

Amanda Michiko Shigihara
California State University, Sacramento, U.S.A.

“I Mean, Define Meaningful!”: Accounts of Meaningfulness among Restaurant Employees

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Abstract Drawing on ethnographic data collected over a five-year period, this study addresses the complex topic of what constitutes meaningful lives. This research examines restaurant employees’ accounts of meaningfulness in and outside their workplaces. The meaning they ascribe to their jobs and activities external to work reveals five categories of meaningfulness: *Helping, Mentoring, Expanding, Belonging,* and *Supplementation*. Regardless of popular opinion, which marks restaurant work as meaningless, the data show how and why restaurant employees construct meaningfulness from the intrinsic and extrinsic rewards of their jobs. Additionally, this investigation sheds light on how social constructions of meaning have the potential to contribute to *and* diminish one’s sense of meaningfulness. This study provides a more comprehensive and inclusionary perspective of the related concepts of meaning, meaningfulness, and meaningful work. Specifically, meaningfulness exists in quotidian and extraordinary experiences, and the workers engage in, understand, and appreciate both.

Keywords Restaurant Employees; Meaningfulness; Work and Occupations; Quotidian and Extraordinary Experiences; Intrinsic and Extrinsic Rewards

A table of customers asked me, “Do you do anything else other than work here?” And I explained I had a master’s, and I am looking for a government job. And then they exclaimed, “You should work for Google! Our daughter used to work for

Google! Our daughter used to work for Google, and it’s so good!” And they wouldn’t stop talking about it. Apparently, people want to give me advice to get out of the restaurant industry. But, who’s to say that working at Google would make my life any more meaningful? I mean, why is a guy in finance, or a banker, or a nurse more meaningful? [Pause] Well, maybe a nurse is more meaningful. I mean, define meaningful! [Tia, 24, server, bartender]

Amanda Michiko Shigihara is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology at California State University, Sacramento. Her primary research areas include deviance, social psychology, and life course.

email address: shigihara@csus.edu

As Tia intimated, meaning, as a concept, is subjective and escapes precise definition. Similarly, Csikszentmihalyi (1990:215) wrote: “*Meaning* is

a concept difficult to define, since any definition runs the risk of being circular. How do we talk about the meaning of meaning itself?" Nevertheless, we know that people search for meaning throughout their lives, even if it is an unconscious search and they are uncertain for what they are searching (Frankl 1959). We also know that work heavily influences perceptions of meaningfulness as people spend more of their waking time working than engaged in any other activity, and according to Baumeister (1991:116), "no account of life's meaning would be complete without a careful consideration of the meaning of work." Research shows that perceptions of work meaningfulness play an important role in positive employee well-being (Arnold et al. 2007), and meaningful work can contribute to satisfying people's life purposes (Chalofsky 2003).

Exploring meaningfulness in restaurants is timely and relevant because restaurant work affects many people's lives (socially and economically), and the amount of organizational costs largely depends on whether or not the work feels meaningful. Fifty percent of all U.S. adults have a history of working in the restaurant industry, over 33 percent of all U.S. adults garnered their first job in a restaurant, and currently, restaurants employ approximately 14.7 million people or 10 percent of the U.S. workforce (National Restaurant Association 2017). These numbers not only reveal the far reach of the restaurant industry, but also that most workers leave it at some point. Furthermore, aside from the very limited "elite" or "high-status" chef jobs (Harris and Giuffre 2015; Leschziner 2015), the majority of restaurant jobs are deemed meaningless with mundane and repetitive tasks, which have more harmful effects (e.g., work-

er alienation) than positive ones (Greenberger and Steinberg 1986; Tannock 2001; DiPietro and Pizam 2008). Ramifications of perceived job meaninglessness are work dissatisfaction, employee turnover, and significant costs relating to recruitment and training (Mobley 1982; Phillips and Phillips 2002). Notably, research indicates that restaurants exhibit retention-related issues and high turnover rates (Ghiselli, La Lopa, and Bai 2001; Dermody, Young, and Lee Taylor 2004; Wildes 2008).

Occupational studies generally emphasize the pejorative qualities of restaurant work. The deficient wages, benefits, stability, control, challenge, and intrinsic rewards in restaurant jobs have landed them in the category of "bad jobs," and are therefore not treated as providing interesting or meaningful work experiences (Kalleberg 2011). Consequently, many people do not deem restaurant jobs "real" (Ginsberg 2001; Owings 2002; Shigihara 2015). Restaurant employment seems to stymie the workers' well-being rather than bolster it, and research points to numerous negative circumstances that workers encounter: sexual harassment (LaPointe 1992; Harris and Giuffre 2010), emotional strain (Paules 1991; Gatta 2002), heteronormative gender practices (Hall 1993; Tibbals 2007), and problematic work conditions (Siegel 1993; Jayaraman 2013).

Although many employees confront unfavorable situations while working in restaurants, spotlighting the negative does not tell the whole story, and concentrating on restaurant employment as meaningless obscures the meaningful aspects of the work. Hardly any empirical studies have attended to what actually constitutes meaningful work

(Chalofsky 2003). Most among these are limited by the use of quantitative methods and measures (e.g., Steger, Dik, and Duffy 2012). Moreover, very little research (e.g., Fine 1996; Erickson 2009) has investigated what restaurant employees regard as meaningful in their work. The purpose of this article is to examine restaurant employees' accounts of meaningfulness in and outside of work that is considered meaningless, bad, problematic, and unreal. Doing so provides a more comprehensive and inclusive conceptual understanding of meaning, meaningfulness, and meaningful work. Going forward, I review the relevant literature on meaning, discuss the methods and participants, and present how restaurant employees assign meaningfulness to experiences and rewards from work and non-work domains. I conclude with a discussion on research implications for the study of meaning and occupations more broadly.

Meaning, Meaningfulness, and Meaning-Making

Scholars distinguish between the study of "meaning" in the branch of linguistics known as semantics, which examines how words come to signify or indicate ideas (Saussure 1959), and its use in a moral or ethical context, in the sense of life's significance or purpose (Metz 2013). Although the two uses are interconnected, this study focuses on the latter notion where *meaning in life* or *meaningfulness* is "the sense made of, and significance felt regarding, the nature of one's being and existence" (Steger et al. 2006:81). This loose definition involves conditions or qualities in which one takes pride or finds satisfaction. It does not necessarily have to do with

happiness; what makes a life meaningful may not make one happy, and may require sacrificing one's self-interest. Nor does meaningfulness undoubtedly imply moral goodness. In this research, meaning and meaningfulness refer not to an objective reality, but to how people subjectively construct the significance, value, worth, or purpose of their lives.

People's perceived meaningfulness or lack thereof develops from the assumptions about what is regarded as meaningful. Common to people's articulations of meaning is the construct of purpose. According to Klinger (1977), meaning and purpose relate to people's "function," "aim," and what they were "created for," and contributors of meaning broadly include relationships, religion, education, leisure-time, happiness, jobs, responsibility, success, helping others, goals, and feeling loved, wanted, and useful. More recently, purpose has been defined as "a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self" (Damon, Menon, and Bronk 2003:121).

