A new normal? Competing national cultural discourses and workers' constructions of identity and meaningful work in Norway

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ABSTRACT
We examine how conceptions of identity and meaningful work are influenced by a nation's changing economic and political environment. We collected research in Norway – a country with a rich economy that has heavily relied upon oil production since the 1980s. Yet depleting oil resources are prompting an economic transformation. Twenty-seven interviews and a thematic analysis revealed how Norwegian workers safeguarded their traditional, collective workplace values, yet were simultaneously confronted with modern – more masculinized – workplace performances ushered in with the oil era. We contribute to theory by suggesting that work's meaningfulness is constructed by competing national cultural discourses that evolve over time. These discourses become narratives that citizens draw upon to evaluate work and to negotiate their personal and professional identities.

Meaningful work matters. In fact, recent scholarship has suggested that locating meaning in work is a fundamental human need, not a preference (Yeoman, 2014), and that work is a key source of meaningfulness and identity creation (Kuhn et al., 2008). Scholars have acknowledged that people find "meaning" in work through various normative, societal, sociological, and psychological influences (e.g., Lair, Shenoy, McClellan, & McGuire, 2008). For example, constructions of meaningful work are constituted in emergent moments of interaction, produced by historical acts, and derived from a wide array of cultural discourses (Kuhn et al., 2008; Wieland, 2011). Yet, as work interactions and cultural discourse become more globalized, people may have to shift how they make sense of their identity at work and their work's meaning.

Consider a British automotive engineer, who took pride in devoting extra hours to determine the best solutions to work problems and therefore eagerly anticipated her month-long, paid summer holiday. Recently, her firm merged with a U.S. auto corporation, and her new American boss values efficiency over quality, prohibits her to leave the office for more than two weeks at a time, and asks her to answer emails on vacation.

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The engineer begins to question the value of her job and her occupational identity. As this example illustrates, the expanding global market creates unprecedented changes to organizations, industries, and professions, which make it increasingly crucial to understand evolving connotations of identity and the meaning of work.

Research demonstrating the role of national discourse in shaping identity and meaningful work, however, has taken a fairly fixed approach to identity construction. Few studies have examined the shifting national cultural discourses – or discourses about a nation's cultural norms – that employees see, hear, and often draw upon to construct their personal and professional identity and to create and legitimize their descriptions of meaningful work. Although researchers have argued that cultural discourses are important ingredients to constructions of meaningful work and identity (e.g., Wieland, 2010) and that past generational discourses affect current meanings of work (e.g., Long, Buzzanell, & Kuang, 2016), scholars have yet to theorize how *evolving* national cultural discourses challenge ongoing constructions of identity and meaningful work.

The current study fills this gap by contributing theoretically and practically to the literature in identity and meaningful work in two unique ways. First, our study explores changing national discourses during an important political, economic, and cultural shift in Norway – a controversial period for oil exploration and a time of increased citizen reflection on the country's past and future economic state. In the late 1960s, oil was discovered off the nation's continental shelf, and for the next 50 years, the Norwegian economy flourished as a result of plentiful oil reserves. As the oil industry pervaded the Norwegian economy, it also generated a discourse about more aggressive working norms that has begun to threaten traditional Norwegian societal values and notions of identity, which are grounded in segmented professional and personal domains (see Kvande, 2009). Our data uniquely evidence how Norwegian workers safeguard their nationally recognized, collective workplace values, yet are simultaneously confronted with modern, more masculinized notions of resource distribution, economical production, and performance at work. Accordingly, we argue for the meaning of work to be nationally situated – evidenced through historical and contemporary discourses, which citizens very consciously draw upon to construct meaning into their work and negotiate their identity. Moreover, these discourses are not monolithic or static, and their competing, contradicting, and evolutionary nature can further illuminate the core values tied to national contexts at certain points in time.

Second, our results demonstrate how national cultural discourses provide a system of logic, values, and rationality that employees heavily draw upon to understand their identity, and in turn, influence descriptions of meaningful and meaningless work. We use the term "national cultural" not to conflate the terms "nation" and "culture," but to emphasize that nations are one specific dimension of culture. To accomplish these goals, we begin by reviewing literature on identity negotiation at work, arguing for a national cultural perspective.

The cultured nature of identity negotiation in the workplace

Broadly speaking, people's identity consists of the different meanings they and others attach to themselves, based on personal characteristics and social roles (Ashforth &

Mael, 1989). People come to understand their sense of self through interactions with others. Thus, organizational scholars have contended that identity represents individuals' reflexive and discursive understandings of themselves (Kuhn, 2006). From this communicative perspective, identity is a struggle over individual and collective meanings (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005), and identities are socially constructed through identity negotiation processes.

Workplace identity negotiation scholarship suggests both *identity regulation* and *identity work* sustain identity (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). Identity regulation explains the discursive practices, such as roles or scripts that "sutur[e] people to social structures" (Kuhn, 2006, p. 1340). In other words, identity regulation describes the organizational and social discourses that generate and control identity. Identity work, on the other hand, involves people's interpretations of and reactions to discourses, and highlights individuals' efforts to portray a positive and distinctive identity (Kuhn, 2006). Consequently, identity work involves "forming, repairing, maintaining, and strengthening or revising" constructions of the self (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002, p. 626).

Communication and management scholars have explored identity work among firefighters and correctional officers (Tracy & Scott, 2006), human service workers (Tracy, Myers, & Scott, 2006), osteopathic medical students (Norander, Mazer, & Bates, 2011), managers (Ashforth, Kreiner, Clark, & Fugate, 2007), and high-tech entrepreneurs (Larson & Pearson, 2012). Much of this literature has explored tensions in identity, including conflicting ideal selves (Wieland, 2010), the interplay between the historical construction of work and how employees make sense of their role (Ashcraft, 2007), and various ways of framing identity that simultaneously empower and disempower workers (Meisenbach, 2008).

An additional tension in exploring identity at work is the role of culture in the identity negotiation process. According to Anderson (1991), national identities represent powerful socio-cognitive constructs that build an imagined community. Wieland's (2010, 2011) ethnographic field study of the Swedish Research Institute insightfully demonstrated how employees drew upon a cultural value, "lagom," to negotiate conflicting identities. Workers used this Swedish word, translated as "just right," to construct identities that were seemingly contradictory (delivering work while practicing well-being).

Although Wieland's work extended researchers' understanding of identity by considering how cultural contexts shape the identity negotiation process, it does not acknowledge that both identity and cultural views are fluid and change over time. As work becomes more globalized, culturally situated negotiations of identity are challenged. When economic and political environments transform, changing cultural values might require a shift in how workers construct their identities. Thus, the current study explicitly considers the changing values and interests that are privileged in constructions of identity at work. In order to best understand how discourse shapes identity, we also explore work's meaningfulness, since constructions of meaningfulness construct (and disrupt) identity (Kuhn et al., 2008). To this end, we consider the role of national cultural discourse in Norwegian workers' constructions of identity and meaningful work.

