

Well-being and meaning-making in the workplace: Expect what?

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Abstract

This proposal aims to present a work-in-progress of new ideas on the significance of our experiences of expectations; particularly the practical usefulness and meaning-making we can create through critical analysis of them. This will be highlighted through a case example of the authors' own experiential context of being an early-career social work academic within an interdisciplinary environment, from which a critical analysis model of expectations has emerged. Implications for achieving well-being and meaning-making through such a framework are highlighted, as well as identifying potential application elsewhere. To contribute to the ongoing development of these ideas and future research the author invites on-going dialogue and exchange from any discipline/practice field.

It will be argued that the workplace can be a significant environment of interaction for humans. As such, the value of work can be more than just functional activities resulting in payment that creates and supports our lifestyles. It is a place for connection with others, a place for achieving a sense of purpose, and thus a place of generating meaning that contributes to our health, well-being and identity. Crucial to this environment are our experiences of expectations – such as what to do (roles and responsibilities); how to do it (skill); and by when (time). The sources of these expectations can be multilayered beginning with ourselves and other micro interactions; as well as macro influences from elsewhere such as government policy. Being overburdened with unrealistic, demanding, excessive and unattainable expectations can lead to detrimental impacts upon our experience of work and thus health and well-being. This can be seen through consideration of extensive stress and burnout literature. Consequently, developing and maintaining a balance of expectations can be vital for achieving well-being and meaning within the workplace. A vehicle for this balance can be attained through critical analysis of expectations.

Key words: expectations, new academic experiences, workplace well-being.

1. Introduction: Critical analysis of expectations as a new academic

This paper focuses on exploring the meaningful significance of experiences of 'expectations' within the workplace. This exploration will occur through sharing my narrative as a new social work academic within an interdisciplinary Australian regional university setting. From this experiential context a critical analysis of workplace expectations occurred. This was in order to balance workload requirements and form a meaningful identity as a new academic. A particular core motivating element to this analysis was a desire to develop practical mechanisms for achieving a sense of purpose as the dominance of business driven agendas within universities can

be limited to language around ‘consumers’ and ‘outputs’. As identified by Goodman-Delahunty and Walker (2010) managerialist approaches within Australian universities has led to higher workload pressures and demands for academics to be product-driven. Such discourses within academia can neglect and thus be devoid of personal meaningfulness at times. This has been particularly highlighted by Petersen (2011), who explored narratives of early-career researchers. It was found that motivations to be within academia included meaning-making and enjoyment of learning. However, current systems overlook this in pursuit of outputs and as a result workers are questioning continuing employment within the academy. This raises particular concerns around current dominant discourses within academic structures as well as how individuals can maintain well-being and meaning-making.

As an academic I have found the importance of being focused by a sense of purpose and meaning to be core to my identity. Whilst this is central, a further complementing factor is ultimately well-being within the workplace; particularly in light of managerialist realities as well as stress and burnout that can be present, and tied to expectations that various parties uphold, including colleagues and managers. An established body of research within social work and human services practice for example, has revealed that high demands, top-down bureaucratic agendas, role conflicts, tight resources, time pressures and constantly changing practices can create dissatisfaction, stress and ultimately a loss of practitioners (see for example, Coffey, Dugdill & Tattersall, 2004; Huxley, Evans, Gately, Webber, Mears, Pajak, Kendall, Medina & Katona, 2005; Cherniss, 1995; Tham, 2007). Within these experiences can be the various expectations that are placed upon workers. When these are excessive, unrealistic and oppressive, the impacts upon health and well-being are high. This is noteworthy due to the relevance of work-settings, as these are spaces where significant time is spent for creating a standard of living and contributing to our quality of lives, particularly within capitalist waged based societies that are structured around such requirements (Wearing, 2005). However, drawing from the ideas and work of Viktor Frankl, creator of Logotherapy (2006), our existence as meaning-making beings requires consideration. It is argued in this paper that such desires are transferred into the context of our workplaces, encouraging us to reflect on questions like, what purpose and meaning does work create for me? As such, it is significant to consider our own purpose driven identities within our work-settings which can include developing and balancing relevant expectations that are embedded there and at times thrust upon us.