Developing the term, Csikszentmihalyi (1990) identified three ways in which *meaning* is understood: it indicates the purpose or significance of something, it refers to people's intentions, and it orders information or contextualizes words, events, and phenomena. Baumeister (1991) concluded that in order to acquire meaning, people must attain purpose, value, efficacy, and self-worth, where *purpose* relates to people anticipating future fulfillment, *value* helps people decide what is right or wrong, *efficacy* is when people feel they can make a difference and have control over their circumstances, and *self-worth*

pertains to self-esteem based on feelings of belonging and worthiness. Consequently, Baumeister contended that people who have not succeeded in attaining all four are likely to feel a lack of meaning.

Other scholars have discussed *sense-making* to develop the concept of meaning. Mezirow (1991) conceptualized meaning as making sense of or giving coherence to experiences and explained that people learn to make sense of their experiences through formal and informal norms transmitted through socialization. Although scholars define sense-making in different ways, it involves people constructing and comprehending the unknown with their frames of reference or particular points of views (Weick 1995; see also Goffman 1974). Sense-making is a process that fosters people’s assumptions through their experiences that they later draw on to explain or make meaning out of subsequent events (Louis 1980). Generally, the construction of meaning in life has been exclusionary. Just because people do not have purpose, value, efficacy, self-worth, and significance in a conventional sense does not mean they will have meaningless lives. Nor can we automatically equate a lack of sense-making with meaninglessness.

The discipline of psychology dominates the research on meaningfulness. Psychologists primarily examine individual-level factors that influence people’s ability to have and make meaning. Studies on meaning have largely emerged through the branch of the field known as “positive psychology,” which is concerned with well-being and satisfaction (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000). One of the first to investigate meaning, Viktor Frankl (1959), explored

his personal experiences surviving a concentration camp. His reflections led to the term “logotherapy” or healing through meaning. Meaning-making, in turn, refers to “a search for meaning in the experience, an attempt to regain mastery over the event in particular and over one’s life more generally, and an effort to restore self-esteem—to feel good about oneself again despite the personal setback” (Taylor 1983:1161).

Most meaning-making studies focus on stressful life events. Scholars have analyzed the “utility” of suffering and indicated that it constitutes an integral part of meaning-making because people respond to misfortune by imputing meaning to it (Baumeister 1991). Often, people make sense of trauma by appointing a positive denotation to it. For example, women with breast cancer searched for meaning in their suffering; they acquired meaning by revising their attitudes about cancer, reordering their priorities, regaining a sense of control over their bodies, “mastering” the cancer, and maintaining positive attitudes (Taylor 1983). Other studies on trauma have noted similar paths to meaningful lives. Researchers have described meaning-making after the loss of a loved one (Davis and Nolen-Hoeksema 2001). Scholars have also explored meaning-making among survivors of sexual abuse (Wright, Crawford, and Sebastian 2007), survivors of the Holocaust (Armour 2010), and people living with medical conditions (Henrickson et al. 2013). In these cases, meaning-making entailed the extraordinary and a reconceptualization of the life event, where the people could “find meaning” in, “make sense” of, or “find benefit” out of the event or coping process. To illustrate, sexual abuse survivors used their experi-

ences to help others and spent time making sense of their abuse by “understanding” their perpetrators (Grossman, Sorsoli, and Kia-Keating 2006).

Much of the scholarship on meaning-making highlights how people reconcile suffering and the meaning people make after experiencing a traumatic or an extraordinary event. Researchers suggest that extreme circumstances *give* people meaning because these provoke sense-making and meaning-making. Currently, there is a paucity of research on meaning which arises more agentially and free from traumatic or extraordinary occurrences. Studies rarely examine meaning in quotidian acts, such as looking at the stars, going for a walk, talking on the phone, or the tasks people perform in the workplace—saying “Thank you” to a co-worker or having a conversation with a customer. It is, however, important to focus on ordinary everyday experiences out of which people construct meaning (Misztal 2016). From a sociological perspective on meaning, which considers the socio-cultural factors that influence how people ascribe meaning to aspects in their lives, the present study aims to expand the theoretical and empirical understanding of meaning in life by investigating different types of meaningfulness that people experience while in social contexts that are treated as having an absence of meaning.

Meaningful Work

Organizational scholars from a psychological perspective lead the inquiry about meaningful work. Describing meaningful work poses a considerable challenge because there is a lack of agreement on one definition and its essential components. Some

of the earliest scholars to provide insight are Hackman and Oldham (1975:162), who operationalized *experienced meaningfulness of the work* as “the degree to which the employee experiences the job as one which is generally meaningful, valuable, and worthwhile.” Kahn (1990) added to this definition by finding that employees experienced meaningfulness at work when they felt worthwhile, useful, and valuable, and when they made a difference, were not taken for granted, and were able to give and receive in return. Bowie (1998) then characterized meaningful work as that which is freely entered, allows worker autonomy, independence, sufficient wages, and develops employees’ rational capacities, morals, and individual happiness. Other definitions of meaningful work include the ability to establish dignity at work (Hodson 2001), the amount of significance and purpose that employment holds for people (Pratt and Ashforth 2003), and “a positive work-related psychological state reflecting the extent to which employees think and feel they make a significant, important, and useful contribution to a worthwhile purpose in the execution of their work” (Albrecht 2015:212). Still, words like dignity, significant, important, valuable, worthwhile, useful, purpose, and contribution are perplexing. Therefore, it is necessary to examine what people actually describe as meaningful, which is an undertaking in this study.

Some scholarship identifies work meaningfulness by virtue of the relationship people have with their employment. Baumeister (1991) distinguished meaningfulness by categorizing three major roles of work, where a *job* is for the sake of a paycheck, a *calling* is done out of a sense of personal respon-

sibility, obligation, greater good of society, duty, or destiny, and a *career* is motivated by the desire for success, achievement, and recognition. Because of minimal benefits and satisfaction, he proposed that jobs may fail to offer efficacy and meaningfulness. Alternatively, he posited that a career is a powerful source of meaning and self-worth, a calling can provide people with value and fulfillment, and a combination of a career and calling will provide a major and thorough source of meaning. Empirical research suggests that employees with a sense of calling view their work as meaningful and important. For instance, even as poorly-paid employees in "dirty work," zookeepers with a sense of calling and moral duty found broad meaning and significance in their careers and felt their work was worth sacrificing pay, personal time, and comfort (Bunderson and Thompson 2009).

Despite the significance of Weber's (2003) study of the origins of the work ethic, limited sociological research specifically examines meaningful work. Relevant sociological studies include investigating the creation of meaning in the context of manual labor, with particular focus on the question of why employees work as "hard" as they do. Roy's (1959) highly cited study, "Banana Time," revealed that Chicago factory workers created games to break up repetitive tasks and make work meaningful. Twenty years later, while studying the same factory, Burawoy (1979) noted how the employees treated their work as "a game" with incentives to surpass its banality and ensure maximum productivity and earnings. Moreover, he discovered that when the workers participated in the shop-floor culture, which they called "making out," they could attribute meaning

to work absent of meaning in the traditional sense. Willis's (1977) ethnography addressed the positive meaning that working-class "lads" ascribed to manual labor—especially its association with masculinity and resistance to authority.

