**THE EXPERIENCE OF MEANING IN WORK FOR MILLENNIALS:   
A HEURISTIC STUDY**

by

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**Abstract**

Research was performed to study the experience of meaning in work for millennials. Meaning in work pertains to the sense of why people apply themselves to what they do for work. Millennials have become a growing part of the modern workforce. Both topics have been identified as valuable areas of study in the field of Industrial-Organizational Psychology, with multiple authors calling for more study on both topics. However, no study had been found specifically addressing how these two topics intersect. Qualitative heuristic phenomenology was used to explore the question: What is the experience of meaning in work for millennials? The author used personal experience to illicit the essence of the shared phenomenon. For this study, the millennial population was identified as persons born between 1980 and 1996. Millennial co-researchers (participants in the study) had 3 or more years of work experience and a variety of job functions. Data collection was completed by interviewing each co-researcher with a semi-structured question list pertaining to patterns found in the current scholarly literature on meaning in work and on millennials. The analysis was performed using the heuristic approach, in which 15 patterns and seven themes emerged from the units of meaning found in the transcribed interviews. The discovered themes were: autonomy, structure and expectations, value as a person, working relationships, altruism, frustration and stress, and personal care. The findings revealed that co-researchers found positive meaning when these themes and patterns manifested in positive ways, whereas they found meaninglessness and negative meaning when these themes and patterns occurred in negative ways. Additionally, it was found that personal responsibility could impact co-researchers’ interpretations of meaning as applied to their lives and sense of purpose. Further research could explore the relationship between these patterns and workplace engagement/withdrawal, as well as the role of personal responsibility in organizational behavior.

**Dedication**

For everyone who has helped me along the way, thank you. I love you.

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**CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION**

# Background of the Study

The exploration of meaning has been recognized as an important way to understand how someone experiences work in an organization. Workers engage in meaningfulness-making to adapt to a given situation for the purpose of coping and growing within it (Vuori, San, & Kira, 2012). The purpose of this dissertation is to understand unique millennial perspectives on the experience of meaning in work. Millennials, i.e., individuals born between 1980 and the mid-2000s (Council of Economic Advisers, 2014) or between 1980 and 1999 (National Chamber Foundation, 2012), have recently become the largest percent of the U.S. labor force at 53.5 million, composing just over 34% of the workforce (Fry, 2015). By increasing an understanding of the way this generation experiences meaning in work, organizations can develop more adaptive relationships with this age group through improved communication strategies and appropriate expectations (De Hauw & De Vos, 2010; Ferri-Reed, 2014). Like any other generation, millennials hold specific values, motivations, and expectations, which have been shaped by their culture, upbringing, and social/political/economic climate and therefore are inherent in their experience of meaning in an environment such as work.

Negative stereotypes about millennials abound in popular literature, and scholars acknowledge that these stereotypes have an impact on how members of this generation fit into the world of work. Members of this generation are often stereotyped as feeling “entitled” (Fottrell, 2016; Ryan, 2016; Smith, 2016; Tulgan, 2009) and having no loyalty or work ethic (Marston, 2007; Murphy, 2016). Generalizations abound in popular literature: For The Atlantic, Bump (2014) wrote that millennials “are the worst” (para. 1) based on his own personal experience, and Stein (2013) cautioned in Time Magazine that sociological research could be used to enforce negative generalizations, especially when done without broader context of how this generation has been shaped. Members of other generations have provided accounts of mystifying interactions with this generation (e.g., DeMaria, 2013; Stewart, 2009).

To mitigate such confusion, much intergenerational research has been performed to better understand how millennials differ from prior generations, especially related to motivations, expectations, and strengths (Deal, Altman, & Rogelberg, 2010; Gursoy, Maier, & Chi, 2008; Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010; Twenge, 2010; Wong, Gardiner, Lang, & Coulon, 2008). Millennials’ development within specific environmental contexts has often been a topic of study because of how it impacts their values and beliefs, which resultantly affect their behaviors and decisions (Deal et al., 2010; De Hauw & De Vos, 2010; DeMaria, 2013; Marston. 2007; Reizer, Dahan, & Shaver, 2013). They have been surveyed regarding values and beliefs, especially regarding what they consider a “real job” (O’Connor & Raile, 2015), preferred leadership styles (Alsop, 2008), and work attitudes (Kowske, Rasch, & Wiley, 2010).

When reviewing contributions to the theory on meaning in work, it has been established that sources of meaning in work stem from internal values and beliefs of the self, relationships with others, the context of the work itself, and spiritual relevance (Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010). This includes the exploration of how it comes about, such as through calling (Berg, Grant, & Johnson, 2010), leadership styles (de Sousa & van Dierendonck, 2010), and being a part of something larger than the self (Markow & Klenke, 2005). Facets of culture (Brewer, 2010), leadership (Moynihan & Pandey, 2007), socialization (Filstad, 2010), and communication (Anderson, 2005; Budd & Velasquez, 2014) greatly impact how the individual experiences meaning at work. Although there has been research performed to learn more about millennials and meaning in work separately, there are aspects of both which require further study.

Despite the growing body of information on understanding millennials in work, authors such as Gursoy et al. (2008), Ferri-Reed (2014), O’Connor and Raile (2015), Smola and Sutton (2002), Stewart (2009), and Wong et al. (2008) have written about how a lack of research on the millennial generation continues to cause difficulty for prior generations when working with individuals from this age group. More specifically, it would be beneficial for researchers to further explore engagement, reconciliation, and a greater understanding of what members of this generation find to be important (Twenge, 2010; Twenge & Kasser, 2013). Furthermore, more research is needed to better understand this population’s behavior and perceptions in work, as well as to help leaders better manage this population in work. There is also a call for more research related to the meaning in work, especially related to how emotions, psychological processes, and social and cultural influences impact the experience of meaning in work (Rosso et al., 2010). However, even with research leading to the preliminary development of a model of meaningfulness-making, Vuori et al. (2012) noted that their research limitations included the lack of: personal life contexts of the participants; alternative strategies to the ones that participants used in the study; and assessing how likely participants were to engage in meaningfulness-making tactics. Although there is a growing amount of research on the millennial population, there is a call for more research on understanding what matters to them. Additionally, despite the advances in research on meaning in work, there is not enough research on how personal experiences, reactions, and cultures may shape personal responses to meaning.

Although research on millennials and meaning in work has been treated as two separate fields, many of the findings and topics of interest have overlapped. Further study of millennials should focus on how their personal life contexts, cultural and generational factors, and beliefs and values contribute to their experience of meaning in work. The intended possibility is that the findings of this dissertation will contribute to the knowledge base for a theory, or contribute to new theory regarding millennials and/or meaning in work.

Generational influences contribute to any person’s unique experience of meaning in work. The concept of meaning in work therefore becomes a personal experience shaped by the interplay of internal ideas with external interactions. Although existentialist writers have written extensively on meaning (e.g., , Camus, 1965; Frankl, 2006; Steger et al., 2008; Yalom,1980), and scholars and researchers have applied such understandings of meaning to the world of work (e.g., , Burger, Crous, & Roodt, 2012; de Sousa & van Dierendonck, 2010; Ghadi & Fernando, 2013; Hirschi, 2012; Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2011; Love & Cebon, 2008; Vuori et al., 2012), the contemporary dilemma of interest has been summed up succinctly by comedian Joe Rogan:

So instead of investing your time in a passion, you’ve sold your life to work for an uncaring machine that doesn’t understand you. That’s the problem with our society. And what’s the reward? Go home and get a big TV. (McAdam, 2015)

Millennials may be rebelling against this notion. Current research indicates that millennials are not investing in previously held norms related to how work-related meaning “should” develop for the worker in relation to how people are expected to behave and what they are expected to value (De Hauw & De Vos, 2010; Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010; O’Connor & Raile, 2015). This phenomenon was therefore chosen for further investigation into how millennial co-researchers experience meaning in work based on the understanding that their development of meaning could be very different from how individuals from prior generations, shaped in their own, different generational environment, would experience meaning in work.

Heuristics was chosen as the theoretical framework for this dissertation because its design specifically complements the components of the research question as well as the nature of the research that the research question requires. The priority of the heuristic methodology is based on the need for a greater understanding of meaning (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985; Moustakas, 1990). Additionally, the research question calls for personal experience with the phenomenon: the primary researcher would serve as a translator of sorts to help communicate the millennial co-researchers’ experiences in a way that could conceptually be understood by readers of all generations. As expressed previously, there are gaps in the research on the study of meaning in work, as well as on the lived experiences of the millennial population. This dissertation addresses gaps in the literature on personal and cultural components of meaning in work and the millennial population by exploring it through the millennial experience (see Chapter 4). The results of this dissertation may contribute to a greater understanding of theories related to meaning, or more specifically, meaning in work.

# Need for the Study

Current research on how millennials engage in meaning-making at work requires further study. No research was found specifically on millennials’ experience of meaning at work. Research about intrinsic values, such as by Arnett (2004), Cennamo and Gardner (2008), and Jurkiewicz (2000), found no significant results for differences between generations, leading Twenge (2010) to conclude that there is no supporting evidence found to support theories that this generation seeks meaning in work more so than other generations. In fact, she argued that theories about how millennials seek meaning have experienced contradicting evidence, and instead results have been paradoxical in that there is support that this generational “sees work as less important, but is more satisfied with their jobs” (p. 209). However, later research has found that millennials view the essence of work meaning very differently than prior generations (e.g., Deal et al., 2010; Ferri-Reed, 2013; Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010; O’Connor & Raile, 2015), signaling that there is support for the idea that meaning in work exists for millennials but that research has not found support for understanding the specific ways that it manifests for this generation. Additionally, research on the concept of meaning and work has been described as “experiencing its adolescence” because there is still “confusion about what is known about the meaning of work” (Rosso et al., 2010, p. 93). The research literature on millennials and meaning in work indicates that we know millennials view meaning in work differently from other generations, and that there has been some progress in understanding meaning in work, but we do not know how the millennial generation specifically experiences that difference in meaning.

# Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to explore the experience of meaning in work for the millennial population. Research shows significant differences between millennials and individuals from other generations, and it is imperative to understand how external influences, internal processes, personal development, and cultural context shape millennial behavior (Deal et al., 2010). The further exploration of these components would provide valid contributions to the study of meaning in work (Rosso et al., 2010; Vuori et al., 2012). However, this study could not be used to generalize findings back to the entire millennial generation, but its intent is to contribute to theory regarding millennial behavior and the experience of meaning in work.

# Significance of the Study

This topic is significant to the field and specialization of I/O (Industrial/Organizational) Psychology because it focuses on a population of popular interest and how their experience of meaning in work can contribute to improved work motivation, commitment, and performance. This is especially relevant because managers are often unsure how to manage this group (Ferri-Reed, 2014). The study of their values, perceptions, and behaviors has become valuable based on: the need to understand how they will interact with individuals from other generations (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010); the different expectations they hold (De Hauw & De Vos, 2010); how they will behave as workers as they get older (Deal et al., 2010); as well as how to maintain and motivate members of this generation in the workforce (Twenge, 2010). People seek to live with meaning and purpose, even on a daily basis, as these concepts are essential to overcoming meaninglessness, amotivation (lack of motivation), and despair (Leider, 2015).

An organization could use this knowledge to improve relationships with millennial workers, as the act of eliciting meaning at work has been associated with: greater organizational commitment (Duffy, Allan, Autin, & Bott, 2013; Filstad, 2010; Markow & Klenke, 2005; McCarthy, 2008); positive direction of change (Anderson, 2005; Burger et al., 2012; Love & Cebon, 2008); enhanced vision-championing (Raelin, 2006); and improved leadership (de Sousa & van Dierendonck, 2010; Markow & Klenke, 2005). Applying the study of meaning in work to the millennial generation may provide information on how leaders can enhance efforts to develop and retain members of this generation in their workforce. Increased understanding of the millennial worker’s experience of meaning in work requires further study in order to enhance the relationships between millennials and their organizations.

# Research Question

The primary Research Question is: What is the experience of meaning in work for millennials?

# Definition of Terms

The main terms to be defined are “meaning,” “in work,” and “millennials.” Members of the millennial generation were born after 1980 and before 1999 or the mid-2000s (Council of Economic Advisers, 2014; De Hauw & De Vos, 2010; National Chamber Foundation, 2012; Pew Research Center, 2014). Meaning can be defined as “an understanding of the connections and purpose of an activity” (Vuori et al., 2012, p. 233), as well as “the output of having made sense of something, or what it signifies; as in an individual interpreting what her work means, or the role her work plays, in the context of her life” (Rosso et al., 2010, p.94). “Meaning in work” can be defined as the individual’s personal application of his or her self to work in the construal of meaning (Ethical Business Building the Future [EBBF], 2014). Finding meaning in work indicates that the individual is able to apply his or her sense of purpose, value, efficacy, and self-worth based on the interpretation of cues from the work, with the ideal goal being to find a sense of personal satisfaction and fulfillment through reaction to the assigned meaning (de Sousa & van Dierendonck, 2010; Markow & Klenke, 2005; Rosso et al., 2010; Steger et al., 2008). With this, the overall purpose of this dissertation is to use qualitative inquiry to explore how millennials experience meaning based on their personal search within their organizational context, or “in work.” The research methodology has been chosen specifically to address this phenomenon from an individual and experiential perspective.

# Research Design

“A primary purpose of qualitative research is to describe and clarify experience as it is lived and constituted in awareness” (Polkinghorne, 2005, p. 138). Moustakas’ (1990) heuristic phenomenology has been used for this dissertation’s qualitative research. Heuristics honors the subjective experience as a valid method to understand phenomena, through bringing out the co-researcher’s (see below) tacit awareness of a shared experience, often in search for the meaning behind it (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985; Sela-Smith, 2002). Through this process, the interviewee is known as the co-researcher and assigns his or her own meaning to an experience through the conscious and subliminal processing of tacit knowledge (Moustakas, 1990). Heuristics is also applicable because the primary researcher and co-researchers all have birth dates which allow them to be defined as millennials. The use of heuristics is a good fit for the question being asked because it invites co-researchers to be part of the research process, and evidence supports that millennials are highly receptive to collaboration (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010). Heuristics was chosen for its emphasis on meaning, collaboration, and shared experience. However, its resultant findings co-exist with assumptions and limitations which shape how the interpretations have been made.

# Assumptions and Limitations

Assumptions and limitations are recognized as natural occurrences in research, with this dissertation being no exception. The basis of this dissertation operates on preconceived notions or assumptions about meaning in work and generational functioning. Like with any research, there are limitations on what the study can do and how it can be designed for optimal data collection. These issues are discussed in the following paragraphs**.**

## 

## Assumptions

Assumptions must be made in order to perform the research; specifically: general methodological assumptions, theoretical assumptions, and topic-specific assumptions. These assumptions form the foundations upon which the research is built, but also serve as points for critical thinking in determining how the research should be performed and interpreted. Each type of assumption has been carefully reviewed and described as follows:

Regarding qualitative heuristic methodology and its inherent assumptions, the personal human experience has been seen as a tool for understanding subjective, value-laden phenomena, and it is given merit in the assumption that there are some avenues of research in which researcher neutrality cannot exist (Brisola & Cury, 2016). When approached with scientific rigor, subjectivity can hold as a valid means to comprehend reality. In this way, it is acknowledged that there are multiple realities amongst co-researchers, especially for a study on how an individual applies a personal sense of meaning to a context. This epistemology is considered contextual constructionism and is based on the belief that there are multiple realities amongst individuals, and that knowledge is dynamic based on a person’s changing circumstances (Madill, Jordan, & Shirley, 2000). Yet, there are still underlying commonalities. Communications and relationships may shape the way that a person experiences meaning in work (Rosso et al., 2010), and the interviewer and interviewee are dependent on one another because their cognitive appraisal and discussion of the topic, even if one-sided, could therefore serve as a catalyst in shifting any individual perspective. Of course, this comes with the common idea that primary and co-researchers still hold personal bias. A primary researcher attempts to understand how the sense of self must remain separated from the other co-researchers in order to offer a scholarly interpretation of findings, as the same beliefs can co-exist when researching the internal human condition (Moustakas, 1990). The end goal is not to come to generalizations or evidence of causality, but to “produce a description that contains the usual structural dimensions of the experience” (Polkinghorne, 2005, p. 141). Knowing that individuals share similarities between their unique experiences of a phenomenon, a theoretical framework may be applied to further shape the assumptions made about the structural dimensions of the experience.

This heuristic study would offer a theoretical contribution based on its assumption that theoretical value can be obtained from studying someone’s experiences. Additionally, its merit is based on the idea that shared experiences exist in phenomena, and that shared experiences can be catalogued for building theory (Moustakas, 1990). Historically, qualitative analysis has developed as a complement to quantitative research for the sake of hypothesis formation, contribution to theory, and serving as a theoretical foundation through its own right (Carrerra-Fernandez, Guardia-Olmos, & Pero-Cebollero, 2012; Hergenhahn & Henley, 2014). It offers a wide array of modalities for studying textual data of the human experience, whereas quantitative data utilizes a predefined theory as a perspective through which to view the research problem (Creswell, 2013). The current theoretical assumption is that this research would contribute to supporting or refuting evidence regarding meaning in work and the millennial population. This ties into the assumptions made about these topics.

Topic-specific assumptions will impact methodological stance, subject matter conceptions, and data collection choices. Heuristics in qualitative research developed as a response to positivist thinking by embracing the constructivist idea that knowledge continually changes with experience, fed by feeling and meaning, to eternally conceive the internal psyche of every person (Sela-Smith, 2002). The chosen stance for this dissertation is constructivist, which is a significant factor when reviewing previous subject matter on millennials and meaning in work (see Chapter 2). Researchers contend that there are internal and external interactions which fabricate the sense of meaning in work for a person (Rosso et al., 2010), and that individuals respond to these perceptions of meaning in work (Vuori et al., 2012).

There are major assumptions in the theoretical literature which contribute to this dissertation. Meaning can be experienced through the act of work (Frankl, 2006), and organizations serve as a place for individuals to overcome existential fears related to meaninglessness (Blomme & Lintelo, 2012). However, each person has different needs and expectations–especially when separated by a cultural notion such as age group. When it comes to millennials, researchers have offered support for varying amounts of differences between this generation and others (e.g., Kowske et al., 2010; Smola & Sutton, 2002; Twenge, 2010; Wong et al., 2008), which could plausibly be explained by developmental stages (Deal et al., 2010) or the social, economic, and cultural environment (De Hauw & De Vos, 2010; DeVaney, 2015; Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010). The worker finds meaning in work and responds to it in a way that could change his or her perception of meaning, based on the interactions within and between the self and the environment (Rosso et al., 2010). The millennial has these foundational differences from someone of another generation because of the feedback from the interactions within and between the self and the environment. The millennial would presumably experience meaning in work differently than someone from a different generation. Therefore, data collection would be designed to investigate the contextual awareness of meaning in work from individuals belonging to the millennial population through the use of in-depth interviews aimed at eliciting tacit knowledge relevant to these assumptions. Although these assumptions are based on research with scholarly backing, there are limitations to this study due to the nature of the research design itself.

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## Limitations

The qualitative heuristic research methodology holds limitations which have been carefully considered in this dissertation. Heuristics seeks to generalize its findings from the specific, shared portrait of experiences of the co-researchers, but there is a greater focus on how internal processes such as intuition, tacit knowledge, indwelling, and focusing allow the researcher to use his or her mind as a processing tool of the shared experiences (Moustakas, 1990). The researcher is not only viewed as part of the research itself, but is expected to have a deep, passionate interest for the subject matter. However, if not careful, the study could be compromised through the researcher’s bias and the way that personal experiences shape the ability to communicate the experiences of the co-researchers. There is already a conflict with the requirement for factual accuracy in Maxwell’s (1996) explanation of validity, as the co-researchers may remember experiences in a way that do not match the reality of others who had had similar experiences. This may lead to pitfalls in linking the qualitative research to the theory-building process (Bendassolli, 2013). Consequently, the researcher would need to choose what could be extrapolated to theory without generalizing in a way that invalidates the merit and validity of the study. Furthermore, the specific design of the research itself would also lend to the limitations of the study.

The research design of the study itself would also have limitations and flaws, based on its inability to completely encompass the phenomenon. A very overt flaw in this study of the experience of meaning in work for millennials is its sample. The sample size should be large enough to address the research question (Marshall, 1996). The sample in this study will be composed of co-researchers who fit within the millennial age group and have 3 or more years of work experience. Since the millennial population is a very broad category, it was not feasible to conduct a qualitative study with a large enough sample size to properly represent this generation. Therefore, results need to be communicated with this limitation in mind for the study to maintain credibility (Barczak, 2015). However, this dissertation till maintains acceptable standards for rigorous sample selection in qualitative research, with the understanding that it cannot represent an entire population nor return findings which are typical of quantitative studies (see Chapter 3).

Finally, the main delimitation for this study is that causality and relationships are not studied. In quantitative research, the deductive approach is used, in which a researcher applies theory to an area of interest, develops a hypothesis, and tests for a constant such as causality or relationship; in qualitative research, the researcher observes facets of a phenomenon in order to inductively discover patterns for theory creation or contribution (Barczak, 2015). Quantitative research generates numerical data, whereas qualitative research explores a social and psychological experience through the eyes of people (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015). Thus, this dissertation research does not study statistical probability, but instead explores the experiences of the co-researchers as they pertain to their generation and their work meanings.

# Organization of the Remainder of the Study

Chapter 1 serves as an introduction to the study. The background of the study, need for the study, purpose of the study, and significance of the study were explained as justification of its scientific merit. The research question was presented and its terms defined. The research methodology and design were briefly described before the discussion of the general methodological assumptions, theoretical assumptions, topic-specific assumptions, design flaw limitations, and delimitations which are present in this design. In the following Chapter 2, the literature review will explore current literature relevant to the research topic and synthesize the findings found in this research. This includes a comprehensive review of literature related to meaning in work, as well as articles on millennials which relate to meaning in work. In the methodology chapter, Chapter 3, there is a description of how the research was performed. The data and its analysis are then presented in the subsequent chapter, Chapter 4. The final chapter, Chapter 5, offers discussion, implications, and recommendations related to the research.

**CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

In preparation for this dissertation, multiple sources of information were studied and evaluated in a comprehensive literature review on the concept of meaning in work, as well as in regard to the millennial population. Because work on the millennial population has covered multiple fields, ideas, and concepts, focusing solely on a literature review of the millennial population would be cumbersome and would detract from the purpose of this research. Instead, literature on the millennial population was narrowed down to research which combined with tenets found in “meaning in work” literature. This allowed for a synthesis to be developed, showing where meaning in work literature has intersected with findings about millennials in work. A critique of the research methods used in the literature was also performed for transparent conveying of the data. The literature, along with an understanding of its limitations, has served as a foundation for framing the results of this research.

# Methods of Searching

Online databases were mined for scholarly, peer-reviewed articles that were relevant to the study of meaning in work for millennials. The PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, and ProQuest Psychology Journals were searched using the keywords “millennials” and “meaning” and “work.” No research was found for meaning in work for millennials, but relevant articles were found which either focused on meaning in work or on the millennial population. When seeking to study how the term “meaning” could be applied to “work,” the alternative terms “calling” and “purpose” were also reviewed for results. Additionally, articles on existentialism and qualitative heuristic methodology were reviewed to develop a theoretical orientation for the study.

# Theoretical Orientation for the Study

In qualitative research, the research methodology serves as a theoretical orientation since it contributes to theory (Bendassolli, 2013). However, because this study holds assumptions derived from existentialism, the theory of existentialism will also be discussed. Qualitative methodology utilizes induction to justify that which is considered known and valid, as long as the study relies on repeated instances of the finding, as well as on the understanding that the socially constructed view of reality found at one point in time or place may not be true in another (Bendassolli, 2013). Because these relative truths lend themselves to assumptions, that which is known is based on the knowledge which came before it.

Qualitative heuristic research is an offshoot of phenomenology and was developed by Moustakas (1990). The word heurism refers to a way of thinking and exploring related to understanding the discovery process (Kenny, 2012). Mindfulness is an integral part of heurism in that the discoverer must maintain an awareness of his or her experience in the given phenomenon (Powietrzynska, Tobin, & Alexakos, 2015). In Moustakas’s (1990) process, the researcher is very familiar with a phenomenon which occurs on an internal level. The heuristic approach acknowledges the researcher as part of the study, based on the understanding that the researcher is part of the phenomenon because of his or her experience (Brisola & Cury, 2016). The participants are therefore called “co-researchers” because their awareness of their experience is vital to understanding it. This method does not explicitly focus on generalization other than contributing to theory development. There is a greater focus on how tacit knowledge, intuition, indwelling, and focusing in relation to the data will allow the researcher to inductively produce valid descriptions of shared experiences (Moustakas, 1990; Powietrzynska et al., 2015). Steeped in the inner world of the person, heuristics focuses on the internal experiences that offer greater understanding of others. It allows for consumers of research to understand more about how something is experienced by others. In this way, personal experience becomes the tool for understanding subjective reality, and the mind is the processor of experiential data. Still, the mind can be influenced by assumptions about the world.

There are often major theoretical underpinnings about the nature of people, especially related to what people want, expect, and pursue. Several authors (e.g., Burger et al., 2013; Blomme & Lintelo, 2012; Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012; Macmillan, 2009; Rosso et al., 2010) have directly applied existentialist theory to understanding the phenomenon of meaning in work. The act of work has been determined as a vital source of meaning for people and can be something that helps them maintain a sense of purpose (Frankl, 2006). That purpose can be associated with a goal, a spiritual calling, or one’s expression of values (Leider, 2015). It is especially relevant to meaning in work, in which the workers seek meaning by applying their talents, expressing virtues, developing aspects of identity, and finding belonging with others (EBBF, 2014). Work, and the organization itself, presents workers with a means to mitigate their own existential fears of meaninglessness and isolation (Blomme & Lintelo, 2012). Meaninglessness can lead to burnout and detachment in work (Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012). Workers may seek to exert control over their environment or surrender control to overcome these fears and to instead find purpose, thus driving behavior directly related to the experience of meaning in work (Rosso et al., 2010). Additionally, existentialism as a psychological theory fits well with heuristic phenomenology due to the latter’s intense focus on meaning, as well as much of its foundation being steeped in existentialist ideas (Kenny, 2012).

The theoretical orientation of heuristic phenomenology provides a foundation on which to examine individual, yet shared, experiences which contribute to theory, whereas the use of existentialism is pertinent to properly encompassing the abstract concept of meaning. Meaning in work is to be explored in this dissertation through both the heuristic approach and existential assumptions. This basis will be used throughout the study, including the literature review.

# Review of the Literature

As previously noted, there was research on meaning in work and research on millennials, but none was found for the experience of meaning in work for millennials. Research on meaning in work and research on millennials will be reviewed separately, but then the findings of this collected research will be synthesized. The concept of meaning in work will be reviewed first because it offers the foundation for understanding what is currently known about what contributes to the experience of meaning in work; studies on millennials will come afterwards because these studies were deliberately chosen to align with the meaning in work literature.

**Meaning in Work**

Meaning in work can be defined as making sense or significance of an aspect of work (Rosso et al., 2010). The question, “Why am I here?” arises within the workers’ personal quest to understand the meaning behind a job task or goal and why they are pursuing it (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). Marjo Lips-Wiersma, who is considered a leading scholar on the idea of meaning applied to work, explained that the current research on meaning in work has focused on how the general search for personal meaning can manifest through the act of work (EBBF, 2014). In an existential framework, meaningless work can take an emotional and physical toll on the worker, as well as taking away from the organization through that person’s decreased ability to invest in the work itself (May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004). Understanding the “why” behind a task or goal can serve as a powerful motivational force (Latham, 2012; Leider, 2015). Meaning can manifest positively as purpose (Leider, 2015) or calling (Markow & Klenke, 2005). There are also implications for the idea that meaning in work will impact an individual’s experience and perception of meaning in life (Steger & Dik, 2009). Much research has been devoted to understanding the role of meaning in work.

**Overview of meaning in work.** There has been growing empirical evidence which has led to a greater understanding of meaning in work: It has been viewed as a multi-faceted concept which encompasses multiple levels of a person’s needs within the realm of doing a task or job (Lee, 2015). Originally, the concept of meaning in work has held spiritual overtones which have been extracted from religious origins to become accepted in the everyday secular (Weber, 1904). Rosso et al. (2010) reviewed meaning in work literature as far back as Weber (1904) and Whyte (1956), who posited that work offers a sense of personal identity and authenticity through its culmination of deeper meaning. Themes found in Rosso et al.’s (2010) review provided valuable groundwork for understanding how personal meaning coalesces into something that a worker can experience. These themes centered around the idea that there were several sources of meaning in work, and that personal, life, and organizational contexts influenced their manifestations. According to what was found, meaning in work is sourced internally and externally in relation to a person. Internally, the authors found that the individual’s values, motivation, and beliefs are intrinsic to the personal perception of meaning. Spirituality and callings were also noted as important factors for the experience of meaning in work. Externally, they listed the importance of relationships such as with coworkers, leaders, groups, communities, and family. Environmental contexts were listed as design of job tasks, organizational mission, financial circumstances, non-work domains, and national culture (Rosso et al., 2010, p. 92). These themes were seen as the influences which lead a worker to develop positive or negative meaning in an experience. Continued research has not only elaborated on the origin of meaning in work, but on understanding how it manifests in a complex system.

