

Relations between the meaning of work, psychological well-being, and psychological distress: A study in the state military police in São Paulo, Brazil

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Abstract

The state military police of the Brazilian state of São Paulo (PMESP) has the lowest number of police officers in the institution since the 1990s, compared to itself, with a vast number of unpaid leave and resignation requests. Low salaries appear to be a reason, but the police say that this is not the only factor to be rectified; lack of recognition and difficulties in overcoming trauma are also frequently mentioned. This picture refers to a situation that can be understood as low motivation, loss of meaning, and psychological suffering. This study aimed to understand whether there is a general loss of meaning at work in PMESP, together with well-being and psychological suffering. Using structural equation modeling, the study sought to understand the factors that give meaning to the work of these professionals and their consequences for well-being and psychological distress at work. Social usefulness and learning and development opportunities showed a meaningful relationship with meaning of work, with learning and development opportunities being the most important for the surveyed military police officers. Regarding the consequent constructs of meaning of work, significant relationships between psychological well-being at work and psychological suffering were verified. The study indicates that when meaning is constructed (via social utility and learning), there is an increase in psychological well-being, as well as a decrease in the effect of psychological suffering.

Keywords

Meaning of work, psychological well-being at work, psychological distress, structural equation modeling, military police

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Introduction

The state military police of the Brazilian state of São Paulo (PMESP) is the largest and best-equipped police force in Brazil, and is on par with the best police forces in the world. However, the PMESP completed 190 years of

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service in 2021 with the lowest number of police officers since the 1990s. This resulted from retirements, unpaid leave, and resignations, along with a failure to fill all the vacancies made available in the public competitive selection process in 2021, with only 1348 of the 2700 vacancies filled (Pagnan, 2021).

Police officers of all ranks frequently mention low salaries as a reason for leaving the force, together with a lack of appreciation and difficulties in overcoming trauma. Furthermore, the state military police throughout Brazil have been increasingly required not only to offer more effective protection against violence, but also to act with more transparency, legitimacy, and respect for civil rights (Alcadipani et al., 2021a, 2021b; Arvate et al., 2022; Spode and Merlo, 2006; Zilli and Couto, 2017).

This scenario shows the dimension of police officers' distress and challenges, supporting the hypothesis put forward in this research that low motivation, loss of purpose, and psychological distress are factors that promote voluntary resignations. Therefore, the first idea shaping this study came from the understanding that, in general, police officers in the PMESP have lost meaning in their work and are in psychological distress. The research adopted a model that offered materiality to the meaning of work and allowed investigation of how police officers relate to their work and psychological well-being and distress.

The Brazilian Federal Constitution defines the state military police as a force under the command of state governors that mixes police and army identities, generating a hybrid model police force (Cubas et al., 2021). This profile, together with the growth of social accountability and a high level of stigmatization, leads to a job with a high level of stress and feelings of non-appreciation, compromising the mental health of police officers on active duty. Depression, anxiety, burnout (Dantas et al., 2010), and post-traumatic disorder are common pathologies among police officers (Alves et al., 2017; Kleim and Westphal, 2011). This situation implies major challenges for police officers in general, but especially for those in leadership positions. Kanov (2021) states that there is inevitably much suffering in some occupations, such as police officers, for whom the nature of the work exposes them to situations of danger and trauma.

The PMESP faces increasingly complex challenges regarding social accountability. The use of personal cameras attached to police vests when patrolling the streets, since 2020 (Lum et al., 2020), rather than being an instrument to support police activities, has started to be used against officers, often with unfounded accusations of racism and inadequate dealings with the population (Alcadipani et al., 2021a, 2021b). Thus, the environment of a lack of motivation and the high number of resignations, mainly by younger police officers who choose other

professional paths, is not surprising. It is worth noting that, in Brazil, police officers are professionals who rely on stable employment contracts that protect them from dismissal unless they commit crimes, and administrative and other serious infractions. Even so, the number of requests for unpaid leave, early retirement, or even resignations—returning to the uncertainties of the job market—among the PMESP has never been so high.