Research has also investigated workers who create meaning in other "low-status" occupations. Heinsler and colleagues (1990) examined detectives and campus police and how they transformed their "mundane job" into "something meaningful." The officers strove to define themselves to others as "real police" and "crime fighters" instead of workers who merely jump-start cars, fill out paperwork, or do "boring jobs," "thankless work," and "nothing." Many officers "successfully" converted their "dirty work" into valued, satisfying, meaningful, and prestige-giving activities because they perceived their tasks in terms of important outcomes (e.g., collegiality, teamwork, and education). Wharton's (1996) study highlighted constructions of meaning among women in predominantly disappointing residential real estate jobs. These contingent workers constructed meaning by overlooking the employment's exploitative nature, acknowledging their limited career alternatives, and focusing on job rewards, such as flexible hours, autonomy and control, income, excitement and unpredictability, and pride from overcoming work challenges.

Among the few sociological studies that examine restaurants and meaning, Erickson (2009) observed that servers struggled to find meaning in restaurant work because it is stigmatized. On the one hand, social interactions and relationships with people at work had the potential to give their employment

meaning. On the other hand, they protected themselves from lower-status identities by detaching and refusing to see the work as meaningful. In kitchens, Fine (1996:213) noted that cooks were able to construct meaning through aesthetic metaphors (e.g., a dish is like a symphony), but meaning depended on a community of shared understandings and “cooks must continually construct and reconstruct culinary meaning for an unknowing or skeptical audience.” Additionally, although “elite” or “high-status” chefs considered the social and innovative aspects of culinary work meaningful, they struggled for meaning, value, and prestige in their work (Harris and Giuffre 2015; Leschziner 2015).

Despite numerous definitions and constructions of meaningful work, it is a phenomenon not well understood. Rosso and colleagues (2010) contended that scholars tend to focus on singular psychological or social mechanism through which work becomes meaningful rather than developing a more comprehensive view. They argued that researchers have a number of opportunities to develop understandings of the social and cultural factors that influence perceptions of meaningfulness. Furthermore, they recommended that studies focus on the many sources from which employees draw meaning. Scholars also suggest that a single source is not enough to achieve a meaningful life. Emmons (1997) explained that people derive meaning from numerous sources, like jobs, travel, family, education, religion, love, and friends. Importantly, he maintained that many sources of meaning serve as a buffer against the meaninglessness from any one source in a person’s life. The limited empirical research that addresses what constitutes meaningful work typically concen-

trates on how employees construct meaning despite the unsatisfying conditions of the labor itself and the lack of rewards from the work. This study investigates the satisfying conditions of restaurant labor and the meaningfulness that employees construct from the intrinsic and extrinsic rewards of their work, as well as from sources in non-work domains.

Methods and Participants

This ethnographic study draws on five years (2009-2014) of systematic data collection including participant observation, field notes, memos, countless informal interactions and conversations, 52 semi-structured, in-depth interviews, and multiple follow-ups with half of the interviewees. Adopting a variety of methods leads to diverse and rich information, enables comparisons between personal accounts and observable behaviors, and helps grant thicker descriptions and broader insight than only one method would offer (Warren and Karner 2010). Because in-depth interviewing allows researchers to explore people’s detailed experiences, behaviors, accounts, motives, and opinions from their perspectives (Rubin and Rubin 2012), interviews are the primary source of data in this article. In other words, a thorough grasp of perceived meaningfulness required a concentration on the employees’ personal narratives of the concept.

Before formally examining restaurants and restaurant employees’ experiences, I spent eight years working in various full-service restaurants as a server and bartender. My complete membership role (Adler and Adler 1987) aided avenues to field observations, key informants, and interview participants.

Using snowball sampling (Sudman and Kalton 1986), I identified participants, first interviewing close contacts and acquaintances, and then referrals. Broadening past research, I sampled a spectrum of employees from many full-service restaurants (independent and chain) instead of only one restaurant. Full-service establishments comprise restaurants with table service, a full bar, and a chain of command (i.e., owners, managers, and hourly). To develop my conceptual categories and themes, I employed theoretical sampling in later stages of interviewing (Corbin and Strauss 2008). For instance, I sampled by age and employment position to assess whether workers' experiences varied by statuses.

I conducted 52 interviews with 24 male and 28 female bussers, hosts, runners, expeditors, servers, bartenders, cooks/chefs, and managers between the ages of 18 and 48 ($M = 26.6$) from California and Colorado. The participants worked between 2 and 25 years ($M = 9$) in several restaurants and gained experience in various job positions (often concurrently). While some held salaried positions, 86.5 percent held hourly-paid positions; importantly, most restaurant workers earn hourly wages, even in management (e.g., shift managers) and in the kitchen (e.g., line cooks). This study includes experiences from well over 70 full-service establishments. Among the interviewees, half reported White and half reported Black/African American, Asian, Hispanic/Latino, European, or bi-/multi-racial categories. While half indicated middle-class upbringings, half indicated lower-working-class, lower-working-middle-class, upper-middle-class, or upper-class upbringings. Participants disclosed annual incomes ranging between \$2,400 and \$53,000

($M = \$26,457.69$). The vast majority of participants ($N = 51$) varied in their “highest level of education” from some college to a master's degree, whereas one had only a high school diploma.

Prior to the interviews, participants chose pseudonyms and interview locations for confidentiality. The interview guide was formed from participant observation and was adjusted as themes emerged inductively (e.g., “meaningful”), which is a methodological approach that permits follow-up questions, as well as category and concept testing in the field (Strauss 1987). Some broad interview topics consisted of personal histories, workplace structure, social networks, everyday activities, and goals. Each interview lasted between 90 minutes and 4 hours, was in person, and was audio-recorded. I listened to the interviews multiple times as I transcribed them verbatim, and I went through many phases of open and focused coding. As I moved from broad to narrow themes, I used memo writing to analyze and develop emergent ideas, and I assessed concepts and categories in the field by cross-checking them with key informants and interview participants (Charmaz and Belgrave 2012). The experiences documented in this article are not meant to be generalized to all U.S. restaurant employees, but rather to highlight an empirical case that expands the conceptual and theoretical basis for what constitutes meaningfulness in people's work and lives. Despite their different employment positions and durations, restaurants, and demographic backgrounds, the participants provided similar constructions of meaningfulness. Below, I draw on participants several times to provide rich and in-depth personal narratives and perceptions of meaningfulness.

Meaningfulness to Restaurant Workers

Experiences like Tia's, mentioned at the start of this article, were not uncommon among restaurant workers. Throughout my participant observation and the interviews, it was apparent that a commonly circulating assumption about restaurant work is that it does not provide meaningful experiences. Regardless of the belief that one must enter standard employment—perhaps a full-time job at Google, as some of Tia's customers suggested—to experience meaningful work, restaurant employees did not view restaurant work as meaningless or base their meaningfulness solely on where they worked. Additionally, they did not experience meaning only after a stressful life event or an extraordinary occurrence; in fact, meaning, for them, existed in quotidian and remarkable activities. The data demonstrated how meaningfulness is not something that simply *happens* to restaurant workers, it is something that they actively took part in and pursued. Thus, restaurant workers are not without agency in their pursuit for meaningful lives.

