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The perception of meaningful work by employed and self-employed workers in the sphere of education

Intersections. EEJSP

10(2): 212–229.

<https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v10i2.1181>

<https://intersections.tk.hu>

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Abstract

The collection of studies on meaningful work is still quite fragmented and lacks theoretical models that can be applied to various forms of employment status. This article examines the meaningful work phenomenon for both employed and self-employed workers using qualitative data. Drawing on 16 in-depth semi-structured interviews with schoolteachers and self-employed private tutors in Russia, the analysis demonstrates the nature of meaningful work constructed by employment status. Different institutional frameworks form institutional legitimacy, professional community, the final product of work and the prestige of occupation. The article's primary theoretical contribution is the development of a theoretical model that describes the multifaceted and impermanent nature of meaningful work. The practical implications include the revelation of prominent differences among workers having different employment status, which is a solid foundation for future attempts to conduct quantitative research.

Keywords: institutional framework; teachers; tutors; meaningful work; Russia

1 Introduction

The concept of meaningful work (MW) embraces career activities that individuals view as personally significant and worthwhile (Lysova et al., 2019). It is widely acknowledged that MW is an important non-monetary factor (e.g., Lysova et al., 2019; May et al., 2004; Steger & Dik, 2010; Steger et al., 2012) that boosts self-motivation, work involvement, and increases job satisfaction (Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012).

There is a great range of publications on MW in an organization (Bailey et al., 2019; Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012; Lysova et al., 2019; Steger & Dik, 2010; Steger et al., 2012). There are also some studies about the MW of self-employed workers (Geldenhuis & Johnson, 2021; Stephan et al., 2020). Nevertheless, there is a dearth of comparative research investigating the concept of MW among individuals with different employment status. Wolfe and Patel (2019) have attempted to measure the differences between employed and self-employed workers in 'job importance' and 'job usefulness' to society. Unfortunately,

dissimilarities have been mostly insignificant and the differences in the ‘job usefulness’ to society have a small effect size. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to explicate the multifaceted nature of MW and to try to unearth the underlying reasons behind the unsuccessful quantitative comparisons.

The main assumption is that the institutional structure of work constitutes an underemphasized element that impedes the ability to conduct rigorous quantitative comparisons of MW between self-employed and employed individuals. The primary objective of this study is to define specifically how different forms of employment status establish rules and regulations that influence the perceptions of MW.

The area of investigation is the educational sector due to the high level of perceived work meaningfulness among schoolteachers (Malhotra et al., 2016). Teachers, as organizational constituents, are obligated to adhere to the stipulated requirements articulated by the educational institution. While tutors may work as self-employed workers, sourcing clientele directly via specialized platforms (e.g., Profi.ru). Consequently, an intriguing avenue of investigation involves drawing a comparison between the perceptions of MW among schoolteachers and private tutors.

The phenomenon of MW among schoolteachers has been extensively studied by many researchers (e.g., Demirkasimoglu, 2015; Groot Wassink et al., 2019; Turner & Thielking, 2019; Fridayanti et al., 2022). However, the topic of MW is not studied enough among private tutors. It is possible, however, to find studies on the meaningfulness of self-employed workers in general (e.g., Nemkova et al., 2019; Stephan et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the proper investigation of the concept of MW among self-employed private tutors is lacking, primarily attributed to its association with the informal sector of the economy and the reluctance of tutors to divulge personal information (Bray, 2010).

This Russian-based study aims to improve understanding of MW due to the high social status that the teaching profession holds in Russian society. Teaching is considered as important as the medical profession, according to the Global Teacher Status Index 2018 (Dolton et al., 2018). Furthermore, the Russian context presents a clear distinction between schoolteachers and private tutors in terms of institutional structure: schools are primarily public and well-organized, whereas tutoring remains under-regulated, providing tutors with more freedom in their actions. This unique feature of the Russian context provides an advantageous opportunity to explore various institutional structures that contribute to the concept of MW.

2 Meaningful work: a sociological perspective

The multifaceted concept of MW has attracted interdisciplinary scholarly attention (Bailey et al., 2019; Geldenhuys & Johnson 2021; Laaser & Karlsson, 2021; Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012; May et al., 2004; Nikolova & Cnossen, 2020). Unfortunately, no standard definition of MW is agreed upon, at least six different aspects can be identified: ‘as a form of individual self-realization,’ ‘not serving’ (benefiting communities), orientation toward higher goals (‘competence, power, autonomy, and relatedness’), ‘construction and a dynamic sense-making process’, as a temporary psychological state and ‘double-edged sword’ that can lead to a burnout (Tan et al., 2023). The investigations of MW are primarily carried out in

organizational settings (Lysova et al., 2019; Steger & Dik, 2010; Steger et al., 2012) that show how organizations can imbue work with meaning for employees (Lysova et al., 2019). In this type of research, scholars explore objective work conditions, such as job design or leadership styles (Tan et al., 2023), and examine their impact on the perception of MW. There is also a great variety of research at the individual level that underscores the need for workers to collectively construct meanings, rather than having those meanings dictated by people in power (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009). This kind of research places a great emphasis on the subjective experience of MW. Thus, subjective, and organizational levels play a significant role in shaping the current understanding of MW, leaving little space for a broader contextual consideration. Therefore, the objective of this article is to cultivate a more sociological perspective by examining the broader institutional level—specifically, rules and regulations that serve as a reflection of societal reality.

