). Perhaps because of the all-consuming nature of this lifecareer, the process is one of identity formation. In the process of discovering what they enjoy (passion), where their skills are (talent), what kind of work they want to do (values and interests), they discover what is meaningful to them—who they are. It seems as though in this developmental process that they come to a sense of calling, through confirmation, re-negotiation and re-evaluation.

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Appendix I – Ethics approval



UNIVERSITÉ
SAINT-PAUL
UNIVERSITY

24-06-2016
dd-mm-yyyy

Bureau de la recherche et de la déontologie
Office of Research and Ethics

**Comité de la déontologie
Research Ethics Board**

REB File Number 1360.2/16

Principal Investigator / Thesis supervisor / Co-investigators / Student

Last name	Name	Affiliation	Role
Ruel	Chantal	Faculty of Human Sciences	Principal Investigator
Bilodeau	Cynthia	Faculty of Human Sciences	Supervisor

Type of project MA Thesis

Title The Process of Meaning-making in International Aid Work: a Phenomenological Study

Approval date **Expiry Date** **Decision**
2 (clarification)

Committee comments

The Research Ethics Certificate is pending upon receipt of a written response of the following:

The Code of Conduct Form:

A.2: the researcher must revise the start of the data collection;

The Consent Form:

Specify the name of the organizations mentioned in section D - Risks (Code of Conduct Form) and how they can be reached.

Signature

Louis Perron
Chair
Research Ethics Board

Appendix II – Recruitment Poster

The Experience of Meaningfulness in International Aid Work - Research Participants needed!

Understanding the experience of meaningfulness in international aid work.

Do you find your work meaningful?

Do you no longer find your work meaningful?

Have you ever had to struggle with your relationship to your chosen career in international development or humanitarian aid?

How have you navigated that relationship over your career?

Looking for 8-10 research participants!

Did you know that having a sense of purpose and meaningfulness is a key factor in psychological resilience? But is meaning something you *find*, or a *relationship* to experience that changes over time? Is it a *thing*, or a *process*?

You will be asked for two things:

1. To submit a brief (250-500 words) written background piece (in answer to the question “How did you end up in this lifecareer? What were you looking for, if anything?”), and
2. To participate in a one-hour interview over the internet (Skype/Facetime).

I am a former Aid worker (UNDP and Canadian International Aid Agency) who has worked in both long-term development and conflict situations. I am currently pursuing a Master’s degree in Counseling, Psychotherapy and Spirituality at Saint Paul University in Ottawa, Canada, in order to provide mental health support to aid workers. This research is to complete my Master’s Thesis.

The purpose of this research is to conduct a phenomenological study of the process of meaning-making in an international aid lifecareer. Phenomenology is simply a qualitative research method, which aims to capture the essence of a lived experience within a common population, rather than to confirm or test a pre-formed theory.

You will be able to remain anonymous and have control over the use of any identifying information. You will also be able to withdraw your consent to participate at any time during the data collection stage. You will also have the opportunity to review the draft analysis once it is formulated.

Seeking participants who are or who have been:

- Development or Humanitarian Aid Professionals (not volunteers)
- With at least eight (8) years of experience
- At least four (4) years deployed to aid-receiving countries
- Fluent in written and oral English
- Interested in sharing their experiences of wrestling with their sense of purpose and meaningfulness in relation to their lifecareer.

Please contact me at

Appendix III – Email Invitation to Interested Candidates

Dear research participant,

Thank you for volunteering to participate in this research study. It's an opportunity to engage in a reflection and dialogue about your experience of the meaningfulness of your lifecareer. This study is particularly looking at the notion of meaning-making as a *process* that is renegotiated over time and wonders how aid workers in particular navigate it.

You will be asked for two things:

1. To submit a brief (250-500 words) written background piece (in answer to the question “How did you end up in this lifecareer? What were you looking for, if anything?”), and
2. To participate in a one-hour interview over the internet (Skype/Facetime).

I am a former Aid worker (UNDP and Canadian International Aid Agency) who has worked in both long-term development (Central America, Gabon, Ghana) and conflict situations (Afghanistan and Palestinian Territories). I am currently pursuing a Master's degree in Counseling, Psychotherapy and Spirituality at Saint Paul University in Ottawa, Canada, in order to provide mental health support to aid workers. This research is to complete my Master's Thesis.

The purpose of this research is to conduct a phenomenological study of the process of meaning-making in an international aid lifecareer. Phenomenology is simply a qualitative research method, which aims to capture the essence of a lived experience within a common population, rather than to confirm or test a pre-formed theory.

