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When Good Jobs Become Bad Jobs. Professional's Subjective Demands for Meaningful Work**

Abstract

A central question of research on job quality is which factors impact the evaluation of job quality. The possibility of experiencing work as meaningful has repeatedly been named in research as an important factor in the quality of work, but, so far, there is a lack of studies investigating the subjective demands of employees for meaningful work. For this reason, the following contribution focuses on subjective standards of meaningful work, examining which standards employees in "good work" (i.e. expert service work with a high degree of autonomy) have. It also evaluates barriers that undermine the experience of meaningfulness at work. Based on a sample of professionals in "good work" – from positions in management to medicine and social work, the subjectively relevant dimensions of the violation of good work are shown. The study utilizes a perspective of the *sociology of critique* in which the actors themselves criticize the violation of norms in the world of work. 40 qualitative interviews were conducted in which employment biographies, subjectively perceived stress situations, and subjective resources were questioned. The article identifies four areas in which experiences of suffering by professionals are demonstrated by subpar standards for meaningful work. The article aims to gain a more precise understanding of the perception of work quality in professions with good work and to show that the world of work can be understood as a place of criticism impacted by moral standards which influence the experience of employees.

Keywords: meaningful work, good work, job quality, working conditions
(JEL: J81, M54, M59)

Introduction

What makes a job a good job? The question of how to improve working conditions has shaped sociological, psychological, and work science research since its beginnings. Early studies on the quality of work and work design have been carried out since the 1920s (Taylor, 1911; Muensterberg, 1916), and in this early period of industrial production, it was important to understand the negative effects of the new, often very repetitive work activities (Muensterberg, 1916). In Germany, the

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question of the quality of work gained more relevance with a program for the humanization of working life (*Humanisierung des Arbeitslebens*) in the 1960s and 1970s (Poehler, 1980). During this period, efforts were intensified to make work not only more productive but more humane. Work design was oriented to protect the health of workers and enable them to unfold and develop their personalities. Present research on job quality indicates numerous key components (Findlay, Kalleberg, & Warhurst, 2013; Kalleberg & Vaisey, 2005). These include a fair salary, security, opportunities for advancement and skill development, autonomy and control over work, an adequate workload, interesting job content, and good relationships between management and coworkers (Clarke, 2015). Research on work design also emphasizes aspects of work that promotes personality and learning, which include the following: manifold sensual incentives of work, sufficient physical activity, recognition of valuable achievements, and meaningfulness of tasks (Dunckel, 1996; Ulich, 2011). The quality of work is thus measured by both objective and subjective factors. In job quality research, objective aspects of job quality have long been the focus of attention, but authors such as Clark (2005) point out that the subjective dimension of quality of work must also be examined. In labor research, considerations on the quality of work have been intensified in recent years (Clark, 1998, 2005; Clarke, 2015; Findlay et al., 2013; Kalleberg & Vaisey, 2005; Kelliher & Anderson, 2008). Due to the economic crisis of 2008/2009, new deregulations of employment and new stress constellations in work, the question of what constitutes work quality was addressed once again. Central questions in research pertain to how employees experience the quality of their work, what demands they have, and what criticisms they formulate in relation to their work. This brings particularly subjective aspects of quality of work into focus. In recent years, understanding subjective demands and standards of work quality expressed by employees as well as their demands for workplace justice has become especially important (Huertgen & Voswinkel, 2014; Kratzer, Menz, Tullius, & Wolf, 2015; Nies, 2015; Hardering & Lenz, 2017; Walker, 2017). Most existing studies use the understanding of the *sociology of critique* (Boltanski, 2010; Boltanski & Thévenot, 2007) or normative theoretical research on justice as a conceptual-methodological reference point (Dubet, 2008). The sociology of critique assumes that actors themselves are capable of criticizing existing employment relationships and thus forming judgements on the legitimacy of workplace practices (Dubet, 2008). Such studies investigate specific aspects of the subjective experience of work quality. Following these traditions, complex moral landscapes traverse the sphere of paid labor, which is subject to ongoing internal criticism. Employees evaluate the changes they experience against the background of different normative expectations and demands for justice. From this viewpoint, criticizing the working conditions and referencing moral standards is part of the world of work.