Cultured constructions of meaningful work in Norway

In comparison to workplace identity, less consideration has been granted to how employees assign meaning to their work and the dreams, hopes, and aspirations they pursue professionally (Cheney, Zorn, Planalp, & Lair, 2008). In studies exploring meaningful work, scholars have discovered workers draw on religion (Shenoy-Packer & Buzzanell, 2013), spiritual and secular callings (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2015), and even magazine articles (Hanchey & Berkelaar, 2015) to infuse meaning into their careers. In their review of this research, Cheney et al. (2008) summarize that meaningful work enables agency, enhances belonging, creates opportunities for influence, permits people to use and develop their talents, contributes to a greater good, and provides income for a decent living. As "good" as meaningful work might sound, research has shown that making meaning of work is a process full of tensions (Dempsey & Sanders, 2010; Lair et al., 2008; Long et al., 2016; Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017) and double-edged swords (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2015; Bunderson & Thompson, 2009).

Here we explain some of the tensions of meaningful work by exploring how changing national culture and discourses of nationalism influence how individuals perceive work amidst life and professional goals. Scholars have long recognized the effect of national culture on employees' working behaviors and orientations, but meaningful work is also derived from "expectations established by discourses prominent in a particular culture" (Cheney et al., 2008, p. 146). A communication-based perspective necessitates an examination of these micro, meso, and macro socio-cultural discourses that contribute to that construction. For example, words like "productivity" and "success" hold different meaning around the world, and these meanings do not always transcend national boundaries. From a young age, cultures socialize us to the subjective meanings that underlie work (Berkelaar, Buzzanell, Kisselburgh, Tan, & Shen, 2012).

Particularly as work becomes more globalized, culturally situated meanings employees bring to their work may not fit changing organizational, industrial, and cultural discourses. Problematically, little research to date has acknowledged that conceptions of meaningful work are not static, but are dynamically challenged as a nation's economic and cultural environment evolves. Of exception, Long et al. (2016) studied how a certain generation of employees, Post80s Chinese workers, conceptualized meaningful work in relation to past generational cohorts. In their study, Chinese Post80s workers understood work by reflecting on both past narratives of work dominated by Maoist ideology and reformed narratives of work informed by a capitalist work ideology. For example, Post80s workers believed work was meaningful when they could choose an occupation that interested them, unlike Post50s and Post60s generations who were assigned jobs. Post80s workers also drew upon collective voices from different generations, highlighting tensions in their meanings of work.

Although Long et al. (2016) research demonstrates how socio-political transformations reflect the tensions present in employees' notions of meaningful work, the study offers an after-the-fact account rather than capturing the current experiences of workers in the midst of a changing environment. More research is needed to understand how shifting national cultural discourses complicate notions of meaningful work (Michailova & Hutchings, 2006). By exploring an evolving (versus already transformed) national cultural discourse, the current study seeks to better explain the complexity of meaningful work.

To do so, we turn to Norway, where political and economic shifts are challenging discourses about the nation's cultural norms.

In particular, Norway is world-renowned for its egalitarian culture and social democratic government, which supports a strong welfare state funded through taxes, conservative environmental policies, and decentralized economic development and political decision-making (Dempsey & Sanders, 2010; Norway Demographics Profile, 2011). Norway has been depicted as a feminized country wherein typically feminist traits such as nurturance, empathy, collectivism, collaboration, acceptance, and interpersonal sensitivity manifest within social and workplace norms and patterns of reasoning and communicating (Fondas, 1997). For example, gender roles in Norwegian workplaces are neutralized rather than differentiated, quality of life is often favored over money and material possessions, economic protection is prioritized over growth, employees often prefer fewer working hours rather than earning higher pay, and flexible family and workplace structures are more idealized than hierarchical ones (Fondas, 1997; Hofstede, 2001).

Norway's egalitarian culture is often recognized and promoted to its inhabitants in the symbols and messages that are tunneled through various mass media outlets, which further creates and appeals to a sense of national identity. One look at the front page in recent Norwegian newspapers reveals titles such as "Norway: Best Country for Older People," "Norway's at the Top for World Mothers 2015," and "7 Graphs Showing How Equal We Are" – the last of which referred to the time mothers and fathers spend at home with their toddlers (Sandelson, 2015; Sjoberg, 2015). Scholarly research has also documented Norway's culture of inclusion, support, and equal access (e.g., Seierstad & Kirton, 2015). These work practices and articles exemplify a discourse that generates a distinct Norwegian identity and constitutes national work "norms."

Norway, however, is currently undergoing an economic transformation. After a 25-year low in oil production, a controversial debate has grown as to whether Norway should allow new oil drilling in the Lofoten and Vesterålen Islands. This tension between preserving tradition and pushing for more modern goals is felt on a political, economic, and organizational level. As Norwegians debate and form opinions about the future of Norway, their constructions of identity and meaningful work are being impacted. Considering the interconnectedness of the literature in national cultural discourse, constructions of identity, and meaningful work, we present three complementary research questions to guide this study. Although these questions are stated individually, we are ultimately interested in the reciprocal relationships among identity, meaningful work, and national cultural discourses at the macro, meso, and micro levels.

RQ1: How do Norwegian workers rely upon and use evolving national cultural discourses to situate work as meaningful and negotiate their identity?

RQ2: How do Norwegian workers discursively construct and negotiate their identity?

RQ3: How do Norwegian workers discursively construct meaningful work?

Methodology

Site and sample

The current study explores the role that national cultural discourse plays in Norwegian professionals' constructions of identity and meaningful work through an inductive

thematic analysis with a social constructionist epistemology (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Qualitative data were collected in Norway, which stemmed from a larger project exploring culture, work, and society in Norway and a partnership with a business school at a Norwegian University. The Institutional Review Board approved this study, and each participant signed a consent form.

Norwegian workers were recruited through a convenience sampling method from referrals. All participants worked in different organizations across a variety of industries. This variety helped us find commonalities in employees' working perspectives that were of national origin, not just organizational or industrial. We interviewed referred participants who worked in Norway's primary work sectors, including oil, finance, tourism, healthcare, and the emerging construction industry.

In total, 27 people were interviewed, including 16 women (59%) and 11 men (41%) whose ages ranged from 22 to 55 years ($M = 36$) (see Table 1). Interviews were conducted in-person ($n = 21$) and over the phone ($n = 6$) and ranged from 25 to 101 minutes long ($M = 55.3$), resulting in 24.97 hours of data accumulation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in English because it serves as the official language of business in Norway, and Norway consistently scores in the top five of the EF English Proficiency Index.