More and more scholars emphasize the importance of considering broader contexts, asserting that individuals assess the value of their work in relation to social, cultural, and institutional factors (Lepisto & Pratt, 2017). A. Bykov has recently expanded on the concept of MW, emphasizing its cultural and moral dimensions (2023). He contends that the ‘meaning of work’ arises from an individual’s sense-making process, drawing on symbolic elements from societal culture, while the ‘meaningfulness of work’ is a personal evaluation rooted in moral attitudes and perceptions of the core meanings associated with one’s work (Bykov, 2023, p. 5). Bykov examines MW by considering the dichotomy of community versus autonomy. I also find this perspective valuable, so I intend to incorporate it into this article, aligning with the focus on a broader scale—institutional framework.

Firstly, community refers to the sociological functionalist thought, which portrays collectivity as ‘both the source and the end of moral authority and meaningful agency’ (Bykov, 2023, pp. 6–7). Professional groups, key for solidarity, possess strong bonds, well-developed ethics (Durkheim, 1992), and moral norms (Durkheim, 2009), forming the basis of meaningful work through collective meanings. Talcott Parsons lays the foundation for the concept of community by highlighting the significance of institutions. According to Parsons (2013), these institutions consist of formal and informal group rules, including ‘solidarity obligations,’ that shape individual behavior to maintain social order and stability. Despite the criticism, Parsons’ theory provides a valuable understanding of the importance of the institutional framework.

Considering the inherent connection between our central concept ‘meaningful work’ and the economic sector, exploring the economic standpoint is fruitful. North (1990) defines institutions as formal (laws) and informal (customs, norms) constraints, underscoring their pivotal role in mitigating uncertainty and facilitating economic transactions. In this context, school education is regarded as a formal institution, whereas tutoring is considered an informal, supplementary component to the formal system (Makeev, 2019). The rise of tutoring is linked to discontent with formal education. Mikhaylova (2022) highlights the symbiotic connection between private tutoring and Russian public education, viewing the local tutoring market’s growth as a reflection of educational deficiencies. All in all, the scholarly focus on the institutional aspects of meaningful work is scant. The sole reference on the institutional model comes from Warmbier’s (2016) conference paper, defining meaningful work as a social construct shaped by complex interpersonal and intra-organizational interactions.

Secondly, the concept of autonomy, originating from critical theory proponents, posits that modern capitalist society significantly shapes individuals' perception of meaningful work. Rooted in Marx's perspective, capitalism is seen as a negative force obstructing meaningful work due to labor exploitation (Bykov, 2023). Building on this, Fromm (1961) argues that product alienation is a genuine oppressive issue in contemporary society, hindering the attainment of meaningful work. The concept of work meaninglessness, associated with detachment from work products, can hinder the development of moral values (Fromm, 1961). This work product alienation factor may also impede commitment to the organization and work efforts (Tummers & den Dulk, 2011). In resisting adverse influences, individuals strive for autonomy and meaningfulness at work. While workers can maintain autonomy, scholars, including Laaser (2021), highlight that agency becomes integrated into the structure, underscoring the significance of objective autonomy in task completion for meaningful work. However, it has been observed that subjective autonomy, influenced by collective bottom-up norms, holds even greater significance (Laaser, 2021). Self-employment, seen as a modern route to autonomy, enhances work meaningfulness (Stephan et al., 2020). Yet, drawbacks include the negative impact of website rating systems and increased competition among individuals (Nemkova et al., 2019).

Concluding the community-autonomy discussion, community emphasizes belonging, shared values, and solidarity as key factors to MW, while autonomy, as discussed by some scholars in the context of capitalist societies (Bykov, 2023), is about the rejection of established standards and finding meaningfulness in not prevailing societal values. In the context of teachers, community values are influenced by government policies, exemplified by Russia's legal reinforcement of values through the decree 'On the preservation and strengthening of traditional spiritual and moral values,' which includes elements such as collectivism, high moral ideals, and patriotism. When individual's internalized values align with societal values, the individual perceives the work as meaningful. Conversely, when an individual's values diverge from societal norms, the institutional order may feel illegitimate and meaningless, potentially resulting in burnout and exhaustion.

