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The Meaning of Work.
A Semiotic Perspective
for a Cross Cultural Analysis

ABSTRACT

Objective: to compare the meaning of work for three different samples of people working in private companies and in the public sector in one hand, and living in two different countries: Argentina and the Canary Islands.

Methodology: original semiotics-based methodology

Findings: most of the variables that were ranked in the top three average results match in all three samples; Canarians and Argentineans have a different perspective about the State's

role; Canarian workers prefer social relationships over economic and security aspects while Argentineans prefer job stability due to a job insecurity context in the country.

Value Added: the new methodology helps in organizing thought using abductive logic. It helps understanding the meaning of complex phenomena.

Recommendations: it may be useful for managers and researchers in the area of Management for creating creative answers and solutions through the analysis of facts.

Key words: Social Cognition - Comparative Thinking – Cultural Dimensions – Semiotics – Job Satisfaction – Values

JEL codes: M54 (Labor Management); M51 (Firm Employment Decisions · Promotions); M12 (Personnel Management · Executives; Executive Compensation); M14 (Corporate Culture · Diversity · Social Responsibility)

Introduction

The best practices in management recommend focusing attention on the development of their human resources. Administration theories with a humanistic perspective can be considered already scheduled on the main business schools agenda (Aktouf, 1992; Canals, 2009). In line with this, managing with people implies getting to know them as well as possible, in particular, understanding what is the meaning they assign to work and which are the goals and purposes guiding their behaviours.

In Administration studies, the focus of research on work, in the private sector, has been on aspects such as motivation and well-being or satisfaction at work, as a mean to sustain productivity and competitiveness. What we are somehow trying to measure are individual's rate about work, based on their beliefs and culture.

This paper's main goal is to compare the meaning of work in three different samples: the first one comprises people working in private companies administration, the second one people working in the public administration sector (both in Argentina) and a third sample people who work in different organisations in Canary Islands.

The originality of this paper does not reside in the theme that is being researched but in the way it is done, that is, in the triadic perspective proposed by the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce in his semiotics logic. This can be highlighted as the most important contribution of the present research since, as can be observed in its development and conclusions, this methodology allows to deepen the knowledge of complex phenomena like the meaning of work.

In order to fulfil the main purpose, an empiric tool was built following the triadic logic gleaned from semiotics and was applied to two non-statistical samples of people working in the public and private sectors in Argentina. Subsequently these results were compared with the ones obtained in the Canarian sample of the research made by Pérezgonzález and Díaz Vilela (2005).

This paper is organized in four sections as follows: the first one describes in detail the methodology used in this research, while the second part describes briefly the background of previous studies on the meaning of work. In the third section the results are presented. Finally, the fourth section exposes the conclusions and suggests new lines of research.

Materials & Methods
The methodological tool

This paper uses a methodological tool based on semiotics, which was already tested in previous research on the sustainability of organisations (Sastre, 2016). This method was designed to be applied in research on organisations and allows diagnosing the meaning that people individually or collectively assign to complex concepts or phenomena. This research is primarily aimed to Administration researchers and managers of public or private organisations.

The main feature of this method consists in helping organizing the mind and ideas in order to analyse the meaning of complex phenomena. It also contributes in creating a link between Peirce's semiotics theory (1893, 1931) and the practice of Management.

How can it be used? Basically the method consists in three steps or processes: 1) The assembly of the general conceptual matrix, 2) The construction of the specific conceptual matrix of the sign being analysed, in this case: the meaning of work and 3) making a questionnaire. These steps are described as follows:

STEP 1. The assembly of the general conceptual matrix. Influenced by the triadic logical categories of Peirce's sign, Guerri developed an operational model for qualitative research called *Semiotic Nonagon* (Guerri et al., 2016). This nonagon is a conceptual matrix comprised of three columns and three rows. **Table 1** shows the conceptual matrix which served as the base to design the questionnaire.

