

Interactions and the meaning of work in a 'dirty work' industry

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Abstract

Work meaning refers to the employees' understanding of what they do at work as well as the significance of what they do. Using 32 semi-structured interviews with employees at South African gold mines, I investigated how social interactions shape the meaning of work. Based on sensemaking and sensegiving interactions, from within the organization and outside of the work setting, four different themes are yielded which are important for understanding how the meaning of work in a 'dirty work' industry is shaped: organizational taint, hierarchical differences, race and gender differences, and stigma.

Key words: work meaning, dirty work, interactions, sensemaking

"Work is about a search for daily meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash, for astonishment rather than torpor, in short for a sort of life rather than a Monday to Friday sort of dying" (Terkel, 1972).

"Being a diesel mechanic underground, it's not fun, you get full of mud and oil, it's not fun, but that's your job. My hands are clean. I clean my hands. It's just oil, you can wash it off. (...) Lots guys say: "Why are you a diesel mechanic? Can't you work with people? Can't you communicate?" For me is it: start with a problem, and solve it. At the end of the day, when the machine goes out, you know you're happy and it stays away for 2 weeks, that's job satisfaction. And it's weird, but that's my world." (An artisan, one of the research participants)

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1 Introduction

People are the heart, soul, and sinew of companies; through communication and the creation of meaning, they coordinate and focus their efforts (Heath, 1994). Communication is an ongoing process of making sense of the circumstances in which people collectively find themselves and of the events that affect them (Taylor & Van Every, 2000). The basic idea of sensemaking is that reality is an ongoing accomplishment that emerges from efforts to create order and make retrospective sense of what occurs (Weick, 1993). Hence, sensemaking is a critical organizational activity (Weick, 1995).

It is important to study sensemaking because the process is left relatively abstract in the field, while it can provide us with insightful findings about the ways in which individuals in organizations actively generate their own organizational realities (Jeong & Brower, 2008). Additionally, the study of sensemaking is useful for organizational studies because it fills several gaps. Analyses of sensemaking provide e.g. a micro-mechanism that produces macro-change over time, opportunities to incorporate meaning and mind into organizational theory, and reinterpretation of breakdowns as occasions for learning rather than as threats to efficiency (Weick et al., 2005).

Employees engage in continuous sensemaking to discern what meaning their work holds for them. At work, employees attend to and interpret what others do to them and what they do to these others (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). And when people talk about their work, they talk primarily about other people (Sandelands & Boudens in Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). These findings confirm that sensemaking is a social process (Maitlis, 2005) and that social interaction is a crucial mechanism enabling individual actors to engage in a conscious mode of meaning construction (Jeong & Brower, 2008).

Because the need for edifying meaning and identity is often raw in stigmatized occupations, we can learn a great deal about the social construction of work meaning from the experiences of ‘dirty workers’ (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Wrzesniewski & Dutton (2001) reveal that hospital cleaners in the same hospital, experienced and constructed the meaning of their work very differently. One group of cleaners liked the job, enjoyed cleaning, felt the work was highly skilled, and engaged in many tasks that helped patients and visitors and made other’s jobs in the unit (e.g., nurses, clerks) go more smoothly. Another group of cleaners disliked cleaning in general, judged the skill level of the

work to be low, and were less willing to step outside formal job boundaries to engage with others and alter job tasks. An old story about three stonecutters also illustrates how people who are performing the same job, can experience their work differently:

A cathedral was in the first stages of construction and three stonecutters were asked in turn: “What are you doing?” The first replied angrily: “I’m cutting stones.” The second answered: “I am earning a living for myself and my family.” But, the third answered joyously: “I am building a great cathedral!”