Laaser (2021) also emphasizes the significance of 'dignity' and 'recognition' for a MW experience, distinguishing between objective aspects governed by formal institutions and subjective elements shaped by informal activities. Objective dignity concerns how organizations set rules and manage employees; lacking proper policies can lead to insecure employment, diminishing workers' dignity. This is why self-employment and informal economy work are often viewed as less respectable and safe than formal employment (Deranty & MacMillan, 2012). Subjective dignity thrives in conflict-free workplaces, involving self-initiated and organized activities to uphold self-worth. Moreover, objective recognition involves formal appreciation through organized schemes, while subjective recognition centers on informal appreciation, mutual reciprocity, and solidarity among workers. These concepts underscore the significance of both formal and informal institutions concurrently.

It is important to distinguish between the concepts of 'occupation' and 'profession'. According to Freidson (1984), the significance lies in professions having professional control over entry standards, specific knowledge gained through formal education, and a commitment to ethical codes prioritizing client interests. Evetts (2003) asserts that it is an attractive prospect for occupations to be classified as professions. Moreover, occupations hold a certain level of occupational prestige that influences job respect and desirability

(Wegener, 1992). A decreasing trend in occupational prestige Haug (1975) describes as 'deprofessionalisation' that leads to a decline of authority over their field of professional knowledge. These concepts emphasize the differentiation between professional occupations and those lacking professional status.

The study centers on teachers and tutors, with the following paragraphs delving into the concept of MW in the education sector. Teaching, closely associated with the notions of 'calling' and 'vocation' (Wrzesniewski, 1997), signifies an individual's inherent inclination toward fulfilling and socially beneficial work. Research, like Demirkasimoglu (2015), shows that changes in the educational system, growing uncertainty, and desires for higher social status pose barriers to teachers' MW. Conversely, MW is associated with contributing to society, engaging with colleagues (Demirkasimoglu, 2015), and ensuring the well-being of students (Turner & Thielking, 2019). Teachers' well-being is associated with good performance and success, positive feedback, appreciation, moral and financial recognition, absence of irrelevant tasks, and fulfilling social relationships (Kun & Gadancz, 2022). Moreover, scholars outline positive outcomes associated with MW, including increased work engagement (Fridayanti et al., 2022), job crafting behavior and a high level of teachers' resilience (Groot Wassink et al., 2019). In the Russian context, researchers typically use concepts like job satisfaction and teachers' intention to leave (Matveev, 2021) to measure well-being, rather than applying the concept of MW.

The activity of tutoring can be defined as a 'shadow education': additional paid educational service provided for academic subjects (Bray & Kwok, 2003). Bray (2010) highlights private tutors' secrecy that may stem from informal economy involvement. The Russian tutoring market surged from 176 billion to 280 billion rubles between 2021 and 2022, constituting 9 per cent of microbusiness segment services (Avito, 2022). The primary fields of tutoring are centered around core school subjects, specifically Math and the Russian language, both of which are compulsory within the Russian school curriculum. Many tutoring services advertised on client-searching websites are provided by private tutors unaffiliated with formal education institutions, constituting 45 to 72 per cent of all service listings (Avito, 2022). A study of Moscow's top-ranking tutors (Kozar, 2013) also finds that 15 out of 32 have no institutional affiliation, challenging the conventional perception of tutoring as solely a supplementary income source for schoolteachers. Makeev (2019) reports diverse offerings from students, graduate students, schoolteachers, native speakers, and university professors in Moscow, where tutoring prices range between 900 and 1000 rubles per hour. Students generally offer more affordable services, while professors and native speakers command higher prices. Comparing salaries in the public and private sectors, school employees earn around 6 per cent more than private tutors in similar roles (World Salaries, 2024). Moscow and Saint Petersburg are anticipated to offer the highest incomes for tutors.

In conclusion, the literature on MW reveals a noticeable lack of investigations dedicated to broader contexts, such as the institutional framework. While numerous works focus on individual and organizational levels, there is a limited body of research on MW that encompasses various forms of employment status, including both waged work and self-employment. Given the evolving landscape of self-employment and technological advancements, more individuals are seeking autonomy outside formal institutions. Consequently, this article is of particular significance as it sheds light on the growing trend of people striving for MW beyond traditional employment structures.

3 Methodology

The purpose of this research was to reveal how employment status affected the construction of MW. The research question was the following: 'How do employed and self-employed workers construct MW?'

A qualitative methodology was selected to explore subjective experiences and construct meanings (Corbin & Strauss, 2014) due to a limited understanding of the Russian tutoring market. Sixteen semi-structured interviews were conducted (March–May 2022, 11 women and 5 men), with eight participants in each group (teachers and tutors), using maximum variation sampling to capture central themes (Patton, 1990).

To address geographical inequalities, this study examined tutors and teachers in Moscow with a minimum of 6 months' experience. This duration allowed for complete integration into the school and tutoring institutional frameworks. Additionally, participants specializing in the most in-demand subjects were specifically picked (e.g., maths and languages).