The concept of meaning in work has continued to be considered ambiguously defined. Lee (2015) performed a concept analysis to help further clarification, and found four main themes of how meaning in work is understood. The four main themes were: “Experienced positive emotion at work; meaning from work itself; meaningful purpose and goals of work; and work as a part of life that contributes toward meaningful existence” (p. 2259). In contradiction to the part about the experience of positive emotion and meaningfulness at work, Rosso et al. (2010) separated meaningfulness in work from meaning in work, indicated that “meaningfulness” was a measure of the worker’s positive experiences in work, whereas “meaning” indicated that the worker would have positive and negative experiences in work. Studies have shown that while positive meaning in work can have positive outcomes for employees (Vuori et al., 2012), the act of understanding the meaning behind something can lend to the sustainability of the organization (Burger et al., 2012).

Although Rosso et al. (2010) offered that purpose and goals were vital to the experience of meaning in work, as Lee (2015) did, the focus on Lee’s (2015) latter statement, that meaning in work could be defined as a means through which a person finds meaning in life, aligned with current I/O psychology literature regarding how meaning in work is viewed (Blomme & Lintelo, 2012; EBBF, 2014; Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012). Meaning in work can be linked to purpose (Lee, 2015), and individuals continually seek to fill an existential void for the sake of personal fulfillment via applying one’s goals, passions, and abilities for something that will yield rewards related to improved health and greater personal satisfaction (Leider, 2015). Lee (2015) also acknowledged that meaning in work has been recognized as an existential concept.

**Existential basis** **for meaning in work**. Based on Frankl’s (1952/2006) existentialist logotherapy, Burger et al. (2012) explored how employees experience meaning in work in the context of organizational change. Logotherapy (Frankl, 1952/2006) was described as the recognition that meaning is important for improving quality of life, which consequently resulted in a helper’s or leader’s pursuit of guiding others to find that sense of meaning. Burger et al. (2012) argued that their proposed Logo-OD model would help workers embrace deliberate organizational change. Their chosen research strategy was a literature review for the sake of finding themes related to logotherapy, meaning in work, and positive organizational change, in order to contribute to theoretical development. Findings indicated that recruitment, selection, and socialization tactics of the organization were at the core since the worker-environment fit has been recognized as crucial, but that aligning values and cultures between the employees and organization lead to positive perceptions of meaning in work. Practically, they explained that this could take the form of redesigning jobs to match expectations, activating leaders’ purpose-driven role in the culture and representation of employees, involving employees in decisions, and nurturing callings.

The act of finding meaning in the work itself (as opposed to simply through one’s own personal application to work) and the opportunity for the work to offer transcendence to workers were also found to convey a holistic means of helping workers existentially adapt to organizationally driven changes. These positive organizational contexts would theoretically allow for the changes to be reframed in a positive way. The main limitation of this study was that it had no empirical evidence, yet it laid groundwork for understanding the importance of meaning in work: Workers can find transcendence, belonging, purpose, and the ability to adapt and develop positively with the organization through meaning in work, which in turn allows for the organization to flourish. Other studies have been conducted which offer support for the notion that existentialism can be successfully applied to a complex system of people for organizational purposes, as described below.

Sense-making theory will be introduced here because its application to meaning in work has been appraised as a way to understand how workers create meaning in their environment (Weick, 1995; Vuori, San, & Kira, 2012), and Blomme and Lintelo (2012) tied it into existentialist theory for a better understanding of how sense-making manifests for workers. Sense-making theory was developed by Karl Weick (1995) to better understand organizational behavior. It holds seven main tenets: each person makes sense of something uniquely based on the group or context they are in; retrospectively assessing a process can determine whether it was a success or failure and allows the past to appear more clear than the present or future; people hold a dynamic relationship with their environment, both influencing it and being influenced by it; sense-making depends on how others act and react in an organization; sense-making is always occurring; people will notice specific cues in their environment based on personal filters and use these to determine the meaning of something; people are more likely to act on plausible information (Weick, 1995) than to continue a search for accurate information.

Blomme & Lintelo’s (2012) review of the literature on sense-making theory and complexity theory was an exploration of how the organization is viewed as a dynamic system with non-linear interactions. Although no mentions of complexity theory were found in the literature review of meaning in work, the above authors outlined the importance of complexity theory in recognizing an organization as “non-linear dynamic systems whose behavior can be unpredictable,” depending on the positive and negative feedback loops which occur over time (p. 406). If an organization has reached a state of instability, it also holds the ability to self-organize into new structures. The above authors explained that, per their literature review, this phenomenon has been driven by social systems in which individuals extract cues from the environment and act accordingly based on the feedback which they perceive.

In sense-making theory, equivocality is known as the process through which workers interpret this feedback to create meaning and experience, which can be either viewed as entropic chaos or a leader’s opportunity to breed adaptation and positive change in the organization. Existentialism was applied to this understanding, based on Blomme and Lintelo’s (2012) argument that workers have actively sought to fight against meaninglessness in an organizational system, instead pursuing freedom to make consequence-laden choices while grappling with fears of change and isolation. Both Blomme and Lintelo’s (2012) and Burger et al.’s (2012) articles focus on change within the organization, yet the former is about natural, inherent change and the latter relates to deliberate, purposeful change. Like Burger et al. (2012), Blomme and Lintelo (2012) also invoked Frankl’s (2006) philosophical assumptions related to meaning, in that meaning comes from: what is given to others; what is experienced; and the acceptance of suffering or fate as a part of life. However, existential fears and anxieties manifest for the individual within the organization as: death, seeing life as holding finality rather than transmutability to continue and change; freedom to make choices for which one is responsible for the sake of becoming authentic; dealing with the isolation which can ensue when a person is in control of his or her life; and fighting off meaninglessness for the sake of finding purpose, satisfaction, and personal growth (Blomme & Lintelo, 2012). These factors drive the pursuit and experience of meaning, and the organizational setting offers a medium by which to do so. Relative to this dissertation, it can be surmised that the individual would receive feedback from his or her organizational environment, while simultaneously offering inputs into the environment, and would create meaning from this relationship, which lends to structuring their experience of meaning in work.

**Change and Meaning in Work**. Whereas Burger et al. (2010) applied existentialist logotherapy as a potential means to positively effect organizational change through giving attention to employees’ sense of meaning, van den Heuvel, Demerouti, Bakker, and Schaufeli (2013) performed a longitudinal study to explore how meaning in work has contributed

to employee adaptation to change. Like Burger et al. (2010), van den Heuvel et al. (2013) recognized from change literature that injecting meaning into change can help employees make productive adjustments throughout the change. More specifically, they argued that employees’ efforts to create meaning in work would indicate psychological resourcefulness that helps them adapt to challenges in work. However, one difference from the Burger et al. (2010) study would be that the van den Heuvel et al. (2013) study used the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory to argue that employees fear change because it could represent a loss of something that is important to them in the workplace and may have implications for other parts of their lives. It was determined that information about the change was considered a contextual resource, whereas meaning-making was a personal resource.

The implications for this study are that helping employees maintain motivation and personal health in times of change would benefit the organization. Van den Heuvel at al. (2013) noted that prior research in this area had focused on the macro view of change, and research therefore needed to be done on investigating the micro view of change. More specifically, they studied the micro-level employee perceptions of change rather than the change event itself. Using a police district which was undergoing reorganization at the time of the study as their bounded system, the authors hypothesized that meaning-making, adaptive attitudes, and adaptive behavior would be related to information that employees receive about the change, and that “meaning-making is positively related to (a) adaptive attitudes, and (b) adaptive behavior over time” (van den Heuvel et al., 2013, p. 14). Using a Likert scale, van den Heuvel et al. (2013) assessed perceptions of the change and adaptive attitudes and behaviors. In a longitudinal cross-lagged panel design, measurements were taken at three different times utilizing three waves in the change-making process. The researchers were able to determine that there was evidence that providing employees with information while change was being carried out would help with adaptive attitudes later in time, and that meaning in work during the change predicted more adaptive attitudes toward change after the change. Additionally, in van den Heuvel et al.’s (2013) study, meaning in work before and during the change also predicted adaptive behavior, and was the link between information being delivered to employees before the change and their ability to engage in adaptive behavior after the change. Aside from establishing the importance of meaning in work, this study helped illustrated the importance of the meaning-making processes in work.

**Meaning-making in work.** Researchers such as Lips-Wiersma and Wright (2012), Vuori, et al. (2012), and Burger et al. (2012) applied the concept of meaning-making to work by exploring the idea that the worker responds to external stimuli in the environment through activating internal goals, need, and drives. Park (2010) performed a literature review about the act of meaning-making itself to form a comprehensive understanding of meaning. Although Park (2010) did not focus on meaning in work, her article is relevant to how meaning is formed through experience. Based on the literature, this author argued that a person’s global meaning is made up of personal beliefs, goals, and a sense of purpose. This global meaning could theoretically be applied to any event which required the application of meaning within a specific situation. Multiple levels of processing would occur: The person would then theoretically engage in both unconscious and deliberate processes to make sense or meaning of the event, especially when there would be a discrepancy between the meaning behind the event and the person’s global meaning. As a result, the person may: change global or situational beliefs; seek understanding or seek significance; and use various degrees of cognitive and/or emotional processing. The desired outcome is a sense of clarity behind the event or phenomena so that the person can accept it and adapt for the sake of continued personal development. Park (2010) argued that this could impact how someone perceives meaning in life. The literature on meaning in life can tie into meaning in work (Allan, Duffy, & Douglass, 2015), although there is much more research on life meaning than there is on work meaning.

To further an understanding of meaning in work, researchers have focused on the dynamic relationship between the worker and the organizational environment. As an elaboration on Weick’s (1995) sense-making theory, Vuori et al. (2012) engaged in qualitative research to develop their own model on how workers have actively created positive meaning in work. The tenets of sense-making theory, that individuals influence and are influenced by their organizational environment in their attempts to assign meaning to it, were used as the foundation for Vuori et al.’s (2012) model of meaningfulness at work.

The main assumption of Vuori et al.’s (2012) study was the idea that cues in the organizational environment would be interpreted by workers in a way that affects the workers’ perception of meaningfulness in work and their subsequent actions. The cues may be positive or negative and, as posited by Weick (1995), would lead the worker to actively seek a sense of control over a given situation. Built upon prior empirical evidence about the importance of job crafting, the goal of Vuori et al.’s (2012) study therefore was to understand how individuals may seek to create meaning in their work. Their qualitative study utilized interviews with individuals between the ages of 25 and 45 years old who identified as pharmaceutical sales representatives, researchers, or human resource (HR) professionals. These professions were reportedly chosen due to their differences hypothetically providing a variety of differences which would lend themselves to the validity of the research. Whereas their data collection technique came from Yin’s (2003) case study methodology, their data analysis and model-building were styled in the tradition of grounded theory per Strauss and Corbin (1998). The results were shared with colleagues, interviewees, and interviewees’ co-workers for the purpose of trustworthiness, as they used their feedback in the refinement process. However, with the ethical concern about co-workers’ potentiality to guess the identities of the interviewees, there is the possibility that the interviewees may have had reluctance to share more intimate thoughts. In fact, Vuori et al.’s (2012) findings operated on the premise that workers would seek positive routes to create positive meaning, even when there was a negative interpretation of cues in the organizational environment.

Even though this study focused on the creation of positive meaning, its assumptions may be found to contradict evidence from other studies which have indicated that individuals could engage in negative decision-making behaviors as a coping mechanism to work-related challenges (Fioretti & Lomi, 2010), and could develop self-defeating behaviors as a personal response to self-esteem threats, self-regulatory breakdowns, and emotional distress (Baumeister, 1997). Still, Vuori et al. (2012) acknowledged that meaningfulness, or the lack thereof, was a subjective experience with multiple shared patterns. Results indicated that being part of something greater than the self and experiencing intrinsic rewards were the two dimensions responsible for how positive meaning was created. Their findings matched with job crafting and sense-making ideas: Employees would positively reframe the nature of their work, develop self-efficacy, and attempt to change work and task content as active ways to create positive meaning in work. Practical implications included how this study could be applied to the workplace to allow facilitation of greater meaningfulness in work for workers, but limitations included the notion that personal details of the interviewees could have influenced their meaning-creation behaviors, especially with the understanding that different people will have different techniques and ideas for how to enhance positive meaning in work. The authors also contacted individuals who presumably had not experienced burn-out, and the study did not bring long-term consequences into consideration. It was noted that these limitations would be especially relevant in the context of how workers will hold vastly different expectations for their work and their organizations. Even though the study was described as a general contribution to sense-making theory, it offered scientific merit in its unique contribution to the topic of meaning in work.

Although Vuori et al.’s (2012) study relied on sense-making as a foundational theory for understanding the creation of positive meaning in work, Blomme and Lintelo (2012) explained how Weick’s (1995) sense-making theory and complexity theory could be enhanced by existentialism to achieve a more holistic view of an organization. By conducting a literature review, Blomme and Lintelo (2012) argued that the existentialist tenets of death, meaninglessness, freedom, and isolation are aligned with sense-making’s concept of equivocality within a complex system. Organizations are recognized as dynamic, non-linear systems fed through feedback loops which manifest via behavioral patterns by workers, and this can lead to order or disorder (Kogetsidis, 2011). A complex system is not viewed as a chaotic mess, but rather a petri dish of abundant possibilities for organizational evolution (Weick, 1995). There are many routes an organization can go in, depending on which way it is steered by leaders and followers.

**Measuring the individual experience of meaning in work.** With acknowledgement that existential factors influence how workers experience meaning in work, Lips-Wiersma and Wright (2012) developed and tested the comprehensive meaningful work scale (CMWS) within the context of the existential reaction to meaninglessness in work. Although meaningful work scales had already been developed, the authors argued that these prior measures were imprecise, not comprehensive, that they confused individual perceptions of meaningfulness with organizational indications of it, and that they did not encapsulate the concept of wholeness. Therefore, per Lips-Wiersma and Wright (2012), prior research on meaning in work, such as by Arnold, Turner, Kelloway, & McKee (2007) or Rafferty and Restubog (2011), showed the importance of meaning in work but did not truly convey the experience of it. Whereas several authors (e.g., Arnold et al.,2007; Bennis & Thomas, 2002; Markow & Klenke, 2005; Rafferty & Restubog, 2011) have addressed meaning in work from the perspective of the leader’s authority and responsibility, Lips-Wiersma and Wright (2012) addressed it at the individual level.

Individuals are likely to weigh the value of their work goal or purpose by their own expectations or interests (May et al., 2004). There may be antecedents or outcomes to the experience of meaningful work, as Lips-Wiersma and Wright (2012) explained, but these associated phenomena need to be separated from the experience of the person in order to truly understand what constitutes meaningful work. These phenomena were identified as: calling, intrinsic motivation, work engagement, and congruent work values (p. 662). This rings especially true with Lips-Wiersma and Wright’s (2012) acknowledgement that work is a part of one’s life, and therefore a part of one’s search for existential wholeness. The authors began their study with qualitative foundations, but tested its validity through quantitative means. They first used a psychobiographical study through the use of journals for daily perceptions of meaningful work, coupled with action research in a 214-participant workshop. These methods divulged themes which they were able to express using a dimensional model: With the concept of inspiration at its core, four concepts were diagrammed among two dual dimensions. These concepts were: developing and becoming the self; finding unity with others; engaging in service to others; and expressing full potential (p. 660). The dichotomous balancing points were around “being” versus “doing,” and “self” versus “others.” The concept of inspiration was also found to be in contrast with the reality regarding what people choose: Existentially, the person is responsible for the reality which he or she chooses (Blomme & Lintelo, 2012). There may be intrinsic motivators at work, but the person must also accept that which exists in the current state and time.

With these themes in place, Lips-Wiersma and Wright (2012) used the qualitative data to guide and develop a 91-item scale to measure meaningful work. After being reviewed by subject matter experts on meaningful work, the scale was reduced to 71 items. A pilot study was used to collect data on a 1 to 5 Likert-type scale with the intent to measure employees’ perceptions of importance and frequency of experiencing the items in the workplace. Their participants represented a wide array of occupational backgrounds, age groups, and educational levels, although the majority were female with European origins. Forty items were identified as relative to the authors’ proposed understanding of meaningful work; an exploratory analysis on these remaining items resulted in a final 28 items grouped under the four themes and two dichotomous domains, which they grouped into six main factors. Further quantitative research was used to continue enhancing the scale.

To examine the convergent and divergent validity of the developing Comprehensive Meaningful Work Scale (CMWS), Lips-Wiersma and Wright (2012) engaged in two more quantitative studies. They pulled responses from a professional respondent base which was larger than the prior sample size but still pulled in a mostly diverse group, with the exception of fewer blue-collar/unskilled workers than the authors professed they would have liked. There was also greater diversity among gender and racial backgrounds. Between returning to the subject matter experts and performing another exploratory factor analysis, the researchers ended with a seven factor, 30 item scale. The scores from this scale were compared against scores taken from participants also completing seven other instruments related to phenomena associated with meaning in work, which the researchers wished to identify as being separate from the individual experience of meaning in work (Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012). They tested their hypotheses about this differentiation and found statistically significant results to support their statements that the individual experience of meaning in work was related to positive and negative outcomes and antecedents in the workplace, but that these phenomena were not the same as the individual’s perception of meaning in work. Their confirmatory factor analysis confirmed acceptable ratings of internal consistency and test-retest reliability. The CMWS not only measured the individual’s experience of meaningful work, but its linkage to positive and negative phenomena in the workplace.

**Phenomena associated with meaning in work.** The experience of meaning in work co-exists with the antecedents and outcomes which result from the dynamic relationship between the person and the organizational environment. Lips-Wiersma and Wright’s (2012) study identified several phenomena (antecedents and outcomes) that were associated with positive meaning in work: calling, intrinsic motivation, work engagement, and congruent work values. Conversely, they found evidence that burnout and inauthenticity had been existentially linked to negative meaning in work. Each of these associated phenomena is important to consider when investigating the experience of meaning in work.

**Leadership.** Research has been conducted to better understand calling, purpose, and meaning in work. Adams (2012) linked calling with purpose and meaning in work by arguing that individuals are seeking “a sense of purpose and meaning in their work” which can be obtained through pursuit of a calling (p. 65). Meaning in work may have served as a partial mediation between transformational leadership and work engagement, but especially “transformational leadership creates meaning in work that followers do… and that meaning in work also predicts work engagement” (Ghadi, Fernando, & Caputi, 2013, p. 545). Leadership plays a strong role in how employees experience meaning in work and its associated benefits, which would be valuable to explore when focusing on millennial employees. The concept of a calling has transitioned from the religious to the spiritual to the secular, which Markow and Klenke (2005) noted in their study on the relationship between calling, meaning in work, and organizational commitment. They defined calling as being composed of intuitive awareness about having a calling, knowing it serves others, feeling a sense of value and transcendence from it, and being on the correct path for that calling. It is different from a job, in which a task is done only for financial return.

Unlike Lips-Wiersma and Wright’s (2012) instrument development study, Markow and Klenke (2005) maintained a focus on the role of leadership in their literature review, specifically the impact of spiritual leadership. However, their study hypothesized that the individual’s sense of “personal meaning derived from self-transcendence” would be positively related to calling and negatively related to seeing work only as a job (p. 13). They also hypothesized that calling would mediate the relationship between meaning and organizational commitment. Their sample was from undergraduate students at a religious university, and they used the Personal Meaning Profile (Wong, 1998), the calling-career-job construct (Baumeister, 1991), and the Organizational Commitment Questionnaire (Mowday, Steers, & Porter, 1979) to measure participant responses. Their analysis obtained statistical significance for the correlation between calling and meaning-transcendence. Their regression analysis supported their hypothesis that calling mediated the relationship between meaning and work commitment while offering significance for the negative relationship between meaning-transcendence and organizational commitment when work-as-a-job was tested as the mediator. Considering these results, Markow and Klenke (20005) called for greater investigation into different types of organizational commitment and specific sources of personal meaning, noting limitations in the sampling strategy and self-report questionnaires. More recent research has reinforced these findings.

Still viewing employee meaning-in-work from a leadership perspective, de Sousa and van Dierendonck (2010) developed a model to understand the relationship between knowledge workers, meaning in work, complex organizational systems, and servant leadership. Like Blomme and Lintelo (2012) and Weick (1995), de Sousa and van Dierendonck (2010) focused on the aspect of individual meaning within a complex system, specifically how the system may move towards self-organization with meaning as a vital force for the worker experience of meaning. In this context, the individual was seen as dynamically connected to the organization through meaning, but that this connection can be impacted by leadership and the type of work that the employee performs. With this in mind, de Sousa and van Dierendonck’s (2010) model incorporated “meaning, servant leadership, complex adaptive behavior, organizational performance and social performance,” (pp. 237-238). This model posits that knowledge workers actively search for meaning (like in Vuori et al.’s above 2012 study), often through a calling, and that this can be used to nurture organizational and social performance through the mitigating role of servant leadership. The transformation occurs through the complex adaptive behavior of the system, which encompasses both the individual and the organization as a whole. However, their model was based on a review of the literature. It reinforced Markow and Klenke’s (2005) work, but did not add empirical evidence to the scholarly base.

**Extrinsic and intrinsic values**. Next on Lips-Wiersma and Wright’s (2012) list of phenomena associated with meaning in work, intrinsic motivation was found to be a key component. Specifically related to the topic of meaning in work, Rosso et al. (2010) found that intrinsic motivation has been commonly supported in scholarly literature as an integral part of the experience of meaning in work. Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Gagne & Deci, 2005; Ryan & Deci, 2000) offered a clear delineation between extrinsic motivators and intrinsic ones by portraying these ideas on a spectrum. A spectrum would show two opposite concepts on each far end, with varying degrees of the concepts between them. In the SDT spectrum, intrinsic motivation is on the far right and amotivation (lack of motivation) is on the far left; there are varying degrees of extrinsic motivation which move between intrinsic and amotivation. Gagne and Deci (2005) and Ryan and Deci (2000) explained that a person becomes more motivated as he or she moves closer to something which triggers intrinsic motivational factors. Whereas intrinsic motivation has been recognized as the internal personal enjoyment or satisfaction of engaging in something, extrinsic motivation has been defined as the act of doing something for external rewards (Gagne & Deci, 2005; Ryan & Deci, 2000). The desire to act may come from within oneself (intrinsic) and/or may be influenced by a driving force outside of the self (extrinsic). On one far end of the SDT spectrum of extrinsic motivators, closest to intrinsic motivation, a person’s behavior may be motivated by extrinsic factors which are congruent with their personal goals and values. On the other far end, close to amotivation, it was recognized that a person may do something out of necessity.

Throughout the literature on SDT, it has been argued that intrinsic motivation is the strongest motivator (e.g., Gagne & Deci, 2005), yet Latham (2012) argued that there is strong evidence supporting that financial reward, an extrinsic motivator, could be seen as the superior motivator. However, it is possible that both arguments are made in different contexts (“comparing apples to oranges”), as intrinsic motivation is linked with meaning in work, and financial motivators are linked with being able to afford things which would offer alternative pathways for an individual to find meaning in life. In one view, the worker can perform work about which he or she can be passionate; in the other, the worker pursues rewards that could translate, outside of the organization, into security, enjoyment, or even luxury for a person or a family. This is where meaning in work may intersect with meaning in life.

**Relationship between meaning in life and in work.** Erikson’s (1950) theory of psychosocial development has also been factored into research on meaning in work and in life (Allan et al., 2015). Specifically, this theory posited that individuals may seek to engage in contributing to something greater than the self once they arrive at the stage of generativity, which is estimated to occur between ages 40 and 60, so long as the individuals have successfully completed prior stages (Erikson, 1950). Allan et al. (2015) performed a quantitative study to provide evidence for the relationship between age and the active presence or search for meaning in life, as well as to explore how work meaning could serve as a moderator between age and the presence/search for meaning in life. Their first hypothesis was that individuals would experience lower life meaning between the ages of 25 and 45, but would have higher levels of life meaning after that. Conversely, they hypothesized that the actual search for meaning in life would be high during those earlier years, but would become lower after the age of 45. For their second hypothesis, they argued that work meaning would lead to the experience of higher levels of life meaning, independent of age. Their participants were aged 18 to 67, with a highly diverse array of occupations. The Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ; Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006) and the Work as Meaning Inventory (WAMI; Steger, Dik, & Duffy, 2012) were used to assess participants’ perspectives of meaning in these two contexts. The authors used instruments which were strongly aligned with their theoretical foundation of life and work meaning.

The comprehension of meaning in Allen et al.’s (2015) study originates from work by Steger and colleagues; authors such as Lips-Wiersma and Wright (2012) argued that a lot of meaning in work research has focused on the antecedents and outcomes of meaning in work rather than the actual concepts tied to meaning in work. Steger and colleagues’ approaches often focused on the context of the individual, such as personality (Steger et al., 2008), whereas the work of Lips-Wiersma and Wright (2012) focused on the relationship between the individual and work. Steger et al. (2009) and Steger et al. (2006) differentiated between the search for meaning and the presence of meaning, which is an important factor in this study, and Allan et al. (2015) noted that different studies have used different measures of meaning in life. The results reinforced previous findings from Steger et al.’s (2009) research.

There is evidence that the experience of meaning in work has an impact on the experience of meaning in life. Allan et al.’s (2015) research found no evidence to support their notions gleaned from Erikson’s (1950) theory that the stage of generativity would have a positive relationship with greater presence of meaning in life, but did support the notion that the search for meaning in life would decline with age. Although individuals in their 60s experienced similar levels of life meaning despite differing levels of work meaning, Allen et al.’s (2015) research offered support for the hypothesis that work meaning did serve as a moderator for meaning in life: “Individuals highest in work meaning are the lowest in searching for life meaning” (Allen et al., 2015, p. 329). Their findings indicated that meaning in work has served as a highly important factor in an individual’s experience of meaning in life. This has reportedly occurred regardless of age, until an individual enters a phase of life in which the need for work or the experience of life meaning may change.

Purpose, which has also been associated with meaning in life, factors heavily in well-being (Leider, 2015). In their study on the relationship between purpose and brain stroke related activity, Yu et al. (2015) asserted that purpose in life was heavily associated with meaning in work, especially in being part of a larger organization of people. Participants from the Rush Memory and Aging Project filled a modified 10-item measure from a scale of Psychological Well-being (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). After dissecting the brains of the participants after death, Yu et al. (2015) performed a regression analysis which offered evidence that stronger scores of purpose in life were associated with fewer macroscopic infarcts (brain damage), but there was no significant relationship between purpose in life and microscopic infarcts. A strong sense of purpose in life had also been found to be linked to lower adverse health conditions and outcomes in older individuals (Yu et al., 2015). The authors of this study argued, with the use of prior evidence, that this study was another addition of support for the idea that positive meaning and psychosocial wellness in an organization or community has been linked to positive physiological health outcomes.

In another study which was based on the understanding of meaning as presented by Steger and colleagues (e.g., Steger et al., 2009; Steger et al., 2012), Allan, Douglass, Duffy, and McCarthy (2016) studied how components of meaningful work could moderate how work stress could influence the search and presence of meaning in life. The researchers hypothesized that individuals who are effective and active in their meaning creation per Park’s (2010) meaning making model would show no statistical relationship between work stress and meaning in life, whereas those without the creation of meaning would have a negative relationship between the two factors. Furthermore, they hypothesized that this lack of meaning-creation in work would therefore result in a greater relationship between work stress and the search for meaning in life. Again using Steger et al.’s (2006) Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) and Steger et al.’s (2012) Work as Meaning Inventory (WAMI), in addition to the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS; Cohen, 1988), Allan et al. (2016) performed two hierarchical regressions. The researchers explicitly stated that their work sought to understand how work stress and life meaning were moderated by: feeling that work is personally significant; making sense of the world through work; and contributing to a greater good. Their results indicated that these moderators were not statistically significant regarding the relationship between work stress and the search for meaning in life, but that there was a strong relationship when they served as moderators between work stress and the presence of meaning in life. However, the only statistically significant finding was that the creation of meaning in work served as a moderator between work stress and the presence of meaning in life. From these results, Allan et al. (2016) offered caution for their interpretation but postulated that the search for life meaning is more likely associated with variables outside of work, yet the presence of life meaning would be strongly influenced by the experience of meaning in work. The researchers affirmed that their work supported the prior findings of Park (2010) and Steger et al. (2012) that meaning in work influenced meaning in life.

**Summary of meaning in work literature**. Although there are plenty of articles about meaningful work, articles were chosen for this literature review which specifically align with Lips-Wiersma’s (EBBF, 2012) and Rosso et al.’s (2010) paradigms of meaning in work; specifically, that meaning in work ascribes to an individual’s personal sense of meaning in what he or she does for work. Workers extract cues from their environment to determine meaning (Vuori et al., 2012), which is shaped through the workers’ internal processes and external contexts (Rosso et al., 2010). When reading about the millennial population, scholarly literature often reflects on how their internal processes and external contexts impact how they are understood and defined.