The main objective of this article is to evaluate the sources (or antecedents) of the meaning of work for a group of police officers from the PMESP. May et al. (2004) state that the meaning of work can be understood as a form of intrinsic motivation. In addition, Morin (2003, 2008) recommends that assessment of the meaning of work can be considered a measure of mental health in an environment, making it possible to place mental health constructs as derivatives or consequences of the meaning of work (see Figure 1, variables to the right of the meaning of work). This research considers that psychological well-being or psychological distress at work will greatly affect a person's efficiency in carrying out their expected activities and the ability to withstand the pressures inherent to the routinely assumed risks.

This work is organized as follows: after the introduction, there is a brief literature review to present the theoretical model that underlies this analysis. The meaning of work is considered a central construct, and the antecedent and consequent variables are investigated, always considering the need to find measures that allow us to theorize about the quality of mental health in the environment and discuss the relationship between police officers and their work. Next, the methodological procedures are presented, providing sampling decisions, data collection, analysis, and discussion of results. Finally, the last section comprises the conclusion and proposals for further studies.

This article's contribution lies in using the concept of the meaning of work as a way of assessing intrinsic motivation and, above all, influencing mental health at work. The adopted model assumes that psychological well-being and distress are constructs resulting from meaningful (or not) work experience. In addition, the study increases knowledge about subjectivity and mental health constructs in organizations with a rigid hierarchical design that operate and act in extreme situations of danger to life. Even in the military police environment, subjectivity and how each person understands what they do in light of their values and most intimate dimensions cannot be neglected. This research adopts the same line as Alcadipani et al. (2021a), seeking to expand knowledge of what the authors called the "forgotten dimension"—an investigation of the negative dimensions of the meanings of police work, such as tensions, contradictions, and discomfort.

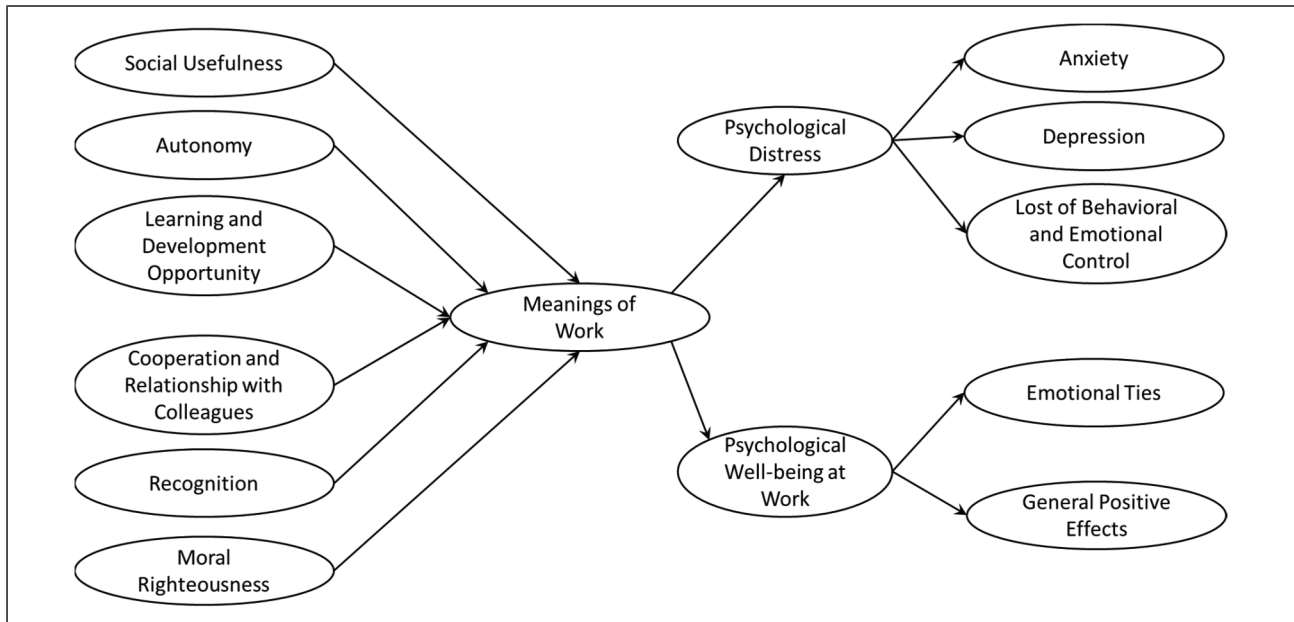


Figure 1. Conceptual model.

