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How the contextual constraints and tensions of a transitional context influence individuals' negotiations of meaningful work – The case of Vietnam

Abstract

This study explores meaningful work in the transitional context of Vietnam under *Đổi Mới* – the renovation policy implemented in 1986. Based on 60 in-depth interviews with participants from various industries, the study emphasises how features of a transitional context can deeply influence the way people make sense of meaningfulness in the workplace. Institutional constraints (institutionalised corruption and lack of institutional support), social constraints (low social trust and sense of insecurity), spiritual yearnings (engaged Buddhism) and other tensions relating to occupational, gender and age differences are found to influence and shape participants' distinctive views of the qualities of meaningful work (pragmatic, reflexive, self-transcendent, and ethical). These views differ from Western ways of conceptualising meaningful work, and affect individuals' negotiation of meaningful work. This study contributes a non-Western perspective on meaningful work, introducing meaningful work through the lens of Buddhist principles and offering a contextualised framework.

Introduction

Recently, meaningful work and what work means have received significant attention in various fields, including management, sociology, psychology and positive psychology (Beadle & Knight, 2012; Bailey & Madden, 2016, 2017; Bailey et al., 2018; Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017; Steger et al., 2012, 2013). While there seems to be no clear consensus on how to define meaningfulness in relation to work, either theoretically or empirically, and the tensions between the various dimensions established for meaningful work are evident (Bailey et al., 2018; Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012), there is agreement on the potential of work as a meaningful human endeavor (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2014; Yeoman, 2014). The way people acknowledge meaningfulness is largely influenced by social and cultural worldviews and value systems (Geertz, 1973; Mead, 1934) that place meaningfulness in a societal and cultural context (Boova et al., 2019). Mitra and Buzzanell (2017) found that employees' meaning-making about work is dynamically shaped by the context, the constraints they face, and political structures. The meaningfulness of work is therefore negotiated retrospectively by employees over time and different contexts, thus requiring a focus on employees' career narratives "to trace how they derive meaning from past and present events, often connecting them retrospectively – and, in turn shaping their orientation to the future" (Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017, p. 598).

This study explores how the contextual constraints and tensions of a transitional context influence individuals' negotiation of meaningful work. The study is set in Vietnam, which has been undergoing market transition from a closed/centrally planned economy to an open economy since the implementation of *Đổi Mới*¹ in 1986 (Desai, 1997; Fforde & Vylder, 1996). Along with rapid

¹ The 6th Vietnamese Communist Party Congress of 1986 adopted the renovation policy known as '*Đổi Mới*'. The focus of the policy was on restructuring financial systems, enhancing balance and cooperation between the public

socio-economic change, characteristics of ineffective and weak formal institutions are evident in the transition. Major gaps exist between legal frameworks and the enforcement capacity of the Vietnamese authorities, with associated high levels of corruption (Vu et al., 2018). This scenario has created trust deficits and tensions at institutional, organisational and individual levels (Nguyen et al., 2005). As a result, Buddhism has emerged as a significant phenomenon in this transitional context, where spiritual yearnings influence the way people perceive and act, and reflecting how informal institutions can become a substitutive source of meaning when formal institutions fail (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004). Studying the impact of these changes, in particular how engaged Buddhism shapes meaning-making at work, exemplifies and contributes to research showing that wider societal and cultural context can affect the way individuals see the inherent worthiness of work (Lepisto & Pratt, 2017; Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017). Following Bailey's and Madden's (2016) approach to identifying the features of meaningful work, this study explores meaningful work in an Eastern context to show how contextual differences can deeply affect the way people make sense of and identify qualities of meaningful work. The findings of this study show that factors such as institutionalised corruption, lack of institutional support, low social trust, sense of insecurity, spiritual yearnings and other forms of constraint affected the way participants negotiated and made sense of meaningful work. In particular, an informal institution, in this case engaged Buddhism, was instrumentalised by participants as a response to weak formal institutions to negotiate meaningful work. Therefore, this study contributes a non-Western perspective on meaningful work, introducing meaningful work through the lens of Buddhist principles and offering a contextualised framework.

and private sectors, initiating institutional change, and promoting foreign trade and financial stability to support the role of small and medium enterprises and national culture.

The paper first reviews the recent literature on meaningful work and characteristics of the transitional context of Vietnam. The methodology is then explained and the findings presented. Lastly, the paper offers a contextualised meaningful work framework based on the findings and discusses further avenues for future studies.

Meaningful work and social context

Meaningful work is “the degree to which the employee experiences the job as one which is generally meaningful, valuable and worthwhile” (Hackman & Oldham, 1975: 162). Meaningfulness is not a unitary construct. Because meaningfulness is context related and tensional, subject to dilemmas, paradoxes (Bailey et al, 2018) and dynamic and contested negotiation (Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017), different assumptions underlie how it is conceptualised, interpreted and constructed in different circumstances (Lepisto & Pratt, 2017). What people find meaningful is often ‘renegotiated’ when changes happen (Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017). This temporal nature of meaningfulness highlights the importance of the transiency of context, and the way individuals justify the worth of their work is a function of social, cultural and institutional contexts (Baumeister, 1991; Wuthnow, 1996). Accordingly, meaningfulness is not an inherent characteristic of a specific type of work.