The term ‘expectation’ is defined here as a belief and/or anticipation (and thus expectation) of actions or events that will happen or not in any particular circumstance and can include believing one will receive something (Oxford English Dictionary online, 2011). In particular, Borg and Porter (2010) argue that expectations are crucial as they can form the basis of beliefs and thus influence action. Within the context of a workplace this can for example relate to beliefs and anticipation in how a role will be fulfilled and by whom, how or what skill and knowledge will be utilised, timeframes for the completion of work activities and the receipt of benefits and payment as a result. This can include the expectations you hold in relation to your own philosophies and actions as well as expectations you have of others. Additionally, this involves expectations others can place upon you. Whilst this definition may appear straightforward in some ways a considered exploration of these contexts reveals that our lives and everyday interactions can be constructed around expectations that are explicitly or implicitly expressed

through numerous sources. Further, each of these sources can have varying degrees of influence and legitimacy; as well as benefits and limitations that enhance or impact well-being and meaning-making.

A range of literature from varying disciplines has explored expectations within workplaces, particularly in terms of socialisation into new settings and performance outcomes (Taris, Feij & Capel, 2006) and; perceptions of workers (Gravett & Petersen, 2007; Lee, 2006), students (Ang & Huan, 2006), managers (Eden, 1990) and even clientele (Beake, Rose, Bick, Weavers & Wray, 2010; Borg & Porter, 2010; Constantino, Arnkoff, Glass, Ametrano & Smith, 2010). In particular DeWall, Pond and Bonser (2010) identified the important link between maintaining balanced expectations and well-being particularly from a psychological self-esteem angle for people in general. This is further supported by Durré (2010) who argues the significance of developing realistic employee expectations in order to avoid extreme disappointment within the workplace. Whilst this can be significant in bridging gaps between perceptions and reality of work it can neglect a wider structural view of sources of expectations that become enmeshed with one's experiences. As such, the literature can become limited to only individual-level perceptions of expectations. An exception to this comes from Borg (2010) who identifies the importance of social and cultural influences within our societies that shape individual perceptions of expectations.

This narrative follows in the footsteps of Borg (2010) by contributing to this knowledge base through exploring a holistic and multidimensional context of expectations. It aims to recognise the diverse inter-relational aspects an individual has, and the societal structures that contain dominant cultural and economic ideologies that directionally affect the micro/individual level. Using this holistic lens as part of critical analysis can lead to creating more focused and meaningful purpose-driven goals as we interact within the workplace.

The above position has arisen through my experiences of being a new social work academic. Transitioning into the world of academia has involved a major reconceptualisation and development of identity within this context as well as experiencing the stark realities and learning curves that exist within this competitive work setting. This includes understanding and taking on multilayered roles and facing the tradition of 'publish or perish'. Through addressing these diverse contexts and attempting to establish meaningful experiences, specific questions in relation to expectations arose such as: what expectations am I experiencing; what are the sources of these expectations; how legitimate are those sources; what are the benefits and limitations of these expectations; and what expectations can contribute to meaning-making and ultimately well-being? These questions formed a framework for critical analysis contributing to my well-being and meaning generation as a result. Key questions and ongoing dialogue raised through this critical analysis and narrative will be highlighted subsequently in order to draw out implications of this framework and opportunities for exploring these ideas further.