Unlike previous studies on subjective experience, this contribution aims to shed light on a specific aspect that has not yet been given much consideration in the con-

text of job quality research; namely, the barriers of and demands for experiencing meaningful work as articulated by professionals in “good work.”

Such work-related experiences of suffering and demands for meaningful work are examined based on a sample of 40 employees in "good work." In this study, “good work” is examined using the example of management positions in medicine and social work. Current studies indicate that occupational groups once described as the epitome of good work are now in particular danger: “good jobs”, which include highly qualified employees and professionals with a high degree of autonomy under good working conditions, have fundamentally changed (Voss, 2012; Hardering, 2017). The introduction of economic principles has rendered many former guarantors of good work precarious. This also increases the danger that highly qualified professionals can no longer experience their work as meaningful (Hardering, 2017; Maio, 2014). “Good work” can no longer automatically be described as such, which raises the following questions: At which points do new experiences of suffering arise in professional work? Which subjective demands for meaningful work are violated?

The desire to experience meaningful work has always been emphasized in research on the quality of work (Hackman & Oldham, 1980; Ulrich, 2011). However, present research contains few references to subjective demands on the experience of meaningful work and perceived blockades of sources of meaning at work (Bailey & Madden, 2016). The aim here is to identify a differentiated picture of the experiences of suffering in work, the resulting critiques of the work situation, and the demands for meaningful work.

By examining employees' criticism based on their lived experiences, it is possible to see which standards of good work are currently undermined and whether changes to work practices have led to blind spots that previous studies did not sufficiently recognize. The article shows that experiences of suffering recounted by the professionals indicate clear barriers to good work. The former "good work" of professionals is now eroded by substantial barriers to the experience of meaningfulness. The field of professional work, which was formally characterised by good work, is beginning to turn problematic. The article also demonstrates that employee criticisms apply normative standards, according to which the expectation of work that is experienced as meaningful can be demonstrated. Employees experience the barriers to meaningful work as blocked sources of meaning that prevent a positive work experience.

This contribution promotes scientific progress in three fields: First, the study contributes to the research of subjective experiences of work quality. By examining actual experiences of suffering, it becomes clear which low-quality aspects of work fuel the criticism of grievances. Secondly, the study contributes to a better understanding of employee wishes in terms of critical work research. Thirdly, an unprecedented research perspective is used to study meaningful work in its different dimensions and gain insight into the moral standards of employees. This positions view

the actors as serious critics of working conditions and thus empirically substantiates critical social research.

The article is structured as follows: First, the study of meaningful work as a dimension of the quality of work is addressed. In the next step, the specific situation of the highly qualified professional employees is discussed, and methodical procedures are explained. Then the findings of the perceived barriers to meaningful work and demands for meaningful work are presented. In a concluding discussion, the implications of the findings on work quality will be discussed.

Job Quality and Meaningful Work

At the heart of the discussion about the quality of work lies the question of how working conditions can be designed to be decent, personality-enhancing, or health-promoting (Ulich, 2011). Since the quality of work encompasses the totality of work requirements and conditions to which employees must agree (Fuchs, 2012), the question of meaningful work can be defined as a sub-area of the question of the quality of work. Work design that enables meaningful experiences is examined in this context. In the Job Characteristics Model of Hackman and Oldham (1980), task significance is an important characteristic alongside skill variety and task identity, and meaningfulness is defined as a state of experience that emerges from the three characteristics mentioned. Ulich's (2011) concept for task design that promotes personal development also addresses the task significance as a design feature of work. The consequence of this design feature for individuals is "the feeling of being involved in the creation of socially useful products" and "security about the agreement of individual and social interests" (Ulich 2011, p. 206). While these models identify certain objective factors as prerequisites for a subjective experience of meaningfulness, they do not determine the experience of meaningfulness alone. However, this described “work-centric perspective” that starts within the work environment and seeks to improve the experience of meaningfulness by employees via changing work structures was criticized and modified to a “worker-centric approach” (Boeck et al., 2018; Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009). The new worker-centric approach to the experience of meaningfulness is used in more recent research and focuses on subjective qualities (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009; Bailey, Yeoman, Madden, Thompson, & Kerridge, 2018). Worker-centric research has received much attention in recent years, as the experience of meaningfulness is linked to a variety of positive outcomes for psychological and physical health and wellbeing (Arnold et al., 2007), motivation (May et al., 2004), and job satisfaction (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). Meaningfulness describes the amount of significance experienced at work by an individual (Rosso et al., 2010). Meaningfulness is often used to describe the positive state of experiencing purpose, authenticity, and transcendence in life (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009; Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012; Bailey & Madden, 2015). Besides the aforementioned explanation of meaningfulness, many stud-