Source: Based on Morin (2003, 2008).

Literature review

The search for meaningful work remains a significant challenge of the 21st century (Pignault and Houssemand, 2021). Consequently, finding ways for work to be meaningful as a human experience remains vital in public and business administration theory (Castillo, 1997; Rosso et al., 2010). Understanding the experience of meaningful work has become valuable (May et al., 2004). It is important because, among other reasons, work is considered a central human experience in building identity (Alves et al., 2017), and a crucial element in finding the meaning of life in general (Frankl, 1991), which is a basic human need (Brief and Nord, 1990). Also, understanding meaningful work is a central issue in the development of human resources in organizations because it is related to individuals' intrinsic motivations.

Work represents an activity of great importance and is central to forming an individual's identity (Bendassolli, 2009). It is vital for human beings and helps give meaning to our lives and actions. This meaning differs from person to person, from one day to another, and from one hour to another (Frankl, 1991). Therefore, it is also essential for people to attribute meaning to their work, because it allows us to develop creativity and imagination. Even painful and dangerous work, or work in hostile conditions, is subjected to a process of construction of meaning, which is a natural human experience.

The literature on the meaning of work in organizational behavior first employed approaches linked to psychology,

anchored in the subjectivity of each social actor. For authors such as Brief and Nord (1990) and Wrzesniewski (2003), the meaning of work is based on each one's perception of their experiences at work. Several academic definitions of "meaning of work" emerged based on this framework, from beliefs, values, and attitudes about work (Brief and Nord, 1990) to personal and meaningful experiences (MOW International Research Team, 1987; Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). Wrzesniewski (2003) points out that the definition of "meaning of work" depends on the orientation a person gives to work and presents three possibilities. First, work as a job or a way of obtaining money and occupying free time. This usually entails that desires and ambitions are outside the work domain, i.e. they are pursued in hobbies and other interests. Second, work as a career in which salary increases, promotions, and increased prestige and status within the company are the main motivational factors. Finally, the third possibility refers to work as a calling, in which the main motivation is not related to salary or advancement in the organizational structure. Rather, motivation lies in the very nature of the activity, with work being an end in itself and generally linked to the satisfaction of contributing to a better world.

Organizational behavior studies adopt more than one term to address the meaning of work, such as purposeful work and meaningful work.

The concept of the meaning of work refers to the objective characteristics related to a type of activity (or job) (Bailey and Madden, 2016). Meaningful work, in turn,

evokes the subjective experience of that same activity. It refers to understanding the extent to which work is “generally meaningful, valuable, and worthwhile” (Hackman and Oldham, 1976: 162). Rosso et al. (2010) mention the difference between “meaning” and “meaningfulness” in the literature on the meaning of work, whereas Mitra and Buzzanell (2017) claim that the terms are, in fact, interchangeable. Some authors propose that the subjective dimension, which defines meaningful work, refers to “the value of work goal or purpose judged concerning individual’s ideals or standards” (May et al., 2004: 14). Others focused on understanding what makes work “meaningful.” For example, Isaksen (2000) and Morin (2008) observed that meaningful work is the combination of each individual’s expected job characteristics and perceived job characteristics. This study chooses to work with a combination of these understandings, observing that others may be used in research in the field. The intention here is to increase our knowledge of the relationships between PMESP police officers and their work, and what moves officers to stay or resign. Therefore, this research follows Morin (2008) and Frémeaux and Pavageau (2022), in considering the “meaning of work” as the central construct of the theoretical model presented and defining it as the experience of coherence between the expected and perceived job characteristics.

