

Meaningful employment in the knowledge economy: An investigation into the experiences of employment performed by private sector, knowledge workers involved in 'handling' people, sales, services and/or marketing.

Hannah Green.

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Abstract

The debate about the meaningfulness of employment can be traced back to the founding fathers of Sociology. The classical theorists Karl Marx (Marx and Engels, 2011) and Max Weber (1930) argued that the labour process was an alienating experience devoid of meaning within an overly rational, disenchanted, capitalist society. Today, within a new 'knowledge-economy', these concerns need to be revisited. That is, what precisely is the meaning of employment in the contemporary context? It is an important area of study that requires further investigation. In this thesis I start to plug this gap by investigating the employment experiences of a relatively under researched group, namely private sector knowledge workers involved in the 'handling' of people, sales, services and marketing (Wright Mills, 1951). Specifically, it will focus on those who do not work in obviously socially beneficial or philanthropic roles. Using biographical narrative interviews, I explored the lived experiences of twenty-three knowledge workers. Interview transcripts were coded thematically and structurally. Three key findings emerged. Firstly, the intentional adoption and projection of neoliberal subjectivities by participants, in anticipation of future exchange value. Secondly affirmation, as opposed to self-actualization or passion, operated as a primary motivator in work. Thirdly meaningful work experiences were uncovered as being linked with biographical narratives of progress. The original contributions that this thesis offers uncovered that participants were alienated from their species essence and fellow beings in complex ways, demonstrating the continued relevance of the classical theorists' concepts. However, this thesis offers an original contribution to knowledge by uncovering a situation of alienation with agency. Participants were alienated but utilised their own agency in a variety of ways. They constructed innovative pathways to meaning that add new understanding to the field. Specifically, this research identified four new pathways. Firstly 1) through affirmation as opposed to self-actualization, secondly 2) through retrospectively narrating biographical career narratives, thirdly 3) through pursuing progress in a consumptive fashion and finally 4) through pursuing an aesthetics of life as opposed to an aesthetics of work. These original contributions provide greater depth and nuance to conceptualisations of meaningful work experiences among knowledge workers.

Declaration

Whilst registered as a candidate for the above degree, I have not been registered for any other research award. The results and conclusions embodied in this thesis are the work of the named candidate and have not been submitted for any other academic award. This research thesis is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) South Coast Doctoral Training Partnership.

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Chapter 1 - The Background to the Research

Introduction to the chapter

This thesis investigates what constitutes meaningful employment among knowledge workers employed in the private sector. At the outset it is noted that 'work' is used in this thesis to refer to paid labour, and not domestic labour, the latter was not the focus of this research. In this chapter the rationale for the study and overall purpose of the research is laid out. The theoretical framework underpinning the research is detailed and its relevance clearly stated. My research is then situated in relation to other key studies in the field on meaningful employment in the knowledge economy. The structure of each chapter of the thesis is detailed. Then the research questions are noted for clarity but they are revisited and fully explained in the chapter three, the literature review.

The particular perspective through which I am going to examine employment is through critical sociological accounts that claim work is increasingly alienating and devoid of meaning. The classical theorists Karl Marx (Marx and Engels, 2011) and Max Weber (1930) broadly argued that meaning is derived through a creative, self-determined labour process that allows individuals to engage in self-realisation. They argued that overly rational and efficient, profit orientated capitalist relations in society are not conducive to this form of labour.

Many contemporary accounts of employment detail alienating, overly rational, disenchanted situations of work (Graeber, 2018; Soffia, Wood and Burchell, 2022). Many contemporary theories of employment also specifically seek to overcome alienating, inauthentic, monotonous situations of work that are said to exist (Steger, 2016; Boltanski and Chiapello, 2018; Gómez-Salgado *et al.*, 2019; Rodríguez, Mesurado and Crespo, 2019). Both camps point to the continued relevance of Marx and Weber's critiques of employment. For this reason, the classical sociologists are looked to in this thesis. There is work to be done to identify a knowledge economy experience of alienation and/or disenchanted overly rational situations of work. This thesis attempts to uncover whether these classical concepts feature in the working lives of a particular group of knowledge workers and if they do feature, what this looks like. Importantly this thesis also attempts to uncover how meaning is or is not obtained from participants' engagement with work.

An extensive review of the research literature yielded four major pathways to obtaining meaning from employment. Namely meaning is documented as being obtained via 1) obviously socially valuable philanthropic work (Houlfort *et al.*, 2018; Gómez-Salgado *et al.*, 2019) 2) in micro level

organisational processes (Chalofsky and Krishna, 2009; Steger, Dik and Duffy, 2012) 3) in crafting and vocational relationships with and opportunities in work (Carroll, 2008, 2020; Sennett, 2009) and finally 4) in the emotionalization of work (Sandoval, 2018; Rao and Neely, 2019; Bygrave, 2020; Pagis, 2020). Various debates exist in relation to each of the pathways identified and there are a number of areas of disagreement and points of contention regarding what constitutes meaningful employment. My research seeks to contribute to these debates and bring new understanding to the field of the pathways to meaning a specific group of knowledge workers are able to forge in contemporary working conditions.

Rationale for the study

The rationale for this research is to contribute to the field new understanding of what constitutes meaningful employment in the private sector of the knowledge economy. In the United Kingdom full time employees spend on average 42 hours per week at work, one of the highest rates of working hours across Europe (TUC, 2019; Eurostat, 2023). These long hours call for some level of meaningful justification for the extended influence of work in people's lives. Politicians, employers, and sociologists alike should have a clear understanding of how employment can be meaningful and should advocate for positive working experiences. Yet despite these long working weeks many issues are cited in contemporary employment relations including burnout, dissatisfaction, job insecurity and alienation (Villadsen, 2016; Muhlbauer and Tziner, 2017; Graeber, 2018; Vallas and Christin, 2018; Soffia, Wood and Burchell, 2022). Further there is a lack of consensus within the research literature regarding what constitutes meaningful employment, discussed further in the later section of this chapter 'situating the research'. These issues sparked my interest in the research topic.

These concerns about the meaningfulness of work date all the way back to the classical theorists. I am combining insights from Karl Marx's alienation (Marx and Engels, 2011) and Max Weber's overly rational, disenchanting, 'iron cage' society (Weber, 1930) specifically. Both authors viewed the labour process as becoming increasingly alienating and unfulfilling under capitalist relations. Since the time of their writing the organisation of our Western economic context has shifted from being primarily structured around rational capitalism to being primarily structured around neoliberalism and the free market (Brown, 2015; Abbinnett, 2021). Yet the concerns about unmeaningful employment remain (Sennett, 1998; Soffia, Wood and Burchell, 2022). The classical concerns then need to be explored and updated within the modern context. Research is needed to identify a knowledge economy experience of alienation and disenchantment in work, and to determine the continued relevance of the classical theorists' ideas. Hence Marx's alienation and Weber's disenchanting,

rational society are explored next to lay the background for this research; some of their concepts have been critiqued for lacking appropriate consideration of human agency, these criticisms are also unpacked below. These criticisms also point to the need for an updating of their theories in the modern context. This research seeks to plug this gap by exploring the varied, complex and sometimes subtle agency participants possess and utilise in establishing meaningful relationships with work.

The classical theorists' concerns

The classical theorists Marx and Weber took issue with capitalist society in different ways yet converge in their shared criticism of an overly rational system that was detrimental to mysticism, the sublime and creative and fulfilling experiences of employment. Weber's (1930) text *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* is firstly explored and his disenchanted conceptualisation of society. Then Marx's theory of alienation is unpacked (Marx and Engels, 2011). The areas of similarity between theorists are noted.

Weber endeavoured to demonstrate how culture, once formed can have unintended effects and consequences. Protestantism (specifically Calvinism) – a cultural factor – unintentionally was an essential precondition to the emergence of a 'capitalist spirit' and thus the capitalist economy (Weber, 1930; Turner, 1993; Tamas and Nistor, 2016). Indeed the Calvinist philosophy of 'predestination' helped create a work ethic among individuals that favoured dispositions of hard work, self-discipline, methodological application and prolonged concentration (Baehr, 2001; Carroll, 2008; Ghosh, 2016).

Weber claimed eventually the religious justification behind the work ethic was dropped (Ghosh, 2016) leaving an 'iron cage' or 'shell as hard as steel' (Baehr, 2001) of bureaucracy and rationalization that capitalism rested upon (Weber, 1930; Turner, 1993). The intricate relationship between increasing secularization and monotheism in addition to capitalistic rationalization had brought about the disenchantment of reality, a removal of the most sublime values from the public sphere and a pluralization of subjective beliefs (Carroll, 2008). Weber (1930) argued the disenchantment of society changed human motivations for action from values, empathy, and emotions to rationally calculated decisions. The rationalizing social order is stultifying, petrifying culture and replacing it with instrumental reason (Weber, 1930). Humans are 'cogs' reasoning according to abstractions and calculations.

Indeed Weber's (1930) iron cage can be understood as a society organised by formal rationality to an irrational extent. Where the iron cage, humanly created, has begun to exert dominance over its

creators producing a situation of irrationality. Weber (1930) viewed modern society as particularly encouraging one of his four ideal types of social action namely 'instrumental-actions' (actions carried out for the purpose of achieving specific goals). He argued modernity had become obsessed with efficiency often at the expense of tradition and value-rational actions (a value-rational action might consider whether efficiency is indeed the best thing for society for example). The process of rationalization in society according to Weber (1978) can be summarised as constituting 1) increasing knowledge and intellectualization, particularly casual, mean-ends logic 2) impersonality and 3) enhanced control. His notion of impersonality refers to the objectification of human beings, reduced to numbers and specifically for the Protestant, 'tools' of God's providence. Clear links can be drawn here to Marx's commentary on capitalist society, specifically his concept of the cash nexus of human relationships, commodity fetishism and wider alienation from fellow beings.

The form of alienation Marx described as 'alienation from fellow beings' theorises that the relationships between workers increasingly mirror the relationships between commodities in capitalist society. His conceptualisation of 'commodity fetishism' (Marx, 1976 cited in Brook, 2009, p. 19) further explains this phenomenon, suggesting that the perceived exchange value of other people takes precedence in our understanding of them in capitalist society. When we enter into relationships we do so as the bearers of economic relations; interactions take the form of 'competitive market relationships in which we are either in an inferior or superior position' (Cox, 1998, cited in Brook, 2009, p. 20). Akin to Weber's impersonality and disenchanting society Marx suggested an inhuman logic of human relations reigns in capitalist society. Specifically, a cash nexus exists between man and man centred on 'naked self-interest [and] callous cash payment.. [that has] drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation. It has resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in place of the numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single, unconscionable freedom – Free Trade.' (Marx and Engels, 1848, p. chapter 1). The third Weberian tenet of an increasingly rationalized society; increasing control, entails increasing regulation of humans via bureaucratic administration, industrialism and legal formalism (Weber, 1978) and arguably also shares theoretical similarity with the 'icy water of egotistical calculation' as described by Marx and Engels (1848, p. chapter 1).

Whilst there are clear differences between Weber's (1930, 1978) and Marx's (Marx and Engels, 1844; 2011) theories a number of similarities in their conceptualisations of capitalist society are pertinent. Whilst Weber took issue with Marx's over reliance on economic determinism, arguably the authors converged in outcome having started from different perspectives. Indeed Weber's theory of disenchantment is arguably an expression of the same condition of alienation as described

by Marx (Hartley, 2012). For Marx the industrial model based on economic class inequalities was the cause, for Weber increasing rationalization and bureaucracy (Hartley, 2012). Both theorists explored the ways in which intensified specialisation and rationalization of production processes have resulted in unprecedented models of efficiency. Also agreeing that the new order of effectivity in the capitalist mode of production led to processes of dehumanization and alienation for its creators (Hartley, 2012; Marx and Engels, 1844; 2011; Weber, 1930).

Marx points to the varied pathways alienation can take (extending beyond fellow beings to include species essence, labour process and labour product alienation). The four expressions of alienation can be understood as a disturbance of relations an individual has with 1) themselves and with 2) the world (Jaeggi, 2014). 'Conversely, unalienated labour, as a specific way of appropriating the world through production, is a condition of being able to develop an appropriate relation to oneself, to the objective world, and to others' (Jaeggi, 2014, p. 11). Of particular relevance to this research is alienation from fellow beings (linked to Weber's impersonality, discussed above) and alienation from species essence, discussed below.

According to Marx, humans' life activity affirms their natural species essence when they produce 'objects that transcend mere subsistence needs' (Marx, 1844, p. 76 cited in Byron, 2016, p. 381). He argues humans possess a natural disposition to produce with spontaneous creativity, affirming their separation from animals and resulting in individual gratification (Byron, 2016). Problematically capitalism alienates individuals from their species essence, people now only produce to survive (through earning a subsistence). "Free, conscious activity," as one's characteristic form of labour, is non-existent; labour is coerced, and since it is performed in a perfunctory manner, it ceases to be "conscious activity" (Marx, 1844, p. 72–3, cited in Byron, 2016, p. 387). Weber's disenchantment clearly echoes and also describes the condition of alienation in a number of ways.

For Weber the loss of religious values and the creation of the overly rational iron cage dehumanized and depersonalized social relations, as expressed in his lament 'specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved' (Weber, 1930, p. 124). The Weberian, George Ritzer (2015) demonstrates that overly rational efficient systems will intentionally attempt to eliminate meanderings, fantastic and enchanting experiences – such as those involved in exploring and developing free and spontaneous creative activity. Indeed creative and magical experiences are unpredictable (Ritzer, 2015), he states '*control and the nonhuman technologies that produce control tend to be inimical to enchantment. As a general rule, fantasy, magic and dreams cannot be subjected to external controls; indeed, autonomy is much of what gives them their enchanted quality. Fantastic experiences can go anywhere, anything can happen*' (Ritzer, 2015, p. 175).

Whilst it is not the scope of this thesis to spend excessive time analysing the areas of convergence and divergence in the theories of two founding fathers of sociology, the shared critiques of capitalist society and employment hold continued relevance and hence have been employed in a number of contemporary studies (Bauman, 2000; Cartwright and Holmes, 2006; Brook, 2009; Schindler, 2017; Boltanski and Chiapello, 2018; Hughes and Southern, 2019). It is these specific factors of alienation, dehumanization and overly rational and disenchanting aspects of wider society and employment relations that this thesis is concerned with. I am using a very specific application of their theories, confining my analysis to considering these theoretical concepts in relation to employment. I am using these concepts because as mentioned their relevance to the contemporary context requires updating, particularly in light of research that cites instances of alienation and dehumanization in the modern context (Graeber, 2018; Soffia, Wood and Burchell, 2022). The classical concepts also remain relevant particularly in light of the continued problematization of a lack of meaningful employment. Marx and Weber argued almost a century ago that the labour process was increasingly devoid of creative and autonomous self-expression and hence devoid of self-actualization and fulfilment. Yet there continues to be a lack of consensus as to what constitutes meaningful employment and research continues to demonstrate that many contemporary knowledge workers experience their work as unfulfilling (Sennett, 1998; Brook, 2009; Graeber, 2018; Salmenniemi, Nurmi and Jaakola, 2020). This thesis seeks to contribute to this gap in the field and develop understanding on what constitutes meaningful experiences of work in the contemporary knowledge economy.

Criticisms of the classical theorists

Part of the rationale for this study is also to conduct a piece of research into meaningful employment that accounts for some of the criticisms of the classical theorists' ideas. Indeed, Marx's concept of alienation and aspects of Weber's Protestant Work Ethic (PWE) thesis have been critiqued for lacking appropriate consideration of the agency humans possess and for offering essentialist notions of the self (Honneth, 2006; Campbell, 2009; Jaeggi, 2014). My research accounts for these criticisms and contributes to the field by updating the classical concerns whilst also exploring the agentic capacities of participants employed in the knowledge economy. To do so, critical accounts of human agency and essentialist notions of the self are unpacked below and were used as part of the theoretical framework guiding the study.

Marx's notion of alienation has been subject to critique. Particularly for lacking appropriate consideration of human agency (Honneth, 2006; Jaeggi, 2014; Øversveen, 2022). Indeed, his theory

of alienation has been described as overly deterministic and it is suggested the agency individuals possess to resist exploitation has not been adequately accounted for. Furthermore the notion of alienation has been subject to critique for advancing essentialist notions of the self (Jaeggi, 2014). The latter critique is now addressed.

The concept of alienation has been critiqued for presupposing an essential human 'nature' or 'essence' that a worker is distanced from and hence also alienated from in their labour (Honneth foreword cited in Jaeggi, 2014). This notion of a 'true' identity perpetuates essentialist conceptions of the self. Jaeggi's (2014) thorough exposition of the concept of alienation however demonstrates how essentialist applications and understandings of the Marxian concept can be avoided.

She demonstrates that self-realisation (engaging with one's species essence in labour) is not an issue of uncovering 'uniqueness' or an essential self, rather it is an act of self-appropriation. It is an act where an individual appropriates their world through activity and at the same time appropriates themselves through realising one's capacity to act. Appropriation in this sense includes 'taking possession of, gaining power over, and finding meaning in something' (Jaeggi, 2014, p. 14). In line with Marx, Jaeggi (2014) argues an individual's capacities, goals and will are made objective through externalization in the world through labour. In this process 'the human being produces herself and her world in a single act... And, insofar as this process is successful, she makes both the objective world and herself her own. That is, she recognizes herself (her will and capacities) in her own activities and products and finds herself through this relation to her own products; she realizes herself, therefore, in her appropriative relation to the world as the product of her activities' (Jaeggi, 2014, p. 14). Importantly this self-appropriation is more than inner growth, inner development or the realisation of uniqueness. Individuals achieve self-realisation through externalization, by abandoning oneself to something external to themselves (their labour). In this sense, 'self-realization does not consist only in the development of one's capacities. Rather, mediated by these capacities and potentials, self-realization is a process of actively appropriating the world...self-realization is to be understood... as a way of being active. One does not realize oneself; one realizes oneself in what one does' (Jaeggi, 2014, p. 206). When unalienating labour is understood this way - as an appropriation of the self - it overcomes essentialist notions of a pre-determined essence that needs to be uncovered.

Jaeggi (2014) clarifies what appropriation of the self is not. Namely appropriation of the self is not the mere absence of heteronomy. Self-determination is essential for unalienated labour, the individual must be able to set their own ends, rather than having external forces determine what they do. However unalienated labour must also meet one other condition according to Jaeggi

(2014); that is, the capacity to act in labour must not be a means to an end, it must be a situation of acting for its own sake. Indeed the character of activities that one engages with must transcend instrumentalism and 'pass over into an action that leads to a goal that is not itself another means to an end but is pursued for its own sake' (Jaeggi, 2014, p. 208). This notion she demonstrates is advanced by Marx and his rejection of instrumentalism. Marx explicated alienation is the disturbance of relations one has with the world and importantly with the self. Marx 'denounces not only the instrumentalization of the worker by the owner of her labour power [heteronomy].. but also the instrumental relation to herself that the worker acquires through it' (Jaeggi, 2014, p. 13). where instrumentalization of labour activities – performed only as a means to an end - results in meaninglessness of work. Jaeggi's (2014) conceptualisation of self-appropriation and self-realisation in her reading of Marx's alienation thus arguably overcomes essentialist critiques levelled at the concept of alienation, demonstrating its continued relevance as a theoretical tool.

However, critiques of the lack of agency afforded to individuals in the concept of alienation remain. Alienation is critiqued as being an economically deterministic concept and as offering a model of heteronomy (Honneth, 2006; Jaeggi, 2014; Øversveen, 2022). Indeed some readings of Marx suggest all labour in capitalist society is necessarily alienating because the motivational structure of the capitalist economy is profit centred (Brixel, 2024). There is some debate as to whether alienation then is an objective or subjective phenomenon and whether an individual can be alienated within capitalist society if they do not feel discontented (Brixel, 2024). Some pertinent contemporary authors challenge overly deterministic conceptualisations of alienation, they explore individuals' abilities to resist capitalist, neoliberal relations in more subtle, passive ways, often unrecognized as acceptance. Berlant's (2011) 'lateral agency' and MacInnes' (1998) 'choice to forget' demonstrate how agency can operate in processes of 'maintenance and survival' as opposed to 'making' in contemporary society.

Berlant (2011, p. 95) describes the 'slow death' of neoliberalism as the 'condition of being worn out by the activity of reproducing life', specifically 'the physical wearing out of a population in a way that points to its deterioration as a defining condition of its experience and historical existence'.

However, she argues one of the ways in which people resist this slow death is to make sacrifices to remain in proximity to mirages of sovereignty. Berlant (2011) challenges the notion of sovereignty in contemporary society as an inadequate concept; defining it instead as a fantasy unrecognized as an objective state, she argues sovereignty is an aspirational concept relying on the ability of individuals to exercise affective control. We need to recognise that agency is enacted within ordinary spaces and does not always constitute a 'lifelong accumulation or self-fashioning' (Berlant, 2011, p. 99), rather our agency is subject to constraints and unconsciousness. Berlant (2011) demonstrates that in

engaging in lateral agency – that is agency without intention – individuals resist ‘the slow death’ in response to neoliberalism. Lateral agency challenges the assumption that subjectivity is always sovereign and instead constitutes ‘a mode of coasting consciousness within the ordinary that helps people survive the stress on their sensorium that comes from the difficulty of reproducing contemporary life’ (Berlant, 2011, p. 18). Indeed within the slow death of contemporary life ‘agency can be an activity of maintenance not making; fantasy without grandiosity; sentience without full intentionality’ (Berlant, 2011, p. 99).

This idea is echoed by MacInnes (1998, p.12) who deems the ‘choice to forget’ that we are condemned to ‘responsibility without power’ in modernity, a mechanism of agentic control. Indeed MacInnes (1998) argues that since Weber (1930) we have been condemned to responsibility without power, no longer able to ‘project our existential anxieties onto God’ (MacInnes, 1998 p. 12). According to contemporary reflexivity and identity theories we are allegedly the authors of our identities and destiny (Giddens, 1991; Lash, 1994; MacInnes, 1998). Yet we possess limited power to alter our lives (Skeggs, 2004). MacInnes (1998) argues a resource available to individuals is the ability *not* to think ahead to future goals and projects of the self. He argues individuals can instead choose to ‘forget’ that choices are always restricted and disappointing and that our control can never be complete.

Berlant's (2011) lateral agency echoes this assertion arguing that in adopting agency without intention individuals reject the fantasy of the ‘good life’ under capitalist relations. They reject the idea that they can have job security, upward mobility and interesting and meaningful work, wider lives, and relationships. They also reject the ‘sense that liberal-capitalist society will reliably provide opportunities for individuals to carve out relations of reciprocity that seem fair and that foster life as a project of adding up to something’ (Berlant, 2011, p. 3), settling instead for ‘a mode of coasting consciousness’ that operates as a system of resistance (Berlant, 2011, p. 18). These theoretical frameworks are employed in fully understanding and exploring situations of alienation, and agency in employment in the current research. Whilst both works clearly problematize the current socio-economic context they also demonstrate that alienation and agency are far from straightforward concepts and that there are more subtle, nuanced and passive ways that individuals are utilizing their own agentic abilities, however confined these may be. This study acknowledges, explores and accounts for the agency that participants possess. In this way this thesis also offers an important contribution to knowledge.

Criticisms of Marx's concept of alienation have been addressed. Weber's work is now looked to in the following section. It is argued that his conceptualisation of the spirit of capitalism more aptly accounts for individual agency.

Weber's agency and the intentional assertion of a work identity

An original contribution to knowledge is now offered in a unique application of Weber's theory to the contemporary situation and research findings. But first an exposition of his theory of agency is unpacked.

Campbell (2009) notes the difficulty in objectively defining a concept of agency in sociology. He attempts to bring greater clarity to the notion of personal agency by distinguishing between two types. Type one he defines as referring to 'an actors ability to initiate and maintain a program of action' whilst type two refers to 'an actors ability to act independently of the constraining power of social structure' (Campbell, 2009. p. 407).

According to Campbell (2009), Weber's PWE adequately accounts for type one agency; that power that individuals possess and utilize to realise their own goals and ambitions. Indeed the Calvinists' autonomous and agentic work ethic and behaviour is credited with playing a fundamental role in ushering in the economic model of capitalism that existed at the time of Weber's (1930) writing. Yet Campbell (2009) argues, according to Weber's (1930) PWE, individuals in capitalist society have very little type two agency. Their 'freedom to act is massively constrained by structural factors' (Campbell, 2009, p. 413) according to Weber's (1930) iron cage metaphor. Indeed Weber (1930, p. 123) asserts that whilst the 'Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so... the modern economic order... determine[s] the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism'. Clearly there is a strongly structural element to a Weberian understanding of society. However when considering the agency the PWE affords individuals, arguably greater consideration can be given to both type one and type two agency than Campbell (2009) suggests.

An alternative reading of the PWE relevant to the current research could suggest greater levels of intentionality behind human action, even whilst living under the 'iron cage'. It is suggested that for Weber (1930) the Protestants not knowing whether their salvation was secured, engaged in a certain form of identity assertion – one of the elect, destined for heaven. Their conduct in this sense can be considered in at least two ways, 1) as an antidote to potential anxiety and 2) as cynical. The reasons why are now unpacked. In the first instance, as an antidote to anxiety their frugal behaviour and dedication to hard work arguably calmed their psyche and any fears they might have in relation

to their afterlife journey. They might reassure themselves they were indeed destined for Heaven. In the second instance, cynically, such presentation might also reassure others of their Holiness. Consider, even for the individual who for arguments sake was indeed part of the elect predestined for Heaven, theologically their earthly actions would not have mattered. Predestination was considered an unchangeable concept – no amount of sin or ‘backsliding’ could forfeit one’s salvation according to Calvinism. It is feasible, if not likely, that many of the Protestants Weber wrote about ‘performed’ and asserted their elected identity in their hard work ethic (Weber, 1930). These meanings behind their vocational devotion are of paramount importance. The spirit of capitalism that exalts work as a moral attribute (Allan, 2017, p. 161) is argued to have led individuals with cynical and/or anxiety reducing motives to embody a particular type of work identity.

This reading of Weber's (1930) work provides a more thorough explanation of the agency he affords to individuals in capitalist society. Signified in this reading are both type one agency in bringing about the new spirit of capitalism and importantly type two agency to act at least partially independently of the constraining power, where the ‘duty’ of performing a certain type of working identity had self-serving reasons and was not solely the product of virtue and morality on the part of the Protestant. This Weberian reading also aligns with the contemporary situation presented in this research. Participants in the current study demonstrated a proclivity toward the adoption of neoliberal subjectivities. This entailed a commodified view of self and work, a focus on rationality, a normalisation of hard work and overwork, a tendency toward self-reliance and resilience and a heavy focus on exchange value (Skeggs, 2004). As fully unpacked in the findings and analysis chapter of this thesis this adoption of a neoliberal subjectivity was argued to be the product of both social formation and individual agency. It was a historically and socially formed subjectivity within a consumerist society geared toward self-branding in work and the marketisation of the self as a normal and necessary component of employment in the knowledge economy. At the same time, the adoption of a neoliberal subjectivity was also the product of more calculated conscious actions of agents. Participants demonstrated an awareness that they were at times intentionally engaging in overwork, rational behaviour, maximising efficiency and commodifying their labour relationship with their employers, namely adopting a neoliberal subjectivity.

Importantly whilst these behaviours were indeed characteristic of the neoliberal, performance orientated cultures they were situated within (Brown, 2015; Vallas and Christin, 2018) they did not appear to be solely the product of blind socialization or some type of false consciousness. Thematic and structural analyses of data revealed participants were actively involved in exchange value practices (Skeggs, 2004). They engaged in certain behaviours – that fit with the culture of the social contexts they occupied – but did so in more cynical ways in anticipation of future gain, for example,

promotions and pay rises. Hence whilst their behaviour aligned with the macro field of neoliberalism, and micro fields of businesses being run according to neoliberal principles, part of the reason for this was not due to participants being blindly socialized to align with the contexts they occupied. Exchange value analyses uncovered intentions behind actions that anticipated future gain and self-advancement.

The meanings behind the Weberian spirit of capitalism linked pre-destination with a workplace identity and state of composure. It is argued the Protestants performed an identity accordingly. Similarly, the spirit influencing participants in the current study culminated in the assertion of a neoliberal work-place identity. The consciousness and intentionality to this performance of identity and its potential links with an alienated sense of self – or not – are fully unpacked in the findings and analysis and discussions and conclusions chapters and a model of alienation with agency is offered. This application of Weber's theory that links the spirit of capitalism with the intentional assertion of a specific identity offers a new theoretical framework to the field. Through which other researchers and academics can understand the performance of identities in employment as possessing links to the ideologies of society – its spirit of capitalism (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2018) - at a given time whilst also constituting self-serving agentic means.

The key Marxian and Weberian concepts of alienation and an overly rational and disenchanting society relevant to this study have been unpacked. Criticisms of the classical theorists have been noted and critically analysed. These discussions point to the need for an updating of the classical theorists' ideas in the current knowledge economy, particularly an updating that actively explores the agency individuals possess in creating meaningful experiences with work. The model of capitalism that existed at the time of the Marx and Weber's writings was a rational one primarily structured around private ownership and profit. The economic context has shifted and is now structured around neoliberalism and the free market (Brown, 2015; Abbinnett, 2021). The ideology of neoliberalism is heavily individual centric, it prioritises individualism and entrepreneurialism. Its philosophy encourages everyone regardless of their socioeconomic background to focus on their own prosperity, it normalises competition between human beings (Brown, 2015). An application of the classical theorists in the modern economic context is paramount. The links Marx and Weber made between alienation, disenchantment and excessive rationalism in society, and meaningless experiences of employment are grounded in a rational model of capitalism. This thesis investigates the extent to which these links persist in our neoliberal model. The wider socio-economic context of neoliberal relations and changes in the nature of work are detailed next to contextualise the research. Then the debates surrounding meaningful employment in the contemporary context are highlighted to situate this study.

Situating the research

The overall purpose of this research is to establish the extent to which knowledge workers in contemporary employment obtain meaning from their work. Contemporary working conditions have been shifting towards a more knowledge centred organisation of work over the past several decades. This has resulted in largescale changes in the nature of work. Specifically, a move from workers taking an active role in producing and manipulating things to instead handling people, sales, services or marketing (Wright Mills, 1951; Inglis, 2005). Indeed, the nature of employment continues to adapt and change not least in response to increasing globalisation, evolving Information Technology (IT) and artificial intelligence, and political and economic factors. Theories of meaningful work must be continually reassessed and investigated in response to this changing landscape. This research plugs this relative gap by updating the current body of research in the field.

Chapter two (Defining the key terms and context) unpacks the notion of knowledge worker, conceptualised in this study as workers whose main resource and tool is knowledge. Knowledge workers manipulate, transmit and transform knowledge and ideas rather than goods, often through the use of IT systems (Field and Chan, 2018). Knowledge workers are often working in professional/associate professional or managerial roles, they utilise expert thinking and often possess high level skills and/or qualifications (Brinkley 2006, cited in Surawski, 2019, p. 106). The participants of this study were knowledge workers, in the private sector, who were salaried and working in the London and Greater London area. All were involved in 'handling' people, sales, services, or marketing. All worked in businesses or organizations that provided services for businesses e.g. corporate law firms. Participants were managers of varying descriptions, administrators, consultants, accountants working in businesses, and legal professionals working in litigation and corporate law. The research was conducted during COVID-19. As discussed in chapter four, the methodology, this presented accessibility barriers to participation. Snowball sampling became more difficult due to the online nature of interviews and 'zoom fatigue'. As a result, participation numbers were affected. Nonetheless twenty-three participants were still recruited for the study and in-depth biographical interviews conducted.

Three interrelated and interdependent historical changes are relevant to the shift in the nature of work in the past several decades, briefly noted here. Firstly, the shift broadly from manufacturing to knowledge work constituting the dominant form of employment in the UK in the post World War Two period (Office for National Statistics, 2022). Secondly the shift toward a new spirit or culture of capitalism post the 1970s (Sennett, 2006; Boltanski and Chiapello, 2018). Thirdly the emergence of neoliberalism as a dominant economic, social and cultural ideology emerging in the 1970s

(Abbinnett, 2021). The first shift and its relation to employment is unpacked fully in chapter two. The second two shifts are unpacked in chapter three, the literature review. Neoliberalism is defined here at the outset however to contextualise the study.

Objectively neoliberalism can be defined as an economic and political free market ideology that prioritises individual liberty and limited government and has 'connected human freedom to the actions of the rational, self-interested actor in the market place' (Stedman Jones, 2012, p. 2 cited in McGuigan, 2014). Succinctly defined by Stern and Siegelbaum (2019, p. 265) neoliberalism denotes 'a global state of affairs, including both hegemonic ideologies and infinite micro-level processes associated with certain political economic tendencies that first emerged in the 1970s... including... financialization, the weakening of organized labour movements, and the promotion of entrepreneurialism'. Characterised by a fetishization of the market as central to social organisation, neoliberalism claims humans are rational agents who act strategically (Stern and Siegelbaum, 2019). Hence the invisible hand of the market should be allowed to operate as an ethic and governmental intervention in the economy should be minimal (Bal and Dóci, 2018). Sociologically neoliberalism has been defined as an order of normative reason that has become a governing rationality, whereby all fields of life including non-monetary ones are economized according to market metrics (Brown, 2015). Neoliberal rationality disseminates the model of the market to all domains and activities and configures human beings exhaustively as market actors. Individuals are interpellated into subject positions as human capital who must attend to their own 'value' in different spheres e.g. relationships, education, health (Brown, 2015).

Within the modern neoliberal context, it is important to consider how knowledge workers establish meaning in their employment. Neoliberalism and its privileging of liberty interlinks with the 'new spirit of capitalism' (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2018) that also claims to 'liberate' individuals from rigid bureaucracy, monotony and the absence of creative expression in work (Gill and Pratt, 2008; Ekman, 2014). The new spirit prioritises greater freedom, flexibility and project work in the knowledge economy and promises more meaningful experiences of employment (Powell and Snellman, 2004; Boltanski and Chiapello, 2018). There is great debate within the literature with regards to how 'liberating' new working relations are. Some suggest that success within the new spirit relies on a very specific type of individual and skill set (Sennett, 2006). Others problematize the neoliberal backdrop and contemporary nature of work for its increasing individualization of social problems. Greater responsibility is placed on individuals to proactively forge meaningful and successful careers in spite of structural factors that have influenced their biographies (Skeggs, 2004). Indeed the philosophy of individualism is a core component of the wider neoliberal socio-economic context and is also increasingly a core philosophy underpinning employment relations (Gunz *et al.*, 2000; Hall,

2004; Inkson *et al.*, 2010). This thesis contributes to the debate on the meaningfulness of work in the new allegedly 'liberating' spirit of capitalism. It does so by investigating meaning making mechanisms from the perspective of a range of knowledge workers employed in businesses or organisations working for businesses, this is an under researched area. The dominant areas of investigation in the current literature are the creative and finance sectors (Gill and Pratt, 2008; Ekman, 2014; Lupu and Empson, 2015). The former has been of particular interest due to the significant prevalence of gig and contract work in this sector. This study contributes research to the field from the perspective of salaried private sector employees.

Part of this thesis' rationale was to explore the extent to which the major documented pathways to obtaining meaning from employment as documented by the literature are in operation for the participants in this study. An extensive review of the research field yielded four key themes or pathways to obtaining meaning from work. Namely meaning is documented as being obtained via 1) obviously socially valuable philanthropic work (Houlfort *et al.*, 2018; Gómez-Salgado *et al.*, 2019) 2) in micro level organisational processes (Chalofsky and Krishna, 2009; Steger, Dik and Duffy, 2012) 3) in crafting and vocational relationships with and opportunities in work (Carroll, 2008, 2020; Sennett, 2009) and finally 4) in the emotionalization of work (Sandoval, 2018; Rao and Neely, 2019; Bygrave, 2020; Pagis, 2020). This research does not claim to offer a perfect knowledge on every meaning making mechanism documented in the literature, but the four avenues stated above provide a robust, comprehensive analysis of the current state of the field. Pertinently, the research investigated whether new pathways to establishing meaningful encounters with and understandings of work were in operation. A number of new pathways were indeed uncovered. They are situated and analysed in line with existing theories and their convergence and divergence explored in chapters four (findings and analysis) and five (discussions and conclusions).

Chapter three, the literature review of the field informed and refined the research focus. Work that is deemed to have an explicit positive social focus e.g. firefighters, teachers, health workers, animal care and public sector employees has been heavily studied (Houlfort *et al.*, 2018; Gómez-Salgado *et al.*, 2019; Rodríguez, Mesurado and Crespo, 2019). Strong links have been made between engaging in socially valuable, philanthropic employment and deriving a sense of meaning. In line with the reality many employees face this research intentionally sought to investigate employment settings that did not possess an obvious philanthropic, social benefit to society (the first pathway to meaning identified in the research literature). In doing so, this study addresses an under researched area of the field. Indeed, a relative gap in the research field is depth of understanding regarding how individuals in highly competitive, profit centred roles that lack an obvious philanthropic focus obtain meaning from their work. The remaining three pathways to establishing meaningful encounters with

work were considered to varying degrees in the study, namely 2) micro level organisational processes 3) crafting and vocational relationships with work and 4) the emotionalization of work.

A variety of 'on the ground' micro level, organizational and interpersonal factors have been associated with meaningful employment. These include task variety, opportunities to use and develop skills and talents, opportunities to cultivate authenticity, self-efficacy and belongingness, task significance (the influence the task has on the organisation, peers or the individual worker), autonomy, mentoring relationships, ethical behaviour among leaders, clear organisational vision and so on (Hackman and Oldham, 1975; Rosso, Dekas and Wrzesniewski, 2010; Steger, Dik and Duffy, 2012; Steger, 2016). Some of these features of meaningful work are touched upon at points in the innovative new pathways to meaningful work offered by this research. Yet, they are not the focus of this research. Indeed, the micro level organisational and interpersonal features of meaningful employment largely stem from organizational and management fields of study and are less relevant to a thesis on the sociological constitution of work and related social issues such as vocational and crafting identities and the broader emotionalization of work within contemporary society.

Two wider philosophies of employment were uncovered by the literature as pathways to meaningful employment. The first being through vocational and/or crafting relationships and understandings of employment. Weber's solution to what he saw as the debilitating division of labour and increasingly rationalized society was the process of imbuing employment positions with meaning through passionate devotion, developing a sense of vocation towards them (Burawoy, 2016; Weber, 1946; Weber, 1922). Akin to the Protestant prototype, establishing blinkered focus and passionate engagement with work, a state of commitment without guarantees (Burawoy, 2016). Similarly the notion of craft in a philosophical sense associates long term dedication and commitment to skill development in work, with the establishment of a sense of meaning (Sennett, 2009).

In an attempt to update the Weberian vocational work ethic, Bauman (2005) argued that work has lost its privileged position as an axis around which individuals fixed their identity. Individuals engagement with work no longer operates out of sense of duty, instead coming first and foremost under aesthetic scrutiny, whereby 'its value is judged by its capacity to generate pleasurable experience' (Bauman, 2005, p. 33). Fundamentally an 'aesthetics of consumption now rules where the work ethic once ruled' (Bauman, 2005, p. 32). Cohering with and extending this assertion is the final major pathway to meaning creation identified in the literature, namely the emotionalization of work. The cultural ideology of establishing 'passion', 'love' and emotional, self-actualizing relationships with work operates as a dominant narrative for knowledge work in contemporary society. Whilst this cultural schema is an unrealistic ideal for many knowledge workers, it functions

as a gold standard that individuals in contemporary society are encouraged to aspire too. Through media, self-help books, organisational management and workplace 'wellbeing' initiatives a prevailing emotionalization of work exists in contemporary culture in the West (Tokumitsu, 2021). When appropriately achieved individuals are said to be able to engage in a 'self-work utopia' relationship with employment, experiencing self-fulfilment and actualization in and through work (Pagis, 2020).

Problematically a false binary is set up in relation to this contemporary ideology, with some condemning the emotionalization of work as insidious exploitation (Gill and Pratt, 2008; Cruz, 2016; Neely, 2020) and others exalting it as a motivational, meaningful path to self-actualization (Sandoval, 2018; Bygrave, 2020). Yet, as fully fleshed out in the literature review, there are a range of complex employee experiences that do not constitute all-encompassing exploitation nor complete self-actualization. This thesis argues that the current literature often fails to adequately consider the individual's constitution and agency in engaging with a variety of working environments. A small collection of studies develop greater depth and nuance to the situation of meaningful employment in competitive, conflict orientated, sometimes exploitative environments (Ho, 2009; Ekman, 2014; Pérez-Zapata *et al.*, 2016) demonstrating how employees themselves can engage in their own self-exploitation (working long hours, meeting unreasonable demands from employers) with their own interests in mind, and also enact their own demands on employers. These studies help to overcome the misleading 'victim employee villain employer' duality often propagated in the literature (Ekman, 2014), acknowledging that whilst the power balance between employees and employers is not equal, employees still possess and operate their own agency. This study also plugs that gap. Indeed, chapters four (findings and analysis) and five (discussion and conclusions) of this research offer original contributions to knowledge in the explanation of innovative pathways to meaning creation that participants journeyed on. Pathways were uncovered that demonstrated affirmation as opposed to actualization, work warrior identities and more materialistic, short term, success orientated conceptualisations of the self can provide meaningful encounters with work.

Structure of the thesis

This chapter has clearly laid out the rationale for this study and its importance in contributing to the field. The theoretical framework guiding the research has also been established. Chapter two, 'Defining key concepts and core terms' provides a thorough explanation of the knowledge economy and the knowledge worker, the research site of this study. The core definitions used in this thesis are established in chapter two. Chapter three, the 'Literature review' unpacks the relevant debates surrounding meaningful employment in the knowledge economy. It explores the gaps in the field

and the areas for further investigation. Chapter four, the 'Methodology' details the methodological approach and methods used to gather my data and establishes their relevance and appropriacy. Chapter five, 'Findings and analysis' unpacks the three major themes arising from the research namely 1) neoliberal subjectivities, 2) affirmation, motivation and meaning and 3) progress biographies. The links between themes are established. Chapter six, 'Discussions and conclusions' clearly answers the research questions (detailed next) and summarises the original contributions to knowledge. Chapter six also offers some brief recommendations for future research.

The research questions

This study's four research questions informed by a review of the literature are listed below. The literature review chapter fully fleshes out how these questions were arrived at and the relative gaps in the field that they intend to plug.

Research questions:

1. Did a sense of craft and/or vocation feature in participants' narratives?
2. Did participants exhibit a sense of passion, love or a 'self-work utopia' in their career narratives?
3. Did individuals pursue self-fulfilment and/or personal interests in their work?
4. To what extent did respondents express a neoliberal subjectivity in their approach to work?

Conclusions

The overall purpose of this research is to establish the extent to which knowledge workers in contemporary employment obtain meaning from their work. A specific group of salaried, private sector knowledge workers constituted the participant population. Since as early as the classical theorists Marx (Marx and Engels, 1844; 2011) and Weber (1930), the labour process has been critiqued as becoming increasingly alienating and devoid of meaning under capitalist relations. Almost a century later there continues to be a lack of consensus as to what constitutes meaningful employment and research continues to demonstrate that many contemporary knowledge workers experience their work as unfulfilling (Sennett, 1998; Brook, 2009; Graeber, 2018; Salmenniemi, Nurmi and Jaakola, 2020). Part of the rationale for this thesis then is to provide an account that updates the classical concerns in the modern neoliberal, knowledge economy context. The specific theoretical concepts that this thesis is concerned with are alienation, dehumanization and overly

rational and disenchanting aspects of wider society and employment relations (Weber, 1930, 1978; Marx and Engels, 2011). This thesis plugs a gap in the field then by investigating the contemporary relevance of these classical concepts in the contemporary context which has seen a drastic shift in the nature of work from workers taking an active role in producing and manipulating things to instead handling people, sales, services or marketing (Wright Mills, 1951; Inglis, 2005). This thesis also explores the classical concepts whilst accounting for some of the criticisms levelled at them, thus developing the depth of understanding of their continued relevance.

Part of the rationale for this thesis is also to develop understanding on what can and does constitute meaningful experiences of work in the contemporary knowledge economy given the continued problematization of a lack of meaningful employment (Graeber, 2018; Soffia, Wood and Burchell, 2022). This thesis contributes to a number of debates in the literature, detailed in the situation of the research section above. Pertinently this thesis explores the extent to which the new spirit of capitalism constitutes 'liberating' working relations for employees and the extent to which these relations are experienced as meaningful. Importantly this research also explores the extent to which the major documented pathways to meaning identified in the research literature are in operation for the participants in the current study. This is an important contribution for a number of reasons. The traditional pathways (through craft, vocational and linear long-term relationships with work) and more contemporary cultural schemas (through the emotionalization of employment) have both been criticised for failing to adequately consider the individuals constitution and their agency (as fully unpacked in chapter three, the literature review). A few key studies (Ho, 2009; Ekman, 2014; Yip, Schweitzer and Nurmohamed, 2017) have made important developments in this area and attempt to overcome the tendency within the literature to view employees as 'victims' (Ekman, 2014). My research contributes to this body and brings new understanding to the field of the pathways to meaning individuals are able to forge in contemporary working conditions.

Chapter two clearly conceptualises a definition of the knowledge worker and the knowledge economy used throughout the remainder of the thesis. Then the areas of contention and gaps in the research literature are critically engaged with in chapter three, the literature review.

Chapter 2 - Defining the Key Terms and Context

Introduction

This short chapter provides a background to the key research terms and context. This chapter is included to clearly articulate the research population and research field for clarity for the reader. The complex definition of a knowledge worker and the defining features of the knowledge economy are laid out. Statistical information is detailed to contextualise the landscape of knowledge work in contemporary British society. The parameters of the knowledge economy are articulated and its convergence and divergence from the information economy and the new economy is noted.

The contextual historical background to the research is firstly made explicit. As briefly noted in chapter one, three interrelated historical periods are relevant to the current study on meaningful employment. This research is not a longitudinal nor historical study, it is concerned with the state of employment in the present, for a specific group of knowledge workers. Nonetheless a number of historical, economic and cultural shifts in recent decades have informed the present situation and hence are explored. The three interdependent movements or eras relevant to this research are firstly, a shift towards a knowledge economy (encompassing aspects of the new economy) constituting the dominant domain of employment in the UK circa post-World War two. Secondly a shift toward a new spirit (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2018) or culture (Sennett, 2006) of capitalism post the 1970s. Thirdly and finally the emergence of neoliberalism in the 1970s as the dominant economic model in the UK and the emergence of a neoliberal imagination as the dominant ideology in Western society (Abbinnett, 2021). These movements overlap and are interrelated in myriad ways. Yet each covers specific concepts and transitions relevant to contemporary meaningful employment that require unpacking. Hence the shift towards the knowledge economy is addressed in this chapter. Then the shift toward a new spirit or culture of capitalism and the wider neoliberal context are addressed in chapter three, the literature review.

The thesis is not concerned with changes in society and employment post-World War two per se, but rather the consequences of this history as relevant to contemporary workers' experiences. For clarity of terms the knowledge economy and knowledge workers are used exclusively to refer to the contemporary state of employment and the participants in this study in the chapters following the literature review. But it is acknowledged that when using the phrase 'knowledge economy' this includes and interlinks with many aspects of the new economy, and the new spirit of capitalism as fully fleshed out below. Equally neoliberalism constitutes a core contextual theme of this research.

Neoliberalism is referred to as the ideological, economic and political context participants resided in throughout this thesis but it is acknowledged that this term denotes a complexity of interlinked logics. Such as the sociological notion that neoliberalism has become an order of normative reasoning, a governing mode of rationality (Brown, 2015). Also the neoliberal imaginary defined as an ideology of aesthetic and performance related ideals that dominate society and employment relations, resulting in the commonly held belief that ‘There Is No Alternative’ economic model (Fisher, 2009; Abbinnett, 2021). In addition to these logics, ‘neoliberalism’ references practical understandings of laissez faire economics, personal branding, individualistic self-reliance and a promotion of entrepreneurialism (Abbinnett, 2021). These three conceptual models are signified to varying degrees when using the term neoliberalism throughout this thesis. A working conceptual definition of a knowledge worker is discussed next.

Defining knowledge workers and the knowledge economy

Knowledge work, knowledge workers and the knowledge economy are concepts that have been heavily researched and discussed over the past few decades. Yet definitions of these concepts abound due to their complexity and continually evolving nature (Pyöriä, 2005; Brinkley, 2008; Surawski, 2019). There is no standard agreed upon definition of the knowledge worker. Hence obtaining accurate statistics of the absolute number of knowledge workers globally and nationally is far from straightforward. A number of proxies have been proposed. The two most widely accepted statistical measures of knowledge work are ‘the occupational approach’ namely the number of individuals employed in the top three occupational groups (‘managers’, ‘professionals’, ‘technicians and associate professionals’) in the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO-08) (Brinkley, 2008; Office for National Statistics, 2022; Wietrak and Gifford, 2022; Eurostat, 2023). Or the number of those with a graduate – or equivalent – level of education (Brinkley, 2008). Using educational qualification as a proxy is problematic as it assumes that graduate level – or equivalent - educated individuals automatically go on to pursue knowledge work, when there is a lack of data to support this (Brinkley, 2008). The occupational approach also has limitations. Some of the categories contained within the top 3 ISCO groups do not necessarily translate into knowledge work. For example, ‘managers’ broadly denotes a range of positions. Managers in retail or the hospitality sector are unlikely to create value by using knowledge, their roles more prescriptive.

Yet in the absence of a clear and coherent definition and measure of knowledge work and knowledge workers, the occupational approach is a useful tool that allows for national and international statistics to be drawn and compared (Brinkley, 2008; Eurostat, 2023). Hence according to the occupational approach, in 2019 there were 77.9 million knowledge workers in the European

Union; the UK had the second highest proportion of knowledge workers, following Germany (Wietrak and Gifford, 2022; Eurostat, 2023). In England and Wales, the top three occupational groups made up 46% of the total population. The respective breakdown constituting 20.2% (5.6 million) of all residents (aged 16 years and over) being employed in Professional Occupations, 13.2% (3.7 million) employed in Associate Professional and Technical Occupations and 12.8% (3.5 million) employed as Managers, Directors and Senior Officials (Office for National Statistics, 2022).

A variety of trends in knowledge work and occupation in the UK have been documented over the past century. The primary sector of employment (primarily agriculture and mining) has decreased from constituting 14.3% of the workforce in 1920 to 1.3% in 2016, as has the secondary sector (primarily manufacturing and construction) from 34.2% in 1920 to 15.1% in 2016 (Office for National Statistics, 2019). Whilst the tertiary sector (services) of employment has seen significant increase from 51.5% in 1920 to 83.6% in 2016 (Office for National Statistics, 2019). The most drastic changes in sectoral composition have occurred in the past 50 years, with manufacturing declining significantly since the 1960s and the service industry increasing drastically over the same period (Office for National Statistics, 2019).

The top 3 occupational groups have provided the most new jobs in the UK over the past decade (Brinkley, 2008; Eurostat, 2023). According to the government commissioned Working Futures report (Wilson, Homenidou and Dickerson, 2006) the growth in knowledge work has been occurring for at least 25 years, where knowledge workers as classified by the top 3 occupational groups increased from 7.9 million in 1984 to 12.5 million in 2004 in the UK.

Statistics demonstrate the broad changes in the proportions of occupations in the United Kingdom and Europe over time. However qualitative definitions related to the nature of changes in occupation help illuminate the situation further and are discussed next.

Qualitative definitions of knowledge work

The term 'knowledge worker' was first used by Peter Drucker in 1952 in an article titled 'Management and the Professional Employee' and was later expanded on in his book 'Landmarks of Tomorrow' (Drucker, 1959; Surawski, 2019). Drucker's (1959) work documented how organisations had changed. At the time of his writing, large-scale organisations had largely demised and with them repetitive and simple work. The main resource of business organisations was now knowledge. Complex work requiring high levels of skill and collaboration was now the prevailing model of work and production. Individuals who could engage with such were now company 'assets' (Drucker, 1959; Sener and Bell, 2019). Drucker (1959, p. 66 cited in Sener and Bell, 2019) juxtaposes the institutions

of the past with what he saw as the new model of employment, the past model reduced ‘work to drill, skill to obedience, knowledge to training and cooperation to the assembly line’. Conversely he saw new working relations as constituting a ‘joint effort of men of high skill and knowledge exercising responsible decision making, individual judgment in a common effort and for a joint end’ (Drucker, 1959, p. 67 cited in Sener and Bell, 2019). Accordingly, the knowledge worker must manage themselves and their own production. The responsibility for work output rests with the individual knowledge worker, who must also be granted the autonomy to meet work demands.

Fundamentally knowledge workers think for a living, creating value by using, transforming, applying or understanding knowledge (Pyöriä, 2005; Sener and Bell, 2019; Wietrak and Gifford, 2022). Since Drucker’s conceptualisation, numerous further formations and definitions have been offered and developed. This is in part due to the fast growth and significant diversification of knowledge work since the late 1950s. The nature of and processes involved in knowledge work across different fields varies greatly, the role of a lawyer is very different from a doctor and different again from a data analyst (Wietrak and Gifford, 2022). Indeed knowledge work may constitute a myriad of different ways of interacting with ‘knowledge’ including but not limited to acquiring, analysing, interpreting, developing, generating, applying, disseminating, teaching or transferring knowledge (Wietrak and Gifford, 2022). In defining ‘knowledge work’ then a variety of qualitative approaches have been taken. Some authors view knowledge work as self-evident, some focus on the degree of collaboration involved in a job, others look at the degree of interpretation of knowledge or the complexity of work (Brinkley, 2008; Wietrak and Gifford, 2022).

Literature reviews by Surawski (2019) and Pyöriä (2005) address the complexity of the term and the absence of a clear definition. Surawski (2019) reviews the ‘overlaps and borders’ between synonym terms and concepts used in the literature. He demonstrates how the term ‘knowledge worker’ is consistently related to a number of features. Namely,

‘knowledge workers work mainly on symbols (representations), transforming them in cognitive processes, which is the main source of added value. To do that, they must command a large body of knowledge equivalent to university education, understood and internalised, grounded in experience and consequently updated. They perform complex tasks, focus on problem-solving, creating knowledge, distributing it, and applying to achieve results. They broadly use documents and ICT, and require high levels of autonomy’ (Surawski, 2019, p. 125).

This comprehensive definition points to some of the key factors associated with ‘knowledge workers’ that helps refine understanding of what constitutes knowledge work, specifically the transforming of symbols (knowledge/data) through a possessed and continually updated body of

knowledge (gained from education and/or experience). Pyöriä (2005) gives credence to this conceptualisation in his formulation of an ideal type of the contemporary knowledge worker. Having conducted a review of the literature Pyöriä (2005) argues knowledge workers do not constitute an empirically homogenous group and are best understood through an ideal type. The themes most often associated with knowledge work are education (knowledge workers require extensive formal education and continuous learning throughout careers), transferable skills, a low level of standardization in work (where work involves abstract knowledge and symbols) and where the medium of work constitutes symbols and/or people (Pyöriä, 2005, p. 124). These themes capture the essential attributes of the knowledge worker and form a usable ideal-type (Pyöriä, 2005). The characteristics and ideal type explicated by Pyöriä (2005) and Surawski (2019) are adopted as working definitions of what constitutes a knowledge worker in this thesis.

The transition from the primary medium of work constituting physical work and/or handling of people, to handling symbols, services and/or people has been in motion since at least as early 1950s. In 1951 C. Wright Mills seminal work, *White Collar: The American Middle Classes* defined a new ‘white collared’ middle class made up of managers, salaried professionals, salespeople, and various office workers among other things. What distinguished this new middle class according to Wright Mills were the new ways of working. Importantly there had been a shift from creating and manipulating things (products) to ‘handling’ people and symbols, to selling and servicing. As explicated by Wright Mills (1951, p. 65-66):

The major shifts in occupations since the Civil War have assumed this industrial trend: as a proportion of the labor force, fewer individuals manipulate things, more handle people, and symbols. This shift in needed skills is another way of describing the rise of the white-collar workers, for their characteristic skills involve the handling of paper and money and people. They are expert at dealing with people transiently and impersonally; they are masters of the commercial, professional, and technical relationship. The one thing they do not do is live by making things; rather, they live off the social machineries that organize and coordinate the people who do make things. White-collar people help turn what someone else has made into profit for still another; some of them are closer to the means of production, supervising the work of actual manufacture and recording what is done.

Wright Mills (1951) work is dated, but his assertions regarding the industrial shift are widely accepted. Much contemporary literature builds on and adapts his frameworks, accepting the central tenets of increased ‘handling’, domination of mental activity, working on symbols, transience and impersonality in work (Sennett, 1998; Inglis, 2005; Sener and Bell, 2019; Surawski, 2019; Neely, 2020). As laid out in the methodology chapter of this thesis the participants included in this study

were knowledge workers in the private sector engaged in 'handling' people, sales, services, and marketing.