Previous studies have shown that meaningful work is closely linked to individuals’ needs for motivation, autonomy, authenticity and self-worth (Rosso et al, 2010), occupational conditions and social orientation (Kohn & Schooler, 1969; 1982; Kornhauser, 1964), and the desire to overcome work alienation (e.g., powerlessness, normlessness, meaningfulness) (Shepard, 1972) through self-determination (Ryan & Deci, 2000) or self-realisation (Waterman, 1993). Within a Western context, Bailey and Madden (2016) identify five features of meaningful work that capture

the fragile and intangible nature of meaningfulness. As such, the experience of meaningfulness at work can be self-transcendent, poignant, episodic, reflective, or personal. However, in other contexts, especially Eastern contexts, contextual differences in terms of philosophies, institutions and cultural values (Barkema et al, 2015) may lay the foundation for distinctive interpretations of meaningful work based on deeply held cultural norms and traditions. Indeed, contextual factors such as changes in cultural institutions (Lepisto & Pratt, 2017) can create challenges, ambiguity and uncertainty for individuals seeking moral anchors in their work (Sennett, 2007). Therefore, while the way individuals perceive the worth of work contributes to the framing processes for social movements (Benford & Snow, 2000), culture in the form of traditions and religion can also provide a value base and rationale for justifying or legitimising the worth of an action (Baumeister, 1991), thus also influencing the way people perceive meaningfulness and meaningful work.

This study explores meaningful work in the transitional context of Vietnam for two main reasons. First, institutional, social and cultural changes in Vietnam have resulted in issues of trust and morality, powerlessness, obsession with materialism, and spiritual yearnings, as seen in the rise of engaged Buddhism, which have influenced the way people think and act (Taylor, 2004). While engaged Buddhism refers to the application of Buddhist principles and philosophies to attend to contemporary sufferings due to social, political, economic or environmental issues (Thich, 1998), in this study engaged Buddhism is not characterised by activism towards social change (Cozort & Shields, 2018). Rather it is about how the practice and application of Buddhism involves sense-making, and how this plays out in organisational contexts (Main & Lai, 2013). Exploring meaningful work in this context responds to calls for studies examining how individuals negotiate meaningfulness in situations of moral multiplexity (Reinecke et al, 2017). Second, most studies on meaningful work are predominantly based on Western conceptualisations of meaningfulness

within individualistic cultural frameworks, while non-Western cultures may experience meaningfulness differently (see Allan et al., 2018 for a review). For instance, the collectivist culture of Korea places importance on recognition and family support at work (Tak et al., 2017). In Confucian cultures, Confucian ethics influence affective and normative motives at work (Kang et al., 2017), or emphasise rewarding coworkers based on the notion of *guanxi*², as seen in China, India, and Korea (Busse, et al., 2017). As such, this study contributes a non-Western perspective on meaningful work that attends to the need for more studies examining the ‘messiness’ of meaningful work (Mitra & Buzzanel, 2017), and in particular reveals the complexities, controversies, and tensions of a transitional context.

The transitional context of Vietnam and engaged Buddhism

The 6th Vietnamese Communist Party Congress of 1986 adopted the renovation policy known as ‘*Đổi Mới*’. Subsequently, efforts toward promoting trade liberalisation, economic stability and private initiatives (Hoskisson et al., 2000) have made Vietnam one of the fastest growing economies in Southeast Asia over the past decade, with an average growth rate of 6 percent (ADB, 2017). However, alongside the economic reforms, the restructuring of the legal system has failed to generate well-functioning markets (Trubek and Santos, 2006). While laws exist on paper, there is weak enforcement by the state (Gray, 1997), confirming Hoskisson et al.’s (2000) view that transitional economies have economic growth but underdeveloped institutions.

Due to the lack of effective systems of law and law enforcement in the country, corruption and political turmoil (Cuadra, Sanchez, & Sapriza, 2010) have reduced levels of trust in the nation’s

² Interpersonal connections, similar to the terms *blat* in Russia and *pratik* in Haiti and referring to instrumental-personal ties that range from strong personal loyalties to ceremonial bribery (Walder, 1986, p.179).

bureaucracy and one party institutional system. Vietnam scored 33/100 in the 2018 Corruption Perceptions Index and was ranked 117 of 180 countries globally (Transparency International, 2018). This reflects the high level of corruption in the country, variously attributed to political uncertainty, poor infrastructure, and weak market institutions and systems of law (Hoskisson et al., 2000).

Alongside rapid economic development and the blending of traditional and modern values, decreased levels of trust are affecting the Vietnamese people due to societal changes. Signs of moral degradation or demoralisation reflect a weakening of the moral and ethical structures that have traditionally prevailed (Zheng et al., 2014), and people are experiencing spiritual yearnings – specifically toward engaged Buddhism³ (Taylor, 2004; Vu & Tran, 2019). People have turned to engaged Buddhism due to its emphasis on experiential knowledge-wisdom in relation to practical matters (Yeshe, 1998), which builds resilience in adapting and responding to social tensions and the competing demands of allegiance to moral norms and the pursuit of economic goals (Johansen & Gopalakrishna, 2006).

Methods

An inductive qualitative study based on a realist paradigm (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to explore meaningful work in the transitional context of Vietnam and identify attitudes, sensemaking and interpretations of meaningful work among the study participants (Ten Have, 2004)

Sample and procedure

³ The rise of engaged Buddhism can be understood in part in relation to the perceived disadvantages of Confucianism as a remnant of Chinese rule, an active element within the regime, and as associated with backward (*lạc hậu*), feudal (*phong kiến*) and superstitious (*mê tín*) beliefs (Leshkovich, 2006, p.298; Vu et al, 2018).