The study involved Russian public-school teachers with similar educational backgrounds (bachelor's degrees from pedagogical universities mostly) aged 23 to 55, teaching middle and high school pupils. The average interview lasted 51 minutes. The fact that many teachers usually combine their activities with tutoring (Kobakhidze, 2018) resulted in the purposeful finding of informants who did not heavily rely on tutoring as their main income, with many having no prior tutoring experience or earning under 10 per cent of their income from tutoring.

In Russia, tutors often register as self-employed for benefits like lower taxes and legal protection. Despite this, some tutors avoid registration to lower service costs. Most tutors in this study (all except 2) were registered and used specialized websites (e.g., Profi.ru, Repetitor.ru, Foxford.ru). Ages ranged from 22 to 47, with prerequisites having no prior public school teaching experience and having tutoring as their sole income source. The average interview lasted 45 minutes.

Participant selection for this study involved diverse methods: snowball technique, personal contacts via websites like Profi.ru, VKontakte groups, Telegram chats, and Avito ads.

Questions were related to personal characteristics (age, education, occupation), career choice ('At what point in your life did you realize you wanted to teach children in school/as a tutor?'), ideal meaningful work (projective questions like 'Let's imagine a situation where a person thinks his job is meaningful and worthwhile. In what area do you think such a job would be?') and personal feeling of meaningfulness at work ('Do you find your work meaningful? What exactly makes it meaningful?'). There were additional inquiries regarding professional communities and their ethical considerations, perspectives on organizational hierarchies versus a more autonomous approach such as self-employment, working conditions, and the perceived prestige of occupations. The 'informed consent' safeguarded participants during interviews, assuring data anonymity and safety. This aimed to minimize dependence on school administration and ease tutors' worries about revealing informal economic activity (see Bray, 2010).

Online interviews utilized various platforms (e.g., Zoom, WhatsApp), chosen based on informant preferences. The process was recorded and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis (Bryman, 2012) was employed, with interviews sequentially coded using open

coding, then grouped into central themes (Table 1), ultimately centered around ‘meaningful work’. Atlas.ti and Excel enabled iterative data analysis, reflecting a dynamic interplay between theory and emerging categories. This research was conducted by a single researcher, which helps to maintain consistency and coherence throughout the analysis process. To mitigate biases and enhance validity, consultations with field experts (professors from Russia and the Czech Republic) were organized.

Table 1 Central themes coding

Meaningful work	
Global meaning	Specific utility of the occupation to society and world
	Universal utility (‘all occupations matter’)
Institutional framework	Rules of self-regulating service market
	Rules of the governmental organization
Personal meaning	Legitimacy of institutional framework
	Professional community
	Final work product (academic and non-academic)
	Professional status of occupation and prestige

4 Results

In this research ‘meaningful work’ was operationalized into 3 dimensions: global meaning, institutional framework, and personal meaning (Figure 1).

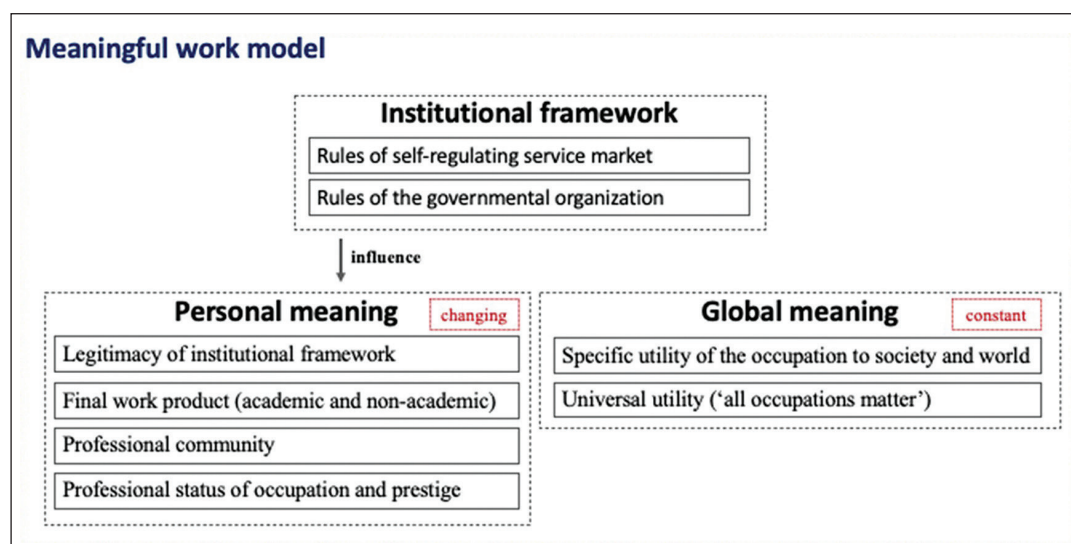


Figure 1 The scheme of the main findings

The 'global meaning' of work referred to societal benefits that were derived from work, either at the national or global level. It was measured with the help of projective techniques: participants were asked to imagine a scenario where the job is seen as meaningful and worthwhile, encouraging them to consider MW beyond their current occupation. As a result, teachers and tutors perceived the global meaning of their work as contributing to the cultural capital of children and the moral well-being of society, ensuring the continuity of generations. In MW literature this aspect is called 'not self-serving' dimension of MW, which reflects striving for bigger goals and contributing to society (Tan et al., 2023). This dimension appears to be associated with the symbolic elements of culture (Bykov, 2023).

