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HOW FUTURE WORK SELVES HIGHLIGHT MEANINGFUL PROSPECTIVE WORK AND BUFFER PURPOSE IN LIFE

Short Paper

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Abstract

The concept of Future Work Self (FWSs, Strauss et al., 2012), which refers to individuals' mental representations of their career-related hopes and aspirations, presents a valuable opportunity to foster a profound sense of meaningful work. Engaging in the process of meaning-making also plays a role in influencing a higher sense of purpose in life. Hypotheses were tested through a three-wave survey administered to a sample of graduate students (N = 117). Findings indicated that higher levels of salience and positive affect in envisioning the FWS were significantly connected with meaningful work, which subsequently predicted a stronger sense of purpose in life. This study highlights how envisioning a hypothetical future work scenario can serve to derive meaning from it and guide further career development. It also extends the literature on FWS by demonstrating the predictive role of FWSs in perceiving meaningful work and in nurturing a sense of purpose in life.

Keywords: Future Work Self, Purpose in Life, Work Meaningfulness.

1 Introduction

People are increasingly seeking occupations in which they perceive a sense of existential meaning (Dik et al., 2015; McKinsey, 2021) to face today's uncertain environment. We conceived meaningful work "as work that is both significant and positive in valence" (Steger et al., 2012: 323). By adopting this definition we align with the literature that considers individuals as agents able to derive meaning by reflecting on a specific job and evaluate work as significant, worthwhile, and with positive meaning (Bailey et al., 2019). Since meaningful work is associated with several benefits (e.g. higher job commitment), scholars widely inquired about its determinants (for a review see Lysova et al., 2019). Our interest particularly focuses on the practice of reflecting on a hypothetical work scenario to identify the source of work meaning (Blustein et al., 2023), and how meaning can be derived from the future while transcending the present (de Boeck et al., 2019; Fay et al., 2023). In fact, beyond the evaluation of the current work, scholars posit that meaningful work should also be seen as "an aspirational work condition oriented toward experiencing a sense of significance" (Blustein et al., 2023: 300) suggesting that meaningful work could represent a desired scenario that differs from one's current situation. However, the potential role of a desired work in engaging individuals with a sense of meaning are scantily studied in the literature (de Boeck et al. 2019; Fay et al., 2023), despite its role to direct future career steps and acquire adaptive resources (Guan et al., 2017) through the reflection on personal career aspirations. To explain how individuals can identify careers that are meaningful to them, we draw on the concept of Future Work Self (FWSs, Strauss et al., 2012), which refers to individuals' cognitive representations of their deepest hopes and aspirations in relation to work. We also state that achieving a

sense of work meaning influences an important aspect of individuals' wellbeing: purpose in life. Thus, the aim of our paper is to address the following research question: *Does envisioning FWSs enhance the acquisition of work meaningfulness, which in turn fosters the perception to have a purpose in life?* The relationships between the different constructs are depicted in Figure 1.

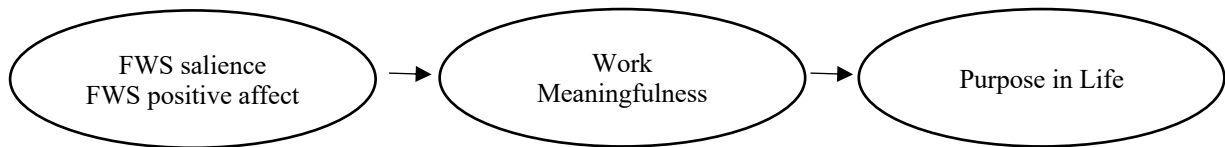


Figure 1. Research model.

The possibility of deriving meaning from future states is particularly critical at the beginning of one's career or during a process of revising one's professional identity, as it may be especially useful to transcend the here-and-now perspective, relying on pre-experience of a particular work and deriving meaning from it. For graduates, gaining insight into which types of work will be conducive of a sense of meaning can help guide their career choices and ensure future employments that align with their values. Furthermore, in a context where individuals are increasingly expected to take charge of their own career management (Hirschi and Koen 2021), it is more important than ever to explore the factors that can assist them in navigating the career construction process.