Sixty in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted in Vietnam to explore meaningful and meaningless moments for people from different occupations (see Table 1 for more information).

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

A purposive sample was gathered in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam's two largest cities in Vietnam, and where the social, political and economic changes of the transitional context are most evident. I used the snowball technique to identify Buddhist practitioners because many consider Buddhism an individual practice and thus rarely promote themselves as Buddhist. The first respondent was identified through my professional network and belonged to a Buddhist community practicing the Mahayana tradition in the workplace. Respondents were middle-class workers from various industries in both the state-owned and private sectors. Participants ranged in age from 27 to 65, with most in the 31–40 age group (mean age: 34.6). The sample consisted of 31 women and 29 men. While all respondents claimed to be Buddhist, 48 of the 60 respondents specified they were Buddhist practitioners⁴. Unlike other Buddhist countries such as Thailand, Buddhism is not the state religion in Vietnam. In fact, because of Western interventions and colonisation over many years (by the French in the North and the Americans in the South), “Vietnam [has] never had a state religion integrating the whole population” (Houtart, 1976, p. 36). However, apart from the dominance of folk religions across the nation (45.3%), there are more Buddhists (16.4%) than other religious groups such as Christians (8.2%) or Hindus, Jews, Muslims, and others (less than 1%) (Pew Research Center, 2010).

Sixty-to-ninety minute interviews (mean time: 116 minutes) took place over four months, from November 2017 until February 2018. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed

⁴ Seriously and actively engaged with the application of the dharma (the Buddha's teachings) in everyday life

verbatim. All transcriptions were translated to ensure the original meanings of the interviews were not lost. Participants were asked to illustrate their responses with specific examples of moments they felt meaningful or meaningless at work, to identify the underlying assumptions informing their perceptions, and to share their thoughts on the opportunities and constraints of the Vietnamese transitional context and its impact on their work (see Table 2 for interview questions). The interview questions were finalised after the interview schedule was piloted with 25 respondents. In the pilot, respondents had difficulty understanding the word ‘meaningful’ in relation to meaningful work. Meaningfulness can be interpreted in several ways in the Vietnamese context. It can be understood as purely meaningful for self and others (*y nghĩa*), or intrinsically or extrinsically valuable (*có giá trị*), and thus means different things to different individuals, both in a negative or positive way. Therefore, in the context of this study, the term ‘meaningful work’ refers to the positive experience of having a sense of happiness and wholesomeness with regard to the self and others in the workplace. In addition, respondents were encouraged to describe their experiences of meaningful and meaningless moments to demonstrate their interpretation of wholesomeness/unwholesomeness as an aspect of their experiences and journeys as Buddhist practitioners.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Analyses

Qualitative content analysis, a systematic method for describing the meaning of qualitative data (Schreier, 2012), was applied in this study. All participants signed a consent form indicating their willingness to participate in the study, and giving permission for the interviews to be recorded. Steps were taken to ensure all study participants remained anonymous. All the interview transcripts

were read and examined closely to gain an overall picture of the interview content and achieve immersion. As a first step, I read through the data several times to achieve immersion and obtain a sense of the whole. I then took 10% of the data to develop the initial coding frame (Schreier, 2012). Open-coding was used to determine what was represented in the text, and give that phenomenon a name (Cowan & Fox, 2015). Codes were grouped into categories and subcategories to develop the initial coding frame and set rules. The initial coding frame included contextual factors such as the weak legal system, institutionalised bribery, insecurity, favouritism, ethical dilemmas and sacrifices, as well as interpretations of meaningfulness, professional development, virtuous conduct and so on. After the initial coding frame was developed, I provided clear descriptions of each category and set rules determining when and what data should be included under a category. Axial coding was used to look for relationships and make connections between a category and its subcategory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The codes were then examined, reorganised, categories and subcategories clearly defined, and all transcripts recoded using the final codes to establish consistency. The final codes included pragmatic approaches to meaningful work, specifically ethicality, transiency, and reflexivity, to name a few. Thematic saturation was achieved by the forty-fourth interview. Finally, I used selective coding to establish relationships across and within the overarching categories, which then informed the contextualised model of meaningful work. Nvivo11 was used to support coding and data analysis.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings I used member check (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), whereby five participants from the study were asked to check whether the findings resonated with them, and changes in interpretations were made based on their suggestions. In addition, I also used peer examination (Merriam, 2015), asking another academic to comment on the plausibility of the

results. Lastly, a Buddhist scholar was also invited to comment on the interpretations of Buddhist terms and practices in the text.

Findings

This section uses excerpts from the interviews to demonstrate how respondents enact the qualities of meaningful work in the transitional context of Vietnam, and highlight the institutional and social constraints that influence the way individuals interpret meaningful work.

Meaningful work in the transitional context

Personal/Pragmatic

As similarly found by Baily and Madden (2016), there are individualistic concerns over job meaningfulness. For instance, for some, meaningful work is a matter of financial expectations and career development:

I am very pragmatic about my work. For me, meaningful work is a job that prioritises my financial needs so that I have the means to take care of family's future. (R42)

However, in this study, institutional and social constraints override personal pursuits, thus pragmatic personal pursuits are activated by such constraints. People have become sceptical due to the ineffective legal system, monopolistic government policies, and institutionalised corruption (Gregory, 2016, p. 239). Efforts from the state toward implementing social well-being for people only operate at a surface level, and there is a tendency to take a pragmatic view of meaningful work (47):

People either just care about the benefits their jobs can give them, mainly financial, or focus on developing their professional skills to become more competitive in the job market.