The meaningfulness of work was also constituted by the 'institutional framework,' which served as a significant point of differentiation in the study. It was found that MW of teachers and tutors was shaped by two different institutional frameworks: a hierarchical governmental organization for teachers and a partially informal market for tutors. These institutions vary in terms of personal autonomy levels. For instance, teachers in Russia have limited autonomy as schools are entirely government-controlled, necessitating adherence to official regulations. Students have limited choice in subjects and must adhere to the school's curriculum, which includes mandatory lessons such as 'Conversations about Important Things,' covering national identity and global events to shape youth upbringing. In contrast, tutors operate independently, setting their own prices and marketing strategies, with limited government regulation in the sector, leading some to evade taxes.

Completing the MW model, the third 'personal meaning' dimension was about the subjective perception of one's work as meaningful. This dimension was assessed through direct questions regarding participants' perceptions of the meaningfulness of their work and potential feelings of meaninglessness. Bykov (2023) defined it as a subjective evaluation grounded in moral attitudes and perceptions of the fundamental meanings associated with one's work. Personal meaning is flexible and subject to change based on factors like leadership style (see also Tan et al., 2023), as noted by one teacher: 'It [the team of colleagues] does not greatly affect some global meaning of work: I have been doing a good thing and I still do it... but if you are constantly being scolded [by school administration] that you are doing things really badly, not globally, but personally it can affect' (P1, Math teacher, 25 years old). This example shows the complexity and contradictions of MW perception, when personal and global meanings do not coincide.

The present study's distinction of MW into three dimensions was reminiscent of Steger's (2012) three-level model of MW, which included organizational, personal, and societal levels. Nevertheless, this study goes beyond organizational structure to include the institutional framework, incorporating both formal and informal rules tied to social and cultural aspects (see also Bykov, 2023). All in all, the 'global meaning' and 'institutional framework' dimensions were characterized by a relatively stable nature, while the 'personal meaning' dimension was subject to constant adjustments constructed by various factors: institutional framework legitimacy, work product perception, social relations, and occupational prestige. In the following section, it was necessary to address the question in more detail: how did the institutional frameworks structure MW? The interaction of the 'institutional framework' and the 'personal meaning' components of MW was mostly considered. The 'global meaning' was excluded from the analysis due to the absence of noticeable qualitative differences between the observed individuals.

4.1 Legitimacy of institutional frameworks and MW

Teachers and tutors considered their work meaningful only when they acknowledged the institutional framework order as reasonable and rational. Legitimacy occurs when 'individual' values align with the moral values embedded in the institutional framework (Bykov, 2023).

Concerning the teachers' case, legitimacy of the organizational institutional framework requires a clear understanding of the organization's purpose (Steger & Dik, 2010), values, and goals (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003) to prevent stress and uncertainty during changes in the educational system (Demirkasimoglu, 2015). Thus, teachers in the study considered their work meaningful only when they believed that control and accountability were necessary to perform their functions effectively (e.g., transferring of work experience, monitoring): 'I think a teacher's work should always be checked. There are always some kind of open lessons, there are always walk-throughs of one teacher's lessons to other teachers. For many reasons: the first reason is to learn from experience, the second reason is to check what is going on there' (P13, Informatics and robotics teacher, 23 years old). They considered the hierarchical structure fair and rational: 'There is you, there is your head teacher, not a direct head, but he is still a head. There is a school director, of course, there is nothing terrible in this, as it should be like that' (P1, Math teacher, 25 years old). The background of administration members also influenced the legitimacy of imposed rules: 'school directors should be adult wise, already very experienced former teachers or working teachers, only then, they are just teachers by their vocation. Then the process will go successfully' (P10, Math teacher, 49 years old). Misunderstandings with administration especially impacted the personal meaning of MW: 'The administration, they seem to be satisfied only with the money they get. And they were very zealous at first, then they ran into misunderstandings and conflicts. And now they sit quietly, get their money, and do not interfere, because they have spoilt everything what could be spoilt. And that's it, it's the young people who are stupid, they are not teachers, they are managers' (P10, Math teacher, 49 years old). To cultivate meaningful workplace experiences of teachers, legitimacy in administration, adherence to external control, and conflict absence are vital. Legitimacy thrives when societal moral values of institutional framework are at the same time shared among employees (Bykov, 2023), mitigating conflicts, disobedience, and a sense of meaninglessness.