Table 1. Participant demographics.

Characteristic	Participants ($n = 27$)	Percentage of total
Gender		
Women	16	59
Men	11	41
Age		
20–35	8	30
35–45	12	44
45–55	7	26
Occupation industry		
University education	6	22
Government	4	15
Sales/finance	2	7
Military	3	11
Non-profit work	3	11
Oil	4	15
Tourism	3	11
Construction	1	4
Health care	1	4
Number of children		
No children	3	11
1	5	19
2	8	30
3	8	30
4 or more	3	11
Income level		
$0–50,000	1	4
$50,001–75,000	3	11
$75,001–100,000	8	30
$100,001–125,000	5	19
$125, 001–150,000	2	7
$150,001–175,000	4	15
$175,001–200,000	2	7
$200,001 or above	2	7
Marital status		
Single	8	30
Married	15	55
Divorced	4	15

Interviews inquired into certain topic areas such conceptions of meaningful work, delineations of the work/home routines, and workplace and home identity, and the effects the oil industry on Norway's working culture. Examples of interview questions included "What makes work meaningful/unmeaningful?" "Does your work ever affect your personal life?" "What is the hardest/best part about being a working professional in Norway?" and "Do you think the oil industry has changed the nature of work in Norway? If so, how?" All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Pseudonyms are used to protect each participant's identity. Interviews were contextualized with casual field notes to keep track of key observations.

When we observed the interview data were reaching saturation, rather than revealing nuances to emerging themes (Patton, 1990), one final interview was conducted. When this last interview did not derive significantly new data, the authors concluded the data collection process. To improve the accuracy, credibility, and transferability of participant comments, member checks were also conducted. Twelve of the 27 participants interviewed voluntarily agreed to be interviewed again a year later. The participants' comments did not change over the course of the year; rather, the additional interviews were used as "member reflections" (Tracy, 2010, p. 844) to gain more clarity into the national cultural discourses that drove participants' conceptions of identity and meaningful work. Overall, 663 pages of text were analyzed.

Step-by-step procedures of thematic analysis

In conducting the thematic analysis, the authors worked through a number of steps. First, the researchers transcribed the interviews into texts, reading them multiple times to heighten familiarity with the data, and began open coding. Next, the authors concentrated on the creation of formal codes that would be used to analyze the data and, in later stages, combined and collapsed these to create seven categories. For example, text such as "standing up for each other at work" was coded as "workplace interdependence," which eventually fell underneath the category of "others-centered." This category provided insight into the theme of meaningful work. Specifically, the researchers adopted what Saldana (2012, p. 100) calls first-cycle "initial" coding to search for themes tied to the three specific research questions directing this study – namely, identity negotiation, meaningful work, and national cultural discourses. Throughout coding, the researchers looked for how participants enacted these constructs, carefully looking for the interactive relationships among identity, meaningful work, and national cultural discourses. Afterwards, the second cycle coding strategy called "pattern" coding was used to identify specific categories that brought meaning to each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 7). Pattern coding involves identifying patterns and relationships in the data, and assigning labels to categories.

Finally, the researchers constructed a tentative master list of relevant themes and asked a colleague to read and analyze a percentage of the interviews in order to reaffirm interpretations of the data. The authors and colleague discussed any discrepancies that surfaced by referencing the interview texts to extract quotations and potent topics in the data.

Throughout collecting and analyzing the data, the researchers were also cognizant of their positionalities as Americans. For example, participants compared and contrasted

norms of identity and meaningful work in Norway with broad generalizations about U.S. working culture. The researchers treated this Norwegian-U.S. comparison as part of the analysis. The fact that the Norwegians, without verbal direction, innately drew this comparison is as much of a finding as the other themes offered in this paper. Consequently, the categories below include quotations that provide insight into these cross-cultural speculations, and how these juxtapositions aided the participants in their constructions of identity and meaningful work.

Findings

This study (1) explored the national cultural discourses Norwegian workers draw upon to construct their identity and meaningful work, and then further inquired how Norwegian workers specifically and discursively (2) construct and negotiate their identity, and (3) construct meaningful work. Our findings reveal how the three research questions posed influence one another. Norwegian's identity-shaping discursive practices are formed and constrained by timely national cultural discourses, which also frame conceptions of meaningful work in Norway.

Research question 1: political and economic discourses used to construct identity and meaningful work

The first research question asked what specific discourses impact Norwegian employees' discursive constructions of identity and meaningful work. The following political and economic discourses offer a macro-level understanding that provides a background for, and gives more depth to, participants' micro-level descriptions of identity and meaningful work, which we explore in later sections of this paper.

The impact of employee rights legislation on "working to live"

Norway's extendable employee rights seemingly position the country as a beneficial and opportune nation in which to work. This national standpoint has also contributed to the emergence of a political discourse that upholds the meaning of work vis-à-vis employee rights. Many participants provided accounts that demonstrated how their workplace behaviors, ways of thinking, and perspectives were situated within this popular political discourse about employee rights. Dyma claimed, "it's about how many things you say 'yes' to and learning to say 'no,'" and "it's important not to have too many tasks. We are protected here by our rights. We have a governmental right to worker health and life outside of work." Elisabeth, a governmental employee, explained how legislation impacted how she negotiated overtime:

> It is not allowed to work more than so many hours. You can't work and expect to get paid if you don't have a deal with your boss for it. At my last job I worked overtime without an acceptance from the boss, and I luckily didn't get fired.

Similarly, Dorthe, a private construction company worker, expressed her frustrations with a previous boss who attempted to violate her rights as a Norwegian:

> At first, when the CEO hired me, he said "Dorthe, you have too much on your plate. You are only capable of working 80%." I said that's OK, I can work 80%. But then I had to travel all

over Norway in addition to my 80% work, and they wouldn't give me extra money for the extra traveling hours … . I said no way. And so I left … I just told them, "fuck off, I'm leaving … I don't like the way you're running your company" … I went in there and said, "you're going against Norwegian law and reaching low in how you treat people, and I don't accept it."

Elisabeth's and Dorthe's quotes personify the strict Norwegian governmental policy enforcing additional working hours must be controlled and documented. Managers are legally bound to pay their subordinates for extra hours that they are asked to work. These examples starkly contrast prior research on U.S. career discourses, such as social entrepreneurship, whose portrayals of meaningful work rest on notions of self-sacrifice and unpaid labor (Dempsey & Sanders, 2010).

Dyma's, Elizabeth's, and Dorthe's comments exemplify the success that recent political discourse enacted by the Norwegian government has had on Norwegians' constructions of identity and conceptions of meaningful work. Specifically, the "Worker's Protection and Working Environment Act (AML Article 12)" polices work content, working conditions, social relationships at work, and work planning for Norwegian employees. Regardless of whether or not employers are genuinely abiding by these mandates, the enactment and heavy publicizing of this law have had considerable implications for constructions of meaningful work.