Part of the drive behind the knowledge economy is the demand for greater value-adding services and products created by a society of increasingly more discerning and better educated individuals and organisations (Brinkley, 2008). The demand is filled through technological development and greater investment in knowledge and other 'intangible aspects such as research and development, software, design... human and organisational capital as the basis for competitive advantage' (Brinkley, 2008, p.5). As economies grounded in technology and innovation develop they become increasingly complex and difficult to coordinate (Pyöriä, 2005). The task of coordinating diverse steps grows as a continually evolving and diversifying economy generates more and more information flows, requiring 'more communicative effort... to manage organizational processes. In keeping with this trend, the demand for informational labour that is capable of handling, synthesizing and creating new knowledge has grown' (Pyöriä, 2005, p. 117). Hence key features of the nature of knowledge work are cooperation, flexibility and quick learning (Pyöriä, 2005), where traditional occupational norms are replaced with a requirement to meet an organization's needs and coordinate information flows that are ever shifting. Versatility in response to relatively unstructured working environments is commonly cited as a feature of knowledge work. Further, where the majority of work is concerned with processes, rather than products.

Context and drivers of the knowledge economy

As per the discussion above the knowledge economy can be seen as developing significant influence in the post-World War two period, with Wright Mills (1951) seminal 'White-Collar' thesis being published in the early 50s and Drucker's (1959) theorisation of the knowledge worker in the late 50s. Whilst it is difficult to pinpoint an exact date, for the purposes of contextual clarity when talking about the knowledge economy this thesis considers its initial advent to be post war, but becoming more fully fledged particularly post 1970s when a new spirit of capitalism focused on projects, creativity, autonomy and the transformation of knowledge is said to have become the aspiration of the workplace (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2018). Knowledge work arguably has also flourished as the dominant model of work partly due to the dominance of a neoliberal imaginary emerging in the 1970s that engineers consumer desires around aesthetics and future fulfilment (Abbinnett, 2021) and hence the consumption of knowledge-based services and products. Where consumer demand is generated and encouraged by a neoliberal economic model in the UK and Euro-Americas and is

increasingly geared towards the consumption of knowledge-based services. The knowledge sector then has responded to by providing those services.

Other key drivers behind the knowledge economy are now discussed. The emergence and increasing dominance of knowledge work and a knowledge economy has been a gradual process rather than revolutionary change, propelled forwards via a variety of factors (Stehr, 2015). Globalisation, new technological developments and market demands from consumers are considered three fundamental catalysts in the shift toward knowledge work (Brinkley, 2008). Indeed, the internationalisation of trade in knowledge work has accelerated access to knowledge flows and information, whilst also increasing competition to a global scale (Brinkley, 2008). Knowledge processes hence have advanced at an accelerated pace on a global stage. The internet and other technological advancements have also facilitated the sharing of information much more readily (Thrift, 2001). Technology in many instances also provides the basis for many knowledge centred processes.

Some of the defining features of the knowledge economy include a 'shift in investment priorities towards the creation and exploitation of knowledge' (Brinkley, 2008, p. 5), mass education up to and beyond graduate level and an expansion of business services, education services and high-tech services (Brinkley, 2008). Excluding the most highly standardized services and commodities, labour time and labour capacity are no longer the sole determining factors in company growth (Stehr, 2015). A key feature of the knowledge work is information, yet the knowledge economy is distinct from the information economy. Whilst information is an essential component of knowledge work, without actors with the capacity to transform information through their intellectual ability, the information remains passive and inconsequential (Wietrak and Gifford, 2022). Information workers then present and disseminate information that is already available in job roles such as customer service operators or trainers. Conversely knowledge workers use innovation to transform and apply information, and achieve competitive advantage or advancement of understanding in their field (Wietrak and Gifford, 2022).

Relevant also to discussions of the context of the knowledge economy is the new economy, it's formation and overlap with knowledge work. The terms 'new' and 'knowledge' economy are also frequently used interchangeably within the literature, whilst there is overlap, they constitute different developments in society. Thrift (2001) explores the period of the new economy, arguing it came to fruition and public attention in the 1980s and by the millennium had come to a halt as there were signs of a new 'serious economic downturn everywhere' (ibid, 2001, p. 429). By the time of his writing in 2001, he argues the rhetorical and financial push of the new economy had dissipated. The

new economy formally ended, unlike the knowledge economy which continues to grow in scope and proportion. Whilst officially many of the tenets of the new economy are now no longer standard economic, employment or political features, the effects of its era continue to be felt. The new economy constituted a new kind of market culture, one comprised of growth arising out of 'increasing influence of information and communications technology and the associated restructuring of economic activity. All kinds of other features can be, and usually are, associated with this core definition – for example, the growth of small high-tech firms, the increasing importance of mobile and highly skilled talent, the rise of entrepreneurship and the centrality of venture capital' (Thrift, 2001, p. 414). The importance of highly skilled workers and the boom in technological innovation intersects with the knowledge economy. The two economies can be seen as running parallel, interacting and informing one another for a number of years. In a similar vein to the knowledge economy a number of global factors facilitated the pervasiveness of the new economy, particularly in the UK. These included the growth in ICT development, the increasing demise of old, physical industry and bureaucracy and, a growth in a culture of entrepreneurship among business owners (Thrift, 2001).

Pertinent to contemporary society is the pervasive rhetoric and governing rationality that remains from the new economy (Thrift, 2001; Brown, 2015). The rhetorical fabrication of the new economy argues Thrift (2001), produced a range of regularities in the economic, political and social world. It seeped into business, government, and popular culture, stipulating how businesses should be structured and operate. It became a new kind of 'brand' which keeps the 'possible, possible' (Thrift, 2001, p. 429) in which technology, business and indeed the world can be constantly redefined and modified to suit businesses and stakeholder's interests. Post financial crash the legacy lives on in management and business practice and in cultural understandings of work. A romantic notion of passion for business lives on (Komisar, 2000, p. 93 cited in Thrift, 2001). A market culture reminiscent of Wright Mill's (1951) 'salesmen mentality' arguably also continues to operate; where, particularly in a neoliberal model of contemporary arrangement, all relationships and interactions are subject to a depersonalized market principles concerned with potential 'costs' and 'benefits' (Wright Mills, 1951; Brown, 2015).

Hence whilst knowledge workers are the focus of this thesis, when talking about knowledge work and the knowledge economy this research recognises the significant role and overlap of the new economy and the effects it has had on knowledge work. The new economy is considered interlinked with and influential on the knowledge economy. For clarity, when using the term 'knowledge work' hereafter in this thesis it is acknowledged that this encompasses and is informed by many aspects of the new economy, and also a new spirit and culture of capitalism. The changing nature of

employment and the pathways to meaning in employment are now critically discussed in the following chapter, the literature review. But first a summary of the key terms being carried forwards in this thesis is detailed below.

Summary of key definitions

This research is concerned with knowledge workers' experiences of employment in the knowledge economy. This thesis defines the knowledge economy broadly as the sphere of employment concerned with intellectual labour and skill as opposed to the use of physical labour and skill (Powell and Snellman, 2004, p. 199).

The literature equates various features and attributes with knowledge work, although not all are a compulsory prerequisite to being considered a knowledge worker. This thesis employs an ideal type of knowledge workers. Knowledge workers are understood in this thesis as individuals working in professional/associate professional or managerial roles, who often utilise expert thinking in the day to day and often possess high level skills and/or qualifications (Brinkley 2006, cited in Surawski, 2019, p. 106). Knowledge workers are defined in this thesis as individuals whose main resource and tool is knowledge. Both knowledge that they possess in explicit dimensions – e.g. the knowledge of how to code data, how to operate IT systems, knowledge of law or Excel formulas – and knowledge that they possess in tacit dimensions (Mládková, Zouharová and Nový, 2015). The latter referring to an individual's practical knowledge, the 'know how' they pick up through doing, the way in which to solve problems and engage with other professionals for example (Mládková, Zouharová and Nový, 2015). Knowledge workers are defined as those whose medium of work constitutes symbols and/or people (Pyöriä, 2005, p. 124) and whose work 'involves manipulating and transmitting ideas, rather than goods' (Field and Chan, 2018, p. 1). When referring to 'knowledge workers' and the participants in this study from here onwards it is this ideal type that is being referenced.

Chapter 3 - The Literature Review

Introduction

The overarching debate investigated in this thesis is the extent to which the labour process in the knowledge economy is meaningful or not. The classical theorists first argued that the labour process was alienating, increasingly devoid of meaning. Research is needed to examine whether the labour process is meaningful or alienating in the modern context, specifically the knowledge economy. The theoretical framework discussed the classical sociological theorists and criticisms of their work. This literature review chapter explores contemporary theorists who have taken elements of the classical ideas and updated them in various way (Bauman, 2000; Boltanski and Chiapello, 2018). This literature review also explores the work of current theorists who are responding to contemporary developments in issues of meaning and agency in employment in the knowledge economy (Sennett, 1998, 2009; Ekman, 2014; Graeber, 2018; Soffia, Wood and Burchell, 2022).

Contemporary developments in the workplace are argued by some to be antithetical to establishing meaningful relationships with work. The modern workplace is critiqued by some as corrosive to the formation of a sense of working identity, as devoid of any sense of long term development and as fractured, unstable and unfulfilling (Sennett, 1998, 2006; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Graeber, 2018).

At the outset the markers or pathways to meaningful work must be considered. A review of the research literature establishes four main bodies or pathways to meaningful work. Namely, 1) philanthropic, socially valuable employment that provides a sense of purpose or calling. 2) Micro level, practical and objective features of meaningful work, often associated with business and management bodies of literature and practice. The first two pathways to meaning are not the specific focus of this research, but they are discussed to contextualise the research in topic two of this literature review. 3) A sense of craftsmanship (and worker identity), drawing heavily on the Marxist notion of species essence (Marx and Engels, 2011) and a sense of vocation, as first theorised by Weber (1930) and updated by contemporary authors. This pathway to meaning is unpacked in topic three of this literature review. 4) The emotionalization of work - with particular emphasis on the passion paradigm - that draws on Bauman's (2000) work and is a response to contemporary developments in employment and society. This pathway to meaning is discussed in topic four of this literature review.

Before each pathway is discussed, meaning, identity formation and alienation within the wider context of the neoliberal, knowledge economy will be explored in topic one of this literature review. The 'New Spirit of Capitalism' promises to liberate individuals, devolving greater freedom, autonomy and flexibility in work (Powell and Snellman, 2004; Boltanski and Chiapello, 2018). However, success within the new spirit is also argued to rely on a very specific 'type' of individual and skill set (Sennett, 2009). Neoliberalism in contemporary society charges individuals with the task of personal branding, entrepreneurialism, a consultant prototype style of work and individualized understandings of the self, one's career and employment choices. These factors of the modern work situation will be explored. The extent to which this wider context facilitates or obscures meaningful experiences with work will be unpacked. This chapter debates whether work is an autonomous liberating act (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2018), driven by emotional pursuits and personal passions (Bygrave, 2020; De Palma, 2020; Pagis, 2020) as some would suggest. Or whether the very emotionalization and individualization of work constitutes a masking of exploitation and overwork (Sennett, 1998; Rao and Neely, 2019; Neely, 2020). Meaning and identity are intricately linked (Watson, 2008, 2009). Issues of identity formation and self-presentation are central to understanding how meaningful work is in the knowledge economy and are explored within the context of our neoliberal society and its influential philosophy of individualism, discussed next in topic one.

Literature review topic 1) The new spirit of capitalism – liberation or exploitation?

The nature of work has changed as discussed in chapter two, but there is a lack of consensus on how meaningful this is. This debate forms the basis of this first literature review topic. Seminal theorists Boltanski and Chiapello (2018) are first looked to, to explain the current situation. They theorise that the contemporary situation of employment is one that has morally justified itself through notions of liberation, freedom, autonomy and mobility in work and that this is inherently meaningful. Indeed, in line with the classical theorists' propositions, greater freedom, autonomy and creative expression in employment are indicators of meaningful work (Weber, 1922, 1930, 1946; Marx and Engels, 2011). Yet various others have critiqued the modern situation. They suggest that opportunities for creative expression are continually thwarted by insecure employment relations and an absence of long-term space in work. Sennett (2006) argues it is an ideal individual who can thrive in current employment (and its fast paced, often competitive formulation). Similarly, Protean and boundaryless career models (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Hall, 2004) and theories of individualization (Giddens, 1994; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), suggest meaning is readily attainable by proactive, driven and self-governing employees. Issues of the individual's constitution are central to these discussions.

The type of disposition, aptitude and personality of individuals required to succeed in the knowledge economy must be unpacked, this is important for understanding how meaning can be obtained, and for which type of individuals it is readily attainable for. The philosophy of individualism underpins our neoliberal economic and cultural employment context (Brown, 2015; Abbinnett, 2021). Indeed individuals are increasingly encouraged to engage with personal branding and entrepreneurialism in understanding and presenting the self (Zarkada, 2012; Vallas and Christin, 2018; Christiaens, 2020). This feature of the modern employment context must also be unpacked because arguably it has the potential to further alienate individuals from their species essence through depersonalization. Indeed, there are pre-determined acceptable subjectivities to 'brand' under in order to be successful, arguably this is antithetical to authentic and free creative expression in work. These issues then are discussed in this first topic. The new spirit of capitalism is firstly explained.

Weber (1930) postulated Protestantism – a cultural factor – was an essential precondition to the emergence of a 'capitalist spirit' and thus the capitalist economy (Tamas and Nistor, 2016; Turner, 1993). At the cultural, historical point of his writing Weber saw the spirit of capitalism as exalting 'work as a moral attribute' where the duty of work itself is valued, as is hard work (Weber, 1930; Allan, 2017, p. 161). How then has the spirit of capitalism shifted since Weber's critique? Boltanski and Chiapello's (2005) seminal work on the New Spirit of Capitalism (NSC) provides a coherent framework for explaining contemporary employment arrangements. They view a spirit of capitalism as underpinning each employment era, defining the spirit as 'the ideology that justifies people's commitment to capitalism, and which renders this commitment attractive' (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005, p. 2). The authors detail the hegemonic nature of capitalism (Gramsci, 1985). They suggest capitalism possesses an ability to survive by endogenizing some of its criticisms in processes that are saturated with different power relations. Further that by incorporating elements of critique levelled against it, the spirit of capitalism acquires greater justification for itself and moral foundations it would otherwise lack (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005; Fligstein, 2006; Gadinger, 2016). Boltanski and Thevenot (1991) theorise what they call 'orders of worth' or 'cites' to describe justificatory systems that seek to rationalize social inequalities that exist. They are comparable to discourses, rationalities or logics (Giulianotti and Langseth, 2016). Different 'cites' or justificatory systems have underpinned each era or 'spirit' of capitalism (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2018). Boltanski and Chiapello (2018) argue, as detailed by Weber (1905; 1930) an initial spirit constituted a domestic form of capitalism underpinned by religious foundations. A second spirit was in operation during the Fordist period ≈1940s-1970s (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2018). The second spirit's ideology that attempted to justify and normalise a commitment to capitalism was based on notions of fulfilling material needs, long term planning and career progression (Sennett, 1998; Boltanski and Chiapello, 2018). In *The New*

Spirit of Capitalism Boltanski and Chiapello (2018) explicate how a new justificatory system, a third spirit that they term a 'projects orientated cite' underpins capitalism and employment within the new knowledge economy.

Complaints levelled at work prior to the advent of the knowledge economy centred on the instrumental, imprisoning and alienating aspects of work, where employees longed for 'creativity, autonomy and self-realization' (Ekman, 2015, p. 595; Marx and Engels, 1844; 2011). In response to this 'artistic critique' (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2018) capitalism altered its spirit and re-orientated work to become more interesting, meaningful and fulfilling by making it 'more team based, democratic and cooperative' and more structured around project work (Fligstein, 2006, p. 585). Indeed, the Weberian-Marxist 'artistic critique' proffered that the model of capitalism centred around the Fordist firm was disenchanting, inauthentic and unmeaningful to employees. In response to this critique the new spirit of capitalism emphasises networking, mobility, autonomy, flexibility and availability (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2018; Castells, 2010). Its justificatory logic suggests that new economic forms of employment are more democratic, fulfilling and result in greater employee satisfaction (Fligstein, 2006). Where knowledge work in the knowledge economy provides opportunities for passionate engagement and self-expression at work (Gill and Pratt, 2008). New autonomies allow workers to assert themselves, realise their interests and harness their creative and entrepreneurial abilities (Gill and Pratt, 2008). The liberated work force allows individuals to focus on – and in turn their employers to capitalise on – their own specialised knowledge (Powell and Snellman, 2004).

However contemporary authors critique the alleged meaningfulness of the new spirit of capitalism in a variety of ways. It has been argued a corollary to the knowledge economy is an intensification of work (Gill and Pratt, 2008; Cruz, 2016; Muhlbauer and Tziner, 2017). Where technological innovation, greater insecurities generated by a competitive global economy, and new institutional logics that normalize overwork are continually increasing working hour demands and extending working hours to places and times previously protected (Moen *et al.*, 2013; Muhlbauer and Tziner, 2017). Indeed Moen *et al.* (2013) explicate bureaucratic rigidity once protected out of hours family and social time, within the new 24 hour economy work is no longer bound to specific times and environments. Rather professionals now operate in an atmosphere of uncertainty and anxiety. Concerns over job security (whether perceived or real) and productivity expectations result in employees self-managing and investing more time in their jobs than ever before (Moen *et al.*, 2013). Also contributing to work intensification, the authors claim is a 'career mystique mismatch' whereby jobs are still arranged as if employees possess no obligations outside of their employment, despite

the traditional model of the worker being supported by an (often female) homemaker/child carer being largely outdated.

Moen et al. (2013) delineate the forms work intensification takes. The first being an intensification in the effort individuals put into their roles. The second termed 'work extensification' refers to the 'overflowing' of work whereby mounting workloads, fast paced, oppressive demands and extensive working hours are the norm. The third form work intensification takes is a growing boundarylessness to work, where work increasingly encroaches on personal time. Problematically engagement with work activities at typically 'non-work' times as often necessitated by the global 24-hour economy are not temporally recuperated in traditional hours (Moen *et al.*, 2013). Rather the additional expectations are surmounted upon a generic five-day week.

Other critiques of the alleged meaningfulness of work and 'liberation' of employees in the contemporary knowledge economy focus on the nature of work itself. A popular theory that has gained traction in recent years is David Graeber's (2018) 'bullshit jobs theory'. It is argued 'bullshit jobs' are an exemplar of capitalism absorbing outside activity into its own domain as a means to survive (Graeber, 2018; Hughes and Southern, 2019). Whereby the creation of largely pointless, 'bullshit' jobs in contemporary society, keeps a host of otherwise unemployed individuals dependent on waged labour and as able consumers. Graeber (2018, p. 2) defines a 'Bullshit Job' as:

'a form of paid employment that is so completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify its existence even though, as part of the conditions of employment, the employee feels obliged to pretend that this is not the case.'

The bullshit job theory (BJT) rests on two premises, one that labourers dislike their work and/or experience no meaning or pleasure in it. The second premise posits that up to half of all jobs are 'pointless', possess no social value and could be extinguished without societal consequence (Graeber, 2018). These bullshit roles are 'seen as utterly pointless by those who perform them' and importantly this assessment is an accurate appraisal of the job's lack of social value to society (Graeber, 2018, p. 2). Graeber (2018) argues bullshit jobs are frequently found in administration, marketing and finance among other fields; these occupations are explored in this research. He also argues these useless jobs have been increasing in number over time and constitute spiritual violence to the soul. These claims are directly counter to the pledges of the new spirit of capitalism that promises more fulfilling, creative labour and self-expression and meaning at work (Powell and Snellman, 2004; Fligstein, 2006; Boltanski and Chiapello, 2018) highlighting the need for further research in this area.

However, Thompson and Pitts (2018) critique Graeber's lack of evidence to support his claims, and his misrepresentation of polls that ask loaded questions. They argue he ignores a wealth of data that suggests people do consider their work meaningful. They concede that empty labour (namely time appropriation at work in response to boredom/lack of real work to be engaging in (Paulsen, 2015; Graeber, 2018)) is a reality for many. But there exists a complex mixture of 'positive attachments to work and work identity' (Findlay and Thompson, 2017, p. 132-133).

The main criticism levelled by Thompson and Pitts (2018) is the lack of wider analysis in the BJT. There are many aspects of work that might comprise 'bullshit'; seemingly pointless tasks including endless meetings, form filling and so on. However, this does not make the entirety of the job pointless. Further neglected in the BJT analysis is the interconnection between types of jobs. If some roles are 'bullshit' the ways in which they support 'non bullshit' roles needs exploration. It is feasible that Graeber's (2018) 'box tickers' - for example administrative roles - provide pivotal work that allows others within an organisation to engage in other things (Thompson and Pitts, 2018).

Soffia, Wood and Burchell (2022) tested the propositions of Graeber's (2018) BSJ theory by analysing responses to the 2005–2015 European Working Conditions Surveys (EWCS). They argue the empirical data does not support the BSJ theory and that the proportion of workers who view their work as meaningless is declining. Nonetheless a large number of Europeans still do not feel their work is useful nor meaningful, and hence Graeber (2018) has uncovered an important social problem (Soffia, Wood and Burchell, 2022). However they argue the BSJ theory has failed to appropriately assess the situation, a state of alienation better describes what is happening for those who do not experience meaning in their employment (Soffia, Wood and Burchell, 2022). Graeber's 'spiritual violence' is grounded in the assertion that employees do not possess power and agency to act on the world in processes of self-realisation, they are subject to 'another person's power' (Graeber, 2018, p. 102) when they are engaging in work that they perceive to be pointless. Similarly argues Soffia, Wood and Burchell (2022, p. 6)

'Marx argued that labour under capitalism is inherently alienating as it blocks individuals' essential need for self-realisation. However, for Marx this was not the result of individuals being engaged in activity that was of no social value but rather because capitalist social relations frustrate the free development of human abilities in spontaneous activity. The alienation of labour then focuses our attention upon the social relations under which work takes place, generally... and the process of control that exists over work relations, specifically.'

They argue a better explanation of the social situation of perceived job 'uselessness' is the existence of social working relations that frustration processes of self-realisation and self-realisation through

externalisation. That is, people are able to self-actualize by demonstrating skills and abilities in work to others who can acknowledge and affirm them. When employment does not provide individuals with opportunities to 'use and develop their skills, abilities and capacities, or [when] their abilities are denied by others in the workplace' this might result in a sense of meaninglessness and reduced wellbeing, or 'spiritual violence' in work (Soffia, Wood and Burchell, 2022, p. 6). Counter to the BSJ theory, they highlight the importance of social working relations particularly the 'degree to which they constrain the ability of workers to affirm their sense of self through the development and recognition of skills and abilities' (ibid, p. 6) is strongly correlated with meaning at work. Where these features are absent in workplace relations, employees are more likely to be alienated from their work. Other important factors include the formation and implementation of one's own ideas and adequate time and space to do tasks well (Soffia, Wood and Burchell, 2022), these findings are also consistent with Marx's theory of alienation (Marx and Engels, 2011).

Soffia, Wood and Burchell's (2022) critique clearly demonstrates that promises of meaningful, fulfilling and creative work in the new spirit of capitalism (Powell and Snellman, 2004; Boltanski and Chiapello, 2018) will depend in part on social working relations within occupations and organisations at specific micro levels. Marx and Engels (2011) argued alienation and meaningful encounters with work will also depend on capitalist working relations at a broader level, specifically how individuals relate to each other and to society (Soffia, Wood and Burchell, 2022). Both micro and macro levels are important in considering alienation in employment (Marx and Engels, 2011). The broader macro levels are explored further in the latter part of this literature review topic when discussing cultural shifts towards personal branding and entrepreneurialism in work.

Many others have also critiqued social working relations in the contemporary knowledge economy arguing that a lack of space for 'long term' skill, ability and identity development in particular is antithetical to meaningful experiences of work. Indeed Sennett's (2006) analysis of the new culture of capitalism also offers a counter narrative to the promises of more meaningful, fulfilling and creative work in the new spirit of capitalism (Powell and Snellman, 2004; Boltanski and Chiapello, 2018). Sennett (2006) labels the new culture of capitalism (writing in the early 2000s) as unstable and fragmentary. He argues it is an 'ideal' man or woman that can survive and thrive under new conditions. This ideal individual must be orientated 'to the short term, focused on potential ability, [and] willing to abandon past experience' (Sennett, 2006, p. 5). Indeed, the contemporary ideal worker has to overcome three challenges, 1) a new meritocratic cultural notion of talent that rejects craftsmanship, 2) a discarding of the importance of experience and lastly 3) a lack of space for 'long-term' projects and personal development in new institutions.

Skills and experience have diminished in importance in the workplace, no longer representing a durable possession according to Sennett (2006). Meritocracy instead celebrates 'potential ability' a framework embodied in the prototype of the consultant. Consultants move 'from scene to scene, problem to problem, team to team' (Sennett, 2006, p. 121). There is talent in the style of work required in the new culture of capitalism, 'it is the ability to think prospectively about what might be done by breaking context and reference—at its best, a work of imagination. At its worst, though, this talent search cuts reference to experience and the chains of circumstance, eschews sense impressions, divides analysing from believing, ignores the glue of emotional attachment, penalizes digging deep—a state of living in pure process' (Sennett, 2006, p. 121-122). The problem with the increasing focus on potential ability is that judgments are subjective and hard to define. Further that the ideal individual full of potential ability must possess the capacity to surrender any sense of established reality, grounded in their skills or experience. Rather as experience increases it loses worth according to Sennett (2006), whilst increasing globalisation allows companies to buy skills abroad at a cheaper price than retraining staff. If there are necessary skills in the new culture of capitalism, they are the ability to cooperate with others and adapt quickly to new projects and problems to solve.

The new spirit or culture of capitalism then, argues Sennett (2006) has done the opposite of liberating us. Instead the personality required to succeed in the contemporary culture is more akin to a consumer constantly discarding previous experiences and learning and instead selling their potential ability (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2018). The consultant prototype rejects a sense of ownership of the skills one possesses. Problematically argues Sennett (2006) most people do not enjoy this cultural ideal, humans take pride in being good at things, and value their past experiences.

In summary so far, in addressing the meaningfulness of work in the knowledge economy there are discrepancies between those who argue that the majority of Europeans find their work meaningful (Findlay and Thompson, 2017; Thompson and Pitts, 2018; Soffia, Wood and Burchell, 2022) and those who argue the opposite (Graeber, 2018). Importantly some have suggested that where meaning is lacking this is more likely the product of alienation than worthless work (Soffia, Wood and Burchell, 2022). Working relations have been heavily critiqued for having intensified in hours and demands (Moen *et al.*, 2013; Pérez-Zapata *et al.*, 2016) and for being overly focused on 'pure process', the absence of skills and space for long term development (Sennett, 2006). Clearly these tensions in the literature require further investigation, highlighting the importance of research into meaningful work experiences in the contemporary knowledge economy. The absence of 'long term' space is echoed by the 'end of work' theorists who are explored next to contextualise the study and the key debates. Writing around the millennium they highlighted many crucial shifts that were

taking place in society, in relation to theories of identity and insecurity in employment. Their theories should be updated and investigated in the current context, hence also the need for this research.

End of work canon – the absence of long term

A canon described as the ‘end of work’ literature predicted a significant loss of jobs in response to gig and platform economies, a constantly changing demand for skills and the increasing impermanence of roles. They also argued that where work remains, it has become episodic, de-standardized and precarious enveloping individuals in situations of job insecurity (Bauman, 2000; Beck, 1992; Sennett, 1998). Bauman (1993 cited in Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. 3) lamented ‘I cannot build for the long term on my job, my profession or even my abilities. I can bet on my job being cut, my profession changing out of all recognition, my skills being no longer in demand.’ The lack of security stifles a sense of ‘long term’ progression in work that corrodes character according to Sennett (1998).

A dichotomy is presented between work in the former ‘modern’ era associated with collectivity and security and the ‘post-modern’ era its individualisation and precarity (Bauman, 2000; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1991; Rifkin, 1995; Sennett, 1998). It is argued instability characterises employment within the knowledge economy, where greater ‘flexibility’ obfuscates precarity and insecurity (Sennett, 1998; Doherty, 2009). Opportunities for establishing social bonds, sustained life narratives, a sense of coherence and the development of desirable personal attributes are diminished within the often temporary, episodic, short term new ways of working (Bauman, 2000; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Sennett, 1998). Indeed Sennett positioned employment institutions as ‘constantly breaking apart or continually being redesigned’ (1998, p. 9) equating modern day working conditions with a state of ‘drift’.

However, these claims made by the ‘end of work’ theorists including the absence of space for ‘long term’ development in work have been refuted in a number of ways. Broadly ‘platform’ and ‘gig’ economies refer to the employment of workers ‘hired under flexible arrangements, as independent contractors or consultants working only to complete a particular task or for a defined time’ (Friedman, 2014, p. 171). Both economies and adaptable ways of working have indeed increased in the knowledge economy which has seen a rise in digitally mediated micro-sourcing and single contract work. These forms of employment are more precarious and less secure (Friedman, 2014). Yet these economies do not constitute the majority of work (Findlay and Thompson, 2017). Doogan (2001, p. 428) argues the ‘end of work’ literature (Bauman, 2000; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002;

Castells, 2010; Sennett, 1998) incorrectly groups part time employment with temporary contracts (or 'gigs') when making claims of impermanence and insecurity. Yet part time work is not necessarily impermanent or insecure. Rather part time employees in most cases opt for more flexible work in balancing educational or family commitments (Doogan, 2001, 2005).

The more flexible structures associated with the knowledge economy have also been extensively critiqued by the 'end of work' canon. Sennett (1998) argues the implicit promise that the new spirit of capitalism will dismantle bureaucratic hierarchies and liberate workers from rationalized systems of time management within the 'iron cage' remains to be realised. He counters more flexible, flatter structures designed to enable project-based tasks and democratic networking concentrate power in the hands of a few. Whereby 'revulsion against bureaucratic routine and [the] pursuit of flexibility has produced new structures of power and control, rather than created the conditions which set us free' (Sennett, 1998, p. 47). Further that 'team-work' discourse obfuscates this fact creating a fictional sense of equality and allowing managers to shirk responsibilities (Sennett, 1998). The reality according to Sennett (1998) then is the creation of new forms of oppression. It has been suggested that increased 'autonomy' often results in a shifting of responsibilities from management to workers, increasing the workload demands being placed on employees, concealed under the guise of employee liberation and project 'ownership' (Powell and Snellman, 2004). Flexibility blurs boundaries and the burdens placed upon personnel might increase without corresponding increases in rewards (Powell and Snellman, 2004). Sennett (1998) praises the iron cage of the previous Fordist era of work. He claims 'time is the only resource available to those at the bottom of society' (Sennett, 1998, p. chap 1). A Weberian ability to accumulate through rationalised time and bureaucratic structures when paired with individual self-discipline provides workers with not only material gains but also a sense of life narrative (Sennett, 1998).

In line with Sennett's (1998) critique, technological advances in the knowledge economy might be considered new forms of power and control. It is true and obvious that technological advances have drastically increased our quality of life and work in many areas (innovating farming, agricultural work, administrative systems, removing manual labour etc.). Yet as mentioned in the work intensification discussion above, in the knowledge economy, this has largely manifest in workers being positioned as continuously 'on-call' and contactable and hence clocking up more as opposed to less working hours (Moen *et al.*, 2013; Muhlbauer and Tziner, 2017). The profoundly social element to technological innovation implementation will clearly affect the way it impacts upon work and employment hours. Work time boundaries are arguably less protected than in the previous rationalised bureaucratic system aligning with Sennett's (1998) critique. Technological innovation makes work possible from almost any location at any time of the day.

Sennett (2006) problematised the absence of 'long term' in his critique of 'potential ability' discussed above. He also critiqued the absence of 'long term' in the knowledge economy as being corrosive to the formation of character and identity among other things (Sennett, 1998). This corrosion he argued is the result of an absence of space for 'long term' relationships, 'long term' engagement with work and projects and hence an inability to establish a working identity and understand oneself. Indeed Sennett (1998) argues to achieve a stable mental state people need to be able to interpret their experiences within a coherent life narrative that meaningfully links past, present and future experiences into a whole. The importance of narrative coherence is echoed by Giddens (1991). He argues that a sense of order and continuity in relation to individuals' experiences allow people to give meaning to their lives and achieve ontological security. However unlike Sennett (1998), Giddens (1991) argues this ontological security does not rely on linking to future goals and a long term perspective. Rather a stable sense of self-identity can be achieved reflexively in projects of the self, provided the individual can 'keep a particular narrative going' (Giddens, 1991, p. 54). In a less dogmatic approach Watson's (2009, p. 431) work on the creation of identities through narration also argues individuals need a 'degree of coherence and consistency in their conception of who they are'.

These authors raise important concerns pertaining to the relationship between narrative coherence and meaningful experiences of employment. However, there is danger in Sennett's (1998, 2006) work of deifying the 'long term' and processes of craft and skill development. Craft and skill development have indeed been widely correlated with meaningful and fulfilling work experiences (discussed in topic three 'craftsmanship and vocation' of this literature review). Yet arguably Sennett's (1998, 2006) analysis adopts a relatively single-minded track of what constitutes meaningful work. Soffia, Wood and Burchell (2022) highlighted that the number of people who dislike their work is in decline in Europe. Furthermore a consultant prototype style of fast paced work, and even living in 'pure process' (Sennett, 2006) may suit and benefit some. Indeed various related bodies of literature support the notion of new systems of flexible, project centred, emotionally intertwined work being linked with positive employee experiences (addressed further in discussions of the emotionalization of work and 'work warriors' in topic four) (McRobbie, 2004; Ekman, 2014; De Palma, 2020; Pagis, 2020). The new spirit of capitalism in the knowledge economy promises greater autonomy, liberation, opportunities for workers to assert themselves, realise their interests and harness their creative and entrepreneurial abilities (Pyöriä, 2005; Gill and Pratt, 2008; Boltanski and Chiapello, 2018). It promises liberation from rigid working structures and greater freedoms (Powell and Snellman, 2004). These promises may hold true for some. The realisation of some of these promises particularly through authentic and creative crafting processes and

passionate, devoted, emotional relationships with work are fleshed out in topics three and four. But first the reality and lived experience of these promises as differently experienced according to individual factors must be addressed. This will be unpacked in the remainder of this first topic.

Arguably engagement with work at an individual level needs to be given greater consideration. The resources available to an individual and their personal disposition entering the workplace should be addressed. Examination of how the personality and socio-economic constitution of a subject influences their engagement and participation in work is needed to develop depth of understanding of the social situation. This is critically discussed below in the analysis of individualization theories and career trajectories.

Individualization theories and careers

The ways in which critics of the knowledge economy address the individual's constitution must be considered. Sennett (1998, 2006) arguably lacks consideration of how individuals' different social and economic circumstances might influence their experiences. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) offer a thorough – but problematic - analysis of how the individual intersects with employment in their theory of individualization. Their work aligns with reflexive conceptualisations of the self, put forward by Giddens (1994). It is argued that both sets of authors (Giddens, 1991; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) offer inaccurate accounts of society and an unencumbered individual. They incorrectly stipulate that all individuals operate as largely unrestricted agents 'free' from structures that previously confined them and that this is an inherently risky existence. Whilst the analysis of Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) in particular is intended to offer a critique of social relations as inherently risky among other things, it has been argued it instead propagates a neoliberal, individualistic ideology (Skeggs, 2019). Theories of individualization and projects of the self are pervasive. They are encapsulated in and reinforced by modern understandings of careers specifically 'protean' and 'boundaryless' careers (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Hall, 2004). These theoretical frameworks of identity hence must be explored when investigating employment experiences in our society that is strongly orientated around individualism and meritocracy (Brown, 2015). These arguments are now fully fleshed out.

Individualization claims that people have been dis-embedded from structural categories (such as stable employment) that used to determine who they were (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Information now readily available to us in the knowledge economy has largely replaced traditional groupings such as class, gender, the nuclear family and ethnic group (now 'zombie categories') as the primary source of identity formation (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1991). Through

projects of the self (Giddens, 1991) the individual – the centre of agency – creates their own biographical narrative. This process is inherently risky (Beck, 2000). It ‘demands’ an active contribution from individuals, ‘if they are not to fail, individuals must be able to plan for the long term and adapt to change; they must organize and improvise, set goals, recognize obstacles, accept defeats, and attempt new starts. They need initiative, tenacity, flexibility and tolerance of frustration’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. 4). Importantly, according to reflexive theory ‘people are forced to conceive of themselves as do-it-yourself producers of meaning’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. 151).

Positive conceptualisations of the individualized biographical narrative and ‘projects of the self’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1991) are reinforced and reflected in the theorisations of ‘protean’ and ‘boundaryless’ careers. Both career models were birthed in response to transitions toward the new ways of working in the knowledge economy. Both models are grounded in the central tenets of individualization and reflexive ‘projects of the self’ (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Hall, 2004). Wiernik and Kostal (2018) describe the protean and boundaryless career forms as behaviour patterns that have emerged in response to increased employment volatility, they are argued to have numerous benefits for individuals, including improved self-efficacy, career satisfaction and more self-fulfilling experiences of work (Wiernik and Kostal, 2018). The protean career in particular ‘is shaped more by the individual than by the organisation’ and can be directed to meet the employee’s needs (Hall, 1976 cited in Hall, 2004). An employee’s choices in their protean career are said to be determined by personal values, morals and goals, allowing them to achieve psychological success (Hall, 2004). The key values driving a protean career according to Hall (2004) are freedom and growth, individuals are more attuned to creating and seeking opportunities for work satisfaction. Indeed, there exists a positive construction within the literature of the ‘protean’ worker, who is able to tolerate higher levels of frustration, is adaptable, will change employers if their personal values are not met, experiences a more successful career and is more highly motivated (Gubler, 2011; Wiernik and Kostal, 2018). The ‘boundaryless’ career defined in antithesis to the ‘organizational’ or ‘bureaucratic’ career (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996) denotes careers that are not confined to unfolding within a single institution but rather are more fluid, dependent on ‘knowing-why, knowing-how and knowing-who’ (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996). Wiernik and Kostal (2018) argue protean and boundaryless orientations are healthy responses to uncertainty in the employment environment.

These conceptualisations offer a counter narrative to some of the arguments presented above, that suggest that an absence of ‘long term’ space in employment in the knowledge economy is antithetical to meaningful work (Bauman, 1998; Sennett, 1998, 2006). Indeed Sennett (2006) argued

the contemporary situation is structured around a consultant prototype employee living in 'pure process' that results in an inability to establish meaning through self-development and through a sense of working identity. Yet the protean and boundaryless careers instead suggest flexible ways of working result in greater work satisfaction, where individuals allegedly possess the agency to determine their own meaningful working careers and wider lives (Hall, 2004; Inkson *et al.*, 2010).

However, theories of individualization and protean and boundaryless careers have been critiqued in various ways. Gunz *et al.* (2000) suggest that 'boundarylessness' rhetoric is not an accurate representation of the employment situation, rather it is a special case that might work well in certain circumstances. They challenge the deterministic notion that boundaryless careers are the way of the future and that we must all adapt. Gunz *et al.* (2000, 2002) also point out that the existence of boundaries is not necessarily a negative phenomenon, countering that they might in fact provide individuals with a sense of stability and space for the long term development of skills, in line with Sennett (1998; 2009). Pertinently it has been suggested that the boundaryless career that is 'heavily preoccupied with growth and learning, has incited people to become the kind of reflective beings who constantly monitor and judge their own moves with the aim of constantly improving... This is not surveillance and control from the top or the centre, but a sophisticated panopticon... which performs a subtler and more efficient control from within – a control that we refer to as freedom' (Sommerlund and Boutaiba, 2007, p. 535). For Sommerlund and Boutaiba (2007) then, the boundaryless career rhetoric might be conceived of as a means to serve particular interest groups such as employers or owners. Whereby the discourse of boundaryless careers operates as a regime of truth normalising potentially exploitative practices increasing work effort and intensity among workers through self-regulatory means (Foucault, 1980).

A disparity exists, where for mobile, adaptable and talented individuals protean and boundaryless orientations might be advantageous (Gubler, 2011). Conversely for individuals whose skills bind them to a single organisation, they might perceive boundaryless careers as a barrier to personal development (Larsen, 2002). Problematic also is the discursive construction of the boundaryless protean employee who is encouraged not to rely on institutional help and support but to find solutions to problems independently (Larsen, 2002; Inkson *et al.*, 2010). Thus supporting the notion that work in the knowledge economy has allowed employers to shirk certain responsibilities (Powell and Snellman, 2004).

Clearly for those with the personal skills and resources to navigate flexible, fast paced, precarious work situations in individualized 'projects of the self' (Giddens, 1991) these types of employment settings might prove beneficial and fulfilling and result in meaningful experiences with work (Gubler,

2011). This is counter to 'corrosive', chaotic or destabilizing lifestyle claims associated with new forms of employment in the knowledge economy that are allegedly antithetical to meaningful encounters (Bauman, 2000; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Sennett, 1998). However clearly the opposite might also be true for those who do not possess the appropriate skills and resources to navigate flexible, protean and/or boundaryless models of a career or employment settings that necessitate them.

From a broader sociological perspective, theories of individualization and projects of the self (Giddens, 1991; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) have also been critiqued for presenting hyper-individualistic ways of interacting with employment as normal, natural and achievable. These narratives exist and have far reaching consequences. Yet the normalisation of excessive unencumbered individualism in work is an inaccurate and at times pernicious discursive practice (Savage, 2000; Skeggs, 2004). Indeed it has been suggested that theories of individualization present overly voluntaristic conceptions of humanity, that assume excessively rational, pragmatic and activist dispositions and capabilities of individuals (Mouzelis, 1999; Adams, 2002, 2003). Arguably reflexivity theories promulgate a hyper-individualism that does not hold up to scrutiny, conceptualising a view of life as something that can be colonised by the active agent (Zhao and Biesta, 2008).

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) argue that traditional structures ('beds') that previously determined 'roles' for citizens are now individualized and 'chosen' in identity formation. Individuals test out different overlapping identities (associated with structural beds; class, gender, family roles and so on) and construct a life 'out of their combination' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. 27). Skeggs (2004) criticises the supposed neutrality of Giddens' (1991) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (2002) method of constructing a biography, which she claims is dependent on an unequal access to resources. Unequal access 'must involve social differentiation and therefore always invoke positions, not just in terms of structure but also in the perspective from which we can know the types of personhood we can inhabit' (Strathern, 1992 cited in Skeggs, 2004, p. 53). Individuals are still affected by structural factors, human relationships, traditions and morals (Adams, 2003; Skeggs, 2004) and class background in particular (Savage, 2000; Skeggs, 2004). Savage (2000, p. 105) argues that reflexivity theories are 'rhetorical ploys' that 'resonate with the middle-class experience'. Where the reflexive model of existence most strongly aligns with the life experiences of the 'young middle classes' and hence maintains a 'middle class bias' (Rasborg, 2017, p. 236). Whatever the motivation behind reflexivity and individualization theories, a situation of increasing personal responsibility in life choices is widely argued to exist in the West (MacInnes, 1998; Hall, 2004;

Cuzzocrea and Lyon, 2011; Field and Chan, 2018; Wiernik and Kostal, 2018). This is in part due to increasing individualism in our neoliberal society.

In his work *The Neoliberal Imagination*, Abbinnett (2021) argues evolution in media and information technologies have resulted in a shift in the ideological imaginary of capitalism. The neoliberal imaginary he defines as the dominant ideology in liberal-capitalist states, an ideology of atomistic individualism centred around performance and 'ideals of aesthetic perfection' (Abbinnett, 2021, p. 2). Indeed capital, culture and aesthetics have become closely entwined, in a worldview in which 'everything seems possible, and where the material limitations of life melt away into the realm of simulation' (Abbinnett, 2021, p. 1). This worldview proffers opportunities for limitless innovation and reinvention, life is represented as a process of constant self-overcoming in all spheres, including constant self-overcoming and exceeding previous performance in employment. This worldview is clearly akin to both protean and boundaryless career models and individualized theories of identity formation. The neoliberal imaginary inhabits education, culture, science and importantly work according to Abbinnett (2021). The neoliberal model holds unquestionable success. To the extent that as a society we have, for the majority, stopped attempting to even consider alternatives (Fisher, 2009; Abbinnett, 2021).

Whilst a philosophy of individualism underpins our western society and knowledge economy (Brown, 2015; Abbinnett, 2021), there are clear problems in individualization theories of identity and career formation that present these processes as neutral and accessible for all. The modern subject is presented by some as a freely choosing agent, shaping their own destiny in a free and unencumbered act (Giddens, 1994; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Yet, others have demonstrated the perniciousness of such narratives (Skeggs, 2019), where individuals are still affected by structural systems of inequality yet they are no longer able to claim that fact as true. Also, where the responsibility for hardship or difficulty in society is determined to be an individual failure. It is clear that how individuals respond to new forms of employment in the knowledge economy will depend on their personal dispositions and resources. Flexible, fast paced, 'pure process' protean and/or boundaryless careers may be highly meaningful for some. Conversely, an absence of space for long term development may hinder the creation of a sense of working identity and the establishment of meaningful experiences with work for others. There are clearly different *experiences* of the nature of employment in the contemporary situation as influenced by the *individual* employee's skill set, adaptability and disposition. It is of fundamental importance that the individual's constitution is considered when making broad claims about the nature of employment in contemporary society. A facet that has been lacking from many employment theories. Whilst it is not the scope of this research to assess the impact of social categories of class, ethnicity and gender on how individuals

engage with employment, this study will investigate personal preferences, attitudes and dispositions towards the new more fluid ways of working. It will examine whether flexible, mobile and adaptable ways of working are enjoyed or sought by some.

The proliferation of hyper-individualistic narratives such as those presented in protean and boundaryless career models and theories of individualization also require investigation. Research is needed to investigate the pervasiveness of these discourses and their reach of influence within the knowledge economy. Identity and meaning are intricately linked (Watson, 2008, 2009). The extent to which individualised rhetoric affects employment relations and the creation of meaningful experiences with work should be explored. Hence the narratives participants tell in research interviews will be examined for discursive fragments that align with individualistic, neoliberal rhetoric, particularly when individuals are describing themselves, their career paths, and their working practices.

Two final domains of identity and meaning within the neoliberal context are explored next, namely personal branding and entrepreneurial understandings of the self. These cultural schemas are pervasive in the current neoliberal context and have practical implications for how large numbers of employees understand themselves and shape their behaviour and self-presentation in day-to-day interactions in the workplace. These discussions are important not just because identity is strongly linked with meaning (Watson, 2008, 2009) but also because these cultural schemas are arguably linked with alienation, a refusal of genuine subjectivity, a depersonalization of the true, authentic self and the absence of authentic creative expression, features associated with meaningful experiences of work.

Personal branding and entrepreneurialism of the self

At the outset of a discussion of personal branding a distinction must be made; neoliberalism is distinct from mere rational capitalism in part due to its onus on entrepreneurialism and personal branding. Whilst capitalism at its core might be described as an economic system centred around private ownership, the philosophy of neoliberalism prioritises individualism, the free market and deregulation.

Neoliberal rationality disseminates the model of the market to all domains and activities and configures human beings exhaustively as market actors. Individuals are interpellated into subject positions as human capital who must attend to their own 'value' and presentation or 'brand' in different spheres e.g. relationships, education, health (Brown, 2015). Practically then argue Bal and

Dóci (2018) neoliberalism's ideology is composed of political and economic logics of competitive performance, self-sufficiency, extrinsic motivation and profit maximisation.

The economic policies of the 1970s formally instated many neoliberal tenets within the UK and USA among other countries. Yet a hegemonic neoliberal worldview can be traced back to the postwar era. The cultural industry of the 1950s and 60s (critiqued by the Frankfurt school) laid the foundations for the aesthetic component of the neoliberal imaginary, discussed above (Abbinnett, 2021). According to Abbinnett (2021, p. 98) the prevalence of individualism in the neoliberal imaginary is 'pre-empted by the aesthetics of future love, future desire and future fulfilment', where rational economic principles of capitalism are buttressed with aesthetic feelings, desires and aspirations. Indeed social commentaries for many decades have addressed the ways in which through the symbolic order of capitalist society, and its progeny neoliberalism, individuals are increasingly constituted as continually desiring subjects (Zizek, 1997; Bjerg, 2008), encouraged to consume and accumulate material possessions. Extensive effort and resource are devoted to generating the 'association of imagined pleasures with particular commodities, services and/or brands' (Smart, 2010, p. 147) through advertising and marketing techniques. Importantly marketing techniques extend beyond products and services to individuals in their personal branding and their identity formation and projection.

Vallas and Christin (2018) show how success in the knowledge economy relies on individuals being able to imbue themselves with symbolic value in a similar process to the ways in which physical products are also imbued with symbolic value. Within contemporary society we are encouraged if not interpellated into embracing commercialised conceptions of self (Vallas and Christin, 2018). Individuals today engage in personal branding work (Brannan, Parsons and Priola, 2015), behaving as utility maximizing agents that manage their 'human capital according to the strict laws of cost/benefit-analysis' (Christiaens, 2020, p. 506).

In our neoliberal society personal branding and entrepreneurial conceptions of the self are commonplace. Yet both philosophies arguably negate authentic expressions of the self and authentic expressions of creativity, features of meaningful labour relationships (Weber, 1930; Marx and Engels, 2011). Instead, both schemas arguably rely on predefined subjectivities focused on profit and success according to market principles, discussed now.

Zarkada's (2012, p. 1) literature review on the conceptualisation of personal branding broadly defines it as a 'marketing concept related to the marketing strategies that a person adopts in order to promote his or her major personal characteristics'. Personal branding is described as a 'proactive behaviour that influences your ability to be sought after, mentioned, valued and given a second,

third and fourth look' (Mobray, 2009 cited in Zarkada, 2012, p. 3). Also defined as marketing activities individuals engage with for employment gains (Shepherd, 2005 cited in Zarkada, 2012, p. 4) and as a process in which the personally branded individual is a 'product, producer, and consumer (...) captive to and conditioned by the controlling interests of global flexible capital' (Hearn, 2008 cited in Zarkada, 2012, p. 3). Personal branding is a widespread phenomenon. Within many industries there are explicit expectations to engage with the process, to have an 'elevator pitch' on hand, and rehearsed rhetoric about who you are and what you do that is equated with perceived competency (Vallas and Christin, 2018). Personal branding has seeped into spheres less obviously focused on (self) marketing. LinkedIn profiles are a common example of conscious self-presentation that vast proportions of the population engage with. In January 2022 approximately 34 million people, 48% of the UK population had a LinkedIn profile (Statista, 2023). Various personal branding measurement tools – such as LinkedIn Social Selling Index, Klout, Talkwalker and Twitonomy - exist to explicitly gage your online presence, to monitor your engagement with the 'right people' and to establish 'professional visibility'. The creation of a Curriculum Vitae at a basic level denotes some form of personal brand. Personal branding discourse which is pervasive on social media platforms, in self-help books, workshops, careers advice services and workplace company culture, encourage the work force to invest in unearthing their uniqueness (Zarkada, 2012).

Indeed, a key component of self-branding in the knowledge economy is determining your unique selling point. Individuals are encouraged to determine the thing that makes them 'special' and causes them to stand out and then to 'consistently and constantly [live it]', communicating it to all (Aruda, 2009 cited in Zarkada, 2012, p. 2). Yet the process of self-branding and actively 'living' out your brand requires an element of staging (Bandinelli, 2020) which calls into question the capacity for it be an expression of a unique and authentic self. It is suggested that the process of translating one's personality, skills and competency into a marketable, attractive brand involves both concealing and altering some aspects of the self (Bandinelli, 2020). Bandinelli (2020) argues this process of concealing and altering is not wholesale commodification of the self, rather an ambiguous process of *both* inventing a self and presenting an (authentic) self; commodification paired with reflexive production of the self. Clearly the 'authenticity' to self-branding is limited when the goal is to 'sell oneself'.

Arguably also the very notion of a *personal* and *unique* brand is undermined. The degree of staging and commodification involved necessitates that there is an external social criterion against which the self is measured. Instead of being a decision based on what one 'authentically' considers their best attributes to be, the attributes of the self that are emphasized and showcased are determined socially by what is considered valuable and acceptable in social spheres. For employees, the features

of the self that they conceal and the features that they present and amplify will inevitably align with what their employment environments esteem in order to be successful at work. Hence it can be argued branding of the self is not a free and unencumbered act, it is dependent on readymade subject positions, models, and cultural identities available in society. Foucault (1998) broadly conceptualised subjectivities as personas and identities that are available in a given society, formed through discursive practices, available cultural narratives, socio-cultural contexts, power relations and individual agency. He argued individuals make sense of themselves, are largely determined by, and locate themselves within said subjectivities. Such discourses and narratives having their own embedded meanings, power, and codes of conduct for operating. Invoking Foucauldian theory Bandinelli (2020, p. 8) argues hence 'the kind of freedom exercised by the subject in crafting the self is never of an absolute kind, rather, it is defined by a web of power relationships and regimes of truth'. There are predetermined ways in which an individual can market themselves and still be afforded credibility, opportunities, and power within the workplace. Each field of employment having its own culturally valuable prototypes of brands. The freedom to transform the self is then clearly structured.

Clearly this also creates problems for authentic self-expression and creative expression, core components of meaningful relationships with work (Chalofsky and Krishna, 2009; Rosso, Dekas and Wrzesniewski, 2010; Soffia, Wood and Burchell, 2022) that prevent situations of alienation (Marx and Engels, 2011). Entrepreneurial conceptions of the self arguably also depersonalize individuals and restrict authenticity and genuine creativity (Cruz, 2016; Bandinelli, 2020). There is much overlap between concepts, both possessing the ability to alienate individuals from their true and authentic interests (their species being) and from others, discussed now.

Entrepreneurialism of the self has been described as a way of 'making of oneself a certain kind of person in order to acquire a certain kind of status', resource, or opportunity (Foucault, 2000 cited in Bandinelli, 2020, p. 5). The 'entrepreneur of the self', or 'mass entrepreneur' within the knowledge economy are concepts widely explored in the research literature (McGuigan, 2014; Cruz, 2016; Christiaens, 2020). The entrepreneurial spirit conceives of the self as a form of capital to be invested in a workplace, in anticipation of a return on that self-investment (Skeggs, 2004; Bandinelli, 2020). An onus is placed on maximising human capital according to cost/benefit analysis (Christiaens, 2020).

Problematically this process also depersonalizes the market 'actor' and arguably is both a product of, and leads to, alienation from the self, from human relationships and from society more broadly. Indeed entrepreneurialism ideologies encourage individuals to view themselves as profit-creating enterprises through the application of market principles to their employment careers

(Vallas and Christin, 2018). It seems clear that this model of entrepreneurial self-perception will foster depersonalization and an orientation toward that which is favoured by the market. If one's genuine interests and desires are at odds with what the employment market deems attractive, according to the entrepreneurial discourse, said interests will be neglected, greatly increasing the likelihood of alienation from an individual's species essence (Marx and Engels, 2011).

Populist notions of entrepreneurialism and inauthentic personal branding arguably also create space for alienation from others (Marx and Engels, 2011). Wright Mills (1951) warned of the personality market that would arise in a society dominated by a marketing mentality, where relational, psychological, and social aspects of humanity become increasingly commodified and exchanged. His conceptualisation of a cash nexus of human relationships and the resulting social alienation in contemporary work that is organised around market principles can be applied to entrepreneurialism of the self, and also inauthentic personal branding. Competitive environments mean that an individual is 'always on', always projecting a particular brand, always looking to capitalise on their human capital through their marketability (Zarkada, 2012; Brannan, Parsons and Priola, 2015; Christiaens, 2020). Genuine human interaction is risky and ineffective time management. Hence genuine human interaction wanes in the workplace and relationships become an interface between individual's different forms of self-projection and self-presentation. Indeed the entrepreneurial, personal branding of the self literature updates the 'personality market' themes described by Wright Mills (1951) within the contemporary context.

Salmenniemi, Nurmi and Jaakola's (2020) study into the experiences of burnout among HR managers, salespeople, bookkeepers, entrepreneurs, teachers, and therapists found participants were alienated via a 'refusal of subjectivity'. This refusal comprised an inability to impact on ones' work place and importantly a sense of being refused as an authentic person, whereby workplaces favoured 'unconditional obedience, docility and disciplining power over personality' (Salmenniemi, Nurmi and Jaakola, 2020, p. 162). Individuals did not feel able to express themselves, their thoughts, or their discontent with work. This absence of authentic expression of the self, alienated individuals and was strongly correlated with burnout. Clearly in the contemporary knowledge economy context, authentic expressions of the self and authentic creative expressions remain important for meaningful experiences of work, concurring with the classical theorists (Weber, 1930; Marx and Engels, 2011).