You cannot blame them really; security in our country today is a luxury. You can never know how and when the state will change policies that can have impact on your professional future. (R31)

State employees (18) such as a medical staff, on the other hand, stressed the importance of professional development, reflecting on how meaningfulness can arise when individuals are able to project a desired future self through their work (DeBoeck et al, 2018), especially when they are facing constraints due to personal connections and favour-based relationships in the workplace based on the collective nature of the Vietnamese context:

I am on a permanent contract, but personal favours take place in our department. The only way to secure your place or to achieve career progression is to show professional development and receive favourable public appraisal that cannot be ignored or taken for granted. (R28)

Another institutional constraint highlighted by respondents (37), especially those working in the public sector, was the lack of institutional support, which affected meaning-making at work. For example, while there have been new initiatives from the state to enhance the public healthcare sector since *Đổi Mới* (Gabriele, 2006), poor infrastructure has reduced opportunities to pursue excellence. A respondent working in a state-owned hospital expressed that:

We are on low incomes. Not only that, we have limited funds to invest in medical equipment and staff training. We do not have enough capacity for patients; consequently, there are long waiting lists for patients and to be fair, our services are slow. Our services are becoming less meaningful. We have enough staff, but not enough skilled staff. Therefore, skilled staff are disappointed with the working conditions and less-skilled staffs have few chances for career development and progression. (R13)

Although experiencing fewer constraints due to the favour-based relationships that are seen more in the state-owned enterprises, employees in the private sector (21) still felt the pressure of job insecurity:

I have a good job and a good salary. But my work often involves long working hours following different projects. It is not as meaningful as you might think if you just look at my position and salary. Sometimes, I do not feel comfortable having to sacrifice my personal hobbies and family time for work, especially working in an insecure finance and banking sector, which involves underground trading that you are not always in a position to know about. (R22)

The above finding lends support to Taylor's (2004) claim that certain kinds of obsession and materialism exist in the Vietnamese transitional context that affect individuals' sense-making of meaningfulness. Indeed, respondents emphasised the importance of earning an adequate salary to live well and have savings to secure the future. In addition, these findings reflect a distinctly pragmatic view of meaningfulness in the context of Vietnam, different from Bailey and Madden's (2017) study highlighting the personal in meaningful work. Personal pursuits and pragmatic views on meaningfulness are activated as a response to the insecure transitional context. Because people feel insecure, they have become more individualistic in considering their personal needs in the workplace, rather than an 'in-group' style of thinking to benefit the group (Fan & Zigang, 2004).

We have lots of teamwork but underneath that, everyone is only doing what is best for them. We had an earlier incident where a team member was convicted for intentionally accepting a fraudulent source of funds for our project and he blamed the whole team. Now people are more careful and even for myself, I prefer to work individually [...] trust is really important for interpersonal and workplace relationships, but obviously it is also a

luxury in today's insecure political and social context [...] I would say it is quite rare to see the spirit of "the leaves protect tattered ones" (*lá lành đùm lá rách*) at professional workplaces. (R49)

A number of respondents claimed the tendency to be pragmatic is due to the influence of the long-held Confucian collectivist tradition within the transitional process in Vietnam (Bond & King, 1985; Ralston et al., 1999), with flow-on effects for corruption and moral issues in the country (Vu et al., 2018).

In my parents' generation and even in mine, we used to embrace Confucian teachings in appreciating others, but it is incredible how these values have become feudal and abused in supporting collective corruption since *đổi mới*. No wonder the younger generations are more individualistic and pragmatic. (R48)

The findings show there are tensions under *Đổi Mới* that are influencing sense of meaningfulness in the Vietnamese workplace, as evidenced by poor infrastructure, institutionalised corruption and inadequate public assistance.

Self-transcendent

Many participants (33) expressed their appreciation of work that can facilitate self-transcendence, the ability to apply the notion of virtuous conduct (*Sīla*) – one of the qualities of the Buddhist Noble Eightfold Path – specifically, "living in ways that do not harm, deprive or exploit other people, animals, and nature" (Daniels, 2007, p. 170). As in other research, self-transcendence in the context of Vietnam reflects the desire to help others, however their sense of transcendence is strengthened when they are able to bring benefit to others, especially in overcoming temptations and challenging contexts due to the weak legal system. A doctor shared:

It is true that we receive incentives from pharmaceutical companies to prescribe medical products because prescribing is not controlled by any specific national healthcare system. I do not deny that it is a common norm in our sector. But it does not mean that I ignore virtuous conduct as a doctor. I am always very cautious to prescribe the most effective and affordable medications for my patient, even when offers are placed on my table. (R34)

Quite different from the sense of self-transcendence described by Bailey and Madden (2016), self-transcendence in this study also reflects the ability to let go of and sacrifice personal ethical codes to bring benefits for larger audiences in response to the institutionalised corruption in the country. For instance, older respondents from state-owned enterprises who had experienced *Đổi Mới* from the very beginning claimed that the flow of foreign investment into Vietnam in the early years had led to high-levels of profiteering at odds with the communist principles of common ownership and distribution of property and wealth. In this context, bribery was sometimes an inevitable act in acquiring needed investment for important but underdeveloped sectors such as education.