Overall, this paper makes several contributions to the literature. First, we expand the understanding of how meaning can be derived from work by reflecting on a work scenario, even when only hypothesized. Additionally, we extend the role of FWS as an antecedent of meaningfulness, considering how work can be pre-experienced through mental travel to a future reality. In this process, we highlight the spurring role of positive affect and salience associated with the image of FWS. Although the meaning is purely prospective, it facilitates the definition of a future to strive toward. Finally, we aim at enriching the literature on purpose in life by highlighting the mediated relationship between FWS and purpose in life.

2 Theoretical Background

Being work meaningfulness enhanced when current work activities are aligned with desired future (de Boeck et al., 2019), we consider the influence of FWS as the mental image of one's deepest work hopes and aspirations. Prior FWS studies only rely on the cognitive dimension of FWS in terms of salience (i.e., the extent to which the mental image of FWS is easy and clear to envision) (e.g., Kao et al., 2022; Strauss et al., 2012) as the sole dimension to observe the influence of FWSs on subsequent outcomes. Differently from previous FWS literature, we also introduce its affective dimension (i.e., the extent to which the mental image of FWS provides a positive emotional experience). Research to date has largely overlooked the potential affective component associated with envisioning the future self. Nonetheless, in their seminal paper, Markus and Nurius (1986) introduced the concept of possible selves, explicitly highlighting the role of affect. Furthermore, subsequent studies have demonstrated that envisioning an ideal scenario is associated with the experience of positive emotions (Rawolle et al., 2017; Schubert et al., 2020). For these reasons, and given that FWSs represent a form of positive possible selves (Strauss et al., 2012), we argue that FWSs are constituted by cognitive and affective dimensions.

In accordance with career construction theory (Savickas, 2013), FWS salience has been identified as an antecedent to career adaptability, which provides individuals with readiness to cope with future career challenges (Johnson, 2016). Providing a clear, future-oriented self-concept, FWS is one of the key components through which individuals individuate the necessary competences to achieve meaningful goals derived from a profound self-understanding. Studies (Dik et al., 2015; Steger et al., 2012) demonstrated that acquiring a salient self-understanding of who individuals aspire to become in the future enhances their likelihood of experiencing a sense of meaningfulness. Indeed, the acknowledgment of the ideal self in relation to work satisfies the authenticity mechanism proposed by Rosso et al. (2010), in which individuals derive meaning from work when they perceive a sense of coherence with their "true" self.

Support for the relationship between FWS affect and meaningful work also comes from the broaden-and-build theory. Fredrickson (2001) recognizes that positive emotions broaden individuals' cognitive and behavioural repertoires, promoting the ability to pursue meaningful goals. Scholars have provided evidence that positive affect forms a foundation for individuals to experience meaning in the work context (Dik et al., 2015) and, through positive affect they are more likely to perceive a sense of meaning in relation to their work (Lee et al., 2020). In our study, positive affect was derived from pre-experiencing the FWS, namely an inner source of positive affect, rather than the work context. This reflects a critical source that can influence the likelihood of experiencing a sense of meaning.

Based on these evidences, we state the following:

Hypothesis 1a: FWS salience positively influences meaningful work;

Hypothesis 1b: FWS positive affect positively influences meaningful work.