Research on the prevalence of personal branding and entrepreneurial perceptions of self, demonstrate a trend in contemporary society towards more commodified views of individuals. It

appears that authentic subjectivities are repressed and pre-determined subject positions must be taken up to be successful in a variety of employment settings. Further research is needed into the ways in which these trends towards depersonalization do or do not alienate individuals. Further research is also needed to examine whether meaningful experiences of work are established under these conditions and if so, in what ways. Indeed a final point of discussion within this topic is the potential for personal branding in particular to provide identity location in the absence of traditional social categories of gender, class, family and so on (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), explored below.

Personal branding and the potential for identity location

Whilst the individualistic claims of personal branding as constituting a ‘unique’, ‘authentic’ and ‘personal’ endeavour do not hold up to scrutiny – instead being largely dependent on readily available subject positions, that are generic and saturated with power – the literature fails to account for a potential positive aspect of personal branding in modernity. Namely the possibility of ‘branding’ providing identity location and security in the absence of traditional identity beds. Identities are socially produced and understood (Payne and Harrison, 2020). As discussed, in previous times traditional social categories (class, gender, family) provided prototype identities to ‘bed’ down in, that gave people an understanding of themselves (Giddens, 1991; Binkley, 2018). It has been argued these traditional categories have waned in significance (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), whilst they still affect our lives (Skeggs, 2004), due to fragmentation, consumer culture and the transition to post-industrial capitalist society, people identify with them less (Binkley, 2018). Nevertheless it is argued ‘uncertainty reduction’ through the adoption of social identities remains a core human motivation, even if the categories of social identities have shifted (Hogg and Terry, 2000, p. 124). Indeed social identity processes are ‘motivated by a need to reduce subjective uncertainty about one’s perceptions, attitudes, feelings and behaviours, and ultimately, one’s self-concept and place within the social world’ (Hogg and Terry, 2000, p. 124).

Given the urge among humans to reduce uncertainty, it is argued personal branding has the potential to provide a new ‘bed’ for individuals to locate their identities within. Where the lack of ‘uniqueness’, and instead relative uniformity of many ‘brands’ create social categories people can identify with and ground themselves in, reducing subjective uncertainty. Being able to narrate one’s life is equated with ontological security (Watson, 2008). The rhetoric of self-marketing arguably creates a space for individuals to assert and affirm a sense of self, one that aligns with others in their field who are also marketing themselves according to the same valued attributes. The structured

nature of readily available subject positions in workplace branding arguably creates quasi social categories to – at least in part – axis identities around.

Zarkada's (2012, p. 6) review of the personal branding literature concludes that hope is being commodified; 'the hope of being acknowledged, feeling unique and worthy of attention and most of all, the hope of finding meaning now that traditional values have been eroded'. This demonstrates support for the proposition that personal branding is being utilized by some as a proxy for identity creation, through the reduction of uncertainties and hope of finding an identity axis to wrap around. Through their brand one can say what they are and what they are not and align themselves with others with similar 'brands', that is others who have adopted similar available subject positions within their field of work.

Further research is needed to explore the impacts of personally branding oneself in line with socially available subject positions, to determine how this relates to an individual's identity formation and whether this provides a sense of enhanced stability or not. Importantly further research is needed to determine how meaningful this process is or can be. This research seeks to plug that gap. Whilst there are numerous different ways a person can 'personally brand' themselves in the knowledge economy, all individuals are situated within our wider economic, political and cultural neoliberal context. As discussed neoliberalism and its philosophy of individualism is highly influential on culture, employment and individuals' understandings of themselves. Hence it must be explored the extent to which this influence facilitates or negates meaningful experiences of work.

Hence the studies fourth research question asks:

Research question four: To what extent did respondents express a neoliberal subjectivity in their approach to work?

This research question will broadly address the following debates. It will investigate the prevalence of individualized, activist understandings of oneself and one's career contributing to the debate on whether these theories are a reality for all to engage with (Giddens, 1994; Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Hall, 2004) or whether they are reserve of a few (Skeggs, 2004; Skeggs, 2019). It will also explore how meaningful these individualized pursuits are. It will explore how meaningful new forms of employment are as experienced by knowledge workers. As has been discussed in this first topic, claims of liberation, freedom, autonomy and increased mobility associated with work in the knowledge economy have been critiqued as exploitative, resulting in work intensification (Moen, 2006), a lack of working identity, a corrosion of character development

(Sennett, 1998, 2006), commodified understandings of the self and depersonalization (Cruz, 2016; Bandinelli, 2020). These features are indicative of a neoliberal market ideology. Hence whether these claims hold up to scrutiny or not will be addressed in this research question. As unpacked in the findings and analysis chapter, in answering this research question an exploration of issues of agency were also addressed. A neoliberal subjectivity was indeed found to be in operation, yet individuals still operated with agency and created their own innovative pathways to meaning.

Conclusions to literature review topic one

This topic explored the debates surrounding how meaningful work is in the contemporary knowledge economy. Employment in the new spirit of capitalism is argued to liberate individuals, granting employees greater freedom, autonomy, mobility and flexibility in work (Mládková, Zouharová and Nový, 2015; Boltanski and Chiapello, 2018). A variety of criticisms of the reality of this ideology were unpacked. Work in the knowledge economy was argued to be associated with work intensification (Moen *et al.*, 2013) depersonalization and a commodification of self, due in part to the wider neoliberal context and its inherent individualism (Cruz, 2016; Bandinelli, 2020; Abbinnett, 2021). These features are associated with an alienated experience of employment devoid of authentic self-expression and creativity (Marx and Engels, 1848; Weber, 1930; Soffia, Wood and Burchell, 2022). Indeed other criticisms of new working relations cited the absence of space for 'long-term' development that is allegedly corrosive to character and identity formation (Sennett, 1998). However advocates of the new flexible ways of working point to the freedom and autonomy individuals now possess to create their own meaning in protean and boundaryless careers (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Hall, 2004). This topic argued that the individual's constitution must be taken into consideration in assessing how meaningful new ways of working are as experienced by employees. Adaptable, fast paced, fluid patterns of work have the capacity to be highly fulfilling and meaningful for individuals with the resources and dispositions positively disposed towards them. Autonomy and freedom are also clearly key components of a creative and authentic labour process that has the capacity to be meaningful (Marx and Engels, 1848; Weber, 1930). The reality of the manifestation of the promises of the new spirit of capitalism then must be explored in the contemporary setting. How these promises are experienced must also be addressed. The literature presented in this topic needs updating in the current context. A modern account of the prevalence or absence of alienation and meaning in employment is needed, this research will plug this gap.

Literature review topic 2) Socially valuable employment and meaningful work

Introduction to pathways to meaningful experiences of work

Topic one investigated claims made by some that the new spirit of capitalism offers a liberating experience of work, it critically explored the types of individual subjectivity that might be most suited to these new forms of employment. This thesis is focused on exploring what constitutes meaningful employment in the knowledge economy. Central to this investigation is an exploration of the major documented pathways to meaning creation in employment. An extensive review of the research field yielded four key themes or pathways to obtaining meaning from work. Namely meaning is documented as being obtained via 1) obviously socially valuable philanthropic work 2) in micro level organisational processes 3) in crafting and vocational relationships with and opportunities in work and finally 4) in the emotionalization of work. Some of the pathways maintain elements of the classical theorists' ideas, particularly classical notions of vocation and creative labour processes (in craft). Some of the pathways have updated the classical ideas, particularly in the emotionalization of work and so called 'passion paradigm' arguing that emotions and aesthetics as opposed to moral duty drive a contemporary work ethic. Some of the pathways directly counter the classical ideas, particularly in studies that document meaning being obtained through success, status and heightened perceptions of the self, discussed in the emotionalization of work pathway. The divergence of opinion within the field demonstrates the need for critical engagement with these debates and further research in this area.

In line with the reality many employees face this research intentionally sought to investigate employment settings that did not possess an obvious philanthropic, social benefit to society (the first pathway to meaning identified in the research literature). In doing so, this study addresses an under researched area of the field. Indeed, a relative gap in the research field is depth of understanding regarding how individuals in highly competitive, profit centred roles that lack obvious vocational or philanthropic focus obtain meaning from their work. Hence the literature exploring philanthropic, socially valuable work is included in brief at the beginning of this theme to contextualise the field.

The second major pathway to meaning creation in the research field, namely the 'meaningful work' literature constitutes a more generic body of research. This canon of work addresses how individuals obtain meaning in their employment at a micro, interactional level. This body of research stems

largely from the disciplines of management and organizational behaviour and hence explores meaningful work from a transactional perspective, that is it typically focuses on what practical, objective things can be implemented to optimise employee efficiency. This thesis is concerned with the sociological study of employment and focuses its attention on the sociological constitution of work, wider related social issues and their relationship with the individual, and the individual's identity formation and understandings of work. Hence the meaningful work literature is given brief consideration within this topic to contextualise the field but it is not the specific focus of this research. Some overlap between pathways to meaning exists and features of the meaningful work literature are picked up at points in discussions of craft, vocation and the emotionalization of work.

Topic three critically explores the notion of craft and vocation and details some of the overlap between concepts. Then in topic four the emotionalization of work literature is unpacked. Critical attention is paid to the potentially exploitative nature of the 'passion paradigm' and related cultural ideologies.

Socially valuable employment

A variety of studies link obtaining meaning at work with philanthropic, socially valuable employment. Work that is deemed to have an explicit positive social focus, for example firefighters, teachers, health workers, animal care and public sector employees has been heavily studied (Houlihan *et al.*, 2018; Gómez-Salgado *et al.*, 2019; Rodríguez, Mesurado and Crespo, 2019). Strong links have been made between engaging in socially valuable employment and deriving a sense of meaning. Such work is often associated with a sense of 'calling', namely a passion for and inner enjoyment of work that is socially valuable (Rodríguez, Mesurado and Crespo, 2019). Possessing a sense of calling is correlated with perceiving work to be morally inseparable from one's life (Rodríguez, Mesurado and Crespo, 2019).

In their multidimensional model Steger *et al.* (2012) proposed different paths of transcendence away from the basic qualities of a job as contributing to meaningful experiences. Indeed work that employees perceive to possess significance, purpose, emit feelings of accomplishment or contribute to their own or others' lives in a beneficial way can be considered meaningful (Cartwright and Holmes, 2006; Steger, Dik and Duffy, 2012; Geldenhuys, Łaba and Venter, 2014; Steger, 2016).

This research intentionally sought to investigate pathways to meaning creation in work that does not possess an explicit social focus. Hence whilst socially valuable, philanthropic work constitutes a clear pathway to meaning in employment it is not the focus of this study. Before conducting interviews, it

was decided if participants brought up these themes in their interviews they would be paid due attention and explored. However, as predicted by the research literature, the individuals in this study (employed in organizations orientated more towards profitability than the social benefit or welfare of society (Rodríguez, Mesurado and Crespo, 2019)) did not cite the social relevance of their work in interviews.

The meaningful work literature

Establishing meaningful work and work engagement have been argued to promote a range of positive outcomes for organisations that help them accomplish their desired targets and goals (Chalofsky and Krishna, 2009; Geldenhuys, Łaba and Venter, 2014). Indeed meaningful work has been associated with increases in individual performance, work engagement, personal fulfilment, a sense of empowerment, organisational identification, improved wellbeing and a reduction in absenteeism and stress (Ahmed, Majid and Zin, 2016; Steger, 2016; Jena, Bhattacharyya and Pradhan, 2019). It is proposed by Jena et al. (2019) that these positive outcomes create attitudes in employees that spur them to go above and beyond for their employers, to take ownership of tasks/projects and in the process become essential assets to their organisations. Chalofsky and Krishna (2009) highlight the intrinsically motivating nature of meaningful work, characterised by individuals viewing themselves as inseparable from their work, motivated by tasks themselves as opposed to external rewards.

In their comprehensive literature review Rosso, Dekas and Wrzesniewski, (2010) identified seven factors that create meaningful work within employment settings. These are opportunities for/the cultivation of authenticity, self- efficacy, self-esteem, purpose, belongingness, transcendence, and cultural and interpersonal sensemaking. The Job Characteristics Model (JCM) (Hackman and Oldham, 1975) claims meaningful work is promoted when job roles compose a variety of activities, necessitating the use of different skills and talents and when there are opportunities to progress with a project from beginning to end (Steger, 2016). Work design, specifically task identity (the extent to which workers identify with their labour) and task significance (the influence their task has on the organisation, peers or themselves) also has a significant impact on the conceptualisation of work as meaningful (Rosso, Dekas and Wrzesniewski, 2010; Jena, Bhattacharyya and Pradhan, 2019).

Opportunities for meaningful work are also explored in workplace relationships and in top-down leadership practices. At the interpersonal level meaningful work is achieved through mentoring relationships, opportunities to help and be helped and respect among colleagues (Steger, 2016). It is also achieved through task and skill variety, autonomy and opportunities for innovation (Schaufeli et

al., 2002; Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). At the organisational level meaningful work can be promoted via clear communication of values and their authentic adoption among senior staff and in policies, ethical behaviour among leaders, a clear vision and allowances for worker autonomy and flexibility especially in the ways in which they complete their daily working tasks (Cartwright and Holmes, 2006; Rosso, Dekas and Wrzesniewski, 2010; Steger, 2016).

Meaningful work can lead to increases of work engagement (Geldenhuys, Łaba and Venter, 2014; Ahmed, Majid and Zin, 2016). The widely accepted theory of Schaufeli and colleagues postulate that work engagement, namely a 'positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigour, dedication, and absorption' is an antipode to burnout (Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Roma, and Bakker, 2002, p. 74). Where vigour denotes higher levels of mental energy, resilience, and persistence even in the face of difficulties. Dedication is characterised by robust involvement in work, a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, and pride. Absorption details an individual's deep engrossment in one's work requiring their full concentration, whereby time passes quickly (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2002). Absorption can be likened to the construct of 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi, Abuhamdeh and Nakamura, 2005; Bakker, 2008) defined as a state of optimal experience characterised by effortless concentration, focused attention, intrinsic motivation, enjoyment and a distorted sense of time (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2002). However whilst flow refers to short-term, fluctuating peak experiences (Bakker, 2008) absorption is more persistent and pervasive (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2002). Indeed work engagement is a prevalent and continual state, not restricted to specific instances or events 'but facilitated through the physical, social and organisational environment' (Krog, 2014, p. 4; Schaufeli *et al.*, 2002). Work engagement has been positively associated with improved employee performance and can augment a company's productivity (Ahmed, Majid and Zin, 2016).

These features of meaningful work are implicitly referenced at points in the following discussions of craft, vocation and the emotionalization of work. Yet as stated the meaningful work literature stemming largely from the disciplines of management and organizational behaviour is not the specific focus of this research. Features of the meaningful work literature are considered in this research, but this research does not specifically seek to explore how to maximise employee productivity at a micro level. Instead, this study is concerned with the sociological study of employment, and its links to the individual and wider society.

Conclusions to literature review topic two

This theme began to address some of the major documented pathways to meaning creation in employment. A review of the literature yielded four key pathways to meaning creation in employment. Work that possesses an obvious social benefit or value to society was briefly addressed. However philanthropic work was not the focus of this study. The meaningful work literature stemming largely from organizational and management fields was then discussed to contextualise the research. Indeed, features of the meaningful work literature are picked up at points in discussions of craft, vocation and the emotionalization of work. The third major pathway to meaning identified in the literature is addressed in topic three next, namely crafting and vocational relationships with employment.

Literature review topic 3) Craftsmanship and vocation

Craft and competition

Craft and craftsmanship exist in both a philosophical and antiquated sense. The antiquated notion of craft refers to those less prevalent, traditional trades including wood working, ship building, the work of a seamstress and so on. The craftsmanship of these professions is not the focus of this research. Rather craft in a philosophical sense – including the motivation to work *well*, skill development, space for collaboration, a sense of future destination – is addressed as relevant to knowledge work. The links between a philosophical sense of craft and a sense of vocation are explored in this topic. Before that craft is defined below, and its applicability to the knowledge economy unpacked.

Craft refers to ‘an enduring, basic human impulse, the desire to do a job well for its own sake’ (Sennett, 2009, p. 9), it is the development of practice over a long duration. Sennett's (2009) conceptualisation of craft does not confine it to a traditional, artisan notion. Instead he defines it as a discipline that ‘cuts a far wider swath than skilled manual labour; it serves the computer programmer, the doctor, and the artist; parenting improves when it is practiced as a skilled craft, as does citizenship’ (Sennett, 2009, p. 9). For Sennett (2009) good craftsmanship is commonly developed out of community and working together, a slow passing down of skills, yet he also explores individual craft as viable. Craft holds central importance for Sennett (2009), seen as an anchor in a material society, that provides meaning and insight into how we navigate and understand social life and interactions. Yet argues Sennett (2009), various contemporary social and

economic issues stand in the way of the discipline of craftsmanship. He argues work in the knowledge economy has weakened the motivation for individuals to work well. In the previous work ethic (in the Fordist era ≈1940s-1970s) work was incentivised by the moral imperative to work for the sake of community and the knowledge and trust that long service and hard work would be rewarded.

Sennett (2009) argues the wealth share in organisations has been disproportionately concentrated in the hands of employees at the top of companies in the knowledge economy, further that service to a company no longer automatically equates to seniority and increases in pay over time. Rewards have generally 'diminished or disappeared; companies now have a short-term focus, preferring younger, fresher workers' (Sennett, 2009, p. 35).

In place of collaboration, he argues exists a model of competition that claims – and fails - to effectively motivate people to work well. He argues collective craftsmanship - an essential component of organisational success - is absent. In collective craftsmanship teams engage in fluid problem solving and finding, and can confidently correct, challenge and discuss with superiors without fear of ramifications. Broadly summarised his argument is as follows; individuals are no longer inherently and effectively motivated to work *well*, to complete a job to the best of their ability due to the demoralisation they experience in competitive working environments. He explicates workers are also caught between conflicting standards of getting something 'right' – namely completed to the highest aesthetic and professional standard – and getting something done in a timely manner (Sennett, 2009). The fast pace of work in contemporary employment he also deems problematic. The onus on meeting objectives in a time bound manner negatively impacts on crafting processes. Trial and error is not an option, rather 'time-anxiety causes people to skim rather than dwell', hollowing out ability (Sennett, 2006, p. 127). The passing down of skills previously took place over long periods of time, generationally adapting and advancing. Skill evolution now occurs daily according to Sennett (2009). Defining a skill as a 'trained practice' (ibid, p. 38) he problematises the lack of space and time for individuals to engage in sustained repetition and become experts.

The meaningful work literature echoes the meaningfulness of long term, 'craft' type experiences. 'Work experiences which reinforce a sense that one's actions are purposeful or move one closer to desired future goals or fulfilments are likely to be viewed as especially meaningful' (Bunderson and Thompson, 2009 cited in Rosso *et al.*, 2010, p. 111). This appears a logical proposition, one that also aligns with a traditional Weberian work ethic focused on future gain, for the Protestant that being graduation to heaven (Weber, 1930). The importance placed on long term working practices and goals however is challenged by Karen Ho (2009).

Ho's (2009) detailed 17 month ethnographic study exploring investment banking and financial markets on Wall Street uncovered a 'strategy of no strategy' among stockbrokers that does not obfuscate meaning making practices. Wall-Streeters intentionally did not plan for the future, instead they took pride in their immediate adaptability to the market, this was part of their cultural identity (Ho, 2009). Hence suggesting that notions of future fulfilment or destination as described by the Protestant work ethic and the long term development of craft (Weber, 1930; Carroll, 2008; Sennett, 2009) are not necessarily prerequisites to obtaining meaningful workplace experiences for all sectors of work. The Protestant work ethic was predicated on a pilgrim like journey which resulted in the accumulation of capital and was associated with a delay of fulfilment. Fulfilment was always viewed as existing in the distance in the Protestant work ethic, and yet was also embedded in the reflective pilgrim-like journey to get there, making the process meaningful. Arguably the same could be said for the crafting journey which prioritizes taking time to get things 'right' (Sennett, 2009). Yet Ho's (2009) 'strategy of no strategy' details how workers derived meaning from current circumstances, particularly their ability to adapt and be 'liquid'. They did not feel the need to create longitudinal employment trajectory strategies, their skill set afforded them meaningful workplace experiences wherever they might end up.

Ho's (2009) ethnography exploring meaning and employment on Wall Street represents a tiny fraction of jobs in contemporary society. Yet it is a pertinent case study that provides insight into the field of employment in the knowledge economy. Wall Street arguably epitomises neoliberalism and the new flexible ways of working in their most actualized form. This is because Wall Street is the ultimate expression of the removal of the stability of the traditional corporation, replaced with a work space intentionally centred around competition, insecurity and individualised risk and responsibility (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Sennett, 1998). It is a sphere of employment worth due attention.

As has been discussed some suggest individuals are encouraged to take responsibility for their own upskilling and reflexively navigate their careers (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Hall, 2004). Some argue this a normal and achievable dynamic that benefits employees as they create careers that fit their own personal desires, interests and goals (Hall, 2004). Yet, this personal responsibility for upskilling clearly requires time and space. Sennett (2009) argues there is no space for skill development in new 'time-anxious', competitive structures of work. The extent to which employers provide time and space for employees to upskill then requires exploration. This will be unpacked within this research, specifically within research question one detailed at the end of this section which investigates the extent to which a sense of craft featured in participants' working lives.

Interestingly for Ho's (2009) stock-brokers siphoned from the most elite universities in the USA, it could be suggested that a level of 'craft' or skill development had already been fashioned in their education. Their abilities were already suitably matched to their work, and for those where that was not the case, they would be 'let go'. Hence for the 'best' employees or those with skills already developed, competitive, time anxious environments may be well suited and even beneficial to them.

A large body of research (Cartwright and Holmes, 2006; Gilbert *et al.*, 2012; Leca and Vranceanu, 2015) claims competitive, conflict orientated corporate cultures negatively impact on company performance and employee wellbeing. Competitive cultures interchangeably referred to as conflict cultures (Gelfand *et al.*, 2012) and 'market cultures' (Quinn and Rohrbaugh, 1983; Cameron and Quinn, 2006) have been characterised in the literature by competitiveness and aggressiveness, their emphasis is on 'getting things done' achieving results and meeting targets (Quinn and Rohrbaugh, 1983; Krog, 2014). Market cultures prioritise clear goals and promote a focus on 'winning'. Rewards are contingent on performance and shareholders' interests are central (Gaal *et al.*, 2010). Decision making is centralized, and managers are directive, demanding, often hostile, hard drivers, frequently operating as employee rivals in the competitive market culture of work (Quinn and Rohrbaugh, 1983; Cameron and Quinn, 2006).

Some degree of conflict between employees is perhaps a relatively normal component of most working environments but within competitive business settings it has been suggested individuals are 'inclined to compete and dominate the conflict partner – rather than negotiating open mindedly— and seek victory and perceive both the board room and shop floor as battlegrounds in which you eat or are eaten' (Gelfand *et al.*, 2012, p. 1132).

Corporate competitive internal environments and performance related bonus cultures have been criticised as building hostility between peers and increasing employee burnout, cynicism and exhaustion (Cartwright and Holmes, 2006; Gilbert *et al.*, 2012). It has been argued by some that emotional competence as opposed to cutthroat mentalities among senior staff members prevent demoralization and loss of staff (Gilbert *et al.*, 2012). Competitive employment settings operate out of an assumption that individuals can actively handle heated confrontations. These environments are often juxtaposed with more traditional workplaces that granted employees security and space for professional development in exchange for loyalty and commitment.

A variety of negative outcomes are associated with competitive working environments that are adverse to collective craftsmanship and collaboration (Sennett, 2009). Including self-centred behaviour among employees and managers, leaders losing their tempers, a lack of empathy, people refraining from censoring their behaviour, personal agendas taking precedence over the long term

wellbeing of the company, unreasonable demands from superiors, the relentless pursuit of profits, distrust and politically motivated appraisals of staff by managers (Koehn, 2007; Gilbert *et al.*, 2012; Leca and Vranceanu, 2015). Gilbert *et al.* (2012, p. 36) contrast these characteristics with community-based organisations that operate more democratically, where leaders attempt to facilitate optimum employee performance, model selflessness, compassion, and effective interpersonal communication. In their analysis Gilbert *et al.* (2012, p. 40) advise organizational leaders to reject the insidious practices underlying competitive workplaces and instead 'infuse their cultures with a more community-centric orientation' for the sake of individuals' wellbeing.

Yet competitive cultures are sustained and reproduced in a variety of contemporary corporations (Tsai, 2002; Ho, 2009) and myriad employees chose to continue to work in these settings. Herein lies a dichotomy. The perception or interpretation of these practices is differently configured by individuals. Yip, Schweitzer and Nurmohamed's (2017) work explicates how 'trash-talking' - a form of rivalry common in competitive corporate environments - can motivate employees' performance, encouraging them to engage in constructive behaviour to 'out do' their opponents. Conversely for other individuals incivility in toxic environments can lead to emotional and psychological distress and develop propensities toward destructive behaviour (Yip, Schweitzer and Nurmohamed, 2017). Steinhage, Cable and Wardley (2015) similarly posit a dichotomous relationship where competition when negatively framed (as necessary to prevent job loss for example) can result in unethical behaviours, manipulation and sabotaging of colleagues for example. When positively framed (in terms of bonuses and rewards for example) however they find evidence for it resulting in greater employee productive creativity to achieve desired ends (Birkinshaw and Lingblad, 2005; Steinhage, Cable and Wardley, 2015). The motivation of financial rewards often associated with market orientated competitive cultures must also be considered. Problematically as explicated by Frank and Cook (2010) in their 'Winner-take-all economics' the fundamental problem surrounding top companies and top tier staff members is that the rewards are so disproportionately large in comparison with lower tiers, some people pursue them at any cost. Often reproducing situations of excessive competition and rivalry (Tsai, 2002; Gelfand *et al.*, 2012).

Clearly there are situations in which employment systems and cultures opposed to crafting opportunities – namely, space for skill development, space for collaboration and a sense of purposive trajectory - do still provide individuals with meaning. The absence of a predefined future destination does not necessarily negate fulfilment in work (Ho, 2009). Pride, meaning and a positive sense of self is achievable through understandings of the self as liquid and adaptable in work. Further competitive cultures antithetical to the prolonged process of skill development (Sennett, 2009) have been found to be motivating for some employees' performance, particularly when

monetary rewards are involved (Birkinshaw and Lingblad, 2005; Steinhage, Cable and Wardley, 2015).

In summary it is clear that meaning can be obtained outside of crafting experiences and ‘long term’ trajectories. Further it is inaccurate to assume the philosophical discipline of craft including the absence of conflict is the desire of everyone, or even the majority of knowledge workers. None the less a compelling case is made for the positive meaningful work experiences that do result from craft – including, the motivation to work *well*, a refining of skills, collaborative work, working with a sense of long-term destination and purpose. Indeed, a pertinent case is in fact made for craft constituting an antidote to alienating experiences in employment, discussed next.

Craft and alienation

It is argued by Sennett (2009) that the satisfaction derived from craftsmanship is a necessary part of being human, further that it is imperative we create things as a way to maintain a relationship with our environment, particularly in an increasingly consumerist and material society. The importance of meaning and intrinsic satisfaction being derived from the creation process is echoed by Wright Mills, who writes:

‘The labourer with a sense of craft becomes engaged in the work in and for itself; the *satisfactions of working are their own reward*; the details of daily labour are connected in the worker’s mind to the end product; the worker can control his or her own actions at work; skill develops within the work process; work is connected to the freedom to experiment; finally, family, community, and politics are *measured by the standards of inner satisfaction*, coherence, and experiment in craft labour’ (Wright Mills, 1951 cited in Sennett, 2009, p. 28).

Wright Mills, (1951) identifies the major features of craftsmanship, including the spontaneous ‘will-to-work’ that has no ulterior motive other than engaging in the processes of creation, and the intrinsic rewards that are obtained through overcoming difficulties in the labour process. According to Wright Mills, (1951) craft workers devise and orchestrate their own plans, according to their will, altering them as they please. The control and ownership of the process adds satisfaction to the crafting experience where one can creatively and autonomously plan, form, and develop their project. There are clear links to similar themes stipulated in Marx’s theory of alienation. Marx conceptualised alienation as the estrangement of individuals from their very human nature (Marx and Engels, 1844; 2011). *Gattungswesen* translated as ‘species being’ or ‘species essence’ broadly denotes his concept of human nature. According to Marx ‘the whole character of a species – its species character – is contained in the character of its life-activity; and free, conscious activity is

man's species character' (Marx and Engels, 1844; 2011, p. 54). Humans are distinguished from animals in their life production. Unlike the animal which is 'immediately identical with its life-activity... it is its life-activity. Man makes his life-activity itself the object of his will and of his consciousness. He has conscious life activity' (Marx and Engels, 1844; 2011, p. 54). Estranged labour reverses this relationship so that man makes 'his life-activity, his essential being, a mere means to existence' fulfilling fundamental needs (provision of food, water, shelter) (Marx and Engels, 1844; 2011, p. 54). This process alienates man from his species essence and hence dehumanises him.

Unlike animals, humans produce even when necessity does not dictate it. Human production is purposive and planned (Marx and Engels, 1844; 2011). They make their 'life activity' the object of their will, that is they are free to subordinate their will to demands and objectives they have imposed upon themselves (Marx and Engels, 1844; 2011). Humans make their life their object and objective, presupposing that their life is indeed under their control. Species essence involves the formulation of plans for the future in one's imagination and the ability to exercise production so as to fulfil those plans, arguably akin to the process of craftsmanship (Marx and Engels, 1844; 2011). Humans then can objectify their intentions by conceptualising themselves as the 'subject' and their creation as 'the object'. For Marx a life of this character achieves self-actualisation (Marx and Engels, 1970). Similarly according to Wright Mills, (1951, p. 222) as individuals develop their skills in the crafting process they also develop themselves through devotion and practice and as they 'confess and reveal [themselves] to the world' through their work. Craft then has a self-revelatory potential (Beamish, 2016). Indeed argues Wright Mills (1951, p. 223) the values and qualities developed in work are brought into an individual's non-working time. He explicates when employment is a crafting experience for people they do not need to 'flee' from work into a separate domain of leisure.

Whilst not necessarily a prerequisite to meaningful employment as argued by Sennett (2009) the philosophical practice of craft - involving the motivation to work *well*, skill development, space for collaboration, a sense of future destination – clearly still holds the potential to be a meaningful practice for many. One that has the potential to combat alienating experiences in work. Yet equally it cannot be considered a dogmatic one-track path to meaningful encounters with work. Sennett's (2009) claims that workers have weakened motivation due to demand and competition, and conflicting standards between working *well* and getting work *done*, whilst important do not apply to all. Monetary rewards, liquidity, competitive environments, a strategy of no strategy are meaningful for some (Ho, 2009; Yip, Schweitzer and Nurmohamed, 2017).

These debates need to be updated and explored in the contemporary knowledge economy. A contemporary exploration of craft, or the absence of craft and the potential for alienation will shed light on how knowledge workers construct pathways to meaning in their employment. Similarly, the potential for competitive working environments to motivate individuals in the absence of crafting processes should be examined to further understand the ways in which employment can be a meaningful and fulfilling experience. These debates will be specifically addressed in research question one which is detailed after the discussion of vocation, addressed next.

Vocation

There is a great degree of overlap between the philosophical conceptualisation of craft and the notion of vocation and work ethic. These features of vocation and the modern work ethic are now defined and then linked to craft. Weber saw the principles of modern capitalism as invoking a set of maxims, principles and values for individuals to be guided by and aspire to (Weber, 1930; Allan, 2017). Accordingly, how one lives their life in the contemporary capitalist culture mattered. The first maxim was to live with a specific goal in mind; for the Protestant this was to prove predestination, yet to demonstrate this, hard work, diligence and the acquisition of money and more money became the earthly goal (Weber, 1930; Allan, 2017). Being rational, organized, and frugal workers signified markers of God's chosen. The second maxim under contemporary capitalism is that all should be engaged with a vocation, employment should be considered more than work. Rather the concept of vocation focuses on the attitude towards work, a person of vocation (evidenced in the Protestant prototype) understands work as a duty but also demonstrates unflinching conviction and methodological rationality, a passionate conviction in ideals (Weber, 1946) and commitment without guarantees (Burawoy, 2016). Whereby the elusiveness of success in work (in the case of the Protestant the elusiveness of being saved) leads to a doubling down of efforts rather than defeatism (Burawoy, 2016). Under capitalism the duty of work itself is valued, as is a hard work ethic demonstrated through a vocational relationship to one's work, the Weberian 'spirit of capitalism.. exalts work as a moral attribute' (Allan, 2017, p. 161). Those who do not work are pathologized, work is seen as an end in itself rather than a means to survive.

Indeed part of Weber's solution to what he saw as the debilitating division of labour was the process of imbuing employment positions with meaning through passionate devotion, developing a sense of vocation towards them (Burawoy, 2016; Weber, 1946; Weber, 1922). In his two seminal works dedicated specifically to the topic, *Science as Vocation* (Weber, 1922) and *Politics as Vocation* (Weber, 1946) Weber demonstrates how individuals can align their personal beliefs and values with their work, finding fulfilment, meaning and purpose in their lives. Vocation then also refers to a form

of employment that the individual feels compelled to dedicate themselves to. For the politician this involves an ethic of responsibility felt at the heart and soul of the individual (Weber, 1946). When discussing vocation in the field of science he explicates what accomplishment entails in modernity. 'A really definitive and good accomplishment is today always a specialized accomplishment. And whoever lacks the capacity to put on blinders... He will never have what one may call the 'personal experience' of science. Without this strange intoxication, ridiculed by every outsider; without this passion... without this, you have no calling for science and you should do something else. For nothing is worthy of man as man unless he can pursue it with passionate devotion' (Weber, 1922, p. 5). Indeed, Weber suggests the scientist must have a disposition that allows for wholesale, total devotion to his work, the fate of his soul rests upon it.

There are clear links between the concept of vocation that Weber (1922, 1930, 1946) describes and a philosophical conceptualisation of craft. The specialization necessary in developing a sense of vocation aligns with the devotion, practise and skill development involved in craft (Wright Mills, 1951; Ackers, 2018). The passion involved in vocation akin to the intrinsic reward of engaging in craft for no ulterior motive other than the satisfaction of overcoming difficulties in the labour process (Wright Mills, 1951; Sennett, 2009). When considered philosophically craft comprises facets that overlap with vocation. Further it might be argued that a crafting process, or flow (Csikszentmihalyi, Abuhamdeh and Nakamura, 2005) will always be involved in a vocational relationship with employment. Where the devotion and passion required in vocation, facilitates spaces for total absorption in work and a loss of sense of time, specifically states of 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi, Abuhamdeh and Nakamura, 2005).

The third and final maxim described by the Weberian spirit of capitalism is that actions are legitimated through rationalization and often quantitative means. Weber (1930) argues we can justify our life choices and trajectories from a variety of angles but these are undergirded by rational and quantitative tenets (Allan, 2017). Importantly Weber saw the ability to develop a vocational relationship with employment as a means to counteract the experience of living in a society characterised by excessive rationality and disenchantment. 'The fate of our times.. characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the 'disenchantment of the world' [and the removal of] ultimate and most sublime values... from public life [means that].. We shall set to work and meet the 'demands of the day,' in human relations as well as in our vocation' (Weber, 1922, p. 20-21).

Problematically according to Weber, the reality of individuals establishing a vocational relationship with their work was a rarity. He predicted instead that society was heading toward a state of nullity, of 'specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart' (Weber, 1930, p. 124). John Carroll (2008) in his book *'Ego and Soul: The modern West in search of meaning'* provides a thorough exposition of meaning making practices in contemporary society. One of the themes of his work is dedicated to employment and sought to update the notion of vocation and a modern work ethic. Carroll (2008) argued Weber was too pessimistic and failed to account for the creative adaptability of the modern West to establish meaning in society. He argues a neo-Calvinist logic continues to drive society, an ideal of a vocational Protestant work ethic shows little sign of declining. Carroll (2008, 2020) cautions against assuming an over extended influence of materialist and consumerist culture. Whilst prevalent this culture is not all encompassing and identity is still chartered by occupation. People are still asked 'what they do' when meeting strangers, those who do not work are still pathologized as lazy, a work ethic is positively presented as an ideal rife throughout popular culture and elite workers have 'difficulty switching off on holiday' he suggests (Carroll, 2008, p. Chapter 1).

Some of Carroll's assertions however appear problematic. 'Difficulty switching off' could to some extent also be attributed to an unhealthy work-life balance and exploitative working conditions that encourage individuals to remain 'switched on' as documented in many areas of the knowledge economy (Moen *et al.*, 2013; Muhlbauer and Tziner, 2017). Indeed, Carroll's contention that the work ethic 'never sleeps' resulting in constant work, risks normalising employment cultures that exploit and manipulate ever increasing amounts of work from their employees. Carroll (2008, 2020, p. 283) would contend that 'a vocation is a way of life, not a job' and point to the fulfilment individuals experience through this 'calling'. Rightly, in this instance a 'difficulty switching off' is not likely to be the product of pernicious working relations that manipulate employees into working longer hours. Yet, it is also true and obvious that not all overwork is the result of a strong work ethic. A point Carroll (2020) also notes. He states,

'it is possible that the ideal of vocation and the reality, as experienced in the jobs that actually exist, are increasingly unrelated and even in conflict. The ideal of vocation as projected on television... is enjoyed vicariously by the majority, for whom work is experienced as routine and low-status... the ideal... would seem, at least in part, to serve as fantasy compensation for what is not, as much as an aspiration' (Carroll, 2020, p. 295).

Certainly, the ideal of vocation remains a pursuit and reality for some. Whether the ideal of vocation 'remains as strong and pronounced a presence as ever in popular culture' (Carroll, 2020, p. 282) is

open to debate and requires careful consideration to avoid obscuring unhealthy working conditions via over emphasising notions of a healthy 'vocational' work ethic.

To conclude, this theme has questioned whether specialisation, craft, and vocational relationships with employment constitute prerequisites to finding meaning in work. This theme has demonstrated the potential for these traditional pathways to employment to facilitate meaningful and fulfilling experiences with work that foster self-realisation and combat alienation (Wright Mills, 1951; Marx and Engels, 2011). This theme has also demonstrated however that for some less traditional pathways to meaning creation exist through atypical mechanisms. Highly competitive, stressful working environments correlated with negative working experiences in employment organisational culture literature (Gilbert *et al.*, 2012; Leca and Vranceanu, 2015), provide individuals in certain situations with a sense of purpose and fulfilment. This theme has also highlighted how the ideal of vocational pursuits in particular may not be a readily achievable reality for all. This demonstrates the need for the current research, which will contribute to the updating of the classical notion of vocation and explore whether it continues to hold relevance for knowledge workers in the contemporary era. This studies first research question asks:

Research question one: Did a sense of craft and/or vocation feature in participants' narratives?

Within this research question attention will be paid to whether a sense of long-term refinement of skills featured in participants' working experiences. The motivations behind work will be explored as part of this research question, specifically whether individuals had a sense of completing good work for its own sake, or whether time boundaries were the focus of task completion. The motivations behind a work ethic will also be explored and the potential for a vocational, devoted relationship with employment unpacked.

Conclusions to literature review topic three

The third pathway to obtaining meaningful experiences of work was unpacked in this theme, namely crafting and vocational relationships with and understandings of work. Craft and craftsmanship were addressed in a philosophical sense. Sennett (2009) a key author on craftsmanship argues collaborative and individual craft practices in organisations have been replaced by a model of competition that fails to motivate individuals to work well. Time anxiety results in a hollowing out of ability and an absence of long-term focus and planning. Others have echoed the negative impact on employee wellbeing and company performance that competitive 'market cultures' create (Cartwright and Holmes, 2006; Gilbert *et al.*, 2012; Leca and Vranceanu, 2015). Yet a variety of studies on competitive working environments counter there are positive responses to a lack of long

term focus and increased competition and rivalry between colleagues (Birkinshaw and Lingblad, 2005; Ho, 2009; Steinhage, Cable and Wardley, 2015). For some these working environments are motivational and result in greater employee productivity.

Clearly there are situations in which employment systems and cultures opposed to crafting opportunities do provide individuals with meaning. The absence of a predefined future destination does not necessarily negate fulfilment in work (Ho, 2009). Meaning is achievable through understandings of the self as liquid and adaptable in work. Competitive cultures antithetical to the prolonged process of skill development (Sennett, 2009) have been found to be motivating for some employees' performance, particularly when monetary rewards are involved (Birkinshaw and Lingblad, 2005). It is inaccurate to assume the philosophical discipline of craft including the absence of conflict is the desire of everyone, or even the majority of knowledge workers.

None the less a compelling case is made for the positive meaningful work experiences that do result from the discipline of craft – conducted collectively and individually. Where the satisfactions of working are their own reward. The worker has autonomy to form plans and bring them to fruition, to engage in self-realisation and development. In these ways the philosophical discipline of craft has been argued to operate as an antidote to alienation in employment (Wright Mills, 1951; Marx and Engels, 2011; Beamish, 2016).

The overlaps between a philosophical sense of craft and vocation and work ethic were stipulated, including specialization, devotion, experiences of absorption or 'flow' and passionate engagement with work. Weber saw the potential for vocational pursuits and meaningful interactions with work as dim. Arguing that society was traversing towards a situation of increasing disenchantment and 'specialists without spirit' (Weber, 1930, p.124). Carroll (2008, 2020) sought to update the notion of vocation and a modern work ethic. He argued Weber was too pessimistic, identity is still chartered by occupation and people are still motivated to work hard and work well. Yet he also concedes the ideal of vocation operates as an aspiration as opposed to a reality for many. Potential problems in overemphasising 'vocational' relationships with work that obscure situations of unhealthy work-life balance were also noted. The extent to which the ideal of a vocation is in fact a reality in contemporary society requires careful investigation.

The fourth major pathway to meaning creation in employment as identified in the research literature is now addressed in the following theme. The so called 'passion paradigm' and wider emotionalization of work as a means to self-actualize through employment is now addressed.

Literature review topic 4) The emotionalization of work

Introduction to the topic

The fourth and final major pathway to meaning creation in employment as identified by the research literature is now addressed. Namely what is being referred to here broadly as the emotionalization of work, encompassing particularly the 'passion paradigm' and 'Do What You Love' cultural ideologies. Aesthetic notions of employment as stipulated by Bauman (2000) provide a theoretical backdrop to the emotionalization of work, discussed first. The passion paradigm and related discourses are then looked to. The potential for exploitation and the perpetuation of inequalities are explored. Critical engagement with the literature reveals a false binary that is presented between paid work and a paid journey towards self-actualization, realisation, and fulfilment. This chapter argues there are a range of meaningful experiences of work available outside of this false binary. These alternative pathways to meaning creation are explored and notions of the 'work warrior' investigated.

Theoretical background to the topic

As discussed in the theoretical framework in chapter one, Weber theorised that the philosophy of Calvinism helped create a work ethic among individuals that favoured dispositions of hard work, self-discipline, methodological application and prolonged concentration (Weber, 1930; Baehr, 2001; Carroll, 2008; Ghosh, 2016). Bauman (2000) sought to update Weber's work. He theorises that it is an 'aesthetics of consumption that now rules where the work ethic once ruled' (Bauman, 2005, p. 32). The move from a producer to a consumer society brought about changes in the centrality of work, which according to Bauman (2000, p. 139) could no longer function as a 'secure axis around which to wrap and fix self-definitions, identities and life-projects'. According to Bauman work has been 'stripped of its eschatological trappings and cut off from its metaphysical roots' work is no longer measured by the 'genuine or putative effects it brings to one's brothers and sisters in humanity or to the might of the nation and country' (Bauman, 2000, p. 139). Work might possess aesthetic privileges that gratify individuals, entertain or amuse them but it no longer offers ethical, self-defining securities, axial orientations toward organising and understanding life projects (Bauman, 2000).

Clearly different forms of employment will manifest different levels of satisfaction and meaning for those engaging in them. However within Weber's work ethic era – prior to 'liquid modernity' – all kinds of work were viewed as equal, in that ethically they all contributed to the feeling of duty

accomplished and a sense of moral propriety (Bauman, 2005, p. 33). The notion of dutiful calling provided sufficient satisfaction to all employees. Within contemporary arrangements however work no longer ennobles human beings, the privileged position of work as the source of identity constitution has been replaced by consumer activities that prioritise sublime experience according to Bauman (2000). Individuals construct their identities as aesthetical 'seekers of sensations and collectors of experiences' (Bauman, 2000, p. 149) not as moral creatures in pursuit of spiritual redemption. In the same vein work is now judged on its ability to generate pleasurable experience, but not necessarily in an ethical sense. For Bauman (2005, p. 34) the typical contemporary individual wants jobs that are 'interesting – varied, exciting, allowing for adventure, containing certain (though not excessive) measures of risk... jobs that are monotonous, repetitive, routine, unadventurous, allowing no initiative... nor... self-assertion are boring'. Bauman sees aesthetics as ruling where a religiously founded work ethic once did. Problematically argues Bauman such pleasurable experiences are not universally available to all, leaving many in unsatisfied jobs selling their labour in exchange for survival (Bauman, 2005, p. 34). Where an entertaining job is a 'highly coveted privilege' (Bauman, 2005, p.34).

Cohering with and further extending Bauman's theorisations surrounding individuals' pursuit of an aesthetics of work – namely work that is interesting, providing experiences and sensations that are exciting and attractive - is a body of contemporary discourse interchangeably described as 'Love of Job' (Bygrave, 2020), the 'passion paradigm' (Pagis, 2020) or the 'Do What You Love' (DWYL) (De Palma, 2020) (in work) mantra. These discourses are all part of a wider trend towards the emotionalization of work (McRobbie, 2004; Sandoval, 2018; Bygrave, 2020; Tokumitsu, 2021). Indeed aspiring to find work that one loves has become a common theme in self-help guides, management and leadership textbooks and popular culture (Sandoval, 2018; Tokumitsu, 2021).

The emotionalization of 'love of work' rhetoric emphasizes individuals need to pursue self-fulfilment and actualization through employment. To have strongly emotive interactions with work experiencing 'passion' and 'love' among other emotions, and to create space for the realisation of existential desires (Ekman, 2014; Rao and Neely, 2019; Neely, 2020). De Palma (2020) demonstrates how the 'passion paradigm' (she coins the term) and associated discourses have become a coherent ideology of work. This ideology is firstly defined and unpacked, then its ability to provide a fulfilling experience will be examined and a critical analysis applied to explore implicit power relations. This thesis focuses on the emotionalization of work in a broad sense, but particular attention is given to the passion paradigm and 'Do What You Love' ideologies due to their onus on promises of fulfilment and meaning, the research focus. Indeed DWYL has been referred to as the epitome of a 'hostile takeover of the desire for self-fulfilment' (Sandoval, 2018, p. 3) and the 'unofficial work mantra for

our time' (Tokumitsu, 2021, p. Introduction). Doing work that one loves is equated with improved quality of life, happiness, and wellbeing.

Defining the passion paradigm and 'Do What You Love' ideologies of work

De Palma (2020) defines the passion paradigm as both a culture and ideology that exists in the contemporary knowledge economy. She conceptualises work passion as 'the emotional experiences of attraction, enjoyment, motivation and perseverance' (ibid, p. 3) in employment. Defining the passion paradigm as an adherence to an ideology which prioritizes and exalts the pursuit of work passion and produces a 'resilient worker who is committed to the pursuit of happiness in work via perfected self-knowledge' (ibid, p. 3). She further explicates the passion paradigm is successful within the knowledge economy because it motivates 'professionals to perform excellent work and controls professionals [through its central tenets of individualism] which convinces adherents that that which ultimately serves and preserves structures of work is of primary service to the self' (ibid, p. 3). The 'Do What You Love' dictum regularly referenced in the knowledge economy employment rhetoric stems from tech giant Apple's Steve Jobs (2005) Stanford University commencement speech where he stated:

'Your work is going to fill a large part of your life, and the only way to be truly satisfied is to do what you believe is great work. And the only way to do great work is to love what you do. If you haven't found it yet, keep looking. Don't settle.'

This discourse in contemporary culture facilitates the expectation among employees of being paid for pursuing what they love. It also prioritises this pursuit as a necessary endeavour, linking work with happiness and well-being, it normalizes a work ethic in which people can and should experience their work as their calling and a means to self-fulfilment (Sandoval, 2018; De Palma, 2020; Pagis, 2020). The attraction of the passion paradigm, DWYL mantra, and wider emotionalization of work used interchangeably here, is based on a central premise of empowerment whereby individuals can determine their life course in line with their personal desires and values (Sandoval, 2018; De Palma, 2020). Employees are encouraged to look to their emotions as 'a guide through their careers' understanding work as an experience that can be adapted and manipulated to accommodate and facilitate a life of their choosing (De Palma, 2020, p. 22). When/if this manifests, individuals are more inspired, more engaged and happier in work, achieving states of flow in tasks (Bakker, 2008) they possess more motivation and experience greater levels of enjoyment (Bygrave, 2020; De Palma, 2020). Intrinsic rewards of more pleasurable work are achieved through pursuing work one 'loves'. Opportunities for self-expression are correlated with employment that fulfils passionate pursuits

leading to greater levels of authentic interaction with employment and arguably staving off alienating experiences (Salmenniemi, Nurmi and Jaakola, 2020).

The synthesis of employment and emotional wellbeing is well documented (McRobbie, 2004; Gill and Pratt, 2008). Viewed on the one hand as the epitome of achieving self-actualization and fulfilment, experiencing everyday as a pleasurable pursuit, and obtaining high levels of purpose and satisfaction from work. On the other hand the emotive bindings to employment have been described as exploitative, power saturated relationships that elicit overwork and represent a colonisation of individuals emotional subjectivity (McRobbie, 2004; Gill and Pratt, 2008; Cruz, 2016) these debates are discussed next.

An enterprising self vs a self-work romantic utopia

Undoubtedly the meaningful work literature (Rosso, Dekas and Wrzesniewski, 2010; Steger, 2016) supports the view that doing work that one loves is a more rewarding experience. Problematically however it can be argued the DWYL discourse sets the bar almost unreachably high and presents a gold standard for how individuals subjectively understand their careers and their lives. To figure out one's utmost loves and desires, find corresponding employment and obtain said employment is a tall order. As part of the wider emotionalization of work (Gill and Pratt, 2008; Rao and Neely, 2019), Pagis (2020) conceptualises the 'self-work romantic utopia' imaginary that exists that also coheres with a DWYL discourse. Pagis (2020, p. 5) defines such as a

'cultural imaginary in which paid work is portrayed as a continuous and central source of enjoyment, excitement, and life's meaning... based on emotional and romantic discursive constructs captured in the popular slogan 'do what you love'... where work becomes akin to a romantic relationship'.

This imaginary he goes on to explain is grounded in the view that work is a central channel for fulfilling emotional needs, viewing the relationship between an employee and their employment as 'infused with positive emotions, free of social constraints and holding the promise for long-term life purpose' (ibid, p. 2). Where employment operates as a central identity marker. The expectation for individuals to foster an emotional relationship with their employment is arguably problematic. This 'tall order' pathologizes a vast array of workplace experiences that are not saturated with a sense of love, arguably denigrating those whose work - a 'central identity marker' (Pagis, 2020) - is not spectacular, passion evoking employment. For those keen to align with a self-work romantic utopia, the discourse also risks encouraging a cognitive dissonance whereby individuals reassure themselves that they love their job, when this is not in fact an accurate representation of reality, creating a mental conflict in the contradictory information. The gold standard of a romantic utopia of doing

what you *love* arguably disparages myriad work experiences that possess many positive qualities and elicit many positive emotions. This disparagement being due to the fears a gold standard creates, namely that one is missing out on a higher level of satisfaction; to be *in love* with your employment.

Pagis (2020) addresses this critique in some ways. His study challenges the 'monolithic and dichotomic' view of doing what you love as being successfully or unsuccessfully obtained by individuals. He demonstrates how the self-work romantic utopia imaginary operated as a flexible cultural script for his participants. His participants adopted creative ways to inhabit the discourse and adapt it to their workplace circumstances. Some of his participants for example inhabited the utopia in a part time job, whilst also maintaining a second better paid, more stable job. Others remained in work that they did not consider wholly fulfilling but focused on the 'more exciting parts' (ibid, p. 14). A further group of his participants inhabited the utopia on an abstract, future based level, where they worked in unsatisfying roles whilst training for new jobs. Diverse, adapted and sometimes partial fulfilments of the imaginary cannot be categorized as either fully successful attempts or not argues Pagis (2020). Problematically however the foundation of his study argues that the self-work romantic imaginary has for the most part replaced the 'enterprising self' imaginary, namely the discursive ideology of work constituting an enterprise culture where individuals are the CEO of their work, concerned with its management, its control and achieving success. Pagis (2020) argues individuals are no longer driven by self-management but instead by their emotional relation to employment. Further that individuals will pursue positive emotions and happiness at the expense of success and status (Pagis, 2020, p. 2).

Whilst emotionalization undoubtedly plays in role in contemporary work (Gill and Pratt, 2008; Sandoval, 2018; Rodríguez, Mesurado and Crespo, 2019) the prioritising of emotions over success is a unfounded claim presented by Pagis (2020). Indeed, his methodological sampling encompasses bias. Pagis (2020) interviewed 60 individuals who had undergone a life-coaching process of 12 to 20 sessions, they had undertaken life-coaching to discuss and formulate plans for pursuing more fulfilling work. Yet the fact that participants were financially secure enough to pursue a life coach denotes a position of success and status already obtained in employment. Arguably thus it was not a prioritising of emotional meaning over success in employment choices. The success and stability already obtained provided a secure base from which to explore romantic relationships with work. The enterprising-self imaginary is arguably downplayed. Given the prominence and traction the DWYL and passion paradigm ideologies of work have gained in popular culture (Sandoval, 2018; Bygrave, 2020; Tokumitsu, 2021), and their attractive nature, this study seeks to answer the following research question:

Research question two: Did participants exhibit a sense of passion, love or a 'self-work utopia' in their career narratives?

This research question will specifically address debates surrounding the alleged prevalence of an emotionalization of work. It will broadly assess how important and/or achievable this is for participants. In a thesis concerned with meaningful employment it is essential that this cultural schema is investigated; claims that an emotionalization of work can operate as a meaningful work ethic must be critically explored.

Overwork and exploitation through the passion paradigm

Other criticisms of the 'passion paradigm' and embedded Do What You Love rhetoric within contemporary employment explore the potential for exploitative relations within the ideology. Neely (2020) demonstrates how industry expectations to be passionate were in operation in financial settings. Among hedge fund investors 'the value of having passion for the work and the expectation that people would express it shaped access to hiring, training and investing opportunities' (Neely, 2020, p. 283). His participants explained evidencing passion for their job was necessary for advancement. Problematically as unpacked by Neely (2020) this emotional demonstration was used by employers to ascertain whether an individual will commit to overwork – working longer hours, being responsive to the market at all times - for the job is described as 'always happening' (Neely, 2020, p. 283). Insidiously then within Neely's (2020) research setting passion rhetoric obscured hidden expectations for overwork.

Arguments of exploitation also claim that 'passion' and emotionalization narratives obscure a shifting of responsibilities from employers to employees, personalizing structural issues as individual ones. A self-regulated 'passionate' workforce carries the risks of work and is encouraged to view poor working conditions and a lack of enjoyment in work as personal problems (Sandoval, 2018; De Palma, 2020). The 'passion' cultural imaginary dictates that if one is unhappy it is due to a mismatch in personal preferences with work, not a failure of an organization to meet emotional or wellbeing needs (Pagis, 2020). The DWYL rhetoric distracts from structural problems, and ties individuals to a constant labour of self-improvement and self-management through promises of liberation (Sandoval, 2018). Indeed as explicated by De Palma (2020, p. 22) the passion ideology is hegemonic in that it serves and protects employment in the knowledge economy by 'deeply individualizing and thereby depoliticizing the experiences of work for adherents while committing them to work hard and work well'. She argues this ideology has the potential to cultivate a fixation of individuals on their own biographies, their own perceived areas of agency, potential growth, and happiness,

detracting attention from structural inequalities, a lack of resources and a lack of security. The ideology also encourages individuals to focus their attention on competing with colleagues instead of connecting with them (Sandoval, 2018; Bygrave, 2020).

As discussed in topic one, reflexivity and projects-of-the-self discourses (Giddens, 1991; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) operate in a similar manner obscuring unequal power relations, and positioning structural problems as individual ones (Skeggs, 2004). De Palma (2020) goes on to demonstrate the potential for the passion paradigm to transform the working relationship from one involving an individual and their employer to one centred on an individual and their personal emotions, whereby emotions are the primary source of security. The passion narrative postulates that if one is dedicated and motivated enough in their goals they will overcome the precarious structural insecurities of their employment settings and find ways to be successful; loyalty is to one's self not to one's boss (De Palma, 2020). Clearly there is an insidiousness to the emotionalization of work in the espousing of excessive individual responsibility and agency. These features are presented as highly attractive but actually appear to be serving the interests of sustaining the institution of work, whilst all the while employees perceive of being engaged in a service to themselves (De Palma, 2020).