Despite the strong influence of this discourse, discourses are not monolithic. Rather, participants very noticeably drew upon another reigning discourse grounded in the contemporary oil economy, which also infiltrated their constructions of meaningful work and identity.

More oil, more money … more masculinity?

Oil and gas has brought incredible wealth into Norway, and by the 1980s, Norway was experiencing a sky rocketing national net profit as engineering and construction investments made in the oil and gas sector registered in dollar signs. However, history has demonstrated that more money usually sprouts more problems. This newly acquired taste for success, expansion, and money has begun to leak into other domains – none more apparent than Norwegian organizations. Coined the "resource curse," some scholars have cited the catchy, alliterated phrase "petroleum perpetuates patriarchy" to shed light on the economic discourses that have crept into the Norwegian workplace (Norris, 2009). Originally characterizing how oil rich countries in the Middle East thrived upon hegemonic masculinity (Ross, 2008), this phrase is now elicited to illustrate a country culture often celebrated for its equality and focus on deindustrialization.

Moreover, the oil wealth era is resulting in the flashing of *nouveaux riches,* which has conflicted with Norway's traditional egalitarian spirit ("Norway: The rich cousin," 2013). In commenting on a contemporary identity crisis in Norway, Lars Roede – an architectural historian and former director of Oslo City Museum – has been quoted as saying, "you could say that we've had more money than sense and ended up destroying the townscape that we are accustomed to and that we love" (Savage, 2014, p. 2). This quotation reflects traditional constructions of cultural masculinity in that material possessions and wealth are being prioritized over quality of life and economic growth is taking precedence over environmental protection (Hofstede, 2001). Moreover, these heightened concerns for materialistic possessions and economic growth on the cultural level come to fruition

through changes at the personal level such as more aggressive strides for power and a heightened focus on competition and individualism (Buzzanell, 1994).

Thus, some have suggested that adapting to the oil industry introduced unprecedented masculine tendencies into the Norwegian economy that have now trickled down into organizational norms and discourse, such as stricter hierarchies, labor-intensive demands, and unprecedented strides for power, competition, and individualism ("Norway: The rich cousin," 2013; Savage, 2014). This shift toward a highly competitive and masculine workplace is not the norm in Norway. However, it has gained steam, and participants' awareness of, and resistance to, this economic discourse was clearly captured in accounts of their work. When asked if Eldrid believed Norway's changing economy had impacted the workplace, she reflected on her job as a tourism project manager in the early 2000s – the peak of Norway's oil production – when she worked for a boss who was new to Norway:

> She would send us emails from her computer at half past ten in the evening. When your boss does that to you, it's a signal … of excessive demand. She is working 24 hours … . So this was a big change in my working environment, which actually pushed me out … Tourism was not always this way … oil has changed the economy … it brings in more money and big people from other countries that have impacted all kinds of industries.

This description exemplifies the burgeoning masculinity in the workplace, which took a debilitating toll on Eldrid – causing exhaustion and violations of meaningful work. Past literature has depicted work environments as dominated by hegemonic masculinity when they normalize longer working hours and physically demanding work, and demonstrate little concern for employees' mental or physical health (Filteau, 2014). Moreover, the discourses buttressing these working environments often stigmatize workers who refuse to comply with these excessive workplace demands as weak (Filteau, 2014). Perhaps this is why Eldrid claimed she was "pushed out" as compared to using language that reflected her departure as a personal choice.

In her interview, Dorthe also described how masculinized performances by her boss – which could have threatened her mental health – clearly violated her conceptions of meaningful work. According to Dorthe, the oil industry depends upon other industries that are often male-dominated, like construction. With both industries growing in Norway, more masculinized working traits – such as control, domination, tough-mindedness, self-interest, and a preoccupation with taking charge (Fondas, 1997) – are present in Norwegian organizations. Dorthe, who works for a nascent construction organization in Norway, discussed how her male boss did not like to be challenged, especially by female subordinates. However, Dorthe challenged him anyway after he egregiously insulted the employees working beneath him:

> You know what he said once? He said the company was just a bunch of monkeys working, and "I hate these monkeys." … The next day I went into another meeting, and he was just yelling at me and others, treating us really bad again. [So the next time,] when he stood up and was about to leave, I said, "you know how you called the people in the company a bunch of monkeys? I have heard a story about monkeys in the organization, but it's a little different. You see, an organization is like a tree of monkeys. The one sitting at the top looks down and only sees a lot of smiling monkeys. The ones sitting at the bottom look up the tree and only see a lot of assholes." … That is when he came around the table trying to grab my notes because I challenged him … I was not afraid of him … They [male

superiors in construction] don't like to be challenged. I know that is why he hated me because I … looked right in his eyes, and I didn't back away.

Dorthe went on to explain how because she violated the authority of her boss and his image of absolute power – which is important in a male-dominated and masculinized industry such as construction – the CEO threatened not only her status in their organization, but her status as an employee in their town: "He sat me down for two more hours and talked to me … threatening me – saying I am going to destroy your future here in [name of town]. It's a small town … it will be hard for you to get another job." Furthermore, these masculinized performances of tough-mindedness, control, domination, and oppression in the workplace were unprecedented for Dorthe. She commented, "This was a shock because I have had so many work experiences before, and I have never had a problem … . I always managed to get a good relationship and conversation with my boss."

Dorthe went on to describe how she attributed these unprecedented workplace performances, which were violating and even eroding her image of the Norwegian workplace, to industries that were ushered in with, and largely interdependent with, the oil industry:

> In construction work … chaos is the rule, it is not the exception … and that is different from the oil industry, where you have so much money and direction. But construction is growing because of oil. These industries bring wealth into our country, but the people coming in with them are also changing our national notions of how people should be treated in the workplace. It's very simple … people should not be coming into my office crying because of terrible treatment, especially not in Norway.

Similarly, Britt, a previous lecturer at a university in northern Norway, described how the masculinized working culture accompanying the oil industry was not isolated to oil related jobs. She described her job in academia as becomingly progressively more "macho" and dominated by groups of male colleagues – sometimes at the expense of females. In the excerpt below, she reflects on an instance of sexual harassment that persuaded her to ultimately leave her position:

> Everybody is saying when you go to the oil industry, you are going to be treated so badly if you are a woman at work. But the worst I have ever been treated was by the board of the University … . in [name of town] where I worked for three years. I had been preparing to where people could take online classes … I set up all of the technical equipment, which is quite a hard job . … . We worked really hard just to get the money to get that equipment … so I was on a Skype meeting with the board members sitting there, and we were going to talk about my progress. I asked them, "what do you think about my equipment?" One of the members said, "I don't know, you'll have to take your camera down to your boobs." … . And that is why I left the university. That couldn't be more meaningless. I said I am done … . I just hung up.