Wrzesniewski et al. (2003) found in their study of the work experiences of ‘dirty workers’ (hospital cleaners), that interpersonal cues, noticed actions or behavior of another person or group, contribute to the meanings that employees make about their jobs, roles, and selves. This finding confirms that the study of ‘dirty work’ has much to teach organizational scholars about the negotiation of meaning in the workplace (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to obtain more insight into the shaping process of work meaning in a ‘dirty work’ industry by taking a close look at the social interactions. To do so, I draw on a qualitative study at a gold mining company.

1.1 The meaning of work

Work meaning is the employees’ understanding of what they do at work as well as the significance of what they do (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). The concept of meaningful work, an important element in self-identity and self-worth, reflects the growing interest in the field of positive psychology which emphasizes the need to focus on actively developing the positive aspects of life and work rather than just attempting to identify and address the negative aspects (Seligman in Cartwright & Holmes, 2006). Insofar as meaning and satisfaction are linked (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997), there may be individual performance implications of work meanings (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003).

Workplaces are networks of social relations and arenas of interaction (Baron & Pfeffer, 1994). Individuals are not isolated entities, but living subjects in interactions with others (Jeong & Brower, 2008). Most every person engaged in work is interacting with other people, whether they are co-workers, supervisors, subordinates, clients, customers, or others in the organizational environment. However, the role of other people on the job is often ignored in favour of

properly specifying the relationship between self and work. The job attitudes literature overvalues the role of job tasks and rewards at the expense of the ties between employee and others (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). But relationships sustain organizations: employees spend huge amounts of time joined in repeated, collective efforts to achieve individual and collective goals (Heath, 1994).

Companies exist because their members share meanings and coordinate actions based on the expectations these meanings contain. The meanings that arise in a company are the products of statements and actions by management along with other personnel; meaning is not something managers can predictably use to control employees. It is negotiated by the dialectic of what people do and say. And therefore, improving organizational performance requires insights into what people do and say that helps them coordinate their efforts (Heath, 1994). In addition, organizations need to address and understand the deeper needs of employees in order to retain them and keep them motivated (Havener in Cartwright & Holmes, 2006). Individuals become increasingly disenchanted and disillusioned with work and fatigued by the constant demand to change and to be flexible in response to organizational needs. That is why employers need to actively restore the balance, recognize the meaning and emotional aspects of work and move towards creating a more energized, fulfilled and engaged workforce (Cartwright & Holmes, 2006).

We do not yet understand very much about how the meaning of work in people's lives is created (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). Thus, for managers as well as organizational scholars, it is important to gain more insight into the shaping process of work meaning. Because meaning is essentially a socially constructed phenomenon (Goia & Thomas, 1996), I argue that this can be done by paying attention to the social interactions within the organizational context, as well as the interactions outside of the work setting.

1.2 *'Dirty work'*

Sociologist, psychologists, anthropologists, and organizational scholars have long been intrigued by the stigma cast onto the workers in tainted occupations; the term "dirty work" is often heard in everyday discussions of organizational life (Ashforth et al., 2007). Work is said to be dirty if society perceives it to be physically, socially or morally tainted (Hughes in Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999).

Physical taint occurs where an occupation is either directly associated with garbage, death, and so on, or is thought to be performed under particularly noxious or dangerous conditions. Social taint occurs where an occupation involves regular contact with people or groups that are themselves regarded as stigmatized or where the worker appears to have a servile relationship to others. Moral taint occurs where an occupation is generally regarded as somewhat sinful or of dubious virtue or where the worker is thought to employ methods that are deceptive, intrusive, confrontational, or that otherwise defy norms of civility (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Managers of dirty workers also experience role complexity and stigma awareness (Ashforth et al., 2007). Thus, taint can be placed in a broader organizational perspective. I argue that a work industry with tainted occupations is tainted as well, and therefore can be called a ‘dirty work’ industry.