Topic one argued the individual disposition and social constitution of individuals must be considered when exploring their ability to engage reflexively with work and careers. Clearly the same consideration must be employed when addressing an individual's response to the passion paradigm and emotionalization of work. It is feasible that for individuals with specific social, economic, and cultural resources the insidious conditions of the DWLY cultural ideology are indeed motivational. The mediating socio-economic factors influencing emotional engagement with work are discussed next.

[The emotionalization of work and the perpetuation of inequalities](#)

Rao and Neely (2019) describe the expectation of demonstrations of passion at work to be a cultural schema, ordering how individuals interact, think, and behave. They explicate this cultural schema has consequences for which individuals are able to access opportunities and rewards in work. Whereby employers perceive an individual's display of passion for their work as a commitment to their organisation, replacing traditional notions of loyalty (Rao and Neely, 2019; Neely, 2020). Demonstrations of passion are a form of emotional labour, the appropriate activation of said emotional capital translates into 'rewards such as being hired and promoted' (Rao and Neely, 2019, p. 5). Problematically the authors articulate how affinities for passions are shaped by social class,

gender, and ethnicity among other factors. For example, they highlight how affluent parents are likely to have heightened expectations for their children and possess the financial security to encourage their offspring to seriously take up extracurricular activities and cultivate passions and talents. At a wider level affluent parents are able also to develop a passionate and exploratory orientation in their children afforded through frequent new experiences such as global travel and engagement in middle class cultural practices (e.g. theatre and museum trips) (Rao and Neely, 2019; Cech, 2021). The financial safety net that individuals coming from more well off backgrounds possess allows these early career starters to pursue their passions in work, rather than pursuing jobs out of necessity (Rao and Neely, 2019). Hence it appears passionate more vocational interests can be socialized processes misunderstood as professional drive, or personal aptitude (Rao and Neely, 2019). The passion paradigm is clearly influenced by and reinforces social inequalities (Cech, 2021).

A further gendered dimension to work narratives that argue individuals should pursue fulfilling work that aligns with their personal 'loves' and 'passions' also exists. Joan Williams argued the 'ideal worker' – desirable to employers – is one with minimal childcare and domestic commitments outside of work, able to work long hours, travel at a moment's notice and accommodate the demands of their employer and hence is 'hopelessly gendered' as male (Davis, 1999; Williams, 2000). Neely (2020) updates this assertion in conceptualising a similar 'portfolio worker' who is desirable to employers – one who demonstrates individualism, entrepreneurship and risk taking and a display of passion for work. Problematically displays of passion as we have seen signal a willingness to work long hours and be 'always on' and thus also relies on someone with minimal domestic and childcare commitments outside of employment. Hence, the 'passionate' portfolio worker is arguably also most likely gendered as a male without dependents (Neely, 2020).

A false binary and over-privileging of emotions in work

Literature surrounding the current contemporary white collared work situation then presents on the one hand the opportunity - if not necessity - for pursuing work that one loves, presented as an achievable maxim that elicits positive and fulfilling workplace experiences (Bygrave, 2020; Tokumitsu, 2021). According to this position failing to obtain 'great' employment that one 'loves' (Jobs, 2005) is considered a degraded state, a relegation to some level of boredom or monotony in work. This is associated with a lack in work ethic and a lack in personal fulfilment (Bauman, 2005); where arguably work is not considered a worthy axis to wrap an identity around. On the other hand, said Do What You Love culture is said to be an ideological apparatus for obscuring overwork, exploitation and class and gender inequalities. Accordingly, doing work that one actually loves is difficult to obtain yet perceived as an individual responsibility and burden. To not have achieved

such is seen as representative of personal failure in some capacity. Employers and institutions are absolved from bearing any responsibility for degraded work experiences (Sandoval, 2018; De Palma, 2020). Problematically these two camps in the literature present a range of false binaries that obscure adequate consideration of the range of interactions eliciting meaning creation in cognitive labour in the knowledge economy.

The two camps present a false binary between a gold standard of work on the one hand and a degraded experience on the other. Between a paid *journey* towards self-realisation and fulfilment where work is a continuous and central source of enjoyment, excitement and life's meaning (Pagis, 2020, p. 5) on one pole and paid *work* on the other.

The two camps of literature – one exalting the DWYL ideal and one condemning it as obscured exploitation and the promotion of inequalities – both also arguably over privilege the importance of emotional and passionate pursuits and under privilege the importance of success and status to individuals, as critically discussed in the 'enterprising-self versus a self-work romantic utopia' subtopic debate above. The DWYL literature elevates emotional pursuits to the highest hierarchical position suggesting this is the utmost level of fulfilment. Similarly, critics of the DWYL literature position individuals as consumed with their emotional pursuits to the extent that they are exploited. Problematically critics present overly passive conceptions of individuals as possessing little to no agency in their navigation of overwork and exploitative practices. Arguably setting up a false binary between victim employees and villain employers (Ekman, 2014). Indeed, these criticisms echo those levelled at a Marxist theory of alienation that highlight the ways in which individuals do operate agency and find meaning in unusual ways (for example through lateral agency (Berlant, 2011)) within often exploitative, unequal capitalist, neoliberal structures.

There are a range of meaningful experiences in the knowledge economy outside of the binaries detailed above. People can obtain meaning outside of a gold standard of passionate, emotive employment interactions. Equally for those who are passionate about their work, their employment still has 'lows' and does not always constitute a journey towards self-actualization. Problematically also a binary is constructed in the literature between 'resilient' workers who pursue happiness at all costs (De Palma, 2020, p. 3) and by comparative definition those who are less resilient because their work is less fulfilling.

Another body of literature is now looked to, to explore more nuanced analyses of the social situation and overcome the false binaries often alluded to in the literature. Neglected in DWYL rhetoric are the ways in which self-actualization and fulfilment are not always the product of passionate work. Notions of self-promotion and success and the continued meaning they hold for participants require

more attention, explored in the literature below. The studies that follow also demonstrate the more complex ways in which exploitation and overwork – when they do occur – are actively navigated by individuals and can serve their own agendas. However further research is also needed in this area; this thesis will attempt to plug that gap.

Alternative pathways to meaning creation in work

Susanne Ekman's (2014; 2015) empirical ethnographic study details how within the realm of the contemporary creative industry, work was seen as a stage for self-actualization a 'platform for existential explorations' (Ekman, 2014, p. 145). Drawing on her data collected from two, three-month long stints, one in a large media company and one in a large publishing house her participants themselves frequently utilised discourses of 'self-actualization' and subthemes of 'passion', 'progression' and 'indispensability' (Ekman, 2014, p. 146). Yet she describes precariousness and opportunism as different sides of the same coin, whereby employees at risk of exploitation and manipulation strategically made use of short-term loyalty and 'double bind' interactions. She conceptualises 'double bind' interactions as a 'relationship of dependence where one party communicates two mutually exclusive demands to the counterpart, combining this with some form of threat about sanctions' (ibid, p. 148). These interactions were common in her study and bi-directional between employees and employers, each could impose demands on the other. A common double bind practised by employees was to 'demand of their managers that they should facilitate highly personal, existential development on the one hand, yet that they should establish impersonal rules and procedures on the other hand.... So when contemplating the very same assignment, an employee might expect her manager to lead her by giving her unambiguous instructions, yet at the same time might feel outraged if she was not given complete 'artistic' freedom' (ibid, p. 148-149). A threatened sanction imposed by employees might be losing motivation, gossiping, creating hostile working environments or threatening to leave the job to join a rival competitor (Ekman, 2014). The ambiguous cultural norms associated with the double-binds in operation – for example asking for clear protective boundaries but also total freedom and autonomy in work – allowed employers/managers and employees to practice opportunism and self-promotion. For Ekman's (2014) participants the instability of jobs allowed managers to terminate contracts with relative ease, but the same right was afforded to workers who were equally keen to leave employment situations that began failing to cater to their own self-development narratives. What appeared at face value to be unequal power relations between workers (subject to unstable

arrangements) and employers, were in fact more bi-directional relationships. Employees, she argued were also 'exploitative and opportunistic in the sense that they do not entertain a notion of consistent responsibility' (Ekman, 2014, p. 153). Her participants were at times powerful, strategic, and demanding generating insecurity and vulnerability in managers. Employees refused to engage in consistent and non-opportunistic responsibilities over long periods and would leave companies if their personal development narratives were not met. They served their own self-realization agenda, clearly demonstrating an ability to act meaningfully as employees and operate some level of agency.

Indeed Ekman's (2014) participants consciously paved their own self-actualizing paths. They were aware and complicit in aspects of their own exploitation, but poignantly also opportunistic in that they exploited their managers/companies for their own benefit. Individuals did engage in extreme working practices, accepting difficult tasks with little or no training, pressurised deadlines and highly stressful environments but this allowed them to operate their own self-actualizing narratives and maintain fantasmatic, existentially heightened working lives (Ekman, 2014). Being under-equipped for tasks for example was viewed as a chance to prove they could accomplish the impossible.

Extreme and unrealistic expectations were perceived as flattery that validates workers self-perceptions of indispensability (Ekman, 2015). Indeed, there was a willingness to engage in extreme over-involvement but not when labour was 'unspectacular'. Highly pressured intensive working environments argues Ekman (2014) do not just serve the interests of organisations, they also cater to the existential desires of workers and their expectations of work that it should 'deliver the stage for this individualized endeavour' (Ekman, 2014, p. 153). Participants were aware of the exploitative practices imposed upon them, and consciously navigated them for their own benefit and engaged in opportunistic domination of managers in various ways. Consciously participants also juggled their own desires for clear protective boundaries and moderation versus limit breaking self-actualizing moments (Ekman, 2014); often resulting in anxiety and insecurity but none the less also providing existentially heightened lives.

The overall message of her study clearly demonstrates that notions of exploitation are more complex than presented by some, challenging passive views of individuals, and documenting the agency employees possess in navigating intensive working environments. She reveals how project workers in the knowledge economy can exercise opportunistic domination over managers/companies within certain contexts. Also demonstrating how individuals are not just victims of overwork in capitalist employment relations, and employers not just villains (Ekman, 2014). Whilst the power balance between employees and employers was not equal, her study imbues the knowledge worker with some level of power, actively serving their own realisation

agenda and actually obtaining meaning from highly pressured environments and tight deadlines that validate perceptions of indispensability.

Ho's (2009) ethnography on Wall Street also explores self-serving agendas within the contemporary workplace and the methods through which individuals obtain meaning. Ho (2009) demonstrates the more complex ways in which overwork is navigated by individuals and how self-fulfilment is achieved through success and self-promotion as opposed to passionate work. She explores how extreme working conditions are actually meaningful to individuals and purposefully pursued as such, even outside of work that one 'loves' or is 'passionate' about.

Ho (2009) shows how her participants (some of whom were clocking up 90–100-hour weeks) purposefully attempted to embody the market, viewing themselves as liquid employees who conducted their own biographies of hegemony. Local cultural forces (organisational ethos, networking events, other banks and so on) did present a variety of narratives that conflated intense work with the perfect lifestyle, but this was upheld by workers understanding themselves as 'liquid'. Ho's (2009) participants were conscious and open about the fact that they were pursuing self-interest, often articulating that they were not in the finance sector for the long haul. Rather they were focused on making a surplus of money and then exiting employment. Many made clear that they considered the long working hours to be a 'young man's game', and personally did not intend to maintain the intensity long term.

Ho's (2009) research goes on to explore the opportunities available to her participants in their intensive cognitive labour. Many cited work as a means to 'prove' their superiority in clear self-actualizing discourses, aligning with Ekman's (2014) participants who viewed completing unrealistic tasks as a means to validate their indispensability. On Wall Street, less intense employment in the 'outside world' was considered mundane and associated with complacent people and lifestyles, a negative connotation (Ho, 2009). Extreme working conditions and seemingly impossible demands placed on employees in an 'every man for himself' culture was interpreted by employees as a 'test' of character and means of 'proving' oneself. A discourse of perceived superiority permeated the financial settings. Individuals viewed the relentless pursuit of profits, unreasonable demands from superiors, exhaustive hours, overwork and lack of work life balance as providing escape from 'complacent' forms of employment (Ho, 2009). Overwork was interpreted as getting things done, a proof of their smartness in contradistinction to the masses of 'complacent', less capable workers in the real world (Ho, 2009). The informants 'legitimated their work and its effects... by appealing to their work ethic... the fetish for working hard and working constantly bolsters claims of hyper-efficiency' (Ho, 2009, p. 106).

The workers did not possess loyalty to their employers and vice versa, both parties being happy with this arrangement. Indeed individuals viewed themselves as 'ultimately liquid' able to cope with the demands of a toxic environment due to their smartness, adaptability and range of network contacts, a culture of 'survival of the fittest' dominated (Ho, 2009). Meaning was derived from their employment in the opportunities it provided for them to exercise their abilities and skills. Leisure time was not coveted by Wall Streeters, they derived satisfaction from avoiding such relaxed, 'complacent' lifestyles in what they considered to be the prime of their careers. Their sense of self was created and validated in the workplace counter to Bauman's (2000) assertions that work is no longer an axis to wrap identities around. Consciously aware that the intensity was not sustainable, they were not deterred, many knew they would go into consulting or other forms of employment in later life but relished current self-actualizing opportunities and indeed financial rewards.

Ekman (2014) and Ho's (2009) rich ethnographies demonstrate in line with other studies (Kosmala and Herrbach, 2006; Lupu and Empson, 2015; Pérez-Zapata *et al.*, 2016) a meaningfulness to work being obtained through achievement, self-esteem and 'proving' of oneself as opposed to 'passion' or 'love of job' (Bygrave, 2020). This is not to say that elements of passion did not feature but they were not foregrounded or hierarchically prioritised. Both studies detail a rejection of 'complacent' or 'unspectacular' work. The cultivation of self-concepts of indispensability and superiority were valued. Whereby the 'best' individuals do not falter in the face of pressure and competition but 'hold their own', actively handle confrontation and succeed in their own self-promotion (Gelfand *et al.*, 2012; McGuigan, 2014). Achievement, status and success were the avenues for the creation of meaning in these ethnographies (Ho, 2009; Ekman, 2014, 2015), aligning with an enterprising notion of self (Du Gay, 1996; Pagis, 2020).

Indeed a sense of fulfilment or meaningfulness being obtained through opportunities to 'prove' one's capabilities and create heightened perceptions of self – as resilient and indispensable – is a phenomenon documented elsewhere in the literature in notions of 'work warrior' subjectivities. Kosmala and Herrbach's (2006) study details a sense of pride among auditors in response to being able to withstand harsh, difficult, and stressful working environments. Where auditors deduced and constructed positive identity associations from this dynamic. Their enduring abilities to cope with mental and physical exertion and exhaustion elicited among some participants a conscious positioning of themselves as different from 'others' in society who do 'less' work, arguably fostering a 'work warrior' sense of self. These positive and esteemed self-estimations resulted in a distancing from professional behaviour, from official working methods, and from a sense of the collective 'team player' mentality within their firms (Kosmala and Herrbach, 2006). Their study whilst never using the phrase 'work warrior' demonstrates a pride in the implied ability to act as one, enduring overwork

and behaving as an work 'machine' (Kosmala and Herrbach, 2006, p. 1411). Similar findings are demonstrated by Lupu and Empson (2015) who document a willingness to become 'captured' by intensive working environments in the finance sector and accept exploitative conditions in exchange for higher status and esteemed self-conceptions.

A gap in the field of research literature is the application of these findings pertaining to work warrior identities to a range of employment settings. The studies cited above that evidence meaning being derived from notions of superiority, indispensability, and opportunities to 'prove' oneself are set in often high-risk financial settings (e.g. Wall Street) and creative industries. Two areas that are heavily researched in the field. This study seeks to plug this gap by exploring the potential for similar work warrior themes in a range of employment settings in the knowledge economy, not confining the search to financial and creative spheres.

The debates presented in this topic require further exploration within the contemporary knowledge economy. Clearly further work is needed to shed light on the different pathways to meaning that individuals forge in employment. A number of claims and debates within the literature have been presented that will be addressed by this research. The claim made by some that emotional relationships with work are a primary mechanism to meaningful experiences with work and a desire of knowledge workers will be investigated, specifically by research question two cited above. Similarly, the claim made by others that the emotionalization of work actually constitutes masked exploitation and an individualization of problems will also be investigated broadly by research question two.

It has been argued that much of the emotionalization of work literature fails to adequately consider how success and status – particularly according to monetary and material metrics – are (still) meaningful pursuits for many. Notions of indispensability, superiority and high levels of competency have also been argued to be meaningful for some. A few pertinent studies have made headway in this area documenting the agency individuals possess in navigating stressful, sometimes exploitative environments and the heightened self-perceptions these environments foster. Research question two will explore these debates in part, in addition to research question three detailed below.

Research question three: Did individuals pursue self-fulfilment and/or personal interests in their work?

Indeed, research question three will explore the motivations behind work. It will investigate the reasons why individuals chose to go into their respective fields of employment and the reasons they choose to remain in their roles. It will explore the alignment of individuals' personal interests with

their employment. Individual interests are associated with meaningful work by the classical theorists who equate personal interests, plans and autonomy to carry out those plans with our species essence (Weber, 1922, 1946; Marx and Engels, 2011). The ability to pursue and creatively work according to one's personal interests and that which is personally fulfilling counters alienation in employment (Marx and Engels, 2011). Hence this research question will investigate the extent to which this is a reality for participants and/or the extent to which success and status and heightened perceptions of the self are meaningful motivators in work.

Conclusions to literature review topic four

To conclude new ideologies of work, namely the passion paradigm, Do What You Love dictum and the wider related emotionalization of work, promise work can be a self-actualizing fulfilling experience. Critics however suggest that these cultural narratives are exploitative and only achievable for those with the socio-economic resources to engage with 'passions'. Further that emotionalization ideologies invoke individual choice and fortitude as the determining factors of success, wellbeing, and happiness in work. Where the passion paradigm individualises problems, absolves organisations from structural critiques and actually constitutes the perpetuation of neoliberal tenets.

A variety of false binaries are set up in the two camps of literature, where work is presented as a paid journey towards self-actualizing on one hand and as nothing more than paid labour on the other. Also, between resilient individuals who pursue their passions and by comparative definition others who lack resilience. Problematically with the exception of a few key studies, there is also a lack of appropriate consideration of employees' agency in navigating exploitative working environments and pursuing their own self-interests.

The assertion by some that passion has become the primary motivator for work is problematic, achievement, success, status, and financial rewards are still important factors in the work ethic of many, not everyone is intent on pursuing highly emotional encounters with work. Further notions of indispensability, superiority and related 'work warrior' mentalities have been demonstrated to be meaningful in certain spheres of employment. Indeed, there are a variety of alternative pathways to meaning outside of 'love of job'.

The prominence and extent to which the new passion ideology of work features in contemporary knowledge workers' lives and understandings of themselves and of their employment requires further research. This is an area this study will seek to shed light on.

Conclusions to the literature review chapter

This literature review offers a number of unique contributions to knowledge in its critical engagement with the research field. This review has critically interrogated a number of claims and false binaries presented within contemporary employment studies. This review has pointed to gaps in the current field and demonstrated the need for further investigation.

Topic one unpacked the new spirit of capitalism's promises of greater employee liberation and devolved freedom, autonomy, mobility and flexibility in work. The wider context of the spirit was explored including the 'ideal' consultant prototype in possession of 'potential ability' (Sennett, 2006) and protean and boundaryless careers that stipulate that those with the skills of self-resilience, adaptability and flexibility are most equipped to succeed, thrive and find fulfilment in the knowledge economy (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Hall, 2004). Various 'decline' theories of work critique new liberation models and flexible, 'short term' ways of working as corrosive to character and the ability to establish a working identity (Sennett, 1998; Castells, 2010). Yet, it has been argued employment studies must take account of individual's subjectivity including their dispositions, aptitudes, preferences and socio-economic constitution. This thesis argues how individuals experience work will depend on their personal biographies and the individual's constitution must be considered when exploring the meaning and fulfilment they derive from their work. Whilst the 'decline' theorists offer credible arguments applicable to some, stability, and a sense of 'long term' has been overemphasised and arguably deified. Short term work, technological innovations that increase accessibility, flatter hierarchies, an onus on 'potential ability' etc. – new features of knowledge work – can be experienced as meaningful for some and result in liberation and a greater sense of freedom.

The potential for alienation in our neoliberal context was also explored in relation to identity formation and individual constitution. The increasing focus on personal branding in contemporary work was critiqued as relying on already available subject positions. Personal branding hence lacks genuine and authentic processes. However, it was theorised that personal branding has the capacity to provide new 'beds' for individuals to locate their identities in reducing subjective uncertainty. Entrepreneurialism, another cultural trope prevalent in employment and popular culture was discussed. Entrepreneurial narratives encourage individuals to perceive of the self as capital to be invested, this was critiqued as a depersonalizing process that has the capacity to alienate employees in contemporary work. These debates require further examination to shed light on some of the discrepancies in the literature.

This literature review also discussed the extent to which the major documented pathways to obtaining meaning from employment are in operation, four key pathways to meaning were unpacked. These included 1) obtaining meaning through establishing a philanthropic relationship with employment where work is perceived to be socially valuable 2) obtaining meaning from a variety of micro level, organisational features of work. Also, 3) the establishment of a sense of vocation and craftsmanship in work and finally 4) the establishment of passion or an emotional relationship with work. The research intentionally disregarded the first pathway and recruited participants from jobs that lack obvious social value.

The establishment of a philosophical craft outlook in work and/or sense of vocation was addressed in topic three. The overlap between the constitution of craft and a sense of vocation was explored, including a focus on specialization, devotion and absorption and flow. Opportunities for crafting experiences and/or the establishment of a sense of vocation in organisational settings was explored. Weber (1930) saw the opportunities for vocations as dwindling, Carroll (2008, 2020) in an update of the modern work ethic argued the opposite. Yet it was argued the feasibility of obtaining the ideal of vocation must be carefully investigated, as this ideal constitutes more of an aspiration than a reality for many. Topic three demonstrated that craft and vocational relationships with work can constitute highly meaningful employment experiences that staved off the potential for alienation from ones' species essence (Marx and Engels, 1844; 2011). But the topic also criticised a number of false assertions presented by the literature. It was critically demonstrated that competitive working environments, rivalry and organisational structures opposed to craft and opposed to the 'long term' can still provide meaning for many employees. Meaning can be found in monetary rewards and a liquid sense of sense. For some highly competitive, stressful working environments that lack future focus and destination provide individuals with a sense of meaning and fulfilment.

Topic four explored the emotionalization of work and related passion paradigm and 'Do What You Love' cultural ideologies. It has been argued a set of false binaries are presented in the contemporary literature between work as a journey towards self-actualization on the one hand and work as mere paid labour on the other. Further between those who pursue their 'passions' constituting highly resilient individuals and those who do not as lacking resilience. Topic four demonstrated the ways in which individuals at times engage in their own exploitation in calculated ways to get ahead and maintain fantastic understandings of their lives. It is argued in line with Ekman (2014) that greater efforts need to be paid to overcoming the 'victim employee' 'villain employer' narrative in employment literature. Whilst the power dynamic between employees and employers is far from equal, greater attention should be paid to the agency and resistance employees utilise. It was critically demonstrated that achievement, success and status are still

meaningful aspects of work for many. Further that ‘work warrior’ subjectivities allow individuals to generate positive, heightened perceptions of themselves and their abilities. A variety of alternative pathways to meaning were documented including the rejection of complacency in work, and the facilitation of understandings of the self as ‘superior’ and indispensable. It is argued not all individuals are intent on pursuing their passions in work.

In summary, the debates presented in the literature review demonstrate the need for further clarification and research into the meaning making mechanisms employed by knowledge workers. The four major pathways to meaningful encounters with work identified in the literature present overgeneralised claims and/or fail to adequately explain some of the more complex ways in which individuals derive meaning from their work. A number of gaps in the literature have been identified leading to the study’s research questions, detailed in full below. Further research is needed to illuminate the ways in which contemporary knowledge workers derive meaning from their work (or not) and to establish greater depth and nuance of understanding than offered by existing theories. This thesis attempts to contribute to this research mandate. The methodological approach of the research and its appropriacy are explored next in the ‘methodology’ chapter. First the research questions are briefly summarised and linked to the overall purpose of the study.

The research questions

This study’s four research questions ask the following:

Research question one: Did a sense of craft and/or vocation feature in participants’ narratives?

Research question two: Did participants exhibit a sense of passion, love or a ‘self-work utopia’ in their career narratives?

Research question three: Did individuals pursue self-fulfilment and/or personal interests in their work?

Research question four: To what extent did respondents express a neoliberal subjectivity in their approach to work?

The first three research questions broadly seek to explore the extent to which the major pathways to meaning as documented in the research literature are in operation. The traditional pathways via linear long-term work, craft and vocational experiences, and contemporary pathways relating to the emotionalization of work and passionate engagement with it are explored through these research questions. Research question three addresses individual interests in greater depth and seeks to

explore the engagement with one's species essence or not. Issues of alienation in the workplace are particularly investigated via research question three.

Issues of socialization and agency are integral to this sociological study. Research question four investigates the extent to which individuals engaged with the wider ideology of neoliberalism (Brown, 2015; Abbinnett, 2021) and if so, in what ways. This is particularly important given the neoliberal backdrop contemporary employment operates within. Issues of personal branding, entrepreneurial understandings of the self and overwork have been critically discussed. Research is needed to explore the impacts of personally branding oneself in line with socially available subject positions in neoliberal society, to determine how this relates to an individual's identity formation, and to determine how meaningful this process is. Research question four allows probing into this area. As discussed neoliberalism's philosophy of individualism is highly influential on culture, employment and individuals' understandings of themselves. Research question four broadly facilitates the investigation of the prevalence of individualized, activist understandings of oneself and one's career contributing to the debate on whether these theories are a reality for all to engage with (Giddens, 1994; Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Hall, 2004) or whether they are reserve of a few (Skeggs, 2004; Skeggs, 2019). Research question four also explores how meaningful these individualized pursuits are. Cumulatively, the four research questions appropriately meet the research's aim to explore how meaningful employment is or can be in the knowledge economy for a select group of knowledge workers.

Chapter 4 - The Research Methodology

Introduction

This research seeks to investigate the ways in which knowledge workers experience their employment as meaningful (or not). Narrative research offers unique insight into both individuals' experiences of employment and the employment settings in which they operate - the research focus. Watson (2009) demonstrates this in his assertion that individuals are cultural animals, composed of both the narratives they self-produce and those which are discursively available to them through culture. Hence narrative research is also well suited to explore the structuring influence of working environments and wider society on participants and also to explore the agency individuals utilise, which is part of the research's broader focus.

The empirical settings of the research are laid out then the biographical approach of the research and its interpretive foundations are addressed. Narrative research methods are discussed and the strength of the narrative approach that bridges the gap between individuals and society is unpacked. The practical approach of interviews and methods of data analysis are explored before detailing credibility considerations and researcher reflexivity.

Empirical settings

As defined in chapter two, knowledge workers are defined in this research as individuals whose main resource and tool in their employment is knowledge. The medium of their work constitutes symbols and/or people (Pyöriä, 2005, p. 124) and their work primarily 'involves manipulating and transmitting ideas, rather than goods' (Field and Chan, 2018, p. 1).

The research participants in this study were knowledge workers. However, the research population was refined via a number of additional necessary criteria. All participants were salaried professionals (not on hourly or 'gig' contracts). All worked in the private sector, specifically within businesses or in organizations that provided services for businesses, e.g. corporate law firms. All participants were working in London or Greater London.

Participants were all also involved in 'handling', specifically handling people, sales, services, or marketing. All were at least two job roles or 'stages' removed from production, that is they did not work on creating the product, nor did they manage the people or processes that did. Participants were either at least two stages removed from what their business produced. Or they worked in

organisations that did not produce anything but instead offered services to other businesses (but not individuals). This study seeks to investigate the meaning private sector, knowledge workers obtain from their employment that is structured around handling people, sales, services, or marketing.

Hence participants were recruited if they met the criteria laid out. Through the researcher's personal and professional links initial participants were approached who fulfilled the research remit. Snowball sampling then allowed the researcher to gather more participants. Twenty-three individuals participated in the research. The employment demographic is now laid out.

Of the twenty-three participants, eleven were managers. The terminology for management varied, one manager's title was 'business projects lead' for example. Collectively the ten participants were responsible for managing a variety of different business interests and projects, these included 'commercial interests', 'mortgage accounts', 'digital experiences', 'cross sell and migrations', 'device pricing', 'projects' and 'senior projects', 'talent acquisition', 'digital communications', 'marketing' and 'business projects'. These managers were all at least two job roles removed from producing anything in a tangible sense, rather they were all handlers of people, sales, services or marketing, or a combination of these features. There was a lot of overlap in what was handled. Project managers, and business project managers for example handled the collaboration of teams of people who themselves handled distribution, finance, marketing etc. The project managers were responsible for coordinating individuals and hence handled people but also elements of sales and services in their ability to 'deliver' projects on time. The talent acquisition manager worked in Human Resources and handled subordinate employees who recruited new staff. The 'cross sell and migrations' manager worked in a telecommunications company and handled the strategy for the movement of customers from one area of the business (pay as you go) to another (longer term phone contracts). She managed projects that attempted to increase the movement of the customer base from the former to the latter which increased revenue for the business.

Of the twenty-three participants, two were administrators. One an office administrator, who handled the needs of people in the office and sometimes worked on the social media of the business. The other a financial services administrator in a mortgage broker firm who handled sales processes, but never did any financial calculations himself. Nor did he offer any financial advice to clients that was not determined by the underwriters in his firm. Rather he passed things on.

Three participants were advisors or consultants. Their respective titles were 'senior marketing advisor', 'managed data services consultant' and 'membership executive (business consultant)'. Each was responsible for facilitating the needs of businesses, namely, to increase revenue. The marketing advisor was responsible for overseeing the marketing strategy of a team, the business membership

executive was a networking agent for businesses to meet other businesses. The managed data services consultant analysed data and created reports to feed back to business' clients. He oversaw data projects and was closer to the 'product' in that he produced real data analysis that contributed to the service his company provided to other businesses. However, for the purposes of this research a distinction is made between producing companies and service providing companies, of which the latter is equated with 'handling'.

Three participants were accountants, one a 'management accountant' (and also the head of Human Resources (HR)), one a 'business accountant' (often used interchangeably with management accountant) and one an 'accounting associate', all in business organisations (not external accountancy firms). Accountants were partially involved in the running of the organisation from a financial perspective – delegating budgets to departments and budgets to staffing. They determined the revenue streams that were apportioned to production. Yet they still fit well with the impersonality and handling criteria in that they made decisions based solely on business objectives, namely the best money-making options. As business/management accountants specifically they managed the cash flow of the business. They were not involved in producing nor involved in managing those who did the producing – they were two steps removed. The management accountant who was also head of HR had been given the HR position as an additional responsibility to their management accountancy work. Their CEO was 'preparing' them to be a future CEO. The management accountant in question worked incredible hours and shared many of the HR responsibilities with the CEO. The HR responsibilities focused on the more prescriptive tasks; hiring and contract termination, legal matters, and employee grievances. Much less, if any, of her HR role was devoted to team building, organisational culture considerations, mission and vision, morale and so on.

Finally of the twenty-three participants three were legal professionals. One a litigation solicitor, one a paralegal in a litigation firm and one a corporate solicitor. The professionals in litigation handled debt recovery for businesses (not for individual contracts). They provided a service that was highly removed from the production of the businesses they worked for. Similarly, the corporate solicitor worked on mergers and acquisitions for businesses which also required little involvement in the work their company clients actually did. Rather the corporate solicitor's job was to thoroughly investigate terms of contracts, the financial status of companies and the risks mergers posed. All legal professionals were providing a service to businesses that prioritised business objectives.

Legal professionals who work on behalf of individual clients or who worked in human rights law, family law or criminal law for example were intentionally not included in this research. This is because these professionals might be considered engaged in more obviously meaningful work. That

is work that has a positive benefit to society (Rodríguez, Mesurado and Crespo, 2019). Work that can be considered socially valuable in some way has a greater capacity for being considered a 'calling' or vocation (Rodríguez, Mesurado and Crespo, 2019) and has more obvious links to facilitating meaningful experiences and understandings of work. This link is well established in the literature in studies that demonstrate how nurses, teachers and humanitarian workers for example obtain meaning from their employment (Skeoch, Stevens and Taylor, 2017; Houlfort *et al.*, 2018; Gómez-Salgado *et al.*, 2019). This research purposefully seeks to investigate how – if at all - pathways to meaning are forged in roles that do not possess an obvious social benefit to society.

Priority was also given to participants in medium to large corporations and businesses. Whilst this was not a strictly defined research criteria, individuals in start-ups and smaller organisations (less than 50 members of staff) were excluded from the research. This was because the research was also interested in roles that encompass a level of impersonality within work as described by C. Wright Mills (1951) in chapter two. Such impersonality tends to be fostered in bigger organisations where it is difficult to form relationships with the many colleagues and teams an individual engages with. Further start-ups and smaller organisations may facilitate meaningful work experiences in different ways through tight knit collegial workplaces with shared vision. These research sites were not the focus of this investigation.

Barriers and difficulties resulting from conducting the research during COVID-19 are now noted. Initially the research was going to comprise an ethnographic study within one single corporate organisation. Due to the shift in working from home practices and accessibility barriers the methodology was altered to biographical narrative interviews. Participation numbers were also affected. It became much more difficult to conduct snowball sampling without an office environment to scout and approach potential participants. Participants were still asked to recommend any other professional connections who might be interested in taking part in the study, however during the pandemic individuals appeared less willing to add additional zoom calls (the interview platform) to their working calendars. Indeed 'zoom fatigue' was a unique phenomenon of COVID-19 that affected this study's recruitment numbers.

Participant demographics

A summary of the participant demographics containing the age and gender of individuals in the study is included in table 1 below. The mean age of participants was thirty-six years old; the oldest participant was fifty-three and the youngest twenty-six. There were ten females in the study and thirteen males. Pseudonyms are included in the table and throughout the research.

Table 1 – Participant demographics

Name	Current Job Title	Employer	Age	Gender
Ashleigh	Buisness accountant	Accountancy firm	28	F
Graham	Commerical manager	Telecommunications corporation	41	M
Chelsea	Management accountant/head of HR	Medical production company	31	F
Julie	Office administrator/head of social media	Insurance firm	47	F
Harry	Litigation solicitor	Civil litigation and dispute law firm	28	M
Jackie	Senior digital marketing associate	Artisan coffee company	45	F
Jonty	Financial services administrator	Mortgage broker firm	28	M
Toby	Mortagage account manager	Mortgage broker firm	32	M
Henry	Corporate Solicitor	Corporate law firm	33	M
Lisa	Senior marketing advisor	Fitness technology company	33	F
Johnny	Managed data services consultant	Data platform building firm	29	M
Mark	Digital experience manager	Digital payment systems company	49	M
Tammy	Paralegal	Litigation law firm	26	F
Susie	Manager of cross sell and migrations	Telecommunications corporation	27	F
Malve	Device pricing manager	Technology firm	39	M
Sebasten	Project manager	Scent infused products company	26	M
Chris	Senior project manager	Telecommunications corporation	29	M
Tom	Membership executive (buisness consultant)	Buisness enterprise collective	37	M
Josie	UK talent acquisition manager/HR	Large bank	51	F
Terry	Digital communications lead	Online shopping company	53	M
Miles	Accounting associate	Digital music platform	38	M
Tracey	Business projects lead	Production company	43	F
Lynn	Marketing manager	Telecommunications corporation	39	
Mean average age			36.173913	

Biographical research; episodic narrative interviews

This research is concerned with participants' workplace experiences and narratives, the factors of work they consider meaningful and their employment motivations. A rich qualitative picture is needed to obtain a sense of participants' personal dispositions, their meaning making processes and the wider social and cultural factors of influence. To achieve the study's research aims then biographical narrative interviews (Rosenthal, 2004; Wengraf, 2004; Merrill and West, 2009; Roseneil, 2012) are deemed the most appropriate research method.

Biographical research is an umbrella term that refers to a variety of related research methods and approaches, including the narrative interview, oral histories, autobiography, biographical interpretive methods, ethnographies and so on (Bornat, 2008; Ojermark, 2012). Biographical research is concerned with obtaining meaning via the reconstruction of segments of individuals' life histories (Bornat, 2008). Broadly biographical research collects and analyses an intensive account of a whole life or portion of a life. It does so with the intent of obtaining 'gestalt', that is an organised whole account considered more than the sum of its parts (Merrill and West, 2009). In the quest for obtaining gestalt Merrill and West (2009) explain attention needs to be paid to how individuals

relate to their story – in their language use, privileging of information and selection of events among other things - as opposed to considering it the mere presentation of facts. Narrative interviews allow participants to move between past, present and future events fluidly, selecting events and information worth privileging. Narratives provide insight into the contextual circumstances that have influenced the participant's biography, even if the individual themselves is unaware (Merrill and West, 2009).

Within the field of narrative interviews there exists a distinction between chronological 'life history' approaches and more episodic, subject orientated ones (Harding, 2006). Life histories solicit broader narratives about participants lives (Kartch, 2018). However, life history narratives tend to result in participants structuring information around generic life stages. The wealth of information to be included in life histories can lead interviewees toward normalising narrative creation and is less effective at addressing how situational, specific social contexts affect how meaning is created and ascribed to phenomena (Harding, 2006). Indeed, life histories can also take considerable time and hence tend to produce summaries among those doing the narration. Episodic narrative interviewing techniques allows the participant to give order to events and make choices about what to include and leave out, these decisions themselves are saturated with meaning (Ayers, 2008; Parcell and Baker, 2018). Ackers (2017) shows how career history interviews can obtain stories of individuals' working lives, whilst still providing space for the narration of other aspects of life accounts that are relevant to employment experiences, without having to conduct all-encompassing life histories. Hence this research will be conducting episodic, career history, biographic narrative interviews, it will focus participants' narration on their working lives but will not exclude other related accounts that individuals deem relevant.

Interpretivist paradigmatic view

Guba and Lincoln (1994) define research paradigms as basic sets of beliefs that guide how phenomena are investigated and research conducted. This research adopted an interpretivist paradigmatic view which at a fundamental level encompasses a quest for greater understanding, meaning or the development of a theory.

This study is concerned with individuals' meaningful subjective experiences and their interpretations of social phenomena. Hence positivist assumptions regarding an objective reality and the use of associated methodological tools to 'capture' this are inappropriate for the current research aims. This research aligns with Dilthey's (1974 cited in Tool, 2007, p. 5) premise that human beings express themselves in complex, frequently changing ways *because* they ascribe meaning to phenomena.

Objects and 'things' only exist within consciousness, which is constantly evolving. Hence only by reliving people's experiences and processes of action can researchers gain insight into the character of meaning attributed to social objects and culture (Dilthey, 2002 cited in Tool, 2007). The scientist must then enter the lifeworld of individuals, achievable through a variety of means (including textual analysis, conversation, ethnographic study) an endeavour at odds with the nature of positivist natural science (Tool, 2007; Chowdhury, 2014).

The interpretive tradition and the assumptions underpinning this research then operate from a relativist ontological position. Relativism views reality as indistinguishable from the subjective experience of it (Levers, 2013). Realities are socially constructed entities that emerge when consciousness engages with objects that are already saturated with meaning (Scotland, 2012). The very labelling of objects in reality shapes meanings and understandings as language contains embedded power relations (Scotland, 2012). Yet, reality is subjectively experienced and individually constructed (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). An interpretive or subjective epistemology sees knowledge as constructed by individuals through their interaction with the world, which is always 'filtered through lenses of language, gender, social class, race and ethnicity' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, p. 21). Knowledge is historically and culturally situated, value laden and relative to specific circumstances (Levers, 2013). The interpretive tradition emphasises the evolving and dynamic nature of social reality (Chowdhury, 2014). Rejecting the positivist notions of knowledge, an interpretive epistemology proffers objective reality cannot be captured, rather knowledge is subjective and open to interpretation, multiple meanings and ways of knowing exist (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Levers, 2013). Understanding is sought through the eyes of those participating in their own social reality (Chowdhury, 2014).

Importantly individuals' actions are guided by rules related to particular forms of life - that is social, economic, historical circumstances - within which one is situated (Whitely, 1984 cited in Chowdhury, 2014). Social inquirers then operate from the premise that 'the description and meaning of an act is the correct application of rules governing the use of concepts; to understand an act is to interpret correctly its meaning in a certain form of life' (Whitely, 1984 cited in Chowdhury, 2014, p. 434). The goal of this interpretivist research is to uncover the self-understandings individuals hold, in addition to the wider 'governing rules' and social factors influencing human action (Chowdhury, 2014; Gann, 2017; Weber, 1968). In short, both structure and agency are examined in the interpretivist tradition. The appropriacy of a post-structural framework in the research is now addressed.

A post-structuralist framework

Introduction to a post-structural framework

Structuralism holds that overarching frameworks possess the ability to effectively explain most social processes and actions. Further that possibilities for social change lie in the unstable, changing nature of structures. Geertz (1973) countered this, explicating how culture cannot be considered an external power (or structure), rather social life is comprised of individuals' own 'webs of significance' (Geertz, 1973, p. 5). To understand individuals' social realities, we need a thick description (Geertz, 1973). Post structuralist interpretive research is appropriately positioned to gain understanding this way in its attempts to access subjects' personal worlds. It is fundamentally aimed at building understanding as opposed to definitive causal models.

Solely structuralist conceptualizations of society would provide a limited view of the phenomena under investigation in this research, namely meaningful employment experiences. Structural analyses alone do not account for the role of actors, their motives and the ways in which their behaviours can modify or reproduce structural phenomena (Holdo, 2020). They fail to acknowledge the interactions between subjects and their environments (Holdo, 2020). Post-structuralist movements within the interpretive tradition do not aim to abolish structuralist assumptions but rather extend them to elicit a more adequate examination of the social world. They address the ways in which both structure and individual actors' agency operate in conjunction together.

At another extreme, interpretive approaches such as those in the phenomenology tradition that focus entirely on the subjective experience of phenomena and claim that reality consists solely of meanings are equally inappropriate for investigating the research topic. The removal of structural considerations confines research to focusing solely on the meanings of individuals' language use, interactions and events without addressing how exchanges also depend on social institutions and bodies, conventions and normalised practices in different fields (Holdo, 2020). For these reasons the philosophical grounding of this research aligns with the post-structuralist approach defined by Holdo (2020) who argues that interactions that connect individuals with social sites reflect conscious and unconscious understandings of issues in society. The interactions themselves are representative of conflict, disruption or reproduction of said social issues (Holdo, 2020). This pertinent point informs the research design of this study. Part of the rationale for choosing narrative interviews was because their formation provides insight into wider social and cultural discourses, ideas and ideologies available in society that individuals draw upon – consciously and subconsciously – in narrating their lives (Watson, 2008; Kartch, 2018).

Yet within narrative research phenomenological approaches have been advocated for by some in a what has been termed 'narrative imperialism' (Watson, 2009). The problems with this approach and the situation of the current research methods are now discussed.

Narrative imperialism

Watson (2009) demonstrates how the 'narrative turn' (beginning around the 1960s) and related influence of post-structuralist thinking saw texts – including narratives – as coming to constitute identities. Bruner (1987, p. 15 cited in Watson, 2009) for example argued the 'self is a perpetually rewritten story' whereby we become the stories we tell about existence. Watson (2009) problematises this view arguing that it risks over-privileging the role of narratives in individuals' lives in a form of narrative imperialism. Rather argues Watson (2009, p. 429) 'it is impossible to understand the role of narratives in people's lives if we fail to recognize that human beings are cultural animals... we need to locate issues of narrative and identity within the process of the social construction of reality'. C. Wright Mills' (1970, p. 232 cited in Watson, 2008) 'sociological imagination' was a profound call for sociologists to make links between individuals experiences and wider social structures and issues, he argued this was fundamental to 'build an adequate view of a total society and its components'. Indeed, humans are composed of both the narratives they self-produce and those which are discursively available to them through culture. 'Culture' being defined by Watson (2009, p. 430) as 'socially constructed reality shared by members of a society'.

Social, political, economic and cultural narratives in the form of stories, myths, news reports etc. all make available social personas that determine in part our identities and how we make sense of ourselves (Watson, 2009). Individuals possess the agency to manoeuvre through available discourses but their embedded situation within them cannot be overlooked, as it is in the narrative imperialism vein (Watson, 2009). Indeed narrative analysis must occur at two levels argue Clandinin and Connelly (2000, p. 2 cited in Amaladas, 2004). Firstly, at an individual level but then always within the context of social relationships because while 'people are individuals and need to be understood as such... they cannot be understood only as individuals' (ibid). This research aligns with Watson's (2009) assertions and rejects a position of phenomenological, narrative imperialism. It assumes humans are cultural beings who are able to narrate their working lives but are also embedded in social situations, and hence draw upon and are influenced by available social narratives and discourses. The methodological theoretical underpinning of this assumption is now explored in greater depth demonstrating how narrative research helps facilitate understanding of the individual's links with society.

Narratives bridge the gap between individuals and society

The adoption of a narrative methodological framework is an appropriate choice for the current study for a variety of reasons. The following section specifically addresses the ability of the narrative approach to reconcile structural influence and individual action. Narratives and indeed narrative research are particularly well suited to social inquiry that seeks to unpack the ways in which structure and agency work in combination in producing meaning, behaviour, and experience. Narrative and experience are intricately linked (Barrett, 2015; Fleetwood, 2016) aligning with the post-structuralist interpretive tradition that views meaning and action as also entwined (Goodsell, 2013; Chowdhury, 2014).

Part of this study's research focus is on the interplay between participants' agency on the one hand and the influence of their working environments and wider society on the other in the creation of meaning in work. Hence biographical narrative interviews are an appropriate method of research due to their underlying ontological assumption that 'individuals have agency, biographies make society and are not merely made by it' (Rustin, 2000, p. 46 cited in Harding, 2006). Indeed as argued by Moen (2006) stories are rooted in society, performed by individuals in cultural contexts and do not represent abstract entities. Human knowledge of the world is relative dependent upon an individual's contextual situation, the stories they are subject to, their personal values and beliefs and their past and present experiences of the world (Moen, 2006). Moen (2006) explicates knowledge consists of a plurality of narratives that are constantly developing and being constructed and re-constructed. Narratives are both psychodynamic and sociobiographic - that is, they are indicative of both individual conscious thoughts and perceptions and also unconscious biases, presuppositions, and dispositions. Hence Wengraf (2004, p. 2) posited the primary focus of narrative analysis is on 'the particularity of individual experience in unique historical and societal locations and processes' which in turn 'lays the basis for systematic later "whole case" comparison and grounded theorisation'. The narrative research tool then allows for the exploration of lived situations and importantly for the exploration of *personal* meanings participants form within the broader knowledge economy context (Roseneil, 2012).

Pertinently narratives thematize points of connection between individual stories and motifs and those of wider collective society (Fleetwood, 2016). Indeed, culture makes available certain types of narrative and story formats, people draw on what they have learned from a variety of different settings and fields within which they are situated. Particular types of language, discourse, ideology and subject positions are made available by culture and are evidenced in the construction of narratives (Fleetwood, 2016). Indeed argues Barrett (2015, p. 5) 'we may consider how self-

presentations [in narrativization] reflect particular locations within social space and the dilemmas that these engender’.

The researcher in this study then has arguably an advantageous propensity toward effectively analysing the participants’ narratives. Having never worked as a knowledge worker within the private sector, or in any kind of senior management role, it is likely that I have never experienced the types of pressures my participants are subject to. Discussed further in my positionality section, my background in mostly public service employment perhaps attunes me to spot normalised practices and cultural differences with more ease than those already employed in such settings.

Meaning, identity and ontological security in narrative research

Narrative research also operates out of a range of pertinent assumptions that fit well with a research project concerned with the creation of meaning, and issues of identity and specifically employment identities. Moen (2006) argues humans are subject to myriad experiences and verbal interactions – both externally with others and internally in self-talk - on a daily basis, narration represents a method for structuring this wealth of information into meaningful parts. Polkinghorne (1988, p. 1) aptly regarded the narrative as the ‘primary scheme by which human existence is rendered meaningful’, it is through narration that humans understand and attribute emotional responses to events (Moen, 2006). Indeed narrative research assumes that humans are story telling creatures and that narratives represent individuals’ attempts to ascribe meaning to situations and phenomena, hence they are rich sites for uncovering meaningful facets of employment – this study’s focus (Kartch, 2018). When telling stories people try to make sense of events, there is a melding of subjective feelings with objective experiences. Narrative and experience are intricately connected and blurred, whereby experiences are made sense of symbolically through narratives, conducted either externally or internally through self-talk (Fleetwood, 2016).

Whilst this research rejects the assertions of narrative imperialism that individuals are solely the story they tell in the present moment (Watson, 2009), it accepts that narratives are linked with identity when the social formation of individuals is also accounted for. Kartch (2018, p. 2) suggests that it is through story telling that individuals are able to discursively construct their own identity and ‘talk a version of reality into being’. Indeed narrating personal experiences is one of the methods for the creation of selfhood (Harding, 2006). Fleetwood (2016) in fact draws attention to the increased reliance on personal narratives as a strategy for identity formation in the 20th century in response to a loss of grand narratives and increasing onus being placed on individuals’ projects of the self (Giddens, 1991). It is clear is that narratives provide access to the meanings that actors

attribute to their actions and also access to the life world and social reality of a participant (Domecka, 2012), this is the focus of this research.

Some key authors on work in post-modernity go so far as to argue that ontological security relies on narrative coherence and the ability to maintain a story of oneself (Giddens, 1991; Sennett, 1998). Giddens (1991) argues that to achieve a stable mental state - or 'ontological security' - relies on individuals' ability to construct narrative coherence. That is, a sense of order and continuity in relation to individuals' experiences that allow people to give meaning to their lives (Giddens, 1991). Giddens (1991, p. 53) explicated the self in post-modern society to be 'reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography', where stable self-identity is dependent upon 'the capacity to keep a particular narrative going' (ibid, 1991, p. 54). Similarly Sennett (1998) argues people need to be able to interpret their experiences within a coherent life narrative that meaningfully links past, present and future experiences into a whole.

McAdams (1993, p. 68) concurs the narrative stories people tell are a means of making sense of their unique life trajectories and experiences with the goal of constructing coherent stories which uphold their self-understandings as 'goal-direct, motivated and purposeful'. Narratives possess core thematic lines according to McAdams (1993). When creating coherent narratives, whilst versions of an individual's story might shift and transform over time in response to external stimuli and the evolution of socially available discourses and narratives, the main components or 'identity anchors' (such as childhood dreams for example) of the individual's biographical account for the most part retain consistency (Wolf, 2019). Rather it is the framing of events and the significance attributed to them that adapts in response to the individual's interaction with the social world (Wolf, 2019). More traumatic events then – such as job loss – it is argued might inhibit the ability of individuals to maintain narrative coherence and a stable sense of self-identity (Sennett, 1998).

This research concurs with the propositions that an ability to coherently narrate one's life with continuity contributes positively to the ontological security of an individual. Further it assumes that narration is indeed a method for making sense of one's identity and developing an understanding of oneself. However the divergence among authors about how coherent narratives are formed, e.g. episodically and reflexively (Giddens, 1991) or through a linear career path (Sennett, 1998) demonstrates lack of consensus in the field.

Furthermore Ho (2009) found a 'strategy of no strategy' to operate among Wall Streeters that did not appear to negatively impact upon their ontological security. Ho's (2009) participants lacked longer term goals and were 'adaptive' to the market, yet they countered personal insecurities through their 'culture of smartness' and exceptional abilities. This is counter to Sennett's (1998)

assertions that individuals need links between past, present and future to achieve a stable sense of career and self-identity. The ways in which a stable sense of ontological security and identity was formed, or not, through methods of narration was hence explored in the research interviews.

The interview framework

Power dynamics and gathering rich data

The appropriacy of narrative interviewing for the current study with regards to eliciting the richest, most genuine data set possible – the object of interpretive inquiry (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005) - is now addressed. The narrative method addresses some key limitations of its most frequently rivalled method, the semi structured interview, in that it seeks to put the interviewee in control and moves the power dynamic from one of interviewer-interviewee to facilitator/listener-narrator (Kartch, 2018). It rejects a directive, often superficial question-answer format in favour of participants being able to genuinely narrate their own experience (Kartch, 2018). Indeed in other types of qualitative interview the researcher's job is one of direction, in narrative interviews the participant is empowered to direct the unfolding of the narrative whilst the researcher adopts a more facilitative role (Kartch, 2018). Participants can authenticate their own version of their working experiences and wider society outside of a superimposed framework.

Questioning variations in qualitative research produce different types of data. Narrative questions elicit stories that contain rich sources of biographical meaning in their structuring and narration choices. Whereas questions requiring an explanation from participants (more indicative of semi structured interviews) tend to elicit answers representative of discursive justifications. Whilst still important these responses are less apt in unpacking the ways in which the subject determines what is and is not meaningful in their working lives (Harding, 2006). Bollas (1995, p. 138 cited in Roseneil, 2012, p. 130) deemed semi structured interviewing responses 'statements of current belief' unlike those of narration which reflect a wandering 'in and out of recovered memories, in particular those that are seemingly trivial' (ibid, p. 130). This study does place greater onus on the latter in line with its attempts at unpacking the social constitution of subjects, their career stories and their meaning making mechanisms. However, it is worth noting both data forms – current beliefs, and career stories and memories – are valuable to the study. As stated, one of the benefits of the narrative interview, strengthening its suitability of choice, is that it can encompass unstructured and semi structured sections. This research adopted a predominantly unstructured approach from the outset of the interview, to set the standard for participant voices being the most important source of

information. After a natural finish to individuals speaking a short series of more semi structured questions were included to cover any areas of the research agenda that had been missed. The specific framework of narrative interviewing is explained in full in the following section.

The structure of the interview

Introduction and sub section one

All interviews were recorded with an audio recording device with the consent of participants. Interviews were comprised of three phases in line with the approaches of Wengraf (2004) and Rosenthal (2004). This research is fundamentally concerned with meaning, specifically how participants derive meaning from their working lives and employment experiences; intricately bound up with their notions of identity and career. Wengraf's (2004) narrative interviewing method effectively positions the research to explore this landscape and meet the study's research aims. Indeed the onus of Wengraf's (2004) method is to allow for participants to express their own systems of relevancy. The gestalt - an organised whole account considered more than the sum of its parts (Merrill and West, 2009) - of their meaning making is protected via the questioning format and the adoption of a facilitative role by the researcher. Specifically, the interviews comprised three sub sections. The first sub section invited participants to narrate their working life story in the format that they choose to tell it. This was initiated via a carefully constructed single narrative question that Wengraf (2004) terms the SQUIN (Single Question aimed at Inducing Narrative). The question was worded as follows:

'Can you please tell me about your working career path to date? Please include any experiences or events that you deem relevant. Begin wherever you want, I won't interrupt, but will take some notes for afterwards'.

During this first phase as the researcher, I spoke as little as possible. In line with Wengraf (2004) I allowed participants to speak for as long as they wished. I did not ask any new questions during this section; my role was to support the informant in the telling of their story. Within the SQUIN section of the interview argues Wengraf (2004) the researcher's mandate is to help participants uncover the (episodic) life history that is relevant to them based on their own systems of relevancy. It is essential hence that the researcher puts aside their own 'system of relevancy' until the later stages of the interview process. As the researcher, during this phase my only verbal input was to ask for more story if the interviewee seemed to have 'dried up'. I did this with questions like 'are you thinking

about something else that happened?’ and ‘are there any other things you remember happening?’ (Wengraf, 2004).

A key principle underpinning the first stage of the interview was to facilitate the development of ‘gestalt’ (Merrill and West, 2009) by avoiding interruptions, interpretations and language that might define what the participant should focus on (Wengraf, 2004). If within narration participants alluded to experiences or phenomena that I did not understand I refrained from immediately questioning but instead made a note to enquire further in the second section of the interview. Part of the rationale for the protection of gestalt in this way was to uncover the elements of their narrative that interviewees explored in great detail and those that they told rapidly, indicative of their systems of relevancy and meaning making processes (Wengraf, 2004).

To further elicit and protect the participants’ formation of gestalt matter, the principle of conceptual open-ness, that is the absence of prior hypotheses formed by the researcher underpinned data collection. This facilitated more genuine interpretations at the data analysis stage. Obtaining ‘real’ endings were also sought (Wengraf, 2004). Wengraf (2004) underscores the importance of avoiding ‘fake’ endings in the SQUIN stage of data collection. He explicates if researchers are successful in enabling the formation of genuine storytelling, participants will always ‘spontaneously end their narrative by saying something like “well, that’s it, that’s my story, that’s how it happened”’ (Wengraf, 2004, p. 7). Silence on the part of participants does not indicate the ending of narration. These periods might instead represent reflection, further remembering or consideration of how to proceed and should not be misinterpreted. Within my interviews then silence was respected and given ample time to exist so that participants might cognise what they needed to. If I deemed the silence to have extended for an overly long period in which the participant was in fact waiting for my input I would offer one of the questions described above that attempted to facilitate further storying.