As Cheney and colleagues (2008) point out, discourses of economic growth and productivity, which encourage employees to work harder and smarter, can cause people to stop and ask, "but are most people happier for all of this?" (p. 153). Oftentimes an overpowering focus on economic advancement can inhibit meaningful work, instead causing elevated stress (Diener & Seligman, 2004). Furthermore, when work is meaningless, employees are more reliant on their affective disposition, or one's tendency to experience a positive or negative state, for work engagement (Steger, Littman-Ovadia, Miller, Menger, & Rothmann, 2013).

Amira, a 41-year-old sales representative, expressed awareness of the conflicting economic discourse: "A rich economy doesn't necessarily mean you will have a rich, or meaningful, career. It could deter it by forcing you to work too aggressively … in a meaning*less* way." Amira's idea of meaningful work allowed her to be spontaneous and pursue her personal aspirations, rather than getting lost in the grind of redundant routines and aggressive battles for power. Amira, like several other participants, did not equate wealth and material assets with the "good life" or an idealistic career. This economic discourse of increasing workplace masculinity functioned to contradict her identity and combated the national political discourse promoting worker rights to a healthy life. The conflict between this economic discourse and Norwegians' constructions of identity is further demonstrated in the next section, which reveals how Norwegian workers constructed separate professional and personal domains.

Research question 2: balanced professional and personal/social identities

The second research question asked how Norwegian professionals constructed and negotiated their identity. The results demonstrate how Norwegians are very respectful and protective of their personal/social identities.

Non-flexible personal identities

The majority of the Norwegians interviewed described leaving their professional identities at work when they exited the office. Although employees worked overtime on occasion – both in paid and informal capacities – Norwegian professionals were still very adept at not letting this interfere with their personal identities. Many of the participants talked about valuing their time away from the office and described their home as their sanctuary, labeling it their "best" time spent. They spoke about working diligently to uphold the title of "mom" and other social/home roles.

For example, Kamilla, an office secretary, claimed that even though her demanding job is saturated with endless tasks, she "refrains from viewing 'holiday' time as 'sync' time," or a period in which she must be synchronized with her workplace. She claimed, "my professional side is important, but it's not everything." Frederick, a 22-year-old bookstore representative, commented, "It's like when I'm at work, I'm working there. When I am at home, I'm home … my body is there so my head is there." According to Frederick, these two very different life domains also acquire and entail distinct identities. Particular professional identities were not central to notions of "self" for the majority of the participants in this study. Rather, their workplace identity is just one of the social identities that they embrace, which allows onlookers to appreciate the communicative interplay between the internal (personal) and external (professional) aspects of their identity. This is best exemplified by one interviewee's comment after being asked how he explains his decision to uphold both his personal and professional identities. He reminds his manager, "this is my working contract. This is what I get paid to do, and I don't get paid to do *this*. So, I'm going home." Frederick's response exemplifies notions of compartmentalization and temporal and spatial dimensions affiliated with work–life borders and balance (Clark, 2000; Roberts, 2008). Although past work has discussed how employees' perceived autonomy and temporal control shape perceptions of meaningfulness (Bailey & Madden, 2017),

Norwegians derived a sense of meaningfulness not only from controlling their time at work, but also at home.

Flexible professional identities

All 27 interviewees spoke to the Norwegian ideology that bringing one's personal life into the work domain is not only tolerated – but even commonplace. Take the following excerpts from separate interviews:

> Most of the bosses I've had have been fair about that. If I need to go to the doctor with my daughter, it doesn't bother me to find someone else to attend that meeting. (Kamilla, office secretary)

> In Norway, everyone understands the importance of family. And if you have family issues, have troubles, and just have to have one extra day, you can get it. (Dyma, university administrator)

> Your career in general has a less central place in Norway than it does, for instance, in the United States. We used to say that in Norway you work to live and in the United States, you live to work. (Elisabeth, tourism governmental employee)

These quotations speak to the evolving realization that identity work – even when enacted in the workplace – encompasses more than professional identities. Rather, opportunities to engage in domestic labor, hobbies, and family matters also heavily influence identity work (Dailey & Zhu, 2017). While personal activities may be imperceptible to work colleagues, activities outside of work are often more meaningful than remunerated employment, and thus are important to our personal identity construction. Thus, Norwegians find it important to assign room for these non-work identities while on and off organizational premises. As seen in the next section, these examples of identity negotiations impacted participants' descriptions of meaningful work.

Research question 3: meaningful work described as others-centered, not always visible to superiors, and preserves time for reflection

The third research question inquired into the construction of meaningful work in Norway. Interviews clearly portrayed how Norwegians infused work with value, and these discourses complemented and further shaped those used in identity construction. Results revealed Norwegian employees find work to be more meaningful when (a) they establish interdependent, supportive relationships with their coworkers, (b) they are not pressured to put in superficial "face-time," and (c) they are able to schedule time-outs during their day to pause and personally reflect. These constructions of meaningful work also provide further insight into Norwegian employees' resistance to the progressive national cultural discourse, ushered in with the oil industry, which favored masculinized working cultures and norms.

Never let down thy coworker – meaningful work is others-centered

When asked whether the quantity of hours worked was related to meaningful work, all 27 of the Norwegian professionals provided insightful comments about encounters with overtime. Although RQ2 demonstrated that Norwegian workers engaged in thoughtful identity work that safeguarded their personal lives, RQ3 reveals how they do not always

associate overtime with frustration, injustice, or transgressions. Moreover, they do not always see staying after hours as inherently conflicting with meaningful work.

Rather, participants almost unanimously depicted overtime as acceptable *if* it entailed aiding their coworkers. Stian, a 31-year-old vice president of a non-profit, explained overtime as a symbol of workplace morality that contributed not only to meaningful but "ideal work." He claimed staying late to help an officemate complete a task is "the kind of thing you do." He further described, "even if you don't get acknowledged for it, you work all night just to get things done together … . That's meaningful." When asked if overtime makes the workplace less enjoyable, Anne, a 54-year-old head of student services at a large graduate university, quickly said, "No. I just put in another hour at the end of the day or in the evening if it's other people relying on me to do something." She further explained that if her coworkers were counting on her and she willingly stayed late to help them, she actually found this work to be very fulfilling. Fourteen of the 27 interviews included similar commentary. From a managerial perspective, Anders equated meaningful work with going out of his way to collectively manage overtime. He described proactively using informal conversations with his subordinates to reveal how stressed they were behind closed doors. He then used this information to gauge how he distributed surplus tasks. He also tried to assign overtime to employees who volunteered for it. Anders claimed, it "usually isn't difficult. People step up when they see others need something."