2. What expectations are present within the work setting?

This initial question was posed at a significantly early phase of being within academia. At that point, clearer understandings of the work-setting and what it meant to fulfil the role were being explored. Personal reflections and management/structural requirements were a key factor in this examination. Management requirements (and thus expectations) were communicated through various mechanisms such as probation meetings; mentoring, conversations with colleagues and university standards. These experiences were an impetus for mapping the range of expectations within this environment, particularly through recognising the diverse roles academics are expected to embody. Lyons and Doueck for example (2010) provide a clear outline of academic activities as including: knowledge generation through research; knowledge dissemination through publication and presentation; knowledge transfer through teaching and; knowledge application within policy and practice settings. This reveals a multilayered academic identity embedded in a range of roles and responsibilities that are constructed around diverse expectations. Within the context of my experience these expectations have been formed mostly around three key roles: teaching, research and administration. Within teaching for example, expectations include developing effective practice embedded within a teaching philosophy, as well as embracing multiple technological mechanisms for engaging with diverse student populations who study internally and/or externally. I soon realised that various parties express expectations as to what effective and quality teaching practice can include. In particular, identified common university teaching standards for academics to fulfil have been communicated by university management and include applying relevant expertise, timely communication with students, efficient return of assessment items containing quality feedback, and being committed to meeting student needs (Division of Learning and Teaching Services, 2011). This provides a solid base from which to consider expectations and build practice from. However, meeting such expectations includes questioning how these are placed within one's own identity and practice. Additionally, this requires maintaining connections with the social work profession and practice field to sustain current knowledge; adding further identity layers of expectations within this environment as membership across a range of settings is juggled. Agbim and Ozanne (2007) highlight the potential difficulties of this as they discuss the pressures and realities of social work academics attempting to balance responsibilities to their university, profession and communities, all of which may contain conflicting values and agendas (and as such, expectations). Consideration of how expectations are communicated explicitly and implicitly within the university setting emphasises this point. Whilst the common teaching standards provide some explicit ideas of expectations within teaching, a range of implicit beliefs of work are also communicated. One such example is facilitating classes with growing numbers of students due to the Australian governments commitment to increasing university graduates in light of reviews of the Higher Education System (Bradley, Noona, Nugent & Scales, 2008). Consequently, the message communicated to academics is that workloads can be effectively fulfilled whilst maintaining quality standards in teaching delivery and addressing diverse needs of students. This is despite ongoing concerns and pressures expressed within academic settings, including social work disciplines and professional bodies (Agbim & Ozanne, 2007; Bay, 2011). The consumerist business/managerialist model underpinning current ideology within Australian settings is also revealed here as academics are expected to be vigilant of addressing the needs of students who are at times referred to as 'customers' or 'consumers'. These experiences highlight a range of subsequent questions to be addressed as a new academic, including what is my teaching philosophy and framework? How do I fulfil these responsibilities? Are they fair, realistic and attainable? And more importantly, what meaning do they have to me? Similar themes and questions are raised within the roles of researcher and administrator through expectations of

increased outputs through research and maintaining contributions to the university community such as through committee membership.

Mapping these roles and responsibilities quickly revealed diverse expectations converging upon my academic identity. The benefit to this was a clearer identification of explicit and implicit messages of expectations present within my work-setting that could be further deconstructed. Alternatively, the realities and potential pressures of these expectations could be highlighted considering tight deadlines for subject administration and delivery set by university management for example, and various stakeholders asserting their positions of expectations, leading to the next key question within this critical analysis framework.

