Some Preliminary Findings on the Meaning of Work in Ghana: A Research Note

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Abstract

It has been argued elsewhere that the meaning of work (MOW) concept has not been clearly operationalized and consistently used in research literature (Puplampu, 1997 under review). This point is taken up by this research where the meaning of work is hypothesized to be characterized in the following terms: that it is derived from an external religious frame of reference and is considered as central to life. The data and analyses are rather preliminary, but offer some support for these two hypotheses.

Introduction

Blunt (1983) discussing the meaning of work in Africa, suggested that many workers conceive their work purely in instrumental terms, as alienating or as a central life interest. The notions of instrumentality and alienation have been used in the literature as work values dimensions (MOW 1987). The issue that arises is this: to what extent is the concept meaning of work different or distinct from other closely related concepts in the subjective experience of work literature? Subjective experience of work here refers to articulations around concepts such as job involvement, job satisfaction, work values, work attitudes, work ethics and so on. These are all psychological dimensions that have been used by researchers and practitioners to describe and understand the experience of individuals and societal groups in the work setting.

The literature is replete with references to poor work attitudes in some developing countries (Kuada, 1994); the determinants and impact of job satisfaction (Akinnawo, 1994); the importance of the protestant work ethic and so on. What does the concept meaning of work contribute to this domain? It is argued elsewhere (Puplampu, 1997) that this contribution is not clear due to the fact that the MOW concept has been used interchangeably with the other subjective experience of work dimensions noted above. How then can a conceptual distinction be made between MOW and other concepts? Indeed is such a distinction necessary?

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This paper suggests that while work values, for example, refer to those deep seated beliefs about what is treasured (or not treasured) in ones working life and the behavioural consequences of such beliefs, the meaning of work must represent more abstract conceptualizations of what work is and its place or role in a person's life. This conceptualization is an indication of what West *et al* (1992) refer to as the need for philosophical debate about underlying notions of work and society. This research is therefore a preliminary attempt at examining how the meaning of work is negotiated, understood and socially constructed.

The Present Study

The present study takes as its starting premise, some of the points made by writers such as Lawless (1989) who notes that there has always been a religious dimension to the meaning of work. The MOW (1987) study found a relationship between the perceived importance of religion and the negative or positive regard of work. It is therefore worth exploring the extent to which the meaning of work incorporates religious beliefs - distinct from religious beliefs exhibited in relation to work values. In other words will individuals in the effort to distil the essence of work make reference to religious beliefs? If so how will such beliefs be articulated into a frame-of-reference where work is concerned? The centrality hypothesis where the meaning of work is concerned as well documented (Blunt, 1983). It proposes that work is seen as a dominant and central life activity. Centrality was therefore examined in this research. The dominant proposition here, however, relates to the notion that the meaning of work concept is not as reified as the other constructs which describe the subjective experience of work. It is more of an abstraction which may or may not directly influence a person's immediate experience of or disposition towards work. In view of the above points, two propositions were advanced and tested by this research.

Propositional Statements

1. The meaning of work would be construed at an abstract, religious level.
2. The meaning of work would be characterised by two dimensions:
   a) work is central to human life;
   b) work is given by God.

Method

Measures

Given the lack of standardized measures tapping into the meaning of work as proposed above, a brief 7 item instrument was developed. Below are the items used in this instrument. Responses were elicited via a 5-point likert scale scored strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (5).

1. We live to work. (C)
2. Work is one of the most important activities in life. (C)
3. I prefer spending time with my friends and family to working. (C)
4. God gave us work. (R)
5. Work is the lot of human beings. (C)
6. I would rather go to work than church. (R)
7. We work to live. (C)

These items were derived in part from the literature which suggests the centrality of work to human life (Ruiz Quitanilla and Wilpert 1990 - items 1, 2, 3 & 7) and also the religious dimension to the meaning of work (Lawless 1989 - items 4, 5 & 6). In order to test the extent to which these questions tap into real beliefs (that responses are not researcher led or artifacts of the insturment per se) a further opportunity was given to respondents to express their beliefs with this statement:

Do you have any comment you would like to make about 'work'? If so please write here: . . . .
. . . .
. . . .

The aim was to elicit written reports which would be amenable to content and thematic analyses. Analyses involved identifying a) ideas related to the meaning of work and b) determining the frequency of mention of such ideas and c) crystallising these ideas into themes based on categorisation. Cairns, Woodward and Hashizume (1992) used a similar method in their study of transitions to work.

Sample

The sample consisted of 138 individuals from 2 different organisations (1 service sector and 1 manufacturing sector) in the Accra-Tema metropolis, Ghana.

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There was no a priori basis for selection of these organisations. The organisational variable was therefore not used in any analyses. The sample was differentiated on the basis of gender (male/female) and seniority of responsibility in the work place (junior staff/senior staff). The seniority of responsibility and gender variables were used as independent variables in preliminary data analyses. Sample breakdown is given below in Table 1. The figures in the cells represent the sample sizes used by SPSS in each computation after eliminating cases which did not provide the relevant grouping information. For calculations of gender related differences, N was 123; for seniority of responsibility, N was 136.