Identity research indicates that people typically seek to see themselves in a positive light, and this positive sense of self is largely grounded in socially important and salient roles - including occupations - and how those roles are perceived by others. Given the stigma of dirty work, it seems likely that dirty workers would have very difficult time constructing a positive sense of self, at least in the workplace. However, abundant qualitative research from a wide variety of occupations indicates that people performing dirty work tend to retain relatively high occupational esteem and pride (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Those who are not engaged in dirty work tend to perceive that dirty workers are dirty people - a belief that is likely to persist even after dirty workers no longer are in their dirty job. Being a “dirty person” in the eyes of others is likely to be a stressful experience, not only because of the knowledge of such negative social evaluation, but also because of subjection to harassment, discrimination, and other prejudiced acts (Bergman & Chalkley, 2007). In short, “dirtiness” is a social construction and the taint affects people’s relationship with the (ex-) dirty workers (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999).

I argue that social interactions play a crucial role when it comes to the stigma of dirty work and its social construction, as well as the shaping process of employees’ work meaning.

Research question. How do social interactions shape the work meaning of employees in a ‘dirty work’ industry?

2 Method

This study used a qualitative methodology to address its research question. Qualitative methods are well suited to the study of dynamic processes (Maitlis, 2005), especially where these processes are constituted of individuals' interpretations (Gioia & Thomas, 1996).

The aim of this study was theory elaboration, drawing on and extending important ideas from research on work meaning, sensemaking and dirty work. Theory elaboration occurs when preexisting conceptual ideas or a preliminary model drives the study's design (Lee et al., 2000).

2.1 Research context

According to the classification of dirty work occupations, mining is a job with a physical taint and a relatively low occupational prestige (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Because mining is classified by society as dirty work, I argue that the mining industry in general gets tainted as well, and therefore can be called a 'dirty work' industry.

This study was carried out in January and February 2008 at four different mines of a gold mining company in South Africa (Johannesburg area). With a production of about 60 percent of the gold mined in the world today, South Africa is the world's largest producer. Gold is the country's main export, the nation's largest single industry and second largest employer (after the agricultural sector). Many South Africans depend on gold for their livelihood (Chamber of Mines South Africa, 2007). However, the inherent technical constraints and the difficulties of labour-intensive, deep-level hard-rock mining at persistently declining grades, has put a lot of pressure on many companies to increase efficiencies in terms of productivity improvements - such as higher tonnage mined per mineworker and increased production volumes - as well as managing and reducing costs (Mogotsi, 2005).

During the period of research, the gold mining company had major challenges ahead to increase gold production and reduce costs. Due to the financial results, among other things, stringent measures for cost containment were implemented and staff got reduced through a restructuring process. In addition, the company had to cope with a national energy crisis. Because of nationwide power outages, production in most South African mines - which include some

of the world's biggest producers of gold and platinum, the backbone of the country's economy - were brought to a halt, sparking concerns over possible job losses. As a result of the shutdown, the mining industry lost around R300 million (about EUR 26 million) a day (IRIN Africa, 2008).

On January 25 2008, the company suspended operations on all its underground mines. After one week the power supply went up to 90%. The higher grade mines went into 100% production, while other mines went into 60% production or no production at all. Due to these constraints, the interviews for this study were conducted at four mines, instead of at one in particular.

2.2 Data collection

The target group consisted of 32 employees working at a mine, 8 women and 24 men. The participants were randomly selected by the HR manager or HR officer at the mine. Due to language barriers, the group did not include the job-group of unskilled African workers with a limited formal experience in the use of English as formal means of communication (the category 3-8 employees). Employees who were working at the head office were not included in the target group as they are not part of the organization of a mine. The target group included artisans, miners, mine overseers, shiftbosses, financial managers, engineers and HR employees.

The study involved face-to-face interviews which consisted of open-ended questions. The interview were semi-structured, covering a number of themes: nature of the job, relationships with others at work, perception of the mining industry and views about the past and the future. Refer to appendix A for the interview protocol.

The interviews of one hour on average, took place in offices at the mines and were recorded with a digital voice recorder. Depending on the availability of the selected employees, the interviews were conducted during or after working hours.