Many studies have sought to identify the characteristics of work to which people give special importance. It is worth highlighting the pioneering study by Hackman and Oldham (1976) that focused on work that allows the following experiences: (a) task identity—understanding a task from the beginning to end of the process; (b) task significance—something that has a positive impact on others; (c) skill variety—being able to use different capacities without boredom; (d) autonomy—discretion over one’s work; and, finally (e) feedback—receiving information about performance and work results. Ketchum and Trist (1992) also suggested a classification with objective characteristics of meaningful work, with six aspects: (a) variety and challenge; (b) continuous learning; (c) discretion, autonomy; (d) recognition and support; (e) meaningful social contribution; and (f) a desirable future, i.e. a positive perspective built from work.

Based on the job characteristics theory of Hackman and Oldham (1976) and the work by Ketchum and Trist (1992) from the sociotechnical school, it is possible to say that there are ways of giving materiality to the experience of the meaning of work. Authors such as Isaksen (2000) and Morin (2008) identified similar characteristics that appear in several definitions of meaningful work, namely: the experience of autonomy, the possibility of working in an environment with a healthy and fruitful relationship, and the sense that the work itself generates positive impacts

for society. Morin (2008) defined a model based on this finding and the work of Weisskopf-Joelson (1968) and Frankl (1991). The model reinforces the meaning of work based on enjoying the work and organizational commitment. According to the author, these elements lead people to experience work environments that favor better mental health and quality of life. The model proposes six job characteristics positively related to meaningful work, called antecedent variables: autonomy, social usefulness, learning opportunities, cooperation between peers and superiors, moral righteousness, and recognition. In parallel, the same model suggests that the presence of the experience of meaning implies psychological well-being or distress (in the case of its absence). Psychological distress is negatively correlated to the meaning of work—an increase in one causes a decrease in the other.

Morin (2008) established a scale for evaluating the meaning of work containing three antecedent factors related to individual experience, called factors of the meaning of work—autonomy, learning and development opportunity, and social usefulness of work—and three factors related to the environment, called factors of meaning at work—cooperation and relationships with colleagues, recognition, and moral righteousness. The proposal of these six constructs as antecedents is also in line with Ciulla (2001), who stated that the meaning of work has an objective dimension (work conditions such as environment and relationships) and a subjective dimension (perceptions of workers regarding autonomy and purpose). This idea was later corroborated by Michaelson et al. (2014).

Morin’s model (2003, 2008) was chosen for two reasons. First, it is inspired by constructs that concern both the subjective experience and the possibility of creating positive environments in which people have strong bonds (Frémeaux and Pavageau, 2022; Pignault and Houssemand, 2021). This seems to be an adequate option, considering the current situation of the PMESP.

Second, the model was built so that the meaning of work could be evaluated to provide a basis for research on mental health and related constructs (Rodrigues et al. 2017), which is particularly interesting considering the situation that the PMESP is experiencing. This study with police officers is an opportunity to discuss the meaning of work and contribute significantly to addressing the PMESP’s current problems, especially concerning the high number of unfilled job vacancies.

A third possible contribution of this work is that Morin (2008) defined a set of managerial recommendations based on evaluations of which constructs are related to the meaning of work after applying the model to analyze a sample of individuals (Pignault and Houssemand, 2021). The possibility of offering recommendations is appealing, considering that this study addresses a real

situation, and the findings may lead to interventions by the High Command of the PMESP.

The proposed model (Figure 1) considers six antecedents of meaning of work (social usefulness, autonomy, learning and development opportunity, cooperation and relationship with colleagues, recognition, moral righteousness), meaning of work itself, and the consequent psychological well-being at work and psychological distress.

Methodology

Data collection took place through a structured questionnaire sent via WhatsApp to state military police officers working in the Brazilian state of São Paulo operational service from 29 October to 25 November 2021. This WhatsApp application is used by the PMESP to transmit guidelines and orders to the military police, spanning ~6700 police officers, distributed as follows: in the Capital region, specifically for the Shock Policing Command, around 2700 police officers; in the Greater São Paulo region, specifically in the Alto Tietê Region, 1200 police officers; and in the interior, specifically for the Metropolitan Region of Paraíba and the North Coast, 2800 police officers. As per the objective of the

research, sampling was focused on the PMESP's operational units.