Table 1: Breakdown of Sample

Male	Female	Senior Staff	Junior Staff
80	43	53	83
N	123		136

Procedure

The personnel departments of the above mentioned organisations were approached for access to staff. Due to the conditions under which access was granted, the questionnaire was left with both personnel departments. They undertook to distribute and the researcher returned one week later to collect returned questionnaires. The researcher consequently did not have any personal contact with respondents.

Results

Descriptive data and principal components analyses of the MOW questionnaire.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for MOW items across the groups

	All			Male		Female		Ss		Js	
	Mean	Mode	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Item											
MOW1	2.56	1	1.53	2.57	1.58	1.56	1.44	{2.92	1.53	2.32	1.49}
MOW2	1.51	1	.79	1.5	.85	1.54	.70	1.54	.72	1.48	.84
MOW3	4.20	4	.82	4.17	.84	4.24	76	4.17	.78	4.21	.84
MOW4	1.63	1	93	1.68	.96	1.41	.74	1.84	1.10	1.50	.77

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MOW5	2.29	2	1.14	2.29	1.14	2.31	1.21	2.16	1.17	2.38	1.12
MOW6	3.84	4	1.17	3.77	1.10	4.09	1.22	3.75	1.32	3.90	1.07
MOW7	2.40	2	1.30	2.47	1.32	2.33	1.28	2.41	1.33	2.40	1.28

Notes: Ss - senior staff; Js - junior staff; {} - significant group differences.

Table 2 shows the means and standard deviations on all the items. There were no significant group differences except on MOW1 where Ss differed from Js (t = 2.21; df 129; p < .05). On the strength of this result, the sample was collapsed for subsequent principal components analyses (pca). Initial pca indicated that in the interests of achieving simple structure, MOW3 and 7 were superfluous to the theoretical and empirical structure of the data. Those two items were therefore eliminated from further analyses. The final structure (varimax rotation) using MOW1, 2, 4, 5 & 6 is presented below in Table 3. Loadings below .40 were suppressed to aid interpretation. The two dimensions account for 54.3% of the variance.

Table 3. Principal component matrix (varimax) of MOW items

	FACTOR 1	FACTOR 2	Overall Mean
Eigen value Cumulative %	1.50 30.10	1.20 54.30	
MOW6			3.84
MOW4	-.82		1.63
	.79		
MOW2		.69	1.51
MOW5		.67	2.29
MOW1		.65	2.56

Factor 1 is interpreted as a Religious dimension while Factor 2 shows a centrality focus. Overall means are indicated on table 3 above to put in perspective the position of the respondents regarding the items loading on each factor.

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Thematic analyses of Written data

This part of the instrument generated a wealth of data. Results are presented below in tabular form covering ideas and the frequency of mention of groups of ideas.

Analyses parameters

The Universe: All statements which make a direct reference to work and working. Categories: Main - a) Statements which reflect the derivation of work for example work derives from or is given by God; b) Statements which reflect the place of work in human life for example work is important, essential or central to human life. Secondary - any other references to why people work or how they construe work.

Table 4. Frequency table of ideas distilled from written data. $N = 70$ (not all respondents filled out this section).

Ideas	Freq
C1. Work is good; work is important to human life; to live we must work; it is essential - the essence of life; work is stimulating and rewarding; without work life would be boring ...	23
C2. Employers should make work motivating such that workers would not complain; if work is not enjoyable it enslaves ...	7
C3. God says if you don't work you don't deserve to eat; God is always working so human beings must work; God instituted work; without work you can't go to church since you must give an offering and pay tithe; the universe gives proof of work; work is enjoyable when you know the work God has given you and you are doing it well ...	18
C4. Work makes it possible to exhibit one's talent and to help society and others; work makes you independent and responsible ...	7

C5. Work is not a direct gift from God. Human beings create 'work' for themselves; there are other equally important activities; work is one of life's activities ...	4

Five categories were identified: C1 to C5 as shown above in Table 4. In each category are main or secondary ideas (refer to definition of universe above) which could be grouped together. From these, three main themes emerged which characterise the data. These are that work is:
- Cosmic, religious, God given (C3 freq 18, C5 freq 4;);
- motivational/societal (C4 freq 7, C2 freq 7);
- central to life (C1 freq 23, C5 freq 4).

C5 could be split and its constitutent ideas placed under C1 and C3. However, It is kept as a separate category because the ideas are antithetical to C1 and C3. Clearly the most favoured themes (going by the frequency of mention of ideas) are the centrality of work to life and the cosmic-God derived conceptualization of work.

Limitations of the study

A number of factors mitigate the level of confidence that can be placed in these results, the theoretical and conceptual implications notwithstanding. Firstly, the MOW instrument shows some lapses in construction. There were two 'preference' items (MOW6 and MOW3) in the questionnaire. In the end MOW3 had to be eliminated as it stood on its own in preliminary pca. The request for written statements about work immediately followed the MOW questionnaire on the same sheet. Respondents may therefore have been influenced by the preceding items they had just responded to, thus reflecting a similarity in themes from the questionnaire.