ies focus on different sources of meaning derived within the workplace (Isaksen, 2000). Studies show that employees are more likely to experience meaningfulness at work when they can connect to such sources (Schnell, 2013; Rosso et al., 2010). Employees may have expectations that they can indeed experience meaning at work (Clausen & Borg, 2011; Schnell, Höge, & Pollet, 2013). However, we know little about concrete demands for meaningful work. The experience of meaningfulness does not occur automatically as soon as the sources of meaning can be tapped subjectively, but at least the sources offer an ideal framework for experiencing meaningfulness. Furthermore, demands for meaningful work have a normative surplus: not only do they represent individual wishes but also refer to ideas of appropriate standards of work. In this context, the sociology of critique offers the opportunity to re-examine what supports or inhibits experiences of meaningfulness using normative standards accessed by employees.

Good Work? The Work of Professionals

For a long time, highly qualified professional service work was regarded as the epitome of work with a good quality of work (Kratzer & Dunkel, 2013). Such professional activities were considered "good jobs" due to their high degree of autonomy and task variety.

The work of highly qualified professionals in medicine such as physicians or employees in social work are also considered as good work. In addition to autonomy and complexity, their tasks fulfill the requirement of adding a recognizable benefit to society. Since the 1990s, public sector professions have been confronted with considerable strains on working conditions and a reduction of autonomy (Evetts, 2003; Freidson, 1988). This increase of stress resulted from changed incentive structures and new burdens due to New Public Management (NPM) reforms (Sowa, Staples, & Zapfel, 2018). NPM stands for the public sector's takeover of management techniques from private businesses after bureaucracies were criticized for being inflexible and ineffective. NPM encompasses decentralization, a stronger focus on customer service, competition due to the introduction of internal markets, performance measurement, and an evaluation of economic effectiveness. One change that can be associated with NPM reforms is the introduction of a new billing system in German hospitals. As part of health care reforms, the diagnosis-related group system (DRGs) was introduced to achieve greater billing transparency and reduce treatment costs (Braun, 2014; Wilkesmann, 2016). The consequence of the introduction of this accounting system is that it is no longer possible to account for the actual length of stay of patients, but only the lump sum planned for the disease in each case. As a result, the cost-effectiveness of treatment becomes an important point of reference for care. As in the medical sector, social work has undergone massive changes in recent years under the growing pressure of economic efficiency (Lutz, 2008; Seithe, 2012). The changes to work organization and employment

structure can be traced back to the conversion of economic procedures and targets concerning quality documentation and efficiency-orientation. In addition, there is increased competitive pressure for services. Various authors criticize the reversal of the logic of social work: when the provision of goods and services to clients is no longer the exclusive purpose, the care of the clients becomes a means to ensure the continuity of the social work provider (Lutz, 2008). Concerning work situations and changes in professional habitus, similar structures can be found in medicine and social work. The intensification of work increases stress associated with burnout diseases in both professional groups (Seithe, 2012; Zwack, 2013). They may experience a tension between economic choices and professional ethics.

Work experiences in the health care sector, especially those of physicians, have been linked to alienation, which is a result of an increase of external, non-medical tasks that leads to a disconnection from the core of their work (Light, 2015; Maio, 2014; McKinlay & Marceau, 2011). Similarly, an increasing alienation in the field of social work has been attributed to its economization. The focus on efficiency has seemingly intensified over the years (Seithe, 2012). As economic principles are further established, the whole language and understanding of social work is changing. Research depicts social workers' experiences of alienation in this context (Seithe, 2012). When professionals are alienated, they are unable to see the meaning of their work (Tummers, Bekkers, van Thiel, and Steijn, 2015; Voss & Handrich, 2013). Previous research on the professionals highlight distinct role expectations (Chreim et al., 2007; Ibarra, 1999; Pratt et al., 2006; Yagil & Medler-Liraz, 2015). Dejours et al. (2018) speak of a "normative deficit," arguing that the current world of work lags behind the moral standards we have for work (p.43). A normative deficit also exists in professional work when the standards of good work are not met. Professional work is in overall danger of losing quality when its quality is undermined by changes in the organization of work.