The questionnaire consisted of 62 questions and was developed based on the scales in Morin's (2003) work. The scales refer to six constructs that determine the meaning of work (social usefulness, autonomy, learning and development opportunity, cooperation and relationship with colleagues, recognition, and moral righteousness; 21 questions). The core construct "meaning of work" was addressed in the questionnaire with nine questions, considering the contributions by May et al. (2004).

Measures of psychological well-being at work and psychological distress were based on Veit and Ware (1983) (32 questions). The questionnaire was complemented with the respondents' demographic data (six questions). All scales used in the data collection instrument had already been tested by Rodrigues et al. (2017) with satisfactory results. This is particularly noteworthy for second-order constructs psychological well-being at work and psychological distress, whose most appropriate presentation proved to be precisely the second order.

Constructs or latent variables cannot be directly measured but can be assessed by a set of observable variables (phrases or assertions) (Vieira and Ribas, 2011); these are observable variables that make up the so-called psychometric scales (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994). Second-order constructs, in turn, consist of first-order dimensions or constructs, in this case: anxiety, depression, and loss of behavioral and emotional control composing psychological distress, and emotional ties and positive general effects composing psychological well-being at work.

The collection instrument presented a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 6 (totally agree) to measure the respondents' degree of agreement with statements used to measure the constructs involved in the proposed model.

The adopted quantitative method involved descriptive statistical analysis, confirmatory factor analysis (measurement test), and structural equation modeling. All calculations were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics® 22.0 (descriptive analysis) and IBM SPSS Amos® 22.0 software (confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling).

Analysis of results

Application of the questionnaire resulted in 211 valid responses. The respondents' profile (Table 1) shows that: (a) >50% of respondents were low-ranked (private/corporal), which was expected because the sample concentrated on police officers who work in the operational service of the state of São Paulo; (b) almost 80% of respondents were male, which is consistent with the profile of the

Table 1. Respondents' profile.

Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage
Position/rank		
Private/corporal SMP	115	54.5
Sergeant/sub-lieutenant SMP	42	19.9
Lieutenant SMP	15	7.1
Captain SMP	34	16.1
Major SMP	1	0.5
Lieutenant colonel SMP	4	1.9
Gender		
Female	44	20.9
Male	167	79.1
Place of work		
São Paulo, the capital city	35	16.6
São Paulo, metropolitan region	95	45.0
Inner cities in the state of São Paulo	81	38.4
Area of work		
Police	196	92.9
Firefighter	15	7.1
Activity		
Administrative	96	45.5
Operational	115	54.5
Length of service (years)		
<10	26	12.3
10–19	77	36.5
20–29	100	47.4
≥30	8	3.8

Note: SMP = State Military Police.

PMESP's personnel who carry out operational work; (c) because the study adopted a convenience sample, there is a greater concentration of respondents in the metropolitan region of São Paulo and inner cities in the state of São Paulo, locations of easy access for the researchers; (d) also for convenience, close to 93% of the respondents work in the police force (the other officers are firefighters, an activity that is part of the state military police in Brazil, what makes police officers and firefighters able to exchange their activities throughout their careers, working under similar situations); (e) in terms of the respondent's activity, there was a balance between administrative and operational activities, which is interesting for the analysis because it promotes a mixture of points of view with regard to the meaning of work for respondents carrying out different activities; and (f) the relative employment stability of the respondents was verified because about half of them have between 20 and 29 years of service.

After the descriptive statistics of the sample, confirmatory factor analysis was carried out. The analysis, followed by construction of the measurement model, adopted the maximum likelihood method (Byrne, 2010; Marôco, 2014), examining the variables social usefulness, autonomy, learning and development opportunity, cooperation and relationship with colleagues, recognition, moral righteousness, meaning of work, anxiety, depression, loss of behavioral and emotional control, emotional ties and general positive effects. The confirmatory factor analysis verified the reliability and validity parameters of the psychometric scales used in the study, considering that the scales measure the constructs indirectly.

Table 2. Statements disregarded due to low factor loading.