**Millennials**

The impact of historical events and social norms are seen to shape groups of people who were born within a set age group (Wong et al., 2008). Some millennials reportedly express that they have a burning desire to find purpose in the workplace, but that their drive can be quelled when an employer would act in a way which they decipher as imparting negative meaning towards their efforts (McLeod, 2015). There is conflicting evidence regarding generational differences in attitudes at work, in addition to an observance of how the popular press often drives generational stereotypes (Kowske et al., 2010). Whereas some evidence has indicated that millennials do search for work with purpose, fulfillment, and positive meaning (Ng, Schweitzer, & Lyons, 2010), other research indicates that financial rewards may take precedent for them (Leveson & Joiner, 2014; Twenge, 2010; Twenge & Kasser, 2013). Empirical evidence has also revealed that the millennial person is impacted by both generational and contextual/personal circumstances (De Hauw & De Vos, 2010). However, caution should be taken to remember that developmental processes are also at work when analyzing any age group (Wong et al., 2008). Nevertheless, despite the need for more exploration, researchers have embarked on attempting to attain a clearer understanding of what makes the millennial generation different from its predecessors. After reviewing literature on the millennial generation, articles which intersected with the study of meaning in work were included in this section.

**Generational impact on work attitudes.** Building on prior research,Kowske et al. (2010) examined work attitudes of millennials compared to prior generations. More specifically, they performed a hierarchical age-period-cohort (HAPC) regression analysis to examine work attitudes in a manner which would control for confounding variables of personal development and the effects of the historical period. They collected data through the Kenexa WorkTrends employee opinion survey from a diverse sample of employees in the U.S. The first research question (RQ1) sought evidence of generational differences in work attitudes, whereas the second research question (RQ2) was that, if the first research question showed affirmative results, then “how are millennials’ work attitudes different from prior generations?” (Kowske et al., 2010, p. 269). Evidence was found that small generational differences do exist for RQ1. For RQ2, Kowske et al. (2010) reviewed the similarities and the differences in their results. They asserted that their evidence showed similarities in “satisfaction with the work itself, satisfaction with pay, and turnover intentions” (Kowske et al., 2010, p. 275). The differences indicated that when compared to older generations, millennials were more satisfied with: their company and job; job security; recognition; and opportunities to find more desirable jobs and advance in their career.

However, the differences were also found to be small in variance, indicating that these differences were minor despite having statistically significant results. Kowske et al. (2010) looked to historical and generational context as a means to explain these differences, such as the concept of job security possibly defined differently among generations due to industrial changes. The above researchers also noted shifts in HR retention strategies as potentially bolstering millennials’ satisfaction with career development. Kowske et al. (2010) explained their interpretation that millennials’ satisfaction with recognition does not necessarily mean that they may want more recognition, but that it could mean that they are more satisfied than prior generations with the recognition they receive, even if everyone receives the same amount of equal recognition. The authors additionally pointed out that the same type of conflicts have been historically recorded to occur between younger and older generations, as younger generations redefine notions such as that of a “real job.”

**“Get a real job.”** O’Connor and Raile (2015) replicated Clair’s (1996) research on the colloquialism “Get a real job” (p. 276). More specifically, they asked millennials, what is a real job? In this qualitative study, student participants wrote one-page essays on their experience with the phrase “real job” and what it means to them. Their RQ1 asked about the characteristics which millennials viewed as being part of a real job, and RQ2 asked about the meanings that they assigned to this colloquialism. After reviewing the responses, researchers coded for characteristics and utilized a thematic analysis to better understand participants’ expression of meaning. For RQ1, it was determined that the “five most common characteristics [were]: financial autonomy, college education, career, enjoy/passion/fulfillment, and benefits” (O’Connor & Raile, 2015, p. 282). Most mentions of financial autonomy were related to supporting oneself financially, and the mention of career was related to a long-term commitment. For RQ2, four categories emerged under two broader, overarching themes. The themes were acceptance of the term and rejection of the term. Under acceptance, 79 of the essays qualified the “real job” concept as a rite of passage or mark of distinction. The categories of rejection indicated that 50 other participants saw it as a meaningless concept and relative to each person.

Each of these categories in O’Connor and Raile’s (2015) study was elaborated upon regarding the context of how each was written about. The concept of a rite of passage was written as a sign of adulthood, something that would distinguish their jobs after graduating college from the ones they had before or during college. This is similar to the other positive category, mark of distinction, relatedly indicating that a real job held greater rewards, higher responsibilities, and demanded more respect than one that is not considered a real job. Those who saw the real job as a relative and subjective concept indicated the participants’ shared view that the definition of a real job depends on the individual’s world view: Someone may hold a job which others would not consider a real job, but that person would still find meaningfulness and purpose in what he or she did. Relatedly, some participants outright rejected the concept of a real job as being meaningless – to the point that their essays were strongly worded with grammatical and punctuation-based emphasis regarding their feelings of how the word is practically derogatory towards any job that could be considered not to be a real job. For both of the larger themes which indicated positive and negative perspectives of the colloquialism, participants appeared to often indicate how this idea was shaped by their personal expectations for the meaning of the work which they experienced or planned in their own lives. This is one realm of study, as the expectations which they hold for employers would be different when it comes to how they experience meaning in work.

**Corporate social responsibility values.** Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has been recognized as an important factor for attracting millennial workers (Catano & Hines, 2015; Leveson & Joiner, 2013). This ties into the idea of meaning in work per the evidence that cues from the work environment influence the type and level of meaning that a worker would assign to his or her work (Vuori et al., 2012), and that values have been recognized as an essential part of how meaning in work is experienced (Rosso et al., 2010). Researchers Catano and Hines (2015) and Leveson and Joiner (2013) explored the importance of CSR to millennials regarding how these values would potentially impact the research participants’ choices and experiences in workplace environments.

Millennials may choose a workplace based on how their own internal values align with how the company presents itself. Catano and Hines (2015) performed a quantitative MANOVA analysis to understand how students responded to job ads which offered corporate responsibility values such as “community involvement and pro-environmental positions” in addition to “psychologically healthy workplace (PHW) policies such as work-life balance” (p. 2). Their first two hypotheses were that the millennial participants: 1) would rate ads with CSR or PHW more highly than others without mention of these; 2) would rate organizations with both CSR and PHW as more attractive than those who had only one or none of these variables. For the latter two, they predicted first that value dimensions of Self-Transcendence and Openness to Change would predict how attractive CSR and PHW were to millennial participants, and second, that Self-Enhancement and Conservation (the opposite of Openness to Change) value dimensions would be negative predictors of how these variables appealed to millennials. Using an experimental design, their evidence indicated support for the second and third hypotheses, but not the first or fourth. In other words, evidence indicated that participants were not more attracted to ads with CSR or PHW than ads with only basic information, but that participants did rate organizations with both CSR and PHW as being more attractive than other organizations without both. Additionally, there was statistical significance that participants who were more open to change and self-transcendence were more likely to appreciate those kinds of workplaces. Although there was minor evidence that values of self-enhancement and conservation were negatively linked to finding a CSR/PHW workplace as being attractive, there was no statistically significant finding for this hypothesis.

Based on the global trend of greater scrutiny for organizations, Leveson and Joiner (2013) sought to explore how millennials would perceive the importance of corporate social responsibility (CSR). Their definition of CSR included recognition of five dimensions: “community relations, diversity practices, employee relations, product quality, and environmental impact” (p. 24). They also noted that individual cultural traits (e.g., gender, race, personal values, and GPA [Grade Point Average]) could impact each person’s response to a company’s CSR. For their three research questions (RQ), they asked if CSR was important for students’ choice of job, if there was a relationship between this importance and their cultural factors, and which of the five CSR dimensions that students valued most. With the use of a Likert scale-based questionnaire, they ranked responses to questions related to CSR and cross-tabulated them with demographic factors. The researchers’ findings were that although most students prioritized CSR values, the participants indicated that they were willing to trade CSR values for financial rewards. However, female students with higher GPAs and altruistic tendencies appeared less likely to desire this trade-off for ethical action versus better salaries, which Leveson and Joiner (2013) indicated was similar to that of prior generations. The researchers conjectured that this could indicate that within-generation differences may be greater than the ones between generations. Additionally, when studying how CSR factors ranked among participants, they occurred in this order from most important to least important: Workplace practices; social impact; corporate governance; global warming/climate change; environmental impact (p. 28). They discovered that business students were more likely to prioritize extrinsic job rewards than students in humanities. Other research has found a notable link between millennials and extrinsic rewards.

**Intrinsic versus extrinsic values**. Unlike the Baby Boomer generation, research supports the belief that millennials do not prioritize their career as part of their identity, and thus behave differently than those who belong to generations who have been more oriented toward work as a focal component of life (Brewer, 2010; Marston, 2007). Some researchers have contended that “millennials prefer meaningful work over well-paid work” (De Hauw & De Vos, 2010, p. 294). As previously stated, Leveson and Joiner’s (2013) research indicated that some millennials are more likely than others to seek extrinsic, financial rewards over the intrinsic ones of contributing to a greater good through an organization which adheres to sound ethical practices – the difference was related to gender and “personal ethical ideology” (p. 24). Although Leveson and Joiner (2013) explained that this difference could be based on some students holding “a poor understanding or ambivalence about CSR” (p. 29), it may also potentially reflect the findings that even though generational influences are at stake, personal factors were also important in understanding behavior (De Hauw & De Vos, 2010). In a review of older studies on the prioritization of intrinsic and extrinsic values across generations, Twenge (2010) and Twenge and Kasser (2013) offered the conclusion that millennials are not intrinsically motivated to seek meaning in work and argued that they may value extrinsic factors more than prior generations did. This could be tied into the belief that millennials are more motivated toward meeting lifestyle-related interests outside of work, rather than using work as a means to find meaning. However, Twenge’s (2010) use of the word “meaning” may have been misconstrued: She defined meaning as an intrinsic work value and used it in the same reference of being able to apply talents, maintain altruistic and social values, and express personal identity. There was no formal definition for meaning in work in Twenge’s (2010) review. According to other scholars, meaning indicates the positive or negative sense-making which a worker finds in his or her environment, whereas meaningfulness is the amount of positive sense-making in which an individual can engage (Rosso et al., 2010; Vuori et al., 2012). In departing from Twenge’s (2010) use of meaning in work and adopting definitions from other authors (e.g., Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2011; Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012; Rosso et al., 2010; Vuori et al., 2012), this dissertation’s contextualization of meaning in work therefore becomes about how positive and negative cues lend to the individual worker’s sense of why they are doing what they are doing in their environment.

There is still research which supports that millennials desire meaningful work based on values associated with the organization’s ethical behavior and its ability to meet their personal fulfillment needs (Rawlins, Indvik, & Johnson, 2008). Built on evidence that millennials prioritize work-life balance and extrinsic rewards while still being identified as socially conscientious, Ertas’s (2015) research called into question how public service motivation (PSM) would affect millennial participants’ intentions to find greater opportunities for extrinsic rewards while in federal service positions. The regression analyses indicated that millennials were more likely to hold turnover intentions at higher rates than workers from prior generations, but that they held much in common regarding what would lessen those turnover intentions. Participants indicated that they were less likely to leave their job if they had pay and job satisfaction, as well as perceptions of distributive fairness in the workplace, opportunities for self-efficacy, the ability to express creativity, and a good work group. The concept of work-life balance was only statistically significant in some contexts, but not in all. The conclusions were that millennials, although more likely to quit or move to another position in a government job, valued overall work satisfaction as a way to meet their needs and motivate them to stay in their current positions. Other research offered slightly different results.

Research was also performed by Johnson and Ng (2016) to see if the altruistic allure of the nonprofit sector was enough to keep millennials in jobs that would often not pay as much as private and public-sector work. Although nonprofit work has been seen as a means for millennials to find the positive meaning which evidence indicates this generation would desire (Ng et al., 2010), the researchers acknowledged the prior work which revealed that millennials may prioritize extrinsic rewards (e.g., Twenge & Kasser, 2013). Johnson and Ng (2016) hypothesized that: Millennials would be less inclined to leave nonprofit work as their pay increased; Millennials in a nonprofit organization would be less likely to leave nonprofit work if they believed their pay was at the same level as their peers within the nonprofit world; millennials would be more likely to leave if they believed that peers in other sectors were paid more; millennial managers are less likely to leave the nonprofit sector as their pay increases; and millennial managers are less likely to leave if they believe they are paid the same as peers in all sectors (nonprofit and otherwise). However, through quantitative testing of the 2011 Young Nonprofit Professionals Network (YNPN) survey, they found no evidence that millennials would express interest to switch out of the nonprofit sector when offered competitive or increasing pay. Johnson and Ng (2016) reported that their findings instead indicated that “pay is not a key consideration in nonprofit employment” (p. 296) but that intrinsic rewards remained most important. The researchers found, instead, that the respondents were more likely to leave the nonprofit sector based on levels of education; they implied that millennials with higher levels of education were more likely to leave for more desirable pay as driven by a sense of job entitlement. The research results also provided the finding that millennial managers were more likely to stay in the nonprofit sector with increasing pay; it was suggested that managers who found a sense of positive meaning in their work and long-term employment had greater intentions of staying in that sector. Once more, the importance of meaning in work for millennials has been noted to hinge on the experiences of the millennial individual.

**Generational versus individual values.** There is some conflicting research related to generational differences, especially within the context of seeing social and cultural forces as shapers of any generation. Wong et al.’s (2007) research on generational differences in personality and motivation found no significant differences between millennials and prior generations relevant to personality and motivation, leading the authors to conclude that many generational differences may be more attributable to age and development. However, Kowske et al. (2010) claimed that research did show generational differences in personality, including an increased need for social approval. When developing a meaning in life scale, Steger et al. (2006) indicated that measures of social approval were an important consideration in researching the validity of their instrument. Millennials are turning to alternative outlets for social approval, such as using online social networks as a locus for self-presentation and identity formation (Doster, 2013). In summary, research indicates that millennials’ development of values and personas outside of work are likely to have greater priority for them over their use of work to develop identity and social relationships, especially if they do not feel as though they are receiving enough positive cues from others in the organization. However, this may be predicated by the individual’s values, beliefs, and motivations.

**Leadership.** Leadership has been a visible component of how millennials engage in and make sense of their work. Millennials have very specific expectations for how their manager or supervisor should guide them (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010). Not only have they expected mentor-style relationships (Society for Human Resource Management [SHRM], 2009), but they have also valued transparency from their managers and supervisors (Gursoy et al., 2008). This expectation has been connected to how meaning-making and relationship styles intersect: The creation of meaning-making as an adult has been linked to relationship-attachment styles which potentially began in the employees’ initial caregiver relationship and later impacted how the individual engages in future authority-based relationships with others (Reizer et al., 2013). With the general knowledge that millennials were likely to be exposed to parents who treated them in structured ways that boosted their self-esteem (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010; O’Connor & Raile, 2015; SHRM, 2009), even to the point of potentially increased narcissism (Deal et al., 2010), and that millennials may not feel as though they need to prove themselves through the same rigors that previous generations faced (Marston, 2007), the revealed pattern is that millennials may expect their superiors to emulate these parental styles by guiding them through challenges and then allowing them to freely engage in that which they wish to do.

There are overlaps between research on meaning in work and research on the millennial population. Whereas the meaning in work literature studies what meaning in work is and how it manifests for workers, research on millennials can be used to understand how their generationally driven and contextually developed values and needs can contribute to understanding how they experience meaning in work.

# Synthesis of the Research Findings

Researchers have made strides in refining the current knowledge base of meaning in work and of the millennial generation. The experience of work meaning has often been determined by how an individual would interpret cues in his or her environment, which would resultantly impact the choices which the worker has made (Vuori et al., 2012). These interpretations are informed by the individual’s own personal world view and values: Values, beliefs, and motivations are internal factors which determine how a person experiences meaning in work (Rosso et al., 2010). Relatedly, researchers have determined that the millennial person’s expectations are impacted by generational and contextual circumstances (De Hauw & De Vos, 2010) even though many of these views could also be influenced by developmental age rather than generation (Wong et al., 2008). Values, beliefs, and motivations, as informed by external environmental factors such as social and cultural influences, lend to the development of meaning in work (Rosso et al., 2010). Therefore, these factors could also be applied to research on millennials to better understand their interpretation of meaning in work.

**Development of meaning.** The creation of meaning comes from responding to external stimuli with one’s own internal values, needs, and worldviews (Burger et al. 2012; Park, 2010; Rosso et al., 2010; Vuori et al., 2012). Millennials have internal values, beliefs, and ideas shaped through generational, contextual, and individual experiences (De Hauw & De Vos, 2010; Wong et al., 2008). Meaning in work has been found to influence meaning in life (Park, 2010; Steger et al., 2012), and can exist as a moderator between work stress and the presence of meaning in life (Allan et al., 2016). The act of making and applying meaning to a situation has been considered a personal resource, and employees may believe that something important in the workplace impacts other parts of their lives (van den Heuvel et al., 2013). Many millennials express that they want to find purpose in work, at their workplace, but experience negative feelings of meaning in work when their employer acts in a way which quells their desire to do well there (McLeod, 2015). In fact, leadership can be seen as a key component in studying the millennial generation: Leadership can create positive or negative meaning in work for employees (de Sousa & van Dierendonck, 2010; Ghadi et al., 2013). Van den Heuvel et al. (2013) found that transparent and informative communication helped facilitate workers’ adaptation to change. Millennials appreciate transparent and open communication from their leaders (DeMaria, 2013; Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010), which feeds into the way which an individual interprets cues in his or her environment. In turn, these cues become internalized and acted upon.

When applying this knowledge to the millennial generation, it could be said that millennials often do not see their career as part of their identity, and are more unlike prior generations in that regard (Brewer, 2010; Marston, 2007), but may instead see it through a diverse array of views which range from seeing established work as a part of life to the idea of a real job being a concept which holds no meaning (O’Connor & Raile, 2015). Their orientation to work may be influenced by generational development.

**Generationally influenced work orientation**. An individual may approach a job with one or more of three currently recognized orientations towards work: as a job which offers financial return (especially to fund interests outside of work); as a career which provides status and position in addition to earnings; and work as a calling in pursuit of intrinsic rewards (De Sousa & Van Dierendonck, 2010). Millennials have been found to be slightly more satisfied than older generations with what their organizations offered them (Kowske et al., 2010). Because millennials are less likely to see work as a part of their identity and more interested in flexible career paths (Marston, 2007; Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010), it can be asked how the concept of meaning would motivate a millennial. Would they work hard to engage in positive meaning-making at their current organization? Or would they only use their current job as a means to an end for meeting needs? And if their expectations for meaning and/or their needs are not met, would they withdraw and seek something which appears more attractive to them? This could include working solely for compensation in order to fund an external pleasure, or to go to another organization. The millennial generation has not been perceived as loyal, based on their penchant to change jobs and careers often (Gursoy et al., 2008). However, research on millennials has uncovered that there are specific values and ideas which this generation upholds, based on its development.

**Existential application**. Existentially, it is believed that people attempt to fend off feelings of isolation and meaninglessness, especially when seeking purpose and positive meaning in life (Blomme & Lintelo, 2012; Leider, 2015). This includes the act of making sense of the work environment: An organization is a dynamic system with complex interactions which trigger adaptive behavior (de Sousa & van Dierendonck, 2010; van den Heuvel et al., 2013; Weick, 1995). Individual perception of meaning has encompassed all stages of life (Phillips & Ferguson, 2013; Przprioka, 2012) and has existed as both a presence to be built upon and as well as an ongoing search (Steger et al., 2006). Therefore, the way that the individual has approached work would determine the meaning that he or she assigns to work. Millennials view the experience of work differently than prior generations, based on their generational, contextual, and individual values, beliefs, and motivations. It could be argued that although the choice of what to do for work could have an impact on how meaning manifests for the millennial worker, their experience of meaning could be influenced by their satisfaction level and their perception of how the job applies to meeting their personal needs and expectations. A millennial worker’s sense of purpose could be one that is tied to the greater good which they feel is worthy of their time and effort, but it may also be tied to the system which offers them purpose and meaning, even if the millennial worker is not personally invested in the company’s outputs. Therefore, with an understanding of what contributes to meaning in work, it has become important to investigate how these factors impact the millennial generation

**Motivation.** As the experience of meaning is heavily influenced by personal values (Rosso et al., 2010), individuals are likely to use their own expectations and needs as the means to determine the importance something in work (Mat et al., 2004). Evidence has indicated that when a worker feels drawn to doing something that serves others, which offers the worker the feeling of value, he or she is more likely to find a sense of positive meaning and transcendence in work which can especially impact work commitment (Markow & Klenke, 2005). It has been argued that intrinsic motivation is the strongest form of motivation (Gagne & Deci, 2005), yet others argued the side of evidence based on evidence, that individuals often make their choices as a reflection of financial rewards and other extrinsic motivators (Latham, 2012). Positive meaning in work, that which brings a sense of satisfaction and purpose, would be considered intrinsic, whereas it is said that millennials would rather pursue external rewards. In fact, millennials have been found to choose financial rewards over greater-good goals (Leveson & Joiner; Twenge, 2010; Twenge & Kasser, 2013), but there is also evidence that they do seek, and even prefer, work with intrinsic value (Catano & Hines, 2015; Johnson & Ng, 2016; Ng et al., 2010; Rawlins et al., 2008). A balance of satisfaction with both extrinsic and intrinsic rewards has been found to be linked to lower turnover intentions (Ertas, 2015).

**Social and cultural factors.** Improved organizational outcomes such as commitment and vision-championing come from the process of active meaning-making by the organizational members, but this requires social cohesion (Filstad, 2010). “A central focus of social science has been on how socially constructed meaning systems shape social action” (Love & Cebon, 2008, p. 239). Coworkers, groups, communities, and culture have been found to be an important component of how an individual develops meaning in work (Rosso et al., 2010). As there are other people and resulting relationships inside and outside of the work environment, people can find meaning through the act of work or from striving for those they care about (Frankl, 2006). Relationships and resulting interactions can be an important part of how meaning is experienced.

Millennials often hold specific expectations for how they will be accepted into an organization: They navigate through membership negotiation, which is the inherent process in which they find their place within an organization (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010). Per Myers & Sadaghiani (2010), research has shown that their interactions are often mitigated by their expectations for how relationships with supervisors and co-workers should progress: Their interactions with others and expectations for what they should be allowed to do often play a poignant role in how they find meaning at work. Current scholars believe that millennials enjoy working in groups and engaging in teamwork, even though they may have different expectations for appropriate norms and behaviors from workers in other generations (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010). Millennials have also been found to value workplaces which purport to act upon ethical principles (Catano & Hines, 2015). Therefore, millennials may engage in meaning creation in the workplace through the act of belonging to something greater than the self, as a way to fend off isolation and meaninglessness. Meaning in work is linked to meaning in life, and this desire to contribute to something greater than the self does not change between developmental stages (Allen et al., 2015). However, there is conflicting evidence about how this truly manifests in this generation’s choices. Gursoy et al. (2008) found that even though millennials are often strongly oriented towards collaboration and teamwork, they are likely to question rules, challenge norms, and to feel as though they are not respected or appreciated from others. These behaviors are arguably tied to personal values, beliefs, and motivation, which are a vital part of establishing meaning in work (Rosso et al., 2010), but influenced by cultural and social messages. The experience of meaning in work would inevitably manifest for millennials in positive or negative ways, depending on generational influences and personal interpretations

# Critique of Previous Research Methods

Many of the research studies in this literature review relied on comparing the millennial generation to prior generations. However, the boundaries of a generation are often blurred and differ, depending on the researcher’s definition of age range, which may cause validity problems with the research findings (Kowske et al., 2010). From the literature review, there appear to be two major limitations: those which occur in research methods specifically related to intergenerational research, and those which are recognized as paradigmatic shifts which occur over time and may therefore impact how a construct is defined. For research method limitations, multiple authors noted specific challenges related to comparing generational differences with quantitative methodology. Additionally, there is a recognition that older and younger generations may hold different interpretations of the same concept; this would indicate that, in general, participants may be responding to a variable as they had learned through their specific generational influences. In other words, a concept may not mean the same thing to two different generations of people. Educational factors were also key, as most research in the literature review relied on college students or graduates for their sample. These specific challenges would not include the regular pitfalls which may occur with any quantitative research, which was also present in these studies based on the need for educated interpretation and correctly designed studies. This section has been written to explore those specific challenges found in the research used in this literature review.

There are limitations with conducting generational research. The relationship between age, time period, and generation has often presented confounding variables because the individual’s personal development may hold a different impact from their experienced variation with historical events or shared generational experiences (Kowske et al., 2010). In another example, Allan et al.’s (2016) quantitative research using a regression analysis could not determine causal relations because the study was cross-sectional. Kowske et al. (2010) explained how the use of cross-sectional designs and cross-temporal meta-analysis have been used to help reduce, but not eliminate, these limitations: A cross-sectional analysis may hold historical period as a constant but still confound the other two variables, whereas a cross-temporal meta-analysis may confound generation and historical period but not developmental age. Because of these remaining limitations, the above authors advocated for the use of a modified cross-sectional analyses known as an age-period-cohort (APC) model or hierarchical age-period-cohort (HAPC) model to mitigate these issues (Kowske et al., 2010). However, there are still limitations found in cross-sectional analyses in recent studies.

Studying the interactions of coefficients of variables, such as how different generations respond to the same thing, could require the researcher’s own interpretation of the data (Ertas, 2015), and is therefore subject to potential bias or misreading. The study of turnover intentions between generations (Ertas, 2015) was influenced by how the researcher read the data to determine how the results could be applied to the different generations being studied. The researcher and consumers of research may each hold generationally driven beliefs or views of which any person may not be self-aware; Ertas (2015) took caution to explain the nature of her results, allowing for readers to understand the conclusions which were drawn and to potentially develop their own conclusions. Although the point of quantitative research has been to develop data that is as objective as possible, qualitative philosophies regarding social constructivism present the different challenge of capturing constructs which may shift depending on cultural factors.

In several studies, educational levels factored as potential influences in participant answers. In qualitative research on the millennial population, O’Connor and Raile (2015) studied undergraduate college students to understand their definition of a “real job.” This was based on the idea that the colloquialism “a real job” may have changed between generations because of social and economic influences, as well as expectations and needs which have differed between generations. However, their participants were comprised of college students, whose pursuit of higher education may have given them different perspectives of a “real job” than those who did not pursue a higher education. Many of these students believed that a real job was something they would receive after graduation; the data would likely be different for a different set of millennials who did not have the same educational experiences. Similarly, Catano and Hines (2015) and Leveson and Joiner (2013) utilized undergraduate students in their study of the relationships between corporate social responsibility (CSR) values and millennial job choice. The results of these studies could have been influenced by the students’ experience in seeking jobs, and their relative expectations regarding what an organization should offer. If they held survival needs which were different from individuals who did not pursue further formal education, their responses may be different from millennials who are seeking to meet survival needs over self-esteem and self-transcendent ones, as per Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy. However, Leveson and Joiner (2013) noted that their study was pertinent to understanding student values for the sake of CSR imbued education. They drew participants from three different fields of study (humanities, business, and science) and found differences in each one’s willingness to trade ethical values for financial reward. This indicates that the field of study could also impact the participants’ responses in any study which has utilized students as its sample.

Relatedly, Johnson and Ng’s (2016) participants were college educated professionals who were eager to succeed; they explained that their results about motivational factors of nonprofit workers may have been influenced by the fact that their participants were eager to advance in their career in a way that outranked their interest in greater pay. Students in De Hauw and De Vos’s (2010) study were polled to see if their job expectations changed in response to a recession, but there may have been different results if students with lower levels of education had been used as participants instead. Whereas the college students may have been seeking more knowledge-based jobs, there could have been a difference among those seeking jobs considered to be blue collar work. Meaning in work can be seen as a relative concept, depending on the worldview of the worker.

Meaning can also come through suffering (Frankl, 2006). Many of the studies which reviewed meaning in work (e.g., Vuori et al., 2012; Lips-Wiersma and Wright, 2012; Markow & Klenke, 2005) viewed the impact of positive meaning, rather than the impact of negative meaning. Like Frankl (2006) explained, even negative meaning and suffering can lead to adaptive outcomes. However, no research was found which acknowledged the impact of negative meaning and its short- and long-term outcomes for the worker and the organization. Additionally, although many studies have produced valid evidence regarding their participants, their choice of participants may also not reflect data which would be found through an exploration of diversity factors present in the millennial population. Consequently, despite the informative body of evidence which has formed about meaning in work and the millennial generation, there is much more work needed to truly round out a more comprehensive understanding of either concept.

# Summary

There has been extensive research conducted on the concept of meaning in work as well as in regard to the millennial population. Meaning in work manifests through internal influences and external experiences (Rosso et al., 2010), often within the context of a dynamically changing system (Weick, 1995). Millennials have been shaped through influences and generational contexts, but their individual development has also played a role in what has driven their behavior (De Hauw & De Vos, 2010). They come to the workplace with different expectations than prior generations (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010), which could be seen as strengths or weaknesses, depending on how a manager chooses to understand and utilize this information about them. There is conflicting literature about the motivational forces which drive them, even though their relationships with co-workers and leaders has been noted for millennials’ interest in pro-social team values and reported value of parental-style relationships with supervisors. These come together to create how the millennial worker experiences meaning in work, whether positive or negative. However, there are still limitations found in previous research, and more work needs to be done to increase the body of knowledge about both meaning in work and the millennial population. This heuristic study has been designed to add to that growing body of literature.

**CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY**

In qualitative heuristics, the methodology used for this dissertation, the researcher is considered one of the participants who has shared an experience or phenomenon with the other participants. “Through exploratory open-ended inquiry, self-directed search, and immersion in active experience, one is able to get inside the question, become one with it, and thus achieve an understanding of it” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 15). To this end, researchers utilizing qualitative heuristic phenomenology often write with the first person “I” (e.g., Bermudez, Zak-Hunter, Stinson, & Abrams, 2014; Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2010; Ozertugrul, 2017). To maintain alignment with this theoretical foundation, Chapters 3 through 5 will also utilize the first person “I” in order to convey how the research was carried out and interpreted.