Meaningfulness in General

When participants broadly spoke about meaningfulness, four major themes emerged. First, they discussed the meaningfulness of family, friends, and social groups. Second, they highlighted how helping others and making a difference is meaningful. Third, they emphasized the meaningfulness of enjoying life, happiness, and feeling needed and loved. Finally, they stated that succeeding at any attempted endeavor was meaningful. In most cases, the participants described a combination of

these themes when defining meaningfulness. Additionally, they often used the words “meaningful,” “important,” “enjoyment,” and “happiness,” or variations of these words, interchangeably. Before mentioning these themes, they typically prefaced their statements with broad, grand, idealistic, and/or altruistic terms that characterized meaningfulness to them. That is, they emphasized humanitarian efforts, such as “making an impact,” “making a difference,” “making a change,” “helping others,” “acts of kindness and respect,” and other benevolent deeds that reflect prevailing definitions of meaningfulness (i.e., making significant, important, and purposeful contributions).

Tia, who has worked in restaurants for almost ten years, began contemplatively, “Meaningfulness is making an impact, something that will change someone else's life.” After pausing to ruminate, she elaborated, “In terms of meaningfulness, my family is number one. They are the number one thing that is meaningful to me. And then, second, is friends. What's the point of being successful if you have no one to share it with?” At the time of the interview, Tia's life was incompatible with her perception of a meaningful life. She stated, “I don't necessarily feel like my life is meaningful now, but I do make an impact on my family, my niece and nephew especially. I don't really have any hobbies that I do all the time. I did run a 5k once because it donated all the money to autism, and it was for a good cause.” She laughed while saying, “I sit on the couch and watch TV,” and then rhetorically asked, “Does shopping count?” Laughing again, she blurted out, “I like eating.” In spite of her perceived lack of meaningfulness in her life corresponding to her self-disclosed

absence of widespread impact she is making on society at large, Tia told me that she is content with everyday occurrences, such as watching television with her friends and family.

Longstanding employee, Maria (35, general manager), noted, "Meaningfulness is something that helps other people, like being a teacher and teaching or being a social worker and helping with social services." She revealed, "I volunteer weekly with refugees with English and job searches through a non-profit. I have also thought about volunteering at this bike shop that fixes and gives bikes to the homeless. That stuff is meaningful because it is helping people." Maria described finding meaning in vacations and hanging out with friends, and then said, "I also want to go on one of those long vacations to another country to volunteer and help people or something like that." Notably, she explained, "Before I was volunteering, I felt like I wasn't doing enough with my life in general," and then stated, "When I was younger [laughs], I envisioned my life having more meaning. And when you get older, you get stuck in a cycle of paying bills. And then, when you have enough to pay your bills, what's the point? And then you barely have enough to even pay for those things, from the restaurant, and have extra to do meaningful stuff." She added, "Honestly, I mean, I want to enjoy where I work, and I want to make more money." Self-reflexive about aging, Maria discussed her determination to secure more meaning in life, but was aware of and saddened by the fact that meaningful contributions often require money and resources.

Jesse (45, manager), an established worker of well over two decades, emphasized that family, friends,

having fun, happiness, and enjoyment are all part of a meaningful life. Large elements of Jesse's meaningfulness were derived from music and motorcycles. He mentioned both when comparing his life to that of his brother:

My brother who earns three times as much as I do, but, I mean, he puts his ass to the grindstone, maybe just a bit too hard for my liking, and, you know, he worries about me, but, I mean, he got married, has the job, had a kid, and those things are great, but the one thing that I have is motorcycles. And if you talk about getting my rocks off, going for a ride really gets me happy, that makes me happy because you lose your thoughts in the wind. There's nothing like losing your thoughts in the wind. I get on my bike, and I forget about every little thing...and, oh yeah, I'm such a musician. I still play music in a band. And that makes me happy too.

Jesse also found meaning in the values of "treating people with respect," "loyalty," and "the art of listening" to others. He continued to describe meaningfulness by juxtaposing people's values.

I think that people's values [pause], everyone is just so driven to live in the rich neighborhoods, all the customers, they're striving to have the two-point-five children, the dog, and the Volvo, and if that's their gig, God bless 'em, you know? I missed out on my opportunities to marry young. I probably missed out on my opportunities to have kids. But, now I'm content, I just want to be content, and I'm happy with that role. It's tough coming across people that I see that are just putting their heads to the grindstone, I mean, I admire those people...it just scares me, it scares me how

hard people work, and I'm hoping that they're happy, because, you know what, I haven't been happier.

If taken at face value, Jesse appeared as if he does not "work hard," and he spoke as if working hard cannot bring happiness or meaning. However, on several occasions, he revealed how "hard" he works in all of his endeavors and the associated happiness and meaning they provide. Other key elements to Jesse's story are his military background and overseas service during Desert Storm. He explained that after he returned to the United States from the Gulf War, all he needed was "to heal." He said, "I didn't need to make my brain think twenty-four-seven and worry about everything; instead of concentrating on a career, I concentrated mostly on happiness...I missed out on the kids, I missed out on that career path, so, yeah, I discovered restaurants, and that's where I was truly happy." Later, he told me,

The most important thing is, I need to be happy at work. *I do*. If I'm not happy at work, I'm terrible, I'm not a good person, I'm just not fun to be around. You know what I mean? It's awful, and who wants to be that person? I don't. I want to be happy, I want to be nice, I don't want to be mediocre, I want to be happy and make your day.

Contrary to popular belief, Jesse suggested that laboring in restaurants does not make him mediocre, meaningless, *or* unhappy.

To Lilu (27, manager), meaningfulness and success go hand-in-hand. She stated, "Meaningfulness is when you gain success out of something, when you achieve something from an action and gain success."

Furthermore, she said, "Meaningfulness in my life is doing well at my job, having all the necessities for my family—food, water, soda, and booze [laughs]—and making sure I can pay the bills." After more consideration, Lilu emphasized, "Meaningfulness is when others feel that I am a leader, mentor, and an overall great person, and a dependable person." Even though she did not report having any hobbies, her meaningful activities involved making other people "feel good" and "cared about" because doing so provided self-gratification. Lilu insisted, "if people feel cared about, that's what's meaningful. And when I feel cared about, that's meaningful. I have to feel loved or else my whole world will shatter. And also my family is number one." She then described ordinary activities like going shopping and watching television and movies with her family as meaningful.

When Val (39, server, shift manager) spoke about meaning, he stated in a slightly facetious tone, "We can all make the world a little better place by helping each other one day at a time." But then, more seriously, he asked me if I had ever watched the Monty Python movie, "The Meaning of Life." He proceeded to describe the restaurant scene where a patron exploded and the waiter declared, "If you want to know what I think the meaning of life is, when I was just a boy, my mother put me on her knee and said, Gaston, my son, the world can be such an angry place, go into the world and try to make people happy, make people laugh, try to make peace with everyone. That's why I became a waiter." In earnest, Val said, "I believe in this philosophy." Throughout the interview, he expressed that meaning involves living the "golden rule" of "do unto others as you

would have them do unto you." Commonly, participants highlighted meaningfulness in "little acts of kindness."