2.3 Data analysis

The data analysis proceeded in four stages.

In the first stage of the data analysis, I used the framework of Wrzesniewski et al. (2003) regarding interpersonal sensemaking and the meaning of work. I reduced the data by selecting stories which were related to job, work and self meaning. Job meaning is the meaning of the tasks and activities themselves and the meaning of the evaluation of those tasks and activities. Role meaning is the understanding employees have of what their position in the formal structure at work is and how they evaluate that position. Self meaning is the self-understanding that employees acquire about themselves when at work (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003, p.100).

In the second stage, I analyzed the selected stories from the perspective that “social interaction is a crucial mechanism enabling individual actors to engage in a conscious mode of meaning construction” (Jeong & Brower, 2008, p.241). I identified six interaction levels: employees are interacting with (1) higher management, (2) their supervisor, (3) colleagues, (4) subordinates, (5) family and (6) the general public. In addition, I reduced the data by selecting stories in which the respondents talked about their interactions on these six levels.

In the third stage, at first, I made a distinction between interactions within the organization, and interactions outside of the organization. An employee has organizational interactions with his/her supervisor, colleagues, higher management and subordinates. Non-organizational interactions take place between an employee and his/her family, friends, relatives and the general public. Secondly, I identified two categories of interactions: interactions based on sensemaking and interactions based on sensegiving. The study of Goia & Chitipeddi (1991) offers a framework for this categorization. According to them, sensemaking has to do with meaning construction and reconstruction by the involved parties as they attempt to develop a meaningful framework for understanding the nature of, in this case, interactions. Sensegiving is concerned with the process of attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others toward a preferred redefinition of organizational reality. This framework implies that employees are actively trying to develop a meaningful framework for themselves, but also for others. Thirdly, I observed that the stories about interactions based on sensemaking, can be described

as affirming, disaffirming or ambivalent. This is in line with the results of Wrzesniewski et al. (2003). According to them, an affirming story describes an interaction that conveys affirmation of and appreciation for the respondent and his/her job. A disaffirming story is pertained to interactions that the respondent interprets as conveying disaffirmation through an expressed lack of appreciation or even disgust for the job the respondent performs, his/her role and for him/her as a person. An ambivalent story depicts interactions where others cues were equivocal and contained elements of affirmation and disaffirmation.

In the fourth stage, the analysis of stories about organizational and non-organizational interactions, based on sensemaking and sensegiving, yielded four different themes important for understanding how the meaning of work in a 'dirty work' industry is shaped: organizational taint, hierarchical differences, race and gender differences, and stigma. Tables 1.1 en 1.2 give an overview of these themes. In the next section I further specify each theme, in order to answer the research question.

TABLE 1.1
Sensemaking: Interactions and the meaning of work

	Organizational interactions	Non-organizational interactions
Sensemaking	<p>Dealing with organizational taint</p> <p>I want that recognition. You don't get it on the mines. It's a part of 'You haven't got a choice, you will do it'. That's the attitude. And that's what I don't like. (Disaffirming)</p> <p>Dealing with hierarchical differences</p> <p>The part that I don't like is if my supervisor says I'm not doing anything, while I'm working hard. We should be given the support systems. (Disaffirming)</p> <p>I get support from my engineer and foreman. Both come back to us and say: "Thanks guys, well done." That's also good motivation. (Affirming)</p> <p>Dealing with race and gender differences</p> <p>Some other men have bad impressions, who still don't like women in mining. You know, like, some other ones, when you work with them, you may find out maybe they say you must lift something but it's heavy. They'll be telling you: "No this is 50-50 gender equality, pick that thing". (Disaffirming)</p>	<p>Dealing with stigma</p> <p>"You're always dirty, look at your hands." But my hands are my bread and butter. (Disaffirming)</p> <p>Dealing with gender-specific stigma</p> <p>Some other people have bad impressions about working in the mine, especially in us women, some other women believing in that if you work in the mine, you slept with some men. They've got that concept. (Disaffirming)</p>