Table 1. Conceptual Matrix

	Knowledge (Past)	Behaviour (Present)	Social Value (Future)
Theoretical Practice	**Quadrant 1** Possible conceptualizations of work compiled in different ideologies and theories. **The difference**	**Quadrant 2** Expectations. Capacities and skills required for the job. Feelings and perceptions about job practice.	**Quadrant 3** Esthetical value of the job position. Kinds of perceptions and understanding job relevance and its externality.
Practical Actions	Quadrant 4 Work roles/job positions and relationships.	**Quadrant 5** Concrete actions in the everyday job. The different	**Quadrant 6** Ethic aspects of work role. Work confrontation with the outside world.
Political Practice	**Quadrant 7** Cultural aspects and specific job legislation.	**Quadrant 8** Situations in job practice. Pragmatic effect of concrete actions in everyday job.	**Quadrant 9** Purposes and goals that lead job action (the mission as the ordering principle) The differentiation

Source: author´s own editing based on Guerri et al., 2016.

A working tool was elaborated based on this conceptual matrix. It consists of three parts which are related to the way of exteriorizing the sign we would like to research. Those three parts mentioned above are: 1) the Theoretical

Practice, 2) the Practical Actions and 3) the Political Practice. To complete the nine logic quadrants of the semiotic matrix, each part of the questionnaire has three subdivisions.

STEP 2: Assembling the specific conceptual matrix for the sign 'Meaning of Work.' Previous research done in private organisations environment was used as the base to elaborate the specific conceptual matrix of the present research.

In first place, we have used the variables proposed by Pérezgonzález y Díaz Vilela (2005) in their research, based on the heuristic model proposed by **Meaning of Work (**MOW) International Research Team (MOW, 1987). As already mentioned in the background studies' section, this was the first theoretical model referring to: the Centrality and importance of work, its rules and beliefs about it; work as an individual's right or as a society's duty and outer and inner assessment about work. To complete the conceptual matrix quadrants, we have used MOW dimensions and variables.

In second place, we have completed some semiotic quadrants with variables used by Broveglio, Genoud and Picasso (2012), where no MOW variables were found. The selected variables were distributed in a conceptual matrix and some others were added. In **Table 2** we present the variables used as the base to elaborate the questionnaire (next step) and we identify the theoretical model source for each one.

Table 2. Meaning of Work Conceptual Matrix

	Knowledge (Past)	Behaviour (Present)	Social Value (Future)
Theoretical Practice	Quadrant 1 MOW Labour rights F1-F3-F5-F7-F9 (5 variables) + 2 added variables	Quadrant 2 BGP Resources and satisfaction at job (6 variables) + 6 added variables	Quadrant 3 MOW Work Involvement B1-B3-B5-B7-B8-B11-B12-B14 (8 variables)

Practical Actions	Quadrant 4 MOW Roles of work E9-E10-E11-E12-E14-E15 (6 variables)	Quadrant 5 BGP Kind of work assigned (4 variables) Autonomy and feedback (6 variables)	Quadrant 6 BGP Importance (4 variables) + 9 added variables
Political Practice	Quadrant 7 MOW Duties at work F2-F4_F6-F8-F10 (5 variables)	Quadrant 8 MOW Functions of work B2-B4-B6-B9-B10-B13 (6 variables)	Quadrant 9 MOW Goals at work E1-E2-E3-E4-E5-E6-E7- E8-E13-E16-E17 (11 variables) + 4 added variables
	TOTAL 18 variables	TOTAL 28 variables	TOTAL 36 variables

Source: author´s own editing.

STEP 3.The questionnaire assembly. Using the conceptual matrix of **Table 2**, we have designed a questionnaire. The first part consists in biographic questions, which afterwards (the working tool questions) are organised along the different quadrants of the matrix and new questions are elaborated for the added variables.

Following Díaz Vilela's (1997) methodological recommendations, the answer range for all questions remained homogeneous. The respondent was asked to rate from 1 to 10 each of the propositions mentioned in the questionnaire, being 10 the most valuable or important option and 1 the less valuable or important. Afterwards the results obtained were summoned, averaged and organized in the same way as the questionnaire, that is to say, in nine parts or quadrants. Three of these quadrants express the *possibilities,* three other express the *way of expressing* and the last three express the *social values* of work.

The sample

In order to expose a cross-cultural analysis, it was taken three different samples from two different countries. The Canarian sample consists of 169

people and the results were obtained from Pérezgonzález y Díaz Vilela (2005, p. 96) research. The public administration workers' sample consisted in 103 people working in different modalities (PAW). The private sector workers´ sample consisted in 130 people (PSW).