Albeit subjectively, the participants frequently used the phrase "making a difference" to describe meaningfulness. For example, Portia (37, server, bartender, shift manager) stated, "Making a difference is what I would say is meaningful. Well, that, and helping people, and, like, feeling needed, yeah, feeling necessary, not like a lump of nothing [laughs] with nothing to show for." In sum, the participants constructed meaningfulness in general through one's relationships, contributions, self-gratification, and achievements.

Meaningfulness in and around Restaurant Work

Meaning [pause] okay, wait, okay, like so I do hair, right? That seems so little in comparison to everything that's going on in the world, like war [laughs]. And I wait tables, well, that's little too. But, who the fuck's to say that isn't meaningful, like, okay, I make people smile, I listen to them, I, like, am their therapist for free, wait, hmmm, okay, now that I think about it, I should be getting paid as much as a therapist [laughs]. Anyways, okay, I would say what is meaningful is helping people, and, like, *I do that, I do that every day.* [Aster, 30, server, bartender]

The ways in which the participants generally conceptualized meaningfulness permeated how they constructed the meaningfulness of restaurant employment. They described the meaningfulness of the extrinsic rewards (e.g., income) and the intrinsic rewards (e.g., positive feelings) from restaurant

work. Further, meaning surfaced through quotidian occurrences, like short conversations at work, and through exceptional practices, such as volunteer efforts of the restaurants. What the participants constructed as meaningful were not always tied to the restaurant in and of itself, and they made distinctions between meaningfulness of particular workplace practices and meaningfulness that the work provided them elsewhere. Though meaning had a direct relationship to the work, much of it manifested from the tangential characteristics associated with the work. The participants were cognizant of the negative perceptions of restaurant jobs and revealed ambivalence about the meaningfulness of their employment. Their awareness of social constructions of meaning in some ways contributed to and in other ways diminished their sense of meaningfulness. The data presented five major categories of meaningfulness in and around restaurant work: *Helping, Mentoring, Expanding, Belonging, and Supplementation*. These categories are not mutually exclusive, and participants talked about experiencing them individually and simultaneously.

Helping

When the participants told me about the meaningfulness of workplace practices, they described acts of giving back to the community, helping others, and providing people jobs. For example,

What else is meaningful is our restaurant also gives back to the community. Because we are a corporation and make money, they think we should give back, like donating and feeding the homeless, serving at a homeless shelter kitchen. But, they set these give-

backs on our days off without pay, and we do not get replacement days off. So I like to give back, but the corporation is still a corporation in the ways that they do things, you know what I mean? [Lilu]

One can hear her ambivalence about the meaningfulness of restaurant “give-backs” because of the way they transpire. In other words, Lilu believed that helping others is meaningful, but the give-back meaningfulness is diluted by the corporation’s exploitation of its employees.

The restaurant resembled a space where employees helped others at distance and in an abstract form. Val illuminated this phenomenon when he said that restaurant workers “experience humanity on some of the most prime levels. I mean, you can have the family out celebrating a wedding tomorrow, you can have a family come in after a funeral for a grandchild, you can have people who just eat, I mean, shit, everybody eats, not everybody can afford to eat out, but everybody eats.” He added, “We have an opportunity to make memorable moments very special for complete strangers, and I think that’s important. You know, somewhere in the world is the picture that you took of all those people together at those tables you served, even though the people may be separated by miles. Someone, somewhere, is saying, ‘Oh yeah, we had that waiter take that picture for us.’ So you’ve influenced the positive, the positive life, and that’s meaningful.” Val also acknowledged food service as a “hard industry” and explained that the hard work made him grateful. “It makes me appreciate what I have more,” he said. “You know, you see families come out with the wheelchair, and the oxygen tank, and you know the daughter with

the multiple sclerosis, or my co-worker’s daughter has MS, so it just reminds me.” He paused, and added, “It’s an old saying, but by the grace of God, my feet work, my hands work, my eyes work.” He knocked on the wood table and said, “I’m in good shape, and it’s something to be thankful for. That, and the cash.” Here, we see meaningfulness in the everyday and remarkable, as well as in the intrinsic and extrinsic rewards of restaurant work.

For Seymour (25, server, bartender, shift manager), meaningfulness is a byproduct of restaurant culture. He explained that the restaurant is a place where people help their co-workers and have the means to help their family members. He told me, “We are all pretty tight knit, we all look out for each other when we need it. If somebody needed some money or something, or somebody needed to be picked up from jail, we’d go pick ‘em up, just like looking out for each other.” Furthermore, Seymour explained that restaurant work enabled him to help his mother pay bills when she lost her job. Storie (23, sous-chef) maintained that restaurants are meaningful because they afford “a lot of jobs and money for more people than anybody would know,” such as purveyors, cleaners, and electricians. Maria had a similar assessment when saying:

What is meaningful about restaurant work is providing work and jobs to people. A lot of people cannot find work, and we can give jobs to those people who maybe don’t have an education or the skills for other jobs. Often people do not speak enough English, and we have hired a few refugees. Also, it is meaningful to provide a place for people to enjoy, like, working and a fun environment.

In like manner, Jesse explained the meaningfulness of helping his friend obtain a restaurant management position after he was downsized from an electronics store.

Tia provided details on meaningfulness as helping others by comparing different types of jobs and the tasks that accompany each. She first stated, “Meaningfulness is not like stocking clothes at a department store. It doesn’t impact the workers or someone else’s life in a good way.” She then indicated, “Meaningful work is something that will help others make their lives better, like working at a job to help stop human trafficking. That is what I thought I would be doing when I was in school. And now, it is a government job that I think *will be eventually* meaningful.” Tia also expressed equivocation about the meaningfulness of restaurant employment, but she explained that it allows her to pursue occupational and life goals that are helpful and meaningful.

Other participants talked about how employees will not “get rich” working in the restaurant industry, but it helps secure a living to support a family.

For the kitchen staff, I know for a fact, you know, there’s a few, a couple salary guys, that can afford to have their own apartment, they are all married, and they all have at least two kids, and I don’t know if their wives work, but I know they have an apartment, and they have a car, and their kids go to school, and they’re not starving, and they don’t have crappy cars...I make 32K a year, and I don’t think it’s great, but it’s not horrible, I mean, there are families that live off 32K a year. [Oliver, 24, kitchen expeditor]

Overall, the participants conceptualized meaningfulness in and around restaurant work in terms of the value and significance of giving to, helping, and providing for others.

Mentoring

The participants discussed the meaning of mentoring, guiding, and leading others. In a follow-up conversation with Jimmy (43, executive chef), he exemplified the theme of mentorship:

I don’t know that I’d say that restaurant work is meaningful, like, I change the world or shit like that, but I make awesome food [laughs], and people need to eat to, like, live [laughs]. But, shit, that’s a hard question. But, yeah, I guess, like, my life is more meaningful now that I am executive chef ‘cause I make more money and I get to mentor the newbies and kick them around for a while to get them into shape [laughs], so I guess I’m like a teacher, so that is like meaning, that helps.