Secondly, one of the organisations from which the sample were drawn was at that time facing imminent divestiture (privatisation). Respondents may have been under pressure to present an acceptable view of themselves given the possibility of redundancies and mass lay-offs. The above points may have been further compounded by the fact that the researcher had no direct access to the sample since the personnel departments undertook (under the terms of access agreement) to distribute and retrieve the instrument. Questionnaires may

therefore have gone to people who the personnel department felt should be included in the study.

Discussion and conclusion

This study set out to test the propositions that the meaning of work is negotiated at an abstract level and secondly is characterised by two beliefs - work is central to human life and is given by or derives from God. The results show broad, but tentative support for these propositions. It is important to state, however, at this point, that these are tentative results and the MOW instrument is very rudimentary. The primary concern here is to initiate reconceptualizations in this area.

Proposition 1 suggested that the meaning of work would be articulated as an abstraction. The results of content and thematic analyses of written data confirm this supposition. C1 and C3 were the most favoured thematic clusters going by the frequencies of 23 and 18 respectively. As noted earlier, an abstraction has the quality of being separate and removed from the object or phenomena in question. An examination of the statements in C1 and C3 tentatively indicate this abstracted quality. For example, work is seen as important to 'human life', is 'good', is the 'essence of life', is 'stimulating and rewarding' and without work 'life would be boring'. These are all potent but generalist references to the place of work. It is significant that respondents do not personalise these statements about work. A process of abstration could be inferred from the fact that respondents did not make statements such as: 'my work as a ... is important to my life'. Relevant exemplars are not invoked, instead generalities and intangible are used to articulate how work is understood.

This is even more so when C3 is examined. How does a person know that 'God is always working'? except as a belief that is separate from but real to the person? One may further ask, in what way does the 'universe give proof of work' except that the one with such a belief probably holds a world view which sees the created or evolved order as evidence of 'work'? Again the quality of an abstraction comes to the fore here. That 'God is always working ...' suggests a self-evident belief that God is, and that God's activities constitute work. How one is to 'know the work that God has given you' is another indication of an external or outside-of-oneself frame-of-reference. This study did not explore the origin of respondents stated beliefs. It would be interesting to test the extent to which

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Joelson and Wahlquist's (1987) Swedish findings - about the apparent crystallization of work beliefs during childhood - hold in the instance of these findings from Ghana.

C2 and C4 are more closely linked with direct observables or tangibles. Respondents make reference to employers' responsibilities and the need for work to be enjoyable. They also refer to one's societal responsibility, helping others and one's independence as tied in with work. C5 presents ideas which run counter to C1 and C3. Quantitative methodology may suggest that with a frequency count of only 4, C5 is probably insignificant. While this may be so, it may be worth exploring further the basis for what appears to be a very rational outlook to work.

Proposition 2 states that MOW would be characterized by two dimensions namely that work is central to human life and is God given. Support for this position comes from the two factors identified from pca of the MOW questionnaire. Although the results of such exploratory work with pca must always be taken with care, the structure fits clearly with a cosmic-theological and centrality conceptualization of MOW. This is buttressed by the dominance of these themes in the written data.

For factor 1, MOW6 is negatively correlated with MOW4. The mean for MOW6, 3.84 suggests disagreement with a preference for going to work rather than church. This is set against agreement (mean 1.63) with MOW4 that God gave us work and contextualizes the cosmic-theological view of MOW. There is broad agreement with all the items loading on factor 2, confirming that work is seen as an essential component to human existence. The stability of this two dimensional conceptualization is open to further investigation. It is very probable that there will be national and or regional variations in the dimensions which express the meaning of work.

The balance of evidence from the data show that work centrality (C1 and Factor 2) and the cosmic-religious meaning to work (C3 and Factor 1) are seen as essential to an understanding about work. As noted by England and Misumi (1987), important differences in MOW between Japan and the United States relate to differences in work centrality. It is suggested that to tap into work meaning, researchers should endeavour to keep the conceptual purity of Meaning of Work. Four of the items used in the MOW questionnaire are particularly promising in this regard: we live to work, work is one of the most important

activities in life, God gave us work and work is the lot of human beings. Other possible questions include: what is work, how did you come by your understanding of work, how did human beings come to regard work the way they do? Such questions would steer researchers away from use of measures which effectively rehearse previous findings in job involvement, work values and work attitudes research.

A final point must be made about the motivational implications of MOW. One would have expected that with such a strong work centrality and cosmic-religious MOW conceptualization work attitudes would be generally positive. There is, however, abundant anecdotal (Assimeng, 1981) and empirical (Kuada, 1994) evidence to suggest the generally poor work values, attitudes and behaviours in Ghana. (A qualification is, however, in order here: much of the sentiments associated with poor work behaviour relate more to the urbanized, waged, public sector worker, rather than the rural subsistence worker or workers generally, Assimeng, 1981). This underscores the idea that a person or group of people may hold a particular meaning frame which may be inconsistent with actual behaviour at work. Further research is therefore needed to examine how meaning as an abstraction coexists with, influences or gives rise to particular values, attitudes and behaviours at work.

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Acknoledgements