Current state of knowledge

From an anthropological perspective, work could be defined as the task everyone has to do in order to discover the meaning and purpose of life (Martínez-Echevarría, 2015). Therefore, besides its objective dimension which is determined by technique and technology, work acquires a subjective dimension, presented as a non-biological need related to human dignity (Corazón González, 1999).

In the last centuries, the concept of work has been studied from different fields such as Economy, Sociology, Psychology and Philosophy, among others. Hackman et al. (2010) have admitted recently that work phenomenon has changed. They have introduced the idea that *job is in flux* thus, proposing the development of conceptual models and more comprehensive research instruments. Moreover, it has been recognised the importance of considering social or/and interpersonal aspects as a mean to understand the interactions and relations structured at work (Grant & Parker, 2009).

Generational changes have guided research on the meaning of work in the direction of young people, who, despite of their mainly instrumental vision, have a positive attitude towards work. They have expectations, demands and search for a job with meaning to their lives (Agulló, 1998). In addition, some researches indicate that young people tend to consider work as a duty during the first working years (Martínez Sijas et al., 2001).

The importance that it is attributed to work also depends on other factors besides the generational ones. Work can acquire different shades depending on the surrounding culture and the socioeconomic context (Zubieta et al., 2008). In less developed societies with high rates of unemployment, ma-

terialistic values are emphasised (Carballo, 2005) while in more developed societies with economic stability, values related with leisure and other life areas are highlighted (Peiró & Prieto, 1996).

Therefore, the meaning of work is a multifaceted and interdisciplinary phenomenon, and in the field of organizational studies, the main studies on the meaning of work go back to the last years of the 1960s. Hulin and Blood (1968) have done research on the values of the Protestant ethic as a variable involved in work satisfaction. Following research has sought to develop a conceptual framework for classifying, describing and operationalizing the belief system about work (Buchholz, 1978). The first structured theoretical model to analyse the concept was proposed by the Meaning of Working (MOW) International Research Team in 1987. In this model the meaning of work is determined not only by the person (his experience and decisions) but also by his surrounding life context. For this reason, the researchers have worked with a sample of 8,700 workers from eight countries.

The MOW International Research Team (1987) finishes the model which is represented by three domains as follows: 1) the Centrality of Work defined as the belief about the value that work has in people's lives. Two main components can be noted. The first one is related to belief s and values translated into two mutually reinforcing concepts: Identification with work and Work involvement (Lawler & Hall, 1970). The second one can be associated with central life interests (Dubin, 1956); 2) Duty and labour rights oriented Social Norms. It refers to normative beliefs about work including duties and labour obligations (Ruiz Quintanilla S.A. & Wilpert, 1991) along with its underlying rights, that is, responsibility of society and 3) Work Results / Goals valued in economic and comfort terms.

The MOW International Research Team (1987) considers six possible work roles: 1) providing status or prestige 2) providing income 3) keeping people busy 4) providing social contacts 5) being a way of serving society 6) the role of being satisfactory and interesting by itself.

The model was afterwards replicated in numerous post-MOW academic researches, so it is validated both theoretically and empirically. In line with

this it is worth mentioning academic research of authors such as Harpaz, (1990) and Díaz Vilella (1994, 1997), among others.

In order to compare possible cultural differences when rating the meaning of work, we took into account the results of the research done by Pérezgonzález and Díaz Vilela (2005) who have surveyed a sample comprised of 146 people in Tenerife. This research was selected because the authors have had as the main purpose to replicate the conclusions of Díaz Vilela (1994) who stated that due to the tourism orientation and leisure activities of the Canarian population, there is no high index of work centrality (Pérezgonzález & Díaz Vilela, 2005, pp. 91–92). Moreover, these authors present a comparison between all the variables, which makes it possible to evaluate the results with the research carried out in Argentina.

Some variables were taken from the research done by Broveglio, Genoud & Picasso (2012) in which the social representations of 400 Argentine workers in Buenos Aires city (C.A.B.A.) and Greater Buenos Aires area (G.B.A.) from different hierarchical levels in production and service companies are described.

Results

In this section we compare the results obtained in Pérezgonzález & Díaz Vilela's (2005) research with the one obtained using PAW and PSW samples. With the rating obtained from each of the respondents individually or collectively, we have elaborated a numeric data matrix where we can see the most important quadrants emerge, or the most valuable ones, and the variables that were placed last. **Table 4** presents the average of each sample.