TABLE 1.2
Sensegiving: Interactions and the meaning of work

	Organizational interactions	Non-organizational interactions
Sensegiving	<p>Dealing with organizational taint</p> <p>We have a braai once a month or every second week. We just discuss problems. Get them involved. We have our tea together in the mornings. Just talking, about every day things. Bring them in. They work with you, and you need them. Especially with our job.</p> <p>Dealing with hierarchical differences</p> <p>When production is not going well, it is quite very difficult. The main thing that I do, is to communicate more and more. (...) I tell them that this is the problem that we're heading for. This is what you people should do.</p> <p>Dealing with race and gender differences</p> <p>Your relationship between two persons, between white people and black people, that's very important. (...) If there's a problem, a guy will come and assist you. And all the guys stand together and complete the job. That's team spirit. I get along with the blacks who are working here.</p>	<p>Dealing with stigma</p> <p>My girlfriend is scared. That's not a good thing. It's my work, she can have car accident, that's the same as me going underground.</p> <p>Dealing with gender-specific stigma</p> <p>My mother doesn't like it, even now. She wants me to look for another job. She says I'm gonna die. I told her that even in the office I can die. Maybe working in the office, there's a robbery somewhere, then they shoot, then that gun came to me, I'm gonna die, it's one of the things.</p>

3 Results

The data analysis yielded four themes important for understanding how the meaning of work in a ‘dirty work’ industry is shaped: organizational taint, hierarchical differences, race and gender differences, and stigma.

3.1 *Organizational taint*

Employees are interacting on a daily basis with people in the organization. They communicate with their supervisor, higher management, subordinates and direct colleagues and make sense of what they say. Several respondents reported about how others in the organization communicate to them:

Sometimes you get forced to do something. But you have to do it. (Shift boss)

Big jobs have to be done during Christmas time. We don’t get recognition for it. It’s like ‘we haven’t got a choice, just do it’. Even if they just send a letter out to my family/wife, that is what I want as a person, that recognition. (Artisan)

Like there is some communications: “I want that to be done tomorrow. Go and do it.” That’s a mining type of thing that you got from all the years past, you get that type of thing: “Go and do it, make a plan.” (Mine overseer)

Colleagues are very important. You have to work together. If I don’t get along with them, they nail me. They keep my machine longer than it suppose to be. (Miner)

These disaffirming stories indicate that the employees, including the ones in a supervisory role, have to deal with taint in the organization. This affects their work meaning, because they feel that they have no choice than just do what they got told to do.

The interactions based on sensegiving show us that employees with a relatively positive work meaning, make an effort to improve the communication with others and reduce the organizational taint:

Any job that I want to do, or what they want from me, you must sit down, you must have all the people involved. Let them be a part of your team. Discuss it with them. Make it clear to them. Get their views. Take the best ones. Combine it

and then a proper action plan, by the right communication. That's what I mean by communication. (Mine overseer)

Our job is a heavy duty, it's hard work. Changing a 800kg tyre by yourself is not fun. You must get the people to work with you. (...) We have a braai once a month or every second week. We just discuss problems. Get them involved. We have our tea together in the mornings. Just talking, about every day things. Bring them in. They work with you, and you need them. Especially with our job. (Artisan)

3.2 Hierarchical differences

A part of all the organizational interactions, take place between employees of different levels in the hierarchy. Some of the respondents had affirming stories about these interactions.

I get support from my engineer and foreman. Both come back to us and say: "Thanks guys, well done." That's also good motivation. (Artisan)

My motivation is my mine overseer. He's a good person, I don't want to disappoint him. With personal problems, he helps me. He's also positive. He makes me feel positive. (Miner)

The affirming stories make clear that employees make a positive sense of these interactions, which in turn affect their work meaning: they get motivation and they feel positive at work. Disaffirming stories about interactions with i.e. supervisors, show the opposite: employees are disappointed when there is no interaction or when the interaction does not fulfill their needs.