It is sometimes necessary to bribe to acquire needed investment for important but underdeveloped sectors such as education. In Vietnam, good deeds come at a price, through self-sacrifice. (R26)

As a Buddhist practitioner and an analyst, I advise my clients to consider social responsibility and long-term orientations in their decisions, even if it involves short-term losses. Sometimes, it costs my reputation as well if the clients are only after short-term profits, but this is what represents meaningful work to me. (R47)

This reflects the impact of the paradoxes and dilemmas of the transitional context on meaningful work, where institutionalised bribery and lack of trust in the society (Vu, 2019) generate pragmatic orientations to satisfy the obsession with the material and secure a living, but at the same time self-

transcendent approaches are required that sometimes involve sacrificing personal moral and ethical codes.

Reflexive

Bailey and Madden (2016) highlight that sense of meaningfulness is more episodic than sustainable because it tends to be found in distinct moments rather than as a constant state. In this study, such moments are found in the way respondents experience reflexivity at work, an important part of Buddhist practice that generates meaningfulness for them. Thirty-one respondents indicated reflexivity as an important feature of meaningful work in a context where Buddhism has become increasingly engaged in people's lives. For these respondents, reflexivity helped in reflecting back on the 'self', and their interpretations of the context in which they worked. For example, a participant from the retail industry found a strong sense of reflexivity in what he had previously thought of as meaningless work. For him, the more difficult the situation he found himself in, the more he could turn it around and instead reflect on himself:

For me, finding meaningfulness in meaningless work is the most fascinating experience. As a Buddhist, I understand that life is impermanent [...] if you ask me if I find my work meaningful, I have no definite answer for you. What I can tell you is that I used to think of my work as a painful and meaningless job. Why did I have to deal with fussy, demanding, and rude customers? But then I realised – it is me who is being meaningless here. I was too attached to my own 'ego', my own perceptions [...] But now I find my work meaningful in the sense that it creates challenging cases for me to reflect on how well I can practise non-self and non-attachment. I learn from my customers and train myself every day. (R9)

In the example above, the respondent applied Buddhism to facilitate a proactive personality (Macey & Schneider, 2008) and enhance his construction of meaning, rather than feeling

powerless to generate a sense of resilience in the workplace. Another respondent, who had been practicing Buddhism for more than fifty years viewed meaningful work as transient in form, and therefore it should be free from expectations:

The most meaningful experience for me was when I stopped having expectations for meaningful work. Nothing is meaningful forever and once you realise that, you are free from suffering and expectations. Meaningfulness should be everywhere if you understand that nothing is permanent. (R18)

In the context of this study, these experiences were influenced by informal institutions such as engaged Buddhism as a replacement for weak formal institutions. The recent spiritual movement in Vietnam, especially the growth of engaged Buddhism in the social, economic and religious activities of the country has begun to influence the way people interpret ‘self’ and life purpose, including what they consider meaningful. Buddhism reflects an ethical system, way of thinking and process of practicing-learning-transforming to understand the universe (Cooper & James, 2005; Daniels, 2005; Johansen & Gopalakrishna, 2006; Marques, 2010). As an individual practice, the process of self-transformation in Buddhism to attain wisdom involves the continuous accumulation of both successful and failed experiences from self-reflection. Therefore, when people engage Buddhism in their work, they consider meaningful work as work that helps them to reflect upon themselves and tame their desires, thus providing favourable conditions in which to practise Buddhism.

Ethical

Due to the weak law enforcement that has led to institutionalised corruption, for most of the participants in this study (42)⁵, meaningfulness came from work that is ethical. A respondent from the oil and gas industry illustrated this phenomenon by describing how collective corruption can lead to work alienation, creating a sense of normlessness (Shepard, 1972):

Having an ethical working environment is extremely important. [...] You must have heard of the recent corruption scandal involving high-ranked state officials and our company [...] Collective corruption was exposed during the investigations, and upper level managers, CEOs and all the people associated with the system were convicted, indicating that without an ethical work environment, you can never feel safe. (R23)

He further described the tensions associated with institutionalised corruption, especially when:

...collective corruption is tempting and you can be considered an outsider or be isolated if you do not support the system. Once you are in a company that suffers from scandals, your reputation and professional career will be affected. So what is the meaning of having well-paid jobs with powerful positions when you may have to exchange your personal reputation, or might even end up with a conviction? (R23)

In addition, due to weak law enforcement systems, the practice of law tends to serve and favour people in positions of power, potentially leading to work alienation. For instance, as a corporate lawyer shared:

I personally struggle with and sometimes question the meaningfulness and ethicality of my profession. I defended and won a case for a firm that was involved in environmental pollution scandals [...] (R52)

⁵ This represents the number of respondents

Having to operate in a high context⁶ culture, where decisions are mainly based on power, relationships and personal favours, can affect the psychological well-being of people such as lawyers, leading to a loss of interest and purpose in their work. This is due to the need to form an ‘other-self’ to fit in with others’ expectations or achieve wider acceptance by the group (Obodaru, 2012; Schalk, 2011). There is also a tendency to cling to a sense of security, including job security, and the ideal of a secure working environment where personal codes of ethics are not jeopardised because of the weakened moral and ethical values in society and within state government that are evident in the transitional context (Vynoslavska et al., 2005; Zheng et al., 2014).