Table 3. Matrix for average results

Quadrant 1	RIGHTS		
Ranking	Canary sample	PAW	PSW

1st place	F09. Having a job	F07.	F03.
2nd place	F05. Taking part in changes	F05.	F07.
3rd place	F07. Working with aim	F03. Education system	F05.
Last place	F01. Company workshops	F01.	F01.
Quadrant 3	WORK INVOLVEMENT		
1st place	B14. Consuming little time	B14.	B14.
2nd place	B08. The most important	B05.	B08.
3rd place	B05. Central	B08.	B05.
Last place	B12. Nothing more important	B12.	B12.
Quadrant 4	ROLES		
1st place	E12. People	E15.	E15.
2nd place	E15. Products / services	E09. Money	E09.
3rd place	E10. Occupation/ profession	E10.	E14. Tasks
Last place	E11. Company / organisation	E11.	E11.
Quadrant 7	DUTIES		
1st place	F04. Saving money	F02.	F02.
2nd place	F02. Social contribution	F04.	F04.
3rd place	F06. Improving the job	F08.	F08.
Last place	F08. Accepting the job	F10. Rating work	F10.
Quadrant 8	FUNCTIONS		
1st place	B10. Intrinsic	B06. Serving society	B10.
2nd place	B02. Producing income	B02.	B02.
3rd place	B04. Interpersonal contact	B10.	B06.
Last place	B13. Keeping busy	B09. Status / prestige	B13.
Quadrant 9	GOALS		
1st place	E08. Interpersonal relationships	E16. Good salary	E16.
2nd place	E07. Physic conditions	E06. Permanence	E06.
3rd place	E13. Interesting job	E07.	E01. Learning
Last place	E02. Promotion	E03. Autonomy	E03.

Source: author´s own editing, based on n=146 (Canary Islands), n=103 (PAW) and n=130 (PSW).

From a general perspective, most of the variables that were ranked in the top three average results match in all three samples. The same applies to variables that were ranked last.

In **Quadrant 1,** the Canarian sample has ranked in first place the variable: "Every person who wants to work should be given a job." This was not valued by the Argentine samples. Instead, "Our education system should prepare all people to do a good job" appears in the first places of both samples' rating. This shows the different perspective that the Canaries and Argentines have about the State's role. The emphasis in the educational system can be observed in quadrant 2 rankings, in which both private and public sector workers assume that „The activity they perform requires professional training" and that "They feel they must be personally responsible for the correct or incorrect results of their job." From the semiotic point of view, these feelings about the practice of work materialize the enabling conditions, which were expressed in the previous quadrant in the form of ideologies about the performance of work.

Quadrant 3, which refers to the work involvement, is the only one in which all the variables coincide: both those placed in the first places and those placed last. The proposition "I believe that work should consume a minimum part of people's lives" was ranked first, while in consonance with this, the variable that holds "I believe that in life there is nothing more important than work" was placed last. This coincidence shows that there are no cultural differences in the ways of perceiving and understanding the importance of work.

Quadrant 4 addresses the roles that people assign to work. The Argentine samples have ranked in second place "The money obtained working", while the Canarian sample rated in first place "The kind of people with whom one works." From hiring modality perspective, in the sample of public administration workers, those who most valued the money were those with political appointment, i.e., workers with no career or temporary contracts. In the sample of people who work in the private sector, those who most valued money were the businessmen, that is 12% on average above people who

work with a contract of employment. Both Argentine samples valued in the first place, as the most important role of their work, "The product or service that results from my job." A semiotic perspective of this answer requires an evaluation of the results of the added quadrants, that is, Quadrant 5, in which the role is materialized in tasks in the practice and Quadrant 6 in which the effects or results of those tasks are valued in the outside world. In this sense, a semiotic coherence was found in both samples that ranked first the same variable. Workers of the mentioned samples have expressed that "I know well the results of my work performance" (Quadrant 5) and that "Many people can be affected by the quality of my work" (Quadrant 6). This chaining logic of quadrants 4, 5 and 6 seems to indicate that people in the Argentine sample perceive and perform significant tasks in terms of the products or services that reach and qualitatively affect the context in which they work.

In **Quadrant 7** the variable that appears in third place in the Canarian sample is the one that states "The improvement of work is the responsibility of the worker." This variable was low ranked by the Argentine sample, coinciding in both samples' first place the one that states "Every trained citizen has to contribute to society with his work." This social duty also appears in second place of importance in the Canarian sample.