**Purpose of the Study**

The recognition of differences between generations is nothing new, but we are called to better understand each generation of people. As stated previously, the purpose of this dissertation is to explore the experience of meaning in work for the millennial population. The community need for greater study and understanding is apparent and has been communicated often in both scholarly and popular literature (DeMaria, 2013; Gursoy et al., 2008, Ferri-Reed, 2014; Herman, 2016; O’Connor & Raile, 2015; Ryan, 2016; Smola & Sutton, 2002; Stewart, 2009; Wong et al., 2008). Organizational leaders want to better understand how to successfully engage and keep workers from this generation (DeMaria, 2013; DeVaney, 2015; Ferri-Reed, 2013). When addressing the discipline-specific need for the study, we are exploring a topic relevant to Industrial-Organizational Psychology which pertains to how a specific population experiences meaning in work. The act of finding positive meaning in work has been linked to a worker’s ability to improve performance and investment in the organization (Burger et al., 2012; De Sousa & Van Dierendonck, 2010; Duffy et al., 2013; Filstad, 2010; Markow & Klenke, 2005; Raelin, 2006). However, this study pertains to a specific experience which millennials may have in the world of work. Unlike some studies about meaning in work (e.g., Vuori et al., 2012), it does not seek to understand how meaning in work is made or developed by the participants. Strictly regarding the millennial population, the purpose is to explore which events or occurrences are meaningful and hold a positive sense of meaning, in addition to those which are meaningless and hold a negative sense of meaning. This study therefore seeks to provide more clarity about the millennial population while also adding to the literature about meaning in work.

# Research Question

The primary research question is, “What is the experience of meaning in work for millennials?”

# Research Design

This study followed traditional heuristic design. I chose the heuristic approach because I have experienced the same phenomenon as the individuals whom I interviewed. Because of this, I am considered the primary researcher and my participants are co-researchers (Moustakas, 1990). Unlike other forms of qualitative research, this idea holds validity because we recognize reality as a subjective experience, but each experience may hold common meaning for everyone who has been through a similar circumstance (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985; Sela-Smith, 2002). I recognized myself as being a very different and separate person from my co-researchers, and took steps to ensure that I did not project my values, beliefs, and perceptions onto them (see Chapter 4). Yet, still I found commonalities behind our shared experience. As I interviewed each individual, including myself, I activated what Moustakas (1990) referred to as tacit knowledge. I recognized my mind as a processor of information, separating my experiences from those of others but still recognizing the shared patterns and themes behind our experience as working millennials. Then, it was my task to represent our shared experience as accurately as possible, in a manner which provided clarity and knowledge of how we have experienced meaning in work.

# Target Population and Sample

The population would be the larger representation of individuals who are being studied, whereas the sample was the group whom I interviewed. In this qualitative study, we are unable to generalize the findings back to the broader population, but we can evaluate how well the sample’s data contributes to theory on how millennials experience meaning in work.

## Population

In this dissertation, the population of reference has been the millennial population. I settled on using the initial birth year of 1980, for multiple reasons. First, it was established as the initial millennial birth year in multiple scholarly and government publications (e.g., Council of Economic Advisers, 2014; De Hauw & De Vos, 2010; DeMaria, 2013; DeVaney, 2015; Murray, 2015; National Chamber Foundation, 2012), even though many of these offered different end birth years such as 1994, 1995, 1999, 2000, and 2002. Most of the articles used in the literature review recognized 1980 as the initial birth year for millennials. Second, other scholarly sources provided a range of different years: Some used 1979 as the beginning birth year (Catano & Hines, 2015; Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010; Smola & Sutton, 2002), whereas others used 1981 (Pew Research Center, 2014) or 1982 (Doster, 2013; Kowske et al., 2010). Other authors did not provide specific years but instead used a broad explanation such as being born “between the early 1980s and early 2000s” (Stratton & Julien, 2014, p. 262) or current “employees aged from late teens to mid-twenties” (McGuire, Todnem, & Hutchings, 2007, p. 594). Each author had their own sound rationale for choosing those years. Therefore, the year 1980 served as an appropriate medium value in that range. The year 1996 was chosen as the end birth year for this study because it fit within the previously given end date ranges and ensured that participants would be 21 years or older (and therefore more likely to have at least 3 years of work experience).

## Sample

The sample size served as a representation of the population, but the study’s results could not be generalized back to that broader population. After I chose the birth year of 1980, I also wanted to include participants who had at least 3 years of work experience and could present as a diverse group within this population. Additionally, co-researchers needed to have an intense interest in the topic for the study to maintain its integrity as a heuristic study (Moustakas, 1990). This was considered the inclusion criteria. However, for ethical reasons, I excluded individuals who had experienced something traumatic while working. This was considered the exclusion criteria because it would potentially cause participants to re-live something traumatic for which I would not have been able to provide adequate after-care, and the resulting data may have possibly provided a different set of experiences than what was sought after in the research question. The initial sample size was eight to 15 participants, or until data saturation was reached. This range was chosen to ensure that the collected data would present patterns and themes which could contribute back to theory on meaning in work. I carried out specific procedures to ensure that my co-researchers would be deliberately chosen and their confidentiality protected, and that their data could be properly collected and analyzed.

# Procedures

For the study to maintain its validity and ability to be replicated, I engaged in distinct procedures. These procedures were not only chosen to maintain alignment with the qualitative heuristic approach to research, but were approved by the Capella Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure ethical appropriateness. The procedures begin with selecting participants and move through the process of collecting and analyzing data from their interviews.

## Participant Selection

Based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria, I used purposeful criteria-based sampling based on Creswell’s (2013) recommendations to deliberately select participants for their diverse perspectives. I created flyers for physical spaces and for social media sites. The flyers explained what the study was about, what was expected of the co-participant, what the co-participant could expect from me, and my contact information. The physical flyers were posted in coffee shops, vape lounges, and a cigar bar where I have often spotted individuals who have appeared to meet the age requirements for being millennials. The social media flyers were posted on my Facebook page, where friends would sometimes choose to share the flyer on their Facebook pages or direct their friends and associates to the study. The flyers were also posted on Reddit.com’s millennial subsection. Once interested people responded to the flyers, I screened them to ensure that they met inclusion criteria and did not qualify for the exclusion criteria. If they met the criteria, I sent them a copy of the IRB approved informed consent form and the interview guide questions. Before the interview could begin, the co-researchers were alerted that they would need to return the signed informed consent form, as well as to read and meditate on the interview guide. Once this was agreed upon, I coordinated with them to find a time and day at the neutral IRB approved location or through video chat. Steps were taken to ensure protection of participants.

## Protection of Participants

Several steps were taken to ensure that the confidentiality of participants was protected. Physical flyers were posted in a way that interested individuals would not be identified as reading only that particular flyer. Co-researchers were interviewed in a neutral location to keep others from hearing the discussion, where the co-researchers could still feel comfortable. Researcher data was coded with numerical coding which could not be deciphered. After the data has been kept for 7 years after the study is completed, the electronic data will be deleted from its device and any paper data would be turned over to a professional recycling company for confidential shredding. With these protective measures in place, I was able to engage in appropriate data collection procedures.

## Data Collection

Once approved co-researchers agreed to participate in the study, the interview was scheduled at a time convenient for them. I initially interviewed myself; my data was included in the data set, but this interview was also used as one way to distinguish myself and my perceptions from those of my co-researchers. After providing participants with the informed consent form and question guide at least 24 hours before the interview was scheduled, I met seven local co-researchers for face-to-face interviews, but used video chat for the three co-researchers who lived too far to reasonably drive. In the local interview sessions, I requested for the co-researcher to sign his or her informed consent before the interview began. For video chat, I asked the participants to sign and scan their signed informed consent forms to me before the interview. All interviews were audio-recorded. During the interview, the interview guide offered the opportunity for me to engage in a semi-structured interview with my co-researchers, asking different open-ended questions when the interviewee offered information which presented further opportunities for exploration. I let the co-researchers know that I would follow-up with them during the analysis process to make sure that I accurately represented their experiences, also known as member-checking. Member-checking and extended interviews are important in heuristic research (Moustakas, 1990). At the end of the interview, I let the co-researcher know that they were always welcome to contact me with any questions, concerns, or further information. The interviews were transcribed by an approved third party professional transcriptionist.

## Data Analysis

I followed Moustakas’ (1990) instructions when performing the data analysis. After the interviews were transcribed, I remained mindful of separating my own views from those of co-researchers (see Chapter 4) as I read the transcriptions while listening to the original audio of each interview. I did this in a rhythm of rest and work in which I would study the data, reflect and allow it to process in the back of my mind, and then return to review the data again. I completed this process several times. When I found units of meaning, I circled and clustered them to determine how they related to each other. From this, common themes emerged. I refined them with quotes from co-researchers and made sense of the data by referring to the information in the literature review. My personal experience served as a guide for how to highlight and reframe the co-researchers’ shared insights, themes. and patterns. I also used member-checking to enhance reliability by returning to the co-researchers and asking that if my portrayal of their experiences was accurate. From that I created a portrait of the whole experience and asked co-researchers for feedback. Once that task was completed, I developed three individual portraits of co-researchers who embodied that shared experience.

# Instruments

The instruments I used were two audio-recording devices, my training and experience, and my guiding interview questions. Video chat platforms were also used as communication tools. This section describes my role as the researcher, my guiding interview questions, and ethical considerations taken in the research.

## The Role of the Researcher

It should be noted that I barely fit into the millennial birth year framework presented here because I was born in 1980. I was drawn to heuristic study because as I learned about the millennial population in literature, I would often see reflections of my own experiences through the descriptions and reports about this generation. Interestingly, older adults often told me, “You’re not a millennial!” and then would go on to describe their own perceptions of millennials. Challenge accepted.

Per the heuristic approach, I included my experience in the research. This allowed me to offer candid responses to co-researcher communication so that I could reframe their shared experiences as a singular entity in a methodologically appropriate analysis of what they expressed. Therefore, I acknowledged my role as being part of the phenomenon but allowed the data to elicit the shared experiences. It was important for me not to mislead co-researchers during the interview process or to analyze the data through the lens of personal bias. Rather, I understood myself as separate from the others yet still a part of the phenomenon. Aside from using self-interviewing and mindfulness in this goal, my qualifications helped me to achieve this as well.

My qualifications have strongly depended on my formal training in interviewing through mental health counseling education (master’s degree), including my continuing education on this topic. Additionally, I have had coursework in qualitative and advanced qualitative methodology classes, which have allowed me to learn and practice for this endeavor.

## Guiding Interview Questions

In following Moustakas’ (1990) suggestions for formulating interview questions, I noted pieces of information which stood out in the literature review, and grouped them into topics. Any pieces which implied causality were screened out, and I focused on my notes until a central question was formulated and refined, which served as the main research question. The notes used to create the main question were then used to formulate the guided interview questions.

**Main research question.** What is the experience of meaning in work for millennials?

* When a person engages in work, it is very common for them to try to make sense of what they are doing and why they are doing it. Even if there is an understanding of why the work is being done, the worker may still ask himself or herself why he or she is doing it. Please tell me about why you are doing the work that you do.

**Guiding interview questions**.

1. Please tell me about what types of tasks and performance expectations you are required to accomplish. How do you feel about these duties?
2. What are some things that are important to you when it comes to your ability to pursue these tasks and performance expectations?
3. What do you want to do in your organization? Specifically, what tasks and duties are appealing to you?
4. Where do you see yourself going in your organization?
5. We have expectations about how others are supposed to behave, and we experience internal feelings and reactions to their behaviors. How do your relationships with co-workers impact why you do what you do for work?
6. How do your relationships with work leaders impact your perception of why you do these things for work?
7. What benefits and rewards does your work give you, and how strongly do they matter to you?
8. Some workers have little control over how they do their work, whereas others have a lot of control. What are your thoughts about the amount of control that you have over how you do your work?
9. Tell me about any positive and negative experiences related to what you do in your work. How have they affected you?
10. There are many stereotypes about the millennial population. If you have experienced any personally applied to you, how did that affect your ability to do your work?
11. How have these work experiences contributed to your personal health and well-being?
12. How have these work experiences contributed to how you feel about your organization and the work that you do for it?

# Ethical Considerations

For the purposes of this research, this population was not considered vulnerable, and the greatest ethical challenges were privacy and confidentially. This specifically applied to: maintaining confidentiality; finding a private interview place which met Moustakas’ (1990) recommendations for a comfortable space; appropriate coding of co-researcher data; and appropriate storage/destruction of data. While it would be important to highlight the cultural and experiential differences between participants for the purpose of this study, being too specific in describing participant experiences may void confidentiality. To mitigate this, I have provided demographic information without attaching the information to each participant, for the sake of maintaining anonymity. Descriptions of each participant have described lifestyle without factoring in cultural nuances which could identify them. Demographics have been stated for the general participant description, but participant statements have been linked to lifestyle expectations in the analysis. Additionally, I sought interview spaces which would not create a power imbalance or confidentiality breach, but allowed for breeding trust and comfort in the interview process between myself and the interviewee. When video chat was used, my co-researchers and I each stayed in private rooms with closed doors for the duration of the interview. The need for objectivity remained an additional challenge, as the analysis must present results other than positive feedback (Creswell, 2013), without having caused participants to feel as though they were harmed or manipulated. I engaged in open communication at all times, before, during, and after the research process, and invited my co-researchers to do the same.

# Summary

Qualitative heuristic methodology was used in the development, data collection, and analysis of this research. After I developed the research question, I used multiple scholarly sources to create a framework for my target population. After I gathered the sample of this population for my study by selecting participants with the use of inclusion and exclusion criteria, I collected the data through in-person and video chat interviews. Co-researcher privacy and confidentiality was protected during the entirety of the study. I analyzed the data according to Moustakas’ (1990) method and wrote about the findings in the following chapter, the presentation of the data.

**CHAPTER 4. PRESENTATION OF THE DATA**

# Introduction: The Study and the Researcher

The purpose of Chapter 4 is to explore the analysis of the composite experience gleaned from the co-researcher interviews. These interviews sought to answer the research question: What is the experience of meaning in work for millennials? Because it has been performed with heuristic methodology, I provide reflexive journaling in this chapter so that the reader can be more aware of my own biases and experiences. This connection to the shared experience contributed to my ability to serve as an interpreter of the co-researcher’s processing of their internal experiences of meaning in work. After that, I introduced the seven themes, which are composed of 15 patterns. The original data was used to produce three portraits of co-researchers whose experiences were the best representations of the data: They experienced the found patterns to the fullest extent among the pool of participants, and yet served as opposite examples of how the patterns manifested for this group of co-researchers. I then developed a creative synthesis of the composite, shared experience. The co-researchers provided rich, detailed accounts of how they experienced meaning in work.

I became interested in the topic from hearing commentary from older individuals about their impressions of millennials. While I do not hold being a millennial as an integral part of my identity, I was curious and somewhat pained by how older people could espouse emotionally charged comments about my age cohort. I held a brief focus group with a group of individuals who were 55 or older before I began this study, asking them some of the same questions which I later asked my millennial co-researchers. According to this group, millennials think the internet is the “higher power”; will target corporations for pollution but are unaware of how they themselves pollute; were “raised by television and not their parents”; think they should get “something for nothing”; don’t take responsibility for themselves and rely on everyone else for survival; do not do well in workplaces because “they are not used to getting yelled at.” Per their social circle, one recounted a rumor of someone who interviewed millennials for job positions and could not find anyone who wanted to work a 5-day work week; therefore, all millennials were lazy. While these views obviously do not encompass the views of every older individual, there has been a noticeable development of negative stereotypes of this generation.

With much of this negative rhetoric about millennials circulating in the media and in social circles, I wanted to learn more about what millennials themselves would say. Much of the scholarly and popular literature was aimed at understanding millennials in the world of work, and therefore learning more about the experience of meaning in work for this population seemed like a logical avenue of exploration which would contribute to the growing body of literature. Because of my personal familiarity with this phenomenon, I chose the heuristic research methodology because of how it acknowledges that my own experiences can contribute to a deeper understanding the data. However, the possibility of bias would absolutely be present in this study. There is the possibility for bias in any study, but this type of study could be said to hold a double-edged sword of bias and self-knowledge when applying oneself to the research endeavor. Even though the intent was for me to use my own part in the research process as a means to illuminate the shared experiences of the co-researchers, it may also have influenced how the data was understood, despite my best efforts at separating the perspective of myself from the conveyed perceptions of others.

I am a licensed professional counselor, so I have extensive training in interviewing others ethically to not to influence their answers. I also continually engaged in the act of self-evaluation to better understand my own biases and reactions in order to review the data appropriately. This work was designed to convey the experience of meaning in work for millennials while allowing for others to critically approach this data, whether through their own scrutiny or through possible future replications of this study.

# Description of the Sample

The sample was comprised of a group of individuals who fit within the age range and other inclusion factors chosen for this study. I sought as much diversity as possible in this sample, and limitations will be noted later in the appropriate section. Participants will be referred to as co-researchers because of the idea that their own expertise in the experiences would allow them to provide feedback on how the data should be interpreted (Moustakas, 1990). The 11 co-researchers, including myself as the primary researcher, will be described in this section.

Ten co-researchers responded to the call for research, and the addition of my own experiences brought that number to 11. Of this group, there were five females and six males. Among them, five had master’s degrees, three had bachelor’s degrees, and three had high school diplomas. One of the individuals with a high school diploma expressed that he had also taken some college courses. All identified as Caucasian/White. Occupation titles varied and were spread across multiple fields. They were: Data Analyst in the nonprofit mental health sector; High School English Teacher; Therapist; Self-Employed (manual labor); Director of a political activist group; Retail Worker; IT Auditor for a bank; Product Estimator for a manufacturing company; IT consultant and leadership expert; Systems Analyst for a university; and Network Security Engineer for a financial company. Each person had experienced 3 or more years of work in an organization, including the individual who was self-employed at the time of the interview. Two of these co-researchers volunteered the fact that they had previously served in the U.S. Air Force. The age range of this group was from 24 to 37, with the average age being 31 years old and the median age was 33. Eight co-researchers were from the Southeast region of the U.S., whereas three who answered social media flyers were from the Midwest region of the U.S. No participants or near-participants were withdrawn or elected to be withdrawn from the study. There were many similar reasons for participation in the study.

The co-researchers each expressed that they were very passionate about this topic. Some were following a calling and discussed how their work experiences gave them positive and negative meanings associated with their desire to pursue what they were passionate about. Others saw the organization as a way to make money and pursue things outside of work which mattered to them; yet their work experience was still very important to them. They spoke more about these concepts than how their status as a millennial impacted their work; most even saw being a millennial as a non-issue in the workplace, aside from expressing a sense of annoyance by having stereotypes pushed on them. There were a few times when workers expressed potential difficulties which could have come from age differences, but these issues were shrugged off when the co-researchers accepted them as a normal part of work. Three participants expressed the belief that they would provide results which were abnormal when compared to their peers and thus “skew” the data. Even though participant experiences, personalities, beliefs, and goals did vary significantly, the data still revealed patterns of shared experiences when analyzed through qualitative heuristic standards (see below).

# Research Methodology Applied to the Data Analysis

The co-researchers were a vital part of the exploration. However, I used journaling as a means to understand my own reactions to concepts of meaning in work, to ensure that I would be mindful of my own bias and experiences. This assisted me in mitigating the potential risk of allowing my own bias to seep into the interviews and possibly even guiding the co-researcher’s responses. As per heuristic methodology (Moustakas, 1990), I also needed to include my own interview in the data set. My role for this research has been partially to serve as an interpreter between the co-researchers and the readers. I recorded myself and transcribed my own interview. This helped me to prepare for the interviews with others.

Interactions with the co-researchers were smooth and pleasant; there was a mutual interest in the topic, which appeared to drive all co-researchers toward often expressing passionate views related to the research question. Several of the co-researchers contacted me and immediately expressed how they felt that this was an important topic, whereas most of the others expressed this same view during the interview. Only two did not express this directly, but, like the others, also had strong views in response to many of the questions. After co-researchers agreed to participate in the study, I sent them the IRB-approved informed consent form and list of interview questions, asking them to review both before the interview. Upon meeting for the interview, I asked participants to review and sign the informed consent forms and to ask any questions they had. After providing the promised $25 gift card incentive, with the details that co-researchers had the right to withdraw from the study at any time, I turned on both digital recorders and let co-researchers know this as I was doing so. No major problems occurred, as all the interviews went well and the co-researchers reported that they were comfortable with the interview process when asked about this. A professional transcriptionist (who signed a confidentiality agreement) transcribed the recorded interviews. I chose interviews as the method of data collection, and I did not choose alternative forms of communication because I wanted to exclusively focus on the content and expressions which arose in the conversations.

The analysis was performed according to the approach developed by Moustakas (1990), with eight steps in total. For the first step, I gathered the transcribed data and reviewed it by listening to the audio recordings while reading the transcripts. Sometimes a co-researcher would say something with overt emphasis or emotionally laden tones, and I made note of those as well. I took notes of instances where the co-researcher emphasized something through a change in vocal tone and pace. I then immersed myself in the material by re-reading each interview to better understand each co-researcher’s total experience, paying attention to how the details constituted the whole. I set aside the data to engage in rest, allowing my mind to process the information with my own tacit knowledge. Using my mind as the processor of the information, I would then return to the data and often cognitively acquire new insights upon reviewing the material. These insights were noted, and the material was grouped into units of meaning. This cycle continued several more times, where I departed from the material to rest and then returned to it in order to cultivate a growing understanding of the experience. From this process, I developed individual reflective depictions of each co-researcher’s experience of meaning in work.

Once there was an individual depiction of each co-researcher’s experience of the phenomenon, I reviewed the original data to compare this structure to the original transcript data. From this, I again engaged in the cycle of rest and immersion in the material of all participants until the essential themes emerged. The essential meaning units of the experience were listed, and a full reflective depiction of the experience was created to capture the essence of the group experience as a whole. Co-researchers were asked to confirm if the description matched their individual experiences.

For visualization, I created a graphic (see Appendix A) which summarized the themes and patterns into a depiction which was easy to understand. Each theme and pattern were phrased in a way which summarized the personal expression of the co-researchers with “I” statements. The graphic served not only to help me visualize how the themes and patterns fit with one another within the current scholarly understanding of the concept of meaning in work, but I also sent it to co-researchers for feedback regarding how essential these themes and patterns were in their experiences. Co-researchers were also invited to provide further feedback to clarify how they interpreted how the findings aligned or did not align with their own experiences. This feedback was incorporated into the analysis for both the individual and group depictions.

Once the composite experience was completed, I selected three co-researchers whose experiences were congruent with the composite depiction, and developed portraits of their unique, individual experiences. Not only did this represent the reality of the shared phenomenon, but also demonstrated how the themes and patterns could manifest so differently for each individual. The findings of the analysis have been reinforced with quotes and other statements which make up the heart of the shared experience of meaning in work.

# Presentation of Data and Results of the Analysis

There were multiple themes and underlying patterns which emerged from the data analysis. The patterns were complex due to the intrinsic nature of meaning itself. Meaning can be experienced both positively and negatively (Rosso et al., 2010), and this duality emerged in the interview data. Additionally, co-researchers may have expressed an experience or perception which fell within a larger theme, but there were a few variations regarding how the resulting patterns manifested in their experiences. The patterns will be listed and illustrated with participant quotes, followed by a descriptive thematic essence and synthesis, and co-researcher portraits.

The patterns were as follows:

1. Need for autonomy after training and guidance
2. Strong dislike for micromanagement
3. Need for clearly defined parameters and expectations
4. Lack of structure leading to perceptions of unfairness and confusion
5. The perception of being valued as a person leading to loyalty and motivation
6. The perception of not being valued as a person leading to meaninglessness
7. Like-minded co-workers can make the job enjoyable and drive professional development
8. Co-workers without the same values can lead to a highly negative work experience
9. Satisfaction in doing good for another person
10. Satisfaction with contributing to the greater good
11. Perception of leadership and co-worker behaviors creating a negative environment
12. Being emotionally or personally over-invested in the job
13. Learning healthy habits to cope with job stressors
14. Appreciation for company’s support in self-care
15. Giving up on trying to do well, and/or planning to leave when needs are not met

There were three forms of equilibrium found in every pattern: the perception of where a person’s responsibility versus the organization’s responsibility should lie; adaptability which arose when a person had a negative situation, but one or more positive factors offset the impact of that negative factor; and the feelings of powerlessness in a system coupled with powerfulness over a specific personal or professional domain. The concept of personal versus organizational responsibility was experienced as the balance between what the company can do for the person versus what the person needs to do for himself/herself or the company. In the adaptability piece, many co-researchers expressed that although aspects of a job could be recognized as tough or challenging, the co-researcher had a greater resolution to overcome these obstacles (or at least cope with them) if their priority needs were met by the organization. Powerlessness versus powerfulness was the duality that co-researchers expressed in the recognition that they were caught up in a system and were powerless against its greater force, but still had power over the parts of it which they could influence and affect. Each pattern had a multifaceted series of experiences connected to it, but participant responses unanimously reflected the larger patterns and themes.

Once these 15 patterns emerged in the data analysis, I grouped them into seven themes which reflected the composite experience.

1. Theme 1: Autonomy
   1. Pattern 1.1: Need for autonomy after training and guidance
   2. Pattern 1.2: Strong dislike for micromanagement
2. Theme 2: Structure and expectations
   1. Pattern 2.1: Need for clearly defined parameters and expectations
   2. Pattern 2.2: Lack of structure leading to perceptions of unfairness and confusion
3. Theme 3: Value as a person
   1. Pattern 3.1: The perception of being valued as a person leading to loyalty and motivation
   2. Pattern 3.2: The perception of not being valued as a person leading to meaninglessness
4. Theme 4: Working relationships
   1. Pattern 4.1: Like-minded co-workers can make the job enjoyable and drive professional development
   2. Pattern 4.2: Co-workers without the same values can lead to a highly negative work experience
5. Theme 5: Altruism
   1. Pattern 5.1: Satisfaction in doing good for another person
   2. Pattern 5.2: Satisfaction with contributing to the greater good
6. Theme 6: Frustration and Stress
   1. Pattern 6.1: Perception of leadership and co-worker behaviors creating a negative environment
   2. Pattern 6.2: Being emotionally or personally over-invested in the job
7. Theme 7: Personal Care
   1. Pattern 7.1: Learning healthy habits to cope with job stressors
   2. Pattern 7.2: Appreciation for company’s support in self-care
   3. Pattern 7.3: Giving up on trying to do well, and/or planning to leave when needs are not met

Each theme and pattern were brought to life through an analysis of the co-researchers’ responses to the research questions. In this presentation of the analysis, individual quotes may have been redacted in order to protect confidentiality. Via heuristics, the goal is to interpret the data in a way which illuminates and clarifies the shared experience, while still maintaining the researchers’ voices as vital, whole parts of the findings (Douglass & Moustakas, 1995).

**Reflexive Journaling**

The act of self-disclosure is an important aspect of heuristic phenomenology (Douglas & Moustakas, 1985). “One’s own self-discoveries, awarenesses, and understandings are the initial steps of the process” (Moustakas, 1995, p. 16). Journaling has been recognized as a vital part of the heuristic process, as a means to immerse oneself in the phenomenon and engage in self-dialogue for the sake of better understanding the structure of the experience. I began journaling my experience of meaning in work in late 2014, when there were issues that I grappled with when the work appeared meaningless. I also embarked on outlining positive moments to ensure that I could see the “good” more tangibly, which was related to my practice of remaining grateful to the universe and constructive in my approach to life. This helped inspire my fascination with meaning in work.

Upon reviewing my journal entries as part of the immersion process for this research, I noted that there were several times when something aligned with a specific pattern. My endeavor has been to bring forth my own experience for the sake of self-evaluation and awareness. Self-knowledge allows the primary researcher to thoroughly understand the phenomenon from first-hand experience in order to elicit a description of the true experience for co-researchers (Moustakas, 1995). As part of that self-search, I have listed snippets from journal entries which correspond to the patterns found in this research.

December 18, 2014; Theme 4, Pattern 4.2: Co-workers without the same values can lead to a highly negative work experience.

A co-worker just yelled at me in the hallway because I allowed a kid to complain that her subordinate was very rude and unprofessional to him. She complained that I was being unreasonable because I take the kids so seriously. If we’re rude to them and treat them poorly, how can they take us seriously when we try to help them?

March 12, 2015; Theme 2, Pattern 2.1: Need for clearly defined parameters and expectations.

In a meeting today, one of the directors over several units complained about my role in advocating for patient rights, that “kids know their rights but not their responsibilities. Criminals will think they can use their *rights* to get away with doing things.” Okay, that’s your department…. Teaching them rules and appropriate behaviors. That’s why they’re in treatment. My job is to make sure we don’t abuse them while they’re here. Why am I in trouble for advocating for their rights?

March 19, 2015; Theme 3, Pattern 3.2: The perception of being valued as a person leading to meaninglessness.

I just finished an investigation…. It was determined that the [action taken] was justified, but that staff lied to me anyway about the more minor details. They lied because someone had an emotional reaction and cursed at a kid. Seriously, I understand that this is a rough job. But if they’re just going to lie to me, and leadership members are okay with the lying instead of helping that person with the emotional reaction, why am I even doing this?