You will be able to remain anonymous and have control over the use of any identifying information. You will also be able to withdraw your consent to participate at any time during the data collection stage. You will also have the opportunity to review the draft analysis once it is formulated.

The selection criteria for research participants are as follows: participants who are or who have been:

- Development or Humanitarian Aid Professionals (not volunteers)
- With at least eight (8) years of experience
- At least four (4) years deployed to aid-receiving countries
- Fluent in written and oral English
- Interested in sharing their experiences of wrestling with their sense of purpose and meaningfulness in relation to their lifecareer.

If you fall within these criteria, please read and sign the attached consent form, which outlines the research purpose, your role, any ethical considerations, how your information will be used and how your anonymity will be ensured. You can scan the signature page and send it back to me via email.

Following that, I will invite you to send in a 250-500 word reflection on how you got into international aid work, in order to set the background context and to enable us to be focused during the one-hour Skype interview. I will be contacting you to schedule that; it may take us some time to figure out a time, particularly if we are in very different time zones.

Thank you very much for assisting with this research.

Chantal Ruel
M.A. Candidate
Counselling, Psychotherapy, and Spirituality

Appendix IV – Research Participation Consent Form

Title of the study: The Process of Meaning-making in International Aid Work: a Phenomenological Study

Researcher: Chantal Ruel, BA (SFU '00), MPA (Queen's '01), MA (candidate '16)

Dept: School of Counselling, Psychotherapy, and Spirituality
Faculty of Human Sciences
Saint Paul University

Contact:

Supervisor: Professor Cynthia Bilodeau, Ph.D.

Dept: School of Counselling, Psychotherapy, and Spirituality
Faculty of Human Sciences
Saint Paul University

Contact:

Invitation to Participate: I am invited to participate in the abovementioned research study conducted by Chantal Ruel and Cynthia Bilodeau.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of the research is to conduct a phenomenological study of the process of meaning-making in an international aid lifecareer. Phenomenology is simply a qualitative research method, which aims to capture the essence of a lived experience within a common population, rather than to confirm or test a pre-formed hypothesis.

Participation: My participation will consist essentially of a brief written reflection and a one-hour interview conducted over the internet during which I will be invited to reflect on my relationship to my work and my experience of its meaningfulness over time. The written question will be sent to me with the first email and the interview will be scheduled once my written response is received. The interview itself will be recorded using *eCamm for Skype* software.

Risks: My participation in this study will entail that *I volunteer very personal information*, and this may cause me to feel negative emotions related to my past experiences, particularly if I have struggled with my work because of extreme stress. I have received assurance from the researcher that every effort will be made to minimize these risks, by inviting me to share only a level of detail with which I am comfortable.

Benefits: My participation in this study will contribute to a better understanding of the lifecareers of aid workers, of the challenges they face and the lived experience of meaningfulness in the work. It will help contribute to an understanding of meaning-making as a process that must continually be renegotiated over time and to understanding how individuals experience this themselves.

Confidentiality and anonymity: I have received assurance from the researcher that the information I will share will remain strictly confidential. I understand that the contents will be used only for developing an interpretive analysis that captures the essence of this experience common to the research participants and that my confidentiality will be protected through password-protected accounts and secured hardware.

Anonymity will be protected in the following manner: you will be asked to volunteer a pseudonym that will be used to refer to your data throughout the study. Any identifying information will be kept in a separate, password-protected file, to which only the primary researcher will have access. You will also be asked which, if any, identifying information you would like to keep confidential, such as your nationality or your current country of deployment, etc. The names of any employer organizations that you mention will also be kept confidential and excised from any transcripts that are read by anyone other than the primary researcher.

Conservation of data: The data collected—your written submission, emails, interview recording and interview transcripts—will be kept in a secure manner, on password-protected accounts, password protected computers, in locked offices to which only the primary researcher will have access. They will be stored as back-ups on an external hard drive which is not connected to the internet and which will be password-protected. Saint Paul University policy requires that research data be kept for five years. Once the study is complete, all data collected will be stored on DVD and locked in a file cabinet at Saint Paul; versions stored on computer and external hard drives will be deleted and emails will be erased..

Voluntary Participation: I am under no obligation to participate and if I choose to participate, I can withdraw from the study at any time during the data collection stage and/or refuse to answer any questions, without suffering any negative consequences. If I choose to withdraw, all data gathered until the time of withdrawal will be deleted/destroyed, if I request it in writing/email.