Purpose in life is defined as “the aspect of meaning in life that is specifically associated with the sense of direction” (Fang et al., 2024: 63). Multiple outcomes associated with a greater sense of purpose in life, both personal related outcomes (e.g., lower risk of dementia; Sutin et al., 2021), and professional ones (e.g., higher income; Hill et al., 2016), as well as the fact that purpose in life represents one of the constitutive elements of psychological well-being (Ryff, 1989). Work dimension has been attested to be a critical aspect on how individuals assess their overall purpose in life (Sewdas et al., 2017), so that how individuals shape their work life could enhance their sense of purpose in life. Prior research demonstrated that meaningfulness has a positive impact on psychological well-being and purpose in life (Fang et al., 2024; Steger et al., 2012). Although these two concepts are closely intertwined, they are distinct, and scholars highlighted how meaning related to work drives the development of purpose in life (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). Given the previous considerations, we state the following:

Hypothesis 2: Meaningful work is positively related to purpose in life.

Scholars have provided initial support for the relationship between FWSs' salience and psychological well-being (Li et al., 2021; Pisarik & Shoffner, 2009). We hypothesized that, beyond the cognitive component of ideal selves and in accordance with prior research (Fredrickson, 2001), the affective component experienced through envisioning the FWS could enhance the sense of well-being. Relying on the aforementioned evidence that focuses on psychological well-being, we propose that this relationship may similarly apply to the specific dimension of purpose in life, which is one of the fundamental aspects of psychological well-being (Ryff et al., 1989). Therefore, we expect the following mediation to be observed:

Hypothesis 3a: FWS salience has a positive association with purpose in life, via meaningful work;

Hypothesis 3b: FWS positive affect has a positive association with purpose in life, via meaningful work.

3 Method

Data were collected in the context of an Italian public university from a sample of graduates enrolled in a self-development program designed by an academic centre to help students become aware of their career aspirations through deep reflection and a written description of their future work self. The data collection consists of three online surveys. Participants were explicitly informed about the confidential treatment of all responses and personal information, in accordance with research ethical standards. At the beginning of the course, the first survey collected demographic characteristics (e.g., gender) and personality traits (e.g., neuroticism). At Time 2, two weeks after the beginning of the course, participants created their future work self statement and completed a survey to assess affect in envisioning the FWS and FWS salience. After the end of the program (twelve weeks from Time 2), at Time 3, students received a follow-up survey to measure their perception of having found a prospective work meaningfulness and psychological well-being.

The initial number of enrolled students was $N = 163$, corresponding to the number of respondents to the first survey. The final sample, consisting of students who answered all surveys, is $N = 117$. This represents a response rate of 71,8%. The average age of the sample was 25 ($SD=4.1$). Seventy-eight

percent of the sample was female, which resembles the gender distribution in the population of students attending the considered university.

3.1 Measures

For all measures described below, participants were asked to respond using a 5-point scales with a response format ranging from 1 (= *Strongly disagree*) to 5 (= *Strongly agree*).

3.1.1 FWS salience

Sample's future work self salience was measured by the 5-item scale developed by Strauss et al. (2012), and participants were asked to rate how clear and easy it was for them to imagine the visualization of their desired future. The construct and predictive validity of the measure were validated in Strauss et al. (2012). Cronbach's alpha in this study was .94.

3.1.2 FWS positive affect

The positive affect associated with the experience of FWS envisioning was assessed using the Positivity and Negativity Affect Scale (PANAS; Watson et al., 1988). In light of previous studies, we used a selection of the items related to detecting positive affect (Lee et al., 2019; Shao et al., 2024). Respondents rated how five adjectives (e.g., "enthusiastic") described the affective state they experienced regarding the mental image of their desired future, as described in their future work self statement. Cronbach's alpha was .87.

3.1.3 Meaningful Work

This variable was measured through four items from Steger and colleagues (2012) (Meaning Making through Work subscale, part of the broader Work as Meaning Inventory (WAMI) and Kohles et al., (2012). From the original phrasing, we adapted the text to adjust it to our context that analyzes the FWSs. Participants were asked to rate the perception of meaning achieved after the formulation of a future work self statement during the twelve weeks prior. Cronbach's alpha was .90.

3.1.4 Purpose in Life

Participants' purpose in life was assessed using 5 items from purpose in life subscale from the Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scale (RPWB, Ryff 1989). Participants rated how clear their sense of purpose in life was between the time they wrote the future work self statement and T3 (twelve weeks later). Cronbach's alpha was .89.