Organizational change? I'll send management on a course to work with people. They haven't got that relationship with the people. According to me, if I done a job, and the job is perfect and the stuff is running, they must come to me, thank me for the job. (Artisan)

Part that I don't like is if my supervisor says I'm not doing anything, while I'm working hard. We should be given the support systems. (Mine overseer)

He (supervisor) definitely need more communication. Some things he doesn't communicate, he does it on his own. For example: "This is what I done, can you

look at it". I see rather more involvement. Always the feeling, be part of the decision. Most of the time you can do it like this. Get ideas. He breaks a lot of communication from head office. He doesn't involve me. He makes decisions for us. He rather has to communicate. (Engineer)

Several respondents gave an indication of how they interact with their subordinates, and indirectly make an attempt to influence their sensemaking process:

I always thank my people. I make sure that they hear me. (Artisan)

Motivating people: encourage them, give them the results of yesterday, keep on and work safe. (...) Go to workplace, know their names, then they know you care for them. They feel happy. You gain their confidence. (Shiftboss)

3.3 Race and gender differences

The female respondents, who are working underground, gave examples of how their men colleagues act towards them and what they say about 'women in mining':

Yes, the time has changed. Because, at first it was usually only men. So it has changed because there are women now. And those men they usually said like "I wonder if you going to manage to work here". They didn't like us at first, the guys here, when we came here. They'll be saying: "You think this is the place to play". (...) Some other men have bad impressions, who still don't like women in mining. You know, like, some other ones, when you work with them, you may find out maybe they say you must lift something but it's heavy. They'll be telling you: "No this is 50-50 gender equality, pick that thing". (Female underground worker)

Because it is only a couple of years ago that women started to work in the mines, the sensemaking process of women is more complex: most of their stories about interactions were disaffirming. Nevertheless, they also mention interactions that conveys affirmation:

I get motivation from these guys that I'm working with. The other one said to me, one day he said to me: "You see my child, I'm gonna leave this mine, and I wish when I leave this mine I come here then I hear that you are a shiftboss or the mine overseer." I said: "That I'll try, I'll try to do something." (Female underground worker)

In the South African mining industry, not only ‘women in mining’ is a sensitive topic. Although most respondents didn’t mention anything specific about race, some respondents made clear that the interactions between black and white people are important in the work setting:

Your relationship between two persons, between white people and black people, that’s very important. (...) If there’s a problem, a guy will come and assist you. And all the guys stand together and complete the job. That’s team spirit. I get along with the blacks who are working here.

3.4 *Stigma*

This study reveals that dealing with the image of the mining industry and the stigma of ‘dirty work’ is a key issue when it comes to making sense of the interactions outside the organization. The respondents revealed stories about their interactions with people outside of their work setting: their family, friends, relatives and the general public.

My feeling is that people look down at me, because I’m an artisan. They don’t understand the job. Artisans have to have skills. (Artisan)

“Mining: go and crawl in holes. Get phthisis. Work for that money but kill yourself.” But I’m still not dead. I’m still working in the mine. (Mine overseer)

Most of the stories about interactions with people outside of the organization are disaffirming. This indicates that employees are aware of the stigma on their jobs or the work industry in general. Several respondents explained how they make sense of these disaffirming interactions and deal with the stigma:

They say: underprivileged people working on the mine. If they want to say that, it’s their story, means nothing to me. I’m here for a job, I’m earning the money, I’m happy, that’s it. I’m not part of the mining community. (Artisan)

The average diesel mechanic: dirty fingernails, scuffed jeans, safety shoes. That’s a typical diesel mechanic. When I go out, I dress very smart. And when people ask me ‘What are you doing for a living?’ And I say ‘I’m a diesel mechanic’. And they say ‘What? Why? Couldn’t you do something else?’ And I say ‘What else must I do?’ And they say ‘Go study’. Well, I studied. I just laugh at them. (Artisan)