I heard ambivalence about the meaningfulness of restaurant work in Jimmy’s account and laughter, as if he is not allowed to be proud of his job until he can negotiate intrinsic and extrinsic rewards from the employment.

Lilu also displayed equivocation about meaningfulness in her work, but felt that mentorship helps personal feelings of meaning. “My job? Meaningful? *I guess so,*” she said slowly. “Well, ‘cause you need it to pay bills, but I do like mentoring the hourly workers and the new managers. That gives me meaning. We are a team at work. That’s meaning-

ful.” Additionally, Maria mentioned, “The restaurant is not necessarily meaningful because I feel like the restaurant is entertainment, like fun and entertainment, but not meaningful, at least in the way that I think is meaningful. But, what could be meaningful at the restaurant to me, as a manager, is shaping the employees when they first come to the restaurant to work, like when they are young, like teaching them about how to work, and hard work.” Maria wavered between whether the restaurant had meaningfulness or not, but she enjoyed mentoring employees:

I like and enjoy working at the restaurant, and I like helping the workers grow up. Ultimately, though, serving lunch and dinner is not meaningful, but you can be good at it or shitty at it. It’s a job that sustains life, but it’s not torture. For the most part, it’s enjoyable. I’m not *just* going to work there ‘cause I have some kid to take care of, I mean, I have me to take care of [laughs], but ultimately, I could choose somewhere else to work, like at any other job, secretary, nurse, I don’t know, like any lower level job, well, a nurse is meaningful, but then you have to deal with gross stuff. Nurses can make a lot of money though, at least from what I’ve heard.

Maria conveyed that she is not compelled to remain working in restaurants because of limited occupational options or out of necessity (e.g., to support a child). She intimated that her job offered agency, autonomy, and enjoyment.

Participants also highlighted the other end of the spectrum where they were the pupils or apprentices, thus illuminating the meaningfulness of receiving guidance. Storie showed her appreciation

when recalling how the executive chef hired her: “Nobody would hire me, nobody would hire a girl that didn’t have much experience in a restaurant, so he gave me a chance. He is very protective over me. I always say he is like my dad, and it is very much, you know, a father-daughter relationship.” Storie also described the importance of the mentorship of the other cooks and chefs. She told me that culinary school did not teach her “shit” compared to what the back-of-the-house did. For instance, she declared, “These men taught me how to do it faster, how to do it better, make it easier, like it’s amazing, I’m like why didn’t they teach me how to French a lamb rack like this in school? Honestly, I mean, this takes me two minutes. The other way takes me twenty.”

Expanding

When participants described meaningfulness, they discussed how restaurant work expanded their growth, horizons, self-sufficiency, responsibility to thwart abusing their power, and respect of others. Nicole (29, server, bartender) found restaurant work meaningful because it gave her confidence to overcome shyness:

I think serving was good for me. You know, at seventeen, when I first started, the idea of going up to a table and talking to strangers was intimidating, and then a couple years down the road, it was no big deal at all. Now, going to talk to restaurant owners isn’t so scary, you know? And so I think that naturally my personality isn’t social and outgoing, but I like being that way as opposed to being shy, and so I think that my job has shaped me into being that way. I think that came second ‘cause I wasn’t born that way.

She exemplified the extrinsic and intrinsic rewards of restaurant work, "[its] just a really good place to enhance your understanding of people, in general. You just meet, like, so many people, you become friends with people, it helps pay for your bills, and it's always something you can fall back on."

Likewise, Lucie (23), who worked as a busser, hostess, food runner, bar back, and server, noted, "Restaurants are a huge part of enhancing life and people, and, I mean, it's been such a huge part of my life, and also just the people you meet. I mean, the restaurant industry brings so many different kinds of people together, so I definitely think it enhances your life in many ways." She then stated, "Like, seriously, probably all my best friends I have I once worked with in a restaurant, or met through restaurants, or, you know, that culture for sure." Adding to this theme, Abigail (27, manager) mentioned, "You meet a whole bunch of different cultures, you know, lifestyles, so, I mean, I wouldn't trade it, not right now, not at the age I'm at." Furthermore, Seymour said, "I think the restaurant has definitely opened my eyes to seeing even a broader spectrum of different kinds of people that are out there, whether it be racially, or age, or gender, or differences, just behavioral." He explained, "There are just so many different personalities out there. It's just mind boggling, you know, so I don't know, that is definitely something that has come to my attention since I have worked in the restaurant industry."

The data showed how restaurants can motivate workers in meaningful ways by encouraging them to expand their educations. Cindy (33, server, shift manager) stated, "I graduated high school. I took a

class here and there. I never really did well in school. I didn't get serious about my education until I was about twenty-four, when I was working in the restaurant industry, and I think that was probably what motivated me to get serious about getting a degree, because I don't want to work at a restaurant forever."

Following up with Jesse, he explained that work is a means to financial stability so he can expand meaningful experiences with family and friends.

All I care about is that I have, you know, I can pay my bills, and, seriously, work is just to pay bills. It really is just that. And, yes, and there is also some social connection. But, what it is, work allows for you and I to enjoy this telephone conversation, you know what I mean? I don't like people who are married to their work, you know, but if they're happy, God bless them. You know what I mean? That's their gig. But, work just provides me money so I'm able to go spend time with family and friends. That's the most meaningful thing.

Jesse then reasoned that the restaurant aids in his pursuit for meaningfulness by saying, "I look at it as me almost using the restaurant to better my life."

Another element of meaningfulness that emerged from the interviews was expanding the responsibility to avoid abusing one's power. For example, Jesse told me he did not become a police officer after his military duty because he feared unbridled power. He said,

I didn't become a cop 'cause, I mean, I could ruin your day. I could throw you in jail. I could impound your car. I could write tickets. My word is God. You know

what I mean? I'm just like, there's no way. I didn't want to have that much power, and still now, even as a manager, the bad sides of me are not good. You know what I mean? So, I think it's just best for me to chill and relax and enjoy life.

Moreover, Seymour told me he liked his non-authoritative positions in the restaurant as a server, bartender, and part-time shift-manager because he did not want to be tempted to "misuse power." He said, "I just don't like being in charge and having to tell people what to do. It's not really my thing. I mean, I can do it, but, like, most of the people I work with are my friends also. We're all kind of at the same level. It'd just be awkward, like, if I had to boss them around, or, like, something like that."

Meaningfulness also included treating others with respect. Icarus (22, server, lead trainer) explained that restaurant workers learn "they aren't important, or that they're not skilled or valued in society." He elaborated by saying, "It's just a cycle of treating people like shit, which sucks, and I wish we all could just get that empathy for each other and realize that we are all human beings and that we all have value, you know, no matter what we all do, we all mean something. Who's to say a CEO of a company is more important than a dishwasher at a restaurant?" Throughout the interview, Icarus told me that working in restaurants meaningfully expanded his empathy, respect for others, and awareness of the "value" of all people.