I would appreciate a job where I do not have to suffer from the headache of having to please or bribe state officials against my ethical values. (R59)

These societal problems are reflected in the way respondents from both the state and private sectors questioned the meaningfulness of their work. For instance, a significant number of respondents (16) from businesses in the private sector reported being asked to bribe state officials/staffs as part of their job requirement, and against their will:

Part of my job is to negotiate incentives for state doctors and hospital pharmacists to maintain our specialised product lines for patients suffering from gastric ulcers and kidney failure [...] I was never comfortable with offering incentives but that is part of my job [...] but the meaningfulness of this work is questionable to me [...] (R50)

In the public sector, participants (21) also experienced the impacts of moral degradation at work, especially in having to cover up for higher ranking managers:

⁶ Refers to cultures in which people are deeply involved with each other based on relationships, social-hierarchical structures and strong self-control (Hall, 1976).

I work in the state bank, which guarantees the security that many people wish for. But how would you feel if your corporate loan deal was used by your manager to facilitate fraudulent financial activities for a state project? It is not meaningful to me at all. (R2)

Individuals' adaptive preference in shaping meaningful work – the role of an informal institution – engaged Buddhism

When formal institutions fail to support social trust, informal institutions can become a substitutive source (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004), as seen with engaged Buddhism in this study. Buddhism reflects an ethical system, way of thinking and process of practicing-learning-transforming to understand the universe (Daniels, 2005; Marques, 2010).

[...] when I started practicing Buddhism, rather than blaming the external conditions, I came to understand myself and learnt to control my emotions. Applying non-self (*vô ngã*) in my work made me become more patient and skillful in dealing with complex dilemmas or difficult state officials. (R42)

Respondents valued the Buddhist principles of impermanence (*vô thường*) – phenomena in life always are interacting and changing; non-self (*vô ngã*) – the notion of letting go of ego, the self and desires; and non-attachment (*không bám chấp*) – the rejection of extreme choices manipulated by one's perceptions. For these respondents, Buddhist principles helped in reflecting back on the 'self', and their interpretations of the context in which they worked.

Applying non-self (*vô ngã*) and non-attachment (*không bám chấp*) helped me a lot in learning from own mistakes. I started to appreciate my work, stopped judging difficult clients and even my own boss. (R40)

By understanding impermanence (*vô thường*), I was able to be more flexible with stakeholders' expectations and find meaningfulness along that constant self-adjusting journey. (R19)

For respondents, applying Buddhist principles facilitated a proactive personality (Macey & Schneider, 2008) by enhancing the construction of meaning and meaningfulness at work.

Practicing Buddhism helped me to change and adjust myself to find meaning in what I do rather than relying on or expecting that from external conditions. (R29)

Although respondents considered ethicality an important feature of meaningful work, based on the principle of non-attachment in Buddhism that embraces context-sensitivity, they did not see ethical failure as a threat to meaningful work. Because Buddhism is more about correcting and developing the 'self' in response to the impermanent nature of external contexts that are beyond individuals' expectations (Vu & Tran, 2019), respondents were thus trying to adapt to the context because they considered it a social illness of the Vietnamese transitional economy, and beyond their individual control:

You find this tricky, unpleasant and somewhat impure (*ô uế*) working environment nearly everywhere. (R32)

In response to the social constraints outlined above, also evident was a proactive adaptive preference (Sen, 1985; Naussbam, 1997) among respondents to working conditions as a fundamental setting in which to practise Buddhism. Respondents in this study showed a tendency to downwardly revise their expectations of work meaningfulness, thereby narrowing their occupational opportunities and social mobility. In other words, because of the narrowed options perceived by individuals under adverse circumstance, they tend to adapt their preferences so that

what they really prefer becomes subsumed by contextual factors (Teschl & Comin, 2005). It is however important to note that the adaptive preference indicated by respondents in the context of Vietnam reflects how individual preferences have been deformed by adverse social conditions and political oppression (Naussbam, 1997). For instance, many businesses are bound to accept or be flexible toward different forms of bribery to survive and operate in Vietnam. Respondents, however, rationalised their flexible approach to bribery as enabled by Buddhist practice that fosters their ability to be context-sensitive and let go of personal pursuits. Demonstrating their sense of self-transcendence in meaningful work, respondents R26 and R47 emphasised that understanding and practicing the notion of non-self – the ability to let go of egoistic pursuits – made it possible for them to transcend their own reservations for the benefit of others. Ironically, even when demonstrating the qualities of meaningful work, pragmatism was still strongly emphasised by respondents.

In summary, in the context of this study, engaged Buddhism can be seen as an instrument used by respondents to justify their adaptability to unfavourable or ‘unhealthy’ working conditions in the transitional context rather than seeking to initiate changes. On the other hand, some respondents shared that adaptability is sometimes needed for the greater good. As such, engaged Buddhism fosters the sacrifice of personal goals for the greater good, facilitating self-transcendence – overriding personal expectations and needs for the sake of all sentient beings. Such ethical and self-transcendent approaches sometimes involve the sacrifice of personal goals due to contextual challenges. Nevertheless, the same argument was made (with regard to external conditions and challenges) by individuals to justify their pragmatic approaches to meaningful work.

Yet, the question remains: To what extent can engaged Buddhism generate self-transcendent initiatives to cultivate meaning-making at work, and when does it become an excuse to comply

with alienating working conditions? The transitional context of Vietnam thus reflects paradoxes and dilemmas in meaning making in the workplace.