These comments combined to depict overtime as not always mandated, but at times embraced due to a desired norm of instrumental support that symbolized meaningful work, even if helping others resulted in overtime or personal life interruptions. This finding reinvigorates the previously posed questions of whom meaningful work is meaningful to (Broadfoot et al., 2008) and why meaningful work includes other people (Cheney et al., 2008). This finding also adds to research surrounding workplace prosociality and well-being, which demonstrates that employees who observed simple daily acts of kindness in the workplace were happier, more connected to one another, and more satisfied with their lives (Chancellor, Margolis, & Lyubomirsky, 2016).

Finally, while research has identified "others-oriented" as a characteristic of meaningful work, the results in the current study are distinctive in that they exemplify a tension-centered approach of deriving work's meaningfulness (Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017). To elaborate, work's meaningfulness depends on both positive and negative aspects of a job, which can involve employees living with tensions. The participants in this study willfully chose to work overtime to provide instrumental and emotional support to their coworkers and described this type of work as meaningful. However, as Bunderson and Thompson (2009) point out, meaningful work can sometimes act as a double-edge sword, since achieving it can cause workers to withstand demanding work and strain on personal relationships beyond the workplace.

Additionally, participants' constructions of meaningful work breathed new meaning into identity negotiations that were not communicated when explicitly asked about identity. In other words, participants offered implicit re-constructions of their identity when inquired about work's meaning. For example, when asked to reflect on identity negotiation, participants adamantly protected their personal identity from professional interruptions. However, constructing meaningful work as others-oriented overtime integrates professional and personal spheres. This surface-level conflict in their discourse

was truthfully grounded in similarity in thought; participants who interpreted and treated workplace relationships as personal relationships seemingly found the code to unlock meaningful work.

"Less focus on face-time" – meaningful work is not always visible to superiors

Many of the employees in this study reiterated that impression management – or the use of tactics to enhance one's image in the workplace – was not of primary concern and actually conflicted with perceptions of meaningful work. For example, when asked about how her corporate (public) calendar resembled meaningful work, national spokeswoman Hanne almost scoffed at the question prying into her external motivations:

> I am not putting everything in there because it's not necessary . … . I don't have time to put things in there to show everyone else that, "hey, I'm busy." That's not how you show your worth … work with real meaning doesn't have to be broadcasted to the world.

Ann-Heidi, a 36-year-old governmental tourism administrator who often works alongside Americans, offered similar statements. She alluded to the self-serving American ideal of "face-time," or superficially performing around those with more organizational power. In discussing meaningful work, Ann-Heidi bluntly replied:

> We have less focus on face time [as compared to Americans]. If we have a task, we do the task, finish it, and then we can go. It seems like some of those in the US like more being in the vicinity of their bosses … coming in before the boss, leaving after. And what actually is supposed to be done seems to be less important than just being available.

To further elaborate, this comment and several others suggest that meaningful work is self-governing rather than always visible to superiors. Success was defined by time efficiency and task completion – not by physical presence or the number of hours spent on company territory, or "phony" face-time. In the same vein, June explained that meaningful work allows "a great level of freedom to perform the tasks the way you want to or need to and when you need to, because it's mostly the deliverables that count." This finding parallels past research emphasizing Northern European's protection of their vacation time (Richards, 1999). Yet, it mirrors more subjective definitions of meaningful work by suggesting that when it comes to protecting one's time, Norwegians not only scrutinize the annual calendar, but also their daily schedules.

Thus, for Ann-Heidi, June, and others, meaningful work was grounded in the luxury of having choices through degrees of autonomy and working in a genuine environment – that is, where productivity is measured in outcomes and relationships rather than superficial appearances. Past research in meaningful work often lists autonomy as a key ingredient to work's meaningfulness (Bailey & Madden, 2017; Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017). However, previous scholarship often likens autonomy to internal goals such as the freedom to set work agendas, flexible work arrangements, and the ability to work independently (see Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017). In this study, the autonomy desired by Ann-Heidi also manifested as *external* goals in that she framed work meaning-making as the ability to succeed in an organization without performing an ever-available and visible workplace façade. This finding also offers a nuanced understanding as to why Norwegian workers were resistant to the more masculinized working culture facilitated by the oil industry, adding to work that has described visible busyness as an important dimension

of a masculinized work culture (Kelly, Ammons, Chermack, & Moen, 2010). Similarly, this finding speaks to participants' previous constructions of identity by demonstrating that meaningful work *entitled* workers to their personal life and to only work in the working hours. But again, we also discover unparalleled insight in the juxtaposition of meaningful work and identity constructions. For instance, in inquiring about meaningful work, we learn that the "working hours" – that contextualized and bound the professional identities discussed in the first research question – are demarcated by work tasks as compared to the clock.

"Me" meetings – meaningful work preserves time for reflection

Finally, 13 of the 27 participants emphasized the importance of preserving time in their busy schedules to momentarily push their responsibilities aside and collect and organize their thoughts. In fact, the practice of doing this at work appeared to be integral to constructing a positive professional and personal identity and to finding intrinsic meaning in work. This was especially true for employees working in occupations with elevated levels of emotional labor, anxiety, or other stress-related conditions. Often, this designated time for reflection involved intermittently prohibiting themselves from using technology. When Anne, a 55-year-old administrator at a business university, was asked what assigned work meaning, she explained:

> Once a month, I have meetings with myself … I put a note on my door that nobody's in, and I close my phone. I put the away message on my email and simply summarize my head, clean my desk, and go through things to get a mental picture and then write them down … It's a cleanse, and it allows me to find the meaning in what I do.

Others spoke of taking time to "empty their brain," intentionally scheduling intervals in their to-do list to "relax," and adding "slack" time to the end of their daily routines. The femininity of the Norwegian culture and its focus on quality of life measures (Arrindell & Veenhoven, 2002) is exemplified in this notion of using work time to sustain one's personal and psychological health. Kine, even compared meditation at work to religious meditation. She explained that while at work, "I reserve time to close my eyes and train my mind to be still. In the silence, I can see and hear more clearly … sometimes I need a second to remember why I do this and why it matters." These findings illustrate that prioritizing time for reflection – in which one fosters connections with a sense of self – elicits realizations of meaningful work. These "time-outs" grant workers the opportunity to continuously discover work's meaning.