Key to the first section of the interview was active note taking by the researcher. I took general notes chronologically as stories went on to provide a mnemonic aid. I detailed the general different sections and/or themes that guided the story telling and further subthemes. For example, one participant chose to describe their very early years as an apprentice. The general theme I transcribed was ‘training’ with the following subthemes ‘mechanics course’, ‘on the job learning’ and ‘sense of pride’. Of paramount importance was my detailing of themes and subthemes in the order participants described them and in the verbatim keywords that they used, with additional notes in my own choice of language. This also enabled the establishment of genuine gestalt and participants’ systems of relevancy to become clear (Wengraf, 2004). As part of the note taking process, I also

made notes to myself on areas I wanted to inquire further into, points I did not understand and areas of conflict in narratives.

Sub section two

The second section of the interview then was the narrative follow up. During this phase I asked questions but did so sticking strictly to the sequence of topics laid out by the participant and using the same keywords that they used. Indeed this section was restricted to asking only narrative pointed questions, that is, only questions about subjects the participants had raised (Wengraf, 2004). To retain gestalt once a topic had been discussed I did not return to it, a principle of never returning to earlier topics underpinned this stage (Wengraf, 2004). During this phase I made further notes, particularly on any points that led me to form questions outside of the subject matter detailed by participants, and hence would be asked in the final stage of the interview.

Processes of 'active listening' underpinned all three sections of the interviews but were particularly fundamental to the first two in the quest to elicit unhindered story telling from participants. Active listening is comprised of nonverbal support and a mirroring of emotions when appropriate (Wengraf, 2004). Nonverbal cues help facilitate the establishment of rapport and trust between interviewees and interviewers, creating a 'safe space' for the development of rich and complex narratives.

Iacono et al. (2016) argue researchers should - when appropriate - use their own facial expressions to mirror and convey understanding of participant emotions, attentively responding to the ways in which participants discuss and frame phenomena in their reactions. Wengraf (2004) promotes the use of empathetic and un-intrusive mirroring of emotions as a helpful interviewing skill that lets participants know their emotional responses are accepted in a non-judgemental manner and do not need to be suppressed. He continues researchers in the narrative interviewing tradition should not attempt to 'rescue' participants from their emotive responses by changing topic. Rather physical gesturing or phrases such as 'that's still hard for you' are more appropriate responses. Importantly however researchers must avoid paraphrasing and/or interpreting in their supportive statements (Wengraf, 2004) as this represents the researcher imposing their own meanings on the situation.

Indeed in the continuous effort to maintain the flow of the narrative I did not console, give advice or insert myself into participants' storying with comments such as 'I have had a similar experience', rather every effort was made to make participants feel listened too (Wengraf, 2004).

Semi structure sub section

The current study diverged slightly from the recommended approach detailed by Wengraf (2004) with regards to a third sub session of interview. Wengraf (2004) suggests that post completion of sub sessions one and two, researchers may wish to re-interview participants in a more semi structured format to obtain answers to questions that perhaps were not covered in narration or the follow up. In principle this premise was adhered to in the current study. However, the final section of semi structured interview questions was conducted immediately after sub session two, within the same data collection session. This was done for a number of reasons. Firstly, participants often had extremely busy working schedules and practically would not have been able to commit to two interviews. Further the importance of rapport in obtaining rich data sources was considered fundamental to the study. Hence the researcher did not want to break the hopefully friendly and trusting atmosphere that had been established via the first two sections of the interview. It was felt pausing and then restarting another interview at a later date could necessitate a need for participants to 'warm up' again. The nature of the interview structure used for the current study set the stage for participants being the authoritative voice, worthy of the researchers attentive listening by placing the narration stage first and semi-structured questions last. Indeed, this order ensured the standard for roles (interviewee as narrator and interviewer as facilitator/listener) had been established.

The use of the semi structured questioning post story telling exploration overcame limitations in using purely narrative methods. Indeed, facilitating participants' working narratives alone affords the researcher a lack of flexibility in covering more specific and nuanced areas of interest. The semi structured section allowed the researcher to gain deeper and more specific responses to issues of interest (Bell, 2010). Indeed within this final interviewing stage finally the interviewer was able to orientate the participants more toward questions, concepts and phenomena that were of interest to the researcher (Wengraf, 2004). Hence the semi structured questions elicited a more intensive probing of 'passion' at work, autonomy, craft opportunities, role descriptions, responsibilities, and workplace identities and so on. This stage yielded a detailed account of more specific areas of participants' lived experience whilst still ensuring they had authentic voice by avoiding highly structured close ended questions (Gill et al., 2008; Wills, 2007).

Interpretation, the subject, and memory

A critique of the interpretivist paradigm is the potential for slippage in interpretation, both in participants interpreting their own stories and in the researcher interpreting participants' interpretation (Goodsell, 2013). Narrative research effectively considers and accounts for this. Narrative analysis acknowledges that it fails to capture a 'real', complete, or factual history, emphasising that this has never been the goal. Rather as demonstrated the primary purpose of the narrative interview is to gain understanding of people's personal experiences and perceptions and unpack how these have been influenced by their situation within societal structures. The objective of providing narrative space being to allow participants to reconstruct events and phenomena from their lived experience, noting the conscious and unconscious ways in which participants relate to such through their language use, the roles they construct and exploratory descriptions (Wengraf, 2004).

In addressing the role of the subject and of memory Harding (2006) contends there exists a spectrum upon which the subject can be viewed in qualitative narrative interviewing. At one extreme the subject is assumed to be fixed, possessing authentic voice, viewed as able to relay past experiences accurately as they occurred and hence providing a narrative of a real experience (Harding, 2006). This approach can prove problematic however as it fails to acknowledge the ways in which contemporary understandings can shape memories and narration. At the other end of the spectrum the notion of authentic narrative accounts are rejected, instead subjects 'are seen as vehicles for articulations which can be traced to and explained away by cultural contexts' (Rustin, 2000, p. 41 cited in Harding, 2006). Again, unswerving adherence to this philosophical view is overly dismissive of events and encounters that did in fact happen and are used by individuals to situate their narratives. The issue of memory is also central to these accounts viewed at one pole as a recount of factual reality and at the other extreme as pure imagination (Harding, 2006). Harding (2006) argues it is necessary to work between extremes, regarding memory and subjects' narratives as concerned with the 'interpretation and representation of events and an active process of producing meanings and subjects. Autobiography is not a reality report though it contains factual events, the process of re-membering within narrative creation involves resurrecting past information but also processes of figuring ones place within it and hence is intricately entwined with identity formation' (Radstone, 2000 cited in Harding, 2006).

In line with the approaches of Rosenthal (2004) and Wengraf (2004) the interpretation of narratives relies on elaborate coding of transcripts that separate out the 'lived life' that is the chronological sequence of events, from the 'told story', namely how people identify with their story. Practically the

coder might label segments of text differently as descriptive, passionate, passive, argumentative etc. (Bornat, 2008; Merrill and West, 2009). This study adopted this approach in its two pronged thematic and structural analysis discussed further in the data analysis section below. Denzin (1989 cited in Moen, 2006) echoed the distinction between the 'factual' lived life from what he termed 'facilities' (told story) which he saw as representing how individuals experienced and interacted with the facts. He articulated a further concept, 'fiction' described as 'a truthful narrative that deals with the facts and facilities and is faithful to them both' (Denzin 1989 cited in Moen, 2006, p. 63). Obtaining this 'fiction' then is the goal of narrative research, claims to objective 'truths' are arbitrary and unnecessary in interpretivist research and of little importance to this study on individuals' personal construction of meaning in their employment. The next section then addresses how the qualitative data in this study was analysed.

Data analysis

The appropriacy of narrative research methods in the current study which is concerned with the social constitution of subjects has been addressed. Discussed now is the appropriacy of the specific method of data analysis conducted in this research. This is discussed in relation to other employment studies that have adopted narrative methodological approaches.

Methods of narrative analysis

Riessman's (2008) typology of four main methods of narrative analysis is widely utilised within the research literature on narrative inquiry. Riessman (2008) identifies four broad methods of analysis - thematic, structural, interactional, and performative - but states they are not mutually exclusive and different approaches can be combined. Others draw heavily on Riessman's (2008) model but make slight adjustments, rename or alter categories, for example Parcell and Baker (2018) detail thematic, structural, functional and dialogic/performance methods of analysis.

Thematic analysis emphasises the context of data texts, minimal focus is given to performative elements or 'how' things are said (Riessman, 2008). Thematic analysis is closely related to grounded theory approaches whereby researchers inductively categorise data and conceptualise meaning (Riessman, 2008). Within this approach typically narrative inquirers code data fragments, look for commonalities and areas of divergence between data sets and accordingly categorise codes into 'themes' that attempt to explain the meaning of the narrative (Riessman, 2008). Underpinning this approach is the premise that analysis of the content of narrative data enables the researcher to

determine moments of experience the narrator considers important or meaningful (Parcell and Baker, 2018).

Structural analyses incorporate thematic elements, paying attention to both the content of stories but also their assembly (Parcell and Baker, 2018). Structural analysis looks at the narrative form and its composure, addressing the genre of the story, linguistic form and the 'plot' or sequencing of events (Riessman, 2008). How the story is told is attended to, narrative devices employed by the speaker and their intended effects uncovered (Riessman, 2008). Indeed, the communicative work a story accomplishes might be deciphered in structural analysis. Typologies for story telling are often employed, for example the six-part Labovian model (Labov, 1982 cited in Riessman, 2008, p. 3) addresses the basic components of a narrative's structure. Namely the 'abstract (summary and/or point of the story); orientation (to time, place, characters and situation); complicating action (the event sequence, or plot, usually with a crisis and turning point); evaluation (where the narrator steps back from the action to comment on meaning and communicate emotion – the "soul" of the narrative); resolution (the outcome of the plot); and a coda (ending the story and bringing action back to the present)' (Riessman, 2008, p. 3). Not all components may be found in every narration, nor in the exact order, but the framework serves as a guide.

Interactional – sometimes referred to as 'dialogic' (Parcell and Baker, 2018) – analytical approaches incorporate both thematic and structural elements but emphasise also the dialogic process between teller and listener (Riessman, 2008). Indeed the context of the storytelling is addressed, the interactional context of the interview, the historical, social and political context and the discursive context (Parcell and Baker, 2018). Narrative creation is seen as a process of co-construction as the researcher asks questions and for clarity (Riessman, 2008). An extension of interactional analysis is Riessman's (2008) fourth category; performance analysis. This approach examines that beyond the written or spoken word. It views storytelling as a performance by an individual who possess a past, a set of predispositions and meanings and who actively presents to their 'audience' through their gestures, gaze and embodied actions (Riessman, 2008). Arguably it is helpful to group interactional, performance and dialogic methods, as will be done here, due to their intricately linked nature (Parcell and Baker, 2018). Choice of delivery methods, personal style, implied meanings through language use, persuasive linguistic devices can all be examined as involved in how the narrator wants to be known and the goals the story is accomplishing for the narrator (Riessman, 2008; Parcell and Baker, 2018).

Parcell and Baker (2018) however note the complexity of performance analyses; often narratives are told for different reasons simultaneously. Specific goals may for sought for the storyteller, they may wish to document an experience or narrate for therapeutic reasons for

example, careful and considered analysis is required (Parcell and Baker, 2018). Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical view theoretically facilitates this analysis method. Whereby narratives in the performance/dialogic analytical framework are viewed as vested presentations of the 'self', fundamentally bound up with narrators active identity work (Riessman, 2008; Watson, 2009). Riessman (2008) details some helpful features to address in this analytical vein. Namely the actors allowed within the story, their positioning, presentation and 'roles' and the enactment of dialogue between characters – how their speech is reported, intonation, accompanying gestures.

The analytical approach of the research

This study offers an original contribution to knowledge by conducting biographical narrative interviews in investigating meaningful work in the knowledge economy. There is a scarcity of research that employs a narrative methodology on this specific topic, with most research conducting semi structured interviews (Kosmala and Herrbach, 2006; Doherty, 2009; Lupu and Empson, 2015; Daoust, 2019; De Palma, 2020) ethnographies that include semi structured interviews (Ho, 2009; Ekman, 2014; Neely, 2020) or in a couple of instances surveys and questionnaires (Findlay and Thompson, 2017; Rodríguez, Mesurado and Crespo, 2019).

A further original contribution to knowledge is offered by the unique analytical method employed in this research, namely the combination of thematic and structural levels of analysis. A very small number of studies investigating employment in the knowledge economy have employed narrative research. Of these, there is a dearth of studies that have employed thematic and structural analyses (Chudzikowski, Gustafsson and Tams, 2020) and none found at the time of writing that employ this two pronged level of analysis specifically to investigations of meaningful work in the knowledge economy. The duality to the analytical approach also overcomes some of the limitations of conducting thematic analysis alone, discussed below.

Wolf (2019) conducted life history interviews, treating data collected as narrative material and aimed to establish the ways in which participants established protean identities through examination of their narratives. Participants were managers who had experienced at least one significant career change – indicative of the 'protean' career (Hall, 2004). Wolf (2019) conducted solely thematic analysis on narratives, inspired by constructivist grounded theory approaches. Four identity core building blocks of protean identities were uncovered (Wolf, 2019). Thematic analysis consisted of coding, the establishment of recurrent themes via comparing and contrasting stories and from this the creation of a conceptual model that grouped different narrative practices according to the function that they served (Wolf, 2019).

Ayers (2012) however argues that thematic analysis alone represents a strategy of data reduction whereby deciphering the important codes and concepts within a data set can prove problematic. According to Riessman (2008) lone thematic analysis methods can mimic positivist modes of inquiry in their lack of consideration of context. The detachment of data from its context risks 'cleaning up' of categories and statements (Charmaz, 2003, p. 269 cited in McAllum et al., 2019) and privileging of certain perspectives. Indeed within a thematic category – such as those identified by Wolf (2019) – it is assumed that each participant response meant the same thing when this might not be the case, further ambiguous responses that do not 'fit' the pattern can be overlooked (Riessman, 2008). A tolerance of ambiguity is essential within narrative research that seeks to unpack genuine experiences argue Etherington and Bridges (2011). The context of an speech fragment must be considered within wider social, economic and cultural discourses, and within the context of the interview itself (Riessman, 2008). McAllum et al. (2019) provides further criticism of the segmentation of data within thematic analysis that fails to link phenomena and events together. Gestalt – the consideration of the whole account – is arguably missed (Wengraf, 2004; Merrill and West, 2009).

In line with McAllum et al's. (2019) recommendations the current study employed both thematic and importantly structural analyses on participants' narratives. Indeed to overcome the potential decontextualization of the texts, structural frameworks address the temporal linking of events and actions, the logics and rationales behind story transformations and provide insight into a particular story world 'replete with understood and often implicit rules and norms, especially regarding role obligations' (McAllum et al., 2019, p. 366). Indeed the integrity of the text is preserved, not fragmented (McAllum et al., 2019). McAllum et al. (2019, p. 366) goes so far as to suggest a 'narrative's meaning is derived from its plot'. This study holds this to be partially true but also considers plot creation to be the result of complex internal and socially constituted meaning making processes (Watson, 2009). This research then examined the archetypal roles of characters within narratives (for example the linguistic creation of 'heroes', 'villains', 'helpers') and the implied role obligations and capacity to exercise agency (McAllum et al., 2019). It focused on attempts at recasting of roles and their evolution in addition to events that participants chose to foreground in their narratives, all in an effort to establish the coda of meaning of the narrative in question (Riessman, 2008).

Similar approaches have also been conducted by Chudzikowski, Gustafsson and Tams (2020) who utilised both thematic and structural analyses in their investigation into a sense of career alignment among consultants in a large management firm. Narratives collected from participants were initially coded but then discussed among researchers. Recurrent themes were identified at this stage and

researchers drew on existing literature and considered relevant career models. Importantly where themes appeared to be recurring among interviewees attention was then paid to the different ways in which participants arrived at phenomena and constructed their storying of events – to avoid blanket categorisation (Chudzikowski, Gustafsson and Tams, 2020). This practice was also employed in the current research. Distinctions were made between the ways individual participants talked about the same subject matter, some in political ways others more instrumentally (Chudzikowski, Gustafsson and Tams, 2020). The boundaries of narrative themes were then also clarified in this research by continually referring back to the literature and to theory in a non-linear approach, moving back and forth between theory and data (Lupu and Empson, 2015).

The dual stage to narrative analysis

The dual stage to narrative analysis was also conducted in a non-linear fashion. Transcripts were coded thematically and structurally. Using NVivo software, fragments of text were highlighted and given codes and subcodes. Fragments of text were also coded structurally using annotations in NVivo. An example of a fragment from Sebasten's – a Project manager in a scent infused products company – interview transcript that was coded both thematically and structurally is below:

'...as far as business management is concerned, I don't know how well I tick off all those boxes. I probably am missing a lot of business management boxes because I've only just started in this role. But obviously I can't use that as an excuse as to why I didn't complete my work or why I can't do what I'm supposed to do, it's about you as an individual taking the opportunity and being able to earn the skills for this title no one is going to help you or hold your hand' (Sebasten's interview transcript).

Thematically this excerpt was coded 'lack of training' and 'individual responsibility'. It was also coded under the theme 'protean orientation' subtheme 'figure it out'. Structurally the following note was also added to this interview excerpt:

'S employs the discourse of individual 'doer' responsibility. The onus for understanding the role he places upon himself. He uses the phrase 'earn the skills for this title'. Company training or support isn't noted as an option. The traditional notion of a job involving the role of the 'trainer manager' and 'trainee employee' are rejected. Roles are cast as an 'opportunity giving employer' and 'proactive employee'. The job contextualised as a test of one's ability to figure it out. The genre of this fragment lies embedded within an 'overcomer' wider narrative within neoliberal society. Akin to sink or swim tales in popular culture.'

The thematic and structural analyses were considered together and grouped into three overall themes with various subthemes, discussed in the findings and analysis chapter. The overall themes were, 1) Neoliberal subjectivities 2) Affirmation, motivation and meaning and 3) Progress biographies. This under used analytical method offers an original contribution to knowledge by applying this methodological framework to meaningful employment in the knowledge economy. This research is not aware of any other study that has employed the same methodological approach in investigating the same research criteria.

Limitations of interactional/performance analysis methods

Some would suggest however a limitation to both Wolf's (2019) and Chudzikowski et al's. (2020) analytical approach however is a neglect of interactional, performance analysis considerations (Riessman, 2008). Riessman (2008) warns that in a similar vein to the thematic approach too strict an application of the structural approach to narrative analysis can decontextualize narratives by failing to consider interactional, relationship factors in the interview process. Where 'research settings and relationships constrain what can be narrated and shape the way a particular story develops' (Riessman, 2008, p. 4).

Czupryna's (2019) narrative inquiry into identity construction and sensemaking of organizational discourse among employees at Fortune 500 companies addresses these criticisms. Czupryna (2019, P. 90) took a three-pronged approach to narrative analysis concerned with 'content, context, and the relationship between researcher and participant'. She employed thematic and structural analyses but importantly also kept notes on observation processes during the interview to help understand how immediate interview contexts influenced narration.

Similarly Haratyk et al's. (2017) autobiographical narrative interview into a freelance psychologists' personal meaning of work conducted performance and structural analysis on their data set. During data collection researchers transcribed notes on participants' 'pauses, hesitations or paralinguistic phenomena (laughter, crying, self-corrections, etc)', regarding them as 'significant markers of the dynamics of the interviewees self-perception' (Haratyk et al., 2017, p. 141).

These approaches that incorporate performance-based analyses are grounded in the idea that narrativizations reflect a projection toward an 'audience' where actors engage in the presentation of the self, emphasising particular attributes and accomplishments (Barrett, 2015). Problematically as unpacked in discussions of narrative imperialism above, this viewpoint arguably overlooks issues of social formation, presenting instead an exaggerated, temporal, fluid sense of self. Concentrating too heavily on performance analyses and the active construction of identity 'in the moment' by the

individual within the narrative interview risks viewing identity work as being solely constituted in the production of the text (Watson, 2009). It risks failing to adequately account for the ways humans are also composed of the narratives discursively available to them through culture. For these reasons this research focused on thematic and structural analyses alone, as laid out above.

Data collection

Virtual interviews

This research study originally intended to collect data via face-to-face interviews. However, due to COVID-19 restrictions in 2019-2020 - the period of data collection - all interviews were instead conducted virtually via the videoconferencing platform Zoom. There are a variety of advantages and disadvantages to using virtual software for data collection, sometimes referred to as Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) (Iacono, Symonds and Brown, 2016).

The use of virtual platforms such as Skype, Zoom, Google Hangouts, Microsoft Teams etc. in qualitative research are commended for extending geographical sampling boundaries (Iacono, Symonds and Brown, 2016; Archibald *et al.*, 2019). The internet eliminates geographical constraints, possessing the potential to connect individuals from different cultures, continents, and geographically diverse areas. Virtual platforms hence can break barriers of time and space and promote more democratic participant access to research projects (Iacono, Symonds and Brown, 2016).

Limitations often cited include software access and the experience of technological issues as presenting barriers to research (Iacono, Symonds and Brown, 2016). Iacono, Symonds and Brown (2016) found particularly amongst older generations there may be a lack of access or reluctance to use virtual technologies. Some participants in Archibald *et al.* (2019) study cited issues in establishing internet connections, limited webcam and/or microphone functionality and outdated hardware. Within the current study however none of these issues had any significant impact upon data collection processes. The participants in this research represented a relatively young demographic the oldest being fifty-three. Further, due to the nature of their jobs – often involving engagement with a variety of virtual software systems - they were all incredibly well versed in the use of virtual video conferencing and possessed good if not excellent technical abilities. Further, because data collection occurred within the latter stages of COVID-19, employers and individuals had set themselves up with reliable software, hardware, and internet providers. In line with Archibald *et al.* (2019) on the rare occasion there might be a lag in internet connection this actually

helped establish greater rapport with participants as we discussed and agreed on the strangeness of new ways of working and the frustrations of technological failures.

An advantage of using Zoom as opposed to face to face interviews in this study was greater flexibility afforded to participants which positively impacted upon their participation. Iacono, Symonds and Brown (2016) and Archibald et al. (2019) argue virtual interviewing methods afford individuals greater flexibility in logistical considerations, time, travel and can cater to participants' busy schedules. Indeed time effectiveness and cost effectiveness are both cited as benefits of virtual participation (Deakin and Wakefield, 2014; Archibald *et al.*, 2019). For the participants in the current research these were attractive features of virtual interviewing. Participants were all in professional roles, many were in senior positions, all with moderate to busy workloads and schedules.

One female participant in particular showed me her outlook calendar to help me understand the intensity of her daily workload. Filled with meetings, she lacked almost any free time to achieve the 'actions' set at said meetings. She was also on many occasions throughout the week required to be in two or three separate meetings at once. Her example was indicative of many of my participants' working schedules. Many were grateful that we could engage with a medium that facilitated flexibility and did not 'waste time' getting to and from the interview.

Rapport

Some have suggested VoIP platforms can hinder the establishment of rapport between participant and researcher in qualitative interviewing (Iacono, Symonds and Brown, 2016). However nonvisual, 'audio only' interviewing methods and telephone interactions bear the main focus of critique. Seitz (2015 cited in Iacono, Symonds and Brown, 2016) showed how social inquirers concerned with intimate research topics, such as personal dating experiences can have more trouble establishing rapport with participants over virtual platforms than in face to face interactions. However, this did not appear to pose a problem in the current research perhaps due to its focus on employment experiences.

Deakin and Wakefield (2014) actually found that rapport was built more quickly in their study of Skype interviews compared with in person interactions, arguing that online research produces much the same responses as more traditional mediums. This is echoed by Archibald et al. (2019) and Iacono, Symonds and Brown's (2016, p. 6) study who reported 'no problem with regards to rapport' although in the latter they question whether this is due to them knowing most of their participants prior to interview. Personality has been found to be an impactful factor in some instances, whereby more reserved or less responsive participants create greater barriers to establishing researcher

rapport (Deakin and Wakefield, 2014; Iacono, Symonds and Brown, 2016). Within the current research to help negate any responsivity issues and establish the best possible connection with participants several emails, texts and phone calls were exchanged (where participants consented) prior to interviews to help establish a trusting and friendly relationship with the researcher (Archibald *et al.*, 2019). The researcher made explicitly clear that participants could ask any questions and query any aspect of the research process via email at any time. A conscious effort was made to ensure that the researcher's approachability was communicated.

Privacy considerations

Using a virtual platform to conduct interviews raises some privacy issues, now addressed. Participants were sent the link to Zoom's privacy policy before the interview and briefly informed of its practice. Zoom stores a range of personal information provided by its users. Including individuals' names, contact details (if provided) and IP address, user generated information ('meeting title, invitees, participants, call quality measures, messages and files shared between participants') in addition to 'use of cookies and tracking technology (e.g., browser type, Internet service provider, referring/exit pages, operating system, etc.)' (Archibald *et al.*, 2019, p. 6). The audio and video content of Zoom meetings however are not stored (unless users proactively record meetings, which this research did not do). Zoom users may request copies of their data and request restrictions on further processing of their data. Participants were informed of the above and asked if they were happy to continue with the research, all consented.

Credibility and researcher positionality

Dependability argue Lincoln and Guba (1985) is achieved via clear and transparent description of the research process, showing the logical and traceable steps that have been taken. Credibility in research according to Lincoln and Guba (1985) refers to the believability of inferences made. It addresses the genuineness of the researchers representations and explanations of participants' views and experiences (Nowell *et al.*, 2017) as recognised by readers of the final piece of research.

Polkinghorne (2007) draws a distinction between qualitative and quantitative researchers. He argues within qualitative, narrative research dichotomies of trustworthy versus untrustworthy research are redundant, rather there are degrees of validity surrounding claims. The confidence in a claim is determined by the plausibility, cogency and soundness of arguments presented by narrative researchers. He places the 'test' for validity in the hands of the reader. It is the readers' judgement of credibility which counts, which will be based upon the strength and power of arguments

presented. He explicates the credibility of claims are a function of the judgement of the community within which they are presented, specifically the background beliefs and values of a group determine their perception of legitimate evidence. Hence it is paramount that consideration is given to the academic community critiquing a study. As has been explored, a variety of epistemological and ontological assumptions underpin narrative research. The current study's credibility must be considered within the parameters set by this body of assumptions (Polkinghorne, 2007).

To contribute to the soundness of arguments presented in the research, meticulous data management was employed. Interview audio recordings were stored for reference. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and then analysed (Nowell *et al.*, 2017). The reflexive positionality of the researcher is also detailed for transparency, discussed next.

Reflexivity

Alvesson and Skóldberg (2009, p. 8) describe reflexivity as giving 'attention to the complex relationship between processes of knowledge production and the various contexts of such processes, as well as the involvement of the knowledge producer'. It is acknowledged within qualitative research that the 'worldview' of the researcher – their predispositions and contextual makeup – will influence their research in different ways (Schwandt, 2000; Bignold and Su, 2013; Mason-Bish, 2019). Hence researchers should engage in internal dialogue, critical self-evaluation and reflection throughout the research process (Geertz, 1973; Finlay, 2002; Corlett and Mavin, 2018). A detailing of researcher positionality also helps provide transparency for readers who are then able to make their own validity and credibility judgements regarding the finished analysis (Polkinghorne, 2007).

Post-structuralists in the interpretive tradition however also argue against an excessively inward approach to reflexivity or 'navel gazing' as possessing the potential to skew findings by placing too much onus on the researcher's own emotions and experiences (Finlay, 2002; Corlett and Mavin, 2018). Where excessive preoccupation of the researcher with their own 'emotions and experiences... can skew findings in undesirable directions. The researcher's position can become unduly privileged, blocking out the participants' voice' (Finlay, 2002, p. 541). Corlett and Mavin (2018) concur excessive reflexivity can reduce practice to self-indulgence or even paralyse research processes. This study then aligns with the recommendations by both Finlay (2002) and Corlett and Mavin (2018) to strike a balance between avoiding 'navel gazing' and extended emoting and actually seeking relevant and purposeful self-awareness. The research also attempted to maintain a primary focus on the research matter incorporating explorations of the self only when they provide enhanced insight (Finlay, 2002).

A brief detailing of the researcher's positionality is hence included below, before discussing the stages of reflexivity employed in the current research.

Positionality

I am a 30-year-old middle class, white, female. Unlike my participants the vast majority of my career has been spent working in the public sector, in teaching and support roles. This proved beneficial in interviews. It allowed participants from the private sphere to operate as more knowledgeable others with ease. It became natural for me to ask 'obvious' questions as a researcher, pertaining to their role, their organisation, and their sector. Like most of my participants I live and work in Greater London, this provided an element of common ground, rapport was built through discussions of geography and commuting.

Mason-Bish (2019) shows how positionality is both transitory and dynamic. Through the three staged interview structure (Wengraf, 2004) participants' voices were privileged in the interview (Harding, 2006; Corlett and Mavin, 2018). However what they chose to share/narrate was likely subconsciously influenced by my gender, age and conversational approach – my positionality (Day, 2012). For this reason, I paid conscious attention to how I presented these phenomena. In line with a post-structuralist approach a Foucauldian conceptualisation of power views it as something not definitively held by individuals, but as actively negotiated in discursive struggles (Foucault, 1980). Indeed power is exercised rather than possessed (Mason-Bish, 2019). Harvey (2011, p. 433) in discussions of conducting elite interviews argues power is not just associated with titles and positions rather it is bound up in professionals' 'ability to exert influence' through their capital, networks and 'strategic positions within social structures'. Many of the participants of this research maintained well paid, relatively high-status roles – some were top tier managers for example. Mason-Bish (2019) warns that notions of elitism can blindside researchers, who become so grateful for access that they fail to capture what happens within the interview process. Perceived power-imbances can also work the opposite way, whereby participants perceive the interviewers status to be superior because they are in control of conducting the interview (Mason-Bish, 2019). This research sought to counter any potential for power imbalances in a number of ways.

Firstly, I intentionally invoked a positionality as an 'outsider' to my participants' working environments, I was happy to let them educate me on any aspect of their work and workplace interactions that they wished to. My active and attentive listening further helped establish rapport and sense of trust. As a younger female, it was perhaps easier also for me to take on an 'unthreatening' role, argued by Mason-Bish (2019) to create a greater sense of security for

participants to share details of their lives. Age played a factor. When interviewing older females and males it often became easy to establish a kind of maternal or paternal exchange. When interviewing individuals in a similar age bracket to myself, conversational chat before engaging in the official interview process was more contemporary and relatable and further helped establish a friendly relationship between my subjects and me. Finally the use of humour even within interviews helped create a sense of a 'normal' conversation, negating a 'detached' interviewer stance, Finlay (2002) argues this can in fact give the illusion of researcher participation at times alleviating any sense of 'interrogator' role.

Further stages of reflexive practice

Day (2012) details three stages of reflection the researcher can engage with in the research process to enhance reflexive objectivity. The first pertains to the researcher questioning and explicitly situating their understanding of the nature or knowledge and reality, namely their epistemological and ontological assumptions (Alvesson and Skóldberg, 2009; Day, 2012). The interpretivist research paradigm has been clearly laid out and the ways in which it frames the research outcomes of this study have been made transparent.

The second stage of reflexive consideration according to Day (2012) relates to the 'doing' element of research; the methodological practices, the relationship of the researcher to participants and to data and the general investigative process. Interpretation bias claims are often levelled at qualitative research, arguing that interviewing questions will always be leading, the areas the researcher decides to follow up are never neutral, the structure of an interview protocol is saturated with personal agendas that guide topics (Bignold and Su, 2013). These criticisms however are more appropriately levelled at semi-structured interviewing techniques. One of the advantages of Wengraf's (2004) one broad question interview approach is that the participant is deemed the 'knower' and designated control over the interview, the interviewer becomes a facilitator. The structure of narrative questioning (without interruptions, false endings, promptings etc) is also utilised to empower narrators and ensure their voice is legitimately heard (Etherington and Bridges, 2011). These features help guard against the researcher producing 'expected' texts (Wengraf, 2004; Polkinghorne, 2007).

The third and final stage of reflexive engagement implores researcher reflection in the evaluating and interpretation of findings (Day, 2012; Corlett and Mavin, 2018). A variety of procedures and empirically tested methods (Ayers, 2008; Riessman, 2008; Parcell and Baker, 2018) for coding, analysing and drawing conclusions from the data were employed, as discussed above. Briefly noted

here then, were the questions as a researcher I posed to myself. In particular I reflexively questioned whether I found what I 'wanted' to find (Corlett and Mavin, 2018). I satisfied myself that this was not the case, because starting out the research process I was not sure what I was looking for, hence it became very easy for me to adopt an 'open minded' stance exploring any and every point of interest that arose. All participant experiences were considered valid, even if the experience was only applicable to one or a few individuals (Holdo, 2020). To further the credibility of the study, I adopted a de-centred approach, actively attempting to uncover ground level phenomena, seeing my role as that of facilitator as opposed to expert (Holdo, 2020). I was conscious that participants were the source of meaning. My interpretations then sought to connect what was being said to wider social, cultural traditions, structural influences and institutions (Corlett and Mavin, 2018; Holdo, 2020).

Research ethics

This research was granted ethical approval from the University of Portsmouth in 2020. The full ethics form including exemplar participant consent forms are included in Appendix A. Participants were anonymised in the study, the researcher used pseudonyms throughout this thesis and removed any identifying factors. All participants were offered a transcript of their interview should they wish to see it, however none asked to do so.

Conclusions to the research methodology chapter

The chapter has laid out the research phenomena under investigation, namely knowledge workers experiences of their employment and the ways in which they draw meaning (or not) from their working careers. The empirical settings have been defined. The research population constituting knowledge workers in the private sector who are specifically engaged in handling people, sales, services, or marketing, working in London or Greater London. Both the specific methodological approach and the interpretivist paradigm that underpins the assumptions regarding the nature of knowledge and reality have been established. Narrative research methods were argued to be a highly appropriate methodological tool due to their ability to bridge the gap between individuals and society. Narratives are both agentic and socio-biographically formed. Individuals are cultural, social animals (Watson, 2008), their narratives represent discourses, myths and ideologies present in society. This research is interested in investigating how individuals are structured by the social environments they occupy. Hence the collection and analysis of career narratives which are self-produced and also composed of socially available narratives effectively meet this research aim.

The dual approach to data analysis was explained. This approach offers an original contribution to knowledge. The application of both thematic and structural analyses to narrative transcripts is a relatively underused method in employment studies. Further this research is not aware of any other study that has employed this approach specifically to investigations of meaningful employment in the knowledge economy. The combined use of thematic and structural analyses was a decision critically arrived at that overcomes the risks associated with thematic analysis alone. Namely risks of decontextualizing texts, data reduction and lack of temporal considerations. This research sought gestalt – an organised whole account considered more than the sum of its parts (Merrill and West, 2009). The inclusion of structural analyses facilitated a more thorough understanding of narrative stories, their logics and rationales, the linking of events and the roles taken up by actors. The data analysis is presented in the following chapter, 'findings and analysis'.

Chapter 5 - The Research Findings and Analysis

Thematic and structural analysis of the research data uncovered three key themes, discussed in this chapter. Firstly, the adoption and projection of neoliberal subjectivities by participants. Secondly self-affirmation and a variety of 'winner' and 'work warrior' mentalities were in operation as primary motivators in employment. Thirdly biographies were predominantly understood through the lens of progress. Narratives of identity and working careers were wrapped around an axis of progress and an aesthetics of life. These findings are laid out and fragments of participants' narratives included to demonstrate phenomena. Then in the final conclusions chapter of this thesis the significance and implications of these findings are discussed and original contributions to knowledge are offered.

Theme one – Neoliberal subjectivities

Introduction to theme

The first major theme identified in this research uncovered an orientation toward neoliberal subjectivities among participants. This theme unpacks what constituted a neoliberal subjectivity for participants and how this is defined in this research. This theme is titled as such because data analysis revealed that the philosophical and ideological features of neoliberalism clearly aligned with the subjectivity participants were engaging in. The adoption of a neoliberal subjectivity was a form of personal branding; the personal branding literature is updated in this theme, fleshed out in full in the conclusions to the theme. The continued relevance of the Marxian concept of alienation and the Weberian conceptualisation of an overly rational disenchanted society are also demonstrated in this theme. The conceptual definition of neoliberalism used in this research is hence briefly restated below and then a neoliberal subjectivity is defined.

Neoliberal rationality disseminates the model of the market to all domains and activities and configures human beings exhaustively as market actors. Individuals are interpellated into subject positions as human capital who must attend to their own 'value' and 'branding' in different spheres e.g. relationships, education and health (Brown, 2015). As stated in the literature review, the use of the term 'neoliberalism' in this thesis signifies a range of logics. For clarity however it is reiterated that practically neoliberalism's ideology is composed of political and economic logics of competitive performance, personal branding, entrepreneurialism, self-sufficiency, extrinsic motivation and profit maximisation, among other things (Bal and Dóci, 2018).

What a neoliberal subjectivity looked like varied from individual to individual but a number of commonplace factors throughout the data set were identified, discussed in the first section of this theme. These included a cognitive commodification of self and work among participants and the adoption of subjectivities focused on rationality and exchange value. A normalisation of hard work and overwork was also evident. Absent was a conceptualisation of the labour relationship as constituting occupational or vocational careers. Absent also was the pursuit of personal interests in work. Finally, an undercurrent of self-reliance and resilience was also identified in participants' subjectivities. These features coalesce to form neoliberal subjectivities that align with the political and economic logics of neoliberalism including competitive performance, personal branding, entrepreneurialism, self-sufficiency, extrinsic motivation and a profit maximising ideology (Bal and Dóci, 2018).

In the second section of this theme the workplace environment participants operated within is explored to illuminate the situation leading to the alignment with neoliberal subjectivities. The structural, socialized formation of a commodified sense of self is explored. Equally the more calculated conscious actions of agents are looked to - specifically participants' intentional adoption of attributes and behaviours constitutive of a neoliberal subjectivity in anticipation of future self-gain - addressed in discussions of *exchange value*. The assertion of neoliberal identities as a form of personal branding for future exchange value and self-promotion are explored. Finally, the culture of participants' workplaces and their inherent performance management logics which appear to further entrench and facilitate the adoption of neoliberal subjectivities are addressed.

Commodification of self and work

The first subtheme among participant interviews was a normalised culture of workers cognitively commodifying themselves. In every interview each participant was asked at some stage 'how would you describe yourself in relation to your work?'. Some individuals asked for clarification at which point they were asked 'how would you describe yourself as a worker?' Some of the responses that typified the general trend of answers are detailed below:

Chelsea (Management accountant and head of Human Resources in a medical production company): Get things done kind of worker. Yeah, I think that's it yeah. I just like to get things done and um, you know, I just make sure I do my work. No excuses.

Julie (Office administrator and head of social media in an insurance firm): as a worker I am a doer. Of course we all have days where we are not efficient as we could be. But for the most

part, the objectives of the business... my objectives or tasks or whatever you want to call them, I achieve what I have to

Ashleigh (Business accountant within an accountancy firm): Self-motivated and dedicated. I get stuff done.

Graham (Commercial manager in a telecommunications corporation): God.. What kind of worker.. probably a sociable one. I think I work quite hard as well. I think, the two of those. There is no value in lazy people and I try to do the opposite of that, but also like to be pleasant and social at the same time.

Consistently participants described themselves in terms of their ability to output work, 'get stuff done', be a 'doer' or 'hard worker'. There was a strong commodification of labour in terms of their efficiency and effectivity. Objectives or tasks were frequently cited and quantified when participants attempted to articulate the 'kind of worker' that they were, yet the nature of those objectives or tasks were not explored, nor their meaning or significance to employees. Without further probing and exploration from the interviewer no one described themselves in terms of their vocation, their skills, their abilities (other than their ability to 'deliver'), their interests or their craft.

As referenced throughout this theme, participants' discussions of their roles lacked reference to sublime or subjective values. A disenchanting situation could be said to be in operation, akin to Weber's iron cage of 'specialists without spirit' and 'sensualists without heart' (Weber, 1930, p. 124). Participants' descriptors of themselves in terms of their ability to output work as opposed to the nature or objectives of the tasks they complete on a daily basis suggests a more mundane and customary interaction with their employment, 'specialists' in what is mundane, 'sensualists' of the customary (Weber, 1930). Counter to the artistic projects rhetoric of the new knowledge economy (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005) creativity rarely featured in narratives. Workers did not identify with their work in the sense of their craft or talents being utilised. There was no sense of honing their skills throughout the course of their career as in a vocation. Progress was evidenced but via the path of promotion, title, and salary.

When interviewing a lawyer named Harry for example there was no discussion of his specialism of law (litigation). Nor of the roles he necessarily takes up in his work – the researcher and data gatherer when building client cases, the adversary or orator in the court room, or the wordsmith who writes submissions (court documents), opening statements and discursively creates cases. Rather Harry discussed his ability to work hard. He situated this within a contextual background of

stress citing states of overwhelm at times. He begins his response to the question ‘how would you describe yourself in relation to your work?’ with a presentation of self that arguably he would like to be seen as; a ‘jovial’ worker. Further divulgence suggests however that this features less prominently in his subjectivity and outward facing identity (Watson, 2009) than he instinctively first assumes.

Harry (Litigation solicitor in a civil litigation and dispute law firm): I think people would say I'm quite jovial. I'm the jovial one. I like to think that people are.. don't get me wrong there are some moments where work is a bit overwhelming and I feel quite stressed and quite quiet and people will suddenly say why are you so stressed? and I'm like I'm not stressed. Just for once I stopped talking so much and I'm just trying to focus on work. And I think some people, they mistake that for stress when realistically I have just realised we need to work hard instead of just talking. I would like to think, uh, well it's quite hard to say about myself, but I am quite hardworking. Whether that be hardworking in the correct way or the incorrect way, I don't know, that, I think that's for somebody else to judge. Um, but I'd like to think I'm somewhat hardworking.

HG: What would the incorrect way of working be?

Harry: Uh, in terms of just working in a way that's not efficient, all my work is just rubbish.

The use of Harry’s phrasing ‘realistically I have just realised we need to work hard’ is indicative of his commodification of self. A *realisation* moment suggests he has uncovered truth. Talking socially with colleagues whilst a sentence earlier was the playground of his joviality, is now situated as representing a state of lack in work. By Harry’s own admission the type or amount of work he has to engage with is stress provoking to the point of overwhelm. At this point one might expect Harry to lament that the demands of his job are hard, time consuming or difficult to manage. Instead, Harry offers acceptance of the job and presents a transactional analysis of the situation. The work is non-negotiable, non-changeable, not worthy of critique. The variable in the metaphorical equation is Harry, he takes on the burden of work himself, measuring his performance in terms of efficiency, his ability to ‘focus’ and churn out what is required. Aligning with a neoliberal ideology his sense of his labour is one of exchange (Skeggs, 2004), he exchanges efficiency and rational calculation to meet a workload demand. This commodified subjectivity is applied to his colleagues also, he ‘realises’ as a collective they ‘need to work’ and ‘work hard’.

Socialized formation of commodified self

The commodified and rational view of labour and the labour relationship arguably represents the historical and social formation of participants to some extent. A commodification of work as an exchange between employee and their organisation (employer) characterised my participants' subjectivities, aligning with a neoliberal sense of themselves. This finding overwhelming applied to all participants despite their varying fields of employment. As described at the start of this theme, it has been argued by some that a governing logic of neoliberalism is in operation in society (Brown, 2015). Whilst it cannot be argued that such logic unequivocally and definitively impacts all individuals, especially in a uniform manner, the social context must be paid due attention. The sweeping trend among individuals to consistently situate their employment subjectivities as a commodity – a 'doer', as efficient, as someone to 'get stuff done' – points to the increasing commodification of society and (consumer) relationships that participants have grown up in (Zizek, 1997; Bjerg, 2008; Fisher, 2009). Individuals are situated within a marketing society within contemporary capitalism. Extensive effort and resource are devoted to generating 'association of imagined pleasures with particular commodities, services and/or brands' (Smart, 2010, p. 147) through advertising and marketing techniques.

Importantly it is not just products and services that are subject to marketing. As discussed in the literature review of this research various authors have demonstrated how the contemporary subject is interpellated to identify with neoliberal principles as part of their subjectivity through increasing emphasis and reliance on personal branding in employment (Brannan, Parsons and Priola, 2015; Vallas and Christin, 2018; Christiaens, 2020). Vallas and Christin (2018) show how success in work – in knowledge economy settings – relies on individuals being able to imbue themselves with symbolic value in a similar process to the ways in which physical products are also imbued with symbolic value. Individuals today engage in personal branding work (Brannan, Parsons and Priola, 2015), behaving as utility maximizing agents that manage their 'human capital according to the strict laws of cost/benefit-analysis' (Christiaens, 2020, p. 506). The following quotes illuminate the normalisation of personal branding and commercialisation among participants.

Ashleigh: how you brand yourself is massive. You need to pay attention to your persona. Your LinkedIn page for example, is purely for branding and is so important.

Jackie (Senior digital marketing associate in an artisan coffee production company): having your CV up to date and always desirable is really important. But more than that you really do have to do self-marketing. You have to be ready to introduce your job role and

responsibilities in an effective way at a moment's notice, either to a senior member of staff or when networking. Those first introductions are everything, people will make judgements on those first impressions.

As described by the literature and participant quotes above, there exists in the contemporary social situation a strong undercurrent toward prioritising primarily economic goals and ideals in employment and wider social life. Such ideals encompass a focus on personal branding, marketing, and a personal management of one's own human capital. This wider field within which my participants were socialized arguably created, fostered or at the very least encouraged the adoption of commodified views of self through a subjectivity orientated toward such over time. The trend towards marketability in the workplace speaks directly to the narratives my participants presented regarding their sense of work self and their commodified view of labour as one of exchange value as opposed to a sense of occupational or vocational work over the course of a career.

In line with the theoretical framework of this research, it is suggested the social situation described above had an influence in the formation of a subjectivity that aligned with a commodified view of labour. Participants' subjectivities and understandings of themselves were historically structured and socialized in correspondence with wider neoliberal governing logics in society. However, also in line with the theoretical framework of this research, participants did possess agency. There was a level of consciousness to their socialization and they actively navigated such for their own benefit, discussed further in 'exchange value' practices below. Before that, the conceptualisation of overwork as a rational pursuit is detailed.

Rationality and overwork

Rationality and overwork were central to workers' sense of their commodified selves and wider neoliberal subjectivities. Participants' language around work tasks were often framed as being 'needed to be done'. Interestingly this framing was rarely in response to a directive from a manager or senior member of staff. Rationality could be said to be internalised. The rationalisation of meeting an organisations objectives seemed to coincide with a normalisation of pressure and oftentimes overwork. As employees rationalised their work and became more efficient they appeared to take on more work or got promoted and organically increased their workload.

The following extract from Jonty an administrator in mortgage finance exemplifies the logic around the priority of getting work done, without having such a mandate directly imposed by one's superiors at work.

HG: do you have seasons where things get harder at work?

Jonty (Financial services administrator in a mortgage broker firm): Yes, absolutely. Especially this year I believe everyone had their fair share of being pressured, especially at work, being able to perform. I have felt pressured, with my time at work, it is normal to be pressured to work. There are goals that ought to be met and whenever pressure comes along, it's not a forced pressure that is given to me from the top management. It's more of a pressure that I have within me knowing what I need to do and my responsibility to do my job. And my manager doesn't, doesn't give me that pressure. She almost supports me in a way, to be able to overcome that pressure and for us all, to be able to achieve what we need to.

Jonty adopts business rhetoric of 'goals that ought to be met' whilst maintaining 'it is normal to be pressured at work'. In a similar vein to Harry, Jonty posits that everyone, his entire workplace should come under this pressure climate to achieve what they 'need to'. Amongst all participants there was a lack of questioning or critiquing of a performance orientated remit. It made sense to individuals that they should work hard and if pressure came it was an indicator of work that needed to be accomplished not an indicator of unrealistic demands or unhealthy working environments. Jonty went so far as to stipulate that the added pressure at work does not come from his superior. The origins of extra work and pressure at work were externalised beyond employers, viewed as a natural phenomenon. This raises interesting questions regarding the extent of responsibility Jonty and others place on employers to manage employees' workloads. I asked Jonty to elaborate on what the sense of pressure looked like.

Jonty: It was spread out throughout everyone, which gives them the responsibilities that they need to do. For example, for myself without a direct instruction or request from my boss... there's only a little amount of time during the day and, you know, I actually gave myself the preparation that I need. To do that I might need to come in early or to finish late just to finish work that needs doing. That may be working late on Friday nights. But that's fine because that's the goal that I have in mind in myself that I need to do this.

Jonty discursively positions added work pressure as the 'responsibility' of employees, the mantle for this extra work is unquestionably to be taken on by Jonty and his colleagues. This excerpt is indicative of a normalisation of overwork by Jonty. Starting early and finishing late are cast as 'preparation' time, appropriate in Jonty's eyes because he has set the completion of work as a goal for himself. Noticeably it is not an individual task or project that Jonty is identifying with eliciting his dedicated efforts toward, rather it is the volume of work. Getting the work done is what propels

Jonty. As mentioned this was often a function of the commodified self. Similar self-reliant themes were echoed by other individuals:

Chelsea: it's a necessary part of the work to be able to endure pressure and not crumble. We need people who can be relied upon. As part of our team for example, we have certain people who should know when deadlines are coming up – 'month end' for example. These things shouldn't come as a surprise to them. There's a lot of work and it sometimes takes some long nights but we have to meet that target, if you don't have that kind of attitude, that resilience it's a problem for the organisation.

Toby (Mortgage account manager in a mortgage broker firm): I am responsible for a series of projects, tasks, and outcomes. And those things lie with me, however they get done, they are my responsibility and so there's no exceptions. And so what you will find with the way our company works is you have periods where everything is crazy crazy busy but then other times when it is quieter and just more manageable. So it's definitely not absolutely mental all the time, but during those times is when, yes you've got to step up really. Managers will look to see as well, who is going to get this done? Who can handle a project of this magnitude? Who can lead this and get those outcomes from a team and deliver

Both Chelsea and Toby's quotes echo discourses around self-reliance, self-resilience, and an ability to 'endure' pressure and overwork. Discursively these themes cohere to form a wider narrative of rationality, rationally being able to meet an organization's objectives through the outworking of a personhood as a resilient, rational, reliant, hardworking 'doer'. Failing to conduct oneself as such is pathologized as having 'crumbled', as possessing the wrong 'attitude', and implicitly as amounting to a 'problem' for the organization. The adoption of a rational sense of self appeared largely defined through its separation from others. Toby explains there are 'no exceptions' permitted in his work to fail to meet certain standards of reliance. He goes on to explain managers assess and differentiate employees on the criteria of ability to endure and handle excessive work and deadlines. Of particular interest was the absence of participants questioning or critiquing such working practices. Indeed, individuals displayed little to any resistance to adopting and engaging with commodified versions of themselves. It was conceived of as rational to prioritise the pursuit of workplace objectives, even to excessive lengths.

Importantly participants' subjective positioning as a commodity, to be used, to rationally achieve their workplace purpose; namely to output work and at times overwork had different root

influences. On the one hand there was a historical socialization to participants adoption of a neoliberal subjectivity and its inherent rationality. A significant corollary to this however was a set of motives grounded in a conscious effort to assert a certain identity and a commercialised presentation of the self for future personal gain, discussed next.

Exchange value

The rational pursuit of workplace objectives was not mere benevolence on the part of employees, nor seemingly solely the product of socialization. The rational pursuit of workplace objectives also held a vested interest for individuals as an extension of their commodified selves. Their reputations were attributed to their work, a fact that they were acutely aware of and often referred to, indeed it was central to understanding their adoption of neoliberal subjectivities. The following quote illustrates this finding.

Henry (Corporate solicitor in a corporate law firm): I think everyone to some level everyone feels, overworked, and underpaid. Um, but I also think I will happily work. I don't mind the work necessarily so I would never feel overworked because also I think they're in my name, um, so every letter that gets sent out, has my name on it. And I think no matter how much work... like that's my reputation at the end of the day and that's quite selfish perhaps a bit egotistical, but I want to present myself in the correct way. So no I don't feel overworked myself.

Henry begins by explaining he feels overworked and fractures this with an ending that states the opposite. His initial reaction perhaps is indicative of his felt experience, his final statement is more of an intentional decision. He decides he does not feel overworked because in line with his commodified and commercialised self, he prioritises his personal branding and marketing, his self-presentation. If a level of overwork ensures he is able to present and brand himself in a way that he deems appropriate then it is not viewed as a chore or an over exertion. In line with Skeggs' (2004) discussions of exchange value, my participants including Henry were not merely exchanging labour for wages. If this had been the case there would be no need to continually go above and beyond the level of work required. All participants were on salaries not commission. Nor would participants – like in Jonty's example above (section 'rationality and overwork') – need to demonstrate extensive self-reliance and resilience, an ability to endure and take responsibility for extreme pressures at work. Arguably a symbolic exchange took place. Skeggs (2004, p. 75) argues 'most formulations of the self are premised upon the accrual of property and value in the self via various technologies...

[the] self... can conceive of a future in which value can be realised: a specific exchange-value perspective, one that transforms leisure into employability and cultural into symbolic' (Skeggs, 2004, p. 77).

Henry's name being on letters that were sent out of the office had implications for him. He refused to feel overworked because he was attributing symbols to his personhood, these cultural workplace symbols were values as a 'doer', a hard worker, one who could endure pressure and overwork and one who could rationally meet an organisation's objectives. An analysis in line with Skeggs' (2004) concept of exchange value would argue these values were accrued by Henry to his self. Where he understands that his practice, disposition and activity within his workplace culture has the potential to enhance the overall symbolic value of his personhood (Skeggs, 2004, p. 75). Henry can conceive of a future in which value can be realised through his self-accrual practices. He can exchange the cultural values and symbols he has accrued to himself for other forms of capital; employability, promotions or pay rises, or networking gains. Arguably the values he has procured within his personhood – as a resilient, rational, self-reliant hard worker - cohere to form a neoliberal subjectivity. He implicitly signals to employers and colleagues an alignment with the principles of neoliberalism. This was a common theme throughout interviews, evidenced further in the quotes below. An alignment with, and flourishing as, an individual possessing a neoliberal subjective positioning was deemed valuable to participants. The assertion of a neoliberal subjectivity was a form of personal branding valued as creating marketable employees.

Lisa (Senior marketing advisor within a fitness technology company): the latest project I have taken up is really above my pay grade, as in it's usually the heads of who would do this work, so I am being underpaid for basically doing a head of's job, that my head of gave me to do, probably because he doesn't want to do it. But long term, it looks good, it looks good that I am able to evidence I have already completed work at a head of level. So, I am underpaid yes which isn't fair but it does also favour me, and particularly makes me stand out as a candidate. If for example a promotional opportunity arises I can use this project as part of my competency for the job.

For Lisa, a choice to engage with work above her pay grade is justified through the perceived future exchange value of doing so. Being able to reference this project she explains, will 'favour' her in potential promotional opportunities and separate her from other candidates. Taking on this project is an investment in her future competency as perceived by others.

Johnny (Managed data services consultant within a data platform building firm): ...so how we work is sort of an agile project method. And what we do is we'd work in what you call sprints. So we have an overall objective to complete, and that might be to get a system live and provide a whole lot of dashboards and things for, for a client. What we then do is we break down the project into what we call a sprint and a sprint is a two week sort of section. And then we say, okay, in sprint zero and sprint one, we need to achieve this many tasks.... So from there we map out all the tasks based on the hours of consultants we have... what has happened however is we'd have told the client a set number of hours and due to different unexpected errors it's going to take way, way longer to complete. We could go back to the client and explain this is going to take longer. And it's not unreasonable to say that because whenever we take on a project we don't make official guarantees to clients. But normally what actually happens is, we don't tell the client and we carry on working until midnight and things like that to be able to go live.

Interviewer: and how do you feel about that? Does your manager ask you to work until midnight?

Johnny: no, no, we are not asked, but we do also all know that the deadlines are coming round. We can go to our manager and have him liaise with the client for longer deadlines, but really I personally don't mind the working until midnight sometimes. I wouldn't want to all the time, but if I have those sprint tasks for myself I would rather just achieve them. It doesn't look good for the client otherwise and it doesn't look good on me in terms of how I am perceived. And these sorts of things can affect how I am seen as a consultant and my career progression and future prospects.

Johnny also demonstrates a preoccupation with his self-accrual practices. He sets up the nature of running into unexpected difficulties as not an 'unreasonable' thing to communicate to clients. Yet positions himself in opposition to this. He would 'rather just achieve' the tasks within the predefined limit, even if the number of hours needed to do so does not match up with what has been delegated within the sprint. For Johnny his focus is future based again contextualising his overwork within a wider view of how he is perceived and how this may impact upon implied future promotions, pay rises or networking opportunities, his 'progression' and 'prospects'. Arguably Johnny accrues symbolic values to himself as embodying the nature and format of his employment setting. The model of work within Johnny's company is described as 'agile', centred around series of 'sprints'. Discursively the company he works for has set the tone for working practice, as one requiring

flexibility, adaptability, and quick delivery. Johnny's behaviour symbolically ticks all of these boxes. He adaptably works longer hours to deliver on time. There is an emblematic stance taken by Johnny in doing so, an implied signalling of his compatibility with his working environment and hence also the assertion of an identity that is compatible with achieving success in said setting.

