

REVIEW ARTICLE

Qualitative research output on the meaning of work in Latin America, 2010-2023

ABSTRACT

This study used a qualitative approach in the form of a systematic review, specifically using concept maps to analyze research conducted by Latin American authors on the subject of the meaning of work. The analysis covered research studies published on academic databases from 2010 to 2023. The primary aim of this study was to identify common themes and theoretical frameworks derived from the body of research. Another aim of this study was to draw attention to the limitations of existing research and to explore innovative approaches to the understanding of human talent. The study also discussed future research pathways in the field of the meaning of work. The study findings revealed that there is a significant number of qualitative-based publications that address current issues related to traditional and non-traditional employee groups. Even so, this study revealed a key area to further develop: qualitative studies focused on the overlap of artificial intelligence, automation and related technologies destined to affect both the nature of work and human capital management, since these emerging technological trends will invariably influence the way in which employees think about work, thereby affecting how they regard its sense and importance.

Keywords: Meaning; Work; Concept map; Latin America.

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INTRODUCTION

A systematic literature review was performed to identify qualitative-based papers on the subject of the meaning of work. The vast majority of research on the construct termed ‘meaning of work’ was published in English for many years, using the generic term *meaning*, which was translated into Romance languages as both *significado* (meaning) and *sentido* (sense). This research focused only on the term *sentido* as a main descriptor. In order to ensure the correct exploration and collection of published data, the information was filtered by keywords, topics and publication dates. The main descriptor, both in singular and plural forms, was combined in Spanish—as well as its equivalents in Portuguese—with Boolean operators and the terms to be applied for relevant literature search were refined as [(*sentido* AND *trabajo*) OR (*sentido* AND *trabalho*)].

The explored themes were limited to publications within the fields of business administration, human resource management, human resources, psychology of labor, and sociology of work, with dates ranging from January 2010 to March 2023. The research databases were available online through Pedro Zulen Central Library from Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos, in the city of Lima, Peru. The indexed data bases reviewed were: EbescoHost, Dialnet (Sistema de Información Científica Redalyc, online archive of Spanish-language scientific papers), Latindex (Sistema Regional de Información en Línea para Revistas Científicas de América Latina, el Caribe, España y Portugal), LILACS (Literatura Latino-Americana e do Caribe em Ciências da Saúde), ProQuest, SciELO (Scientific Electronic Library Online), Sciences Direct, Scopus, Taylor & Francis, and Web of Science. The initial review provided 296 results. Those publications which did not come from indexed journals and those using linguistic, semantic and/or thematic terms close to, but not matching, the initial filtering and exclusion criteria were eliminated. A total of 39 results remained, which were then read and fully analyzed to be evaluated under rigorous conceptual and methodological criteria. Finally, 24 publications relevant for this systematic review were selected.

Morin (2001) and Morin *et al.* (2007) defined the meaning of work as an effective representation of the act of working, developed through the perception and reproduction of sense. In other words, the meaning of work is subjective and varies from individual to individual, and is built through the experiences from the work environment. Bianchi (2018) stated that the theoretical overviews of the meaning of work in the last 50 years intend to highlight the concepts and determining factors of this construct. This led to the production of a rich body of research using various theoretical, epistemological and methodological approaches which defined the meaning of work as a multifaceted social construct that becomes a continuous, dynamic process covering the professional career of an individual. As a consequence, the results of research on the meaning of work have been fragmented and even contradictory, which has resulted in this research field being considered difficult to interpret as a whole (Rosso *et al.*, 2010). However, studies on the meaning of work have demonstrated their particular importance in human capital management due to their impact on work-related behavior, satisfaction, motivation, commitment, productivity, performance, identity, absenteeism, empowerment, stress, sense of identification, employability, resilience, creativity, ethics, well-being, and overall life satisfaction, among others (Rosso *et al.*, 2010).