Belonging

Belonging represented a salient part of meaning to the restaurant workers. It, in part, explained why

they remained employed for such long periods. The construct of belonging included making friends, maintaining friendships with co-workers and customers, and feelings of "fitting in." When interviewing Portia, she first described her ambivalence about the meaningfulness of restaurant work, and then provided insight about the meaningfulness of belonging: "It isn't that restaurant work isn't meaningful," she said. "It's that other people think it isn't. That hurts me because even though I don't wanna do it forever, and I have hope for better, just because I work in a restaurant doesn't mean I'm worthless." She then added, "Restaurant work has some meaning. Maybe not like the meaning everyone thinks is meaningful, but you serve people. You help out people. It gives you the ability to do other stuff too, like pay your bills, help your family. It's hard to say what is meaningful. It's anything that makes you feel good about yourself, and makes you happy, even if it isn't all the time." Gradually, Portia began to describe the importance of belonging. "My friends at the restaurant are important," she said, "and talking to the customers and learning new things from them, from their daily lives to like what they do for a living. Maybe, it's just that we all just need to feel like we belong, and fit in. That's meaningful to me." Her account of restaurant employment reflected the meaning and importance of the quotidian and actually incorporated several categories of meaningfulness—*belonging*, *helping*, and *expanding*.

Cindy also mentioned friends in the restaurant as meaningful and described the theme of *expanding* as well. During the interview, Cindy worked as a restaurant server and shift manager and as a sales representative during the day. She noted,

I have worked in the industry for a long time. It's definitely been my point of networking for friends. It is where I have met a lot of my friends. It basically gave me the skills to even advance into the sales position I am in now, and it just fits my personality. Basically, it molded me into what I am. So in the future, it will continue to be a big part of my life, and, hopefully, it will be to go into restaurants to sell food and wines.

All of the participants recounted enjoying their restaurant friends, and the vast majority of them directly described friends as a meaningful part of restaurant employment. Cliff (23, server, bartender, shift manager) said, “I like it. I think working in a restaurant is more satisfying, more exciting. You meet more people. You make more money. You make more friends.” He then explained, “I mean, you make friends with the workers *and* customers. I have had a couple of regulars follow me from restaurant to restaurant, but mainly I am friends with people I work with. You just meet a lot of friends. I have kept in touch with most of them over the years.”

For Tia, friends are the reason she has stayed so long. To her, the restaurant is not simply a workplace; it is a space full of “meaningful relationships.”

I definitely enjoy working there, I have friends there, I get along with management, that's why I have stayed there as long as I have, because it's not just a workplace, because I have meaningful relationships with people. When I first started there, I was just thinking, like, oh, okay, I'm gonna stay here for like six months, and then I'll be out, like I just don't want to do this

forever. And then after a while I started building friendships...and the harder you work, you're recognized for that, and then you get better sections and shifts and stuff, so I think that's why I get along with management so well because I know that they appreciate me, and like you get their acknowledgement for it...and that I have relationships with them outside of work. You know, they are more than just a manager. They are friends.

As Tia alluded, friendships within the workplace exist well beyond the restaurant space. We see this when Val elucidated numerous co-worker bonds and presented the theme of *helping*:

I will go to their house, they will come to my house, we'll go to dinner, we'll meet for a drink, but, um, or we will have email communication, in the age of Facebook, and all that. As a matter of fact, I still keep in contact with old co-workers. And it's weird, once you go through the hell of a restaurant, I mean, if you go through hell on a bad night, I mean, you bond like brothers, right? Band of sisters. So, yeah, I still talk to people I worked with, you know, 15 years ago. We don't talk often, we talk a couple times a year, you know, but some people I work with, I would pee on if they were on fire, 'cause I have to help people at all times.

The participants also discussed meaningful connections with customers. Nadia (20, host, cocktail waitress, server) said, “I think the main thing that I got out of it was the relationships that I formed with people.” She conveyed her most significant memory by discussing a powerful bond she formed with a father and his two-year-old daughter who ate

at the restaurant every week. Nadia explained that every Wednesday night she was determined to have a conversation with the little girl who never spoke, and “finally, just one day, she said something back to me. So then, week after week, she’d start talking more, and then like a year later, it was to the point where his daughter would come running in to give me a hug, and he told me, ‘I really want to thank you. You’ve really helped her a lot. She would not talk to anybody.’ And that is what I’m most happy about working there, is the people.” Ultimately, personal relationships in and around restaurant work provided the employees a powerful sense of meaningfulness.

Supplementation

In a final category of meaningfulness that emerged, the workers recounted the activities in which they participated outside of restaurants to supplement their meaningfulness. They frequently mentioned volunteering or interning at charitable organizations and participating in various hobbies. To them, such activities granted additional meaning in their lives.

Maria told me, “I think because most people do not consider restaurant work meaningful—a lot of the employees, and the outside world—many workers, in general, often supplement meaningfulness with volunteer work, you know, to find more meaning in life.” As mentioned earlier, Maria volunteered with refugees to help them learn English and find job placements. She later revealed that her restaurant sponsors volunteer activities for the workers, and she said the employees also have their own volunteer ef-

forts. Specifically, Maria explained that “some have internships or volunteer at non-profits. Other people supplement meaningfulness with school, getting an education, or working toward something else.”

Describing her feelings before and after completing her master’s degree, Tia assessed how she supplemented meaningfulness while working in restaurants. She also speculated about what other restaurant workers engage in for meaningfulness beyond restaurants:

Before, when I was in school, school made my life more meaningful, my internship made it more meaningful, because I always knew, I thought, I would have a job, a career later. And, I think a lot of people are like that because they are in school or doing something else. But, at the same time, I think a lot of people are completely fine with restaurant work without needing anything else that is meaningful. But then, others have day jobs for meaning and work in restaurant for more money.

Furthermore, Tia believed restaurant work served a meaningful purpose—it financed her education and helped in the pursuit of an entry-level government position.

Chloe (24, cocktail waitress, server, bartender, shift manager) talked about meaningfulness as working towards a “collective good.” She did so by volunteering at animal shelters, and for two years, volunteering at a non-profit for victims of rape and sexual assault.

I feel so passionate about it. I love being connected with survivors, and watching them go through that growth cycle from the trauma to the healing, and be-

ing at that point of contact, and feeling like I made a difference to somebody. Whether or not the world sees that I’m making a difference in people’s lives, I know that I changed that person’s life... Some things are more important, and these are the things that are important to me, I’m really excited now that I’ve been so involved, I really feel like I know what I’m doing.

Chloe’s account reflected normative constructions of meaning. In other words, the experience of trauma—albeit in others’ lives—enhanced her meaningfulness. Later in the interview, Chloe mentioned several hobbies, such as dance, music, burlesque, physical fitness, and working out that gave her meaning beyond the workplace and her volunteer efforts.

Participants also talked about adding meaning to their lives by volunteering or interning at non-profit organizations. For instance, Lucie explained that she volunteered at a women’s clinic and even noted that there is something “so inspirational about it.” Edna (22, host, server) mentioned that she volunteered with an organization that served the needs of homeless children and their mothers. Likewise, Griffin (41, server, bartender) volunteered at a men’s homeless shelter, preparing meals and cleaning the quarters.