Assertion of a neoliberal identity

The meanings behind the Weberian spirit of capitalism linked pre-destination with a workplace identity and state of composure. The theoretical framework in chapter one argued the Protestants performed an identity (as hard working, frugal, duty driven) accordingly. The motivations behind their conduct can be considered at least two ways 1) as antidote to potential anxiety around not being pre-destined for heaven and 2) as cynical behaviour that demonstrates their holiness to others. This theoretical lens can be clearly evidenced in the intentional adoption and assertion of neoliberal subjectivities by participants. As demonstrated in the section a 'socialized formation of a commodified self' above a historical socialization is likely to have influenced participants' sense of themselves and their labour as a commodity. However, a corollary to this was a more conscious and intentional engagement with and adoption of practices constituting a neoliberal subjectivity – rational behaviour, overwork, displays of resilience – as part of their understandings of future personal gain through exchange value. At times participants consciously asserted an identity constituted by a neoliberal subjectivity; they did so in anticipation of future self-advancement. At a wider level this assertion of identity can be considered a personal branding move. The subjective meaning behind engaging with commodification, rational behaviour and overwork arguably is for more cynical, self-promoting reasons, to get ahead within their field of situation that values said behaviours and identities.

In understanding the complex interplay between structure on the one hand and agency (involving the assertion of specific identities) on the other it is helpful to revisit Weber's (1930) iron cage of rationalization in modernity that he argued would eventually lead to a 'nullity' and imagined level of sophistication in society (ibid, p. 124). Arguably this theoretical lens can be applied to the participants above fixated on the rational exchange value of their labour, and their implicit accruing of symbolic capital to themselves. Extending Weber's metaphor, this process could be described as a state of nullity on the grounds that what is obtained through their work (symbols, reputations as 'hard workers', 'grafters', 'doers' who are able to deliver) acquires for them more work, bigger roles with greater responsibilities and hence more opportunities to engage with and showcase their

overwork, commodification of themselves and rational actions, namely their neoliberal selves. Subverting their fallible humanity and their engagement with the sublime or that which convicts or compels them. The adoption of a neoliberal subjectivity by participants with its tendency toward instrumental, objective rationality paired with a seeming lack of sense of vocation or inherent interest for their work (explored further in theme two) might render them 'specialists without spirit or sensualists without heart' (Weber, 1930, p. 124). Part of the overall aim of this research was to explore the contemporary applicability of Weber's ideas. This research finding demonstrates the continued relevance of Weber's (1930) Protestant Work Ethic and related concepts of a disenchanted, overly rational society. The continued relevance of the related Marxian concept of alienation is also demonstrated next.

Depersonalization and alienation

The literature review highlighted the potential for personal branding and entrepreneurial understandings of the self to alienate individuals from themselves and from others, but also to potentially provide new identity categories to locate oneself within, in the absence of traditional identity 'beds'. The choice to adopt a neoliberal subject position as the primary brand and identity marker that is communicated to others, appeared to foster some level of alienation from the self. Indeed branding of oneself as a market actor inevitably promotes depersonalization (Zarkada, 2012). Individuals divested themselves of human characteristics by investing in their marketability, specifically their marketability as rational, efficient and without error akin to automated machines. The adoption of this specific neoliberal subject position arguably denotes an inauthentic relationship with the self and a subversion of genuine individuality, depersonalizing and detaching from true species essence (Marx and Engels, 1844, 2011). In choosing to locate themselves (actively viewing, branding and positioning themselves) as neoliberal subjects focused on 'delivering' and accruing symbolic neoliberal values to their personhood, participants were not able to abandon themselves to their work (Jaeggi, 2014). They were not free to determine their own will in spontaneous creativity (Marx and Engels, 1848; 2011). However, there was freedom and agency in the choice to adopt the neoliberal subject positioning.

Furthermore, in the absence of traditional identity beds, the neoliberal subject positioning of participants can also be argued to provide some sense of identity work, creating a space for individuals to assert and affirm a sense of self, one that aligns with others in their field who are also marketing themselves according to the same valued attributes. Social identity processes reduce subjective uncertainty about one's place in the world (Hogg and Terry, 2000, p. 124). The process of understanding oneself as a market actor has the potential to be an alienating process, yet

simultaneously one that provides some level of stability and ontological security that one knows who one is. The authenticity of this recognition of a 'true' self is however open to debate. These ideas are now fully fleshed out in discussions of alienation and an irrationality of rationality.

The realised 'benefit' of personal branding and depersonalization that employees did reap (namely through prioritising their personal agendas over company loyalty and imbuing themselves with symbolic value in anticipation of later exchange value) is debatable. Participants' excessive rational action to complete work, often normalising pressure and overwork achieves for them an irrational state of affairs. Intentionally public demonstrations of coping under pressure by working long hours and personally shouldering the responsibility for unrealistic tasks, resulted in promotions that consistently entailed even bigger workloads, greater pressure, and more responsibility. In this sense, there is an irrationality of rationality (Weber, 1978; Ritzer, 2015) within the contemporary knowledge economy workspaces these individuals occupied.

Knowledge workers' proclivity to mentally commodify their labour led to impersonal understandings of themselves and of colleagues, in particular managers who were viewed as personnel they needed to impress or use for networking gains or personal agendas. Peers were conceptualised first and foremost as 'workers' – as opposed to human beings - in a similar sense to how the self was perceived. The sense of outwardly expressing a specific worker identity to get ahead encroached on the inward relationship with the self (Wright Mills, 1951). Contemporary workers both expressed to the world and to themselves that they were rational and capable 'doers' of work, largely divested of human characteristics.

The inability to remove a particular neoliberal subjective positioning in personal relations and in relation to the self is conceptualised via the lens of dehumanization, disenchantment and alienation (Hartley, 2012; Marx and Engels, 1844; 2011; Weber, 1930). For participants the consistent objectification and impersonality of relations with others clearly can be likened to fellow beings' alienation and a level of commodity fetishism (Marx, 1976 cited in Brook, 2009, p.19). Rational decision making based on expected exchange values arguably demonstrates an understanding of the self as a bearer of economic relations, as a commodity possessing value that is relational to colleagues commodified value. Individuals interacted with networking and other gains in mind, mirroring the relationship between commodities.

Lack of working identity and species essence alienation

Commodity fetishism towards others also extended to understandings of the self. Individuals' personal branding specifically focused on imbuing themselves with symbolic value that could be used in exchange processes, a commodified understanding of the self, reigned. The findings of this research demonstrated an overall inability amongst participants to articulate a specific working identity related to the features of their *work*. That is, individuals readily theorised and promoted notions of their identities as neoliberal subjects, as 'doers', as rational, capable, and hardworking, features related to their ability to handle *workloads*. Yet strikingly absent was any kind of theorisation of a vocational working identity, that is an identity related to craft, skill, daily tasks, projects, even job roles and responsibilities, discussed further in theme two of this findings chapter.

Indeed, there was a striking inability of individuals to explain what it was they actually *did* for their working careers and what they did to fill the hours of the working day. The latter confusion was not because they were not busy, but because tasks appeared largely administrative, bureaucratic, and orientated around meetings. The lack of craft, passion and work that one loved, paired with a neoliberal, commodified sense of self, arguably constituted another form of alienation, namely species essence alienation.

Indeed, a distinct lack of discussion of conscious, spontaneous, creative activity in work was evidenced among participants (Marx, 1844, p. 72–3, cited in Byron, 2016, p. 387). A discourse of subsistence and survival better explains the career narratives of individuals. Working identities did not extend beyond notions of 'doers'. Participants self-disclosed the key pillars of their identities to be their compliance, effort, and adaptability. This research finding then demonstrates the continued relevance of the Marxian concept of alienation in the contemporary workplace.

Of specific interest to discussions of alienation and also the structure versus agency lens employed in this research is the fact that participants chose to remain within their fields of employment that valued neoliberal subjectivities. The iron cage described by Weber (1930) confines humans – despite being created by them – yet leaves their powers intact. They can leave the metaphorical cage at any time yet have not chosen to. The reasons for this no doubt involve a certain level of socialization and cultural influence, as discussed. However as demonstrated participants were not blindly socialized, and actively acted in sometimes cynical ways in anticipation of future gain; for example, promotions and pay rises. Hence the potential meaning and fulfilment participants did obtain from their work and commodification of self, causing them to remain in their roles must be considered. At an empirical level participants' continued adoption and outworking of a neoliberal subject position

resulted in rewards and material benefits. Explored in the next two themes of this findings and analysis chapter are some of the further meanings individuals drew from their employment and as such, possible reasons for choosing to remain within their fields, and within their metaphorical iron cage. First, explored in the 'neoliberal workplace culture' section below is the cultural environment participants were situated within and its role in forging individuals' commodified neoliberal sense of themselves and their work.

Neoliberal workplace culture

Introduction to subtheme

The culture that participants were operating in is now looked to, to further illuminate the situation leading to the alignment with neoliberal subjectivities. As we have seen historical socialization and conscious action lead to the adoption of various attributes, dispositions, and behaviours constitutive of neoliberal employment identities. It is now argued that the contemporary cultures that individuals operated within tended also to be structured around competitive performance logics and market ideals, and commodified views of the labour relationship. A sense of job insecurity was also evidenced. These findings were applicable in varying capacities to almost all participants. This exploration is important because a function of the culture participants were situated within was that it tended to reinforce their neoliberal sense of themselves and their work. Again, this subtheme highlights the complex interaction between cultural norms and socialization within work and the self-aware thoughts, actions, and behaviours of the individual actor.

Performance culture

The language participants used reflected discourses of neoliberalism and its central tenet of individualism. When describing workplaces participants described those arranged around the principles of a free market and individual responsibility. The following quotes highlight the competitive, market orientated nature of employment environments. These environments facilitated a normalised understanding of the exchange value of self and of performance orientated logics at work:

Interviewer: As I understand it, you go through restructures every few years. How do you handle that? Is it at all stressful?

Graham: So I think that the very first time I went through that, yes stressful, very much so. It was not a very nice thing. And I think you see it with people that go through that first time, getting quite, quite stressed. I think some people got quite upset by it as well because they're like, 'how can you live without me?' But obviously work is work and it's quite easy to lose people and continue working. I think that personally I've been through so many of them now, that it doesn't necessarily faze me massively. You kind of know the people that would be... would leave within a reorg, which is constructive dismissal, which is not the best thing. But in terms of job security, because I've worked with the same company for so long, the redundancy packages mean that's kind of okay. And potentially I should be looking to work for another company at some point soon anyway. But yeah. The reorgs, they are not a particularly good thing. I don't think they're a massively healthy thing for us to go through quite regularly as we do.

Graham's interview fragment arguably illuminates a period of socialisation for himself. His first business reorganisation was stressful and unsavoury, but he has been positioned within a market orientated business – cutting the least 'useful' employees every few years – for so long it has become normalised and 'doesn't necessarily phase' him as much. Graham is able to identify the people who would be 'constructively dismissed' during a reorganisation of his company. His awareness of exchange value extends to others' abilities. Perhaps the motif of this section of discourse is best summarised by Graham himself; '*obviously work is work and it is quite easy to lose people and continue working*'. Interestingly Graham does not say 'work is my craft', or 'work is our livelihood'. It could be argued he purposely personally branded his identity around a commodified employment subjectivity in line with the environment he was operating in, this was instead of narratively orientating himself around his job skills, vocation, or occupational career – a key finding through interviews.

The employee providing value to the employer relationship is also distorted in Graham's extract. According to Graham work 'easily' continues without the value an individual employee may bring. Arguably this 'easy' dynamic rests on the remainder of self-reliant employees who are not axed in a restructure, seamlessly picking up the extra work – like Jonty, described above Graham has witnessed restructures so many times that whilst he deems them 'not massively healthy' he has an understanding that, that is the way things are. This excerpt highlights a situational, cultural influence in Graham and others' adoption of rationality, hard work, and commodified views of their labour. The threat of job loss in frequent restructures encouraged individuals to invest in their neoliberal

subjectivities and by extension exchange value to increase the likelihood of job security. This finding was evidenced across other interviews, some of which are detailed below:

Mark (Digital experience manager within a digital payment systems company): I was there, I was probably actually only there for two years and there was planned a big kind of department merge. We knew it'd be some of the most experienced being put up against each other. There was a lot of opportunity to evidence your capability in the run up, especially in terms of leading a team. But ultimately the person I was up against was more experienced than me. He got the role and I got my redundancy. So that was fine.

Tammy (Paralegal within a litigation law firm): it's somewhat of a constant fear... or actually driver. Driver is a better word. It's somewhat of a constant driver, that restructure setting, knowing that there is always a culling around the corner.

Tammy described the motivational properties of ever imminent restructures. Whilst Mark explicitly referred to the window 'of opportunity' to invest in ones outward facing identity and symbolic value prior to a restructure.

A culture of perceived and real ramifications for 'failing' to meet an organisation's objectives also contributed to a neoliberal cultural backdrop that influenced participants' understanding of themselves and their working worlds. Interestingly, oftentimes the ramifications described were illusive and arbitrary. Participants made comments like 'if you don't work hard it's just not going to work out', or 'there's a certain level of acceptability here', or when referring to someone's work 'it just doesn't cut it'. It often was not clear whether such phrases specifically meant redundancy, or lack of further promotion, or some sort of disciplinary action or dressing down. These phrases were used in a variety of contexts and it appeared participants themselves did not always have a specific situation in mind. Rather just an understanding of what was an 'acceptable' standard in their working environment and what was not. Participants held an invisible framework of performance markers that they saw as in operation in their individual spheres. Performance management was foregrounded in interviews. It operated as a distinct focal point that people came back to when contextualising why they did what they did, or to justify their scorn for colleague's misdemeanours. In other situations, ramifications were more tangible and accountability measures more obvious. In the interaction below, Harry the litigation solicitor, had just explained that management did not approve of solicitors being on the phone to clients for too long:

Interviewer: Are people let go, if they're not meeting these targets? What are the ramifications of you being on the phone for too long?

Harry: Well, first of all, I should say all of our calls are recorded and listened to by a what's called a compliance officer. That's the hidden word for a snitch. So they listen and obviously anything bad, they'll tell your supervisor. So it's apparently for the clients, in my opinion, that's not really it. It's to make sure everything's profit and short, sharp to the point. In terms of ramifications, when I first joined, there was a lovely lad named Palaver and he didn't make... he didn't cut the mustard. So after six months was up, he was just let go. And we weren't really told as to why. Like I think they should have told us because the rumours were way worse, than the actual truth. And we never, we will never know, but I just think that obviously... you know having been there for only a couple of months myself, that really seeded a lot of nervousness. I was like, what if that's me? But yeah, so I think the ramifications can be quite serious if you don't cut the mustard, which seeds a lot of doubt and fear, I think.

Harry's quote highlights the pivotal role culture can and did play in participants' psychology and understanding of 'normalised' working practices and their own responsibilities. The tangible accountability in letting Palaver go without telling employees why seeded 'doubt and fear' and contributed to Harry's 'nervousness'. Harry had not been pulled up for his performance. Yet the culture of his law firm – including mysterious dismissals, compliance 'snitches' and an orientation toward 'profit' being 'short, sharp and to the point' – left Harry initiated into, or at least more strongly acquainted with an ideology of individualism, performance management and self-responsibility. Harry voiced fears that he may not 'cut the mustard'. Interestingly elsewhere in his interview Harry was very vocal about how hard he worked and the responsibility for self-sufficiency and self-reliance he took on, arguably a response to his cultural environment.

Conclusions to the theme

To conclude, this theme has addressed the complex interplay between structural socialization and individual agency in the context of participants' adoption of and alignment with neoliberal subjectivities. It has explored the context of consumerism and personal branding within which individual actors are historically socialized and formed. It has also addressed a tendency among participants to consciously engage with certain facets of a neoliberal logic namely, a commodified sense of work and self, rationalization, overwork, self-reliance, and self-responsibility. It is argued participants at times chose to do this in conscious identity assertion for future gain and self-

promotion as part of their personal branding. Participants symbolically align with the ideals of their working environments to get ahead, accruing symbols and values to their personhood as 'hard workers', 'doers', efficient and effective employees. These principles were valued by participants because they were valued by their fields of employment.

These findings align with the research literature that describes neoliberalism as a dominant ideology and a governing mode of rationality that has disseminated to all domains and activities (Brown, 2015; Abbinnett, 2021). However, these findings also advance the literature by demonstrating how this 'governing mode' is taken up by individuals, specifically as a form of personal branding that is the result of both agency and socialization. The literature that postulates that personal branding is a unique, personalized endeavour (Zarkada, 2012) is also rejected in this instance. This form of branding was strongly uniform and consistently demonstrated among interviewees, advancing a more standardized engagement with a neoliberal branding of the self.

The choice to adopt a neoliberal subject position as the primary brand and identity marker that is communicated to others, was argued to foster a dehumanized, disenchanting state of alienation from others and from the self (Marx and Engels, 1848, 2011; Weber, 1930). Rational decision making based on expected exchange values (Skeggs, 2004) resulted in an objectification and impersonality of relations with others. Individuals socially interacted with an understanding of themselves and of others as bearers of economic relations. Respondents demonstrated an inability to articulate a working identity related to features of their *work*, instead consistently narrating their identities through commodified means as 'doers', rational, capable and hardworking. This neoliberal sense of self paired with a lack of craft, passion, skill development and work that one loved constituted a form of species essence alienation. Absent from participant narratives was any discussion or sense of engaging in creative, spontaneous, inherently interesting work; indeed, participants appeared to be alienated from what their inherent interests were, discussed further in the following two themes.

Weber's iron cage was briefly referenced to help set up the questions of meaning in employment central to this study. This thesis asks why individuals choose to remain in the metaphorical iron cage, namely working environments that encourage and at times seemingly necessitate the adoption of neoliberal subjectivities for success. It also asks what, if any, meaning and fulfilment are individuals drawing from their employment that they chose to stay working in the roles that they do. As has been demonstrated self-advancement and empirical rewards and benefits (including salary increases and promotions) are offered as part of the meaning participants obtain from engaging in their work. The next two themes explore the meanings behind work further. Specifically explored is the meaning

obtained from 'winning', and from affirmation within the 'battleground' of work in theme two. Then the meaning obtained from being able to construct a biographical narrative of progress is explored in theme three.

As will be further unpacked in the remaining two themes a situation of alienation with agency was in operation for my participants, this research finding constitutes an original contribution to knowledge. This first theme has demonstrated the continued relevance of both Marx and Weber's ideas of alienation, disenchantment and rationalization in society, these concepts remain important in the contemporary context. This thesis updates the classical theorists however by demonstrating that whilst alienated in complex ways, participants constructed innovative, agentic new pathways to meaning. These new pathways to meaning were through 1) affirmation of the self (addressed in findings theme two) 2) retrospectively narrating their careers, 3) pursuing progress as a consumptive practice and 4) pursuing an aesthetics of life as opposed to an aesthetics of work (the latter three pathways are discussed in findings theme three).

Theme two – Affirmation, motivation and meaning

Defining the theme

This theme is titled as such because it explores the intersections of affirmation, motivation and meaning in employment. This research uncovered affirmation as opposed to self-actualization constituted an innovative pathway to meaning that individuals forged. Indeed, affirmation was a primary motivator in employment. Self-affirmation is defined in this theme as processes, phenomena and situations that signalled to participants their ability, capability, indispensability and at times superiority. For the participants in this study affirmation encompassed understandings of the self as a 'work warrior', as highly competent and highly capable of delivering, particularly in response to overwork and pressure, it constituted an understanding of the self that rejected notions of 'complacency'. Affirmation operated in place of the traditional pathway to meaning of linear, long-term crafting and vocational relationships with work. Affirmation also operated in place of the contemporary cultural schema of the emotionalization of work. Both major documented pathways to meaning in the literature are hence advanced and a new pathway of affirmation is instead theorised for the participants in this study.

A number of specific literary studies are advanced by this theme, detailed in full in the conclusions to the theme. These include an amending and updating of Ekman's (2014) notion of self-actualization with instead self-affirmation as a primary motivator and meaning making mechanism in employment

for these knowledge workers. The individualization careers literature (Hall, 2004) is advanced in demonstrating a new protean type of personhood. The emotionalization of work cannon (Sandoval, 2018; Bygrave, 2020; De Palma, 2020; Pagis, 2020) is challenged in the assertion that not all individuals are pursuing passionate and emotional relationships with work. Similarly the traditional long-term, craft and vocational literature (Weber, 1930; Wright Mills, 1951; Sennett, 1998, 2009; Carroll, 2008) is explored in the contemporary context. The absence of time and space for skill development and trial and error in the knowledge settings that these participants occupied updates this cannon by unpacking some of the barriers to crafting and vocational relationships with work. This theme contributes to the nuanced body of studies (Ho, 2009; Ekman, 2014, 2015) that demonstrates that exploitation, overwork, and stressful employment environments can at times facilitate meaningful experiences with employment and heightened perceptions of the self.

Introduction to findings theme two

Protean career theory argues contemporary career paths are no longer determined via organisations but instead by individuals and their choices (Hall, 2004; Gubler, 2011). These choices are said to be determined by employees' personal values, morals and goals, allowing them to achieve psychological success (Hall, 2004). The Do What You Love (DWLY) mantra similarly claims many are actively pursuing their passions and dreams through employment (De Palma, 2020; Pagis, 2020). The current spirit of capitalism is said to rely on a 'projects cite', whereby capitalism is upheld by a majority workforce who pursue employment because of its interesting and varied nature (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). Fundamentally also because it allows individuals to self-actualize through their work (Ekman, 2014, 2015). This literary contextual background formed part of the basis of investigation for this research. As part of a wider investigation into meaningful employment this thesis was interested in how strongly – if at all – self-actualization, personal dreams, goals, passions, and interests feature in individuals' working lives and, if they featured, the ways in which they narrate such. Specifically, the research was interested in how the major documented pathways to meaning through the emotionalization of work and also through long-term crafting and vocational pursuits were in operation or not. The research also sought to investigate the extent to which individualized understandings of employment and working careers were in operation.

As discussed in the first section of this theme 'affirmation in the battleground of work' the research found the quest for and obtention of workplace affirmation to be a primary motivator and avenue for meaning creation in employment. Rather than passion for the job (Pagis, 2020), a sense of individuals 'doing what they loved' (De Palma, 2020) or obvious paths to self-actualization (Ekman,

2014, 2015). Motivators defined here refer to the reasons participants put effort into their work, worked hard, or exhibited any kind of work ethic/commitment. The motivations for work also appeared to be intricately entwined with the ways in which participants drew meaning from their work.

As explored in the section 'winners, losers and self-presentation', it was meaningful and motivational for participants to engage in the 'battleground' of work, to present themselves as 'winners' and separate themselves from 'losers'. There was a rejection of lesser 'complacent' subjectivities.

Also unpacked in sections 'winners, losers and self-presentation' and 'anxious presentations of the self and the absence of craft', absent from participants narratives and working lives was an investment in a philosophical sense of craftsmanship conducted over a long period of time. There was a lack of refining one's craft or skills. Rather participants often anxiously invested in the presentation of self as invulnerable, as one who could 'hold their own' and 'deliver'. In line with the protean career literature (Hall, 2004) participants directed the shaping of their careers as opposed to their organisations and invested in making themselves adaptable. However, counter to the conceptualisation of the protean career (Hall, 2004) participants were not compelled to do this by personal morals, large goals and the pursuit of psychological success. Rather fears of being pigeonholed and self-affirmation seeking underpinned participants' pursuit of this reconceptualised notion of protean careers.

Finally explored in the section 'greater responsibility, overwork and work warriors' were the ways in which participants drew meaning from a sense of their own indispensability. This sense of indispensability was obtained through workplace achievements, particularly achievements that required excessive work or were achieved within stressful conditions such as short deadlines. A work warrior mentality – namely a sense of self as a battle victor having achieved great feats especially in the face of adversity - appeared to foster an elevated sense of self for some.

Affirmation in the battleground of work

The second finding's theme uncovered by an analysis of the research data identified a lack of passion as a motivator for employment. Instead, a strong theme of work being pursued as a means of self-affirmation was evidenced. Affirmation was sought and achieved in various ways, including being headhunted for internal and external roles, taking 'ownership' of an 'area' and through 'winning' internal battles, and being recognised for such. A fascinating dichotomy was evidenced aligning with Ekman's (2014) notion of double bind relationships at place in intensive working environments.

Ekman (2014) defines 'double bind' relationships broadly as 'dysfunctional' interactions involving mutually exclusive demands. For Ekman's participants employed in the creative sector, individuals juggled desires for clear protective boundaries and moderation versus limit breaking self-actualizing moments. Within this research individuals were found to dichotomously juggle desires for clarity in their roles and areas, managerial support and 'backing' on the one hand (features indicative of clear protective boundaries and moderation) versus opportunities for self-affirmation through some of the mechanisms mentioned above (being headhunted, 'owning' an area and 'winning' internal battles). Departing from Ekman (2014) I deem this self-affirmation as opposed to self-actualization for a number of reasons. As detailed above, participants rejected the notion that they were 'Doing What They Loved' at work. Equally almost without exception they stated they had little to no passion for the job. 'Wins' were constructed as necessary signifiers that they were capable and deserved a seat at the table, hence affirming their abilities. Intense stress and even mental breakdowns were frequently cited in the pursuit of winning. Indeed, a strong component of the affirmation motivator theme is the notion of affirmation within the 'battleground' of work. The following narration by Suzie a commercial manager of cross sell and migrations (managing the movement of customers from one area of the business to another to make money – from 'pay as you go' to a user contract) in a telecommunications company analysed structurally helps shed light on the affirmation motivation theme and its 'battleground' context.

Suzie:So all these areas are not only losing me that money, when you apply cost, I was losing millions of pounds. I needed to do something about that... so I went to these people who are already difficult, there's one guy in particular in the outbound world in trading called [Craig]. He was really really tough and I remember being on the phone to him, and being like in a nice way you're losing me money, in a really nice way trying to work up to it and being really diplomatic, looking at the reports and stuff and he was like yeah it's impossible to make every sale positive so were just not gonna do it sort of thing. And I was like well what's the point, why do this if it makes no money, we are a business we are a company at the end of the day the point is to make money and were not making money, like come on now that makes no sense. And I basically had this horrible fight for about 3 months, June, July and august, where we'd present a report and I would be called a liar. I had the phone put down on me by a [very senior individual who], who called me relentlessly on the way into work one morning, he called I didn't pick up, he kept calling I didn't pick up and I was actually on the tube, so eventually I picked up when coming out the underground and this was all before 9am so before I am even supposed to start work, and... he was like 'I don't believe you, I

don't believe your report it's wrong, this isn't what we're seeing, you're lying', he put the phone down on me and shouted at me and it was horrible, because he made me feel like I was a little girl and I'm trying to be a woman in business I'm just trying to prove who I am... And so it was just this nastiness of like 3 months... and it was just horrendous and it actually got to the point where I had a break down in the office and I ended up shouting and crying at this guy in the middle of the office... what I was finding as well, was that these people were doing stuff behind my back and making their own reports that were factually incorrect and circulating them to their powers that be and my director and feeding it all around and deliberately cutting me out the loop. So I was fighting all of this stuff, and it was shit, because you're supposed to own this entire area of the business that was my job and here's everybody else doing it for me and doing it wrong and telling me that I'm wrong when I know that I'm right and this guy Adam just came up to me one day and said I've been looking at your data and it's wrong and I just lost it, I lost it at him. I was like I can't do this, the way we work is a shit show, it's fucking horrible, I was like I feel horrible within this, I was like you guys are doing so much behind my back, I was like I literally cannot function.

The master motif of this short piece of prose demonstrates how Suzie constructs her employment setting as a battleground in which she is personally competing. In the opening section the 'loss of money' created by another department with conflicting objectives is positioned as a personal loss. She states trading are losing *her* money. Later she affirms the natural order of 'owning an area' within business, expanding that that is her job. This is underpinned by a wider neoliberal discourse of individual responsibility (Powell and Snellman, 2004; Cruz, 2016). Suzie takes on these problems as her own initially and does not apportion blame toward her organisational structure. This is despite her explaining that the department she was dealing with has conflicting objectives set by management that clash with her own.

Instead, Craig from trading and the other senior individual are cast as villains in the narrative, whilst Suzie takes up different roles. First she positions herself as the 'diplomatic' and diligent employee who 'read the reports' and was trying to rectify a loss of revenue for the business. Later she takes on a role of adversary similar to those in the trading department as she 'fights' back over the course of three months. Finally, when it seems she can fight no more, she accepts the position of victim in her breakdown and lament 'you guys are doing so much behind my back... I literally cannot function'.

Interestingly it is at this time, that perhaps her organisation is looked to and held somewhat accountable for her ordeal. Her declaration 'the way we work is a shit show' places onus beyond her individual responsibility. It speaks perhaps to an indirect acknowledgement that a system of

different departments with conflicting goals typically does not elicit cohesion or unity in working environments (Gaal *et al.*, 2010; Gelfand *et al.*, 2012). Or it may refer more to the way in which the dispute was handled namely through ‘nastiness’, name calling and disrespect (being cut off on the phone). In either case these factors can be categorised as indicative of a competitive, market culture that the organisation promotes or at the very least allows. Indeed literature suggests organisational culture is a pivotal part of any company, paid due attention by senior management as a means to promote certain behaviours and attitudes among employees and hence achieve a firm’s desired targets and goals (Schein, 2004; O’Donnell and Boyle, 2008; Graham *et al.*, 2017). The implication being that Suzie’s culture is intentionally structured as it is. Her remark ‘the way we work is a shit show’ is indicative of being more widely directed at her company, a shift in responsibility from the individual to the organisation.

‘Double bind’ interactions like Suzie’s above were commonplace. For Suzie it might be said the tension between wanting to ‘own’ her area on the one hand and her longing for support and more collegial working conditions on the other is a clear example of a double bind tension in operation. For Suzie winning was a priority but the hostility she encountered created a fracture in this pursuit, evidencing the double bind nature to her work and areas of personal dissatisfaction for Suzie. The battleground context and importance of being able to affirm oneself and one’s abilities in work was evidenced across interviews. Suzie’s narrative analysed structurally is a good exemplar of the typified responses that constituted the formation of this theme. The battleground context for self-affirmation is further explored in the context of ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ and self-presentation described next.

‘Winners’, ‘losers’ and self-presentation

In addition to the implicit sense of individual responsibility fostered by the ‘battleground’ environments my participants occupied, was a clear distinction between ‘winners’ and ‘losers’. Where success affirms one is not a ‘loser’. In the vignette above Suzie explains her data issue led others from an opposing camp to take up her work behind her back, by extension ‘owning’ parts of *her* area. The pivotal problem being that she is ‘supposed’ to be the dominant voice on an area. This part of the story is arguably more upsetting and anger inducing for Suzie than the original issue of a rival department losing her money – a factor that affects her actual job as a commercial cross sell manager. The take up of her work is considered a territorial grabbing battle move, constructed as an attempt on her credibility and by extension her positionality within work as a ‘winner’ or at the very least as capable. The wider connotations of being a winner (as also echoed numerous times by my

other participants) were that she was secure in her work, she 'could deliver' and hence 'add value' to the organisation. These phrases were commonplace in all interviews. In line with similar studies (Ho, 2009; Ekman, 2015) conducted in intensive, results orientated workplaces, the phrases were indicative of discourses of indispensability (Ekman, 2015) and a rejection of lesser 'complacent' subjectivities (Ho, 2009) – characteristics of being a 'winner'. My participants indirectly spoke of their need to 'win' to affirm their status and capability within work. Suzie would have respect as a 'winner' but not as a 'loser'. When the rivalry developed into her being cut out of the loop it signified a weakening of her position, despite 'knowing she was right' about her data, she could not rest in that credibility. The issue had become greater than truths and falsities. It was one of identity and status, as perhaps evidenced in her admission '*I'm just trying to prove who I am*'. Her identity was challenged, and this eventually resulted in breakdown.

The concept and rhetoric of 'winners' and 'losers' in work was rife throughout interviews. As was its positioning as identity affirmation. Participants invested heavily in the presentation of themselves as winners. They spoke as much about the need to win as their separation from 'losers'. One individual described a scenario in which her manager told her to delete emails from a colleague deemed 'less capable' rather than bothering to reply. Terms such as 'space cadet' were used to describe work colleagues who 'couldn't deliver', in reference to their perceived light-headedness, stupefied state and lack of assertiveness. It never seemed to be of great importance what specifically was or was not being delivered. Attention was focused on the immediate 'battle' at hand. The following exchange with Malve a device pricing manager illuminates the winner affirmation theme well.

Malve (Device pricing manager in a technology firm): A phrase my boss uses is, and it's when I'm going to do something in a meeting that might be contentious and he's like, have you got your big boy pants on? Or do you need me to come as well? And at the start I was like, I know I'm going to get savaged here in this meeting. So I probably would appreciate your input, but now I manage it on my own. If I can't back myself, then no one can. And if I don't back myself, people will see a chink in the armour and probably go for it and will see it as a weakness. So yeah, I think backing yourself in your environment, is very key. Even when you're wrong.

This quote highlights well the double bind relationship (Ekman, 2014) participants often had with their organisations. Similarly to Ekman's (2014) participants, Malve was pulled on the one hand by a desire to have his boss 'input' in his defence when he inevitably gets 'savaged', whilst on the other he recognises that if he cannot back himself 'no one can'. He rationalises 'backing himself' as a

means of survival and protection. If he fails to do so he will be seen as weak as evidenced in his use of the phrase 'chink in the armour'. Self-doubt was frequently viewed by participants as a weakness and as an opportunity to get ahead by other colleagues. Similarly, to Suzie, Malve deemed such weakness as posing a threat to his deserving a place in his environment. His ability to back himself was a means to 'winning' which affirms his value.

The meeting room was frequently the arena in which battles were fought in the workplace. Malve's short quote gives a glimpse of the prep work done between him and his manager prior to entering a situation of contention. Strategizing with other managers and/or senior managers characterised a lot of prep work described by participants. Perhaps a more traditional view of a meeting aligning with adhocracy or clan workplace cultures (Gaal *et al.*, 2010) might be one of collaboration, an opportunity for colleagues to update one another on progress and come to solutions and plans of action. In the business orientated private sector spaces that many of my participants represented this was not the case. Conclusions and plans of action were decided prior to meetings, it was then up to the individual to present and compete in the most self-assured way to secure a win. What was particularly fascinating about Malve's statement was that he ended it by highlighting how important it was to 'back yourself' even when wrong, I asked him to elaborate on this.

[Malve]: This week, for example [a device] launched and I'd set up a set of pricing agreements with all the adults in the business. The Managing Director of marketing, second to CEO, I presented it to him and he approved it. Then once the pricing came through, I kind of didn't necessarily agree with what I'd pre-approved. I was looking at it and I was like I actually I think we can make a bit more money from this. But recently a lot of my feedbacks are that I'm not assertive enough. Finance were really putting the pressure on me to do the move that would make a bit more money, even though it wasn't what I had previously agreed. So I knew that I agreed with finance, but I had to back what I'd previously had approved by the grownups to fight my corner.

This elaboration by Malve arguably is indicative of an identity struggle in the workplace rather than a pricing one (an actual component of work). Malve perceives other people's opinions of his assertiveness to be at stake. He decides this is more worthy of protection than promoting his professional expertise. This is arguably representative of implicit norms within his field of business. In the hierarchy of value, one's identity or status is considered to trump best practice for the business. This provides an interesting commentary on the competitive employment cultures my participants occupied. As demonstrated competitive subjectivities are seemingly promoted in the managerial business environments my participants described. It has been suggested competitive

dispositions amongst employees have the capacity to enhance productivity and efficiency (Gaal *et al.*, 2010). The participants in this study do present as keen to 'own' their areas and perhaps this elicits harder work and consequently increased revenue. Conversely however competition appears also to promote intensified self-management at the expense of business objectives if necessary. The wider role of self-management and the absence of opportunity for craft as a result is addressed next.

Anxious presentations of self and an absence of craft

Identity struggles and intensified self-management practices in the workplace similar to those described in Malve's pricing incident were commonplace. Individuals were heavily invested in and orientated toward what they deemed 'appropriate' presentations of self, as winners, as credible employees who added value to their organisations. Importantly what was absent was investment in craft in any sense. Craft refers to 'an enduring, basic human impulse, the desire to do a job well for its own sake' (Sennett, 2009, p. 9), it is the development of practice over a long duration. Craft has been argued to hold central importance (Wright Mills, 1951; Sennett, 2009), it is seen by some as an anchor in a material society that provides meaning and insight into how we navigate and understand social life and interactions, whilst also operating as an antidote to alienation (Marx and Engels, 2011). As demonstrated in the literature review a number of links can also be made between crafting experiences and the development of a vocational relationship with work, namely through specialization and passionate devotion (Weber, 1922, 1978).

A philosophical sense of craft - involving long term refinement considered vocational in nature (Ackers, 2018) - was absent from participant interviews in two senses. Firstly, as discussed within this theme, motivators for work focused on opportunities to 'win' battles, to create distance from 'losers' and to avoid complacent subjectivities, these features in turn provided participants with a sense of affirmation of their abilities. Notably absent from workplace motivation discussions was a refining of skills, talents, or abilities, long term projects/plans or even personal passions – factors associated with a sense of craftsmanship, and indeed vocation. The meaningful work literature cites states of flow as constitutive parts of work that individuals find fulfilling. Where flow refers to states of prolonged absorption in tasks (due to their inherent interest) often resulting in a loss of sense of time (Csikszentmihalyi, Abuhamdeh and Nakamura, 2005). Craft similarly cites heightened levels of motivation in work, at times causing obsession with 'perfect' quality, even to the point of deforming the work itself (Sennett, 2009). Neither state was evidenced in interviews. Secondly a sense of craft appeared absent from participants' employment lives due to the lack of space for long term craft opportunities. Participants were not afforded the time, space or

opportunity to 'try and fail', to learn and grow, central tenets of the craft experience (Sennett, 2009). Rather the onus was on getting things right first time and 'proving' oneself from the offset. The 'winning' mentality that pervaded necessitated participants do not make mistakes and by extension discredit their reputations or 'lose' a battle for their team or department. Some of the quotes below exemplify the vacuum of space for both trial and error and the development of a craft outlook:

Sebasten (Project manager in a scent infused products company): And for me, for instance, I always wonder what people's ambitions are because obviously I have lots of ambitions myself, so I'm always thinking, okay, what do I want to do? Or, you know, for instance if you make a mistake, could someone use that as leverage against you? Or could that, you know, could you lose out on a position because of, because of that mistake, if someone else brings it up? Someone could turn around in a meeting and reference, well you did so and so, you dropped the ball with X, Y, Z

Sebasten was highly mindful of his behaviour. Sebasten spoke about his conscious self-disciplining that he engaged with at work. There was a sense of inauthenticity to his work self at times during his interview. As detailed above he had a keen interest in how his own mistakes could be used as 'leverage' against him, he was highly preoccupied with the notion that he could 'lose out' on positions, promotions or otherwise because of said mistakes. Sebasten like many others did not perceive of trial and error or relative 'failures' to be an acceptable or safe component of his working practice. His employers did not directly mandate this, rather Sebasten, saw mistakes as directly being correlated with costing him future success. Sebasten like most participants was heavily invested in his presentation of self as invulnerable, instead of being invested in a sense of craft or his work tasks or projects. Arguably this was encouraged - if not caused - by a cultural understanding of a lack of space for crafting experiences and error making. Employees' focus on how they were being perceived by others arguably was an anxious endeavour. Indeed, for Sebasten the perceived threat of 'losing out' speaks to an anxious distrust of others, of his environment and a need to safeguard against such to get ahead.

Tom (Membership executive in a business enterprise collective): it's important how you are perceived, so I had to nail that project at all costs, like you can't have that fail because it will be associated with you and then your credibility is questioned. So even though [Derrick] is the more senior individual than me hierarchically, they [management] want me to get work out of him because I am the project manager. So I have to do that slyly. So I go about it in a non work orientated way and basically show a lot of carrot not stick. It's just saying, Oh yeah. So

how about this? Just very light-heartedly saying, can we get on this? after indulging him by just chatting about cricket or football or something, for an hour. Um, but then in my mind I'm thinking right, when's good for me to cut off this conversation and turn it back on to work. I've got to nail this.

Similarly, Tom – who sold memberships to a business consortium network, to business leaders - resorts to 'sly' tactics to ensure he 'nails' his project. He employs people management techniques to obtain the work he 'needs' from the senior individual, arguably engaging in his own personal managerial skill development. However, he prefaces this interaction with serious concerns about potential failure. Failure would result in the questioning of his 'credibility' and must be avoided 'at all costs'. Arguably Tom is apprehensively orientated toward his self-presentation. Potential project failure is not condemned because of the effects it may have on the business, on other projects or the personal sense of not having done a good job. Credibility - an outward facing attribute - is at the forefront of Tom's mind.

Chris (Senior project manager in a telecommunication corporation): So culture. Yeah, there's certainly is backlash if you piss someone off too much. There have been times when I've favoured someone over someone else and the person I have not favoured will call up my boss and be like, Chris needs to pull his finger out here. We're in a very unique kind of role where we appreciate that we will piss people off when we can't make them happy. A lot of our work is about presenting a good and balanced argument for what we're presenting, what we're trying to achieve.

Part of Chris' role as a senior project manager was to assess and sign off on (or not) different teams projected budget requests for each quarter. As described, at times he favoured certain departments over others based on what was best financial practice for his company. He had an oversight of all funds. Yet Chris had to consciously monitor 'backlash' from favouring certain individuals or teams more than others, regardless of whether it made financial sense or not. It was a normalised practice for individuals to call Chris' boss to assert their complaints and make demands for change. To manage this Chris explains a good portion of his job is engaging in justification of his professional decisions 'presenting good and balanced arguments'. It is not enough for Chris to rest in the credibility of his professional status and accountancy training. He needed to spend time investing in his credibility by justifying and accrediting his decisions discursively.

A similar anxious investment in the presentation of self was demonstrated by some in response to more direct top-down pressures that also evidenced a vacuum of space for trial and error:

Chelsea: so at a wider team meeting [the head of marketing] stands up and he goes yeah as far as I'm concerned this is a flat structure you all have authority to make the decisions that you need to, to do your job well and he's like il back you as long as you can justify the decisions that you've made and show that it's the right thing to do, then il back you.

Chelsea highlights the conditional role of managerial support. On the one hand employees have the support of their director when they are 'right' and can 'justify' such. On the other such support is not offered if the decisions one makes are not 'the right thing to do'. Interestingly given the nature of the format in which decisions are justified, namely in convincingly debating with others, what was the 'right' thing to do according to Chelsea was not clear. Rather at times it was not what was right or best practice, but what you could persuasively argue that got backing. Chelsea thoroughly appreciated the managerial support when she got it, as did her colleagues. Comments from her boss such as those stated in the quote above however did seed an implied cultural mantra of *only accurate ways of working*. Being given the 'authority to make decisions' was valued, but seemingly absent was the space to develop decision making skills and specific knowledge for success. The implication was good workers would figure it out as they go.

Suzie: so in my marketing capacity, I could always take things so far, until it would go to my marketing director vs the trading director and then we would always lose. So every single time. Because there was no real proper leadership in marketing it was very weak. No real opinions on things, [the marketing director] doesn't really fight the corner. Whereas [the trading director] knows his shit and he goes in from that perspective of we are right. So, I am glad to have moved [from marketing to trading] because trading hold all the power and they hold the authority because of who their leadership is. The leadership at the top of marketing doesn't have the authority to kind of stand up to the trading element.

Suzie demonstrated how the 'perspective' of being 'right' led to authority and 'power'. Her quote clearly juxtaposes a situation in which being right leads to success, versus a situation in which a lack of 'opinions' and lack of fight does not. This was important for Suzie because the good work she felt she was doing whilst working in marketing was being discarded every time trading had a conflicting objective. It was important that management were also invested in presenting themselves as correct. This finding again demonstrates the importance of the 'appropriate' investment and presentation of self that was prioritised over a long duration of the development of skills and one's craft.

A lack of long-term craft opportunities was also evidenced in participants' frequent job and role changes that placed them in new situations with new skills and projects to quickly get to grips with.

The regular displacement stifled a sense of long term work within projects or areas of the business in line with Sennett's (1998) assertions, however departing from Sennett individuals did not perceive this to be corrosive to their character or abilities. Rather movement had associated positive attributes due to the exposure to the 'different ways of working' it facilitated, discussed next.

Protean type orientation

Data analysis revealed a re-conceptualised notion of what it means to engage in a protean career for the participants in this study. In line with Hall (2004) individuals directed the shaping of their careers as opposed to their organisations. Participants almost without exception worked to make themselves adaptable – frequently moving between job roles within organisations and sometimes, but much less frequently moving to new organisations. Yet this was not compelled by personal morals, large goals, and the pursuit of psychological success as in the protean career. Rather it was motivated by fears of being pigeonholed, intricately intertwined with anxious presentations of self and self-affirmation seeking. Moves also happened in response to promotion and progression, discussed fully in theme three, progress biographies. Within the 'pigeonholed' rhetoric was a direct rejection of becoming too dedicated or confined to a specific area. Interestingly this runs counter to the meaningful work literature which argues dedication and absorption in facets of work are factors that increase work engagement and elicit more positive, fulfilling and meaningful employment experiences (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2002; Bakker, 2008). It seemed instead that a fear of being pigeonholed operated in conjunction with a strategy of no strategy (Ho, 2009). Similarly to Ho's (2009) Wall Street bankers (concerned only with immediate trades and financial rewards), participants often did not have a long-term plan or sense of employment trajectory, there was a distinct lack of goals beyond the immediate next step and a lack of connection to future goals. Rather they saw it as important that they had experience in as many 'different ways of working' as possible to be seen as both capable and marketable for 'when' they applied somewhere else. Included below are just a few examples of quotes participants made when unpacking their fears of being pigeonholed.

Josie (UK talent acquisition manager in human resources in a nationwide bank): So I think I will just see what happens. Um, so I'm not looking for leave, but I'm also conscious that I've been there kind of five years, which is the longest I've been anywhere. Um, and of course you don't want to get to that point where you're kind of pigeonholed and it's even harder to move. So I guess that's something for me to think about in the next year or so.

Terry (Digital communications lead in an online shopping company): But after, after a certain amount of time, I began to realize that actually as a job it had put me in a very pigeonholed

situation. I could have taken those skills elsewhere, but probably wouldn't have earned as much money... I felt stuck.

Sebasten: My main worry is then being pigeonholed, stuck in a rut where I can't get a job that's equivalent for a long time. Um, and being out of a job, but otherwise I feel quite secure.

In place of protean orientations being motivated by personal morals and goals was instead cyclical anxieties around becoming 'stuck'. A key motivation behind participants' frequent movement between roles was so that they might become more versatile. They became more versatile so that they might be able to move roles. They were afraid that if they remained in positions too long, it would hinder future movement because of a lacking in the protean prototype, specifically they would not have experience in a range of settings, and employers, managers and colleagues would view them as less adaptable or versatile. Interestingly job changes in most cases took place within a single organisation. This was counter to Sennett's (1998) theory that individuals are not opting for careers progressing through a single institution. The traditional upward linear path described by Sennett however was evidenced less. Individuals often switched to different departments within companies, took on different projects and wore different 'hats'. One managerial accountant for example moved into a role as head of Human Resources, the traditional linear career path for her would have expected her next promotion to be Chief Financial Officer. Sideways moves were sometimes a promotion. Whilst promotions were always preferable, sideways moves into different roles on the same pay grade and status level were often evidenced. Again, this resulted from anxieties participants presented around inertia, stagnation, and a perceived lack of progress.

Indeed, external progress factors (bigger salary, better position, greater responsibilities) were important to my participants. Yet interestingly their focus on adaptability was not motivated by desires for personal development and growth. Rather being adaptably protean seemed a response to a wider societal view of how employees in the knowledge economy and business sector in particular 'should' operate. To not be moving was pathologized. Increasing versatility was not rationalised on the premise of increasing skills or personal attributes as described in Hall's (2004) protean career. Skill and attribute enhancement were occasionally mentioned in narratives but were seen as potential positive outcomes of being protean, not the justification for doing so. Equally my participants did not feel employers were overly concerned with tangible skill diversity. Rather job changes and the increased versatility that followed were more often rationalised as eliciting better understanding of the field of employment – specifically 'different ways of working' – to stay attuned

to how things might be done. This was exemplified in one exchange with a ‘talent manager’ in a large insurance firm, in charge of managing talented individuals in a business faction of the company. The manager (Josie) had just expressed her concerns around becoming pigeonholed and it being hard to move (quoted above).

Interviewer: Can I ask why that's important to you, to not be pigeonholed?

Josie: Yeah, in terms of personal development certainly that doesn't bother me too much. I think it's more, if you start to look for roles, because people or companies want to see different ways of working, I think when you move around, you see lots of different things and different ways companies run and work. Whereas when you work for one company, you've only seen that one point of view. Um, so I think if I was to go to another company, I think it's good to kind of get broad, wide parts of experience and you know, different experience.

Hence job changes could take place within organisations as long as greater experiences were acquired in addition to exposure to new ways of working.

Graham: I like the things I do at the moment, but I've kind of mooted points before about how ideally the things I do at the moment are slightly pigeonholed and so it would be quite nice to do other things. So, I would probably say my next moves over the next five years or so would be just getting experience in different areas of the business.

It could be said that in some sense my participants were recreating the conditions, or structures that housed them (Weber, 1930; Ho, 2009). In the stock market Ho (2009) argued stockbrokers embodied the market in their self-understandings as liquid employees (adaptable, resilient, capable) this liquidity in turn characterised the stock exchange and helped foster a situation of precarity. Similarly, participants invested in their versatility and versatility in turn appeared to operate as a currency. They were ready for and experienced in change, but with no long-term plans. It was an interesting dynamic in their field of knowledge work. Everybody expected people to move, so everybody moved to ensure future doors would be open to them. Again, this investment in an adaptable workplace identity was prioritised over investment in long term crafting abilities or investment in personal skill or attribute development.

Greater responsibility, overwork and work warriors

A further subtheme identified under the motivators for work was the value attributed to greater responsibilities and overwork by participants. This finding was also implicitly bound up in identity and ability affirmation. Perhaps unsurprisingly being given greater responsibilities at work was deemed a positive interaction. Greater responsibilities were affirmatory of participants' abilities, deemed a 'mark of success' and in that sense rewarding, demonstrated by Johnny and Chris below:

Johnny: yeah hard work, those periods of working until midnight definitely get rewarded in both pay and promotion. I mean, with promotion comes a pay rise, so you definitely get rewarded for it. You get recognition within the company as well. A lot of the time the directors give you feedback as well, like good feedback on things. For example, I wrote a blog recently and one of the directors got back to me on that and he said he really loved my blog and things like that. And you get more responsibility as well, even with its clients and things like that. Which to be honest, I think the pay increase, obviously the pay is nice. But you're never really fully content with a pay rise after a certain amount of time, you know, you want the next one, then you want the next one. But sometimes with greater responsibility and things like that, it is more rewarding than the pay rise.

Chris: What's important sometimes is being recognized for knowing a specific subject area. So if you become the person associated with a certain technology or project or area of the business. For me, I think that's a mark of success because people automatically label you against that because they know that you know it well when you become an expert in it, obviously promotions and pay rises are important too. But I think what I've just described comes above that.

Great responsibilities however did not always elicit appropriate temporal restructurings of individuals' roles to allow time for the added tasks. This dynamic resulted in overwork. Overwork was a common feature of employment amongst all participants. Overwork was an imposition on participants, something they had to engage with in response to increased demands from employers. However, there was a general acceptance of overwork to a certain point. As demonstrated in theme one overwork was often normalised by participants as constituting part of the neoliberal subjectivity that they wished to assert. Discussed here however are two further specific reasons for the acceptance of overwork.

Firstly, as mentioned if overwork was the result of being given greater responsibilities – at least in the short term – it was accepted. Secondly the requirement of overwork in stressful, timebound situations contributed to a work warrior complex that produced positive conceptions of one's abilities. The work warrior mentality referring here to a sense of self as an overcomer having achieved great feats especially in the face of adversity. Being able to meet tight deadlines and cope under excessive pressure was often constructed as an indicator of one's proficiency and at times superiority, akin to the role that increased responsibilities also played. Being given greater responsibilities and bridging periods of extreme work or over work contributed to an esteemed sense of self and of one's abilities. It is important to note however that overwork could not be sustained indefinitely and when one felt overworked for too long this tended to alienate workers. There was a fine and nuanced balance between the exploitation employers could level at workers and what they would accept. In line with Ekman (2014) this study also found intricate double bind interactions to be in operation again stemming from participants' juggling of desires for clear protective boundaries and support from managers on the one hand, and autonomy and freedom to 'own' areas and demonstrate their 'winning' capabilities on the other. Accordingly at times overwork was pathologized, associated with extreme stress and breakdown and a lack of fairness. However seemingly more frequently, overwork was accepted as creating opportunities for meaningful work experiences, as long as the results were tangible and a sense of work warrior identity was able to be fostered. Pressure as opposed to passion found affinity in participants' fulfilling encounters with their paid employment demonstrated below:

Josie: [describing a period of intense work over Christmas when Josie was meant to be on annual leave but given deadlines that necessitated working]....so it was really stressful, but on a weird side, I like the challenge. So, although it's stressful and it's not ideal, it's that satisfaction of being able to do that and get it done. And it's having a new challenge, um, is what I enjoy about the role.

Jackie: So I do get a sense of satisfaction out of what I do sometimes. I wouldn't say I'm one of these people that dreads, you know, turning up for work. But don't get me wrong. There are times. And I think all of my team will say this there'll be times where you just think, I just can't do this anymore. It's just grinding me down. And then you kind of get a second wind and it's great. So I think there's a sense of achievement, I guess, in that, in aloneness, when you're trying to fulfil that almost impossible task by the deadline and you've managed to

successfully meet the objectives. You get the project completed in time ready for the higher business leaders to use what you've done. It's all very different, you know what we do. So there's definitely dark days, you know there are bad days. There are good days and bad days on the whole of late.

Josie's quote exemplifies the tension in overwork. On the one hand pressure can be experienced as meaningful, providing a sense of 'satisfaction'. Josie explained she was given a deadline approximately a week before Christmas that needed to be fulfilled before the New Year. Whilst it was never expressed that she should work during annual leave it was an impossible task to complete outside of her holiday. Josie worked late on Christmas eve to meet the deadline. In this sense pressure arguably is experienced as exploitation and overwork, Josie was aware of this and communicated her frustration in our interview highlighting the 'stressful' nature. It was not a deal breaker for her, however. Josie did not instigate any sanctionable action toward her employers; she did not ask for time off in lieu for example or make threats to leave. Rather she juxtaposed her frustration with the 'satisfaction' of being able to manage the stress and 'get it done'. Arguably had she had a more reasonable time frame to operate within, the work would have been less satisfying. A theme echoed by Jackie.

Jackie's discourse around difficulties in the workplace conjures notions of more extreme negative wellbeing, the language of 'dark days', a 'grinding' down and a very final statement of analysis 'I just can't do this anymore' do not typify what might be described as a fulfilling employment experience. Yet it appears that without the 'darkness' of work a binary might not be established in which Jackie is able to draw meaning from the sense of 'aloneness' or singularity she experiences in fulfilling 'almost impossible task[s]' and deadlines. The aloneness described speaks to a very specific discourse of being 'set apart' or in some way superior or indispensable. 'Aloneness' by definition implies there are no others - at least within Jackie's immediate context - who have delivered what Jackie has been able to deliver. Without such an 'impossible' situation Jackie might not have found herself 'alone' in meeting the objectives set. More achievable objectives feasibly could be delegated or shared out among colleagues. It would seem a sense of work warrior mentality is in operation for both women, where binaries of literal dark and light days in work, or stress and impossibility on one pole and magnificence and achievement on the other manufacture spaces for meaningful employment.

This raises interesting questions about the benefit or need for sustaining binaries in knowledge work settings. A case can be made for metaphorical binaries encouraging or perhaps even partially constituting meaningful or interesting work experiences, if meaning is otherwise lacking. Derrida

(1981 cited in: Schwartz, 1990, p. 861) famously viewed binaries as embodying secret 'violent hierarchies', where one of the phenomena in opposition is always considered superior. As explicated further by Derrida (ibid) there is a fluidity and range of interpretations available within binaries that their hierarchy seeks to obscure. This post-structural lens can be applied here. In the binary between 'dark' and implied 'light' days that Jackie describes, superiority is associated with the 'light' days synonymously seen as 'good' days. The 'dark' days are defined through their opposite (to light) signalling their extreme perversion or inferiority (ibid). However, the hierarchy presented by Jackie misdirects the interpretation of the situation. Indeed the 'dark' days described cannot be considered all 'bad' as constructed by Jackie. As demonstrated the darkness provides a structure through which Jackie demonstrates her brilliance and finds affirmation, satisfaction in her achievement and arguably an elevated sense of self, as a 'work warrior'. Analytically the 'dark' days cannot be categorically inferred inferiority. They play a key role in creating space for obtaining meaningful interactions with employment. Arguably the benefit of Jackie comparing her work tasks to that of the 'dark' is that they then appear even more exceptional – and hence rewarding - when she completes them.