Academic research on the subject of the meaning of work began in the 1950s, when Morse and Weiss (1955) published a seminal work that confirmed the key role of work in people’s lives. Ever since, the concept has been reviewed and expanded by several authors (Kaplan & Tausky, 1974; Tausky, 1969; Vecchio, 1980). These studies, to a lesser or greater extent, were influenced by the utilitarian view on employees’ role in an industrialized society. In spite of this, they confirmed the importance and value of work in people’s lives. A second and very prolific stage in the study of the meaning of work took place in a post-industrialization period, where employees’ opinions, attitudes, insights and cultures became significant elements to define the meaning of work. The results of a study by the MOW International Research Team (MOW, 1987) conclusively established the impact of social norms and the

dependence on the goals valued by employees in relation to the meaning of work. Around the same period, one of the first formal academic models of the meaning of work was published (Roberson, 1990), explaining the construct in relation to three basic dimensions: centrality, work values, and work orientation. The third stage of illustrated approach to the meaning of work took place during the processes of globalization, the fourth industrial revolution and the expansion of neoliberalism, when the new production, economic and technological models reconstructed the concepts of the world of work and the work-human duality, with profound individual and organizational implications (Bedoya, 2017). Modern-day employees face new work-related situations where the meaning of their work is constantly being constructed and deconstructed (De Cuyper *et al.*, 2008; Gifford, 2022; Irigaray *et al.*, 2019; Raj and Seamans, 2019; Wang and Siau, 2019; Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001). In the 1980s, during the first stages of globalization, there was a significant interest in understanding the meaning of work among expatriates and Western managers working in Asia (Campbell, 1985; Chow *et al.*, 1987). However, as globalization continued to move forward, there was increasing awareness in academia of the need to include approaches related to the meaning of work among migrant professionals and Eastern managers working in Western countries (Wang *et al.*, 2017, Zhang *et al.*, 2022). Yet there is still an academic void in relation to the meaning of work among Latin American professionals working in Asia.

Although the amount of research output in Latin America on the meaning of work has been limited, it grew during the late 20th century and the early 21st century through theoretically significant contributions and numerous quantitative studies. Qualitative research outputs from the region have not been as numerous, and were not grouped together by using concept maps in an attempt to form a solid scientific body of work (Arellano and Santoyo, 2016). It is important to highlight that a fundamental limitation of this study was the fact that a majority of the qualitative reports come from a single country.

AIMS OF THE PAPER

1. To present valid and relevant information regarding Latin American studies using qualitative methods, retrieved from academic databases, on the meaning of work construct dated from 2010 to 2023.
2. To present standardized information regarding the theoretical and practical findings of the qualitative analysis performed on Latin American qualitative scientific publications related to the meaning of work.
3. To evidence that Latin American qualitative research outputs on the meaning of work is highly significant for the expansion of the body of knowledge and the practice of human capital management, especially in the region.

To establish potential new qualitative research avenues in the region for the meaning of work construct.

ARGUMENTATIVE REVIEW

Each article was read in depth, gaining an analytical and contextual understanding of their methodological approaches, research methods and instruments, as well as their results. Then, thanks to the use of the concept map technique developed by Arellano and Santoyo (2016), the individual data collected were integrated, leading to a collective view of the papers. This made it possible to understand the specific goal of these contributions and the future challenges described by the qualitative research analyzed.

The type of work performed or assumed by the research participants is the common factor linked to the existence of the meaning of work among workers. A true meaning cannot exist if the individual does not identify as a worker or assume this role (Rosso *et al.*, 2010). In addition, groups of miscellaneous issues linked to the meaning of work (see Table 1) were identified, such as the work context (four mentions), working conditions and job satisfaction (three mentions each), as well as gender issues, preconceptions, discrimination, stereotypes, survival, appreciation, pleasure and suffering, and

working history (one mention each). The theoretical standpoints reflected in the publications to interpret the meaning of work were dissimilar, which is expected from qualitative studies (Flick, 2015). In publications using a single theory or model as a theoretical foundation, Social Constructivism was the most employed theory (five publications), followed by Morin's Theoretical Model (three mentions), and the Psychodynamics of Work (two publications). Additionally, real-life context, grounded theory,

phenomenology, psychoanalysis and the theory of social representations provided theoretical foundations for four studies. Finally, nine publications used two theories or models simultaneously, with Morin's theoretical model being used three times, followed by functionalism and MOW, each with two mentions.