3.2 Control variables

To account for potential gender differences in envisioning the future (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2009), gender was included as a control variable (dummy coded with 0 = male and 1 = female) in analyses of FWS salience and positive affect. Additionally, neuroticism was included as an individual personality trait to examine its impact on deriving meaning from work experience (Lysova et al., 2019; Steger et al., 2006). We assessed neuroticism using 6 items from the Italian version of the Big Five Questionnaire (BFQ-2) (Caprara et al., 2008). Cronbach's alpha was .85. Finally, similarly to the positive affect, we consider the role of FWS negative affect. To do so, we employ 5 items (e.g., "nervous") from the Positivity and Negativity Affect Scale (PANAS; Watson et al., 1988). Cronbach's alpha was .86.

4 Findings

We used Lisrel 10 to analyze the data. Descriptive statistics and correlations among the study variables are reported in Table 1.

	Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	FWS salience	3.31	1.00						
2	FWS positive affect	3.55	0.88	.47**					
3	Meaningful work	3.83	0.91	.32**	.51**				
4	Purpose in life	3.68	0.88	.42**	.52**	.48**			
5	Neuroticism	3.06	0.90	-.27**	-.09	-.18	-.42**		
6	FWS negative affect	2.03	0.89	-.37**	-.39**	-.32**	-.49**	.39**	
7	Gender	0.79	0.41	.08	.01	.08	-.14	.33**	.08

Note. $N = 117$. $P < 0.10$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 1. Means, standard deviations and correlations.

With the aim to assess discriminant validity, we conducted confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) for the four variables within the model. Results from the data analysis indicates that the model fits the data well [$\chi^2 = 205.81$, $df = 146$; (RMSEA) = 0.06; CI (RMSEA) = 0.0389 - 0.0772), PCI = 0.21; (SRMR) = 0.06; (CFI) = 0.96] (Hair et al., 2010; Hu & Bentler, 1999). To address the risk of CMB, following the suggestion of Podsakoff et al. (2003), we applied a single common method approach and compared the standardized regression weights of all items for models with and without a common latent factor. The differences in these regression weights were negligible, which confirmed that CMB is not a major issue in our data. Nevertheless, since we measured both meaningful work and purpose in life at Time 3, we conducted a closer examination of these variables to control for CMB. We constrained meaningful work and purpose in life to a single factor. Results show a poorer fit for this model.

Hypotheses testing was performed using structural equation modeling (SEM). In Model 1 we analyse the relationships to test how the FWS (salience and positive affect) influence meaningful work, which, in turn, is associated with purpose in life. We also try to detect whether meaningful work fully mediates the relationship between FWS dimensions and purpose in life. The global fit indexes of the SEM model 1 [$\chi^2 = 214.09$, $df = 148$; RMSEA = 0.06; CI (RMSEA) = 0.0424 - 0.0794), PCI = 0.15; SRMR = 0.07; CFI = 0.96] demonstrate a good model fit according to the criteria proposed by Hu and Bentler (1999). Hypothesis 1a and 1b posit a positive association of FWS salience (1a) and FWS positive affect (1b) with meaningful work. The analysis confirms a positive and statistically significant relationship between FWS salience and meaningful work ($\beta = .27$, $p = .007$), and a strong and highly significant relationship is also attested between FWS positive affect and meaningful work ($\beta = .50$, $p < .001$). These results demonstrate that both FWS dimensions are reliable and robust predictors of meaningful work, providing full support for hypotheses 1a and 1b. Hypothesis 2, which indicates that meaningful work anticipates purpose in life, was supported by the findings that show a positive and significant relationship between meaningful work and purpose in life ($\beta = .69$, $p < .001$).