Occupational, gender and age differences

The findings also reveal a variety of factors (the nature of occupation, age, gender) that generated tensions and impacted on how respondents interpreted meaningful work. In terms of occupation and working conditions, the findings highlight that the pursuit of ‘goods of excellence’ at work (Beadle & Knight, 2012) differed among respondents, with some suffering from boredom due to routine work, while others carried out creative tasks in positions with more responsibility.

I am a doctor but my time is wasted on time-consuming administrative work rather than having the opportunity to practise medicine like other senior doctors in our hospital. (R46)

There were also different pressures evident in the state-owned and private sectors. While respondents from the private sector had more flexibility in their jobs compared to working within the bureaucratic systems of the public sector, they also suffered from higher expectations and ongoing pressures due to competition:

While we have a relatively flexible working environment here, which I really enjoy, I am constantly under pressure to meet targets. (R16)

Younger respondents (aged 27–45) showed a tendency to emphasise pragmatic views of the meaningfulness of work compared to older ones (aged 45–65). This difference reaffirms respondent R48’s comment that younger generations have been influenced by observing and experiencing the negative and feudal impacts of the co-opting of Confucian values in institutionalised corruption in the country. On the other hand, younger respondents also showed more concern for ethical problems. Many referred to their exposure to the study of business ethics

in higher education, supporting other findings that younger Vietnamese people are less tolerant of unethical behaviours (Nguyen et al., 2015). For instance, a respondent with six years' experience expressed:

As a journalist, I am particularly keen on promoting ethicality even though freedom of speech and information is sometimes restricted in Vietnam. It is however part of my professional etiquette and what makes journalism meaningful for me. (R43)

In terms of gender, there were no significant differences in how contextual constraints influenced male and female respondents' interpretations of meaningful work. However, interestingly, female respondents (31) tended to demonstrate greater need for work that is ethical. This concurs with Nguyen et al.'s (2015) findings that Vietnamese females tend to be more ethical than their male colleagues. This tendency closely links to the Vietnamese norm emphasising the importance of mothers as role models, based on the traditional worship of Mother Goddesses (*Đạo Mẫu*) – the value 'child blessed thanks to mother' (*Phúc đức tại Mẫu*).

I am a mother of two children. It is important for me to ethical, fair, and truthful in life and at work. I need to cultivate virtue and morals since these values will all reflect back on how my children are blessed and learn from me in the future. For me, being ethical at work is all it takes to make my job meaningful for me and my family. (R29)

While respondents were from both Hanoi (36) and Ho Chi Minh City (24), the findings do not reveal significant differences in how meaningful work was perceived between the two cities, despite the general assumption that the southern part of Vietnam is more individualistic due to exposure to American culture during the Vietnam War (Ralston et al., 1999). Overall, the responses demonstrate similar orientations to meaningful work, with no notably different struggles evident between old and new values in the modernisation process (Bond & King, 1985).

In summary, while the nature of their profession, demographic factors and individual preferences did affect the way respondents defined meaningful work, contextual factors had a greater impact on meaning-making at work. Financial security is crucial to people in Vietnam as basic needs and well-being have been inadequately protected during the rapid economic development of the transition. There has been an emphasis on individual achievement in the post-war period (Quang, 1997) in response to the negative impacts of a collectivist culture that has facilitated institutionalised corruption and weak law enforcement in Vietnam. Participants looked to engaged Buddhism to adapt to the challenging working conditions and institutional and social constraints. However, engaged Buddhism could also be used by respondents as an instrument to justify adaptability to situations that sometimes involved what they considered to be unethical behaviours (bribery), either to secure their positions or to offer support for initiatives for the greater good.

Discussion

This study adds to the limited body of work exploring the impact of social and cultural contexts on meaningful work (Boova et al, 2019; Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017), and makes a number of contributions to the literature of meaningful work.

First, this study further extends the multidimensional and paradoxical dimensions of meaningful work (Bailey et al, 2018; Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012), reaffirming the importance of societal and cultural context to interpretations of meaningfulness (Boova et al, 2019). The study contributes in addressing the absence of research on the links between meaningful work and political, economic and normative institutions, and how the ethical-moral values embedded in national cultures can affect meaning-making (Yeoman et al, 2019). As similarly found in previous studies (Baily & Madden, 2016; Berge et al, 2010; Hurst, 2014), there are individualistic concerns over job meaningfulness in Vietnam. Work is meaningful when it ‘brings fulfillment to ... lives’

through creative learning and continuous development (Chalofsky, 2003: 74). It is part of the process of self-development and becoming, and provides opportunities to express full potential (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009). In addition, meaningful work is impermanent and non-static, with changes that involve individual adaptation to certain contexts over time.

However, this broadly Western model significantly differs from how meaningfulness is understood in this study, and the transitional context plays a crucial role. First, institutional and social constraints have fostered a pragmatic individualism in securing future and career, and perceiving materialistic pursuits as meaningful. Second, there are paradoxes in how meaningfulness is perceived due to contextual constraints and pressures. On one hand, meaningful work is thought of as ethical and self-transcendent. On the other, due to contextual constraints, personal ethical codes are compromised to attain self-transcendent meaningfulness. While similar in some respects to Bailey and Madden's (2016) findings on self-transcendence in a Western setting, in the context of Vietnam, meaningful work as self-transcendent involves more than just doing good for others, but also the ability to transform oneself and make personal sacrifices over moral and ethical struggles.