Construct	Statement	Code
Cooperation and relationship with colleagues	I have a good relationship with my work colleagues	CR1
Recognition	My salary is fair considering my efforts at work	RE4
Anxiety	Think about your work last month. How did you feel? Scared	AN7
Depression	Think about your work last month. How did you feel? Ill-tempered	DE1
Loss of behavioral and emotional control	Think about your work last month. How did you feel? Nothing worked as I wanted	PC2
Loss of behavioral and emotional control	Think about your work last month. How did you feel? It would be better if I was dead	PC4

The first phase of the analysis observed the goodness of fit of the measurement model using chi-squared (χ^2), incremental fit index (IFI), Tucker–Lewis index (TLI), comparative fit index (CFI), and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). The model's goodness of fit was considered adequate, with indices within the range recommended in the literature ($\chi^2_{(gl)} = 2280.804_{(1388)}$; IFI = 0.926; TLI = 0.917; CFI = 0.925; RMSEA = 0.055, 90% CI [0.051 : 0.059] (Byrne, 2010; Marôco, 2014). The correlations found between the items of the variables were incorporated into the model, improving the goodness of fit and not compromising the analyses (Byrne, 2010).

Subsequent analysis verified the scales' factorial validity. Because of low factor loadings and little contribution to the quality of parameters evaluated, some of the initially considered statements were excluded (Table 2).

Factor loadings are the correlation of each measurable variable (phrase or statement) with the respective construct (latent variable), indicating the degree of correspondence between statements and constructs. Factor loadings are the means of interpreting the role of each measurable variable in defining the construct, with higher loadings making the variable more representative of the construct (Hair et al., 2009). The statements that remained in the measurement model showed factor loadings within the range recommended by the literature, indicating factorial validity (Hair et al., 2009).

The analysis continued to verify the composite reliability (CR) and convergent validity (average variance extracted [AVE]) of the scales used.

The CR and AVE values surpassed the minimum recommended (.7 and .5, respectively) (Byrne, 2010; Marôco, 2014), confirming the scales' reliability and validity (Table 3).

Table 3. Composite reliability (CR) and convergent validity (AVE).

Variable	AVE	CR
Social usefulness	.707	.879
Autonomy	.762	.905
Learning and development opportunity	.726	.888
Cooperation and relationship with colleagues	.588	.811
Recognition	.661	.852
Moral righteousness	.763	.928
Meaning of work	.670	.947
Anxiety	.705	.955
Depression	.788	.918
Loss of behavioral and emotional control	.704	.905
General positive effects	.742	.963
Emotional ties	.623	.830

The discriminant validity of the scales was verified using the Fornell–Larcker criterion (Fornell and Larcker, 1981), which compares the square root of the AVE of each construct with the Pearson correlation verified between the constructs. If there is discriminant validity, the correlations have values smaller than the square root of the AVE values of the scales. As shown in Table 4, the correlation between the constructs was below the square root of the AVE of each construct in most cases, indicating discriminant validity in the scales used. The exceptions were the relationships involving cooperation and relationship with colleagues and learning and development opportunity (.778 vs. .767) and loss of behavioral and emotional control with depression (.849 vs. .839). However, the differences were centesimal and insufficient to compromise the discriminant validity of the constructs. After all tests, the parameters (reliability, factorial validity, convergent validity, and discriminant validity) were considered satisfactory, indicating that the scales used were adequate to measure the constructs.

After verifying the scales' validity and reliability, the proposed conceptual model was evaluated, examining the statistical significance of the relationship between the six antecedents of meaning of work and the relationship between meaning of work and psychological well-being at work and psychological distress. Table 5 shows the results (path coefficients and respective significance).

The constructs social usefulness, and learning and development opportunity showed a positive and significant relationship ($p < .05$) with meaning of work. Learning and development opportunity was considered more important for the respondents (higher beta value). Likewise, the data showed no significant relationship between meaning of work and autonomy, cooperation and relationship with colleagues, recognition, and moral righteousness ($p > .05$). This does not mean that the respondents disregard the importance of such antecedents but that a statement advocating the existence of the relationship assumes, statistically, a risk of error that is greater than that predicted for the research (5%).