With regard to the choice of participants, most studies applied a single method for selection, with volunteer sampling in the first place (five

Table 1

Analysis of academic publications with qualitative methods

Publication	Main issues linked to the meaning of work / Theoretical perspective(s)	Citations
Psicología: Teoría e Prática	Type of work, work conditions, effects of work / Psychodynamics of work	90
Revista Estudos Feministas	Type of work, gender, sexual division of labor / Social constructionism	14
Revista ADM.MADE	Type of work, sexual orientation, work context / Social constructionism	17
Revista Escola de Enfermagem da USP	Type of work, job satisfaction, social contribution of work / Real-life context	9
Revista de Administração Mackenzie	Type of work, financial independence, social fulfillment, identity, appreciation, development, satisfaction, flexibility, calling, occupation, life history, work conditions / social constructionism / Psychodynamics of work and social integration / Morin's theoretical model / Job crafting model and symbolic convergence theory / Psychoanalysis / Social constructionism and Morin's theoretical model	131/7/ 4/1/4/ 22
Psicoperspectivas Individuo y Sociedad	Type of work, emotions, reintegration / Grounded theory	39
Sociedade, Contabilidade e Gestão	Type of work, ageing, preconception / Work appropriation and centrality	22
Equidad & Desarrollo	Type of work, work conditions / Phenomenology	3
Revista Alcance	Type of work, bureaucracy, work context / Morin's theoretical model	2
Cadernos de Psicologia Social do Trabalho	Type of work, public invisibility, social discreditation / Functionalism and Morin's theoretical model	8
Psicologia & Sociedade	Type of work, occupation, independence, survival / Psychosocial processes of diversity and inclusion at work	9
Revista Pensamento & Realidade	Type of work, autonomy, hierarchy, family / Social constructionism	4
Revista de Ciências da Administração	Type of work, work context, appreciation, satisfaction / Functionalism and MOW	2
Revista Brasileira de Estudos Organizacionais	Work history, retirement, pleasure, suffering / Psychodynamics of work	2
Cadernos EBAPE.BR	Type of work, work context, hierarchy, type of work, gender, stereotype / Theory of social representations / MOW and Morin's theoretical model	0/1
Cogent Psychology	Type of work, own and other people's perception / Social constructionism	17
Revista Psicologia: Organizações & Trabalho	Type of work, work history, recognition / Morin's theoretical model	3
Revista Brasileira de Enfermagem	Type of work, work context, motivation, pleasure and suffering / Analysis of inferences and interpretations	0

Note. Prepared by the author, 2023.

publications), followed by purposive sampling (three), and snowball sampling (four). Nine articles used two types of sampling, while three did not state the sampling method used. There was a wide range of employee sample sizes, with a minimum of one and a maximum of 50 individuals. Three studies had the largest number of individuals, four included 10 individuals, and three had seven participants. The participants' ages ranged between 18 and 87 years. They were of both sexes and from cities. No ethnic or rural groups were included among the participants. The employees' occupations were greatly varied, from public and private sector workers to professionals in several occupations, including liberal professions, healthcare, education, engineering, architecture, arts, personal care, trade, security and protection, industrial and other service workers. Work hierarchy was considered in four publications, and included heads, managers, directors, and business owners. Most of the participants were employed, receiving direct or indirect payment, while a group of participants generated their own income through their professional activities. Only one group was not actively at work; it was made up of retired individuals. No publication included individuals in voluntary or pro bono work. Regarding the data collection techniques, 16 publications only used semi-structured interviews, while four reports used in-depth interviews. Other techniques, namely focus group, life history, narrative interview and structured interview, were used once each. Similarly, four studies used two techniques alongside the semi-structured interview: focus group, participant observation, in-depth interview, and projective picture test. One publication used three techniques as a block, and another used four techniques. It is worth noting that two publications did not clearly state the techniques used. In relation to the data analysis techniques, 13 publications used content analysis, followed by discourse analysis and narrative analysis (two mentions each), and thematic network analysis (one publication). Four studies used two analysis techniques, while only one study reported the use of three techniques. One of the studies does not mention the analysis techniques used. All the studies used audio records of the