Contrasting with teachers, tutors found their work meaningful when their personal values aligned with those of the free market, enjoying flexibility and freedom. This included the ability to independently set the prices: 'after New Year's Day, I said, "Well, here we go, you should pay about 20 per cent more. I'm a little bit smarter now, I know this and that, I promise that the lessons will be more exciting, I promise that we'll have all kinds of quizzes"' (P9, tutor of Math and Physics, 22 years old). Furthermore, unlike teachers, they were not bound by the school curriculum and therefore could easily reschedule or cancel lessons: 'I'm a person who might impulsively want to go to Saint-Petersburg, to my grandmother's dacha in Smolensk. And why not? I only need the Internet, I can cancel one or two lessons, well, to have time to get there in the morning' (P9, tutor of Math and Physics, 22 years old). However, tutors' meaningful work hinged on their financial self-regulation skills as self-employment did not guarantee financial security (see also Freidson, 1984).

Accurately predicting income fluctuations was crucial: 'I usually define 20-25 per cent of total income per month as possible cancellations' (P5, tutor of Informatics and design, 26 years old). Moreover, in informal tutoring, undocumented transactions caused stress for tutors due to tax audit risks and client fraud, hindering MW: 'I had one case, but it was only once: a girl came to me for tutoring, and did not pay, she just deceived me. And now I have a clearly laid out system of how I work with clients' (P15, English and Japanese tutor, 22 years old). Thus, tutors embraced the values of the free market to find satisfaction in their work style, coupled with strong financial skills enabling a balanced lifestyle.

To sum it up, this section highlights the crucial role of institutional legitimacy in shaping workers' personal meaning of MW. Legitimacy relies on internalized societal values: workers may pursue greater autonomy in alternative institutional frameworks when societal values do not align with their personal values. For example, teachers may seek more meaningful opportunities in the free market as tutors, suggesting increased autonomy.

4.2 Finding MW through professional community

Achieving MW requires collaboration with others, but the extent of communication intensity varies based on the institutional framework and personal preferences.

The MW of teachers was related to interactions with colleagues in school, owing to frequent face-to-face communication, shared values, a sense of belonging (see Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009) and recognition (Kun & Gadanez, 2022). The participants stated: 'There are after-work gatherings, they also unite the school team very much. It is necessary to share emotions and energy with colleagues when the lessons end' (P2, teacher of English and Spanish, 25 years old). Teachers emphasized the significance of various forms of interactions: 'We celebrate some common holidays together, such as New Year, 8th of March, Teacher's Day. We can have some kind of joint trips to the theater, cinema, cafes—it's all welcomed. We give each other presents. It is very important when you realize that this is not only your colleague, but also a friend, a comrade who will help you' (P4, English teacher, 23 years old). Conversely, conflicts and fragmentation of the school community hindered the achievement of MW, as competition and envy among colleagues generated a hostile and uncomfortable atmosphere. The informant showed exactly how the unwilling competition at work took place: 'If someone [a colleague] does it and everyone likes it, then I should do it too so that they [the school administration] won't forget about me' (P1, Math teacher, 25 years old). The reasonably broad age range of teachers and contradictions in the perception of the learning process led to frustration towards proactive colleagues: 'We have too much initiative at school. In my opinion, a little less is needed, as we must ensure that the school remains a serious educational institution rather than becoming solely a place for entertainment' (P10, Math teacher, 49 years old). Overall, the meaningfulness of teachers' work depended on mutual support, celebrations, and a lack of conflicts and atomization. Professional community was especially crucial for MW because of the daily face-to-face interactions and a tightly knit environment.

In contrast, tutors' involvement in the professional community was quite limited due to its online and voluntary nature. Some tutors viewed clients, such as parents of children, as partners and did not seek colleagues. Meanwhile, others engaged in online group chats and courses to foster professional connections and discuss work-related matters.

Geldenhuis and Johnson (2021) similarly noted that self-employed workers derived meaning from collaborating with others. Nonetheless, it was notable that despite earning a stable income, some tutors felt isolated from the community: 'I envied the guys who worked at CPM [a non-profit and non-governmental educational organization: the Center of Pedagogical Mastership]... They are drinking together there, and they go to the bathhouse... Well, that is, like they have some colleagues, they meet with them in person, and you can complain to them about work. I was pretty lonely, actually, working all the time [as a tutor]' (P8, tutor of Law, Social studies, 23 years old). Thus, tutor communities were voluntary and primarily online, though some sought face-to-face interactions.

The difference between tutors and teachers can be explained through the autonomy versus community lens (Bykov, 2023). Teachers are surrounded by a well-institutionalized community, actively participating in face-to-face interactions, and internalizing the values of the institutional framework (professional ethics). They value mutual help, positive interactions, and absence of conflicts as key for MW. In contrast, tutors are more autonomous, and even though a community of tutors exists, interactions are quite limited. Hence, tutors have no specific informal rules within their institutional framework, leading to a lesser emphasis on community characteristics for MW.