This result corroborates the findings presented by Rodrigues et al. (2017) in similar research carried out with experts from the Brazilian Federal Police, where the constructs social usefulness and learning and development opportunity were significant for the construction of meaning of work.

Regarding the consequent constructs of meaning at work, there are significant relationships with psychological well-being at work and psychological suffering. Meaning of work and psychological well-being at work have a positive relationship indicating that, when seeing meaning in their work, police officers feel good, psychologically, and develop their activities. Therefore, stimulating social

usefulness and learning and development opportunities help state military police officers find their work meaningful. Also, the findings show a negative relationship between meaning of work and psychological distress, suggesting that police officers who perceive meaning in their work are less likely to present psychological distress in the face of the challenging mission they carry out in their daily work. This reinforces the importance of social usefulness and learning and development opportunities to increase the meaning of work and its positive consequences.

Finally, it is worth comparing the effect of meaning of work in the consequent elements of psychological well-being at work and psychological distress, disregarding positive or negative effects. The research found that the effect of meaning of work on psychological well-being at work is greater than the effect of meaning of work on psychological distress. In this sense, the effect of meaning of work is doubly positive because it increases the positive effect of psychological well-being ($\beta = .566$) more than it decreases the effect of psychological distress ($\beta = -.474$).

As for the coefficient of determination (R^2), an indicator of the percentage of the dependent variable's variance that is explained by the variance of independent variables, social usefulness and learning and development opportunity, constructs presenting a significant relationship with meaning of work, explain more than 60% of this construct variance ($R^2 = .602$). This result shows the model's high explanatory power for meaning of work. In turn, meaning of work explains more than 32% of psychological well-being at work ($R^2 = .321$) and more than 22% of psychological distress ($R^2 = .225$). There must be other factors not considered in the model that explain the missing percentage to reach 100%, the maximum value of the coefficient of determination. Further research can be conducted to discover these factors, but this does not diminish the importance of the results observed in this study.

Finally, the statistical robustness of the analyzed relationships was verified using the G*Power® 3.1.9.2 software (Faul et al., 2007, 2009), obtaining post hoc test scores of Power > 0.99 for meaning of work, psychological well-being at work, and psychological distress.

Conclusion

The decision to carry out this study was made after a real situation in which police officers were resigning, and job vacancies remained unfilled in the PMESP. It is understood that the absence of meaning at work leads to a loss of motivational tonus and causes a loss of mental quality of life, demotivation, and, ultimately, resignation from the organization.

This research showed statistical relationships between the meaning of work and psychological well-being and

Table 4. Discriminant validity of the scales – Fornell–Larcker criterion.

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Social usefulness	.841											
2. Autonomy	.441	.873										
3. Learning and development opportunity	.582	.813	.852									
4. Cooperation and relationship with colleagues	.524	.616	.778	.767								
5. Recognition	.411	.799	.769	.730	.813							
6. Moral righteousness	.559	.824	.794	.742	.802	.874						
7. Meaning of work	.648	.495	.683	.639	.518	.603	.819					
8. Anxiety	-.272	-.414	-.413	-.344	-.422	-.435	-.362	.839				
9. Depression	-.389	-.409	-.477	-.408	-.418	-.475	-.444	.838	.887			
10. Loss of behavioral and emotional control	-.354	-.390	-.463	-.384	-.425	-.512	-.418	.732	.849	.839		
11. General positive effects	.296	.494	.557	.458	.526	.515	.439	-.819	-.745	-.740	.862	
12. Emotional ties	.178	.260	.344	.370	.207	.268	.342	-.348	-.451	-.317	.507	.789

Note: Values in diagonal and in bold are the square root of the AVE of each construct.

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Table 5. Path coefficients.

Paths (relations)	Beta	p-value
Social usefulness → Meaning of work	.328	<.001
Autonomy → Meaning of work	-.193	.175
Learning and development opportunity → Meaning of work	.453	.003
Cooperation and relationship with colleagues → Meaning of work	.158	.201
Recognition → Meaning of work	-.016	.897
Moral righteousness → Meaning of work	.126	.329
Meaning of work → Psychological well-being at work	.566	<.001
Meaning of work → Psychological distress	-.474	<.001

distress in the case of state military police officers. The results offer an opportunity to understand the extent to which the construction of the meaning of work can be developed to reduce the number of resignations in the PMESP.