In **Quadrant 8** the three samples ranked in second place the variable that states "I believe that the main role of work is to produce income." Only those who work in the public administration ranked first the variable that states that "Work is mainly a useful way of serving society." This rating is consistent with what was rated in the previous quadrant and with the kind of work that these people perform in the public service.

Quadrant 9 is possibly the most relevant because it addresses the purposes and goals that guide ones actions towards work. In this quadrant the differences in social and cultural aspects are revealed. As can be seen in Table 4, the Argentine samples coincide in the rating of both the first two places and the last one. "Having a good salary and good working conditions" was ranked in the first place while „Having a good stability in employment

(permanent work, stability for the family, retirement)" in second place. These rankings reflect the context of job insecurity that Argentina is living at the time of the survey and that, apparently, is not the case of the Canarian workers who prefer social relationships over economic and security aspects. They also consider important to have a varied (multitasking) and interesting work, while the Argentinean sample in the private sector considers important „The opportunities to learn new things through work." It is worth noticing that those who have most valued learning in the workplace were people over 56 and those who have completed at least one university postgraduate course.

Final remarks

This paper has addressed an issue that has been researched with scientific rigour in the last 50 years. For this reason we have not given deep treatment to the epistemological framework, already well explored. Instead, a new methodological framework was proposed.

The main objective is to compare the meaning of work for three different samples of people working in private companies and in the public sector in one hand, and living in two different countries: Argentina and the Canary Islands, in the other hand.

The contribution of this work is related to the methodology used in this research, which proposes a semiotic perspective to analyse the meaning that people, individually or collectively, assign to facts or concepts. What is the difference between the methodology proposed here compared to others? After the analysis of the results obtained it is possible to conclude that, at least, three differences or contributions can be observed.

Following the semiotics triadic logic, the first contribution comes from the category of *Firstness* that has to do with the abstraction or the mere possibility of thinking a phenomenon. In this way, the method allows to organize and systematize thought, in this case the phenomenon "Meaning of Work." This previous conceptualization allowed us to design a conceptual matrix

(see Table 1), to then identify the variables contained in each logical quadrant.

When concepts are materialized in the category of *Secondness*, it is possible to perceive the lack of some variables which were not considered in former studies. As can be seen in Table 2, the variables of the MOW model were not enough and we have had to complete the matrix with another theoretical model. Moreover, we have added variables that later resulted in high evaluations by the respondents, such as, the trainings perceived as required for the job position. The category of the *Secondness* is the category of the facts, of the practice. This means that previous research with variables that can be incorporated in this method can be found for any sign or phenomenon in research, making it an interdisciplinary method.

Thirdness refers to a system of values in a cultural context at a given moment. In this sense, the contribution of the method used in this work is the attribute of being open to the community of researchers and the researched. In the phase of *Firstness* (thinking about the possibilities of the phenomenon) and *Secondness* (updating those possibilities in concrete models), researchers and other participants in the research, such as managers or employees of organisations that are being researched, can take part in. Valuations in the category of *Thirdness* maintain a logical connection with the other quadrants, giving the matrix dynamism to interpret the results. It is worth noticing that the samples that were used in this study are not representative of the population. That means that the possibility of expanding the database in order to make the inferences significant is open for future research in the field.

After presenting at least the three contributions of the methodology based on semiotics it is worth highlighting the advantages that, managers and researchers could obtain by using it. In first place this is a diagnostic tool. Naturally the more complete a diagnosis of a situation or of an attributed meaning is, the better decisions can be made. Administration as a science or technique, generally, has no interest in doing research in organizations in order to have a better understanding of them. Instead, its interest resides in getting to know those organizations to take action in them. In other words,

diagnostics offered by administrative models are meant for action. Peirce's pragmatism and semiotics propose learning reality through the facts presented to us, hence becoming this the main reason to connect Peirce's philosophy with the practice of Management.

In short, we can conclude that the method may be useful for managers and researchers in the area of Management. The proposal open to discussion is to invert the so called *onus probandi* (in legal terminology). That is to say, not to look in empirical facts for proofs of models that provide answers using deductive logic, but to follow an abductive logic, and search in empirical facts for hypotheses or possible creative answers to our research questions.

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