3. What are the sources of these expectations?

After initial mapping and exploration of expectations, the varied sources influencing this experiential context began to emerge quite clearly across micro, meso and macro layers of interaction, representing the holistic and multidimensional interconnectedness of experiences of expectations. Analysis of the micro level began with reflection upon my own expectations within this setting, including what I thought constituted effective, quality and meaningful academic work. This involved scrutinising experiences, knowledge and practice for improvements. However, determining what improvements were needed became an ongoing process of reflection in light of theory, evaluation and engagement with the expectations of others. As such, the micro context constantly interacted (voluntarily and involuntarily) with the meso, which included direct contact with academic literature, colleagues from a range of discipline and practice backgrounds, university management and students. Once again this highlighted the interconnected web of expectations due to diverse sources expressing their own perceptions, needs and thus expectations of work. Whilst the university has expressed expectations within common teaching standards for example, students' expectations can still vary significantly and are communicated to staff regularly. At times, this reflects the prevalence of the consumerist model due to 'I expect...' phrases. Periodically, this can occur without necessarily understanding the multiple roles and responsibilities academics attempt to embody; becoming a further aspect of practice requiring effective and meaningful action that addresses and balances these ranges of views and expectations. Finally, the macro layer incorporates the totality of the university system as well as other societal structures including academic communities and tertiary education sectors that transcend national borders, governments that implement education policy, and wider cultural influences such as a Westernised context embedded in dominant neoliberalism and economic rationalist ideologies (Healy, 2005). These numerous systems, institutions and structures express their own expectations of what constitutes academic work and can ultimately filter back into the micro layer and be experienced in many ways. As identified, this has included an increase in student numbers, a standard of teaching being expressed, and anticipation of certain research outputs. Collectively analysing these aspects raises questions around their equity, realism and legitimacy as expectations.

4. What is the legitimacy of these sources?

In identifying sources of expectations, questions around their legitimacy, as well as power to influence work-setting experiences were subsequently highlighted, explored and in some cases deconstructed. Questions were asked about each expectation and source in terms of: do I really need to follow through on this and who has power in this context? Developing responses to this involved gaining knowledge and understanding of systems including policies and procedures. An example was identifying my capability to assertively decline expectations of others, such as teaching methods they may have suggested to me. This provided an avenue to sift through the diverse and multiple opinions that could be asserted upon my practice and thus expectations of what to do, how to do and by when. The result of which involved developing more effective responses to colleagues and management in light of knowing and understanding systems and the limits to their power. Consequently, a more informed position was developed and incorporated into my academic identity and thus translated into relevant action. This included evaluating and implementing what I came to know as the most appropriate teaching methods in light of my identity. Such reflection provided room to analyse the benefits and limitations of each expectation in terms of my own practice framework and ultimately identify avenues for meaning-making.

5. What are the benefits and limitations to these expectations?

This question centred on exploring the impact, both positive and negative, of work expectations. The former aspect to this allowed consideration of expectations that contributed, enhanced and motivated my work, particularly in terms of contributions to well-being and meaning-making. One such example relates to the expected use of technology which can enhance teaching practice, particularly in relation to connecting more effectively with external students who can be dispersed geographically. Being able to communicate and facilitate learning through online environments changes traditional philosophies in relation to teaching, as well as meaningfully adhering to personal practice frameworks and student needs. However, a limitation to this expectation is finding the time and resources for learning new technology and incorporating this efficiently into practice; another reality of time pressures within academia. Further to this is identifying expectations that negatively influence the work setting, and thus well-being. This can include excessive levels of expectations such as high workload demands and time pressures to complete activities. Reflection here allowed for identification of such excessive expectations. This led to a process of sorting and organising expectations to consider what can ideally fit within my lived experience, as well as clearly identifying problem areas that can threaten well-being and ignore meaning-making. Such contemplation created a cyclical process of analysis as identification of such expectations and limitations facilitated further reflection upon legitimacy and power of sources. This filtered into developing a meaningful work environment through consciously taking on relevant expectations and shedding what was possible; the final aspect to this critical analysis framework.

6. What expectations can contribute to meaning-making?

Addressing this question involved bringing together reflections from previous components to this analysis and coherently developing goals, priorities, strategies and ultimately actions in light of personal meaning-making. In particular this allowed for the development of specific meaningful expectations, particularly around research directions for example. These were incorporated into my academic practice, and allowed for filtering out others that were determined to be unrealistic

or unnecessary. More importantly a conscious effort was made to responding effectively to expectations through identifying areas for attention such as how the teaching/student relationship will be conceptualised and acted upon. As such, rather than becoming potentially paralysed by expectations they were incorporated into my work setting in a more meaningful way and achieved a sense of balance and well-being.