March 23, 2015; Theme 4, Pattern 4.1: Like-minded co-workers can make the job enjoyable and drive professional development.

I’m not alone in this. Another employee saw something inappropriate and took action. She supports my process. She can see how there is merit in what the process does. It helps her do her job because she believes in treating people fairly and with respect. I really appreciate that about her. She stuck her neck out to make sure the kids in her care feel protected and secure. This is what’s going to help them get better. Even with behavioral problems that they have, we can model better behavior for them instead of reinforcing non-helpful behaviors.

March 27, 2015; Theme 1, Pattern 1.2: Strong dislike for micromanagement.

[Supervisor] stopped me to discuss how mentally ill teenage girls should not be writing what he deemed unrealistic and frivolous grievances. He seemed completely perplexed that they did this. He tried to tell them not to write grievances. He tried to tell me how to do my job. I am licensed in this field; he is not. He is telling mentally ill teenage girls that they can’t advocate for their rights because he’s telling them that their concerns are frivolous, even when they could be serious (and serious to those girls, if not to him!).

Nope. I am taking the kids seriously anyway. Even when the allegation is false, they’re trying to tell us SOMETHING.

April 24, 2015; Theme 5, Pattern 5.1: Satisfaction in doing good for another person.

There’s this child that no one believes. She has made 30 complaints about her treatment this year, so far. Just because she makes so many complaints, everyone acts like she’s not worth listening to. To be fair, they’re probably worn out from having so many needy children to care for. But seriously, not all of her complains were proven to be false – what need is she trying to meet? She does have true ones, and they were serious! I argued this point to my colleagues. I saw a look of “Oh..” on some of their faces. Like kind of a light bulb went off.

August 1, 2015: Looking back at this child’s grievance history, her number of complaints, and the types of complaints she was making, severely decreased over these past few months! I think people are taking her needs more seriously.

July 15, 2015; Theme 6, Pattern 6.1: Perception of leadership and co-worker behaviors creating a negative environment.

Two very vocal members of the leadership team are incredibly homophobic and can’t seem to stand that some of the kids identify as transgender. I am seething at the ignorant, horrible remarks that these two are allowed to spew. I thought I was disgusted with them before. I can’t be at a place that allows this kind of bullshit, especially on the leadership team. But who is going to stick up for these kids when leaders behave this badly? What is going to happen to the kids?

August 11, 2015; Theme 2, Pattern 2.2: Lack of structure leading to perceptions of unfairness and confusion; Theme 3, Pattern 3.2: The perception of not being valued as a person leading to meaninglessness.

I just returned to work after being at a week-long conference. Managers performed investigations while I was gone. That’s understandable. However, they did not follow the procedure for how investigations are supposed to occur in my absence. They were performed with bias and I caught a director in a lie. Great. They continued the investigation after I came back. I tried to appeal to them that they can utilize my position to free up managers so that others do not need to do my job for me, but they declined. I have no authority to just take over, so I just backed out. Seriously, I couldn’t handle more retaliation. As I have asked the [senior leader] several times, why do you even need me here if this is what is going to happen? But he’s trapped too. Insanity.

August 2, 2016; Theme 1, Pattern 1.1: Need for autonomy after training and guidance; Theme 2, Pattern 2.2: Lack of structure leading to perceptions of unfairness and confusion.

I don’t have a lot of oversight, and I don’t have someone breathing down my back. I’m free to do what I need to do. There are some places where I have total freedom and control to do what I think should be done for a certain project. However, I received little to no training for a lot of the things I do. I’m kind of lost here. I’ve figured out a lot, and ask questions and seek guidance where I can, but no one can offer clear answers for many of these questions. This has led to a lot of problems.

September 15, 2016; Theme 1, Pattern 1.2: Strong dislike for micromanagement.

I feel completely constricted and controlled, and that’s really burnt me out.

October 30, 2016; Theme 6, Pattern 6.1: Perception of leadership and co-worker behaviors creating a negative environment; Theme 7, Pattern 7.3: Giving up on trying to do well and/or planning to leave when needs are not met.

I performed the research that they asked for and provided the recommendations. Leadership could have simply said, “No thanks.” Instead, they spent almost an hour denigrating the hard work into which my team had put so much effort. I have lost respect for this leadership. My energy would be better spent focusing on other things than trying to please them.

January 3, 2017; Theme 4, Pattern 4.2: Co-workers without the same values can lead to a highly negative work experience.

The intern thinks it’s fun to sabotage our work. It’s a game to change numbers on our spreadsheets which we then present to our leadership. And I can’t report him because he’s in really tight with some of the leadership. So my spreadsheets are getting locked now.

March 29, 2017; Theme 7, Pattern 7.1: Learning healthy habits to cope with job stressors.

Having some negative experiences has really helped me to develop and mature as a person. I’ve learned patience and more about how to view the person that the negativity is coming from. My health has suffered a bit, but I’ve learned how to take better care of myself and get stronger, mentally and physically.

April 18, 2017; Theme 7, Pattern 7.2: Appreciation for company’s support in self-care.

Well, I have a lot of flexibility with time, so that’s really nice. Work emails are still flying at 9pm at night, but I appreciate the ability to have more freedom with time in order to engage in some of the self-care I need.

June 1, 2017; Theme 3, Pattern 3.2: The perception of not being valued as a person leading to meaninglessness; Theme 7, Pattern 7.3: Giving up on trying to do well, and/or planning to leave when needs are not met.

My prior supervisor would often ask for my professional opinion and then immediately belittle it. My efforts to do more were ignored, and anything deemed “reinventing the wheel” was met with fear from leadership. I know that what I did was quality work, as I received praise from co-workers and managers. And yet I was asked, “Why aren’t you doing more?” The whole thing just seems to be about getting caught up in a game instead of actually contributing to something great. Everyone is in a clique. I realized: it’s not about hard work here, it’s about weird high-school style drama and people being petty so that they can feel better about themselves. So, I realized that I must play the game too, until I can get out.

October 1, 2017; Theme 3, Pattern 3.1: The perception of being valued as a person leading to loyalty and motivation.

I finally have a supervisor who said, “You are being underutilized! What would you like to do here? I want to use your strengths.” I felt a stir of hope. I immediately began writing a proposal for how I could better serve the team, with a refreshed commitment towards being a dedicated part of my company.

In heuristics, the primary researcher’s own view has been recognized as an important part of the data set. However, there is also a recognition that the researcher will always hold bias in any form of research (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985), whether it is overt and known or subtle and undiscovered by the researcher’s own internal evaluation. In this review of how my journal entries aligned with the findings, I gleaned a better understanding of how my own views contributed to the analysis. The goal of the analysis is to allow the co-researcher’s voices to contribute to the data set as strongly as my own. However, I use my own experiences to empathetically shape my voice so that its description is as accurate and all-encompassing as possible. Furthermore, I wholeheartedly recognize that my views, values, and motivations are going to be vastly different from those of my co-researchers.

**Departure from the data set.** Unlike my co-researchers, I mentioned the importance of appropriate tools and I described experiences of working in toxic environments. My co-researchers shared experiences of being in environments which seemed to range from toxic to challenging to functional, to even somewhat ideal. The ones who had been in toxic environments expressed that they changed employment when faced with those challenges. Often, I asked myself if my reactions to my environment, and my perception of my experience in work, were fueled by my stage in development, my generational group, or my own personal outlook. Were my perceptions of experiences based on a generational ideal, or a personal one? Exploring and dissecting the experiences of other participants helped shed light on how this shared experience manifested like a light passing through a crystal; all the same source, but still diverging so uniquely and diversely with each co-researcher.

**Theme 1: Autonomy**

Autonomy was a very prevalent and powerful theme which was discussed in all interviews. As the analysis was being developed, this theme was strongly linked to Theme 2: Structure and Expectations. However, these two themes were separated due to their dualistic yet complementing nature and the strong views which co-researchers held for each. There were three forms of equilibrium found in every pattern: personal responsibility, adaptability, and power. Co-researchers reported that with autonomy, they had greater ability to take personal responsibility -- as opposed to expecting their organization to do everything for them; the desire to learn from mistakes and continue growing as a person and a professional; and the feeling of power over the things that they were able to control, even if they felt powerless within a larger system. Repeatedly, co-researchers reiterated their preference for autonomy and their dislike of not having it.

**Pattern 1.1: Need for autonomy after training and guidance.** Co-researchers recognized the value of training and guidance, but expressed that they often did not like ongoing specific instructions about how to do their job once they knew how to perform their tasks and duties. Across several different types of jobs, multiple co-researchers specifically touched on the belief that training and oversight were helpful at first, and then it became mostly unnecessary, except for cases where guidance is requested or needed, and follow-up training is used to enhance knowledge. Two quotes which directly encompass this idea came from one co-researcher with few chances for advancement in her field, whereas the other co-researcher had multiple advancement opportunities.

My first year that I taught, I had one class that, to prepare for, that was a scripted curriculum. They handed it to me and they said, “You're going to do this on this day, this now and the other.” That was very helpful in my first year… It really bothers me now because I'm an expert. I know what I'm doing.

I was put into training the whole first year on the job... You had a lot of oversight. You had a lot of people that would make sure you're doing the right work... It was nice to have that support... As you move up in the company, you get more and more freedom, but you also make more and more relationships with the higher up people who are going to be giving you the oversight.

Often, the co-researchers addressed the need for autonomy directly. They spoke to how important it was for them to do their jobs effectively. It was often tied into their beliefs about their own competency, as well as their ability to use personal strengths to meet their work goals. For some co-researchers, autonomy was linked to how this control yielded greater professional development gains. For others, the co-researchers focused heavily on the concept of freedom and control. However, there was a divergence in how that concept of freedom and control played out. One ideal was often about having control over how the job was performed and the mission was carried out to achieve an important outcome. Another co-researcher’s interview often focused on how he sometimes paid for that freedom with fears related to being able to pay bills and maintain healthy relationships.

Like if we have an idea for a technique, if we have an idea for some sort of intervention, we don’t have to ask people for permission…You have to develop your own style and your own model.

I get to shape my own goals…I shape my own schedule. I have a lot of say in what our mission execution is going to be…The autonomy is a huge reward for me.

You want freedom to do things on your own…The best way to make that happen is just get out there and do what I know I can do…You have to think to yourself, “What can I do to put cash in my pocket now, and what’s the easiest way to make that happen?” I do it better when nobody’s over my shoulder. I just do the work better.

Several co-researchers highlighted that autonomy was highly prized but only useful when they were able to perform within clearly communicated parameters and rules. When employees knew what would be expected of them and what they were allowed to do, they were empowered to creatively complete tasks because they had a functional framework to function within. This concept of a framework has been explored more in Theme 2. With that sense of structure, co-researchers were able to discuss how they held confidence in how to exert their autonomy.

I have a lot of freedom in terms of [how I perform duties]. Being able to communicate with so many different people gives me a level of control over what I am doing. I feel like that is a good level of control to have, because there are guidelines that I need to follow… Everyone in the office is able to go talk to anyone they need to, to complete their task and get the help they need…. If there are problems, I’ll find out what their problems are, why they’re happening, and then we’ll go do it.

I like the amount of control I have. I have a set list of goals every time I come in. We get an email, usually at the beginning of the day, that outlines what we need to do. So I’ve got a lot of freedom in how and what gets done, but we have guidelines on how we clean and how we close, things like that…I know how to efficiently do things now rather than take the roundabout way.

I have to have a lot of control. I’m okay with “You have to do these things, because it’s our policy.” That’s fine, I understand. If I have to use this system, that’s fine, I understand. But on a day-to-day work I want to be able to do it the way that best fits me, in that…I am not going to do things if they are not as efficient as I could do them otherwise… I guess it’s efficiency, being effective and getting it done correctly.

Many co-researchers valued the ability to ask questions as a means to navigate their autonomy, which was connected to leadership’s ability to be available, approachable, and show interest in employees (values which appear in other themes in this analysis). Occasionally, co-researchers would mention the importance of seeing mistakes – even with varying degrees of leadership guidance and training in the picture – as learning opportunities rather than damning incidents.

I want to make my own mistakes. A lot of people want to give you advice or tell you what to do because they think you’re making a mistake. I’m a very cautious person and I overthink things…By the time I make a decision to do something, I’ve already thought about it thoroughly, and if it’s a mistake, I’m ready to make the mistake. Yes, that’s really important, like autonomy means also being able to make my own mistakes. Not just to make my own success.

While this sentiment can be recognized as incredibly powerful, it should be noted that the consequences of autonomously-made mistakes in one profession may be different than the consequences of mistakes which could occur in another profession. For example, a mistake which causes inconvenience in one industry would not be considered comparable to a mistake which could negatively impact a human life in another. Two of the co-researchers both discussed the experience of making costly mistakes at work due to lack of information or lack of experience. These mistake experiences more closely align with theme three, value as a person, because of how their leaders responded to their mistakes, so they will be discussed in greater detail in that section.

**Pattern 1.2: Strong dislike for micromanagement.** Co-researchers were often very clear about their distaste for micromanagement, and the feelings which were created when a manager engaged in micromanagement. One co-researcher did speak positively of micromanagement in the same way that others spoke of initial training and onboarding (“For getting dumped onto a new project with no knowledge of how the project works, absolutely, micromanagement is needed”), but also mentioned that once the onboarding process was over, it could become detrimental (“The more often it’s used, the less effective it is”). Otherwise, this co-researcher and all other co-researchers discussed negative experiences with micromanagement.

They questioned everything and wanted me to do everything the way they would do it and I said, “Look, either you can let me do it my way and we can get the results that we’re uniform about trying to accomplish, or if you want it done specifically and micromanaged, then I think it’s better for you to just do that.”

A lot of times, micromanagement is because there’s just lack of trust in that individual.

I try to learn every day…If someone gives me very clear direction, I think that’s different than micromanaging. I don’t like to be micromanaged at all, but also, if I’m being micromanaged, then I think I’m not really needed at this situation, so I’m going to do something about that. Find another place in this company or another company.

Any person who uses micro-management as their go-to management technique, you’re setting yourself up for failure. Your team is not going to work under you or it’s not going to be a good outcome. They’re going to leave or you’re going to leave.

Most of the commentary from co-researchers was on the advantages of autonomy, rather than the detriments of micromanagement. Yet, it was explicitly stated, “I hate being micromanaged.” When the dislike of micromanagement was introduced to co-researchers as one of the patterns during the member checking process, many wrote back and strongly agreed.

**Theme 2: Structure and Expectations**

Closely tied to autonomy, co-researchers also discussed how clearly defined and communicated structures and expectations empowered their ability to work effectively in their autonomy. These concepts of parameters often tied back to leadership communications, organizational policy and procedure, and even organizational culture. The three forms of equilibrium found in all patterns – responsibility, adaptability, and power – also appeared here. Clear structures and expectations allowed for the participants to communicate a sense of understanding where their responsibilities lied, as well as where they could expect the organization to step in. When there was little to no sense of structure or expectation, co-researchers expressed their ability to adapt through other positive means, such as learning how to draw their own boundaries (discussed further in Theme 6, self-care) or ultimately leading them to major life changes such as finding a new job or a new career path. Regarding power, the idea of clear structure and expectations was seen as empowering for employees, whereas a lack of communicated structure and expectations lead to greater powerlessness. With a lack of structure, co-researchers reported chaos and confusion, which sapped them of their motivation and ability to do well. Co-researchers not only shared appreciation for clearly defined structure and expectations, but alternately perceived decisions in the workplace as unfair or confusing when there was no structure or explanation behind a leadership choice.

**Pattern 2.1: Need for clearly defined parameters and expectations.** Co-researchers commonly expressed their need for clear instructions and an understanding of what they needed to do and how they were expected to perform. Their concepts of a good framework were tied to how their leadership communicated these parameters, how the structures were written into the company’s policies and procedures, and how well the policies and procedures had been integrated into the organizational culture.

I need clear instruction of what the expectation is and I need support from my higher ups [to carry out the expectation]…. Sometimes [leadership says] “Do this” and then 2 weeks later, “Why did you do this?” If it’s not clear or if it’s contradictory, it gets very confusing…Tell me what you want and I’m going to give it to you to the best of my ability.

That is very important…knowing that this is part of what the company does. This isn’t just, I happen to have a good boss, or I happen to have good co-workers. A lot of these are just policies. This is how the company works. Expectations are pretty clearly laid out. The way that expectations are conveyed to me, I guess… There’s a lot of communication there...

I did have a clear structure, it was very specific… and there are a lot of constraints [in what I do]…. Being 100% genuine means that I have to understand why an action is important.

I think it’s important to know how I’m being measured and what their expectations are…. Part of mentoring people is making sure that they have clear expectations because now, they’re given a path to success, where if they don’t know what their expectations are, how can they be successful or how do they know how successful they are?... I think the company’s responsibility is to set a clear expectation of what your performance is and what they expect you to accomplish and to compensate you for that.

Several co-researchers commented specifically on how in-the-moment communication was valuable for them when it came to performing work exactly to their supervisors’ expectations. They appreciated constructive feedback which helped them feel positively about their direction and accomplishment, but which also guided them into learning what their parameters should be with their supervisors.

I was able to say, “Hey, I figured out how to get the outcome you want, for that condition.” I was very proud of myself. [My supervisor] is like, “Yes, good job and just make sure you do A, B, C, D, and E before you get to the other.” I’m like, “Okay, good.”

Give me specific directions to meet. It’s like, “Okay, what is the task I’m trying to accomplish? When do you need it by?” And any other X, Y, or Z requirements.

Having a structured list gives us a game plan for the day…. You have a goal you’re working towards rather than, like I said, just standing around doing nothing…. Knowing that there’s a plan in place and how we’re going to get there just keeps me on track.

While the appreciation for clear and proactively communicated parameters was overtly stated, the co-researchers’ experiences related to lack of structure were expressed with more subtleties. Co-researchers openly expressed their awareness of the importance of structure and expectations, but their negative experiences regarding lack of structure was not so clearly stated.

**Pattern 2.2: Lack of structure leading to perceptions of unfairness and confusion.** Co-researchers expressed distress when their leadership did not enforce or support structures and expectations. They did not directly acknowledge the problems as a lack of clearly communicated structures and expectations, but their experiences were highly similar when discussing these problems. Co-researchers shared stories of poorly distributed rewards, lack of enforcement for policies, confusing policies, cross-cultural misunderstandings at the management level, and even poor behavior from management, which undermined efforts to be productive and motivated. Different management styles or the perception of poor leadership support were seen to either dismantle existing structures and expectations, or to sabotage any attempts to build structures and parameters related to work. When discussing leadership, they often commented on their perceptions of leadership getting in the way of creating and maintaining structures and expectations.

I have been given clear instruction by my administrator to enforce uniform policy. I enforce uniform policy and the kid says, “No, I’m not giving up my [non-uniform item].” I call for support and then nothing happens. I’m like, “Okay, so you’ve communicated this and I am doing this. But your actions are not supportive.” [It’s] very frustrating when you don’t have consistency of support.

The higher up [on the chain of command] you get, is just when it starts to become harder to get support because egos get in the way or ulterior motives get in the way.

There’s one of the head guys [who] makes policies that even my co-workers, who have obviously been working there 10, 15 years are like, “These are just the worst policies and there’s nothing we can do about them.” And I’m like, “Oh yes, I agree with you, what can we do about this?” And like nothing because they’re higher up than us and we have to do these things based on leadership.

The management differences between the American management techniques and the Indian management techniques are very, very far apart. They’re not even from the same book. I’ll have people that are coming and asking me like, “How should I handle this situation [with a manager]?”

[Company leadership] started telling us that we were going to get promoted. As the company grew, [my supervisor] was going to move up to a manager and me assistant manager. I knew that it was a lie. They were trying to keep our morale up. I had worked so many blue-collar jobs like this. I can tell when they’re just making stuff up to give you a sense of false boosting morale. I got frustrated at that.

Sometimes there are very unrealistic expectations, but people are held accountable to things that they would have told you is just not possible.

Co-researchers also provided examples of when there were no clear parameters outlined for a process. For example, the individual noted in the onboarding vignette in Theme 2, Value as a Person, expressed frustration when there was no clearly followed and fair policy for how starting pay and raises were distributed, and consequently experienced a sense of unfairness: Workers with less experience and less education were being paid more than him, which caused a huge drain on his morale. Other co-researchers commented on the same issue regarding their own experiences:

The company's trying not to create waves; we as employees are expected not to talk about our salary. That's the unspoken rule, that you're not supposed to talk about your salary, but we all talk about it.

There are some places where you see people doing a bad job and nothing happens to them, and you are like, “Well, why do I bother when [co-worker] over there is doing nothing. I work really hard for everything and then this guy does nothing and gets paid the same.”

There’s the implication that the company seeks to exploit the worker on some level through unfair practices which occur without transparent and fair rules. One of the co-researchers with leadership experience stressed that,

Often times leaders will make poor decisions, but they make the best decisions based on the data that they have. If they have poor data, they have to go by their gut. Sure, we all have decisions that we don’t understand, but it’s a business transaction, those people are in their positions to make decisions and run them how they see fit. If I really don’t like the way it’s going and don’t agree with it, I have the freedom to go somewhere else…Bad decisions, they’re frustrating, sometimes you can feel powerless, but you always have the power to leave.

For other co-researchers, the choice was not as simple as leaving. Some felt very strongly about staying at their jobs and did not want to leave , detailing the numerous sacrifices that they made to stay at their jobs. Another detailed the fear of not paying bills or maintaining a healthy social life when he left his prior dysfunctional workplace, discussing how he greatly enjoys his freedom but lives in fear and anxiety about having important needs not met.

On a procedural level, another co-researcher illustrated how stress occurred due to little to no parameters around how employees were supposed to share duties. Being expected to do more than the job required, this co-researcher had to enforce boundaries between herself and co-workers in order to maintain her health and well-being. Aside from creating a schedule for her own duties, she also described refusing to take on the duties of others in situations where job roles were ill defined. As she learned how to cope, she detailed the personal toll:

I’ve made a schedule and I stick with it. Now, I’ve really had to put up boundaries in order to stick with that schedule. I’ve had to make people mad at me for sticking with my schedule.

It’s affected my personal life so horribly. Taking home stress, taking home just being done with everything and it spilled over into me and [significant other]. I’ll come home, and I’ll just be like, “Get away from me.” [laughs] But, I feel like I almost had to go through that because I had to understand how important and how sacred my personal life actually is.

Relatedly, another co-researcher separately shared how her significant other’s similar work environment has also caused similar emotional and physical challenges:

My boyfriend really hates his work environment and it’s stressing him out and he has depression…. He has had to change his medicine…. His co-workers are dumping the work on him, pretty much, and his boss is not really doing anything about it.

The reaction to coping in difficult situations will be covered in Theme 7, Self Care. Because of the role that leadership plays in how the person views the organization and his or her role within it, the next theme related to how leadership decisions may impact the co-researcher’s perception of being valued in the organization.

**Theme 3: Value as a Person**

Value as a person related to how leadership caused the employees to feel about how the organization viewed them: as people with strengths and potential, or as “a cog in a machine of a cog in a machine that is propping up the machine that is driving humanity forward,” as one co-researcher put it. That perception of value may come from the actions of a single leader, or from the policies and group leadership decisions which are put in place in the agency. Relationships with leaders were discussed frequently in the interviews, but the co-researchers often returned to how the leadership behaviors and decisions left the employees feeling regarding their perceptions of how they were valued. Those who recognized that their leadership valued them as a person with strengths and potential expressed loyalty to the company and were motivated to improve. Those who did not feel as though leadership valued them described a sense of meaninglessness, and several expressed that this caused them to either leave, or plan to leave an organization. This line of thought also overlapped with Theme 2, Structure and Expectations. When workers felt as though leadership placed or allowed structures and expectations which de-valued them as people, the workers also expressed the interest to leave their past or current workplace.

The forms of equilibrium found in every pattern (responsibility, adaptability, and power) can be applied to Theme 3 as well. Co-researchers expressed a variety of beliefs regarding what the responsibility of the company should be versus the responsibility of the person. Several individuals expressed expectations for how the organization should treat them, whereas others spoke of how the workers’ actions can also engender the positive value with which they are treated. Still, when moving on to the offset of adaptability, co-researchers expressed a greater interest in growing professionally and doing well with mastering skills when they felt as though their leadership cared about them. Conversely, those who felt like the leadership did not care about them, spoke of giving up. Unsurprisingly, those who felt like “a cog in the machine” also expressed feelings of powerlessness, whereas those who reported that they felt supported, needed, and respected, were empowered to do their jobs well.

This theme may appear dualistic in its valued versus not-valued approach, but many of the co-researchers’ experiences with these patterns are intertwined. The most powerful examples can be found in one co-researcher’s onboarding process and two other co-researchers’ experiences with discipline. The other more clearly dualistic statements will be described under the separate patterns subheadings.

For the onboarding experience, a co-researcher described a scenario that left him with great doubts about his company, but the feeling of being valued by a leader helped to overcome these issues in order for him to continue a career with this organization. According to this co-researcher, the company provided what was perceived as unfair pay distribution amongst co-workers; he was being paid the same or less than other co-workers, despite this co-researcher reportedly having more experience and positive employee reviews than less experienced and less educated co-workers. The co-researcher reported major distress from this: This was a major event for this person, who saw the financial reward of work to be a priority.

When you get shafted and you don’t really get any type of pay raise, or a very miniscule one compared to what you know somebody new coming into the company would be making…. That makes me feel completely unvalued in the company’s eyes and it makes me not have a drive to finish work or to really go up, above, and beyond what they’re asking for.

This co-researcher also experienced several challenges with leadership which were demoralizing:

My first boss was a very negative force in the environment. Moreover, he just didn’t care about what I was going through, what was happening with my development, especially in the pay structure.

In this part of the interview as described above, the co-researcher discussed how the job strictly became about simply making money rather than feeling motivated or loyal toward the company. However,

I had one [manager] that is taking me under her wing to guide me in my development… It’s nice to have that type of teamwork and that type of somebody that you can rely on to call out your mistakes and help you develop and show you the way…. I can definitely tell that she’s taken part of her job as developing me, which is really nice…. I can definitely say that having somebody that is there, that you feel like is there for you to develop and to help you along the way and is invested in your moving up in the company is very nice.

This co-researcher indicated that in order to deal with the unfair financial practices that he experienced in his company, he chose to apply for a position within the company which paid more. The manager who showed investment in him was described as a type of saving grace which helped to mitigate his negative experience. This co-researcher did not speak of leaving the company despite initial highly negative experiences, but instead planned to move up within the company.

In the second example of how value as a person has played out in leadership, two co-researchers detailed experiences with being disciplined when making costly mistakes in large, multi-national companies. Both expressed an acceptance that they each made a severe mistake, as well as an acceptance with how the discipline was meted. The first company provided clear communication, respectful and supportive managers, and a dignifying but appropriate consequence to the error; this co-researcher expressed gratitude, loyalty, and appreciation for his company with no desire to leave. The second company did not provide enough clear communication to avoid the mistake, and then openly communicated the fault of the employee with negative emotional reactions from managers. Although this co-researcher expressed gratitude that the company offered many personal opportunities to help employees feel valued by the company overall, and expressed that the discipline was warranted, this person expressed the desire to leave his current company as soon as his contract expired.

The first co-researcher explained that he had clear rules and expectations communicated to him, with managers who welcomed questions and often provided guidance.

If I screw up…and it costs us…[managers are] going to try and first of all help out the customer and then second of all go over with me what happened and make sure that I understand what the problem was and how to fix it and avoid it going forward…so there are consequences, but the point of the consequence isn’t to humiliate and to punish me, it’s to make a point that this is something that we need to avoid in the future. It’s not just like a slap on your wrist and go back to work. It’s, “This is a real thing but we are willing to help you and move forward.”

When the costly mistake was made, the co-researcher described that managers privately disciplined him without other co-workers’ knowledge, and did not use him as a scapegoat to the customer who was impacted by the mistake.

It’s not intended to make me feel like less than my other co-workers. It’s not to give them anything to laugh at. It’s not to give me anything to feel bad about. It’s to keep my mind on it. Keep my mind on what I’m doing.

This co-researcher expressed gratitude and appreciation for this organization with the belief that managers were authentically developing employees into better workers. “Sometimes it can be a little bit stressful, but I work for a good company. They take care of us.”

In the second scenario, the other co-researcher’s experience was completely the opposite.

Management was very clear to me just how pissed off with me they were. I mean, they bashed me up enough, that they had to in front of the client and got me off of the hook, diffused the situation.

Unlike in the prior co-researcher’s experience, managers, co-workers, and customers knew about this co-researcher’s mistake. This co-researcher described how professional evaluations and interpersonal work relationships always tied back to this event.

I guess it’s good that I have that to compare to, plus we can use it to- like when the new people that come in are all scared out of college, you’d be like, “Don’t worry, you can’t screw up worse than [co-researcher] did.” …They shouldn’t forget about it. I mean…there’s a dollar value attached to the mistake that I made, and it’s like, “Yes, it was my fault.” I mean, I can’t pass the buck. It’s like it was my fault.

However, the co-researcher noted “that was an example where I was put in a situation where I didn’t know- I didn’t have all the information available, so I would just have the capability to make a big mistake.”