This article adopts a definition of “meaning of work” as the sense of coherence between expected and perceived job characteristics, according to each individual’s ideals and moral standards (Frémeaux and Pavageau, 2022). When considering the importance of the meaning of work, an idea that goes against common knowledge stands out: salary and benefits are the most important characteristics expected in a job. The centrality of work in the human agenda cannot be neglected, and it is essential to consider its role as a vital space for creativity, autonomy, and socialization.

Maslow (1964) postulated that the search for meaning is a deep human need, and work is much more than the experience of earning a living; other dimensions, social and symbolic, often designated as intrinsic dimensions, are at the heart of the so-called work orientation (Maslow, 1964). Experiencing these intrinsic dimensions helps members of an organization to find meaning, giving organizations opportunities to develop management policies that favor psychological well-being and the fulfillment of various human needs.

This article evaluated police officers’ mental health related to the work environment through the meaning of work. The research considers the meaning of work as a proxy variable for intrinsic motivation and psychological well-being. Although there are many ways to assess the meaning of work (Rosso et al., 2010), Morin’s model (2008) was chosen because it includes a notion of mental health and brings concrete dimensions of work, in addition to the issue of subjectivity involved in any research dealing with meaningfulness (Pignault and Houssemand, 2021).

The results showed that social usefulness, and learning and development opportunity are constructs that build meaning in the respondents’ point of view. Such constructs proved to be valid as antecedents and, therefore, explain what gives officers an experience of coherence between what they expect from work and what they experience. A question that deserves further research is whether the PMESP has the conditions required to carry out work activities that favor the experience of usefulness and learning.

This study’s main finding was that the effort to build meaningful work, beyond being associated with social usefulness and learning, is doubly important because it increases police officers’ psychological well-being at

work while decreasing—though less intensively—officers’ psychological distress. Also, there is sufficient evidence to prove that the model is valid and adequate. In other words, the findings allow us to conclude that the experience of social usefulness, and learning and development opportunity contribute to building meaning and, consequently, generating psychological well-being.

Based on these results, it is possible to suggest measures to optimize people management practices in the PMESP. The findings suggest that assessment of the meaning of work can contribute to overcoming the severe problems of sick leave and resignations faced by the institution. Thus, the meaning of work for police officers should be reinforced, increasing psychological well-being and strengthening the ties connecting professionals and the institution.

For example, managers could employ staff in activities that deliver useful results to society, to the detriment of merely administrative services, and provide the state military police with direction for functions that challenge them and favor learning. By participating in courses, training, and qualifications, social usefulness and learning and development opportunities can be enhanced, with the consequent strengthening of the meaning of work and psychological well-being.

This study also sought to contribute to the academic community by deepening knowledge related to the peculiar category of public agents and, specifically, state military police officers in the Brazilian state of São Paulo.

The limitations of this research include the sample being selected for convenience and not probabilistic, i.e. there is no intention of characterizing the PMESP as a whole. Instead, the study presents a “snapshot” of the sample and offers a starting point for future research covering police officers from all regions of the state of São Paulo. The reduced number of respondents was also a limitation of the study, especially the low numbers of female respondents, which prevented statistical comparisons between genders. Despite the balance between administrative and operational activities, which is interesting because it promotes a mixture of points of view, comparison was not made between these two groups concerning the meaning that work has for the respondents, which also can be seen as a limitation of the current research.

Similar research with samples from other groups of state military police officers of the state of São Paulo and other Brazilian states may present a vast range of possibilities to increase knowledge on the meaning of work for these professionals. Thus, future studies could examine in-depth elements such as the profile of individuals who ask for sick leave and analyze whether the experience of building meaning can mitigate the problems that lead officers to resign. It cannot be denied that the meaning of work

generates psychological well-being, but it is worthwhile investigating whether the lack of meaning of work and psychological well-being causes resignation. This research raises reasonable hypotheses to be tested in future investigations.


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