7. Implications and opportunities for work practices and experiences

From this narrative, the benefits of critically analysing experiences of expectations allowed for a systematic deconstruction for considered reflection. This facilitated identification of diverse expectations including sources of influence. Scrutinising these sources and expectations in terms of legitimacy, benefits and limitations led to consciously incorporating relevant expectations into work practices. The end result was a practical ability to make decisions embedded in meaningfulness, which contributed to a sense of balance and well-being within academia.

A range of further implications and opportunities from this analysis can be identified. First, this has shown the potential range of expectations that can exist within a work-setting and as such one's interactions and experiences can be constructed around these. Identifying these allows for scrutiny and dialogue around what is equitable, justifiable and realistic within work environments from which meaning can derive. Subsequently, this critical analysis framework establishes opportunities for dialogue between colleagues, management and other relevant stakeholders for consideration of expectations. For example, within teaching this can include facilitating open conversations and negotiations with students around expectations within learning environments. Such opportunities open avenues for further research and action in these areas. Applicability within social work theory and practice is another option for further exploration as clinical practitioners can consider the implications of expectations within the lives of service participants who at times may be experiencing functionality issues related to excessive expectations experienced personally and socially. This approach would provide an avenue to complement holistic multidimensional approaches within social work that emphasise consideration of micro, meso and macro layers of interaction and influence evident within lives of clients.

Second, such analysis can lead to developing visibility of expectations, particularly implicit/subtle messages that can be communicated. Consequently, this highlights power relations as well as opportunities for re-conceptualisation of one's own sense of agency. In this case, a deconstruction of my expectation sources and their legitimacy highlighted gaps and opportunities for decision-making processes and action. Through developing knowledge of systems in particular I was able to incorporate the power I had to construct work philosophies and practices, thus providing room for balance, well-being and meaningful action.

Third, ongoing change within work environments requires continual understanding, negotiation and compromise to find balance and generate meaning, through which this framework can be utilised consistently. As shown here, it allows for highlighting the interconnectedness of expectations between multiple layers of interaction. This creates a more holistic exploration of expectations experienced in light of diverse human and structural relations and influences that are

continually experienced, sometimes in new and different ways. Questions remain however, in terms of addressing structural issues and balancing power differentials within the workplace setting. This should include consideration of coercive use of power, particularly as individuals navigate influential top-down structures (Abercrombie, Hill & Turner, 2000) that impact expectations and experiences.

Finally, this particular critical analysis neglected to explore connections to sources outside of work that can be just as powerful and influential, particularly when family members are dependent upon our work for providing a means of living. However, this can be incorporated where relevant and highlights the individualised nature of people's experiences of expectations. Consequently, the usefulness of this framework can be applied across others areas of lived experience as people interact within many domains, such as family, friendships, relationships, social, cultural, political, health, fashion and beauty, and economic expectations. This can allow for wider analysis for achieving well-being and meaning-making within the totality of our lived experience, and in particular achieving balance between work/life.

8. Conclusion

The value of work cannot be underestimated in light of the opportunities afforded to meet our identity and existential purpose-driven needs. It is however, an environment constructed around diverse expectations in terms of beliefs and anticipations of roles, as well as sources influencing our conceptualisations of work and actions. This paper has allowed experiences as a new social work academic to become an impetus for exploring the significance of expectations within the work environment and deriving meaning and well-being from this through critical analysis. The results from this experience led to psychological and practical benefits as I: re-conceptualised how I viewed my relationship with others and sense of agency within the institution; re-focused what expectations really mattered and others that could be dismissed; and finally developed targeted, achievable and meaningful goals within the workplace. This brought about a better sense of balance and created a focus on what it meant to be an academic, including finding a place within such an environment and future avenues for continuing to maintain well-being and generating meaning.

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