In some ways, "me" meetings reflect previous meaningful work scholarship examining "calling," which conceptualizes work as a mechanism enabling spiritual growth and achieving transcendent goals while affording workers the opportunity to realize their unique purpose (Duffy & Dik, 2012; Hall & Chandler, 2005). However, as Mitra and Buzzanell (2017) point out, constructing work's meaningfulness is not a static process, and therefore fastening fixed adjectives to meaningful work is ill-conceived. Rather, constructing meaningful work is an ongoing process that is (a) grounded in communication, (b) facilitated by fluid, meaning-giving cultural and historical discourses, and (c) contingent upon temporal and spatial contexts (Kuhn et al., 2008). Although the participants' commentary in this study seemingly reflects previous research associating meaningful work with self-growth, self-actualization, and spiritual quests, the quotations above, in

combination with the discourses discovered in R1, offer a deeper, more nuanced portrayal of how workers dynamically and communicatively ascribed meaning to their work. Participants were dynamically constructing the meaning of work by comparing Norway's traditional (i.e., past) feminine working culture with contemporary, more masculinized work experiences, and retrospectively resisting this unwelcomed transition. "Me" meetings again evidence workers' refusal to always be available and accepting of unexpected work tasks dumped on their desks by their employers. Yet, compared to the face-time category above, "me" meetings are largely a product of workers' *internal* goals. These demanded periods of calmness and reflection further demonstrate workers' resistance to enacting more competitive and aggressive (i.e., masculinized) workplace performances (Kelly et al., 2010). Finally, these findings reinforce workers' previous constructions of identity negotiation – which enabled personal needs to bleed into work – and advocate that we must focus on the whole person to understand employee values and identity (Shenoy-Packer & Buzzanell, 2013).

Discussion

The findings in this study represent a strong attachment to egalitarian work structures with roots in communality, a known orientation in Norway (Arrindell & Veenhoven, 2002). More uniquely and significantly, this research contributes in its discovery of shifting national cultural discourses in light of the current economic and resource changes in Norway and how employees draw upon these discourses to construct their identity and meaningful work. Thus, this study captures the way Norwegians use dynamic national cultural discourses to socially construct their professional worlds, assign meaning to work, and navigate their identity.

Our findings reveal a reciprocal relationship between the three research questions posed in this study. Two competing national cultural discourses – an economic discourse about oil and a political discourse about Norwegian workers' rights – emerged to influence perceptions of Norwegian identity and meaningful work. Furthermore, identity negotiations contribute to, and are influenced by, meaningful work. Figure 1 visually represents the nature of these relationships. In discussing identity and meaningful work, participants evoked performances of relevant national cultural discourses, or widely circulating ideologies of the time. For example, participants described meaningful work as requiring less face-time by drawing upon prominent political discourses in Norway that mandated employees' work be autonomous and free of micro-managing. These national cultural discourses also drove participants' identity negotiations – where employees drew upon Norway's distinct employee legislation to construct personal life as a right, not a privilege. Continuing the process of mutual influence, identity was also inherently tied to depictions of meaningful work and vice versa. Participants believed their personal life was a right, and constructed meaningful work as "me" time, requiring less face-time with superiors. Table 2 offers examples of how discourse, identity, and meaningful work are connected.

Although some of these findings and discourses may be unique to Norway, we encourage future scholars to examine the interrelated connections among evolving national cultural discourses, identity negotiation, and meaningful work in other parts of the world. As such, we offer three propositions that additional qualitative and/or quantitative research might explore:
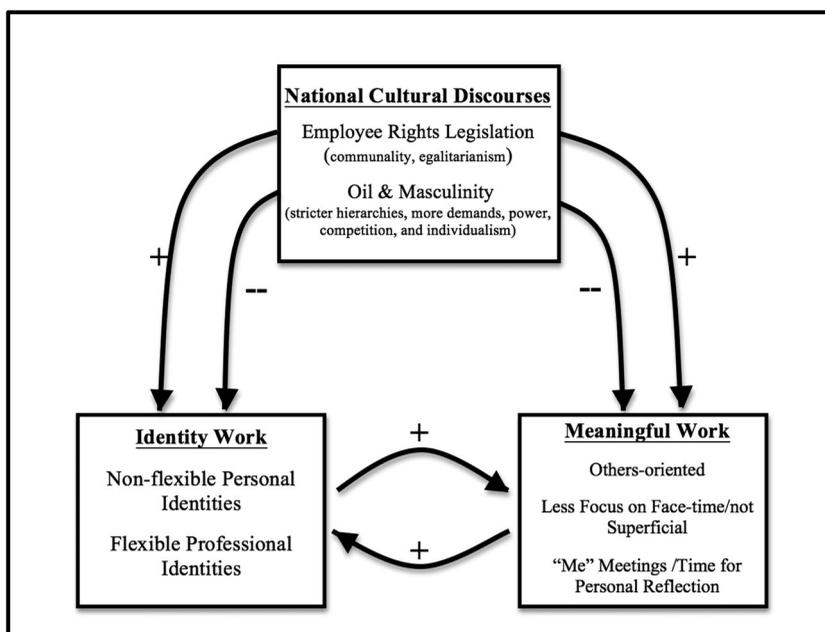
Figure 1. Reciprocal relationships between R1 and R3 results. Note that the plus and minus signs placed between the variables in this figure do not carry the same meaning as in a quantitative study. Rather the plus signs symbolize that the employee rights legislation discourse drives and reinforces participants' constructions of meaningful work and identity work. The minus signs symbolize that the oil and workplace masculinity discourse conflicts with participant's constructions of meaningful work and identity work, and therefore, participants resisted this discourse.

Proposition 1: Evolving national cultural discourses are used to construct meaningful work and identity.

Proposition 2: Evolving national cultural discourses can both reinforce and conflict with constructions of meaningful work and identity.

Proposition 3: Constructions of meaningful work and identity are inherently related.

National cultural discourses, identity negotiation, and meaningful work

This research contributes to our understanding of organizational communication by coalescing the everyday language individuals use to construct identity and meaningful work with macro-level meanings of work in a specific national context (Broadfoot et al., 2008). We borrow from Ashcraft's (2007) definition of occupational identity and also conceptualize meaningful work as "an ongoing rhetorical endeavor – occurring across time and space, across macro- and micro-messages, across institutions and actors, and in response to lived exigencies" (p. 10). Indeed, the findings from the current study uniquely highlight the macro, meso, and micro dimensions of the communicative meaning-making of work. Whereas the first research question highlighted the role of macro societal discourses in Norwegian employees' work, the second and third research questions focused more on how Norwegian workers used micro and meso levels of discourse to construct and negotiate identity and meanings of work.

Table 2. Examples of discourses and their use in constructions of meaningful work and identity.