This co-researcher described his relationship with leadership in paradoxical terms (“They care about me…My office has identified that I produce above average work on time…”), but made it clear that the connection to the company was completely financially driven (“It’s like [the company] is hiring my brain for 45 hours a week in exchange for a paycheck”). The co-researcher described how the use of emotional intelligence allowed him to navigate challenges with leadership (“It’s like competence does not get you promoted, it’s playing the people game”) and noted that any emotional investment went to colleagues. It should be noted that this co-researcher was the one who described feeling like a “cog in a machine.” Despite expressions of appreciation for what his company has offered employees, the co-researcher described firm plans for leaving the organization at an appropriate time. Without knowing anything about the second co-researcher’s experience with discipline, the first co-researcher in this vignette stated,

If I didn’t feel like I was doing a good job – for example, if my boss always yelled at me, if they humiliated for that thing [the costly mistake] instead of just having the punishment clearly laid out and done in a quiet manner, then I may not feel like these are the kind of people I want to be around. I may not feel like this is the kind of thing that I’m good at. I may be looking for something else to do. But they [management] don’t want that to happen. They try to foster confidence any way they can and that’s a really critical part too.

Separate from these complex and dynamic experiences, co-researchers often described very concrete experiences which fell on one end of the “value as a person” spectrum: Often, they either felt very valued, or believed that they were seen as expendable by their past and/or current organizations.

**Pattern 3.1: The perception of being valued as a person leading to loyalty and motivation**. Some co-researchers articulated highly positive experiences of feeling wanted, respected, appreciated, and supported by past and current leaders. Like in the prior vignettes about one co-researcher’s onboarding experience and the other’s disciplinary experience, the co-researchers who felt valued were loyal to their current employers even when they perceived their situations as less than ideal. None openly volunteered plans to leave, and many of the co-researchers recognized how leadership involvement was tied into their professional development. Co-researchers often described joy in doing great things for their company when they felt valued; those who followed a calling especially appreciated when their company supported their desire to go “above and beyond” for others. For co-researchers who simply saw the job as a way to make money, they described how being treated with value helped create more positive experiences in work.

If I have a work leader that is consistent and supportive, I will do everything in my power to support them, and to share their vision…even if it’s something I might be less inclined to go with personally…It’s difficult to give my all to somebody who won’t give their all for me.

It’s been important to help me do my job is…to know that the employer, if I’m working for somebody, actually cares about their employee. Otherwise, that morale goes away if you know that you’re just a number and you’re just making them more money. That’s one thing that helps me do my job.

They are looking out for us, they always will stick up for us…Our boss will also be there to say [to irate customers], “You guys need to relax a little bit and stop yelling at my employees.”

I would do anything for my manager just because she’s helped me out a lot over the past years.

One co-researcher described being specifically chosen and sought after for her current position, which established a positive trend of her wanting to do well in the new position. Even though she faced negative factors such as lower pay scale and reportedly poorly conceptualized policies due to the nature of her organization, her feeling valued made a very strong impact on her motivation and performance.

They’ve more or less just poached me and I was okay with that. [laughs] It felt very nice to know that my reputation got noticed.

I really enjoy being told I’m doing a good job. That might be a total millennial trait but I’m like, yes, let me know I’m doing a good job and I really take that and run with that.

There were things that I had that other people…saw potential in me, and they wanted to help me with my career and utilize the talents that I have. That was very nice. I think that anyone will appreciate that.

My current supervisor, I like her a lot. She gets stuff done and I appreciate that and she’s very competent. I appreciate that too, and I know that she’s climbed up the ladder, which is something that I’ve been doing and want to continue to do. So, when I see that and that she can do that as well, it gives me hope that one day I will continue my ascent…. She treats me very well. She’s open if I needed to come say anything and if I have questions, she’s there to answer them. So it’s a very good and open relationship.

**Pattern 3.2: The perception of not being valued as a person leading to meaninglessness.** Many co-researchers described the experience of not being valued, whether it was through direct interactions from leadership or through the experiencing of policies and procedures which subtracted from their feeling of worth to their organization. This often occurred when they perceived organizational leadership as unfair, unsupportive, dishonest, incompetent, and petty. One co-researcher described how the lack of support and investment in maintaining employees lead to the perception of organizational dysfunction. In this scenario, employees are not paid well or trained well for a very high stress job.

When you first are hired, you go through the whole orientation thing and then everything else, all of your trainings are on the computer. It’s click, click, click, pass. And the questions are ridiculous, like, “Should you kill a child?” “No.” “Yay, you passed.” [Staff] get so frustrated and I think that a lot of staff who do not-so-good things with the kids or to the kids, I think a lot of it is honestly because they’re just so frustrated and they don’t know what to do.

Another described similar approaches to training which fueled mounting feelings of not being valued by the company: “Right now, we’re just going to throw you in the job and you can learn from yourself.”

There were also expressions of disgust and frustration at feeling used and exploited by an organization.

I’ve worked a lot of jobs that have been like that in the past where they don’t really care for their employees, really. I just got sick of working jobs like that.

Companies will try to boost your morale with stupid tactics, like get you in a room together with everybody and, “We just made 40 million dollars this year. I just want to applaud you all for helping us make the 40 million.” But, so what? That doesn't really motivate me. You know what I mean? Cool, I clocked in every day, driving my pickup truck Monday through Friday. I'm barely making it and made my boss $40 million dollars. It's kind of like, “Hey, I'm the fat cat. Thank you all for helping me achieve my dreams.” Companies fail to make it personal with their employee. That's where they fail. They don't care about what you're aiming for.

I think in our society, it is constructed in a way to where we are not focused on helping someone develop who they are on the inside, to help them develop their unique talents and skills and what not.

[Companies] are not out there to be some kind of ministry, they’re out there to make money. That’s their approach: “You’re going to be our indentured servant or you’re out of here.”

Additionally, several co-researchers described the meaninglessness of a job where the client placed no value in the co-researcher’s work, even when the co-researchers were working for the client’s benefit.

Yes, we want to put out the best quality work that’s possible, absolutely…but at the end of the day, the client doesn’t care about it and we don’t, it’s compliance. They’re doing this because they have to do this.

There’s not really any reward to working there. Because the customers kind of suck, but helping them occasionally feels okay…But a lot of times it’s just not worth it, because you know they’re going to raise a fit somewhere else.

**Theme 4: Working Relationships**

Co-researchers offered highly polarized depictions of working with co-workers, in that the co-workers could either contribute to the positive experience and a functional environment which allowed the co-authors to grow and do well, or they contributed to a negative experience and a dysfunctional environment which was unsustainable. Related to the forms of equilibrium, co-researchers reported that positive relationships with co-workers helped them to take responsibility for proactive action, adapt to difficult situations, and feel empowered over their organizational realms (places where they could have control). Conversely, co-researchers described the idea of negative relationships with co-workers being something that was not their responsibility, and that these types of experiences lead them to not want to adapt to organizational challenges. They also often expressed feelings of being powerless when dealing with co-workers with whom they had negative relationships. Again, this is a highly dualistic theme. Co-researchers often reported having co-workers who they enjoyed working with and/or did not like to be around.

**Pattern 4.1: Like-minded co-workers can make the job enjoyable and drive professional development.** Multiple co-researchers discussed how shared vision and professional development interests allowed them to work on a functional team. Several co-researchers described ideal experiences in which they were able to perform their job duties well because of a team that sought to perform effectively. This often occurred when co-workers sought to support each other, learn from each other, and shared similar goals. It was often mentioned that co-researchers wanted to work with people who had the same ideas and values. With this kind of team, co-researchers reported that their jobs were easier than prior experiences with dysfunctional employee interactions, that they were able to better help their clients, and that this contributed to a better organizational environment as a whole.

We all have a similar idea of what we need to do for our [clients] to be successful. We know where we’re going and we know what we need to do to get it there and we are going to be successful because there’s not going to be a lot of conflicts.

I need to be around people that believe and think that way, not people that are just coming there just so that they can make a paycheck and clock in, clock out, get through the day, go home as quick as possible. I want to be around an environment where people actually have a work ethic, where they actually believe in actually doing the job.

I don't know if I would still be in [this] business if I didn't have such a good support structure around me, if these people weren't so helpful, and weren't so good at what they do.

I would say that the people are more critical to whether I can find meaning than the actual work itself in some ways, actually in a lot of ways.

The fact that I've got people around me who are helping, and I don't just take numbers and put numbers in. I talk to people, I form relationships, I form communication with people about what's going on that's critical to whether or not I can enjoy my job or if I can actually find purpose there.

Several co-researchers described scenarios in which co-workers aided each other with professional development, whether through inspiring each other to continue learning or to challenge each other to continue improving. These appeared to be fostered through warm interpersonal relationships.

I love [my co-workers]. I feel like I get a lot of support…. I get a lot of good feedback.

There are things that I'll learn during trainings that I can take back and use…or present them to other co-workers and just have them say, “I didn't know that.” Then if my co-worker goes to a training that I didn't go to, they come back and they're like, “Here's all this stuff that I learned.” That definitely helps.

Now I feel more like I'm working with peers, and so I guess I generally like to try to live up to the expectations that I know they have of me.

I think overall I've had actually better formed relationships with my current group than I did with my previous group just because they do see me also as a peer and they appreciate the efforts that I make.

[Co-workers] are all trying to prove themselves, but in a sense that they want to prove that they are worth what they are doing, rather than that they are worth more than someone else.

Similarly, co-researchers also described how personal feelings and the nature of interactions with co-workers could impact a day’s work:

[It's important to have] a good person working alongside me. We've all-- like me and the other managers, have people we prefer working with and don't. Just having them on your shift helps a lot.

Most of the people that I work with are very nice, very easy to get off with and they're very all lighthearted, easy to joke around with, which is really nice.

However, for jobs that did not require much teamwork, the role of co-workers took on a different paradigm. One co-researcher discussed how personal relationships with co-workers provided a sense of meaning which was not connected to the actual job duties:

My co-workers are absolutely the best part of this job. I don’t work for any of them on my project… but I interact with them on a daily basis. I eat lunch with a couple of them every day. They’re absolutely the best part of the show. It probably has something to do with the spectrum of experience levels they have where I’ve kind of assume a role of -- not like a mentorship role but more people come to me with questions than they go to other people. I have a couple of guys that come to me with financial questions, I’m their financial advisor. I have a couple of people that come to me with work questions. Okay, like, “Situation X happened in the office, how the hell am I supposed to deal with it.” There’s a couple of girls from [another country] that work here that don’t really have a firm grasp on how certain American things work so they come to me for questions.

Although co-researchers often communicated appreciation for like-minded co-workers, several co-researchers commented on the importance of being able to appreciate different views and strengths, so long as co-workers were willing to collaborate. They recognized the value in different viewpoints, but also strongly indicated for the importance of emotional intelligence in co-workers.

I think the most valuable asset somebody could have coming in to a job like this is the ability to work with a team that you don’t necessarily see eye-to-eye with. Having somebody who’s a good team player is so much more valuable than somebody who’s competent but an asshole. You want somebody who can play with the other children in the pool nicely.

Unfortunately, a lot of parts of living in the world is a certain level of emotional intelligence is required in terms of reading people in how they are representing themselves to you and then responding in a way that makes them feel at ease.

I had a great manager who…coached me in letting go of my personal attachment to projects…those were some tough lessons for me to- not all things have to be my way. Part of that is also recognizing and valuing what other people contribute, really taking valuing people who have strengths that are opposite of mine and doing something together.

**Pattern 4.2: Co-workers without the same values can lead to a highly negative work experience.** Conversely, co-researchers spoke with frustration and distaste at co-workers who appeared lazy, incompetent, controlling, or complacent. There were multiple stories about how non-collaborative co-workers made others’ jobs much more difficult:

One of my co-workers was very set in her ways. She was not necessarily hostile…but didn’t interact unless she had to…It made it difficult since we’re all supposed to be kind of on the same page, and she would go off and do something different. It meant that sometimes we did extra work.

There was just one guy who worked on a particular assembly line that I didn't-- He was just a jerk. He actually ended up getting fired shortly after I [moved positions] because he was mouthing off to his supervisor or something. They had been putting up with him for too long.

I've got some lazy co-workers. So, I'm honestly having to go behind them a lot and make sure they're doing what they need to do. That puts a little bit more pressure on me.

My co-workers, who half of them are technically above me, I would-- I like them, but at the same time, they're kind of taking advantage of me just because I can do physical things they can't. So, oftentimes it's, “Hey, can you come lift this?” And I'm sort of like, “I can't do it anymore.”  
  
It’s whenever people don’t want to do their jobs, it gets put on [my role] to do it.

Multiple co-researchers expressed frustration at how they wanted to do well and even improve processes within the organization, but felt unable to do so because of their co-workers. Their perception was that co-workers did not want to perform job duties with integrity, but it is unclear if that was what actually happened in those instances. Personality conflicts, environmental stressors, and differing value systems appeared to play a role in co-researchers’ lack of ability to exert their efforts for positive change over their environment. Multiple co-researchers reported leaving their organizations in those scenarios.

I feel like if people could just get more honest. There are a lot of shitty things about this place, a lot. If we can acknowledge that, but then do something about it that would help to improve it. And I feel co-workers just aren’t there because they say that’s too negative to say, and “No, you’re just bringing down morale.” And I’m like, “I’m not trying to. I’m just trying to be honest.” Just to say, “This is a fact. This is what’s happening. Let’s fix it. Let’s do something else.”

One of the biggest complaints I heard from people was they couldn’t find people that would even show up for the job. If I'm hired here, I have this job to do. I have this window to clean, that's my job. If [co-worker] over here doesn't want to do the full job, it's not on me because I got to a point where I was getting tired of having to change people… I got to where, if I was working for somebody, I just didn't care anymore. I would just do my job and my job only. If they screwed up, that's on somebody else. I just rather focus on me doing the job. That's where my focus would be as far as that goes.

I was thinking about my last job where I was one of maybe a few couple of people who had a degree. A lot of them had been working this exact same job for 15, 20, 25, 30 years. They just really didn't have the same ambitions or drive that I do, they didn't have the same background. For me it was a difficult environment to work in I guess. I got along with them but it was never the same mental stimulation or same peers I guess.

There were also examples regarding how “not fitting in” could make the co-researcher uncomfortable in the organizational environment.

If I were to go work at a warehouse and Monday morning I walk in there, it’s pretty predictable that the guys there, they’re going to be talking about the draft coming up in the NFL…. Over time, I just became cynical hearing the same conversations over and over again for 16 years.

There are some people that annoy me, that I work with… they’re just annoying people to work with that are overbearing.

The co-researchers’ experiences with co-workers were reported to be dualistic in nature; they could be either good or bad. Per the co-researchers’ accounts, positive interactions fueled professional development and productive behavior, whereas negative interactions lead to anger, frustration, and, at times, plans to leave the organization. Factors which sometimes balanced out these strong feelings were identified as altruism and personal care. When co-researchers had negative experiences in work, the ability to engage in altruism could potentially help them overcome their challenges.

**Theme 5: Altruism**

Not all co-researchers explicitly expressed the desire to contribute to the greater good, but all discussed how important it was for them to act in a way that was beneficial for co-workers or the organization. Although a minority of co-researchers were following a calling, most co-researchers indicated that their priority was to make money in order to care for their families, pay bills, and pursue things outside of work which they felt were important. Even so, co-researchers expressed satisfaction with being able to help co-workers and clients or do good things for their company. The altruistic acts may have occurred only within the scope of the organization being the “greater good,” but co-researchers expressed a sense of intrinsic reward at being able to engage in these acts.

There was one co-researcher who did not mention satisfaction from helping co-workers, clients, or the overall organization. This co-researcher reported strongly feeling as though he was not valued by his organization, and that the organization did not value employees overall. He depicted his workplace as having poor reward distribution practices and micromanagers. He described how this lead him to withdraw from his organizational culture and attempt to focus solely on using it to meet personal needs. He and other co-researchers reported that they viewed their jobs solely as a way to make money; the difference appeared to be that the other co-researchers described a more functional and positive organizational culture in which they were able to enjoy the act of contributing to others.

In terms of the three forms of equilibrium found in each pattern, co-researchers who spoke of behaving altruistically often described how it gave them a sense of personal responsibility over what they did, empowering them to do the right thing. This often helped them to adapt to other hardships which they may have encountered. When they were able to behave altruistically, they reported satisfaction with their work experience.

**Pattern 5.1: Satisfaction in doing good for another person.** Multiple co-researchers, whether following a calling or simply wanting to get paid, strongly described the desire to help people. For some, it was in the career choice they had made. For others, it was to help others avoid some form of suffering. Some of the desire to help was aimed at clients, and for others it was aimed at co-workers. These acts may take place because of the belief “That’s our job,” as more than one co-researcher put it, indicating that co-researchers therefore saw their job duties as doing good for co-workers, clients, and the organization. This is a step away from someone who believes that a job would be something that he or she needs to put minimum effort in for the sake of getting a paycheck. These co-researchers expressed that the act of doing right by others, and helping others benefit, was an important part of their work experience.

Primarily, it's just helping people… being able to help people complete projects, help things go right.

For me, the focus is getting people to feel empowered and changing the way people think about these things, whether or not the law changes. It's the *way* people think about these issues that are important to me.

Every teacher is part of the child that they're teaching.

Part of [my job reward] is the financial aspect of it, but part of it is also the opportunity to invest in other people's lives, find out what they want to do and drive them toward their goals. Making sure people are in the right position so that they can align…. Coaching other people to get where they want go.

I’m giving people information they didn’t have prior, and to help them make a better decision. That’s the thing that really rings my bell.

I have an emotional investment in [coworkers’] emotional wellbeing. So, I mean, Yes, I care about – I care that they have a good life. I care that they have a good employment.

You do whatever you can to make sure that [the customers’] needs are taken care of…. They’re asking us to do something and we need to provide that service for them. That’s our job.

I don't care how defiant, how oppositional [the kids are], I don't care. That's where I thrive…I love working with kids who hate me, because to me, that's my job - to help them to change their perspectives on things. Help them realize, “Okay, I got to this point in my life because of things that I did. And I can change it." Just seeing that being able to turn around, that's awesome.

I do like mentoring and developing people, but a lot of that is finding out what they want to do, and then making sure they are in the right role where they can be effective and move toward that.

We have a lot of customers and a lot of them are very nice people. A lot of them are fun to talk to. I like helping them out because they'll tell me about what the project's doing, what they're going to be working on. It's nice to be able to put this together.

I wouldn't say I'm passionate about the [product] itself so much as about the whole process and about being with people and helping people, having people help me.

**Pattern 5.2: Satisfaction with contributing to the greater good.** As stated previously, co-researchers did not always indicate a desire to contribute to a greater good outside of the organization. This was especially true for co-researchers who saw their work as a job rather than work as a calling, but many of them still discussed how their jobs impacted the world outside of their work. There were several instances in which they described their interest in doing what is best for the organization, which serves as the greater good in this instance. Again, this is a departure from those who would seek to meet only their own needs within the organization. Often, co-researchers spoke of how helping other people was recognized as a means of contributing to the organization.

Just making sure that things are-- that the people are in the role where I can get the most productivity out of them and the company is going to be best positioned to grow.

We always try to put our best face forward in order to create a positive impact in the community.

I like knowing that I have helped contribute positively to my society…. I can help shape what our world is like…

For me, in my job, everything is about, "Are we profitable and are we growing?" As long as those things are happy, those things are jiving, then we are good.

It's like a puzzle, making sure that I'm covering [my company] when I'm charging [the customers], so I'm not giving things away and actually costing [my company] money, but I'm also able to give [customers] a good price that they can use and they can make money off it as well.

I love getting people involved, tapping into someone's discontent where they feel a certain wrongness. There's a moment where people are like, “I can't handle it anymore, I can't ignore it anymore, I want to do something.” I like reaching people who are at that point and saying, “Let's look at this, here is what you can do, let's get active, let's get your voice heard.”

They'll tell me what the projects are. They'll be doing things for schools or for government facilities or for stores, for people's houses. It's just cool to think about all this stuff that people are putting together, things that I'm helping to create, basically.

Co-researchers described personal satisfaction from being able to contribute to their organization or to the world around them. Sometimes it was through activating the potential of others, and other times it was through recognizing how their actions could make a difference in the micro and macro systems around them. However, they reported feeling great frustration and stress when they felt blocked from being able to perform their duties, and when they became too emotionally or personally over-invested in their jobs.

**Theme 6: Frustration and Stress**

In the entirety of the interviews, co-researchers expressed frustration when there were barriers to their ability to perform their jobs effectively. In tandem with expressions of gratitude and appreciation for the positive aspects of work, co-researchers described some very strong feelings about what happened when the phenomenon turned negative. These feelings of frustration surged upon recounting perceptions of leadership and co-workers who contributed to a negative environment, or when the co-researcher was emotionally or personally over-invested in the job. When it came to leadership and co-workers, there were vehement depictions of unfairness, poor communication, and poor treatment. As for their own personal investment in the job, some noted that this came from their sense of calling, whereas others described it as the desire to do well and perform their task effectively. They depicted intense negative reactions when faced with the perception of being blocked from completing their duties well.

Regarding the three forms of equilibrium found in each theme: Although some participants noted the importance of taking personal responsibility and focusing on one’s own behaviors, there were still underlying expectations for the company’s responsibility in their situations. Their frustration and stress sometimes lead to adaptation, such as one co-researcher describing how her work situation lead her to enforce her personal boundary needs, but many others held the view that they were placed in a situation which they needed to flee. Finally, the experience of frustration and stress from these factors often lead co-researchers to report feelings of powerlessness, leading many to take actions which helped them regain a sense of power. Much of this leads up to theme seven, which is about the coping mechanisms which co-researchers reported using in such difficult situations. The frustration and stress came from their external environment and internal cognitions.

**Pattern 6.1: Perception of leadership and co-worker behaviors creating a negative environment.**  Per the co-researcher depictions, this frustration arose from many of the negative aspects of the prior themes, such as experiencing micromanagement, organizational unfairness, lack of clearly communicated structures or expectations, no feeling of being valued as a person for the organization, and co-workers who did not share the same values.

For example, the co-researcher who was quoted as saying “I just didn’t care anymore. I got to where I would do my job and my job only” expressed frustration at repeated experiences with co-workers who did not want to do a job effectively (therefore impacting his ability to do his job), as well as frustration at companies which appeared to exploit their workers. There appeared to be a link between companies who exploited their workers and workers who did not invest in their jobs. He described scenarios that he witnessed in which employees are promoted based on their friendships or ability to appear charismatic to upper managers instead of their actual competence, something which other co-researchers also commented on. However, he maintained hope that he could find or build something better with a company that valued its workers, and with co-workers who wanted to contribute to the success of a company.

Based on this idea that leadership and co-workers have not always been chosen based on competence, multiple co-researchers expressed frustration with others reportedly blocking the company’s ability to do well, and the ability for the co-researcher to be part of a functional system. This was often based on their interactions with leaders and co-workers, and ranged across the perceptions of having poor leadership and/or demeaning and disrespectful co-workers. Co-researchers described their experiences with emotionally laden tones:

A group of leaders can pass directions to a manager; he can still say “Okay, I'll do that.” Then not actually implement it and there's no checks and balances there. It's all based on what [he] reports. And [he's] going to lie.

Going into the office [when it’s unnecessary] feels a little weird for me. Having to be mandated to go into the office because this one person said so. Because he doesn’t like telecommuting. I feel like it’s probably a little bit of a generational gap, though.

I do get very sensitive when, especially, a younger man will come and try to tell me how to do something…but I do shut it down too, and I know there [have] definitely been instances where I've been bitchy and at this point, I have decided and I don't care if [laughs] people think I'm a bitch because I'm not going to suffer someone telling me to do something I already know.

In their responses, many co-researchers idealized expectations of fairness, reward for hard work, and mutual respect. There was a sense of bewilderment at the motives of others who behaved in a way that they perceived as being inappropriate or unethical. Co-researchers also experienced frustration and stress when they had an emotional or personal over-investment in the job.

**Pattern 6.2: Being emotionally or personal over-invested in the job**. When co-researchers held high expectations of their workplaces which were unmet, or when they threw themselves into their work with dedication which took more from them than they could necessarily offer, they expressed frustration and stress. Examples included having to work multiple jobs to make a living while following a calling, being frustrated when unable to do something important, and feeling a sense of personal failure in their inability to complete their tasks. As per one co-researcher: “It’s really difficult not to get emotionally or personally involved because that’s how you’re spending your time. When you’ve worked your butt off to do that.”

One co-researcher often spoke of how he perceived prior workplaces as highly unfair based on his personal expectations of the merits of working hard to do a task well. He described himself as a hard worker who was easily disgusted when he saw that hard work was not rewarded in his workplaces. Instead, he reported that individuals who were favored by managers were often promoted over competent, hard-working ones and that leadership would use dishonest and threatening behaviors as their attempt to motivate their workforce.

Work experiences have made me a negative person, actually…. I’ve fought depression, anxiety, and stuff…I’m just angry because I believed that solely a good work ethic would get me ahead, but then I discovered that work ethic doesn’t necessarily get you ahead. Working hard is just a component to many other components that contribute to someone’s success…. Now, I’ve realized where I’ve failed in the process. I’ve realized where I’ve failed to do certain things, but only after, in retrospect. It’s kind of made me an angry person, I guess.

This co-researcher described growing up in a lower socioeconomic status that he’s had to work his way out from, and continues to run from falling back into this status in his efforts to be financially successful. He had even mentioned how his work experiences impacted his ability to maintain healthy relationships with other people. Relatedly, another co-researcher, who held a much higher socioeconomic status and served as an example of someone who did not become overly invested in his work, spoke of how he used emotional intelligence to influence leadership toward favorable treatment for him:

I put on a face to them. I act to management. It’s always smiling, “Hey, how are you? I’m doing great. How are you? How was your weekend?” Unfortunately, a lot of parts of living in the world, is a certain level of emotional intelligence is required in terms of reading people in how they are representing themselves to you and then responding in a way that makes them feel at ease. Just having the emotional intelligence to reply correctly to a person in a superior position, that’s all it takes to get noticed. It’s like competence does not get you promoted, it’s playing the people game.

Whether a co-researcher was able to utilize interpersonal skills to “get ahead” or not, there was a broad recognition across co-researchers of how work can be a complex environment that requires maneuvering in order to deal with work challenges. As one co-researcher said in response to being given some demands that made no sense to him: “Okay, I’ll play the game, boss.” Another co-researcher described how she outright defied her organizational authority, rebelling against the status quo of the place, in order to perform her duties. Although individuals in her workplace’s social structure may have been inconvenienced by her actions, she received no repercussions from the leadership and was able to perform her job duties better. Another co-researcher recounted a time when she directly challenged her leadership on a decision, based on deeply held ideas about a decision:

I have had a disagreement with my current boss recently, that they wanted me to do something and I said, “this is not going to help us at all, and it’s going to waste time and money.” I stood firm and it wasn’t pretty…I do not make a stand like that regularly but this [action] they wanted me to do was a complete waste of time, in my mind.

The two extremes depicted here range from compliance to defiance, both serving as a means of coping within the organization to perform duties. Other co-researchers described more moderate responses to managing their personal investment in the organization, such as one who described negotiating with multiple systems of people to solve errors and overcome challenging scenarios. This co-researcher also recognized his industry as “a very volatile and cut-throat environment,” and being in a leadership position, held more power in his organization than the other co-researchers, whose frustration often came from powerlessness over their environment. This sense of emotional and personal over-investment in the job presented itself as neither positive nor negative, but it was the frustration and stress which made it negative. Co-researchers who expressed being heavily invested in their outcomes were much more passionate about doing things correctly and working hard to achieve idealized outcomes, and struggled when they felt the need to be at odds with others in the organization in order to attain work goals. Much of the frustration spilled over into discussions about self-care. Co-researchers either developed methods of coping with the frustration, pulled back from contributing to the best of their ability in order to deal with the situation, or mentioned leaving the department or the company entirely.

**Theme 7: Personal Care**

In response to job stressors, co-researchers often discussed how personal care was a vital part of their experience of meaning in work. Related to the forms of equilibrium (responsibility, adaptation, and power) found in all patterns: If they were able to learn how to cope with the stressors, they were better able to adapt. This often occurred when they took personal responsibility for their own well-being. They felt empowered to do what was best for them. However, co-researchers frequently held expectations for how the company was supposed to support their ability to engage in self-care. The work-life balance concept was mentioned, with co-researchers describing their attempt to manage it for themselves while still being able to perform their duties. When they continued feeling stress from being emotionally or personally over-invested, they either emotionally detached or developed highly negative responses.

**Pattern 7.1: Learning healthy habits to cope with job stressors.** In addition to professional development, co-researchers spoke of how stressful situations in work lead to furthering their personal development. Many depicted how they held themselves responsible for coping in difficult situations, and each had different strategies. The strategies included setting boundaries for what they will/will not do for work, managing their time, and learning how to cope with difficult emotions.

I couldn’t go to a work event one time because I had a concert planned…far in advance and so I couldn’t drop out of that…One of my co-workers asked, “Where are you going?” “Oh, I can’t go to the thing tonight. I’ve got choir.” She goes, “Yes, you do stuff outside [the workplace].” She didn’t mean for that to be a meaningful comment, but I’m thinking like, “Oh my God.” Why is that unusual? That’s what’s supposed to happen. You’re supposed to do things that aren’t work when you’re not at work…You separate them. I don’t want to live my whole life at [workplace].

Now it's like, "I'm still fine even though things [at work] are bad." If I didn't figure that out I would have never gotten to where I am. I would have never figured out how to be in a relationship with somebody. How to not take things out on them. How to still maintain, "Hey, you have a life outside of work. You need to maintain yourself.” I would have never gotten back into yoga. I would have never gotten back into fitness, and feeling good about myself and just in general.