The Present Study

The present study aims to understand the subjective demands for meaningful work. The basis for understanding standards of good work lies in critiques articulated by professionals as well as experiences of suffering. This research perspective can be assigned to recent work that uses ideas from the sociology of critique and studies on worker consciousness in the field of industrial and occupational sociology (Huertgen & Voswinkel, 2014; Kratzer et al., 2015; Nies, 2015). Such studies aim to examine to what extent organizational practices are regarded as legitimate by employees and what gives rise to consequent acceptance. Furthermore, the investigations aim to uncover criticisms formulated by the actors to gain an insight into the moral standards of employees (Dejours et al., 2018).

According to studies in this field, subjective demands on work can be reconstructed from the critiques of the working situation. Fundamental moral demands of em-

ployees are affected when their wish for meaningful work is violated. Therefore, the focus is on more than the quality of experience of work but also normative ideas of a functional working world.

The study is part of a research project on meaningful work based on 40 interviews with physicians and social workers in leading positions.[1] The interviews were conducted in Germany between 2014 and 2015. Our case selection combined a sampling plan with theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 2005 [1967]; Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2013) to include relevant sociodemographic characteristics such as age, gender and position as well as relevant patterns that emerged in the research process and theory formation. The sampling process aimed to build a sample that reflects the heterogeneity of the field (Kelle & Kluge, 2010). Due to their leading positions, these professionals obtained high occupational autonomy. We interviewed five chief physicians, eight leading senior physicians and seven senior physicians, who were all employed in public service at university hospitals. Their age ranged from 33 to 63 years with an average of 50. They worked 57 hours a week on average. We conducted interviews at five German university hospitals of comparable size (1100 to 1700 beds). Aiming at different workloads, we interviewed physicians with different specialties like neurology, gynecology, neurosurgery, palliative medicine and cardiovascular surgery. The sample of social workers is composed of 20 professionals between the ages of 35 and 63 with an average age of 53 years. We interviewed employees from different sectors such as social service, youth welfare, family counselling, addiction care, and probationary services. Because of the variety of work subjects and sizes of organizations, the exposure profiles vary. Except for three part-time employees, their weekly working time averaged 42 hours.

We conducted semi-structured biographic-narrative interviews about the working life (Will-Zocholl & Hardering, 2018). After a short description of their recent working experience, participants were asked to recount their professional biographies. Furthermore, we inquired on topics like general work experience, experiences of meaningfulness, desires concerning work, strains and resources as well as their perception of recent changes in their respective professional fields. The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and predominantly occurred in the employees' workplace. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded using Maxqda 10 to support data organization. The analysis was guided by Grounded Theory Methodology (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) and theory-driven analysis (Will-Zocholl & Hardering 2018). Grounded Theory is a research style that emphasizes the temporal parallelism and interdependence of the processes of data collection, analysis, and theory building. Accordingly, data collection, evaluation, and theory develop-

1 The interview material originates from data collected in the research project „Societal conceptions about what makes work meaningful and individual's experiences of meaningfulness at work, which was conducted at the Goethe University Frankfurt between 2014 and 2018. It was funded by the German Research Foundation, DFG, HA6994/2–1. For description of the method see also Hardering (2017); Will-Zocholl and Hardering (2018).