4.3 Defining the final work product according to institutional frameworks

The choice of the most meaningful work product was shaped by the values embedded in the institutional framework, impacting the perception of MW.

While teachers acknowledged the importance of academic achievements, non-academic outcomes were prioritized in defining MW: 'It is not so important for me whether they will have strong minds. It is important to make them good people' (P1, Math teacher, 25 years old). Turner and Thielking (2019) also emphasized the significance of non-academic outcomes for teachers. The professional ethics stressed the social responsibility of teachers, which included nurturing children and working with parents to address issues: 'a huge, huge share of time is devoted to upbringing, because children have conflicts, some kind of quarrels. Even today, literally, at half past three, I was sorting out why the boys fought' (P4, English teacher, 23 years old). This enhanced their MW, as society perceives teachers as moral role models who set positive examples, with some teachers aligning with the role's expectations: 'It's easy to live without photos in a swimsuit on social networks... or without any parties and so on' (P4, English teacher, 23 years old). However, some teachers acknowledged conflicts between their teaching role and other social roles, proposing limiting teaching responsibilities and expectations of 'ideal behavior' to the school environment: 'I believe that a teacher at school is a person who should demonstrate excellent behavior. But when the teacher goes outside the school, it is an ordinary person who can walk around in a swimming costume and smoke or drive an open-topped car and shout songs' (P13, Informatics and robotics teacher, 23 years old). These findings indicated that teachers experienced governmental and societal pressures to prioritize the moral upbringing of children, compelling them to act in a highly moral manner. Thus, institutional framework, grounded in societal values, shaped the prioritization of teachers' non-academic work product.

In contrast, tutors believed that demonstrating exceptional academic results by their pupils was crucial for achieving MW: ‘I thought: “Oh, what a smart kid, I’ll teach him till the 9th grade, he’ll graduate with a mark of 5 and I’ll tell everyone about it. It will be an advertisement for me, and it will be a blessing on my soul”’ (P16, Math tutor, 47 years old). Establishing a good reputation allowed them to utilize informal methods for finding clients, such as word-of-mouth marketing. Furthermore, tutors adopted a more individualized approach towards their clients (‘friendly mentoring’ form) to achieve better academic results. The trend towards individualization was also noted by Mikhaylova (2022). It proves the idea that tutors prioritize pupils’ academic success by utilizing marketing tools (e.g., good reputation, personalized approach, and positive feedback) to attract clients. This reflects capitalist values (Bykov, 2023) such as efficiency, competition, and profit. However, while some individuals go beyond tutoring roles, providing emotional support, it is important to note that these actions stem from the tutor’s personal goodwill rather than role expectations.

To sum it up, teachers and tutors prioritize academic and non-academic outcomes differently due to distinct institutional frameworks as teachers adhere to governmental and societal rules, while tutors operate within the regulations of the free market.

4.4 The power of prestige: institutionalization and professional status of an occupation

The public perception of an occupation is shaped by its ‘objective dignity’, which includes organizational policies, management practices, and worker interactions fostering self-respect (Laaser, 2021). These policies, as formal institutions, ensure secure employment terms, safe working conditions, fair rewards, and transparent monitoring, making highly institutionalized professions to be potentially prestigious and meaningful.

The teaching occupation is thoroughly institutionalized by the government and possesses ‘objective dignity’ (Laaser, 2021). Teachers associated the prestige of the profession with several aspects of their work, such as decent working conditions, official registration, paid vacations, and sick leave (see also Deranty & MacMillan, 2012). They also mentioned a good salary, respect from children, parents and society, and stringent qualification requirements (pedagogical degree). The government’s connection to teachers created a dependence on government policies and formed the societal status of teachers: ‘The view of parents is that teachers are people who are paid for by their taxes, so we supposedly owe everyone and everything’ (P7, Geography teacher, 24 years old). Given the profession’s institutionalization by the government and its interconnectedness, some officials propose elevating teachers to civil servant status to boost prestige. This includes aligning their salaries and benefits with those of government officials. Overall, the occupation of teachers achieved its status as a ‘profession’ (see Evetts, 2003) due to government institutionalization, but its prestige depended on factors like government policies.

In contrast, tutoring lacks formal institutions and ‘objective dignity’ (Laaser, 2021), leaving tutors vulnerable to client fraud and lacking equity safeguards. Tutoring operates based on market dynamics without centralized oversight, leading to ambiguity in tutors’ professional status. Some tutors viewed it as temporary work, while others preferred

informal arrangements, leaving them socially and economically vulnerable. Moreover, decent pay did not make the work meaningful: 'In the most profitable months I earned 100,000 rubles, not even working 40 hours a week, but still, there was no feeling that this was a real and decent job... and it's even difficult for me to introduce myself on Tinder and mention what I do for a living' (P8, tutor of Law, Social studies, 23 years old). Altogether, the institutional underdevelopment of the tutoring market led to uncertainty about whether tutoring could be called a 'profession' (see Evetts, 2003). The association with the informal economy and lack of social legitimacy for self-employment (see Stephan et al., 2020) created confusion around the status and the level of tutoring prestige.