I’m very careful about certain hours being blocked out for the different kinds of things that I want to do, whether it’s work or even spending so many hours a month having lunch with friends because I enjoy that.

I'll just emotionally detach myself just like when I lost my job. There were some hard feelings and things about lost income, but there is also accountability because I know that my career path is volatile like that.

Several co-researchers mentioned the ability to separate their personal lives from their work lives. One co-researcher attributed it to her choice, whereas another described it as the nature of the job which he held:

I never bring my work home… That's extremely important to me. I don't want to be the 12 hour a day person… Work will never be my life. That's just not how I want to live. I want to have my time... Have hobbies and have friends, and go do things.

Once work is done, work stays at work. I have the luxury in a job in a corporate world that, once I hit my 8 hours for the day of my 40 hours for the week, I can just drop everything and pick it up the next week. I don’t have to worry about everything that’s going on.

**Pattern 7.2: Appreciation for company’s support in self-care**. Co-researchers also acknowledged the role that their organization took in helping them administer self-care and work-life balance in their lives. Whether it was due to the nature of the work itself, or the company’s culture, co-researchers frequently expressed the importance of how their work allowed them to engage in practices and activities which benefitted their health, development, and well-being. This ranged from the company providing non-work rewards, to professional development opportunities, to the ability to take time off.

I have the flexibility to work from home all the time. That’s a very big deal.

Workers may want to be trained in something that is not relevant to their job, and the company allows them, sponsors those trainings as a reward.

Next week is staff appreciation week, they are going to have ice cream and they have other things going on.

We all go out, as a department we go to lunch or do that kind of thing. It is not necessarily free lunch and we have to hurry back, but it is nice to have those things.

Co-researchers described a variety of choices and options that the organization offered for meeting their personal balance needs; some were intentional company offerings, whereas others were more reflective of how the organizational culture accommodated self-care. Still, others came from the nature of the job itself, such as if an individual worked from home or had work that did not require heavy attention. Those who did not have their personal needs met often spoke of just giving up on trying to do well, and had plans to leave their current organization (or had already left one where they struggled).

**Pattern 7.3: Giving up on trying to do well and/or planning to leave when needs are not met.** There were also cases where the co-researcher reported that they had been or were unable to cope with some of the stressors in their work environment. Efforts toward self-care had reportedly helped them momentarily cope, but there were times when the negative responses were so powerful that the individual either left the organization or had concrete plans for leaving. The reasons for leaving were often tied to not having needs met and being unable to cope with work environment challenges.

[From repeated negative experiences] I got to where, if I was working for somebody, I just didn’t care anymore. I would rather do my job and my job only. If they screwed up, that’s on somebody else.

I’ve worked a lot of jobs…where they don’t really care for their employees, really. I just got sick of working jobs like that.

Working these days is about keeping your head down until the shit hits the fan.

I lost trust in some of the people running the show.

I just won’t tolerate that anymore. I’ve seen it countless times.

Multiple co-researchers recounted stories of leaving or planning to leave their current organization. Some reported the mobility to leave, whereas others reported either attempting to do minimum work or responding with behaviors which could be perceived as inappropriate in the workplace (e.g., being “bitchy” or refusing to take on extra work) as a means of self-preservation. The experience of meaning in work for millennials ranged from positive to negative, with co-researchers describing multiple responses within a shared phenomenon.

**Exemplary Portraits**

As part of the heuristic process, three portraits were developed to illustrate how the experience of meaning in work has manifested for these specific participants. The co-researchers each depicted an intense variety of responses to this shared experience, so the portraits are meant to show how the shared patterns emerged in unique and multifaceted ways for each co-researcher. The names below have been changed for confidentiality purposes, and job descriptions may be vague so that they can’t be traced back to the co-researchers. These co-researchers were chosen to depict the positive and negative ends of the spectrum of experiencing meaning and work, as well as to differentiate the experiences of those who see work as a job versus those who are following a calling.

**Portrait 1: Jake.** Jake’s experience fell on the very positive side of encountering meaning in work. His work was not a calling; instead, he started out his job as a means to make money and attained his current position when his supervisors accommodated a hardship he endured because of a workplace hazard. According to Jake, his job tasks basically involved performing calculations and collaborating with clients and co-workers. Jake’s portrait was chosen because he embodied many of the positive stereotypes attributed to millennials (e.g., altruistic, social-justice minded, collaborative) and, from his depiction, his workplace has actuated his strengths through fair and transparent practices. He described being in a mutually beneficial relationship with his organization, in which he felt valued and empowered to do his job. In return, he endeavored to contribute back to the workplace to the best of his ability. He respected and appreciated his supervisors and his co-workers, whom he felt respected and appreciated him in return. Through these circumstances, he reported an overall positive sense of meaning in what he did.

To Jake, his supervisors lead by example and provided a functioning example of a democratic hierarchy. Having autonomy was a critical piece of his job, because he needed to reach out to multiple co-workers in his facility, and possibly in other facilities, to complete his tasks. He recognized that this circumstance was more than just having good workers, but that it was an integral part of the company culture. Communication in his workplace was described as being open, with expectations being clearly laid out. Having supportive leaders, affirmative policies, and collaborative co-workers was vital for him to be able to do his job.

That is very important, not only just having these people here I know to talk to, but knowing that this is part of what the company does. This isn't just, I happen to have a good boss. I happen to have good co-workers. A lot of these are just policies. This is how the company works. It's just good to have that feeling, to feel like you're in that support environment, to have a boss who you can say, "Hey, I'm not able to complete everything that I have on my plate right now. Can you help?" And they'll do what they can to help.

Just knowing that that's not going to have any negative repercussions, where, "Why can't you do all of this? You should be able to do this without having to bother me about it." It's basically an open-door policy with any of my bosses. I can go talk to the plant manager, I can go talk to the sales manager or to the general manager who is over this facility and absolutely in charge of it as well. All their offices are open as long as they're not on the phone or in a meeting, I can go talk to them…. It's a mutual cycle of support that just makes everything a little bit easier to do, a little bit more worth doing.

In tandem with expressing an appreciation for what his organizational environment offered, Jake took ownership of his part in the company. This included personal responsibility for initiating positive interactions and accepting constructive feedback. For example, Jake indicated that he was proactive with relationship-building in his organization, as well as maintaining knowledge of current company happenings.

I make a point to go out there anyway and talk to some of the guys, especially the supervisors, to make sure that I know what's going on. I don't always get to go and walk around the plant and talk to all the guys in the area, but anytime I do, they know who I am, I know who they are, and it's just a good situation there.

Jake also expressed an appreciation for how his supervisors offered feedback, and conveyed his understanding of how it was meant to help his professional development. He described his leaders as participating in role model behavior; they behaved in a way which he perceived as competent and fair, especially because he held the belief that they were interested in his professional development and valued him as an employee. He explained that he liked to do well and perform competently in his job tasks.

Like the plant manager, he'll go out in the plant and he'll say, "Check this out, this is what it should look like." He'll offer helpful criticism and basically just lead by example and that's what my bosses do.

[The managers] are looking out for us, they always will stick up for us. For example, if a customer has a problem, they will stick up for us and as long as we haven't violated any policies or anything, we haven't done anything bad, they're going to take our side as long as they possibly can.

So, there are consequences, but the point of the consequence isn't to humiliate and to punish me, it's to make a point that this is something that we need to avoid in the future. It's not just like a slap on your wrist and go back to work. It's, "This is a real thing, but we are willing to help you and move forward.”

Jake reported that he witnessed very little turnover in his workplace in the several years that he has been there. Leaders reportedly attempt to accommodate a worker who struggles in their role, but they also provide clear expectations and structures that workers are expected to operate within.

There's a pretty high level of fairness in most of these support-versus-response-to-infractions of any kind. The only time where you might find something that is very harsh for something that might seem like a small thing is when safety is concerned.

When he experienced setbacks which may have reflected poorly on his performance, Jake worked hard to show his supervisors that he “understood what happened, and that I knew what to do going forward” to continue proving that he was worthy of being part of the organization. “Just to make sure that everyone is confident that they can work with me just the same way that I’m confident that I can work with them… I work with good people.” Although he trusted that they would not lose respect for him, he still felt inspired and driven to continue showing that he was a productive member of the organization.

Jake’s personality and values could also be said to play a role in how he responded to his environment.

I am working to try and get more money, obviously, but the things that I like to do and the people that I like to know, those are more important to me than getting all the money... I would say it's probably a balance in-between there because I'm getting paid pretty well, but as I said I'm not necessarily passionate about the [product] but belonging in this group is very important to me.

Social interaction, being part of something bigger, and making things happen. Those are the biggest things [that are important to me]. Also, the monetary compensation that makes up for the difference between the lack of passion versus the time that I would spend on it. Monetary compensation and social interactions, they've all helped to make up the difference there, I guess between that.

When it came to any dissatisfaction, he reported that there were issues which could be improved to make his job easier. He also reported that he would be interested in better financial rewards, but that his current organizational environment and current compensation level helped him to feel satisfied with his current earning level. He noted that his financial needs would change if he moved to work at another location or gained more responsibilities. He agreed that his current organization offers him a sense of purpose and greatly contributed to his positive psychological well-being. The next portrait will be of someone whose experience was a stark contrast in comparison to Jake’s experience.

**Portrait 2: Bob.** Bob’s experience was the opposite of Jake’s. He spent several years in companies until he became so disgusted from his experiences that he chose to be self-employed. He described several encounters with dishonest company leadership, unfair organizational practices, management that did not value his worth as a human being, and co-workers who appeared lazy and complacent to him. This frustrated him greatly because he strongly believed in the ideal that hard work should be rewarded, and felt driven to perform his duties well.

Bob described coming from a background which left him at a disadvantage, causing him to have very few choices when it came to employment.

My only options were whatever I could get. I didn’t have the choice, “Well, hmm, let me just pick what career I want.” I started to do whatever I had to do. What I realized is I grew sick of having to do what I had to do. Over time, it wears on you and then you want freedom. You want freedom to do things on your own and be your own boss.

His depictions of negative work experiences contributed to his overall view that organizations did not care for their workers. Bob’s experiences drove him to seek freedom, despite the risks that came with it.

The only things it means to me is that this is the best, quickest way I can figure out how to make money, being on my own without a network, without a cushion, without any kind of support or whatsoever, no government help, no family to fall back on, nothing like that. It's like literally, you have to think to yourself what can I do to put cash in my pocket now and what’s the easiest way to make that happen? That's like the whole purpose behind it.

I fear the-- Just general fear that I'll go hungry and just knowing that nobody's going to take care of me if I fall into that, if I don't work… I fear not being able to have the kinds of relationships I want with people and friendships.

He had grown weary of how organizations typically operated. Seeing himself as a competent and dedicated worker to any task (“I'm not going to cut corners. If that's my job, I'm just going to do the job”), he chafed at micromanaging leaders and complacent co-workers. He wanted to feel like his employer cared about him as a person, and that he could be in an environment “where people actually have a work ethic, where they actually believe in actually doing the job.”

Bob described himself as being creative and entrepreneurial. He was actively educating himself about marketing and product development, and held specific ideals about how an organization should treat its employees. There was a company he idealized because it empowered its employees to do well, and he contrasted his perception of this company with his own experiences.

[This ideal company] teach[es] skills that you can take and apply to the real world… the strategies for investing, to their employees… basically, their objective is to teach their employees how to become independent and on their own, be free to do what they want to do. Whereas, a lot of companies, they want to make you part of their cult and keep you trapped in our business. There's a lot of fear and manipulation within the companies to make you fear losing your job. They want you to stay in the job out of fear.

Much of his distress came from negative experiences with his prior management. He described one manager who let him do his job and compared him to another who took an authoritarian role:

He did not take the approach of “I’m the boss,” or “Here’s what you do, and you better be doing that,”…. He took one of those leadership roles where he’s more friendly…. I do my job. There was never an issue of him having to tell me what to do or anything like that…. He had a couple of good employees under him…. That was easy. Whereas before, [at a previous job]…the guy that they had over me, he always emphasized his position and his authority. “Well, here’s the way we’re going to do it and blah blah blah,” and always had to talk about his position and take on this “I’m over you” role, which is so common… people get fed up, they’re not happy…. There’s too much of a superiority complex that goes on in these jobs.

Bob was also heavily impacted by dishonesty at one job where he was promised a promotion which he never received. He generalized multiple companies as regularly acting dishonestly, as “all these companies with their lies and how they do business is just discouraging…. Companies will try to boost your morale with stupid tactics…. Companies fail to make it personal with their employees.”

There was additional frustration with hiring and promotion practices. Bob recounted when a younger college graduate was hired to be his manager, yet this manager reportedly did not have the emotional intelligence to properly manage subordinates effectively and sensitively. The younger manager instead relied on micromanaging and controlling techniques. “That drove me to quit.” He noticed that co-workers were often promoted for being charismatic rather than competent, and was frustrated when co-workers felt they were entitled to more money than was appropriate. When co-workers regularly argued, did not show up for work, did not perform the job correctly, or acted in other irresponsible ways, he struggled at work. He became angry because he had previously believed that his work ethic should have yielded rewards, only to find out that there were other tactics he could have used to find success. He believed that companies are naturally going to be harsh on employees “because that’s the only way you’re going to get them to do anything” because of a perceived “lack of work ethic.” He described why this study appealed to him; its description tapped into his deeply held views of how the current world of work operates, as well as his hope that it could be transformed into something more authentic and meaningful.

I think in our society, it is constructed in a way to where we are not focused on helping someone develop who they are on the inside, to help them develop their unique talents and skills. We have a system set in place that looks like that but it's not actually that…

They give you this illusion of this happiness but what that fails to do when you have this format, this template, this framework that's being taught to people, they experience what how I would describe like a cognitive dissonance because part of them knows that, "It's not exactly what I want to do." But at the same time, they're taught it and they do believe it because they've been taught it. And so, they go after that path.

Then they don’t really find happiness trying to follow that model. If we can figure out-- that's why this study interested me because I think this is the kind of stuff that needs to be taught. If we can figure out what a person's unique talents and skills are and help that person figure out the real world and see the real world for what it really is, then they would probably do a whole lot better in their own life and contributing to society.

It's a lie, so it's a big lie. Most people, I think, are working at jobs that they don’t like.   
And in fact, every Labor Day, I see these articles on social media talking about something 80% of people don't like their jobs and they mess around on the job and etcetera. But if we could teach people to-- if we had a realistic way to teach people how to figure out what they're good at and how they can excel based off their innate talents, then we could have an all productive society.

People will do things because it comes from the heart as opposed to it coming from what they've just been taught, if that makes sense.

I might be struggling but I’m free.

**Portrait 3: Lisa.** Unlike the prior co-researchers, Lisa followed a calling that was related to her own personal struggles which began in her childhood and haunted her until early adulthood. She had to fight systemic issues to do what was best for her clients, which took a personal toll on her health and well-being – yet she described this suffering as strongly contributing to her development into a stronger and healthier person. Fewer quotes are used for Lisa than for the other portraits, for the sake of protecting confidentiality due to the specific nature of her work.

Lisa was able to take her prior experience and apply it in a way that helped her clients. She enjoyed the challenging nature of her job because she could apply her own personal understanding of the dynamics which were present in the tasks she needed to perform. She worked in a place where she was held responsible for more tasks than she thought was appropriate. In response, she “actually pushed back and been like, ‘Nope.’ And I’ve gotten a lot of backlash from that.”

Lisa described how the challenging nature of her environment helped her to develop boundaries, to not only rebel against unrealistic organizational expectations which could be detrimental to her own wellness, but could also impede her ability to perform her duties appropriately and do what was best for clients. Instead, she attempted to re-route tasks to where they belonged. She enjoyed the challenging nature of her job, but was experiencing symptoms of burnout due to the dysfunction in her organization.

Creativity was an important part of helping her do her job well, and Lisa enjoyed the opportunity to try new techniques. Her ability to take part in multiple trainings was also highly valued, and she expressed appreciation that her workplace not only allowed her to partake in the trainings, but that she was able to trade knowledge with co-workers who had attended different trainings. “My co-workers, as far as my [same job description] coworkers, I love them…. That’s where I get my support from.” Strangely, there had been a perceived lack of training when she first began her job, but she reported appreciating the opportunity to “learn by doing” when she was new.

Regarding leadership for her workplace, Lisa voiced strong feelings about power distance and corruption. She stated that leaders often did not understand the experiences of lower level workers, which lead to poor leadership. She was also very frustrated with the perception of dishonesty and lack of integrity among managers.

I feel like people that are in higher up positions at a place like this really need to have done their time as a [lower level role]. And if you haven’t done your time… then you don’t know what you’re doing… There are different dynamics. There are different things to consider. There is a whole team that you have to consider, and what different parts of that team do. And so I feel like someone who hasn’t worked in that environment, just wouldn’t know; not because they’re stupid, but because you don’t think about it.

Just the higher up you get, is just when it starts to become harder because egos get in the way or ulterior motives get in the way…. they're kind of removed from your reality and they're not synching with what your needs are to help you do your job.

Lisa spoke of leaders who engaged in unethical practices to meet goals established for them by higher leaders who demanded accountability but offered minimal support for doing so. It was especially frustrating when co-workers formed cliques to help leaders cover up the lack of integrity, often at odds with co-workers who were upset by these actions. Still, she recognized that the organization did not do much to support or annually train the workers in lower level positions who were often faced with these difficult dynamics. Although her position received some helpful rewards in the form of training and a voice in the way certain things were carried out, she was also at odds with those who performed unethically.

Co-workers in different departments often had ill-defined job roles and many would attempt to push work onto others, or co-workers who shared the same job role as Lisa were treated as inexhaustible resources. The challenges of the job caused her to take control over a lot of her own job functions and set strict boundaries for how she would interact with co-workers and clients. While this helped her to develop establish better boundaries in her own personal life, she felt as though this was not fair for co-workers who struggled with setting boundaries in the workplace.

No one’s looking to do you any favors there, you need to do it yourself… I can definitely see how, if other people aren’t as assertive or outspoken or whatever, then they have a harder time and that’s not right…. That’s not fair to other people who want to feel like they’re more supported in doing that, as opposed to what I’ve had to do and just say, “I don’t care if you support me or not. I’m not going to do that.” Now, my supervisors will support me, but I’ve made a lot of other departments mad at me.

The stress of the job had spilled over into her personal life, especially impacting her relationship with her significant other. However, despite the negative experiences that she encountered, it brought her to an important realization about balancing her personal needs with her work life.

I would never have realized how special and protected I need to keep my personal life, had it not been under attack from me not keeping it separate and me not taking self-care. When I first started to work there, my psychological state just crashed and burned because I wasn't taking care of myself. When I started to see that I was like, "Oh no, no, no, time out. I need to actually take care of myself." So I put a stronger emphasis on taking care of myself, which made me a happier person, which made me less pissed off at my job, which made me less pissed off at home. I was able to see, "Oh, it is important to take care of yourself."

Because of my own [past history], I was never a priority for myself. So really having it look at me in my face as far as like, "You could seriously screw yourself out of the greatest thing [the relationship] ever if you keep going on this path that you're on.” Made me jolt back to reality and say, "Okay, I need to take care of myself." That's, in turn, made both my personal life and my work life stronger, if that makes sense. You're going to get affected by your work life, that's normal. It was correlated. If things were good at my job, I was fine. If things were bad at my job, I was not fine.

Now it's like, "I'm still fine even though things are bad.” If I didn't figure that out, I would have never gotten to where I am. I would have never figured out how to be in a relationship with somebody. How to not take things out on them. How to still maintain, "Hey, you have a life outside of work. You need to maintain yourself.” I would have never gotten back into yoga. I would have never gotten back into fitness, and feeling good about myself, and just in general.

Lisa acknowledged that her organization was not completely dysfunctional. “There are so many wonderful staff who I just – they’re amazing” because they have the ability to do well in the highly stressful nature of their jobs. Greater honesty, authenticity, and empowerment of new and different ideas would have made it an even better place, according to her. Despite these positives, Lisa left this organization and found employment in the same field with another agency shortly after the interview.

**Creative Synthesis**

In heuristic tradition, the creative synthesis is the assemblage of the data into a composite depiction of the shared experience of meaning in work for millennials. This is performed by reviewing the original data and utilizing tacit knowledge and intuitive structuring (Moustakas, 1990). I created a graphic (see Appendix A) of the themes and patterns as if spoken by the co-researchers, including myself as one of the co-researchers, with details about how each pattern may manifest. Using this graphic, I summarized the co-researcher’s amalgamated experiences, and will go into further description here about the shared experience of meaning in work for millennials.

Co-researchers responded to the topic of the experience of meaning in work for millennials due to their intense interest in the topic; they held a desire not only to understand the phenomenon to a greater degree, but also to understand what it meant for themselves. They had specific ideas about what gave them a sense of positive meaning, and expressed frustration and distress when recounting the experiences which provided them with negative meaning. These experiences impacted how they felt about their organizational environments, organizational practices, co-workers, leaders, job tasks, and themselves. To some extent, it influenced how they viewed their organization, or even a majority of organizations, as a whole.

One of the most predominantly discussed concepts was how autonomy interacted with structure and expectations. Co-researchers unanimously valued their autonomy, yet recognized that their autonomy was only as beneficial as the parameters they had been given. When co-researchers did not know what was expected of them or the rules regarding how they were supposed to perform, their autonomy became confusing and meaningless. Autonomy in this case served as a means for co-researchers to experience negative meaning, as several did when not having clear parameters lead to organizational dysfunction. There were instances when the lack of parameters and clearly defined expectations even caused some co-researchers to experience backlash, whether for making a mistake due to lack of knowledge regarding what they were supposed to be doing, or in attempting to create their own rules and parameters in the absence of such. However, those who experienced clearly communicated expectations, coaching, policies, and who understood the means by which to do their jobs, described a sense of satisfaction with their ability to operate autonomously in their roles. The way that these parameters should be communicated also came up in the interviews.

Training and clearly delineated instructions are incredibly welcomed, but only at the right time and place, according to the co-researchers. Co-researchers described how intensive training and outlined instructions were valuable at the beginning of a job or project, but not always helpful afterwards. This was differentiated from training that existed for the sake of professional development, which co-researchers lauded. Instead, co-researchers felt that initial instruction was valuable, but that they often deserved their autonomy once they knew how to perform their tasks. Many explained that once they reached a level of competency over their duties, they wanted to be allowed to pursue their tasks with little oversight. The ability to pursue self-efficacy through mastery, as built through the right balance of structure and autonomy, provided great positive meaning for co-researchers. Most commented on the importance of regular guidance and support so that they could seek help for areas where they struggled with mastery. Others accepted regular guidance as a normal and appreciated part of their work experience, especially when the leader providing the support had shown a sense of value in the co-researcher as a person.

There were strong emotions and views surrounding how being valued lead co-researchers to view their experiences in work as meaningful or meaningless. When the leadership of an organization was able to show co-researchers that they mattered in the organization, the co-researchers reported a much more satisfied view with their organization than those whose leadership made the co-researchers feel undervalued and even exploited. In this instance, “leadership” could refer to broad policies made by leadership members which impact the workers (such as company-sponsored shows of appreciation and professional development opportunities), or it could indicate when a person in any leadership position showed interest in a lower level worker.

Company-sponsored decisions were often incorporated into the co-researcher’s depictions of self-care, where the organization was seen as sponsoring something which promoted work-life balance, helped moderate stressful conditions, and contributed to professional development interests. Interpersonal interactions were described as having a powerful impact, such as a when leaders who were viewed as approachable and competent made an effort to provide constructive and affirmative feedback, and communicated to the worker that they wanted to help him or her do well in the organization. The majority of co-researchers portrayed how that type of leadership behavior often inspired them to “go above and beyond” for their leader, or it at least helped co-researchers to better cope with other organizational dysfunctions which could have otherwise caused them to feel like there was no purpose for what they did. When co-researchers described an experience of not feeling valued by leadership, they often expressed a sense of complete meaninglessness, which could be summed as, “Why am I putting so much effort into something when no one cares about what I do or if my needs are being met in return for the effort?” Additional frustration or apathy arose for those who felt as though co-workers were rewarded by their leadership for the wrong reasons.

Relationships with co-workers was a polarized issue for co-researchers. Co-researchers were energized and ecstatic about co-workers who shared similar values, behaved in a socially amicable manner, and wanted to work collaboratively toward the same goal. They expressed a love of sharing knowledge with these co-workers, and reported that projects or joint efforts went more smoothly and easily. Multiple co-researchers spoke of how these types of co-workers helped inspire them and challenge them to work harder and to continue growing as professionals. The social aspect of interacting with co-workers was also important, because it often gave co-researchers a means to attain rewarding social interactions at work, even if the content of those interactions was not always work-related. However, even when the interactions were not relevant to work, co-researchers still expressed that their relationships with these co-workers gave them a sense of positive meaning in their work – a reason to show up, to continue nurturing relationships with co-workers, and something that helped make the work day more enjoyable. Conversely, co-workers with different behaviors, such as perceived poor work ethic, disagreeable social behaviors, and refusal to collaborate, were often reported to make the job much more difficult and unpleasant for the co-researchers. Co-researchers spoke often about how their relationships with others in the workplace, whether that person was a co-worker, client, subordinate, or leader, were vital in how they experienced meaning in work.

Co-researchers spoke fondly of doing good things for others. However, these good things were not always communicated as altruistic gestures, and co-researchers also expressed their dislike of doing things for others whom they believed to be taking advantage of them. The most altruistic feelings were most clearly laid out when co-researchers discussed doing good things for their clients, co-workers, and communities, whether it was helping another with personal affairs and interests or in being able to benefit others through the co-researchers’ job tasks (such as helping customers save money or helping others improve their life situations). Some co-researchers spoke of how the effective performance of their tasks allowed them to contribute to the company overall, which was especially satisfying when they were able to participate in the company’s forward movement. Those who spoke of being unable to contribute were often frustrated and sometimes angry. The inability to contribute or perform a task effectively often lead to great frustration and stress for co-researchers.

Several obstructions were noted by co-researchers as things which prevented them from effectively contributing. The responsibility for any hinderance may have laid with the worker, with the organizational leadership, or both. Often, the perception was that the leadership had made uninformed and thoughtless decisions which negatively impacted the co-researchers, even if the leadership was unaware of the negative impact. Negative interactions with co-workers or customers/clients could also serve as a stressor, but this was often mitigated by the level of support which co-researchers received from their leadership. The issue was that constraints, lack of clarity in communication of expectations, toxic environments, and improper distribution of rewards often caused co-researchers to either be unable to perform their tasks or to feel like their tasks were not worth doing. However, multiple co-researchers acknowledged their own roles in the frustration and stress, such as when they over-invested themselves in an aspect of the job, or when they needed to take responsibility for themselves in order to achieve their desired outcomes. They reported responding to these problems with multiple and varied coping strategies.

Self-care was an important topic for co-researchers, whether it occurred in discussions on work-life balance or personal changes. Often, co-researchers described the cognitive strategies they adopted when dealing with difficult situations, such as emotional detachment or re-arranging priorities. They often vowed not to let their work interfere with their personal lives, as well as not to allow the job to take more from them than they could emotionally and physically handle. Other times, co-researchers noted how the company took steps to help them do well. Some co-researchers reported company actions which some may argue as frivolous, such as a staff appreciation pizza party or the chance to go off-site with co-workers for lunch, but it was pointed out that the opportunity to enjoy time at work was something that co-researchers found to be satisfying. Through a more systemic level of functioning, companies also offered greater well-being opportunities by allowing co-researchers to engage in self-care. This included flexibility with time, so that co-researchers could attend to personal issues when necessary. Some also enjoyed jobs where they didn’t “take the work home,” which included the ability to detach oneself from work. This included emotional disengagement, as well as not having to engage in any job-related tasks after the workday had ended or during time off. When co-researchers’ coping abilities did not allow them to cope with the job stressors, and/or they felt completely frustrated by the perceived lack of support from the organization, they often reported giving up on trying to do well and often made plans to leave their company. Conversely, those co-researchers who felt supported by their company were able to utilize constructive coping mechanisms to create positive meaning in their work, and reported that they were satisfied with their organization.

# Summary

Multiple millennial co-researchers discussed their experiences with meaning in work. Positive experiences with meaning in work inspired them to stay within an organization and endeavor to do well, whereas negative experiences lead them to report abstaining from organizational engagement and to even plan their departure. However, co-researchers often described situations where negative experiences could be mitigated by positive experiences, which helped co-researchers to adapt and overcome the more unpleasant circumstances.

Autonomy, structure and expectations, value as a person, working relationships, altruism, frustration and stress, and personal care were seven vital themes which emerged from interviews on the experience of meaning in work for millennials. Co-researchers explained how these themes and their underlying patterns impacted their experiences of positive and negative meaning in work, leading them to find a sense of purpose or the perception of meaninglessness in what they did. With the understanding that this body of evidence has been interpreted through heuristic means, this analysis offers implications for how these findings can be used, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

**CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS**

The analysis has been laid bare in Chapter 4 for the reader to critically review, and the interpretation, critical evaluation of the study design, and recommendations for use of the results are described in Chapter 5. The interpretation compared the results to the literature review, bringing up similarities and differences, and pointed out how it may have contributed to a better understanding of the current body of knowledge on both meaning in work and millennials in work. The critical evaluation of the study design was intended to offer transparency on the limitations of the study, and it fed into recommendations for future research which could be performed in a way that compensates for these limitations and delimitations. Future research could also be based on further exploring the results, especially through following up with quantitative studies. The results could not only be generalized back to theory, but offered recommendations for how to manage millennial workers. This chapter served as the conclusion for this study on the experience of meaning in work for millennials.