Pseudo control and meaning

The existence of affirmation as a pathway to meaning (through 'winning', affirmation of abilities and work warrior conceptualizations) constitutes a significant research finding because it extends the scope of the current research literature on meaningful work. Research has placed onus on specific micro features of meaningful work, (Rosso, Dekas and Wrzesniewski, 2010) or on passionate, self-actualization experiences (Ekman, 2014). This study found the affirmation of abilities and the affirmation of self can function in place of self-actualization. Furthermore, it is argued in this discussion that affirmation operated in place of, and as an antidote to, a lack of sense of control. Where the relative lack of control over the security of roles and workplace boundaries was offset via contemporary workers finding security in their abilities and prowess. If they could find evidence that they were indeed highly competent employees this provided a sense of psychological comfort that they would not be without work. They were too good to be fired, and if fired they would find other jobs.

The precarity of the knowledge work individuals engaged with – often subject to company restructures and redundancies and tightly structured deadlines – meant that a sense of control through job security was not readily available. Arguably the affirmation of ability and a 'right' to a seat at the table that participants often described provided a pseudo sense of security and worth

and in turn a *sense* (although rarely actually manifest) of control. In reality participants did lead relatively precarious working lives. Undoubtedly they were willing to engage in some level of self-exploitation and over work to 'get ahead' and fulfil personal agendas (Ekman, 2014). It must however be acknowledged that despite the 'pay off' of working long hours and taking on too many responsibilities, participants had extremely limited, if not a total lack of, agency to choose *not* to engage in overwork. Interviewees were at pains to make clear deadlines must be met. Nonetheless a pseudo sense of control and security was fostered through identities as capable and hardworking employees, realised through an affirmation of abilities in work.

Problematically it is argued the preoccupation with affirmation and 'proving oneself' - and the related pseudo sense of control and security - further obscured and redirected individuals' attention from personal interests, passions and self-realisation (Marx and Engels, 1844, 2011; Ekman, 2014; De Palma, 2020). Being anxiously concerned with the presentation of self and the competitive workplace - as these knowledge workers were - led to heightened 'need' to be 'right'. Workers would not engage in crafting opportunities over long periods of time for fear that they would miss out on deadlines, opportunities to get ahead and be viewed as 'inefficient'. Rational pursuits of performance management are inimical to enchantment, to meanderings, wanderings and exploration (Ritzer, 2015). Chasing the pseudo control mechanisms through affirmation of one's work created a cyclical loop in which self-realisation was not pursued and the more one was affirmed in work the more this distance was reinforced. Arguably then success in this sense was detrimental to individuals' connection and realisation of their true selves and desires, their species essence (Marx, 1844, cited in Byron, 2016).

Control is 'inimical to enchantment', it is genuine autonomy that facilitates enchanted experiences of true species essence 'fantasy, magic and dreams cannot be subjected to external controls; indeed, autonomy is much of what gives them their enchanted quality. Fantastic experiences can go anywhere, anything can happen' (Ritzer, 2015, p. 175). Such description is clearly at odds with the presentation focused, deadline focused, affirmation through achievement mindset and behaviours of the contemporary workers in this study. It follows that the sense of (pseudo) control individuals fostered when their abilities were affirmed through 'winning' battles in work or meeting difficult deadlines also functioned to limit their real autonomy. They talked of 'owning' projects, yet the relative autonomy that might imply did not appear to materialise. 'Owning' did not necessitate creative autonomy or much scope in directional autonomy, 'owning' an area or project was largely prescriptive in task but did infer responsibility and credit if successful. Hence whilst individuals possessed power and responsibility they lacked real autonomy and control.

Nonetheless an affirmation of abilities was still meaningful and constituted a new pathway to meaning. Without a 'battleground' of work there would have been no peers to compare and compete with. Affirmation of the self as a person able to produce desired outcomes helped develop notions of indispensability and value amongst participants.

Conclusions to the theme

To conclude, this theme broadly addressed the concepts of affirmation, motivation and meaning in work and their intersections for participants in the current study. This theme conceptualised the pathway to meaning that participants forged through affirmation as opposed to self-actualization. This is the first of four pathways to meaning that my participants established with their employment; these pathways constitute original contributions to the research literature. Counter to the 'Do What You Love' and 'passion paradigm' canon of literature individuals demonstrated little to no alignment with a passionate view of their employment nor a sense that they were fulfilling personal interests in work that they 'loved'. Meaning was still obtained from work however in different ways. The investment in and orientation toward an 'appropriate' presentation of self, held paramount importance for participants. It was crucial, and meaningful for individuals to be able to outwardly project credibility, the ability to 'deliver' and add value to an organisation. Participants were keen to be included in the metaphorical 'winner's' camp, rejecting complacent subjectivities, and employing discourses of indispensability in their narratives. These pursuits appeared both meaningful and apprehensive.

Indeed, anxieties around missing the mark, having one's assertiveness or abilities questioned was a key motivator in work for participants. On the other hand being able to 'prove' oneself, achieve under pressure and at times exploitative working conditions were affirmatory experiences for individuals and created avenues for meaning creation. Ekman's (2014) notion of double bind interactions proved helpful in illuminating the dynamics of the presentation of self. Individuals in the current study juggled desires for clear protective boundaries from employers and managerial 'backing' on the one hand with the desire for autonomy and freedom to 'own' areas, prove themselves and assert identities as capable and successful employees.

Opportunities to foster work warrior conceptions of self – as battle victors, achieving great feats – further functioned to create fulfilling encounters with employment. Identity battles appeared to be at the heart of how participants related to their employment, in some instances to the extent of 'backing' oneself even when wrong. Interestingly absent from the affirmatory, motivational, and

meaningful components of employment was discussion of crafting abilities, a refining of skills, or long-term engagement with projects and work.

This theme advances the current body of research literature in a number of ways. Firstly it updates the canon of passionate, emotionalization of employment literature (Sandoval, 2018; Bygrave, 2020; De Palma, 2020; Pagis, 2020); clearly demonstrating that these contemporary cultural schemas are not the reality for all, nor the pursuit of all in the knowledge economy. Pressure as opposed to passion was demonstrated as fulfilling for respondents. This finding advances a model of self-affirmation as opposed to self-actualization as providing meaningful employment experiences, updating Ekman's (2014, 2015) work and providing a new conceptual lens through which to investigate meaning in employment. This theme advances Hall's (2004) conceptualization of the protean career. It has demonstrated how individuals in contemporary employment may be actively involved in directed their careers aligning with the protean career model, but this direction is not necessarily driven by personal goals, morals and values counter to Hall's (2004) assertions. The theme aligns with Ho's (2009) research that broadly demonstrates how work warrior identities and a rejection of 'complacency' in working hours/intensity can be meaningful pursuits. It adds to the field complexity of understanding by unpacking the specific avenues through which this is achieved, namely through notions of indispensability, superiority and an esteemed sense of self at times. It further applies these findings outside of the financial and creative sectors plugging a gap in the field. The aforementioned sectors have been heavily researched (Ho, 2009; Ekman, 2014; Lupu and Empson, 2015; Pérez-Zapata *et al.*, 2016), but the managerial, legal and administrative forms of employment centred around 'handling' people, sales, services and marketing, investigated in this thesis constitute an under researched area.

The next theme addresses the sense of 'long term' in greater detail. Participants' siphoning of meaning (or not) from their career progress trajectories are looked to next.

Theme three - Progress biographies

This theme is titled as such because the defining characteristic of participants' biographies was progress. This was different from a Protestant Work Ethic (Weber, 1930) notion of progress because there was a distinct absence of goals and long term plans for the participants in this study.

Participants' progress biographies did not constitute a pilgrim like advancement towards salvation in which the journey was meaningful. Rather progress in this study looked like progress in a consumptive fashion, progress that was context dependent and progress that was fulfilling because

of the wider notion of an aesthetics of life it facilitated. Each progress step was meaningful for a short-lived amount of time until the next progress 'fix' was sought.

Progress biographies are defined in this theme as the predominant axis orientating participants' understandings of their working careers. Other phenomena featured in their biographies but the primary focus was progress. Three new pathways to meaning are established within this 'progress biographies' theme. Namely, pursuing progress in a consumptive fashion was a meaningful endeavour, retrospectively narrating careers only up until the present was meaningful and pursuing an aesthetics of life as opposed to work was meaningful. These new pathways to meaning also constituted new methods for biographical narration. Hence these new methods advance the narrative literature that positions ontological security as dependent on the creation of narratives that link past, present and future (McAdams, 1993; Sennett, 1998) instead demonstrating that the absence of goals need not result in a crisis of identity. Rather the absence of predetermined goals can in fact be a protective mechanism that liberates individuals to pursue progress in a range of directions. This findings theme also updates Bauman's (2005) aesthetics of consumption by uncovering that an aesthetics of life is instead a guiding maxim for some. Indeed, this theme demonstrates that aesthetic work experiences are not the primary aspiration of the workers in this study, rather success, status, influence, power and material gains etc. things that amounted to an aesthetics of life were the primary goal for my participants. Individuals focused more on self-promotions and projection and less on self-connection, self-realisation or self-fulfilment.

Introduction to findings theme three

The third major theme uncovered in the data analysis identified the widespread creation of progress biographies among participants and unpacked the meaning they attributed to such. Participants' narratives constructed stories that foregrounded their career progression. In line with Riessman (2008) what narrators chose to emphasise in story telling illuminates phenomena considered important, meaningful or noteworthy. The employees in the current study consistently centred their stories of their working lives around an axis of progress. This was through the language of opportunities, promotions, and increase. 'Bigger salaries', 'better jobs' and 'new opportunities' were the framework upon which working lives were mapped. When describing a change of jobs, a personal decision, or discursively dealing with a 'problem' in their working lives, the language of progress was used to justify, contextualise, and orientate career stories. The notion of progress and hence biographies of progress were meaningful to participants for various reasons. The most important reason was because progress was seen as an indicator of success and importance and – in

line with theme two – as a means to affirm one’s capabilities and worth. Progress as an axis and progress as constituting meaning for participants is explored in the first part of this theme ‘progress as a career axis’.

The second section of this theme ‘progress narratives were unspecific and context dependent’, addresses what progress looked like for my participants. As unpacked there was a strongly context dependent nature to how individuals progressed through their working lives and careers. The third section of this theme ‘aesthetics of life’ explores the reasons behind pursuing progress and the understandings of how progress fit with participants’ wider lives. Bauman's (2005) ‘aesthetics of work’ is drawn upon and an ‘aesthetics of life’ is conceptualised and argued to be in operation for participants in the current study. As an extension of this, the fourth and final section of this theme ‘a double stage of progress narratives’ looks at the intersection of pursuing inherently fulfilling work and also pursuing progress. A ‘double stage’ to progress biographies is offered, one in which participants can and do look more to personal interests in the later stages of their careers once a certain level of progression has already been secured.

Progress as a career axis

Progress was foregrounded in narrative interviews in various ways. The quotes below highlight just some of the ways in which participants tended to frequently come back to the concept of progress. It widely operated as an axis around which careers were positioned and pursued and as an axis around which stories were told. It was implied that when narrating the ‘story of your working career’ you would craft a biography around your own personal progress.

Tom: Yeah I mean obviously I want to work somewhere I'll enjoy, but you don't know [that you will enjoy a role] until you go there. But really the prospect of promotions and things like that is what is actually appealing. And for people that say, they're not, I sort of question whether they're telling the truth, because that is what drives your working day really, and how you go about the future. It's important.

Ashleigh: The progression here, perhaps isn't something, that is going to make you step up the ladder very far. But over the last couple of years, I've found my role to increase which is important and I've been able to essentially network with more people than I necessarily would have at a bigger organization, business members and things like that. So I will move on to a better job soon, because obviously it all comes down to not feeling comfortable. If you are comfortable you are probably not progressing.

Toby: ...so as you can see I have taken a variety of steps and progressed my way upwards and there's so much more opportunity to do so, I won't, you know, stagnate here

Lisa: So I've stepped up from my previous role which is good, now I am operating at that next level within the business. It's a good jump because of the doors that it opens, I will be able to apply for the next level of senior roles in a year or so. At my age this is so important too, like to say at 25 I was owning those projects in business is so uncommon like you don't see that. And now at 28 where I am at, position and salary wise, directly under a head of, it's really good for my age.

Tom normalises the idea of people pursuing progression when he questions the authenticity of people who claim not to be interested in promotions. Toby, Lisa and Ashleigh all employ the language of 'steps' or 'stepping' up, a common occurrence in interviews. The notion of 'steps' speaks to a hierarchical ladder that individuals are climbing. The position on the metaphorical ladder holds importance. Lisa draws meaning through her position comparatively, where she is, is 'really good for [her] age'. Toby exemplifies the importance of dynamic positioning, he 'won't... stagnate' where he is, he will keep moving. Similarly, Ashleigh has an eye to a 'better job soon'. All shared an implied sense that moving upwards was the central concern, the axis around which decisions were often made and careers structured. Indeed, as summarised by Toby the axis of progress is 'what drives your working day and how you go about the future'.

These four excerpts are helpful summary statements of the progress narrative. Strongly evident was a narrative of individual progression in interviews when they were analysed holistically and structurally. Often times participants did not directly use the word 'progress' but offered stories and vignettes anchored around the concept. This yielded a variety of findings explored in the remainder of the chapter. Continued directly below is discussion of the meaning found in positive transitions of progress.

Positive progress trajectories

Progression via promotion or salary increase frequently provided meaning for individuals through a sense of perceived upward mobility that they could also narrate to others. This was a common finding, exemplified by Johnny. As part of a wider segment of discourse where Johnny was explaining how he got into data analytics, despite having a childhood dream of becoming a pilot, he explained the following. The cost of becoming a pilot was a barrier so he applied for an apprenticeship within the field of aviation but was unsuccessful. The company that assessed him for the apprenticeship – a training provider company - had some vacancies going so he applied there instead:

Johnny: So I actually applied for a job at that company and they were a training provider and provided apprenticeships. And originally it was just a sort of a business admin job, data inputting, things like that, nothing too technical or skilled as it were. After a year they decided to put me on a business apprenticeship to give me some propriety training, which was really good. And so I did that for another year, year and a bit. Then after my two years of being a business apprentice, they offered me a job as an official business coordinator. However, the salary that they offered, wasn't really great. So I started looking around for other opportunities. I accepted an opportunity at [Satellite Technology – a satellite production and operation company]. So I started off as a first liner, which is you know, basic IT support... And after a year of working there, I got offered second liner, which was, like a promotion and an escalation path for an IT support role, it was a promotion to the next level....Then I got offered another job that was a promotion to the next level, so I handed in my notice at [Satellite Technology], and a month later I started at [Data system] as a junior consultant and then just gradually started working my way up. So really, you know, it was a lot of hard graft....so that was exactly how I got into data and became a consultant in data analytics. I haven't looked back since. I've worked my way up the ranks, you know, gained various promotions along the way. And that's where I am now.

Johnny's excerpt of extended narrative describing his career path culminating in his current role as a data consultant evidences a positive and meaningful orientation toward progress. Johnny had original dreams to become a pilot, two initial barriers to this namely the cost and being unsuccessful in an aviation apprenticeship scheme were reason enough for him to look elsewhere. The need to progress, substituted for the childhood pilot dream. He secured a business admin position that held little affinity with his interest in aviation. His company then placed him on a business apprenticeship, progressing his skills and knowledge; despite this development being in the field of business as opposed to aviation it is perceived of as 'really good'. Progression was rarely confined to a set route or path. Childhood or personal dreams – like Johnnys – did not confine participants' progress trajectories. What was important was avoiding inertia and being able to evidence a dynamic path of upward movement.

Post business apprenticeship Johnny financially then progressed to a better paid role, in another different field, neither business nor aviation, but instead IT when he starts working at *Satellite Technology*. Despite the change of spheres of employment this transition is again positively constructed through the implied financial increase. The salary offered for the business coordinator 'wasn't really great' so he looked elsewhere and accepted a position at *Satellite Technology*. Interestingly this implied additional finance is described as an 'opportunity' rather than some sort of

extra security, comfort, or resource. Arguably monetary gain constitutes an ‘opportunity’ for Johnny as part of a wider notion of what it means to him to obtain meaning from one’s employment. Where the positive transition of financial increase was symbolic of progress and hence inherently meaningful for Johnny. This was an overwhelmingly common finding for participants. Financial promotions were never contextualised within the language of need or provision. Individuals did not cite for example the bills that a raise would pay. A pay rise was more symbolic of upward mobility and success and hence considered meaningful.

Having secured a position at Satellite Technology Johnny describes a series of upward promotions each time to a bigger title or role with greater responsibilities. Again, this path appears to be a meaningful trajectory for Johnny. There is an intentionality to him choosing to ‘gradually work his way up’, and the ‘hard graft’ he employs; he further summarises he ‘hasn’t looked back since’. Participants consistently attributed positive discourse to their upward mobility and took considerable time within interviews to describe their step-by-step increase and progression.

A similar sense of progress being foreground and utilised to establish meaning in work was described by Sebasten, a project manager in a capsule infusion company.

Sebasten: What I like about this job is the money, the title, and being able to earn the skills for this title [pauses].. because I am planning on moving on, I have a time period scheduled out of how long I might stay here, and of what my expectations are for the next couple of years. And if they're not fulfilled, will I move on? Yes, probably. And I will move on anyway. But until then, why I'm here is because I want to develop as much as I can into the role that I am [a project manager]. And then I can go to another role being a project manager somewhere else, but for double the money. Because for instance, I did get a message on LinkedIn last month and it was to be a project manager at some company and obviously I could not apply for it, I'm totally not ready for it right now. It was 80 grand. I was like, yes, I like the sound of this. I'm staying project manager for a while. Um, so for me, it's furnishing myself with the skills that I need to be able to land a bigger job, bigger title. So, you know, to go from my current salary to say forty or fifty [thousand], you know, and then stay a few years there and then go from, fifties to seventy, fingers crossed, everything goes well, sort of thing.

Again, a strong financial orientation established a sense of progress for Sebasten. In a similar vein to Johnny arguably the increase in income was significant not solely for the extra resource, comfort, or security it provided – whilst perhaps these things are implied they did not feature in narrative discussion. Talk of finance rarely evoked discussion of what it was that that money would provide, or

how it would enrich or fulfil an individual's life. No one spoke of the goal that their finances would make achievable, arguably because an increase in wealth was a target in itself. For Sebasten it might be said that pursuing financial increase was meaningful to him because it would be proof of progress, and actually progression was the goal.

In addition to a sense of meaning being established through financial progress, a personal competency progression narrative was also in operation. Sebasten's speech is saturated with a discourse of self-development. He phrases such as 'furnishing myself with the skills', 'earn the skills for this title' and 'develop as much as I can into the role that I am'. Discursively this self-development might be categorised as progress within the self – toward greater competencies.

The responsibility for this progress and development Sebasten positions as resting with himself. It is an individual responsibility for him to 'earn', 'furnish' and 'develop' as a project manager. The responsibility for upskilling and training employees arguably should be the responsibility of employers. Equally, already employed and working as a project manager it is questionable how much more Sebasten should have to 'develop.. into the role'.

It could be posited Sebasten chooses to symbolically create a remit for his own personal competency progress, a remit that he is actively striving to fulfil. Fleetwood (2016) suggests in contemporary 21st-century society individuals place increasing reliance on their own personal narratives due to declines in the centrality of grand narratives in people's lives – such as one's class position, ethnicity, religious identities or doctrines, 'normal' female biographies, and status. In a similar vein the master motif of Sebasten's interview establishes a narrative of progress as opposed to one bedded in a grand narrative or even one bedded in a concept of craft (Sennett, 2009) or vocation (Weber, 1922). The vocational element of his work namely the day-to-day tasks and plans of a project manager, or more broadly the vocational sense of himself as an employee in the field of chemical engineering took up minimal space in Sebasten's prose about himself. Yet he describes 'earning the skills for the role' as one of the things he 'likes about the job'. It is posited that Sebasten is not referring to the development of skills at a micro level. Namely, data management skills, skills related to chemical infusion or software use skills etc. skills related to his actual job that would enable him to develop a crafting or vocational sense. Rather each time Sebasten mentions skill development it is with the specific intention of 'landing a bigger job', so he can 'move on' and go to a 'another role... for double the money'. As described in theme two, 'protean orientations' Sebasten's earning of 'skills' appears to align more with the notion of acquiring understanding of 'different ways of working'. That is, competencies in how to succeed within his climate of work rather than an enhancement of intrinsic expertise or mastery.

Sebasten's self-created personal competency progress remit is intricately intertwined with upward mobility and increased financial gain. It appeared meaningful to Sebasten that he develops his workplace competencies and 'skills' only if they elicit promotion and progress. Such competency development did not appear intrinsically meaningful and satisfying nor gratifying for the sake of self-development. Instead, the meaning siphoned from narrating and pursuing a biography of upward personal competency is in the notion of progressing itself. Particularly the accompanying further promotions, titles, and financial increase that competency development elicits. Sebasten himself states elsewhere in our interview:

'my job now, I fell into, project manager at a chemicals company of all things is never something I'd imagined I'd be working in or particularly care about'.

Fascinatingly the normalisation of a biography established out of one's progress encompasses progress 'expectations' on Sebasten's employers. He exercises his own power in his admission that if his own expectations are not 'fulfilled' by his company he will impose a sanction in the form of leaving that employment, he will 'move on'. When asked to elaborate on what those expectations are Sebasten elucidated the following:

Sebasten: I want accreditation which they have mentioned before. I've looked on LinkedIn at someone that I'm connected with, who's a project manager and I looked at something he's done. It's like a course to be accredited as a project manager. And once the whole corona virus thing dies down, I might suggest it to them... I think the maximum I'm going to stay is another two years, but if in that time, if in a year's time I've not done anything [in terms of project manager accreditation], then I might even consider moving earlier. And really if I can show my value now, which is what I'm trying to do now, show my value, increase my value to the company. And if that isn't, not necessarily rewarded instantly, but if that's not acknowledged, then - I'll definitely stay at least another year either way - but that then would push me to leave after two years, rather than three. Or like bonus wise, if I can prove my worth this year round and then they're only paying one week's bonus to everyone, but then in a meeting just between me and them they say, we're going to pay you two weeks bonus, don't tell anyone, then I'll be like, okay, great. Okay, they've accepted that I've put in a lot of work here to try and make a difference and they've rewarded that. So I want to see some carrot basically not so much stick.

Evidently an important part of the meaning Sebasten draws from his progress biography depends on the tangible acknowledgment of his effort by his employers. Lack of acknowledgement or 'carrot' arguably devalues the personal competency progress narrative that Sebasten seemingly identifies with. Perhaps due to the affirmatory function rewards might hold, where 'carrot' evidences that progress has been made. The very personal nature of the fictional meeting Sebasten describes also emphasises how acknowledgement can facilitate the creation of a progress biography. In his imagination it is a plausible – or at least possible - scenario that he alone might be afforded a bonus and not his colleagues. It is also deemed plausible that this arrangement would be put to him by both his CEOs in a private meeting in which they single him out from the workforce. This in addition to one extra week's pay, Sebasten went on to explain would facilitate a personal state of acceptance and level of contentment within his work. Situations of being personally and financially acknowledged allows him to maintain a story about himself and his career as one of progress.

To summarise, progress positively constructs meaning for the individuals in this study in various ways. Including through financial increase which operates as a success marker, personal competency progression narratives and the ability to develop a sense of a story of upward mobility. In these ways progress was presented and perceived as a positive axis around which to understand employment and careers. Addressed now are negative transitions described in career narratives and how they also find meaning through the axis of progress.

Negative transitions and the axis of progress

Transitions that were experienced more negatively were also made sense of and found their meaning (or lack of) in progress. The negativity of a situation was often conveyed through the parameters of an absence of progress. The notion of moving forward, increasing, improving in some sense held fundamental meaning for individuals. Jackie explained a situation in which her company changed their grading system from a more nuanced numerical one stretching from zero-sixteen to an alphabetised system of only five levels (A to E). Jackie at the time was a twelve. Twelves, thirteens, and fourteens were blanket mapped into an E category with lower-level numbers. Their pay, job roles and titles did not change. But Jackie explained her status did, she had progressed up the ranks for a long time within her organisation. To be re-graded to the bottom rungs stunted her progress narrative in a variety of ways.

Jackie: ...and in the new structure with the new grading system it's like A-E and E is like bottom of the pool, D is like meh [whatever], C is supposed to be a head of level, Bs and As are directors and CEO. The problem is you've got too many people sitting in a D category

because not everybody's a head of and not everybody's a CEO, so you've created like a very slim line thing at the top and it's very fat at the bottom. And the official line of the managers was they said the way that we've reviewed your roles and what category you get mapped into is bench marked against the industry. Your pay is bench marked against the industry and your responsibilities to the company bench marked... it was literally horrible knowing that you've been demoted knowing that the majority of people wouldn't care but there would be a few people laughing at you because you've been demoted. But they [senior management] go ohh but it's not about the grade or whatever and you're like, no it is, my job requires me to work with C grades on a daily basis, and I have to go into all these top meetings which are where the A's and the B's sit, how is an E bottom of the pool supposed to have any influence over them, the A's the B's the C's and the D's when you've given me no power, no status, no nothing, you've taken that away, so the only reason they would listen to me is because of who I am. Because they know me but if they put a new person in at an E grade, they're not going to listen to them, because you know that role that I was doing was just not an E graded role so... pretty shit.

Jackie constructs the change in grading system as a demotion, one that robs her of her 'power' and 'status'. Sennett (1998) argues knowledge work structures and organisations in the knowledge economy frequently flatten hierarchies and concentrate power in the hands of a few. This results in the shirking of responsibilities by some and overwork by others, and a shifting of responsibilities from employers to employees (Powell and Snellman, 2004; Moen *et al.*, 2013). In the confrontational workplace Jackie was employed in, conflict centred meetings were commonplace. Her lament that she has lost power and status speak to this issue. She was concerned that she would be less successful in day-to-day interactions and by extension would not be able to secure even greater levels of power and status than she had already obtained as a 'twelve'. The opposite would instead be true and she considered herself already wounded. Despite maintaining the same role, position and pay, Jackie's re-grading regressively impacted her progress biography. As evidenced in what she foregrounds, her status was important to her. Her sense of self arguably intricately intertwined with her status, as demonstrated in her admission that some 'would laugh at her' for the 'demotion'. She counters this backward step by reasserting her own progress narrative in claiming 'the only reason they would listen to me is because of who I am. Because they know me' invoking her story of success prior to the regrading. People 'know her' because of the journey of upward accomplishment, prowess, and assertiveness she has already secured. She rejects the insinuation of her progress narrative taking a backward step. In the same effort she further distances herself from other 'E's' of whom heads of department, managers and senior staff are 'not going to listen to'. This

direct refusal to accept the status of an 'E' highlights how Jackie makes sense of even negative situations through the lens of progress or indeed lack of. This was a common finding throughout interviews, progress was a key axis around which individuals wrapped their identify formations and established a sense of meaning out of their employment lives.

Progress narratives were unspecific and context dependent

The second section of this theme now addresses how progress was pursued. An interesting finding was a predominantly unspecific and context dependent nature of progress for most participants. For example, consistently for those interviewed the prospect of a promotion was appealing, rather than a move to a specific role. This was a key finding coming out of Johnny's aviation turned data consultant narrative above. His career path was highly determined by his environment and the 'opportunities' that 'presented' themselves. A common finding among participants was that it did not matter to a great extent in which area, avenue, or capacity one achieved progress as long as it facilitate a feeling of success in some sense. The following quotes illustrate the often-unspecific nature of individuals' progress narratives and careers.

Mark: ...instead of following a career of passion, I've just followed my feet. Really. It's just kind of one day at a time. I didn't identify that one area to go into. I've just naturally kept moving, kept moving up

Interviewer (HG): Do you have career goals or similar, for example a five-year plan?

Graham: I think I intentionally don't, which is, I think helpful. Uh, you can kind of see that from the way that my career has gone so far, that it just happens. But, goals no, not necessarily. I think there's things I'd like to do, like managing a team and having people feed into me that's important.... I'm just not sure [about goals/five-year plan]. Um, I don't know at the moment, as long as the job that I've got is giving me what I need in terms of progression, I'm quite happy with that. Yeah. And at the moment I've got no bloody idea because I don't know how things can work out within the next two years [with COVID].

Both Mark and Graham exemplify a 'just happens' adaptation model of employment. Progress and the embedded meaning within a progress narrative was important to both individuals. Both saw their progress as imbued with indicators of success. Yet neither held a plan or set of goals that they worked toward, nor had they previously possessed a strong affinity for any kind of destined career route. Rather their progress imperative was unspecific. As long as progress was achieved this was

enough to establish some sense of meaning within the stories they narrated about themselves. Mark 'followed his feet' and Graham 'intentionally' operated on a level of adaptability and flexibility. Graham prioritised the importance of his advancement, 'as long as the job that I've got is giving me what I need in terms of progression'. Further tendering that a lack of goals is actually helpful, perhaps because it allowed him to more readily progress, seizing whatever opportunities become available rather than being confined to a narrower trajectory. In a similar vein Josie describes her progress as one that did not need initial ambitions, illuminating how the progress narrative can be embedded in an unspecified starting point.

Josie: but I've got a new manager he's been enrolled for eight months. He's much more 'what do you want to get out of your career' type thing, which I've never really had to think about before. I'd just kind of gone with it. So that'll be interesting. So I think there'll be more opportunities to get involved in stuff, which is good experience as well.

Interviewer (HG): And have you been thinking about it, what you want to get out of your career?

Josie: Not really, if I'm honest for me, what I was saying earlier, I want to get that management piece because to move up, and looking at other roles, everybody needs you to have that management experience. So I have kind of got to the point, where I'm thinking right. I need the greater management experience. It's now kind of, what's the next step. Um, there's still a lot I can do in the role that I'm doing. So I'm happy to kind of stick with it for another year or so. Because there is so much that I could do. But you know, if I went somewhere else [pauses] I'm quite happy at the level I'm at with the responsibility that I have. And I'm not sure if I want to take that next step, not quite, cause I think the next step would be more strategic vision setting. And I'm not sure I want to do that because I like getting my hands dirty, you know, like still doing the recruitment and stuff. So I guess I'm just, I'm not sure at the moment what I want to do. So I'm probably going to stick with it for a year or a year and a half, maybe before I do take that management step, then it go.

Josie openly explains that she has 'never had to think about [her career] before'. Interestingly at this middle stage of her career (Josie at the time of interview was 50 years old) Josie is for the first time challenged to think about her own personal desires for her employment, what she 'wants' from it, something she 'has never had to do before'. The apparent alien nature of this concept to Josie

clearly exemplifies that her success thus far has not been motivated by personal employment goals. Perhaps even more interestingly it appears that after this interaction with her new manager Josie still did not spend time reflecting on her 'wants' from her career, at least not on a personal disposition level. As Josie explains her focus remains on her progress trajectory. She brings the impetus of the conversation back to the next calculated move. 'To move up' or on to 'other roles' she needs management experience. Discursively orientating herself toward the 'next step' Josie retains a responsibility toward her own progress – in a similar vein to Sebasten and others who exemplified the personal competency progress biography. One might have expected to see some sort of fracture in the career story when directly challenged to identify her wants in employment - perhaps a realisation of a misalignment of her 'wants' with her current employment - yet it appears not to have been the case. Alternately one could argue Josie was already attuned to her 'wants' perhaps even on an unconscious level. Where the apex of what she wants from a career is progress, upward movement and reaching the next step. Where this is prioritised over personal aspirations or affinities, or operates in their absence.

The structure of Josie's prose also denotes a proclivity toward a context dependent view of progress. Within the sphere Josie finds herself, to progress into a higher paid role with greater status and responsibilities Josie needs to begin engaging with management work at a greater level. She explained elsewhere in the interview that she already led a team but clarified the further management experience she needed was to take up a larger more recognised leadership role with the associated managerial title. One that involved greater strategic implementation and vision setting. As demonstrated by Josie's story excerpt above, this was not something Josie personally felt any particular affinity toward, yet her employment context deemed it the next step – in the hierarchy of power and salary - so she was angling herself in that direction. Josie actually expressed reservations, explaining she was not sure if she wanted it because she liked 'getting [her] hands dirty'. Yet she concludes she will be taking 'that management step'. There was a sense when interviewing Josie that part of her progress narrative - in its unspecific and context dependent nature - was operating at a partially unconscious, socialized level. In line with a neoliberal subjective positioning as described in theme one, she did things because they were the 'right' or 'logical' thing to do within her workplace, demonstrating rationality and a commodified view of work. Her thinking did not seem to gravitate toward a wider perspective, nor challenge a 'logical' unfolding of events. Josie could have looked at other roles or fields that allowed her to 'get [her] hands dirty' whilst also offering a promotion of some sort. Or she could remain in her current role doing work that she enjoyed. Neither were presented as an option. A progress narrative needed to be maintained and how this would be pursued would be based on her socialised understanding of her environment.

The unspecific career paths that individuals took to achieve progression can be likened in some ways to the 'traditional' career path through a single institution (Sennett, 1998). There was a tendency for people to remain within a couple of institutions throughout their careers, achieving upward mobility. This is counter to the new, knowledge economy literature that suggests individuals are jumping between organisations frequently (Hall, 2004). Departing from the traditional model however, participants' settlement within an institution was unintentional. Traditional linear careers as described by Sennett (1998) were not being coveted. Rather individuals' orientation toward the next upward move often coincided with what was immediately and visibly available within current employment settings. In house promotion often conveniently presented as the quickest and easiest route to progress within known structures, participants did not necessarily possess any preference for remaining within one company or organisation. Indeed, as discussed in theme two individuals actually employed some attributes of protean careers by frequently moving jobs roles within an organisation. A tendency toward a traditional career path in the sense of remaining with a single employer appeared largely unintentional but not unwelcome.

Harry - a solicitor - when asked about his ambitions exemplified the progress narrative well. Harry disclosed elsewhere that he had gone into law because he saw it as a reputable profession, one that held prestige. In this sense he held somewhat of a more specific progress narrative, he had intentionally chosen a field of employment. However, in keeping with the unspecific thematic nature of the progress narrative, within law Harry did not hold specific aspirations or goals, nor did he claim to possess any particular kind of passion or vocational orientation toward his work.

Harry: ...within law, I would love just to work my way up. I could lead like a nice team. Maybe a family practice, maybe even have my practice with a fellow lawman. Or I would happily just be my business group head and just lead a team in an effective way. Really just to be successful in what I do, that would be the dream.

Interviewer: And do you think, you know, that would be fulfilling for you?

Harry: Uh, yeah. Yeah, I would think so. I'm not too sure I would ever know until I got there. I always think when you reach a stage where you think it's fulfilling, you're sort of like oh this is it? I think when I finished my undergrad, I thought oh that's the pinnacle, then I was like, you know, it feels like another day. Um, so I'm not too sure fulfilment... I'm not too sure what that would feel like to be honest with you. Um, so I don't know, I really don't know. I'm afraid.

Harry identifies potential promotions that he would 'happily' pursue but does not settle on a plan. The overall and arguably most important intention is to 'just work [his] way up', this is established depending on the field that one is in. For Harry, that might take a number of different avenues, either becoming a business group head, leading a team, or having his own practice. He disclosed elsewhere the type of law that he practices also was not of great significance to him, he worked in litigation but held no allegiances to it. A similar finding was evidenced across interviews, the nature of progressing in one's career was determined by the paths and environment already set out in one's work setting.

To just 'be successful in what [he] does' holds meaning for Harry. A sense of affirmation in doing something well appears to contribute to the meaning inherent within his progress narrative, he hopes to lead a team but do it in an 'effective way'. What is fascinating about this section of Harry's narrative interview is the second thought that he articulates. He acknowledges or perhaps laments that he does not know what fulfilment feels like. It could be said Harry is caught in a cycle of striving but never arriving, infinitely chasing progression but never quite obtaining the rewards he seeks. Suggestibly a sense of striving but never arriving is the product of an unspecific progress orientated mindset. Namely, the adaptable, frequently goalless drive to achieve progression in any manifestation. This finding must be considered parallel to the meaning and affirmation that is being obtained through progress. With each progress step participants did in some sense strive and 'arrive' at a fulfilling experience, where achievements were meaningful (Ho, 2009). None the less it appeared short lived before they moved on to the next progress goal. The identity work and new forms of narrativization that progress biographies facilitated are now addressed.

Identity and new forms of narrativization

As has been explicated by various identity authors (Giddens, 1991; Sennett, 1998) having a coherent narrative that one is able to articulate about their life is necessary for individuals to form a stable sense of self-identity. Sennett (1998) argues an ability to interpret experiences within a coherent life narrative that links past, present and future allows individuals to achieve ontological security. That is, a sense of order and continuity in relation to individuals' experiences that allow people to give meaning to their lives (Giddens, 1991). In a similar sense, Weber (1930) articulated the person of vocation could be likened to a pilgrim progressing toward an end goal (of salvation), a goal which made the journey meaningful.

The contemporary knowledge workers in this study consistently demonstrated a distinct lack of future goals or objectives (beyond further generally unspecific progression) and a marked absence of linking current workplace positions to future goals, events, or trajectories. Knowledge workers participated in the normalisation of 'no long term' (Ho, 2009). An extension of this was the absence of craft or skill development in their frequent movement between job roles as documented in the subtheme 'protean type orientation' in theme two of this findings chapter. Unlike the Weberian person of vocation who worked towards the end goal of salvation, or Sennett's (1998) 'bottom of society' workers who let time accumulate in anticipation of achieving better circumstances and material wealth, contemporary workers lacked specific or personal goals and vision. Aligning more with Ho's (2009) Wall Street bankers 'strategy of no strategy', the only goal or target being aimed at was progress in almost any direction. It is argued whilst this 'strategy' lacked much future thought and vision, surprisingly counter to Sennett's (1998) assertions, a sense of ontological security was still achieved by participants in a number of ways. Hence this thesis offers an original contribution to knowledge in theorising new pathways to constructing narratives in contemporary employment settings. Specifically career narratives that are meaningful and prevent crises of self-identity, crises of character and crises of ontological security in the absence of a biography that links past and present to the future (Sennett, 1998).

These new pathways to narrative creation and meaningful understandings of one's career and identity included, firstly, a retrospective narrativization of progress and achievement markers. Secondly the pursuit of progress as a consumptive practice, that was able to at times anaesthetise potentially meaningfully void incoherent experiences. Thirdly a wider anaesthetising of the human condition through the notion of achieving an aesthetic of 'life' as opposed to an attractive aesthetics of work (Bauman, 2000). These features helped facilitate individuals in keeping their biographical narrative going despite lacking end goals, counter to assertions made by some (McAdams, 1993; Sennett, 1998). They also allowed participants to establish meaning from their employment in subjective ways. The first two new pathways to meaning are unpacked next. A discussion of the third, namely an aesthetics of life follows in the section 'aesthetics of life' and in the subtheme discussion that unpacks the identity work narratives were doing.

Retrospective narration

Retrospective narration as a means to prevent crises of ontological security is firstly discussed. Importantly participants' narratives were not future looking, biographies recounted a thematic story of progress and success up until the present, they were retrospectively constructed. Participants only needed to make sense of their lives until the present day, this allowed them to create a relatively stable identity. This is not to say that individuals were completely without apprehension towards the future. Rather for the most part they did not think about their future plans, future job security or lack of. Counter to others assertions regarding the construction of identity (Giddens, 1991; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) the narratives did not reflect projects of the self. Values, interests, and personal goals did not drive decisions as they do in careers constructed around projects of the self. Self-interest determined decisions but career paths were not purposive or planned. Rather success and progress were pursued in any direction, there was an absence of pre-determined goals.

An addition to this was the intentional narration of careers up until the present. By limiting narration to retrospective career events ending with the present, participants created subjective meaning out of their careers. If they had determined long term goals this would have created the potential for a disjuncture in biographies. The potential to fail to meet said goals could potentially cause later fractures or crises in narratives and in identity formation. Equally if goals were articulated it would create the possibility that individuals were not taking the relevant steps towards said goals. Retrospective narration was finite and a safer option for maintaining ontological security and a stable sense of identity. This was a consistent finding across interviews and was settling to participants sense of self. This finding is significant because it provides a new layer of understanding to the identity formation literature. Redressing inaccuracies in careers literature that stipulates project centred, goal directed careers represent a pinnacle model and are the desire of contemporary workers (Giddens, 1991; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

The pursuit of progress in a consumptive fashion

As discussed, holistic and structural analyses of narratives uncovered that each 'achievement' or step of progress in careers up until the present had constituted short lived fulfilment, before participants started looking to the next accolade or increase they could amass. The achievement of increase (promotion, salary raise, being given greater 'ownership' of an area) rarely constituted long

term significance or meaning. The search for new fulfilment through progress was a continually rejuvenating process, satisfaction with what one had achieved was fleeting. The lack of long-term goals, the preoccupation with constantly achieving the next progress reward without seemingly enjoying the benefits of such for prolonged periods of time, mirrors the pattern of the modern-day consumer. One who is constituted as a continually desiring subject under capitalist relations (Zizek, 1997; Bjerg, 2008) continually pursuing pleasurable experiences but never being fully satisfied (Smart, 2010). Participants appeared to be in a state of striving but never arriving at an acceptable level of progression. They were always concerned with progressing but importantly progress was always determined by what was immediately available and achievable as an increase. Dreams, hopes and long-term aspirations were consistently absent, usurped by current optionality. It was more important to keep moving forward in any direction than to wait for some goal in the future. This was largely because there was an absence of specific, objective, career related goals, that is other than grand notions of success. The absence of goals in this sense then was liberating. It opened the door for progress down any number of avenues, not limited to predetermined plans.

Indeed, counter to narrative theory and research (McAdams, 1993; Sennett, 1998) that stipulates identities are formed through linking the past, present and future, participants in the current study substituted an ability to articulate future direction and plans with short term consumptive progress. When asked what the next steps were for their working lives, they did not defer to interests, wants or longer-term hopes and dreams. They instead cited the attainable achievements immediately available to them. These opportunities most frequently constituted internal or external job postings they were aware of or opportunities offered to them by their network links. Subjectively then, meaning was formed through continually consuming progress opportunities and creating narratives out of all that had been achieved until the present. Whilst a level of acceptable progression was never arrived at, nonetheless this constituted a meaningful pursuit for individuals.

The journey of striving and intermittent short-lived fulfilment provided pace and purpose to participants' working lives. Consuming progress affirmed their abilities and kept them focused on immediate satisfactions, arguably anesthetising them from some of the more negative aspects of their working careers, including their disconnection with their species essence. The speed at which progress and promotion could take place unencumbered by plans and long-term goals constituted a unique source of meaning for these individuals. They were free to keep finding meaning and motivation in their frequent upward movement. This original contribution demonstrates how an absence of narrative that links past, present and future need not result in crises of identity. The

opposite may in fact be true. Where an absence of plan liberates workers to continually affirm their identity through short term wins.

Summary of progress biographies so far

Research suggests dissatisfaction is correlated with work that does not align with an individual's personal attributes, interests and vocational preferences (Chalofsky and Krishna, 2009; Rosso, Dekas and Wrzesniewski, 2010). These factors were not the stimulus or starting point for employment choices among participants. Individuals frequently 'fell into' roles and then endeavoured to climb the career ladder where they were. Achieving progression was foregrounded as the primary driver behind workplace decisions and work ethic. At times a secondary desire to pursue work that aligned with one's personal interests was pursued – discussed in the section 'a double stage to progress narratives'.

To summarise this section, the ways in which progress was pursued by participants was frequently context dependent and unspecific. Long term goals were rarely formulated. Individuals appeared largely directionless. Career plans – if they existed – were adaptable. The priority was to achieve progression. If there was a priority long-term goal, it was progression. Individuals obtained meaning from their progression. It was an axis orientating their decision making and choices.

In many ways it appeared that individuals viewed their employment situations as 'jobs' – that is, labour in exchange for wages, and ever-increasing wages – more than they conceived of them as 'careers' – broadly defined as more vocational pursuits and journeys towards personal fulfilment. Greater wages were a constant focus (indicative of a 'job'). However greater responsibilities and more complex ways of working were also pursued, features that speak to some notion of a career. Some manifestation of a career path was formed by individuals – not one centred around the intrinsic value of work and vocational pursuits, but one centred around the value attributed to the self, the progress one made and the status, title and position achieved. These features appeared to coalesce for individuals and become intricately intertwined with participants' ability to pursue and project notions of various aesthetics of life, discussed next.

Aesthetics of life

In an attempt to update the Weberian vocational work ethic, Bauman (2005) argued that work has lost its privileged position as an axis around which individuals fixed their identity. Individuals' engagement with work no longer operates out of a sense of duty, instead coming first and foremost

under aesthetic scrutiny, whereby 'its value is judged by its capacity to generate pleasurable experience' (Bauman, 2005, p. 33) and an entertaining job is a 'highly coveted privilege' (Bauman, 2005, p.34). Fundamentally an 'aesthetics of consumption now rules where the work ethic once ruled' (Bauman, 2005, p. 32).

For participants in the current study the pursuit of aesthetics did appear to rule in place of a sense of duty. However, diverging from Bauman's work, the aesthetics individuals appeared to seek did not pertain to specific aspects of their employment. Work was not evaluated by 'its capacity to be entertaining and amusing, satisfying... the aesthetical needs and desires of the consumer, the seeker of sensations and collector of experiences' (Bauman, 2000, p. 139-140). Rather than seeking an aesthetics of work, individuals sought an aesthetics of life, namely the accumulation of symbolic and financial capital to themselves through bigger titles, status, and salary. These factors constructed a positive aesthetic concept of one's life through the esteem and sense of worth they were able to attribute to themselves in their promotions and progress and through their materialistic consumption - facilitated by bigger salaries. Achieving progression hence formed an integral part of participants' aesthetic notions of their lives.

Jonty, a finance administrator for mortgage brokers, narrated an unspecific progress story similar to Harry's in the subtheme above when asked about his dreams and ambitions. Jonty also demonstrated his inclination toward obtaining an aesthetics of life as opposed to an aesthetics of work.

Jonty: Well first of all, with the current career that I have, I would definitely want to progress and there's no reason for stopping from achieving what I wish to, to get within the current company that I am in or within the current field that I am in. As my manager first told me when I first started on our informal interview, she said once you've done your training the world is your oyster. And I truly believe that if you have the right determination, the right personality, the right people around you to help you go further along, I believe that you can achieve a lot more than you, than I have now. So yes, I would like to see myself progress from a consultant to a managerial level within the company and just not to stop there to hopefully go even further within the company. I would love to be at managerial level within the industry. Yes. I would love to be able to go into different lenders and be recognized. And to also be an influencer in my sector or in my current field, but also as a person to be able to speak to a local school for example. A good example was my boss, my CEO, actually he goes to a local school and speaks there to encourage kids.

Jonty gives an extended piece of prose detailing a variety of partially specific dreams and ambitions. Namely reaching managerial level, becoming ‘recognised’ in the field of mortgage finance, becoming an ‘influencer’ both in his sector and also an influencer in some sort of public capacity. These dreams appear more idyllic than necessarily specific. This does not mean they are not important to Jonty, rather the nature of what a dream or ambition is arguably aligns more with an aesthetics of life and of self than of work or a vocational realisation of one’s abilities. To get promoted to management level holds some level of specificity although Jonty does not define parameters, the type of managerial role he would like or the tasks, responsibilities, nature of work that he wishes to take on, namely the aesthetical *composition of work*. Rather his prose appears to be more about self-promotion and projection in the acquisition of titles and status and influence, and less about self-connection, self-realisation, or self-fulfilment. Arguably the internal motivation points of reference guiding Jonty’s short story in chronological order are ‘definitely wanting to progress’, viewing the ‘world as [his] oyster’ and ‘achieving more than [he] has now’. These probes into Jonty’s internal world signify a psyche set on the aesthetics of life that he is hoping to achieve and project, and which is prioritised over obtaining aesthetically pleasing *work* (Bauman, 2000). He appears intent on accumulating prestige to himself as opposed to aligning his inner wants, desires, or pleasurable pursuits with the external workplace. A focus toward an aesthetics of life was a common factor within the progress theme. A similar sentiment was expressed by Toby:

Toby: ...to be the boss and basically be the one telling others, be the one, you know, at the top as it were. And don't get me wrong having that responsibility is stressful, like my CEO now, he's having to deal with the merger, with Germany, the combining of companies. Do I envy him? No, absolutely not, it's a lot of stress. But that's the role. So eventually stepping up to senior management and of course the perks and lifestyle that, that is. Stress yes, but obviously those financial rewards and benefits and lifestyle that comes with that, everyone knows who you are, you carry the weight [of that organisation] kind of thing, that's the role.

Toby was describing his intentions and ambitions within his working career. A fascinating tension he holds, seemingly without conflict, is his disdain for the level of stress management entails and yet his pursuit of that role. Arguably the aesthetics of life he pursues, ‘the perks and lifestyle’, the ‘financial rewards and benefits’ outweigh the ‘stress’ that he ‘absolutely’ does not envy. The symbolic status of being the boss is also touched on in his final statement that ‘everyone knows who you are [and] you carry the weight’ of the organisation. This statement suggestibly depicts the boss as a hero character in Toby’s mind who independently ‘carries’ the weight of organisational pressure. Toby

lists being 'known' alongside other rewards, benefits, and perks. It is suggested the symbolism of being 'known' hence is a worthwhile and meaningful feature of becoming the 'boss', a component of what Toby considers an aesthetically pleasing identity and life. Toby is clear that he would like to 'be at the top' so that he is the one giving direction to others.

The concept of individuals obtaining meaning through their conceptualisation of, and ability to, project an aesthetically pleasing life was evidenced frequently in interviews through the language of a 'nice life' exemplified below.

Interviewer (HG): is it important to you to be ambitious in your career?

Johnny: Yeah it is mainly because of the things I'm going to achieve outside of my career, like buying a house and things like that. Having nice, nice things. I feel like if I want those things, then I need to be ambitious in my career. So there's promotions and to be blunt, those pay rises come so that I can afford those things. Um, really that's why I am ambitious.

Interviewer (HG): What motivates you to keep working at this particular role? You've got a degree, a variety of skills, worked in a variety of roles, so what is it about this role?

Sebasten: Uh, so definitely the money and the position title. Resource wise yeah. Provides everything I need. Um, and more, you know I've got it very nice. It provides me a very nice accommodation which I'm very happy with, but also have plenty of free money. But if I actually just didn't do anything [in my free time], I would be absolutely rolling in it right now. Which for me is what I'm happy with.

Whilst 'nice' material things were often cited in a similar vein to Johnny and Sebasten above, it would be a mistake to assume that all motivation behind participants' engagement with work was for financial gain. As we have seen in theme two, a variety of self-affirming motivators – 'winning' battles, being head hunted for areas, 'proving' oneself as capable – were also in operation. What is evident is that in addition to financial motivators, status, power and progression motivators were also in operation. These latter factors amounted to what participants perceived as a positive 'aesthetics of life' and appeared to take precedence over the pursuit of an aesthetics of work. Indeed, rhetoric of self enhancement and self-projection through wealth, symbolic prestige, achievement, power, and status was rife throughout interviews.

A number of new pathways to meaning creation have been discussed in this chapter including through affirmation, through retrospective narrativization and through pursuing progress in a

consumptive fashion. An aesthetics of life being pursued and prioritised over an aesthetics of work constitutes a final new pathway to meaning creation.

For clarity an aesthetics of life defined here refers to a life characterised by success markers, status (in employment hierarchies), financial increase, materialistic increase, promotions, titles and so on. An aesthetics of life was structured around things that could be easily communicated as possessing value to peers, colleagues, and relations. An aesthetically pleasing life was replete with markers of beautiful things, (predominantly, but not limited to, materialistic things). These markers included good holidays, the ability to afford spa memberships, nice accommodation, reporting directly into senior management positions, having a team beneath them and so on.

Notably, what reigned was a notion of an aesthetically pleasing life according to the socio-economic contextual setting participants occupied. Wider social discourses, logics and ideologies of neoliberalism and 'success' in contemporary society offer meritocratic ideals and position wealth and power as ultimate goals (Brown, 2015). The socially available discursive ideals of neoliberalism were the guiding maxim to what constituted a pleasing, beautiful and desired life for participants. Indeed, participants subjectively gained meaning from pursuing – and achieving – success as defined by the fields they were situated in. They aligned themselves with socially available neoliberal discourses. This finding offers an original contribution to knowledge, in that, this alignment with the field offered a substitute to defined long term goals and dreams and the pursuit of personal interests in work.

An aesthetics of life constituted a pathway to meaning creation through anesthetising participants at times to their wider human condition within work. Specifically, participants were anesthetised - or at least had their focus diverted from - the absence of long-term goals and inherently interesting employment in their working lives, as discussed in the preceding themes. An aesthetics of life kept participants focused on all they had achieved. The links between alienation and an aesthetics of life are unpacked further in the conclusions chapter. An aesthetics of life also provided an identity axis for participants, in conjunction with progress, discussed next.

The identity work aesthetic narratives were doing

An aesthetics of life was a tangible goal for participants to amass. However, a more abstract, discursive notion of an aesthetically pleasing life also operated in and through their narratives. Narratives conducted identity work for participants. The neoliberal notion of an aesthetic life functioned as an axis around which identities were wrapped. Achievement and success markers were the guiding framework through which stories were structured. Narratives were organised by

participants according to promotions or increase. With each 'step up' constituting a type of subheading, or new subplot in stories. On the scarce occasion the development of skills, or reference to interests or craft development were alluded to, they were a secondary by-product of a promotion to a new position, described in terms of a happy accident.

The SQUIN (Single Question aimed at Inducing Narrative) participants were asked at the beginning of their interviews; 'tell me the story of your working career...' invariably elicited the story of employment progress (to bigger titles/roles/responsibilities), and related life successes in chronological order. No one for example referenced the interlinking of careers with the domestic sphere – children, domestic labour, care responsibilities – except for when referencing the materialistic increases their job had provided; bigger flat, nicer clothes, holidays, and expensive 'self-care' practices.

The story of participants' working careers, and indeed their working lives were the stories of their progress and acquisition that ran parallel to their understanding of their aesthetic identities. Individuals generally refrained from talking about themselves apart from the markers (or lack of) of their aesthetic lives. No one distinctly separated themselves from their aesthetics of life nor their progress careers, this was their identity. The absence of a separate sense of self was investigated through lines of questioning pertaining to personal interests, hobbies, leisure time. Consistently answers referred back to the aesthetic, materialistic things that success had 'afforded' them, e.g. spa days, holidays, nice dinners, entertaining guests in style.

Much less frequently discussed was work's 'capacity to be entertaining and amusing, satisfying... the seeker of sensations and collector of experiences' (Bauman, 2000, p. 139-140). When the ability of employment to generate pleasurable and fulfilling experience was discussed it was always secondary to self-enhancement goals. The following two exchanges with Lynn and Malve below exemplify this dynamic.

Interviewer (HG): do you think there is anyone who has gone into this type of work for that reason? Because obviously it is well paid?

Lynn (Marketing manager in a telecommunications company): to make money? yeah absolutely. I mean did I want do this when I was younger? No, I wanted to be a vet. And here I am not being a vet. When you get into industry you get paid. Where I'm at now I'm not on the salary that I should be but I'm still choosing to do the job anyway for experience and progression, but I'm not going to do it for ever if I don't get paid what I should be paid. So there is definitely an element of people don't do it unless they get what they deserve

financially. And I do think especially when taking a job you take it because of salary not because of what you want to do. Especially as you get older, you take it for the status and you take it for the salary expectation. Because somebody who has got a really good CV they don't need this job because they can get a job elsewhere but they need the money, so they'll always push for the money as opposed to the job.... and definitely having this job means I can have a nice life and I can afford all of this [gestures to her flat] sort of thing. I'm able to give myself - and other people potentially - like I'm able to sponsor a kid in Africa, I'm able to like help out other people financially if necessary. It's like those jobs have enabled me to do that, and I'm grateful for it, although, I do still want to be a vet. [pause]

Interviewer (HG): do you think if you had your time again you would be a vet?

Lynn: maybe. I didn't do the right qualifications at a level. So I'd have to go back and redo my a levels and then do like 7 years, so I could do it now, which means I'd be a vet by the time I'm 46, I could be a vet for the rest of my life. I'm not going to though. I do want a farm though. Maybe it become a CEO here then I can buy a farm.