5 Discussion

Research on MW is fragmented and lacks studies on diverse employment status. Wolfe and Patel's (2019) study found it challenging to compare employed and self-employed workers quantitatively. The absence of strong differences in the results can be explained now through the findings of the current research: the concepts of 'job importance' and 'job usefulness' can be seen as an operationalization of the 'global meaning' component of MW. Thus, employed, and self-employed workers assess the significance of their specialization to society in the same way. Nonetheless, it does not necessarily imply the absence of differences in the 'personal meaning' component of MW.

Quantitatively measuring differences in MW between employed and self-employed individuals is complex due to unclear underlying factors. This qualitative study proposes a model applicable to both forms of employment status, distinguishing MW into three dimensions: global meaning, personal meaning, and an institutional framework. While global meaning and institutional framework are relatively stable, personal meaning is dynamic, shaped by changing work conditions. This perspective views MW as a continuous process, derived from four domains of resources: work tasks, roles, interactions, and organizational contexts (Tan et al., 2023).

The research examined institutional frameworks and identified qualitative differences in the 'personal meaning' component in areas such as institutional legitimacy, work product, professional community, and occupational prestige. These variations have occurred because of distinct institutional frameworks that dictate individuals' conduct and are applicable not only in the Russian context.

(1) The subjective feeling of MW relies on the alignment between the personal values and the societal values (Bykov, 2023) within the job's institutional framework, whether it be a free-market or governmental organization. If values do not match, individuals seek autonomy outside this institutional system. When values align, the institutional framework feels legitimate, fostering acceptance and compliance. In the educational sector, teachers adhere to governmental and school instructions, thus, their personal values should coincide with the values of formal educational system to experience MW. On the contrary, tutors, acting as independent contractors, are expected to embrace free market principles such as competition, efficiency, profit, and the adept handling of market uncertainties.

(2) The key difference is found in relation to professional community and social relationships, which can be explained through community-autonomy theory (Bykov, 2023). Teachers operate within a well-institutionalized community, engaging in regular face-to-face interactions and embracing the values ingrained in the institutional framework, including professional ethics. That is why waged workers tend to find unity with others, avoid conflicts and atomization at the workplace to feel their work meaningful. Conversely, tutors are more autonomous, with their community existing primarily online and interactions being limited. The community role of tutors is ambiguous; some find it nonessential, while others seek online colleagues for a more meaningful work experience.

(3) Institutional frameworks determine the prioritization of work products, dividing them into academic and non-academic categories. The choice to prioritize one or another product of work is linked to the definition of success and what is specifically regarded by an individual as confirmation of good work (Kun & Gadanecz, 2022). Tutors prioritize academic results to attract new pupils by means of gaining favorable feedback on tutoring market websites (see also Nemkova et al., 2019), while schoolteachers focus on non-academic outcomes (see Turner & Thielking, 2019), fulfilling their societal role and moral obligations. While the product of work is important for both self-employed and employed workers to perceive their work as meaningful, they prioritize different types of results, which is explained by different institutional frameworks.

(4) The prestige of an occupation is found to be the last prominent difference in the MW of self-employed and employed workers. First, the prestige of teaching and tutoring occupations is defined by objective dignity (Laaser, 2021) – the level of institutionalization of the profession that set secure terms of employment, guarantee safe and healthy working conditions. Evetts (2003) highlights the critical role of institutionalization and ‘profession’ status in shaping occupational prestige. This study reveals unequal positioning of tutors and teachers in terms of institutionalization and professional recognition. The factors influencing their prestige vary based on the specific institutional framework. For teachers, it is linked to the power and respect of government policies, while for tutors, it hinges on the social legitimacy of self-employment.

This study has methodological limitations: social-desirability bias due to the sensitive MW topic, which was addressed using projective methods, and the unique traits of Russian public schools, not directly applicable to Western contexts, but valuable for other countries. The last limitation can be addressed by investigating workers from non-governmental organizations in the future. Finally, the sample size may limit generalizability, but it is deemed sufficient for the specific objectives of the research. The results can serve as a foundation for subsequent large-scale research.

Beyond theory, there are practical implications to consider: research findings can aid labor policymakers in enhancing job meaningfulness by accentuating positives and addressing drawbacks in institutionalized and under-institutionalized occupations, thereby reducing disguised unemployment.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Associate Professor Andrey Bykov, Candidate of Sciences (PhD) in Sociology, HSE University, for his exceptional guidance and collaboration throughout this research. His profound insights have been crucial to the development and success of this work.

I would also like to extend my sincere thanks to Yashar Isgandarov for his unwavering support. His encouragement helped me remain focused and motivated throughout the process.

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