The female respondents have to deal with gender-specific stigma when it comes to interactions with people outside of the organization:

Some other people have bad impressions about working in the mine, especially in us women, some other women believing in that if you work in the mine, you slept with some men, they've got that concept. Really. They said: "All the ladies who are working in the mine, they've slept with some other guys who are working the mine." And they say: "Women who are working in the mine are bitches". (Female underground worker)

Based on their own work meaning, employees actively trying to influence the meaning construction of other people about working in a 'dirty work' industry. They normalize their job, e.g. by making comparisons with other jobs or situations:

My girlfriend is scared. That's not a good thing. It's my work, she can have car accident, that's the same as me going underground. (Miner)

My mother doesn't like it, even now. She wants me to look for another job. She says I'm gonna die. I told her that even in the office I can die. Maybe working in the office, there's a robbery somewhere, then they shoot, then that gun came to me, I'm gonna die, it's one of the things. (Female underground worker)

Another way to normalize a job in the mining industry, is by making a caricature of other jobs:

I like working underground. Why does a kid like to climb underneath the bed, or in a cave, behind the cupboard? There is adrenaline involved with. It's nice, I like it. And always it is a challenge. It is not easy, it's not nice to work in that environment. It is like mountaineering, same type of thing. You're not in a office sitting with a lot of paper the whole day and get mental tired. I don't like paper, I don't like sitting, I don't like a computer. I want to do the job. (...) Every single man underground, every problem, every job underground, is different. From day-to-day, it's different. Maybe that's why I like it. If I must work in a bank, counting money, for 8 hours, every day, I will shoot myself within two days. (Mine overseer)

4 Discussion

The research question ‘How do social interactions shape the work meaning of employees in a ‘dirty work’ industry?’ guided this study. I have shown that through social interactions within the organization and outside of the work setting, employees in a ‘dirty work’ industry are dealing with (1) organizational taint, (2) hierarchical differences, (3) race and gender differences, (4) and stigma. The affirming and disaffirming stories about the social interactions suggests that the work meaning of employees can be positively or negatively affected. Thus, the four themes are important for understanding how the meaning of work in a ‘dirty work’ industry is shaped.

This study shows that employees are actively making sense of the social interactions within the organization and outside of the work setting. But besides making sense of the interactions with others, employees also actively try to influence the meaning construction of other people. This process of sensegiving implies that employees through interactions try to improve the view other people have of them and their work, and to reduce the experienced organizational taint. This indicates that the relationship between sensemaking and sensegiving is dynamic: the output of sensemaking, can become the input for sensegiving. And the output of sensegiving, is for another person the start of sensemaking. In other words, how employees make sense of interactions, affects the way they influence the sensemaking of other people through interactions. Thus, employees play an active role in the shaping process of their own work meaning, through sensemaking, and the work meaning of others, through sensegiving.

This study offers three theoretical contributions. First, this study provides insight into how the work meaning of employees is shaped through interactions with others. This is important because organizational scholars don’t have much insight yet into how the meaning of work is created in people’s lives (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). Secondly, this study reveals how employees in a ‘dirty work’ industry become aware of stigma and deal with it through social interactions: an occupation can have stigma if that is decided in interactions. Third, in this study emerged a relatively unknown construct: organizational taint. This construct contributes to organizational studies, because it can be e.g. related to sensemaking processes, organizational culture and leadership styles.