ment were directly intertwined in the evaluation. Besides open coding from Grounded Theory methodology, coding was organized with theoretical prior knowledge of the field of investigation and relevant thematic complexes of experiencing meaningfulness at work. This combination made it possible to be open to new phenomena and include relevant aspects of the theoretical discussion on meaningful work as part of the interview guide. For the present study of subjective demands for meaningful work, the critiques and experiences of the suffering of the actors were analyzed in depth. To gain insight into the experiences of the actors and their critiques of the given circumstances according to the sociology of critique (Boltanski, 2010; Boltanski & Thévenot, 2007), categories and codes on the criticisms and workplace stressors were examined in detail. The focus was on understanding how and in which contexts meaningfulness or barriers to meaningfulness were mentioned. The decisive factor in the analysis was that the experiences of suffering described by the actors were not simply stressful moments at work, but that it became clear during the interviews that these experiences undermined the feeling of meaningfulness in work. Subjective relevance structures that emerged biographically helped us understand this connection. Four barriers of meaning were condensed from this evaluation step, which each point to a subjective claim to good, meaningful work that is violated. The description of the findings first examines the barriers to meaningful work and then the underlying demands.

Findings: Barriers to and Demands for Meaningful Work

Before the barriers of meaningful work are described, it is important to point out the ambivalence of the work experience of professionals in this sample. Besides the meaninglessness experienced and the impediments to meaningfulness, the work of the professionals examined here is also characterized by positive experiences of meaningfulness. The professionals report on three particular aspects that characterize their experience of meaning in work and that they wish were more frequent (Hardering, 2017). They find work meaningful when 1) they see they can do it well and contribute their skills effectively; 2) they can produce visible results for the greater good and thus contribute to socially shared values; 3) they experience recognition, i.e. colleagues and clients value their work. In evaluations of their inner working lives, these positive experiences actively oppose stressful and negative moments. They can thus be understood as resources that enable professionals to continue their work. The structural barriers described below make the three described experiences more rare and difficult to acquire.

Time Pressure and Work Intensification

The interviewees, especially the physicians, report an increasingly high level of time constraints which prevent them from experiencing the work as meaningful. This is in line with Pavlish & Hunt's (2012) study that defines a stressful environment as a barrier to meaningfulness for nurses, and also with Bailey & Madden's (2015) argu-

ment that being forced to speed up work leads to a lack of autonomy over time. Work intensification is characterized by "the need to work faster and face tighter deadlines, a reduction of idle time and the need to conduct a number of work tasks simultaneously" (Paskvan & Kubicek, 2017, p. 26).

In our study, interviewees' main critiques refer to time pressure and a permanent lack of time, which has a negative impact on the work with patients and clients. The consequences of work intensification can be seen in all areas of clinical work and social work. There is no time to talk to patients and clients or make arrangements with colleagues. Time for breaks or a lunch with the teammates is also missing. It is reported that only urgent tasks can be done and important tasks often cannot be accomplished if they are not urgent. It is precisely the feeling of being rushed that fills doctors and social workers with the feeling that they are not always able to carry out quality work properly in a meaningful way. Due to time pressure, they have to miss appointments and are sometimes exhausted so they can hardly guarantee a high quality of work. The consequences of time pressure are not as intense in social work as in the medical field. As time management in hospitals is tighter and processes are more standardized as a result of the pricing system in German hospitals (DRGs), employees experience the time pressure more directly as a consequence of low staffing levels. Physicians report that time pressure forces them to work efficiently to manage the daily routines in the clinic. Due to the processing of urgent cases, it is sometimes not possible to follow up on cases after patient interviews. For example, one physician reported that it was previously possible to read through studies on the disease directly after a patient interview to be better informed on the clinical picture and therapeutic options. This is now only possible in their free time.

The criticism of the lack of time autonomy relates to the demand for time elasticity and the possibility of time regulation, which is a well-studied expectation that employees have on job design criteria. Time elasticity is considered a characteristic of good task design (Ulich, 2011). Bailey and Madden (2015) emphasize the importance of control over time when they describe that the feeling of wasting time or a lack of control over time increases the feeling that work is meaningless. Professionals bemoan the fact that such important work has to be done under enormous pressure as ethically wrong. The actions of the professionals also reinforce how important temporal autonomy is for them. Despite rigid time budgets, they sometimes take the time to partially perform certain tasks themselves, even if said tasks are not financialized in the DRG system (Hardering, 2016).

Social philosophical approaches to the experience of alienation vs. resonance also emphasize the role of the time dimension (Rosa, 2010; 2016). The perception of social acceleration and the resulting feeling of lost time ensures that employees cannot resonate with their work. Reported time conflicts have consequences on the entire perception of the work process. Suffering from lack of time constitutes a fundamental criticism of the infiltration of good work.