National cultural discourse	Participant quotes	Definition of meaningful work	Identity work implications
Political:			
Work content and working conditions (must be varied and give control to workers; standardized work hours)	"If we have a task, we do the task, finish it, and then we can go."	Work is meaningful when it gives control to employees (meaningful work is not superficial)	Self as a transparent, independent, professional and choice-making agent (non-flexible personal identities)
Social relationships at work (must permit and design for employee contact with other persons during work)	"Even if you don't get acknowledged for it, you work all night just to get things done together … That's meaningful."	Work is meaningful when I can provide instrumental support to my co-workers (be mindful) and engage in collective work products (Others-oriented)	Self as a balancer of multiple identities and achiever of social conscious through aiding others in need (flexible professional identities)
Work planning (must ensure personal and professional development of employee)	"Once a month, I have to take time to summarize my head … I put a note on my door that nobody's in … It's a cleanse."	Work is meaningful when I can pause and reflect during my work day ("Me" meetings)	Self as reflective healer realized through responding to personal needs (flexible professional identities)
Economical:			
Petroleum perpetuates __patriarchy (oil has brought a push for more masculinity in the workplace)	"My [new] boss had an impossible time schedule for me … you get so tired because you never have time off." "Tourism was not always this way … oil has changed the economy … it brings in more money and big people from other countries that have impacted all kinds of industries."	Work is meaningful when you *choose* to stay afterwards and embrace other masculine forms of work, not when you're forced. A rich economy does not innately bring rich, meaningful work	Self as decider of his/her own fate and embracing the outcomes Self as a seeker of more than what money can buy (flexible professional identities and non-flexible personal identities)

Unlike Shenoy-Packer and Buzzanell's (2013) study, which discovered that Hindu women unconsciously channeled discourses of religion in ascribing meaning to work, the current research demonstrates workers very consciously drew upon political and economic discourses pertaining to work in Norway. Norwegian workers purposefully centered their definitions of identity and meaningful work in public platforms of prescribed meaning-making and continually invoked Norwegian (verses American) ways of life. For example, constructions of meaningful work mirrored legislative regulations and embraced cultured identities (e.g., Norwegians as family oriented). Contrarily, few of the participants traced their identity or meaningful work to organizational structure or their occupations. This finding is particularly interesting, considering that most organizational communication scholarship to date has studied how identity is rooted in organizations and vocations (Cheney, Christensen, & Dailey, 2013).

Thus, these findings contribute to Ashcraft's (2007) argument that scholars need to challenge traditional configurations of space and look beyond the culture of particular organizations. Exclusively focusing on the organization to derive identity and meanings of work is shortsighted, as formal organizations are not the only place where work gets done or culture manifests. As Kuhn (2006) suggests, discourse is not contained within organizations or particular settings; rather, intersecting contexts shape discourse. Thus, a discursive lens allows scholars to see the cultural impact of discourse on identity and

meaningful work from a *national* purview. This research suggests that people do their work and personal lives differently based on national contexts – which act as an important dimension of culture.

New national cultural discourses challenge meaningful work and identity

While discourses can be instruments of influence and power, they can also result in resistance. This study corroborates past research claiming that these communicative devices can simultaneously inform and problematize the meanings of work (Kuhn et al., 2008). Discourses are not monolithic, and correspondingly, conceptions of meaningful work and identity are not stitched to one universal mode of sensemaking. This study demonstrates how turning points in a nation's economic state can create new discourses that challenge employees' working norms. Norwegian workers in this study appeared resistant to this evolution and created meaning out of the different discourses. Specifically, they juxtaposed the economic discourse of oil and masculinity with their idealized political discourse of steadfast employee rights to illustrate their resistance to a progressive Norwegian work culture. In cases such as Eldrid's – who left her organization because of increasingly masculinized policies rooted in longer working hours and worker health – conflicts between company and cultural conceptions of identity created spaces of microemancipation (Meisenbach, 2008). Thus, national cultural discourses create tensions that further characterize identity and meaningful work in Norway.

Yet, one could argue that Norwegian workers drew on more localized discourses – organizational, industrial, regional, or professional, for example, to construct their identity and meaningful work. As a case in point, Dorthe's explanation of the construction industry as chaotic is an industrial discourse used to make sense of, and even excuse, erratic behavior and treatment within construction jobs and why these jobs can offer less meaningful work. Additionally, collectivism and feminism are cultural traits that are often attributed to the Scandinavian region, rather than Norway alone. Despite this, we chose to label these discourses as *national cultural* because that is how our participants defined, constructed, and identified them. Borrowing from Ashcraft (2005), who studied how pilots resisted industry-wide, crew-empowering discourses that threatened pilot control and authority:

> If one takes seriously the discursive construction of reality, the point is not whether pilots are, in fact, under siege as a professional group but, rather, that they perceived their control to be eroding … This is *not* to say that other empirical realities of their situation do not matter. It *is* to say that, through a lens that sees discourse as constitutive, it makes little sense to invoke evident institutional, material realities to deny discursive truths. (p. 84, emphasis in original)

In other words, discursive truths are just as powerful as reality. Although other levels of discourses are perhaps at play, our participants *perceived* these influential discourses to be national – or uniquely Norwegian. When discussing violations of employee rights, meaningful work, and identity negotiation, our participants resisted these behaviors, classifying them as un-Norwegian. Whether it reflected reality or not, many participants reported discursive truths that Norwegian working norms were under siege in the workplace. The clearest testament to this was Dorthe's cry, "am I actually experiencing this? Is it real? Is this going on in Norway in 2013?"

This of course begs the question as to why the Norwegian workers in this study perceived these discourses to be exclusively Norwegian and drew upon them so heavily to construct their identity and notions of meaningful work. One could argue that Norwegian workers in our sample labeled these discourses as Norwegian in an attempt to differentiate themselves from the two American interviewers and the "American" way of working. Although this is possible, several aspects of our data collection and analysis persuaded us that other, more meaningful answers existed. One answer – which surfaced at several points throughout data collection – is the strong, visible labor unions in Norway that meticulously train workers on their legal rights, fully supporting and representing workers when their rights are threatened. A second answer resides in the pride Norwegians generally feel. Four of our participants even mentioned that Norway was recently recognized as the happiest country on Earth (Helliwell, Layard, & Sachs, 2017) during their interviews. Future studies should explore whether or not workers within countries traditionally ranked lower on this list (e.g., Syria or Rwanda) are as likely to draw upon national cultural discourses to negotiate their identity and construct meaningful work.

Study limitations and conclusion

Every research has its limitations and this study is no different. First, this study used a convenience sampling method that operated through participant referrals, which could be one reason why we reached theoretical saturation after 27 interviews. Despite this, we proactively worked to diversify our sample by asking participants to refer us to other Norwegian workers who they perceived to have different ideas about work and who worked within a different industry. Second, although English is common in Norway, it was not the primary language of our sample. Because of this, we might have lost some cultural insights embedded in the language.

Even with these limitations, this study demonstrated how working professionals draw upon national cultural discourses to construct their identity and notions of meaningful work during a period of transformation in Norway. We hope these findings encourage future scholars to further examine how shifts in prominent national cultural discourses can produce changes in how citizens construct their identity and meaningful work. Future scholarship should continue to study the juncture of national cultural discourse, identity, and meaningful work in other countries around the globe.

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