My requested pseudonym is: _____

Acceptance: I, _____, agree to participate in the above research study conducted by *Chantal Ruel* of the School of Counselling, Psychotherapy, and Spirituality, Faculty of Human Sciences of Saint Paul University, *which research is under the supervision of Professor Cynthia Bilodeau, Ph.D.*

If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the researcher or her supervisor.

If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Office of Research and Ethics, Saint Paul University, 223 Main Street, Ottawa, ON K1S 1C4 ☐ Tel.: (613) 236-1393

Participant's signature:

Date:

Researcher's signature:

Date:

Please sign, scan and send the form to Chantal Ruel at:

Appendix V – Research Participant Selection Questionnaire

Name:

Birth date:

Nationality:

Email:

Skype or Facetime username (please
specify which):

Current country of employment:

Timezone in which the interview will
take place:

Best day and time for an interview (in
your own timezone):

Are you fluent in spoken and written
English?

Have you work in international aid for
at least eight (8) years, as a paid
professional (not a volunteer)?

Have you worked in aid-receiving
countries as an international
professional for at least four (4) of
those years?

Appendix VI – Interview Guide

Thank you for agreeing to help me with my research. This conversation should take about an hour, and will be recorded using *eCamm for Skype*. Before we start, I would like to go over the consent and confidentiality form with you, even though you have already read and signed it. Then I will explain again the purpose of this research.

Do you consent to being recorded? All of your personal identifying information will be kept confidential and all interview records will be secured. After the thesis is complete, the records will be kept in an archive for 7 years. If at any time during the research process you withdraw your consent to participate, I will remove all of your information and delete it. I would need that request in writing, though. Can I confirm which pseudonym you chose to use? Do you have any questions or concerns about confidentiality and about how your information will be used?

The purpose of this research is to describe the process of meaning-making in international aid work. The question of “meaning” though is perhaps not obvious. It can perhaps best be defined by the actual experience of it. Even though every person’s definition may be different, each person in general will also be able to tell whether their work is *meaningful* to them or not. Part of what I’m wondering about in this research is whether *meaning in work* is not something you *get* so much as an ongoing relationship between you, your life and your work. There seems to be a perception that aid work is the gold standard in “meaningful work,” but I’m wondering about the *lived reality* of that meaning, and how our relationship to it changes over time. And most particularly, I’m wondering about those critical transition points (what existential theory calls “boundary situations”) at which we have to renegotiate our relationship to our work. International Aid Work has a particular character of being all-encompassing; our entire lives are handed over to this career, which is why, to my mind, the question of *meaningfulness* is an important one.

Here is how I described this in my proposal: “How is the *expectation of meaningfulness* actually lived? We don't have a clear picture of what kind of *meaning* aid workers expect to find when they choose to enter these careers, and most importantly *whether* and *how* that meaning shifts over time.

One must ask in particular how aid workers negotiate the tensions, how they establish meaningful long-term relationships and social networks, and how flexible and integrated is their sense of meaning.

What are the precipitating factors in the change process?

This study will ask whether and how aid workers have found themselves re-evaluating, reconsidering and even renegotiating the overall meaning of their work, and what are the particular boundary situations, if any, that prompted that? It will seek to find out just how the experience of meaningfulness is sustained and/or changed over time.”

Do you have any questions? Are you ready to jump in?

Question	Sub-question
Tell me about experiences you may have had of feeling your work and life was meaningful.	What were the circumstances?
Tell me about experiences you may have had of feeling your work and life was not meaningful, or when you doubted its meaningfulness?	What were the circumstances?
Has your relationship to your work and its meaningfulness changed at all?	Can you describe any moments/instances in which your relationship to your work (lifecareer) changed? What led to them, what happened, and what did you do?
	How do you understand/think about that experience now?
Under what circumstances would you consider leaving this lifecareer?	
To what extent would you consider your work a calling/vocation/life's purpose?	Has that changed over time?
Is there anyone else you could recommend that we talk to?	

Thank you very much for this conversation. As I mentioned at the beginning, you are welcome to withdraw your participation at any point, by sending me an email, and all of your information and data will be deleted.

Do you have any current or former colleagues who you believe could be interested in participating in this research?

Once I have finished collecting the data, I will transcribe the interviews, code them to try and find the common themes and then develop a draft of my analysis. I will share that with you at that point and invite any reflections or comments you might have.

Ethics approval

Interview protocol and questions