Value Conflicts Around the Quality of Work

The interviews reveal that, from the employees' point of view, subjective and professionally formed standards of good work are not being met. Many interviewees report feeling unable to conduct their work on a professional basis. More than social workers, physicians report that they can barely maintain certain standards of good professional practice due to inappropriate staffing and the time regime of the DRG system. One says, "Nowadays we treat patients badly, superficially and inadequately" (IM04). Many feel compelled to balance constantly between economic requirements and quality requirements, and they fall short of professional standards. Several interviewees touched on the question of authenticity: Physicians especially feel challenged to act in an entrepreneurial role. They discern a conflict between their medical orientation and the organizational focus on profits. The social workers we interviewed also reported that some of their tasks collide with their values. One social worker reports how, against her convictions, she had to convince a patient that his release from the hospital was something positive. She says:

> And I have experienced in the social service that when the doctors decide the patient has to go, then one starts to do everything so the person can leave as quickly as possible to a nursing home or his home. […] So I had the feeling, I use what I can [her talents of persuasion], yes, I can convince people of solutions, yes, but I could not leave them any scope of the decision because my assignment was simply, 'Wednesday afternoon to Thursday, the patient has to leave the hospital.'

This example shows that the social worker must use her talents of persuasion to support a procedure she finds unethical. However, the conflicts are not just about ethical concerns of the employees; rather, they are embedded in conflicting constellations in the organizations. These organizational tensions are accompanied by burdens for the employees, which also have a negative impact on experienced meaningfulness.

Our findings on the declining quality of work are consistent with other studies that report value conflicts as a major source of meaninglessness at work (Bailey & Madden, 2016), especially in professional work (Hardering, 2017; Voss, 2012). As autonomy is generally higher in professional work, and professional work is tied to professional ethics, ethical conflicts appear particularly important to highly qualified workers. Since professional identity is closely linked to ethical standards, professional work is seen as meaningless if professional ethics are violated.

The criticism of declining work quality and permanent conflicts of values is based on the demand for meaningful work that should enable professionals to meet established standards. They will then perceive the work as "good" and high quality. This points to the moral value that professional work is committed to the welfare of society and must therefore meet the highest standards.

Impeded Self-care

Due to high time pressure at work and long hours, self-care, the consideration of one´s own needs and recovery in other areas of life, is jeopardized. Almost all interviewees report self-care practices: they try to take breaks, structure the work so that it fits with their rhythms and recreation pauses, and they do sports after work or take time for friends and family. Nevertheless, the work-life separation does not frequently succeed, which is why interviewees complain about ignoring their own needs for regeneration because of heterogeneous work requirements. They are faced with the problem of taking a lunch break and possibly not treating a patient or writing an important application, thereby endangering their performance and health in the long term. One says: "It is at my expense when I then compromise and say, 'Okay, the patient can still come,' even though I actually waive my lunch break." A social worker reports how he was very stressed during a phase of organizational restructuring and it was difficult to draw the line between his work and private life: "I can't just separate the stress [between] the private and working [life] all the time, that mixes up partly. When I also have stress at home, when I can't relax there either, then it gets a bit difficult" (IM20). It becomes especially problematic for him when, in addition to the stressful work, there are also burdens in his private life. Ignoring one's self-care needs also leads to a conflict between the professional demands of work and the maintenance of one's health, quality of life and participation in other domains. The professionals see themselves caught up in a dilemma in which fundamental values in and out of work are violated. They report the feeling of sitting between two chairs or "having to perform a balancing act" (Hardering, 2017). Because the questions about the right way of dealing with these conflicting demands arise regularly, there are permanent behavioural uncertainties and a questioning of what defines good and meaningful work (Hardering, 2017). Furthermore, the interviewees perceive the duty to balance their own needs with the care of their aid recipients as burdensome and unjust, which also enhances the feeling of meaninglessness at work.