Malve: I do kind of say jokingly mostly, but if I was just to win the lottery and not have a care in the world, I'd probably go and become a gardener or a tree surgeon or do something with my hands and become like a skilled wood craftsman or something like that. However, I don't have those skills, so they wouldn't give me a quality of life that I want to achieve... potentially they wouldn't.

Lynn and Malve's quotes highlight the importance of an aesthetic 'nice life' being achieved. Fascinatingly this was clearly at the expense of – rather than in the absence of - other supposed interests and desires and true career goals. In Lynn's system of meaning, the position of prestige she held and the accompanying financial gratification hierarchically appeared to supersede her desire to become a vet, work with animals or own her own farm. Similarly, for Malve his desire to become a 'skilled craftsman' was secondary in importance to achieving the 'quality of life that [he] wants to achieve'. Lynn viewed choosing money over interests in work as a natural dynamic, she implies people in general take jobs for 'the status and.. the salary expectation', 'not because of what [they] want to do'. She articulates this whilst also clearly stating that she would rather be working elsewhere, as a vet, arguably in a role that would align more strongly with a positive aesthetical experience of work.

The interactions as illustrated by both Lynn and Malve exemplify a pattern of disjuncture in some participant interviews, between what individuals were doing and what they said they *actually* wanted to be doing. This finding was not applied to all participants. Such disclosures were often the reserve of older members of the participant group, those at the mid-to-latter stages of their careers. This disjuncture often also only became evident in interactions where individuals were receptive to being gently but directly challenged on the meaning that their work held for them. In interviews where a strong sense of rapport was fostered opportunities to gently challenge participants elicited moments of reflection from participants regarding what they *actually wanted* which they explained they had largely not reflected on before.

For the most part – as demonstrated – there was a sense of directionless, goalless trajectory for individuals, concerned instead with progress in almost any direction. There did not appear to be a hidden set of desires for work one *actually* wanted to do or at the very least individuals had not considered in great detail what they *actually* wanted to do. In line with previous themes, arguably individuals were operating habitually pursuing jobs that provided status, salary, and prestige in accordance with what their environments defined as measures of success. They had neoliberal understandings of themselves. Further in line with findings theme two participants largely obtained meaning from opportunities for self-affirmation of one's capabilities, work warrior dispositions and their indispensability in work, these factors were prioritised over considerations of personal interests. Nevertheless, at times, most often towards the mid-to-latter stages of careers, some people offered an idealised version of what it was that they 'actually' wanted to do in their work and yet made no effort or attempt to pursue. This can be analysed a number of ways and is addressed in the subtheme 'a double stage of progress narratives' below.

A double stage of progress narratives

The incoherence between what some participants said they 'actually' wanted to do but chose not to pursue can be logically analysed three different ways. Firstly, as performance management, whereby participants' claims about their 'dreams' to 'actually' be a carpenter or vet for instance reflect discourses that are intended to present a particular kind of subjectivity and disposition more than they reflect an accurate representation of reality. Participants chased status and hence it is not unreasonable that such a preoccupation with how one is seen might extend to idealised, but disingenuous narratives about how they wanted to work in more philanthropic, nurturing, or academic roles. One lawyer for example talked at length about a teaching stint he did in a summer

camp and the impact he had on the children there relaying that he could 'easily' have become a teacher instead. When asked why he was then working in litigation law he said that is 'just the way it worked out'.

A second analytical lens might argue that the disjuncture between what people do and what they claim to want to do is the result of socialization and the limited subject positions they felt were available (or worth) inhabiting. As explored in theme one participants operated out of a neoliberal subjectivity and understanding of themselves. Hence it could be argued they pursued jobs that provided wealth, status, prestige, and achievement in accordance with what they believed their social worlds deemed measures of success, and areas of employment worth pursuing. This level of analysis holds some credibility as discussed in findings theme one. However as also discussed in theme one participants also possess agency and consciously chose to assert certain identities and engage in certain forms of work for calculated reasons.

Thirdly then the incoherence might be explained as a matter of priorities where a double stage of progress took place. This final explanatory tool was evidenced frequently in narratives and most convincingly explains the disjuncture dynamic and is hence now unpacked. The discrepancy for some participants between what they did and what they claimed to actually want to do represented a battle between a pursuit for an aesthetics of life and an aesthetics of work. Prioritised was progress in any direction, securing titles, status and promotion, features contributing to a positive conception of one's life aesthetically. Once individuals had reached a certain level of perceived success and prestige however – and this was largely confined to the older members of my participant pool – some began to speak about looking more to personal aspirations and vocational work, things that aligned with their interests and talents and an aesthetic view of work.

For these participants they referred to a stage or 'point' at which a certain level of success or security had been achieved and the focus was able to shift slightly more towards areas of personal interest in work. The shift in focus was not ever wholesale reinvention or upheaval. Malve (quoted above) for example did not quit his job and study woodwork. Nor did Lynn retrain as a vet. Participants tended to stay within the field of work they knew but had enough experience or connections at this point to begin to refine the criteria they employed when looking for new roles. Individuals became slightly more attuned to seeking work that was inherently interesting to them. They held greater knowledge on the different positions that existed and were available to them in their relative fields of employment and were more inclined to apply for roles that matched their personal preferences. Opportunities for progression were still sought but became less significant in light of achieved success. The following quotes illustrate this journey towards more interesting work:

Malve: Am I passionate about what I do? Probably not really. I'm not. But I equally don't see it as a means to an end. I see it all as part of my like learning journey and, and just still discovering really what I want to do, and where I want to be and how I'd like to do it. I'm probably not far off having to find a place where I really do become passionate about what I do to make sure I stick at it. But right now I'm happy to... floating around sounds bad because it sounds like you've got no direction, but I'm happy to test the water in a few different places to see what I'm really interested in. Right now, I'm in a position where I'm in the most interesting job I've ever had. Am I passionate about it? Maybe not.

Malve's section of narrative is particularly interesting because earlier in his interview he described his inclination to become a skilled wood craftsman. This does not feature in his plans to find interesting work. He has fulfilled his first stage of progress and attained a certain level of success and prestige within his field of employment. Content to now find more interesting work this must be done by 'testing the waters' within the frame of success that he already has established. A wholesale restart of a career path – toward carpentry for example – is not considered. Implied then is the notion that his level of salary and status must be upheld in any move he makes.

Miles (Accounting associate for a digital music platform): So realistically my work has been trial and error, but alongside all of that, I'm doing accountancy training as well. So I'm learning to become a chartered management accountant through SEMA which I think is where my skills are. So, I'm very good at finances, my company's finances, I'm very good at working out like numbers, excel money and all that jazz. That's probably where I'm most strong, but I'm not equally interested in doing the real dirty accounting and doing balance sheets and double entry and really like propping up a profit and loss account or making them work together. It doesn't interest me too much. So I have worked my way up in that area for a long time earning different promotions. But, I'd say I've gone slowly through the journey of [pauses].. especially when you're not senior, you can't go where you want to go. You get a job right. And then you can kind of see what other people are doing around the business. So, I'd kind of be interested in something over there. And if a job came up, I would probably move into it if I could. So I guess I've gone through that journey of working out what I do and don't like, it happens to be that each of those steps was moving more towards an area of the business that I'd like to be in.

Similarly, Miles established himself in a reputable field of work, using his financial skills to get ahead. He has since been on a journey of slowly working towards work that he cares more about, 'working out' what he does and does not like, essentially through spotting roles and areas in his business that appear attractive and then moving into them if he could. As acknowledged by Miles himself there was a degree of unintentionality to Miles' progress, 'it happened to be' that each of his career steps was moving toward an area of the business he would 'like to be in'. What is clear however is that his orientation toward work that was more 'interesting' and less 'boring' was a secondary achievement post securing a certain level of success. At the beginning of Miles' narrative interview, he explained he had been successful in accounting because he was good at it. He was working hard to make himself highly desirable through additional qualifications and actively strived for higher paid, more prestigious roles. We talked at length about how he has established himself within the business and had worked to get himself 'taken seriously'. The fragment above came towards the latter end of the interview. Having established himself he now turns his attention to work that interests him more. This highlights the double staged process of the progression journey. The 'slow... journey' that Miles has been willing to take, postponing more inherently enjoyable and interesting work, is a cost he was willing to pay. His number one priority has been his progress to a level of acceptable prestige.

In those interviews where it became evident that personal interests did hold some affinity with individuals, sometimes in a vein of lament a realisation moment occurred. Whereby individuals reflected that their first stage of progress trajectory had its limitations and boredom. Again, such lament was almost exclusively articulated by the older participants interviewed.

Tracey (a 43 year old Business projects lead for a production company): I can say that I have worked hard to achieve a lot, I have some things I would still like to finish. There are a couple of big business projects that we've not reached our final stages of that take up a lot of my time. But I will be glad once they are done now just because I am not keenly motivated, almost... In a general sense I've been this business lead, projects lead, but working within this field for so many years. I know the roles, I've worked my way up and I'm in a position where I'm recognised for my expertise, I operate with these senior colleagues, which is so important to have achieved but I am at times just not motivated. So for me, as we've spoken about, it's taking on those projects that I care more about and even moving myself more into the creative team leads role and operating on the more creative side and less of the business leads side.

The discourse within which Tracey's narrative sits can be said to be that of the progress narrative, whereby she foregrounds the importance of all that she has achieved through the language of being 'recognised for [her] expertise', her hard work and the metaphorical positioning of herself among the 'senior' members of her organisation. These things are clearly important to Tracey. However, a corollary of disillusionment in her work is also articulated through the notion of lacking motivation. Tracey appears to currently be reorientating her work towards that which interests her more, taking on projects she 'cares more about and even moving.. into the creative team leads role'. A second stage to her progress narrative is taking shape. Yet, at this phase of her career there is a hint of lament, a fracture in her progress narrative has appeared. The old system for obtaining meaning from her work, namely through her hard work and upward trajectory arguably is not as fulfilling as it once was. For Tracey there is hope however as she has spotted other roles and areas that she 'cares more about' and seemingly is able to move into, in the hope of feeling motivated once more. Slight fractures occurring in previous pathways to fulfilment was a finding also evidenced by Mark.

Mark: I've got to a point where I'm, I feel like I'm earning enough, I've been leading a core for the last year, or at least I've been working with a team that I love working with. I'm in a job that is okay, I'm not going to pretend it fascinates me, or that I'm really invested in it. That that would be the next level of achievement. The next level of achievement would be being in a job that I really loved and wanted to get up for and found interesting... [something] I've learned that I would encourage people with to hold in high wisdom. And that is if you have the opportunity, absolutely carve out a career that interests you because I've been bored for 30 years, I'm nearly 50 and I've be bored for most of that time. And I've got another 15 years of being bored before I can chuck it all in. And that's 45 years of working, it's a really long time to be bored. So if you can, if you can understand what your, what your personal kind of, um, you know what I'm trying to say, I just can't think of the words. If you can figure out what triggers your interests at a deep enough level, absolutely go after that, you will enjoy your next 45 years. Otherwise you'll be bored probably.

Mark's quote above begins with him listing his achievements in a check list fashion, he has reached a level of finance he is happy with, he leads a team and has acquired the status of leadership/management but he cites the 'next level of achievement' as not yet having been attained. Namely work that actually interests him, that he 'really loves and wants to get up for'. Mark creates a metaphorical hierarchy of his own needs. First finance and security, then status and

role position within an organisation and finally personal interests and desires. Interestingly Mark seems to view – or has at least pursued – these levels in a linear fashion. There appears no discernible reason why interesting employment could not have been the starting requirement for Mark or a focus that intertwined with his career climbing. Arguably again for Mark a double stage of progress was in operation where work that one ‘loves’ was a secondary concern.

The theme of lament in the later stages of one’s career was evidenced in the second half of Mark’s quote. His strong message of advice to seek first one’s interests to avoid 45 years of boredom speaks of a personal dissatisfaction for Mark. Mark’s counsel suggests if he had his time again he would prioritise different things and ‘go after that’ which interests him instead. Strangely, as laid out by Mark himself he is only two thirds of the way through his working life and yet in spite of his apparent boredom he resigns himself to another 15 years of lacking fulfilment. There is an inevitability discourse in Mark’s language use, a sense that it is too late to change things or adapt. Mark did disclose elsewhere in his interview that he was on a similar re-orientation journey akin to Malve, Miles and Tracey. He was slowly transitioning from role to slightly more interesting role. At the time of our interview in fact he was about to take on a new position. Yet from his linguistic framing, and his desire to ‘chuck it all in’ arguably for Mark there is a sense of disbelief that incremental shifts will be enough to totally stave off the ‘boredom’ he experiences, hence his lament.

Conclusions to the theme

Progress biographies were meaningful to participants for various reasons. In similar ways to findings theme two they allowed for affirmation of one’s capabilities and importance. Progress markers – for example salary increases – affirmed individuals were succeeding at work and life more generally. Strikingly, progress biographies were relatively fluid. They were continuously being forged and affected by their contextual circumstances. Progress biographies did not have a predefined set of goals they were orientated toward. Individuals often ‘fell’ into employment situations by virtue of chance and available job opportunities. A career trajectory was rarely – if ever – mapped out at the start of individual careers, even mid-way through careers this was seemingly still absent. Participants possessed more generalised goals, to keep moving upwards, progressing onto bigger and better things. At times there was specificity, for example to move from a junior associate to a senior one. It appeared this was the product of contextual situation – individuals pursued ‘obvious’ next steps. An aesthetics of life was prioritised over an aesthetics of work. Where individuals focused more on self-promotion and projection in the acquisition of titles and wealth and influence, and less on self-connection, self-realisation, or self-fulfilment.

Fascinatingly however for some at the mid to latter stages of careers – and conditional upon a certain level of success already having been acquired – some people took small steps to move their careers towards work that was inherently more interesting and fulfilling. This was never a wholesale career change, the level of success obtained needed to be maintained. Rather people took on projects that suited them more or applied for jobs in other departments within the same organisation. This phenomenon is referred to as a ‘double stage’ to progress biographies. As also noted in the conclusions to findings theme two, this advances the broad canon of the emotionalization of work literature (Sandoval, 2018; Bygrave, 2020; Pagis, 2020), demonstrating that passionate, romantic, ‘love of job’ relationships with work are not the primary desire, nor reality of many.

This theme offers an original contribution to knowledge in theorising new pathways to narrative creation in contemporary employment settings. Three innovative methods of narration creation were uncovered that prevented crises of self-identity, crises of character and crises of ontological security in the absence of a biography that links past and present to the future (Sennett, 1998). Firstly, a retrospective narrativization of progress and achievement markers. Secondly the pursuit of progress as a consumptive practice. Thirdly through the pursuit of an aesthetic of ‘life’ as opposed to an aesthetics of work (Bauman, 2000). These features helped facilitate individuals in keeping their biographical narrative going despite lacking end goals, counter to the assertions of some (McAdams, 1993; Sennett, 1998). They also allowed participants to establish meaning from their employment in subjective ways. Hence these new methods of narrative creation constitute a key advancement to the current research literature. The absence of both stipulating and linking biographical narratives to future goals, need not result in crises of ontological security as argued by some (Sennett, 1998). Rather this absence was found to liberate individuals in a number of ways, allowing them to progress with greater fluidity and ease, this finding constitutes an original contribution to the field of biographical narrative employment literature. These new pathways also constitute an original contribution to knowledge in theorising how meaning is formed for this group of knowledge workers. The major pathways to meaning as documented by the research literature through crafting and vocational processes (Sennett, 2009; Carroll, 2020) and through emotional relationships with work (De Palma, 2020; Pagis, 2020) were not in operation yet meaning was still achieved in innovative ways. This original contribution is discussed further in the answers to the research questions in the conclusions chapter.

The neoliberal notion of an aesthetic life further functioned as an axis around which identities were wrapped. Achievement and success markers were the guiding framework through which stories

were structured. The story of participants working careers, and indeed their working lives were the stories of their progress and acquisition that ran parallel to their understanding of their aesthetic identities. Individuals generally refrained from talking about their selves apart from the markers (or lack of) of their aesthetic lives.

Also of interest to this research were the similarities to the traditional career path evidenced. For the most part individuals had remained within a couple of organisations over the course of their career so far. For participants however this was generally not a conscious decision in either sense – to stay in house or not. Rather it was the result of the context dependent nature of their progress trajectories. Possessing a keen eye to the next upward move often coincided with what was immediately and visibly available within current employment settings. In house promotion often conveniently presented as the quickest and easiest route to progress within known structures, participants did not necessarily possess any preference for remaining within one company or organisation. This differs slightly from the traditional career literature that suggests individuals opt for linear paths up single institutions as a means to build character and foster a sense of security and longevity (Sennett, 1998). A tendency toward a traditional career path appeared largely unintentional but not at all unwelcome.

Conclusions to the chapter

In sum thematic and structural analysis of the research data uncovered three key themes. Firstly, the adoption and projection of neoliberal subjectivities by participants. Secondly self-affirmation and a variety of ‘winner’ and ‘work warrior’ mentalities were in operation as primary motivators in employment. Thirdly biographies were predominantly understood through the lens of progress. Biographical narratives were wrapped around an axis of progress and aesthetic identities.

Both structural socialization and individual agency influenced the adoption of neoliberal subjectivities. Participants possessed a commodified sense of work and self, they engaged in rationalization, overwork, self-reliance, and self-responsibility. Participants chose to do this in processes of conscious identity assertion for future gain and self-promotion as part of their personal branding. Participants symbolically aligned with the ideals of their working environments to get ahead, accruing symbols and values to their personhood as ‘hard workers’, ‘doers’, efficient and effective employees.

Strikingly absent from participants’ narratives were notions that they were doing what they loved, what they were passionate about or what they were interested in. Meaning was still obtained from

work however in different ways. The 'battleground' of work provided an arena for participants to construct meaning through 'winning' in work, affirming their capabilities, developing a sense of indispensability and at times superiority. They separated themselves from 'losers' and lesser 'complacent' ways of working. There was however an anxious engagement in the 'correct' presentation of the self. Anxieties around missing the mark, having one's assertiveness or abilities questioned was a common theme foregrounded in participants' narratives. None the less this also constituted a key motivator in work. Opportunities to foster work warrior conceptions of self – as battle victors, achieving great feats – further functioned to create fulfilling encounters with employment. Indeed, being able to 'prove' oneself, achieve under pressure and at times exploitative working conditions were affirmatory experiences for individuals. Interestingly also absent from the affirmatory, motivational, and meaningful components of employment was discussion of crafting abilities, a refining of skills, long-term engagement with projects, and a devoted, vocational sense of career.

Biographies were narrated around progress and aesthetic identities. Working careers did not appear to have predefined goals that they were orientated toward, if there was a goal, it was to achieve progress. Interestingly progress was largely context dependent. Career opportunities were pursued based on their availability. Participants were unhindered by specific career aspirations. Progress markers – for example salary increases – affirmed individuals were succeeding at work and life more generally. An aesthetics of life was prioritised over an aesthetics of work. Where individuals focused more on self-promotion and projection in the acquisition of titles and wealth and influence, and less on self-connection, self-realisation or self-fulfilment. Interestingly however in a 'double stage to progress biographies' some participants at the mid to latter stages of careers – having obtained a certain level of success – took small steps to move their careers towards work that was more inherently interesting to them.

A number of new pathways to meaning creation have been uncovered and discussed in this chapter, offering original contributions to knowledge. These included obtaining meaning through affirmation, through retrospective narrativization, through pursuing progress in a consumptive fashion and through an aesthetics of life being pursued and prioritised over an aesthetics of work. The latter three features also constituted innovative new methods of narrative creation in the absence of a biography that links past, present and future. The significance and implications of these findings are discussed and in the following chapter, 'discussions and conclusions'. The research questions are also answered.

Considered collectively then the thematic findings of this study demonstrate that neither traditional pathways to meaning (via linear, crafting, vocational experiences) nor contemporary cultural schemas relating to the emotionalization of employment were in operation for respondents. However new innovative pathways are. Understood collectively the thematic findings demonstrated how individuals are highly responsive to contemporary economic relations. They embody the market and wider economic situation. This embodiment links to how they experience their employment as meaningful. The aesthetic markers of a successful life in a neoliberal society – success, status, power, material benefits etc. – are taken up, valued and pursued by participants. Yet this is a meaningful and at least partly intentional endeavour. Individuals choose to remain in their roles that are orientated toward these neoliberal goals. Importantly also they obtained a lot of meaning through the affirmation of their abilities that are conducive to success within competitive, pressurised working environments and situations of overwork, long working hours and stress.

Chapter 6 - Discussions and Conclusions

Introduction to chapter

This final chapter of the thesis unpacks the answers to the study's four research questions and details the original contributions to research. Some future suggestions for research are then offered and finally the applications and implications of this study are noted.

The findings and analysis chapter uncovered three key themes. These three key themes mapped directly onto the research questions. Research questions one and two were predominantly answered by findings theme two 'Affirmation, Motivation and Meaning'. Research question three was primarily answered by findings theme three 'Progress Biographies'. Research question four was answered by findings theme one 'Neoliberal subjectivities'. The links between answers to the research questions are noted and the totality of the answers are considered in the summary to the original contributions to knowledge.

Answering the research questions

Research question one

Research question one of this thesis asked the following:

Research question one: Did a sense of craft and/or vocation feature in participants' narratives?

Findings theme two 'Affirmation, Motivation and Meaning' addressed research question one. Sennett's (2009, p. 9) notion of craft as explored in the literature review refers to the development of practice over a long duration, grounded in the 'desire to do a job well for its own sake'. In employment settings this might look like a refining of skills over a long period of time, involving trial and error and often collaboration with others. Similarly Weber's (1946) vocation refers to a passionate conviction in ideals, where a good accomplishment in work is 'always a specialized accomplishment... [pursued] with passionate devotion' (Weber, 1922, p. 5). Weber (1922) saw the person of vocation as operating with 'blinders' on, so intent was their commitment to developing their work. The specialization necessary in developing a sense of vocation has been argued to align with the devotion, practise and skill development involved in craft (Wright Mills, 1951). The passion involved in vocation akin to the intrinsic reward of engaging in craft for no ulterior motive other than the satisfaction of overcoming difficulties in the labour process (Wright Mills, 1951; Sennett, 2009).

As discussed in theme two of the findings and analysis chapter, this notion of a specialized, devoted and craft centred relationship with work was strikingly absent from participants' working practices in two senses. Firstly, there was an absence of discussion of a refining of skills, talents or abilities, long term projects or plans or even personal passions in participants' career narratives. Namely an absence of factors that are associated with a philosophical sense of craft outlook and a wider sense of vocation. Secondly absent from working practices were states of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, Abuhamdeh and Nakamura, 2005), prolonged absorption in tasks, or elements of obsession or pursuing perfection in work (Sennett, 2009).

Reasons for the lack of specialized craft work and development were unpacked. A clear vacuum of space and time for trial and error was evidenced across interviews. Instead of opportunities to make mistakes and learn and grow, participants possessed cultural understandings that these were not acceptable working practices. Error making and space for crafting experiences were not viable options. In fact, participants' cultural understandings of their environments led individuals to engage in behaviours that adversely affected any opportunities for craft development, namely an intense and anxious investment in the presentation of self as invulnerable and without flaw. Participants were heavily concerned with their credibility; they possessed an anxious distrust of colleagues and managers. They considered mistakes to be potential 'leverage' for others to use against them, that might ultimately hinder their careers, success and security in their job roles. The need to be 'right' and to be able to justify decisions and actions was facilitated by participants' employment settings cultural mantras of *only accurate ways of working*. One of the implications of this cultural mantra was a shared understanding among participants that the most capable employees would figure out the 'correct' and most effective ways of working.

The research findings pertaining to research question one advances the current body of meaningful employment literature in the field. The well-established traditional pathway to meaning in employment via craft and/or vocational pursuits (Wright Mills, 1951; Carroll, 2008, 2020; Sennett, 2009) were not in operation for the knowledge workers in this study. The contemporary employment sites they occupied facilitated the opposite of crafting and vocational experiences. For the respondents in this study this traditional route to meaning was not pursued, counter to more contemporary claims by some that a sense of vocation continues to compel the West (Carroll, 2008, 2020). The second major documented pathway to meaning via contemporary cultural schemas of the emotionalization of work (Sandoval, 2018; Bygrave, 2020; Pagis, 2020; Tokumitsu, 2021) are discussed in the following two research questions.

Research question two

Research question two of this thesis asked the following:

Research question two: Did participants exhibit a sense of passion, love or a 'self-work utopia' in their career narratives?

As discussed in the literature review chapter the 'self-work utopia' is defined by Pagis (2020, p. 5) as a 'cultural imaginary in which paid work is portrayed as a continuous and central source of enjoyment, excitement, and life's meaning... based on emotional and romantic discursive constructs captured in the popular slogan 'do what you love'... where work becomes akin to a romantic relationship'. The 'self-work utopia' coheres with a body of contemporary discourse interchangeably described as 'Love of Job' (Bygrave, 2020), the 'passion paradigm' (Pagis, 2020) or the 'Do What You Love' (DWYL) (De Palma, 2020) (in work) mantra. These discourses are all part of a wider trend towards the emotionalization of work (McRobbie, 2004; Sandoval, 2018; Bygrave, 2020; Tokumitsu, 2021) and broadly follow in the tradition of Bauman's (2005) aesthetics of work. As demonstrated in the second finding's theme 'Affirmation, motivation and meaning', a distinct lack of passionate responses and approaches to work were noted in interviews. Participants rejected the notion that they were engaging in work that they 'loved', a facet of the self-work utopia. Rather self-affirmation was foregrounded and prioritised through being headhunted, 'owning' an area and 'winning' internal battles. Having reviewed the literature this thesis argued that the DWYL rhetoric, 'passion paradigm' and self-work utopia neglect the ways in which meaning is created and people are motivated outside of passionate, personally interesting work.

Pagis (2020) argues that the self-work romantic imaginary has mostly replaced the 'enterprising self' imaginary (Du Gay, 1996). The 'enterprising self' imaginary refers to the ideology of employment that views individuals as the CEO of their work concerned with its management, its control and achieving success. Pagis (2020) argues individuals are no longer driven by this enterprising self-management but instead by their emotional relation to employment. Further that individuals will pursue positive emotions and happiness at the expense of success and status (Pagis, 2020, p. 2).

For my participants, intensified self-management practices and a strong emphasis on success were highly operational, aligning with a sense of enterprising self (Du Gay, 1996; Pagis, 2020). The nature of what was being 'fought' over in the employment 'battleground' rarely mattered, what was at stake were individuals' identities, credibility, and status. These things led to greater success. The notion of pursuing positive emotions and happiness at the expense of success and status (Bygrave, 2020; Pagis, 2020) was not evidenced nor applicable to this group of employees. On the contrary,

the strenuous investment in the presentation of self was often a highly anxious endeavour. There was no space to get things wrong and participants were acutely aware of this. ‘Wins’ were *necessary* signifiers of ability. All appeared on a continuous journey to ‘prove’ and affirm oneself.

In answer to research question two, participants did not exhibit a sense of passion or love for their work in their career narratives. The sense of career narrative constructed by participants more strongly aligned with an enterprising sense of self, than a passionate ‘self-work utopia’, counter to Pagis (2020) assertions. Some heightened emotional responses were evidenced; stress, overwhelm, anxiousness, satisfaction (having achieved something) and pride (in abilities/successes) to name a few. Yet these emotions were the result of striving, battling and chasing success, and less the result of a ‘romantic relationship’ with work (Sandoval, 2018; Bygrave, 2020; Pagis, 2020). Some emotions might be seen in both camps (an enterprising self and a self-work utopia), namely a sense of satisfaction and pride. Nevertheless, noticeably missing from participants’ narratives were accounts of passion, enjoyment and love, central tenets of the ‘self-work utopia’.

Participants did not however exhibit an entirely comprehensive affinity to enterprising careers either (Du Gay, 1996). Success and achievement were important (Du Gay, 1996) but not simply in and of themselves. Success and achievement were strongly affirmatory for individuals’ sense of self and this was a fundamental motivator in work. Appearing to play a self-soothing role, success reassured individuals that they were of worth and value. Some even considered themselves ‘set apart’ or special compared with their ‘complacent’ counterparts. Notions of indispensability, ‘work warrior’ mentalities (a sense of self as a battle victor having achieved great feats especially in the face of adversity) and rhetoric of ‘overcoming’ various work challenges were a common feature of narratives. Biographies were constructed out of an individual’s abilities to succeed despite difficult circumstances. Indeed, notions of self-actualization and its pursuit were absent, whilst interestingly notions of self-affirmation were strongly evidenced. Counter to the enterprising self-imaginary, *work* was less something to be managed and controlled (Pagis, 2020) and more something to be overcome. The *self* was the focus of management, control, and correct presentation.

The first two research questions are both answered by findings theme two; Affirmation, Motivation and Meaning in work. The implications of an absence of both craft and/or a sense of vocation and also an absence of passion or ‘love of job’ are central to an updating of the research literature. The well-established more ‘traditional’ pathways to meaning in employment via craft and/or vocational pursuits (Wright Mills, 1951; Sennett, 2009) were absent for these knowledge workers, as were contemporary cultural schemas of passionate engagement (Bygrave, 2020; De Palma, 2020; Pagis, 2020). This highlights a relative gap in the field of knowledge in how some individuals establish

meaning from their employment, where further research is needed. This thesis goes some way to contributing to this gap by uncovering the existence of four new pathways to meaning that knowledge workers can take. The first of these pathways to meaning discussed here was through affirmation of one's abilities, capabilities, importance and indispensability among other things.

An affirmation of the self and one's abilities constituted a new pathway to meaning. Interestingly this new pathway to meaning was dependent on the highly stressful, pressurised and confrontational working environments participants occupied. Without a 'battleground' of work there would have been no peers to compare and compete with. Affirmation of the self as able to produce desired outcomes helped develop notions of indispensability and value amongst participants. Indeed the literature documents instances of competition and rivalry amongst colleagues in work providing motivational benefits to individuals (Birkinshaw and Lingblad, 2005; Ho, 2009; Steinhage, Cable and Wardley, 2015). Where 'domination' of conflict partners – often talked about by participants when describing interdepartmental meetings – leads to a sense of victory and affirmation that you were able to 'eat' and not be 'eaten' (Gelfand et al., 2012, p. 1132).

The documented 'work warrior' subjectivities in the literature were also evidenced among participants, where a sense of meaning and fulfilment was obtained through opportunities to 'prove' ones capabilities and create heightened perceptions of self – as resilient and indispensable (Kosmala and Herrbach, 2006). A sense of pride was obtained by participants in response to being able to withstand harsh, difficult, and stressful working environments. The endurance to cope with continual mental and physical exertion and overwork facilitated positive affirmations of the self as a capable person, a work warrior.

The significance of this research finding that uncovered affirmation operating as a pathway to meaning overcomes the false binary in the literature that positions work as a journey towards self-actualization on one hand (Sandoval, 2018; Bygrave, 2020; Pagis, 2020) and paid exploitative labour (Gill and Pratt, 2008; Rao and Neely, 2019; Neely, 2020) on the other. There are other instances where individuals do engage in their own self-exploitation to get ahead (in anticipation of future rewards) and to create meaningful understandings of their own identities and abilities. In addition, in line with the arguments presented in the literature review this research documents that for some highly competitive, stressful working environments provide individuals in certain situations with a sense of purpose and fulfilment. Not all individuals experience competitive market cultures as hostile, toxic and detrimental to their working careers, the constitution of the individual person must be taken into consideration. This thesis updates the wealth of literature on self-actualization and

passion in work and demonstrates that it can instead be a more anxious investment in the presentation of the self and the ensuing affirmation that is in operation, but nonetheless this is meaningful for individuals.

The answers to the first two research questions have established that neither of the major documented literary pathways (through traditional craft and vocational means versus through passionate and emotional relationships with work) to meaning were in operation. The next two research question answers unpack in greater detail the new pathways to meaning that were forged instead. The first pathway of 1) affirmation has been detailed. The remaining three pathways of 2) retrospective narrativization 3) pursuing progress in a consumptive fashion and through 4) an aesthetics of life are discussed in answers to research questions two and three.

Research question three

Research question three of this thesis asked the following:

Research question three: Did individuals pursue self-fulfilment and/or personal interests in their work?

Bauman (2005, p. 32) theorised it is an 'aesthetics of consumption that now rules where the work ethic once ruled', and that work is now evaluated on its aesthetic privileges. Judged on its ability to generate pleasurable experience. For Bauman (2005) the typical contemporary individual wants jobs that are 'interesting – varied, exciting, allowing for adventure, containing certain (though not excessive) measures of risk... jobs that are monotonous, repetitive, routine, unadventurous, allowing no initiative... nor... self-assertion are boring' (Bauman, 2005, p. 34). Cohering with and extending Bauman's theorisations is the passion paradigm and DWYL cultural discourse (Rao and Neely, 2019; De Palma, 2020; Pagis, 2020) that also emphasize individuals' need to pursue self-fulfilment and actualization through employment.

The third findings theme 'Progress Biographies' provided insight into the third research question. In answer to research question three, the current study found a double stage of progress narratives to be in operation for some participants, particularly those at the mid to latter stages of their careers. Whereby for some personal interests were pursued in their work but this was conditional upon a certain level of success being achieved. Even in these instances the pursuit of more interesting, arguably more fulfilling work never constituted wholesale re-invention of careers and upheaval into new fields of employment. Rather the transition to pursuing more personally interesting work

comprised incremental steps where participants retained the success and status of their current positions of employment but sought out projects and roles slightly more attuned to their personal preferences.

Counter to Bauman's (2005) assertions then the participants in this study were not compelled by that which is interesting, exciting and possessing the ability to generate pleasurable experience. In the hierarchy of importance, the aesthetic nature of work came secondary to status, salary, and prestige. Success in these factors amounted to what participants perceived as a positive 'aesthetics of life' which interestingly appeared to take precedence over the pursuit of an aesthetics of work. Indeed, this 'aesthetics of life' constituted an innovative pathway to creating meaning from employment as detailed in findings theme three. Self-projection and promotion were more valuable than self-connection, self-realisation, or self-fulfilment. This research finding coheres with Bauman in so much as an aesthetics was reified and replaced a traditional work ethic (based on notions of duty, and proving the self to be one of the elect, an indicator of moral superiority). Individuals were highly concerned with financial remuneration, in part due to consumption desires. Arguably an aesthetics of *material* consumption (Bauman, 2005) formed part of the aesthetics of life individuals wished to assert. Ultimately however the pursuit and/or realisation of interests and that which fulfils them in work (an aesthetics of *work experience* consumption), did not operate as an axis guiding decisions. At best at a conditional, secondary stage, personal interests were looked to.

Findings theme three; 'Progress Biographies' uncovered a number of new pathways to meaning creation among participants updating the research literature. In addition to 1) affirmation operating as a pathway to meaning detailed in research question two above, participants created meaningful experiences with work through 2) retrospective narration 3) pursuing progress as a consumptive practice and 4) pursuing an aesthetics of life over an aesthetics of work as noted above. The latter three of these pathways contribute to the research literature new methods of narrative creation. For the knowledge workers in this study these latter three pathways allowed individuals to establish a sense of ontological security in their identities. The implications of this finding are important because it adds new understanding to the research literature that relatively stable identities can be formed in the absence of a narrative that links past, present and future (Giddens, 1991; McAdams, 1993; Sennett, 1998). Participants lacked future, predetermined goals, yet this was opportunistic and protective for them. They were driven primarily by success and progress in any direction and by a wider notion of establishing an aesthetic notion of life. Personal interests and related goals did not feature in participants career narratives and arguably as such they were alienated from their species

essence, yet meaning was still established through these pathways. A situation of alienation with agency is argued to be in operation, discussed further in the answer to research question four.

Research question four

Research question four of this thesis asked the following:

Research question four: To what extent did respondents express a neoliberal subjectivity in their approach to work?

This research conceptualised subjectivities broadly as personas, identities, and subject positionings aligning with Foucault's (1998) notion that individuals make sense of themselves and are determined by, locating themselves within cultural discourses and narratives. Such discourses and narratives having their own embedded meanings, power, and codes of conduct for operating as discussed in the literature review of this thesis. This premise aligns with the theoretical foundations of the study and Watson's (2008, 2009) assertion that humans are cultural animals composed of both the narratives they self-produce and those which are discursively available to them through culture. Findings theme one, 'Neoliberal Subjectivities' provided direct insight into research question four. In answer to the study's fourth research question, participants did indeed appear to both take up and locate themselves within a subjectivity orientated towards neoliberalism. Participants both actively engaged in practices that philosophically align with the principles of neoliberalism (they engaged in 'exchange value' practices to get ahead, competitively relating to peers and pursuing rational self-interested avenues) and also conceived of themselves as free market actors within a competitive free market. They normalised notions of hard work, overwork, self-reliance and resilience. Broadly these factors aligned with political and economic logics of neoliberalism, comprising competitive performance, self-sufficiency, extrinsic motivation, active attending to one's own value and a profit maximising ideology (Brown, 2015; Bal and Dóci, 2018). Participants embodied the principles of neoliberalism in how they conceived of their labour, their relationships and at times their humanity. They operated as vessels of commodification adopting, normalising, and re-creating the conditions that housed them.

These findings align with the research literature that describes neoliberalism as a dominant ideology and a governing mode of rationality that has disseminated to all domains and activities (Brown, 2015; Abbinnett, 2021). However, these findings also advance the literature by demonstrating how this subjectivity is taken up by individuals, specifically as a form of personal branding that is the result of both agency and socialization. The notion of personal branding as a unique, personalized

endeavour (Zarkada, 2012) was rejected in this instance, also contributing new understanding to the research literature. The way in which participants branded themselves according to a neoliberal subjectivity was strongly uniform and consist across participant interviews. Critical engagement with Weber's (1930) Protestant Ethic thesis in the theoretical framework in chapter one demonstrated that the assertion of identity can be a cynical or anxiously motivated act (among other things); it can be for personal gain or personal affirmation. There was a consciousness to participants' assertion of a neoliberal subjectivity, they did so in anticipation of future self-advancement. It was not merely the result of blind socialization within their working environments and wider neoliberal society.

The implication of this form of personal branding was an inability of participants to articulate a working identity related to features of their *work*. Individuals readily and easily articulated notions of their identities as 'doers', as rational, capable and hardworking, features related to their ability to handle *workloads*. Yet strikingly absent was any kind of theorisation of a vocational working identity; that is an identity related to craft, skill, daily tasks, projects, even the nature of job roles. As discussed in research question three there was a distinct and noticeable absence of discussion of participants inherent interests in work, participants were generally unaware of what these were (this began to shift for some at the latter stages of their careers). Participants appeared to be alienated from their species essence. A complex array of factors demonstrated this situation of alienation.

Firstly, as part of their adoption of neoliberal subjectivities participants were largely alienated from their fellow beings, viewing colleagues as commodities and competition. Secondly as discussed in the answer to research question one, participants did not explore personal interests in work because of a dearth of time and space to 'try and fail'. Participants were acutely aware of the need to be 'correct' first time and anxiously engaged in 'appropriate' self-presentation practices. These social working relations prevented spontaneous conscious human activity and the formation of plans in the mind and the ability to bring them to fruition (Marx and Engels, 2011). Participants were not able to set their own ends in work, they were not able to make their will, capacities and goals objective through externalization in the world (Jaeggi, 2014). Hence arguably they were not able to realise and recognise themselves in processes of appropriating the world and in turn themselves (Jaeggi, 2014).

Thirdly as discussed in the answer to research question three, participants arguably demonstrated a state of alienation from their species essence in what they prioritised. The pursuit of personal interests and fulfilling encounters with employment were not the primary goals of participants, success and status were the primary goals of participants. Participants appeared largely unaware of what inherently interested them.

Fourthly as discussed in the answer to research question four above, participants located themselves (actively viewed, branded, and positioned themselves) as neoliberal subjects focused on 'delivering' on targets set by their organisations and presenting themselves as highly capable, indispensable workers. As such work always achieved organisational goals, it met deadlines, it met financial objectives set by management, it met sprint timelines for clients to name a few examples. Participants were not able to abandon themselves to their work (Jaeggi, 2014) their labour was coerced in the sense that they were subject to performance management. They had to demonstrate capability in their work to retain their jobs. Unalienated labour must transcend instrumentalism according to Marx. The capacity to act in labour must be a situation of acting for its own sake and not as a means to another end (Jaeggi, 2014). As such participants were estranged from their species essence, their proclivity for self-realisation blocked by capitalist, neoliberal working relations (Marx and Engels, 1844, 2011; Soffia, Wood and Burchell, 2022).

Objectively participants working environments appeared to constitute an absence of space for meaningful experiences of work. Subjectively however meaning was still achieved, counter to the assertions of the meaningful work literature (Chalofsky and Krishna, 2009; Steger, Dik and Duffy, 2012; Steger, 2016). As has been demonstrated a number of innovative mechanisms were established by participants that forged meaningful experiences with work. Namely meaning was forged out of the following pathways, through 1) affirmation as opposed to actualization 2) retrospective narration 3) pursuing progress as a consumptive practice and 4) pursuing an aesthetics of life over an aesthetics of work. In this sense individuals cannot be passively conceptualised as entirely alienated subjects. Clearly participants created and pursued their own innovative and purposeful paths to establishing meaningful working lives. Yet, the apparent absence of an awareness and pursuit of personal, inherent interests and desires in work also cannot be ignored. A position of alienation with agency is argued to be in existence discussed now; this finding constitutes an original contribution to knowledge of this research.

Berlant (2011) argues one of the ways in which people resist this 'slow death' of neoliberalism is to make sacrifices to remain in proximity to mirages of sovereignty. The same might be said for the pseudo mechanisms of control participants adopted in the affirmation of their abilities, their effort, overwork, and compliance (as part of the first pathway to meaning; affirmation). Arguably a calculated choice to accept some exploitative practices at times in anticipation of their later exchange value and affirming properties represents participants retaining a sense of sovereignty and autonomy over their lives. A cost benefit analysis might be said to take place.

Lateral agency challenges the assumption that subjectivity is always sovereign and instead constitutes 'a mode of coasting consciousness within the ordinary that helps people survive the stress on their sensorium that comes from the difficulty of reproducing contemporary life' (Berlant, 2011, p. 18). Arguably this analysis can be applied to the findings of this research that demonstrated a purposefulness behind a lack of goals and predetermined career trajectories (as part of the second pathway to meaning; retrospective narrativization). Individuals' lack of goals is argued to encompass some level of resistance to capitalist relations, or, at the very least an agentic ability of the self to act unencumbered by false consciousness. Respondents understood that if they set personal goals they might not be fulfilled. It is argued that instead they protectively employed lateral agency without intention and in doing so did not set themselves up to fail. This idea is echoed by MacInnes (1998, p.12) who deems the 'choice to forget' that we are condemned to 'responsibility without power' in modernity, a mechanism of control. MacInnes (1998) argues a resource available to individuals is the ability *not* to think ahead to future goals and projects of the self. To instead choose to 'forget' that choices are always restricted and disappointing and our control can never be complete.

Pursuing an aesthetics of life (the fourth pathway to meaning) and the absence of goals can be understood through this lens. Where arguably an anesthetising pursuit of progress in a consumptive fashion (the third pathway to meaning) and an aesthetics of life kept participants focused on the present and all they had achieved. The absence of specific goals (coupled with a focus on obtained successes) allowed for a sense of identity that staved off anxieties around potentially failing to obtain future goals. It also helped counter potential dissatisfaction with the fact that what they did failed to provide them with a sense of work identity. Choosing to forget they allegedly can 'have it all' (Berlant, 2011, p. 3) participants found meaning in an aesthetic notion of life. Berlant's lateral agency echoes this assertion arguing that in adopting agency without intention individuals reject the fantasy of the 'good life' under capitalist relations. They reject the idea that they can have job security, upward mobility and interesting and meaningful work, wider lives, and relationships. Instead, they settle for 'a mode of coasting consciousness' sentient and focused on personal gain, but not overly intentional about career paths and identities (Berlant, 2011, p. 18). Namely settling on what they can achieve, what is settling to their ontological security and what constitutes subjective meaning for them. Where materialistic, aesthetic, and affirmatory wins operate to help people 'survive the stress' of contemporary life.

The nuance to these arguments makes it difficult to definitively settle on agency and resistance to capitalist relations on the one hand, or alienation on the other as the more influential factor underlying the new pathways to meaning in work. However, both are clearly in operation to certain extents and a model of alienation with agency is argued to exist for these knowledge workers. The

argument can be made that a semi-consciousness appends to participants lateral agency, to their choice to forget, to their decision to align themselves with a neoliberal subjectivity and pursue an aesthetics of life and progress in a consumptive fashion.

What appears clear is that participants objectively were alienated according to the workplace relations they operated within, they were unable to articulate a working identity and a sense of self, other than that of a commodified 'doer' offering their hard work, effort, and compliance.

Subjectively however meaning was obtained. There was an absence of a *crisis* in identity, but no establishment of a clear working career identity. Subjectively participants were creating meaning from their success, their ability to overcome and operate according to work warrior mentalities.

Alienation best describes the lack of connection to interests and desires. But the new pathways to meaning highlight the agency individuals do indeed possess. Namely to adapt to their surroundings, reject the all-encompassing fantasies of the good life of capitalism and satiate themselves with success according to the fields they operated in. Also, to affirm their sense of self and competency through overwork and to employ the protection of purposefully choosing not to stipulate goals. Individuals had agency and derived meaning from their engagement with their employment. The pathways to meaning they established contribute new understanding to the research literature.

Original contributions to knowledge

In answer to the totality of research questions the original contributions to knowledge that this thesis offers are now summarised.

This thesis uncovered that the major documented pathways to meaning creation in the literature through traditional, long term, crafting and vocational experiences (Weber, 1930; Wright Mills, 1951; Sennett, 1998, 2009; Carroll, 2008) and through contemporary cultural philosophies (Bygrave, 2020; De Palma, 2020; Pagis, 2020) were absent for this group of knowledge workers. Yet meaning was still established in work adding new understanding to the field. This research demonstrates that for some employed in the knowledge economy a situation of alienation with agency is a possibility. The participants in this study demonstrated a situation of alienation from their species essence and fellow beings in a number of ways. However, they forged their own innovative pathways to meaningful encounters with their work. Namely through 1) affirmation as opposed to self-actualization 2) retrospective narrativization 3) pursuing career progress in consumptive terms and through 4) pursuing an aesthetics of life as opposed to an aesthetics of work.

The latter three of these new pathways also constituted new methods of narrative creation adding new understanding to the narrative literature (Giddens, 1991; Sennett, 1998). The absence of goals and pre-determined plans liberated workers to continually affirm their identity through short term wins. The absence of narrative that links past, present and future became opportunistic, and did not need to result in crises of identity as suggested by some (McAdams, 1993; Sennett, 1998).

Suggestions for further research

Suggestions for further research are now offered. Firstly, a longitudinal study comprised of the same methods and data analysis as the current study would illuminate more fully the trajectory individuals take through their careers. Some of the participants in this study at the mid to latter stages of their careers began pursuing more inherently interesting work whilst maintaining an 'acceptable' level of success, salary and status. Future research that tracks individuals over the course of their careers would provide insight into the meaning established in careers at different life stages.

Future research could explore meaningful employment across even more varied employment settings to investigate whether the findings in this study map across industries and sectors or not. This could help employers shape cultures and workplaces to facilitate employees' meaningful encounters with work.

Applications and implications

Applications of research

The applications of this research are now addressed. A real-world application of this research is the recommendation for knowledge economy employees at the early stages of their careers to make greater efforts to explore their personal interests and desires and in an attempt to connect with their species essence. This recommendation is to stave of the potential points of fracture to narratives that some participants articulated in the mid to latter stages of their careers, namely that they were not doing what they 'actually' wanted to do. This research offers a call for young working professionals to take time to reflect on what they enjoy and to consider that this can be pursued alongside other metrics of success, e.g. material success, status, power etc. that may also be important to them.

Implications of research

This research contributes to the research literature in a number of ways. It has widened the field of understanding of meaningful employment in the knowledge economy on two fronts. Firstly by investigating a range of settings considered *meaningless*, an area of research that is relatively underexplored (Soffia, Wood and Burchell, 2022). Secondly by investigating professional, managerial, clerical, and administrative roles outside of the financial and creative sectors. A plethora of studies have investigated meaningful employment in the precarious creative sector and gig economy (McRobbie, 2004; Ekman, 2014; Friedman, 2014; Shibata, 2019) and in roles encompassing punishing office hours in the finance sector (Ho, 2009; Lupu and Empson, 2015; Neely, 2020). The experiences of administrators, project/managers, technological and communication workers and so on represent an under researched group. This research broadens the field of knowledge by exploring these positions.

This research also contributes to the field by answering Ekman's (2014) call for research that attempts to overcome the 'victim' employee, 'villain' employer dichotomy often presented in employment literature. This research unpacks the ways in which participants willingly engaged in exploitative practices at times to get ahead in their own careers. This study like Ekman's (2014) recognises the 'double-side' to precarious working conditions and accounts for the agency professionals did possess. Whilst the power dynamic is not considered to be equal for employees and employers in the current study, employees were not helpless. Ekman's (2014) work is further extended by demonstrating how self-affirmation as opposed to self-actualization can also function to provide individuals with meaning in their career narratives. It also extends her study by unpacking how in instances of self-exploitation and overwork for personal gain, contemporary knowledge workers can obtain personal meaning but still be irrationally engaged with society on a wider level, alienated from their inherent interests and desires.

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Appendix 1 – Favourable Ethical Approval Letter



UNIVERSITY OF
PORTSMOUTH

Dr Theresa Callan,
Interim Dean of the Faculty of
Humanities and Social Sciences

T +44 (0)23 9284 6012
E theresa.callan@port.ac.uk

Faculty of Humanities and Social
Sciences

Park Building
King Henry I Street
Portsmouth PO1 2DZ

T: +44 (0)23 9284 8484
port.ac.uk/fhss

FAVOURABLE ETHICAL OPINION (with conditions)

Name: Hannah Green

Study Title: Meaning, employment and the knowledge economy: An exploration into knowledge workers perceptions of their work

Reference Number: FHSS 2020-002

Date: 31/03/2020

Thank you for resubmitting your application to the FHSS Ethics Committee and for making the requested changes/ clarifications.

I am pleased to inform you that FHSS Ethics Committee was content to grant a favourable ethical opinion of the above research on the basis described in the submitted documents listed at Annex A, and subject to standard general conditions (*See Annex B*).

With this there are a number of ethical conditions to comply with, and some additional advisory notes you may wish to consider, all shown below.

Condition(s)¹

1. Interviews: 5. The researcher is willing to conduct lone interviews with participants anywhere they choose. This is clearly unsafe. Interviews should only be conducted in safe places. The researcher and supervisor need to work out the types of places that are safe. The interviews will be recorded. How will the data be managed on the recording device? The researcher and supervisor should develop the data management plan to cover the recording device and any other equipment used during the project.
2. Withdrawal: 13. Two dates are given for the withdrawal period: October 2020 and the end of the project. It is suggested the applicant goes with October 2020.
3. Invitation letter: There should be an invitation letter.
4. Documents: All documents prepared for potential participants should bear the UoP logo.
- 5.

Advisory Note(s)²

- A. A shift from ethnography to interviews is not a 'minor' change in methodology (response to FE queries). It is, however, sensible and will allow a more ethical project.
- B. It would have been helpful had the term 'knowledge economy' been explained better. This will most probably be the case in the thesis, but here it was not very clear what was meant and a sentence or two for non-experts would clarify it.

Please be aware that, due to the current COVID-19 pandemic, all face-to-face data collection has currently been suspended by the University. Please do not start data collection until this suspension has been lifted.

¹ A favourable opinion will be dependent upon the study adhering to the conditions stated, which are based on the application document(s) submitted. It is appreciated that Principal Investigators may wish to challenge conditions or propose amendments to these in the resubmission to this ethical review.

² The comments are given in good faith and it is hoped they are accepted as such. The PI does not need to adhere to these, or respond to them, unless they wish to.

Please note that the favourable opinion of FHSS Ethics Committee does not grant permission or approval to undertake the research/ work. Management permission or approval must be obtained from any host organisation, including the University of Portsmouth or supervisor, prior to the start of the study.

Wishing you every success in your research



Chair

Mr Richard Hitchcock

Email: ethics-fhss@port.ac.uk

Annexes

A - Documents reviewed

B - After ethical review

ANNEX A - Documents reviewed

The documents ethically reviewed for this application

<i>Document</i>	<i>Version</i>	<i>Date</i>
Application Form	2	13/03/2020
Participant Information Sheet	2	09/03/2020
Consent Form	2	09/03/2020
Interview Questions/Topic List	2	09/03/2020

ANNEX B - After ethical review

1. This Annex sets out important guidance for those with a favourable opinion from a University of Portsmouth Ethics Committee. Please read the guidance carefully. A failure to follow the guidance could lead to the committee reviewing and possibly revoking its opinion on the research.
2. It is assumed that the work will commence within 1 year of the date of the favourable ethical opinion or the start date stated in the application, whichever is the latest.
3. The work must not commence until the researcher has obtained any necessary management permissions or approvals – this is particularly pertinent in cases of research hosted by external organisations. The appropriate head of department should be aware of a member of staff's plans.

4. If it is proposed to extend the duration of the study beyond that stated in the application, the Ethics Committee must be informed.

5. Any proposed substantial amendments must be submitted to the Ethics Committee for review. A substantial amendment is any amendment to the terms of the application for ethical review, or to the protocol or other supporting documentation approved by the Committee that is likely to affect to a significant degree:

- (a) the safety or physical or mental integrity of participants
- (b) the scientific value of the study
- (c) the conduct or management of the study.

5.1 A substantial amendment should not be implemented until a favourable ethical opinion has been given by the Committee.

6. At the end of the work a final report should be submitted to the ethics committee. A template for this can be found on the University Ethics webpage.

7. Researchers are reminded of the University's commitments as stated in the [Concordat to Support Research Integrity](#) viz:

- maintaining the highest standards of rigour and integrity in all aspects of research
- ensuring that research is conducted according to appropriate ethical, legal and professional frameworks, obligations and standards
- supporting a research environment that is underpinned by a culture of integrity and based on good governance, best practice and support for the development of researchers
- using transparent, robust and fair processes to deal with allegations of research misconduct should they arise
- working together to strengthen the integrity of research and to reviewing progress regularly and openly.

8. In ensuring that it meets these commitments the University has adopted the [UKRIO Code of Practice for Research](#). Any breach of this code may be considered as misconduct and may be investigated following the University [Procedure for the Investigation of Allegations of Misconduct in Research](#). Researchers are advised to use the [UKRIO checklist](#) as a simple guide to integrity.

Appendix 2 - UPR16

FORM UPR16

Research Ethics Review Checklist



Please include this completed form as an appendix to your thesis (see the Research Degrees Operational Handbook for more information)

Postgraduate Research Student (PGRS) Information		Student ID:	945460
PGRS Name:	Hannah Green		
Department:	Sociology	First Supervisor:	Dr George Ackers
Start Date: (or progression date for Prof Doc students)	September 2019		
Study Mode and Route:	Part-time <input type="checkbox"/>	MPhil <input type="checkbox"/>	MD <input type="checkbox"/>
	Full-time <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	PhD <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Professional Doctorate <input type="checkbox"/>
Title of Thesis:	Meaningful employment in the knowledge economy: An investigation into the experiences of employment performed by private sector, knowledge workers involved in 'handling' people, sales, services and/or marketing.		
Thesis Word Count: (excluding ancillary data)	91,032.		
<p>If you are unsure about any of the following, please contact the local representative on your Faculty Ethics Committee for advice. Please note that it is your responsibility to follow the University's Ethics Policy and any relevant University, academic or professional guidelines in the conduct of your study</p> <p>Although the Ethics Committee may have given your study a favourable opinion, the final responsibility for the ethical conduct of this work lies with the researcher(s).</p>			
UKRIO Finished Research Checklist: (If you would like to know more about the checklist, please see your Faculty or Departmental Ethics Committee rep or see the online version of the full checklist at: https://ukrio.org/publications/code-of-practice-for-research)			
a) Have all of your research and findings been reported accurately, honestly and within a reasonable time frame?	YES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	NO <input type="checkbox"/>	
b) Have all contributions to knowledge been acknowledged?	YES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	NO <input type="checkbox"/>	
c) Have you complied with all agreements relating to intellectual property, publication and authorship?	YES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	NO <input type="checkbox"/>	
d) Has your research data been retained in a secure and accessible form and will it remain so for the required duration?	YES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	NO <input type="checkbox"/>	
e) Does your research comply with all legal, ethical, and contractual requirements?	YES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	NO <input type="checkbox"/>	
Candidate Statement:			
I have considered the ethical dimensions of the above named research project, and have successfully obtained the necessary ethical approval(s)			
Ethical review number(s) from Faculty Ethics Committee (or from NRES/SCREC):	FHSS 2020-002		
If you have <i>not</i> submitted your work for ethical review, and/or you have answered 'No' to one or more of questions a) to e), please explain below why this is so:			
Signed (PGRS):			Date: 08/09/24