# Summary of the Results

Studying the experience of meaning in work for millennials was a beneficial undertaking because there was no scholarly research found on this specific topic; rather, the study of meaning in work and the study of millennials in work have each separately been determined to be important areas of focus in industrial and organizational psychology (Rosso et al., 2010; Twenge, 2010). There is a growing body of evidence that millennials may view concepts related to purpose and meaning in work differently than older generations do (Deal et al., 2010; Ferri-Reed, 2013; Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010; O’Connor & Raile, 2015), yet earlier research had indicated that there may be little difference between generations (Arnett, 2004, Cennamo & Gardner, 2008; Jurkiewicz, 2000). Although there has been a substantially growing understanding of meaning in work, this concept itself also needs further research (Rosso et al., 2010). Therefore, more research needs to be done in order to better understand how millennials specifically experience meaning in work.

This study is significant in that it contributes to the theoretical body of work on meaning in work and on millennials in an organization, both pertinent topics for industrial and organizational psychology. The subject of millennial workplace behavior has been a contentious topic, with organizational leaders seeking to understand how millennials behave differently in the workplace differently from other generations (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010), what they expect from their organizations (de Hauw & de Vos, 2010), and how to best manage this generation (Ferri-Reed, 2014). Meaning and purpose are vital aspects of living with greater satisfaction and actualization for all people in general (Leider, 2015), and this has been tied into strongly positive organizational outcomes (Anderson, 2005; Burger et al., 2012; de Sousa & van Dierendonck, 2010; Duffy et al., 2013; Love & Cebon, 2008; Markow & Klenke, 2005; McCarthy, 2008; Raelin, 2006). Harnessing a greater understanding of how meaning and purpose manifest in work for millennials could contribute to a theoretical understanding of how to enhance positive organizational outcomes with this generation.

To pursue this investigation, qualitative heuristic methodology was chosen because of my own experiences with the topic and the constructivist idea that reality is a shared event with multiple perspectives contributing to how the phenomenon is experienced. With Moustakas’ (1990) heuristic approach, I pored over interviews which were guided by a semi-structured question list to find repeating patterns of meaning, which contributed to a multifaceted understanding of the phenomenon. However, while this methodology relies on using the mind as the processor of the data so that the primary researcher can bring forth the true essence of the experience, its use also opens up the possibility for bias and culturally laden findings in this dissertation.

From the interviews, the findings indicated that positive experiences gave the co-researchers a sense of purpose and positive meaning in what they did, as well as enhance their involvement in their organization, whereas negative experiences led to a sense of meaninglessness and isolation, and often led the co-researchers to engage in self-preservation mechanisms which may not have always been to the benefit of the organization. Positive experiences could help to mitigate the negative ones when co-researchers acknowledged that there may have been a highly negative factor, and powerful positive experiences helped co-researchers to better cope with and overcome the meaninglessness which would have otherwise resulted from their negative experiences. Specific positive and negative occurrences were grouped into seven themes and 15 patterns, each of which contributed to a sense of equilibrium regarding feelings of power versus powerlessness; where personal responsibility begins and where organizations should hold responsibility; and whether the co-researcher would adapt to a situation and continue to do well, or disengage from the organization as a means to cope. These results are discussed below in order to better understand their context and meaning.

# Discussion of the Results

Data has been gathered and analyzed for the research question: What is the experience of meaning in work for millennials? The results were conveyed in Chapter 4, but there are multiple potential meanings for the results, as well as a context for how these themes and patterns occurred within this specific group. Whereas these are my personal and professional interpretations of the data, the enhanced utility of the research is for readers to be able to draw their own conclusions for how to apply the findings to their practice in work.

The results of this study showed that there are specific work circumstances which contribute to positive and negative meaning experiences for the co-researchers. Although environmental factors such as co-workers, leaders, processes, and organizational culture can contribute to how a worker experiences meaning in work (Rosso et al., 2010), this study highlighted unique dynamics between these factors which resulted in positive and negative perceptions. These positive and negative perceptions then drove the co-researchers’ behaviors so that they would either further invest in their roles or would refrain from greater commitment in order to cope.

When they invested in their roles, co-researchers had more positive interactions with others in their organizations and placed more effort into performing duties effectively and efficiently. Often, the co-researchers’ desires to invest in their roles were also connected to their descriptions of wanting to please a leader who had expressed value in the worker. The co-researchers often described these leaders who valued workers as being competent, fair, and trustworthy. Relationships with leaders were respected, if not even revered, and co-researchers with these types of leaders were more eager to listen to and follow their leaders. Co-researchers who interpreted their work situations to have mostly positive meaning felt empowered to do well, took responsibility for themselves, appreciated what their company did for them, and were more resilient in adapting to challenges. When the co-researchers experienced circumstances which they believed to have negative meaning or meaninglessness, as their method of coping they refrained from greater commitment, and they pulled away from others in the organization who contributed to their perceptions of the negative environment, and they often performed only the minimal amount of work required. They lost faith in their leadership, often seeing their leaders as incompetent, controlling, dishonest, unethical, and complacent. Finding themselves unable to cope with the circumstances, co-researchers with overly negative circumstances expressed negative emotions and plans to leave their position or their workplace.

There are multiple reasons why the results of this study revealed those specific themes and patterns, some of which I may be able to identify and others which I may not. The potential for bias looms as one of the hazards in this study; despite my efforts to reflect on separating my own experiences from those of my co-researchers, the possibility remains that I may have still unintentionally injected my own view into the data analysis process. The results may have also been influenced by the cultural and racial homogeneity of the participant sample. The questions, taken from aspects in the scholarly literature on meaning in work and on millennials, may still not have comprehensively tapped enough into the millennial experience. Still, the results appeared to answer the research question thoroughly, even though more research would be needed to build evidence for these results.

The results may also be interpreted to provide a stronger answer: The findings may not be relevant only for millennials, but may be relevant for a wider audience. Because qualitative work can inform theory, but cannot be generalized to an entire population, the findings may contribute to the theory of meaning in work for individuals of any generation who share the same values as the co-researchers in this research study. In a study, the impact of the participants’ values is pertinent to understand because the results do not apply to individuals with different expectations and needs. An example of this occurred in Cangemi’s (2009) study, in which his participants desired to be treated with respect from their leadership (similar to one of the patterns in this study) because the workers prioritized self-esteem needs, but the prior workers from an older generation had not sought more respectful treatment because they had to prioritize survival needs. Further conclusions for this study have helped to clarify how the research fits into the bigger picture of scholarly comprehension and application.

# Conclusions Based on the Results

While the individual and composite depictions of the co-researchers’ experiences may allow the reader to better understand and possibly even empathize with the co-researchers, inductive reasoning was used to draw the findings into useful and applicable information. The findings were reviewed within the context of the chosen theoretical framework, existentialism, and the previous literature on meaning in work and millennials in work. The findings were further interpreted with this information and through this theoretical framework in order to understand its impact on the current body of scholarly knowledge.

## Comparison of Findings with Theoretical Framework and Previous Literature

Through an existentialist lens, workers seek to overcome meaninglessness, freedom, and isolation through meaning in work (Blomme & Lintelo, 2012). In existentialist theory, the individual must make the conscious decision to create a meaningful life (Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012). Meaning can be used to overcome fears of death and anxiety (Camus, 1965), and a sense of purpose and meaningfulness has been found to have an impact on mental health (Mascaro & Rosen, 2005). The workplace has been used by workers as a way to overcome fears of meaninglessness and isolation (Blomme & Lintelo, 2012). The presence of meaninglessness in work has been associated with detachment and even burnout (Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012), and could cause workers to pull away from their engagement in their work (May et al., 2004). These existentialist assumptions were found to be true in this study: Co-researchers reacted to positive and negative experiences, along with meaninglessness, in their environment -- and their reactions lead them to create positive and negative meaning out of these experiences. While some co-researchers often took personal initiative to figure out how to adapt to their negative meaning or meaningless situations, others expected their company to make changes. Often, there was a mixture of the co-researcher taking personal responsibility while expecting the organization to fit expectations of fairness and functionality. However, neither choice could sustain an environment that was rife with negative meaning and meaninglessness. Whether a co-researcher took personal responsibility and developed effective coping strategies, or chose to place the expectations of change upon the organization, all co-researchers reported leaving or planning to leave this type of situation. The difference was that co-researchers who utilized positive coping mechanisms reported greater and more fulfilling personal development, whereas those who did not report purposefully engaging in positive coping decisions had reported suffering frequently from mental wellness issues such as depression, anxiety, and anger problems. Much like the existentialist Frankl’s (2006) point about how meaning can come from suffering, co-researchers who took personal responsibility for their lives described greater feelings of satisfaction and purpose; they often had a clear idea of what they wanted in their lives (both in work and in their personal time) and they took steps to ensure they had these things, even when it meant changing their thoughts and behaviors. Those who did not take responsibility expressed a feeling of being lost and confused, fearful of what could happen both in their work and in their lives outside of work. Co-researchers had positive and negative experiences which they created meaning from, and their reactions contributed to the sense of meaning that they felt in their overall lives.

Meaning in work has been described in the context of workers finding a positive or negative value in their work (Rosso et al., 2010), and may include the attempt to find personal meaning in life through their work (EBBF, 2014; Lee, 2015; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). Participants in Vuori et al.’s (2010) study positively interpreted their sense of meaningfulness in work when they were able to contribute and feel pleasure from their work, whereas they developed a negative interpretation when not contributing or feeling satisfaction. The act of finding positive meaning in work has been associated with the ability to adapt to change (Burger et al., 2010; van den Heuvel et al., 2013), much like how the co-researchers in the present study adapted better to problems when they were able to create positive meaning in their work. Much like the tenets from Weick’s (1995) sense-making theory, and the findings from Vuori et al.’s (2010) related study on how workers created meaningfulness, the co-researchers in this study sought to exert a sense of control over their situation. They did this through their emphasis on their own self-efficacy: They often believed that they knew how to do a job effectively and efficiently. When they were not given the ability to do this, or there were negative consequences when they performed to the best of their ability, they experienced negative meaning or meaninglessness. Much like the participants in Vuori et al.’s (2010) study, the co-researchers in this study chose positive actions to create positive meaning. Even when there was a lack of meaningfulness, the participants in Vuori et al.’s (2010) study were reported to have still engaged in meaningfulness-making techniques. Examples included working hard, focusing on what was considered good and right, and being assertive for what they believed should happen (Vuori et al., 2010).

Engaging in meaningfulness-making behaviors would impact the worker behavior (Rosso et al., 2010; Vuori et al., 2010). This would then impact the organizational system, and the reactions from others in the system resulted in a feedback loop which impacted worker thoughts and behaviors (Kogetsidis, 2011). However, whether the co-researchers in the present study were able to enact a sense of personal responsibility over their internal choices or not, their choosing positive actions did not always have positive results; the results were the product or feedback from the organizational environment which gave them a sense of autonomy, structure, and value as a person, which the co-researchers needed. Co-researchers were often either empowered or daunted in their dynamic relationship with the organization through their working relationships, which could help them feel like they had either more or less control over their organizational environment. The desire for control theoretically comes from the desire to overcome existentially driven fears (Blomme & Lintelo, 2012).

This study also contributed to the growing body of literature on millennials. Millennials reportedly have held expectations that work (a “real job”) would offer financial rewards, be a long-term commitment, and offer fulfillment (O’Connor & Raile, 2015). Even though O’Connor and Raile’s (2015) participants were college students, the majority of the co-researchers in this study agreed with the importance of the financial rewards. However, the co-researchers did not see work as a long-term commitment when it did not provide positive meaning, and often described how it was often better for the worker, and sometimes even the company, for the worker to switch jobs or companies. However, even financially driven co-researchers described how aspects of their job provided fulfillment, whether it was the ability to help co-workers or build a working system. Many also discussed how their sense of fulfillment came from being able to pursue interests outside of work, or take care of their families.

Research has found implications that millennials value work-life balance, extrinsic rewards, and social conscientiousness (Ertas, 2015). Related to the co-researchers in this study, these implications are also true. Even the ones who followed a calling still valued extrinsic rewards, although those were not what they prioritized, and every co-researcher discussed the importance of work-life balance for them and their families. Social conscientiousness was not overtly discussed, but every co-researcher described a sense of wanting to do right for others or to see others do well. Exceptions for the social conscientiousness occurred when the co-researchers felt as though they were being exploited, and they withdrew from social and organizational engagement. Kowske et al. (2010) found evidence that millennials desire social approval more so than prior generations did, but these particular co-researchers often mentioned going against the social status quo in the workplace when their well-being or ability to cope with negative meaning and meaninglessness was threatened. Their response to the social status quo at work was also often influenced by their leadership.

Millennials reportedly hold expectations for their leaders, such as wanting transparency (Gursoy et al., 2008), mentoring (SHRM, 2009), and possibly even parental relationships (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010). Evidence has been found that millennials are interested in interactions which boost their self-esteem (Deal et al., 2010). As described in the literature review (see Chapter 2), scholarly evidence has indicated that millennial workers may expect their supervisors to guide them through tasks or expectations like a parent, before their supervisor gives them freedom and empowers them to do well. This idea was almost identical to what was found in the present study. The co-researchers may not have always expected parental relationships with their supervisors, but they unanimously expressed appreciation for a supervisor or leader who offered guidance, showed interest and value in them as a person, and allowed them the autonomy to perform their tasks. The caveat here was that the co-researchers also needed the appropriate structures and parameters in which to perform their tasks. A further interpretation of these findings has implications for how this research may contribute to the field of I-O psychology.

## Interpretation of the Findings

This study provided greater clarification for some of the less developed and under-researched concepts found in the current body of scholarly literature in regard to meaning in work for millennials. Many of the findings from this study reinforced the evidence and theoretical ideas from the literature review and offered greater depth to understanding these constructs. The scholarly literature often provided general ideas for how to understand millennials (e.g., DeVaney, 2015; Espinoza, 2012; SHRM, 2009; Wong et al., 2008), and there was strong evidence for how meaning in work may manifest for a worker, but this present study offered greater discernment of how specifically meaning in work has been experienced by millennial workers.

The findings of this study to investigate the experience of meaning in work for millennials revealed that millennials had both positive and negative experiences in work, which lead to the creation of positive meaning, negative meaning, and meaninglessness for them. In general, co-researchers indicated that they wanted autonomy in order to perform their tasks, but that they needed a sense of clear structure and expectations in order to know how to perform their tasks well. They wanted to feel valued as a person by their organization and leaders, and they wanted to work with co-workers who shared similar values and work ethics. It was important for them to contribute to something, whether it was another person, a system, or an idea. They wanted the ability to engage in self-care, whether it was through their own choices or something that the organization gave them. These were circumstances which created positive meaning for them; even if the worker was there strictly for financial rewards, these circumstances gave them a reason to stay in their position and to not only do their best, but to sometimes even push themselves to do well for their organization. However, when these circumstances were not met, the co-researcher experienced frustration and stress. Equilibrium was presented in the form of power, responsibility, and adaptability: The worker wanted to feel a sense of control or power over the environment, and was able to adapt when there was enough of a feeling of control. Those who took personal responsibility for themselves found greater meaning in their suffering than those who did not. Still, the leadership was often held responsible for how the organizational environment allowed them to adapt to their challenges.

Much of the findings revolved around how the co-researchers attempted to balance their priorities with the demands of the organization. May et al. (2004) claimed that workers would use their own expectations and interests as a means to determine the value of a work goal. While this idea also manifested in this present study, co-researchers often mentioned that they would “do anything” for a supervisor whom they trusted and believed to be competent. It is possible they would put aside their own expectations and interests to adopt more of their leader’s views, as the ones who did have positive relationships with their leaders were highly open to their leader’s feedback. Many co-researchers expressed the desire to please their manager or supervisor when they felt valued by them and saw their leaders as competent and fair. However, co-researchers who did not feel this way adopted more of the idea that they needed to create their own rules and sometimes even rebel against the organizational status quo in order to do well in the job and cope with the difficulties. Many in this scenario of having troubled relationships with leaders also emotionally and cognitively detached from their tasks or even their organizations.

This study also provided some insight into conflicting research on millennials. Evidence has both pointed to the idea that millennials do seek work with purpose and meaningfulness (Ng et al., 2010) and that they are more interested in financial rewards (Leveson & Joiner, 2014; Twenge, 2010; Twenge & Kasser, 2013). Whereas the interest to pursue either type of motivational factor may be predicated on the personality and values of the specific millennial worker, this study revealed that even the workers who were strictly financially driven were impacted by the sense of meaning and purpose that they got out of their work. When the organizational environment offered a sense of fulfilment in regard to their ability to do their work well (autonomy and structure), left them feeling valued (value as a person), gave them positive interactions with like-minded co-workers (working relationships), helped them to contribute to something outside of themselves in one way or another (altruism), and allowed for self-care and work-life balance (personal care), every co-researcher described a sense of positive meaning related to why they chose to stay in their organizations and dedicate themselves to performing well. On the surface, the initial answer to “Why am I doing this?” may be “To make money,” but the deeper answer related to why they were doing their specific job at their specific organization, and with whatever level of investment that they had. The deeper answer was often related to the idea that they were at their workplace, doing their specific job because they either chose it or fell into it, but the way that the patterns found in this study played out often determined the level of meaningfulness or meaningless they felt in response to “Why am I doing this?” In other words, the positive reaction was “I am doing this not only because it makes money and I am fine with my tasks, but because I am given the ability to do what I need to do, the structure to do it in, and I am appreciated for doing it. I feel a sense of purpose here.” The negative response was “I do not know why I am doing this because I am not given the ability to do what I need to do, I’m not completely sure of what is going on, and I believe that others in the organization are acting in a way that is wrong. I feel like I have little to no purpose or control in this system and I am suffering.” This is the macro view interpretation of the study’s findings, which must be critically reviewed within the context of the study’s limitations.

# Limitations

There were limitations in the design of this study as well as in the way that the research was carried out. The most glaring limitation is that the research method, heuristic phenomenology, allowed for personal bias to influence the interviews, the analysis, and how the analysis was interpreted. In heuristic research, it is important for the primary researcher to feel a passionate interest in the subject matter and to utilize self-awareness and tacit knowledge to bring forth the most poignant account of the shared phenomenon (Moustakas, 1990). However, even though I took prescribed steps to separate my views from those of my co-researchers through journaling and constant self-evaluation (see Chapter 4), the possibility remained that I may still have injected my own sense of what should be prioritized in this study. Additionally, I noted that I may have been predisposed to certain ideas based on the information which I learned through the literature review process. Qualitative research methodology has utilized inductive reasoning as a form of understanding its findings (Patton, 2002), which can also be flawed in how it takes small pieces of information to create broader assumptions. However, the findings of this study are supported by the research found in the literature review (see Chapter 2) and I have training in ethical behavior as a therapist (e.g., not leading clients’ answers and avoiding countertransference), so these conditions helped to mitigate the design limitations. There may also be limitations in the way that the research was performed and understood.

Despite efforts to obtain a diverse sample, the participants of this study were homogenous in that they were all Caucasian and came from mostly middle-class backgrounds. Only one described himself as growing up in and belonging to a lower socioeconomic status. Although I placed flyers where I perceived a diverse audience, I might have obtained a more racially and socioeconomically diverse group if I had placed the flyers in areas which had very specific and very different types of clientele. On the other hand, a sample that would be too diverse could also serve as a limitation when needing to effectively find patterns in the data.

Another limitation was that my guided interview questions and analysis did not recognize the role of gender in exploring the experience of meaning in work for millennials. As mentioned in the literature review (see Chapter 2), Leveson and Joiner’s (2013) research indicated that female students with specific traits were more likely to prioritize ethical values over financial rewards more so than male counterparts. Because the present study had five female co-researchers and six male co-researchers, this study may not have addressed how gender differences may have impacted their answers. The female co-researchers in this study more commonly described their work as a pursuit of a calling, whereas the males were more likely to state that they sought only financial rewards.

Finally, there was the possibility that co-researchers may have painted themselves more positively in their depictions of themselves. This could also be true of myself. Any person could see themselves as responding to a difficult situation to the best of his or her ability, and these responses may be perceived much more differently by others than by a co-researcher (inclusive of myself) initially thought. Still, the intent of qualitative research, especially phenomenological research, is to get to the inner psychological experience of the participant (Creswell, 2013). This concept opens up possibilities for how the findings from this study may be applied to academic knowledge and organizational practice.

# Implications for Practice

The findings of this study hold implications for both theory on meaning in work and the knowledge base on millennials, as well as for how the results can be applied in an organizational setting. The academic contributions could be used for clarifying and adding to current research, while also potentially paving the way for helping to build future research. The organizational contributions could offer recommendations for enhancing an organization’s relationship with the millennial worker, especially in motivating and retaining these employees. Both angles could help to build the field of I-O psychology’s knowledge base.

It has been established that more research needs to be done on both meaning in work and on millennials in the workplace. Rosso et al. (2010) compiled a comprehensive literature review on the factors which influence the experience of meaning in work, including the roles of co-workers, leaders, internal beliefs, financial conditions, and personal factors. The patterns found in this present study’s analysis could help further explain how factors such as these interact with one another in the formation of positive or negative meaning.

Assessments which measure meaning in work may measure factors associated with work meaning, but which are not necessarily linked to the creation or experience of meaning in work (Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012). A study has been performed regarding how workers create meaningfulness, but it required more evidence to support its findings (Vuori et al., 2012). This present study may help to contribute to a better understanding of separating the essence of work meaning from the conditions which are the result of the work meaning feedback loop. For example, when co-researchers described the conditions that caused them to develop a sense of positive or negative meaning, these conditions (e.g., autonomy, structure, a sense of value, altruism, self-care) were the main catalysts by which they experienced their sense of meaning. Using their internal values, they assigned a meaning, driven by their personal beliefs and expectations, to the event or circumstance. This is congruent with Rosso et al.’s (2010) research. The data in this present study related to how millennials’ experiences of meaning in work manifested, and could help inform other researchers’ quests to understand how this manifestation can be used to better understand and measure meaning in work as a construct by itself.

The results of this research could also be used in practical applications for how to actualize millennials to work effectively in the workforce. From the data analysis, there are several recommendations for leadership. In the onboarding process, leadership could present clear and thorough guidelines regarding the task requirements of a job, how the worker can accomplish these tasks, what is expected of the worker, and how the worker can access assistance if needed. During this time, the leader can begin establishing a mentor-like relationship with the worker, letting the worker know that s/he is an important part of the organization, and that the leader is interested in the worker’s well-being and satisfaction. This is very different from telling the worker to do something just because it is the whim of the leader (and not necessarily in the organization’s or the worker’s best interests) or offering instructions with very little support or clarity. Once the worker has learned the expectations and structures of the job, s/he can be given autonomy to do their job -- and even encouragement to be creative and resourceful. The leader can encourage the worker to take personal responsibility for his or her outcomes, and the leader can model this personal responsibility. Modeling this personal responsibility can include the act of admitting errors or asking for worker input, rather than blaming the worker for problems in challenging circumstances and repeatedly invalidating the worker’s communications without efforts to train, help, or even consider the worker’s views. The goals of the tasks can be reframed as contributing to the professional development of the worker, rather than for the whims of the supervisor. It would also be helpful to continue offering guidance and coaching, especially as new tasks or expectations arise. A warm relationship with the workers will allow them to appreciate constructive advice and use it to improve their performance, whereas the workers will not accept direction so easily if they do not trust their leaders. Provide them with opportunities to enjoy time with co-workers and synchronize as a group in order to adopt similar values and engage in collaboration with each other. Create fair reward distribution based on quantifiable reasoning, such as education level, years of experience, and performance indicators. Treat them with dignity and respect, and protect them when it is reasonable to do so. Listen to what they have to say and mediate a change when you hear about a problem, with fairness. Hold all workers to high standards, but give them the tools and ability to reach those standards. Model competency and mature behavior. Encourage them to take personal responsibility for their growth and performance, and hold them responsible for their behavior in a way which benefits them and the organization. Give them reasons to build on their skills and contribute to co-workers and to the organization. Allow them to take appropriate time and resources to help them meet their personal and familial needs. These are the practices which the co-researchers in this study highly valued, and the powerful impact of these practices showed up repeatedly in the analysis patterns as contributors of positive meaning.

# Recommendations for Further Research

This study revealed other avenues for more research based on the findings and the nature of the methodology itself. From the data, further study could test the accuracy of the patterns, especially if they continue to hold true for millennial workers. This could be done by qualitatively replicating this study, or finding ways to quantitatively measure how these patterns occur for a sample. A replication could be done with a different qualitative methodology other than heuristics, based on the previously noted limitations which are found in the heuristic approach. This study could also be replicated with different groups of people, such as low-income participants, minority groups, those from different geographic areas, and even different political ideologies. As addressed in the limitations section above, gender differences could also be studied. A quantitative study could be performed to also further this research; a regression analysis could be used to determine if the themes and patterns in this study are predictors of positive or negative meaning in work. Additionally, another recommendation is to create a study to address the delimitations of this study: I chose specific questions based on commonly occurring patterns found in the literature review, but another researcher may find different patterns, inclusive of patterns related to gender, which lead him or her to develop different questions for a replication or related study. It would also be pertinent to find a greater diversity of participants, such as conducting a similar study on groups of people with different cultural backgrounds than the co-researchers in this study.

# Conclusion

With an intense interest in exploring how millennials experience meaning in work, I embarked on a qualitative heuristic study in order to interpret the unique views of 11 co-researchers, including myself, into useful and meaningful data. I performed a comprehensive literature review on meaning in work, and on millennials in work, and developed questions for a semi-structured interview guide from the patterns which materialized from both sets of scholarly knowledge. After obtaining 10 participants for the study, following ethical guidelines for protecting their confidentiality, and interviewing them with the interview guide, I analyzed the data with the qualitative heuristic methodology developed by Moustakas (1990). This included analyzing my own experiences in order to illicit a meticulous and systematic understanding of the shared experience of meaning in work for millennials through the use of tacit knowledge and self-awareness. The findings of this study aligned with the evidence presented in the scholarly literature. Despite limitations, the results offered implications for use in academic knowledge, organizational practice, and further research.

At its most grandiose, this research has the possibility of offering pertinent information to organizational circles on how to better manage the millennial workforce, as well as contributing to theory on meaning in work and working knowledge on the millennial population. At minimum, it has served as a compilation of the circumstances, thoughts, and feelings of 11 individuals who have experienced meaning in work, especially regarding how it has impacted them as workers and as human beings. Although it cannot be generalized back to an entire population, this opportunity to understand the narrative of a small group of people has still served the purpose of research in general. The purpose of research in general is to attain a greater understanding of the world and the people within it, and learning about the experiences of anyone helps to broaden our understanding. With each quote, vignette, or expression, the reader comes closer to encompassing a further understanding of humanity, if only by the smallest amount. But it is still a meaningful amount.

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**STATEMENT OF ORIGINAL WORK**

**Academic Honesty Policy**

Capella University’s Academic Honesty Policy ([3.01.01](http://www.capella.edu/assets/pdf/policies/academic_honesty.pdf)) holds learners accountable for the integrity of work they submit, which includes but is not limited to discussion postings, assignments, comprehensive exams, and the dissertation or capstone project.

Established in the Policy are the expectations for original work, rationale for the policy, definition of terms that pertain to academic honesty and original work, and disciplinary consequences of academic dishonesty. Also stated in the Policy is the expectation that learners will follow APA rules for citing another person’s ideas or works.

The following standards for original work and definition of *plagiarism* are discussed in the Policy:

Learners are expected to be the sole authors of their work and to acknowledge the authorship of others’ work through proper citation and reference. Use of another person’s ideas, including another learner’s, without proper reference or citation constitutes plagiarism and academic dishonesty and is prohibited conduct. (p. 1)

Plagiarism is one example of academic dishonesty. Plagiarism is presenting someone else’s ideas or work as your own. Plagiarism also includes copying verbatim or rephrasing ideas without properly acknowledging the source by author, date, and publication medium. (p. 2)

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Research misconduct includes but is not limited to falsification, fabrication, plagiarism, misappropriation, or other practices that seriously deviate from those that are commonly accepted within the academic community for proposing, conducting, or reviewing research, or in reporting research results. (p. 1)

Learners failing to abide by these policies are subject to consequences, including but not limited to dismissal or revocation of the degree.

**Statement of Original Work and Signature**

I have read, understood, and abided by Capella University’s Academic Honesty Policy ([3.01.01](http://www.capella.edu/assets/pdf/policies/academic_honesty.pdf)) and Research Misconduct Policy ([3.03.06](http://www.capella.edu/assets/pdf/policies/research_misconduct.pdf)), including Policy Statements, Rationale, and Definitions.

I attest that this dissertation or capstone project is my own work. Where I have used the ideas or words of others, I have paraphrased, summarized, or used direct quotes following the guidelines set forth in the APA *Publication Manual.* 

|  |
| --- |
| Learner name and date |

**APPENDIX A. DIAGRAM OF THEMES AND PATTERNS**

1. **Autonomy**



1. **Structure and Expectations**



1. **Value as a Person**



1. **Working Relationships**



1. **Altruism**
2. **Frustration and Stress**



1. **Personal Care**

**Equilibriums (found in every pattern): **