The criticism of the impeded self-care refers to the demand for a job that can be accomplished within working hours in high quality without having to sacrifice oneself. This demand for meaningful work can be described as a desire for sustainable work that does not make excessive use of one's labour force. The desire for a good work-life balance is also highlighted in research on work demands as particularly important for succeeding generations such as Generation Y (Pfeil, 2016). In addition to general research on work demands, research on meaningful work shows that the plurality of sources of meaning within and outside work has a positive effect on the experience of meaning in life (Schnell, 2016). Moreover, the conflict over work-life balance can also be described as a conflict of time and values that have problematic effects on meaning (see above: time conflicts and value conflicts) (Bailey & Madden, 2015).

Meaningless Tasks

One reason for time constraints is the increase in administrative tasks such as documentation, calculation, or certain types of advanced vocational training, which the interviewees see as purposeless. One physician said: "Unnecessary forced events like this multiplier training are annoying, where one is sitting an hour or so in there, and listening to something, which, if one is honest, actually has no relevance for anything." (IM03). While in this case, meaninglessness results from a task, in another case, the limited autonomy of action becomes a source of experienced powerlessness and meaninglessness. This is described by a physician who reports on the difficult decisions made when making a diagnosis:

> Every day at every doctor's visit I have to consider whether it is acceptable for the patient to stay or go home. And I have to consider what the consequences are. And what is quite terrible are the complaints from the health insurance companies who want to have a classification changed in the DRG system because they do not accept that what we have coded is true. It's unbelievable. That takes up working time and sometimes one has the impression [that] the health insurance views it as a sport to raise a complaint (IW31).

Here the perception of meaninglessness results from the fact that the actions of health insurance are not perceived at all as legitimate or beneficial. The argument that they do it "as a sport" shows that the control of the classification is perceived as useless and inappropriate. It also undermines the competence of the physicians.

For the interviewees, the meaningless tasks themselves are not often problematic alone. The problem lies in the resulting time deficit which prevents them from doing important tasks like counselling patients or clients.

In most cases, as long as the boring or monotonous tasks ultimately contribute to improving the health or quality of life of the clients or patients, they are accepted by the interviewees. Another critical aspect of meaningless activities like paperwork is the associated de-professionalization: the new managerial tasks prevent professionals from doing high-skilled tasks in which they are well trained. One social worker reports that she now has to do many tasks that she neither learned or enjoys:

> And I do a lot of accounting. Some of the administrative things I like to do, but for some, I also think that I just have to give more away. So, it's no fun for me, it takes me a lot of time (…). And when I talk to a former colleague, she is a secretary out of conviction, yes, she does it with pleasure and she does it by the hand, well, and I sit there and think, 'Oh, I didn't study for that.' And I do not mean that [in a] derogatory [way] in the sense that it is a stupid job, but it is simply not mine (IW40).

The quote from the social worker shows that the administrative tasks do not pair well with her professional self-image. When she says "I didn't study for that," she feels her skills are disregarded. When reflecting on meaninglessness, the interviewees mostly refer to individual tasks and not their job as a whole.

The findings correspond with the results of other studies in which meaningless tasks are regarded as a barrier to meaningful work. In research on meaningful work

and alienation, meaningless tasks were regarded from the outset as a threat to job satisfaction (Isaksen, 2000; Muensterberg, 1916). Recent studies also show that meaningless parts of tasks are often perceived as problematic because they prevent the right important things from being done (Juergens, 2014). As it turns out, the interviewees criticize both the necessity of performing meaningless tasks themselves and the activities of others they see as pointless. The criticism of meaningless activities indicates that the professionals themselves have an idea of how work can be organized purposefully and effectively. It also reveals their loss of autonomy and their claims for real autonomy of decision.

Discussion

Based on the criticisms and experiences of work-related suffering, clear barriers to meaningful work can be identified. The true "good work" of professionals is eroded by massive barriers. The formerly privileged position of the work of highly qualified professionals has been complicated (Hardering, 2017). This study also reveals the challenges of work quality addressed in the research literature on professionals: the organizational changes over the course of the introduction of New Public Management and other economic incentives create a variety of conflicts. A total of four demands for meaningful work can be identified. The most important demand is the demand for time elasticity and the possibility of time regulation, which is the basis of nearly all other demands. Equally important to professionals is the ability to deliver quality work that enables an adherence to professionally-designed standards without neglecting values. Professionals also expect realistic demands placed upon them so that work can be achieved during working hours. Finally, professionals wish to be able to set their own priorities, have autonomy, and fill their working hours with tasks that are important to them. This also includes that working time must not be overloaded with meaningless tasks.