This study extends previous research in two ways: (1) rather than focusing on only organizational interactions, as in the model of Wrzesniewski et al. (2003), it also focused on interactions outside of the work setting. As described in the results: the non-organizational interactions are related to the stigma of ‘dirty work’ and the organizational interactions are related to organizational taint, hierarchical differences, and race and gender differences. (2) Rather than focusing on identity issues of employees who are performing the dirty work, as in the model of Ashforth & Kreiner (1999), it focused on a broader construct, the meaning of work, and on a broader target group: employees in a ‘dirty work’ industry. In addition, this study advances the work of Ashforth et al. (2007) by identifying another tactic for countering occupational taint: by making a caricature of other jobs, employees in a ‘dirty work’ industry put themselves in a positive light and reframe the meaning of ‘dirty work’.

This study has some limitations. First, the national energy crisis and the difficult financial situation of the company, during the period of research, could have influenced the respondents’ opinions about their work and the interactions with others. Secondly, the broad target group made it difficult to draw more specific conclusions about certain groups of employees, i.e. women in mining. Third, it is possible that the four identified themes may not be exhaustive; the themes could be supplemented by the discovery of more themes or subthemes. Perhaps through data collection within other ‘dirty work’ industries or through a larger and more heterogeneous set of data.

Future research should examine how sensegiving interactions relate to sensemaking. In this study, no disaffirming stories about sensegiving interactions were reported, while some employees mention interactions in which a lack of appreciation is expressed. And what is the relationship between sensegiving and leadership styles? In addition, more research about organizational taint has to be done: In which way is organizational taint related to the stigma of the work industry? Future research should also address the challenges of women in mining, and other ‘dirty work’ industries, in relation to gender-specific stigma.

Given the results, the major implication for managers is that they should be more aware of the importance of social interactions for employees. By using symbolic management tools and by paying more attention to relationship building, the shaping process of the work meaning of employees in a ‘dirty work’ industry can be improved with affirming elements.

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(Terkel, 1972; Heath, 1994; Taylor & Every, 2000; Weick, 1995, 1993; Jeong & Brower, 2008; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005; Wrzesniewski, Dutton, & Debebe, 2003; Maitlis, 2005; Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001; Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997; Cartwright & Holmes, 2006; Baron & Pfeffer, 1994; Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Ashforth, Kreiner, Clark, & Fugate, 2007; Bergman & Chalkley, 2007; Lee, Mitchell, & Sablinski, 1999; Chamber-Of-Mines-South-Africa, 2007; Mogotsi, 2005; IRIN-Africa, 2008; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991)

A Interview protocol

Nature of the job

- Can you describe your current job (responsibilities, tasks, activities).
- Can you describe your role on the unit / in the team. Has it changed over the years? How? Do you know what is expected from you? How do you know that?
- Which parts of your job do you like most? Why?
- Which parts of your job don't you like? Why?
- Suppose you get a new colleague tomorrow. Are there stories that you will tell that person to make him/her feel comfortable? Like what? What does that person need, to do a good job? What kind of person does he/she has to be?
- How do you motivate the people who you are working with? What keeps you motivated? Where do you get your motivation from?
- What does your family/friends think about your job?

Working background

- How long have you been working in the mining industry?
- How did you become a (...) ?
- How long have you been working for X?
- What made you decide to work for X?
- How long have you been working at this shaft?
- What are the differences between working at this shaft and the last shaft you worked at?

Sociodemographic details

- Where did you grew up as a child?
- Where are you living at the moment?
- What is your age?
- What is your educational background?

Organizational perception

- If you could change something in the organization: what would it be?

Relationship with others

- In what ways are your colleagues important to the performance in your job?

- Can you describe the relationship with your supervisor? Has it changed over the years? How? How do you feel about this relationship? Can you explain what makes you feel this way? In what way is the relationship with your supervisor important to the performance in your job?
- What kind of support do you get to do your job well? From whom?

Future

- What would you like to achieve in the next coming 5 years?

Past

- If you could do things over in your working history, what would you do differently?
- Can you give me an example of a situation where you felt very happy in your job?

Mining industry

- What is the image of the mining industry? Did it change over the years? In which way?

Additional

- Is there anything you would like to add?