Moreover, to test the mediation (Hypothesis 3a and 3b), we followed suggestions of James et al., (2006) and used the fully mediated model as a base adding the direct paths to it. We tested three comparative models, adding a direct path from FWS positive affect to purpose in life only (Model 3), adding a direct path from FWS salience to purpose in life only (Model 4), and including both direct paths (Model 2). Results, summarized in Table 2, show Model 3 fits slightly better when considering the global fit indexes. Relationships among the variables are maintained. Specifically, the hypothesized relationship between the two FWS dimensions and meaningful work is strong and significant when considering FWS salience (1a) ($\beta = .27$, $p = .007$), as well as when considering FWS positive affect (1b) ($\beta = .48$, $p < .001$). The relationship between meaningful work and purpose in life (H2) is also unchanged, showing a strong and significant influence ($\beta = .42$, $p < .001$). Moreover, when testing the hypothesized mediating relationship between FWS positive affect and purpose in life (H3b), we observed that the direct effect of FWS positive affect on purpose in life is strong and significant ($\beta = .32$, $p = .021$). As Model 3 does not include a direct path between FWS salience (3a) and purpose in life, we relied on Model 2 to further verify this relationship. Overall, these findings suggest that the relationship between FWS positive affect and purpose in life is partially mediated by meaningful work, while the relationship between FWS salience and purpose in life is fully mediated by meaningful work. Therefore, hypothesis 3a is supported,

while hypothesis 3b is partially supported. We performed the analysis including three control variables (i.e., gender, neuroticism, FWS negative affect). We rerun the model to assess: 1) the effect of gender on FWS salience and affect; 2) the effect of neuroticism on meaningful work; 3) the effect of negative affect on purpose in life. None of these variables showed a significant influence, and the findings are maintained.

Model	SB- χ^2 (df)	RMSEA	CI	PCI	CFI	SRMSR
Model 1	214.09 (148)	0.06	0.04; 0.08	0.15	0.96	0.07
Model 2	193.75 (146)	0.06	0.04; 0.08	0.21	0.97	0.06
Model 3	194.37 (147)	0.06	0.04; 0.08	0.22	0.97	0.06
Model 4	199.11 (147)	0.06	0.04; 0.08	0.16	0.97	0.06
	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)	(f)

Note. (a) Satorra-Bentler chi square (degrees of freedom); (b) Root mean square error of approximation; (c) Confidence interval; (d) Probability of close fit; (e) Comparative fit index; (f) Standardized root mean square residual.

Table 2. Models Goodness-of-Fit Indexes.

5 Final Remarks

Our research sought to provide several contributions. First, while existing research predominantly focuses on contextual organizational factors in explaining how work is perceived as meaningful, we explored how meaning is derived through the pre-experience of a hypothesised, desired work scenario. This adds to the limited literature on work meaningfulness that adopts a temporal lens. Additionally, we expand the understanding of FWS by demonstrating how it functions as a powerful antecedent that triggers the meaning making process. Specifically, we show that both FWS salience and FWS positive affect positively influence meaning acquisition. This insight is crucial in career development, suggesting that meaning can be created in advance, helping individuals navigate the career construction process and acquire the adaptive resources they need. Additionally, our evidence further confirms the predictive role of meaningfulness in shaping the perception of a purpose in life. We demonstrate that FWS can impact this perception, with work meaningfulness serving as a mediator. In this way, meaning making becomes a crucial turning point: once the FWS is defined, cognitive processing driven by meaning making is essential; it is also necessary and preparatory for developing a purpose in life, which is paramount for goal setting and sustaining consistent behaviours aligned with the inner self. Finally, our work suggests some practical implications, as organizations and educational institutions could design specific development programs to support individuals in acquiring meaningfulness related to work, while also energizing them through the mental image of their professional goals.

Overall, although the study is not without limitations, we provide new insights on how the concept of FWS serves as a way for individuals to anticipate and prepare for future work challenges by cultivating a sense of meaning related to work. This contribution also enhances our understanding of how the professional dimension can contribute to a meaningful and purposeful life.

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