The subjective demands described above show that the professionals themselves have a clear understanding of how they can perform high quality work based on available resources. The main barriers to this are time and value conflicts which are mutually dependent. In many respects, the observations relate to studies on the work experiences of other professional groups. Voss (2012) studied time and performance pressure in professionals and speaks about new demands for professionals, which he calls “subjectivized professionality.” This refers to the new tasks evolving as professionals seek to balance their roles as professionals, managers, and workers with limited resources. These demands represent a new burden for professionals, as they must now balance standards compliance with the need to keep work processes moving.

This also has consequences for the experienced meaningfulness: When professionals must constantly weigh up heterogeneous expectations, a *reflexivity of questions of meaning* occurs (Hardering, 2017). This means that questions of defending the

meaning of work and the quality of work are permanently in flux. This is a separate stress constellation that can lead to permanent overstrain and demonstrates the new *precarity of meaningfulness at work*. Even work that can enable a high level of meaningfulness is sometimes so stressful that central sources of meaning are blocked. Remarkable is also the fact that although professionals criticize the quality of the work and their experience of meaningfulness is sometimes blocked, they still find moments of meaningfulness in their work.

The findings provide important insights for: 1) research of subjective experiences with work quality, 2) understanding the wishes and demands of employees with regard to their work and their criticism of organizational structures, and 3) research on meaningful work, which has been expanded here to include perspectives from critical work research.

1. For a long time, work quality research had predominantly a focus on objective factors such as job security and salary (Clark, 2005). The recent study also focused on subjective aspects of work quality and showed that the content and organization of work strongly influence the experience of employees. The subjective quality of work is impaired in some places from the point of view of the professionals.
2. The study of workers' consciousness and demands (Kratzer et al., 2015; Dubet, 2008) demonstrates that professionals also have concrete expectations of a good work design that enables them to experience their work as meaningful. Essential demands for conditions that make it possible to experience work as meaningful have not been met. This finding extends the knowledge at the center of previous research pertaining to demands for justice or self-realization. The demands on meaningful work relate to concrete ideas of ideal design that professionals expect and experience from the organization.
3. So far, research on meaningful work has concentrated strongly on understanding sources of meaning and the experience of meaningfulness at work (Bailey et al., 2018). The recent study has shown that blocked sources of meaning are also points of reference for critique. Suffering from a work situation and experiencing meaninglessness can be interpreted as a violation of moral claims, thereby making a connection between empirical research on meaningful work and social philosophical considerations about the right to meaningful work (Roessler, 2011; Yeoman, 2014). This reveals the potential to link sociology to research on meaningful work. It also offers an opportunity to regard the world of work as a place for the negotiation of moral standards by including the lived experiences of employees.

Finally, there are some limitations to the investigation: this study is a qualitative reconstructive investigation aiming to understand subjective experiences of work-related suffering and subjective demands on meaningful work in the field of “good work.” Although the sample is relatively small with 40 interviewees, such a sample

size is sufficient for analysis and claim for explanation. With the focus on only physicians and social workers, two groups with different prestige have been involved. Their work is socially beneficial with a mission to promote the common good. The selected groups of physicians and social workers illustrate the barriers to meaningful living and the standards of meaningful work in the field of "good work." Both groups have different professional self-understandings; only the medical profession is classical, whereas social work is often regarded as a semi-profession. The study of both groups reveals a comparable mechanism which is characteristic of each profession: professionals who experience decreased work quality not only complain about the change but are themselves actors of critique and express demands for meaningful work. They even try to compensate for the violation of moral standards in their own work practices.

It would be interesting to investigate other occupational groups to see what influence the respective occupational cultures have on the demands on the quality of work and the experience of meaningfulness in work. To gain an even more specific understanding of standards of good work in different occupational fields and what certain categories such as autonomy and conflicts of values mean, a comparative analysis between employees at alternative levels of qualification would be helpful for future research.

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