Second, in response to institutional and social constraints, the study identifies certain forms of adaptive preference in individuals' negotiation of meaningful work. Institutional constraints such as weak law enforcement, institutionalised corruption and inadequate social infrastructure affect people's meaning-making at work. Likewise, social constraints such as the overwhelming lack of trust and weakened moral and ethical values in Vietnamese society have created paradoxical interpretations of meaningful work. Respondents pursued work goals by being pragmatic about material needs and learning to cope with institutional constraints, thereby forming a certain type

of adaptive preference towards unfavourable working conditions while still being aware of the importance of ethicality.

Third, spiritual practices, which in this study refer to Buddhist principles, can be used as an instrument to justify an adaptive preference in cultivating meaningful work even in unfavourable circumstances. While Vietnam has a deeply embedded collectivist culture, the institutionalised corruption operating under collective protection caused participants to question the nature of collectivism. As a result, respondents had become skeptical and found Buddhist practice – an individual practice aimed at self-correction and development – to be useful and relevant in helping them to respond to the complex, insecure and impermanent nature of the workplace. As such, pragmatic orientations are evident in this study. As described above, Buddhist principles underlie a variety of approaches to attaining a sense of meaningfulness, however it is essential to acknowledge that any form of excessive attachment, including immoderate attachment to meaningful work, can result in suffering. Buddhism can also be used as an excuse for adapting to the context rather than trying to solve the issues, leading to passivity in accepting constraints rather than actively tackling them. The study contributes a distinctive view on how individuals negotiate meaningfulness through the practice of engaged Buddhism in situations of moral multiplexity (Reinecke et al, 2017). On the other hand, pressures generated by different occupations, differences in levels of moral concern shown by men and women, and variations between age groups in terms of work and life experiences and level of maturity in their Buddhist practice also affected the way respondents perceived meaningful work in this study.

Lastly, the study contributes a contextualised framework of meaningful work (see Figure 1).

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

However, the study's main contribution is highlighting the role of formal and informal institutions in influencing individuals' sense of meaningful work. Both formal and informal institutions can create tensions and pressures for individuals, generating certain forms of adaptability and coping mechanisms that have a significant impact on their understanding of the qualities of meaningful work. In this particular study, it was evident that an ineffective formal institution (i.e., the legal system) was being replaced by an informal one (i.e., engaged Buddhism) that supported social trust (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004) in the context of Vietnam. Both formal and informal institutions were instrumentalised by respondents to justify their interpretations and adaptability in fostering a sense of meaningful work. They understood meaningful work as pragmatic, reflexive, self-transcendent, and ethical, with meaningfulness attained through their adaptability (proactive personality and adaptive preference) in response to the tensions (isolation, pragmatism vs. self-transcendence) within organisational work contexts, which are influenced by both formal and informal institutions. Tensions arising from having to respond to institutional and social constraints result in individuals juggling the need to be pragmatic to secure their needs in the midst of impermanent formal and informal institutions with the need to attain meaningful self-transcendence through work. In response to these tensions, respondents in this study had developed mechanisms supporting adaptability (e.g., when dealing with the ethical dilemmas created by institutionalised corruption), so as to fit in with the perceived qualities of meaningful work as influenced by the contextual constraints in an effort to avoid a sense of isolation in the workplace. The study indicates that an informal institution such as spirituality can be used by individuals as an instrument to justify their adaptive preference in the face of contextual constraints, in turn affecting their perceptions of interpersonal relationships at work and the way they see meaningful work. The study also found interpersonal relationships are affected by the sense of insecurity and

lack of trust within the Vietnamese transitional context (Vu & Tran, 2019). The framework confirms and further expands on the significant effect of contextual constraints (Mitra and Buzzanell, 2017) and social moral degradation (Zheng et al., 2014) on how people respond to and perceive meaningfulness in organisations.

Conclusions

This study contributes a non-Western perspective on meaningful work, introducing meaningful work through the lens of Buddhist principles and offering a contextualised framework. The study highlights that interpretations and individuals' adaptive preference for meaningful work are deeply shaped by formal/informal institutions. In particular, spirituality as an informal institution plays a significant role in meaning making with regard to workplace meaningfulness. The contextualised framework of meaningful work introduced in this paper can be further utilised in future studies to explore how different formal/informal institutions influence the way people identify and make sense of the qualities of meaningful work, and foster different means of adapting to respond to contextual tensions. By exploring the messiness of meaningful work (Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017) through a non-Western lens, the study extends knowledge of both the complex and controversial nature of meaningful work (Bailey et al, 2018; Schad & Bansal, 2018).

However, the study is not without limitations. First, the study would have benefitted from more coders who are familiar with different worldviews to explore and expand possible multidimensional meanings in the data. Second, participants in the study were highly-skilled workers, which limited exploration of the impact of routine, repetitive and mindless work on cultivating meaningfulness. Third, future studies involving cities other than Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, and with distinct provincial characteristics, may contribute additional features of meaningful work worth considering. Future studies could also gain useful insights from

investigating the impact of different institutional factors, cultural logics, spiritual beliefs, and demographic features on the notion of meaningful work. Finally, particularly in the context of Vietnam, traditional norms tend to have greater impacts on females, affecting their sense-making and priorities at work, and this would be interesting to explore further.

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