The hobbies outside of restaurants that the participants considered meaningful consisted of many outdoor activities, such as rafting, hiking, skiing, snowboarding, camping, exercising, and various sports. Discussing meaning supplementation, Wayne (19, busser, expeditor, line cook) said, “I lead a pretty active lifestyle. I play hockey, I ski, I play basketball, I swim a lot, so, yeah, I have a lot of hob-

bies.” Workers also found meaningfulness in everyday activities beyond restaurants: “I spend time on the Internet, chill with my friends, play sports, [do] school work, talk to friends, go outside, go to the beach [pause] I like reading, so I seldom get bored” (Jose, 25, server, line cook). Although the participants found several aspects of their work meaningful, they desired additional meaningfulness in their lives. As a result, they supplemented their meaningfulness with remarkable and commonplace activities outside of restaurants.

Conclusion

With people’s inclination to search for meaning in life (Frankl 1959) and the growing number of self-help books (McGee 2005; Millman 2011) that propose to aid in this search, it is apparent that a sense of meaningfulness is important to people. Nonetheless, when returning to the conceptual issue Csikszentmihalyi (1990) posed decades ago—talking about the meaning of meaning itself—there is a noticeable difficulty to define, measure, or even discuss how to achieve meaning in life. On the one hand, scholars commonly describe meaning in relation to the traditional concepts of purpose, significance, importance, and contribution (Albrecht 2015). On the other hand, these concepts are confounding. Moreover, research tells us that employment has the potential to provide people meaningful experiences (Chalofsky 2003), and the perception of work meaningfulness may improve people’s well-being (Arnold et al. 2007). But, these conclusions lead to the question that I addressed in this article: *Where does meaningfulness arise for people who hold jobs that are regarded as having an absence of meaningful experiences?*

Similar to “happiness” (Wilkins 2008), some researchers have started to recognize meaningfulness as a social construct, which is continually negotiated on an individual and group level (Svensson 2014). However, many scholars treat it as a condition that can be objectively measured (Steger et al. 2012), which belies the fluid quality of meaningfulness. A broader approach is required to understand how individuals, employment contexts, and socio-cultural components shape people’s perceptions of meaningfulness. To this end, the present research provided a qualitative case study from a sociological perspective that concentrated on self-reported sources of meaningfulness and what people “do” to gain meaning in life. The data shed light on five major categories of meaningfulness in and around restaurant employment: *Helping, Mentoring, Expanding, Belonging, and Supplementation*.

By examining restaurant employees’ accounts of meaningfulness in and outside their workplaces, I attended to the complex and subjective topic of what constitutes meaningful work and lives. This study addressed how and why employees constructed meaningfulness while engaged in work that is often considered meaningless (DiPietro and Pizam 2008), bad (Kalleberg 2011), problematic (Jayaraman 2013), and unreal (Taylor 2009). Importantly, the research analyses contributed to developing the empirical, conceptual, and theoretical basis of meaningfulness in people’s lives. Subsequently, this article presented a more comprehensive and inclusionary framework for understanding meaning, meaningfulness, and meaningful work. It also helped to clarify past philosophical descriptions of meaningfulness, such as a significance felt regarding one’s being and existence (Steger et al. 2006).

Expanding past research about meaning made in work absent of meaning in a traditional sense (Roy 1959; Willis 1977; Burawoy 1979; Heinsler et al. 1990; Wharton 1996), the restaurant employees conversely found ways to derive meaning from the mundane *and* remarkable occurrences at work. They saw both the extrinsic and intrinsic rewards of restaurant work and thus experienced the meaningfulness of jobs that are not necessarily by conventional definition a calling, a moral duty, or a combination of a career and a calling (Baumeister 1991). They understood their employment as meaningful because they viewed it as that which helps the self, co-workers, customers, and others; allows mentorship, leadership, and guidance; expands one’s growth, horizons, self-sufficiency, and responsibilities; and permits feelings of belonging and acceptance. Each of these sources contributes to explaining what meaningful, valuable, and worthwhile employment (Hackman and Oldham 1975) actually looks like for people. As empirical research has indicated that restaurant employees have a difficult time perceiving or accepting their work as meaningful (Erickson 2009), the participants in this study had some ambivalence about the meaningfulness of their jobs. However, they did not rely solely on their work to acquire meaningfulness; they readily enumerated the ways in which meaningfulness was supplemented from other sources, such as through volunteer efforts, hobbies, or social events. Ultimately, what this shows us is that people seek to achieve meaning and personal fulfillment in their lives, whether through traditionally conceived pathways or not, in or outside the workplace, or by virtue of altruistic or hedonistic actions.

Apart from employment, meaningfulness has been predominantly conceptualized as that which lies beyond the quotidian and as an experience that *happens* to people after traumatic events (Davis and Nolen-Hoeksema 2001) or extraordinary circumstances (Taylor 1983). Alternatively, this study accentuated how meaningfulness exists in everyday situations *and* exceptional pursuits in and around workplaces. As a result, this research expanded our knowledge on how people construct meaning from ordinary or banal experiences (see: Misztal 2016). It additionally highlighted that people agentically and actively pursue meaningful lives. Furthermore, it indicated that simply because people do not disclose holding the established criteria of meaning (e.g., significant contribution) does not mean that they will have meaningless lives. For example, as cooks have found meaning in the aesthetics of their dishes (Fine 1996), the participants in this study found meaning, value, and satisfaction in serving people or providing them with a memorable experience on an abstract level. By and large, they were content with the meaning of their restaurant employment and emphasized the meaningfulness of the “little things” in and separate from their work (e.g., food and social gatherings).

The accounts of meaningfulness in this article bolster our understanding of how social and cultural constructs of meaning inform and collide with people’s conceptions of meaningful work. For example, spending time talking to a customer, hiring refugees at restaurants, or volunteering with co-workers to feed the homeless bridges people’s search for meaning in both life and work. This perspective of meaningfulness may supply resources for and pathways to positive well-being, employee retention, and a reduction

in turnover rates and organizational costs. Specifically, this research shows that employees recognize meaningfulness in and appreciate work that grants them the ability to help, mentor, and lead others; to acquire experiences and skills; to develop self-sufficiency, rational capacities, and morals (see also Bowie 1998); and to belong and feel accepted. Workplaces in general have the potential to provide the aforementioned meaningful experiences—even ones that are treated as having an absence of meaning. Past conceptualizations of meaningfulness, however, denote a lack of meaning for the vast majority of workers who labor in manufacturing, construction, wholesale and retail trade, leisure and hospitality, and other service-sector jobs. The conclusions in this study are applicable to many jobs that are designated bad, meaningless, lower-status, contingent, and as having mundane, repetitive work tasks. Scholarship and occupations would benefit from future examinations of how meaningfulness arises for employees who hold such jobs. Finally, the research analyses are relevant for investigations of any groups of people with uncertainties about the meaningfulness of their employment (e.g., in medical, educational, and technological fields) or their lives more generally.

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