interviews, which were later fully transcribed for text analysis. Six studies used specialized software AtlasTi® for qualitative data analysis through labeling.

From a geographical point of view, Brazil was the country with the largest research output, with 87.51% of publications, followed by Colombia with 8.33% and Chile with 4.16%. The annual average number of publications within the study period was 1.84. The year with the largest number of qualitative research studies was 2018, with 33.3% of the total number of publications, followed by 2019 with 6.66% and 2013 with 12.50%. A total of 18 journals published qualitative studies within the study period. Regarding the fields of inquiry, 44.46% of the publications were in the field of Management, followed by 33.3% in Psychology, 11.11% in Health, and 5.55% in Sociology and Feminism. In relation to the economic and production sectors, a majority of publications (87.51%) were in the public and private service sectors, including trade, healthcare, education, arts, banking, information technology, public security, and individual professional services. Industry constituted 4.16% of the total research output, while 8.32% of publications were on the informal and retired worker segment. Regarding authorship, each author reported a single publication within the study period. The total number of citations was 407, with the top cited authors being Pinto *et al.*, 2013, (131 citations); Chalfin Coutinho *et al.*, 2011 (90 citations); Bustos and Cornejo, 2014 (39 citations); Irigaray *et al.*, 2019 (22 citations); Nascimento *et al.*, 2019 (22 citations); Silva *et al.*, 2013 (17 citations); Bernal-Torres *et al.*, 2020 (17 citations), and Graf and Coutinho, 2012 (14 citations).

CONCLUSIONS

Compared to other countries in the region, Brazil stands out in its research output in the field of the meaning of work within the 2010-2023 study period. This may be tentatively explained by means of a series of factors, such as lack of interest or knowledge of the meaning of work within the scientific community, together with a lack of resources and support for research. Even though Brazil encounters similar social influences, perhaps the best explanations for

the larger number of publications may be the development of its own theoretical contributions as an internal factor with external contributing factors, the widely-spread awareness that the country has solid labor legislation in relation to employee protection, and the active influence of trade unions which help labor remain a central social issue. Lastly, we should not ignore the fact that Brazil is the strongest economic power in Latin America.

The majority of qualitative research studies on the above-mentioned construct were published between 2018 and 2019. Some focused on labor groups which are usually included in academic studies related to the meaning of work such as artists, individuals in 'dirty' jobs, police officers, women, among others. This suggests that efforts are being made to expand the understanding of the meaning of work beyond typically studied labor groups, with key implications for a comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon. However, the average number of qualitative study publications on the meaning of work in the region continues to be relatively small, suggesting that there is still a long way to go in terms of research using this methodology.

In most of the 24 publications, it becomes apparent that the interpretations of the meaning of work go beyond the typical associations of this construct, and were analyzed together with aspects of workers' lives such as their mental and physical health, quality of life, work-life balance, identity, and the sense of belonging to a social group. Many of the publications stressed the importance of understanding the meaning of work, not merely as an individual dimension, but also as a social and cultural phenomenon influenced by personal, historical, political, and economic factors. Undoubtedly, not all the findings of qualitative research studies on the meaning of work can be easily translated into practical or immediate uses for human resource professionals. However, they do provide valuable theoretical guidance for the creation of managerial strategies and policies in the field of human resources. This is how these studies can contribute to a more effective and satisfactory management of personnel in organizations, which may in turn have a positive impact on business outcomes.

It is important to highlight that the meaning of work model developed by Brazilian researcher Morin (Gripp *et al.*, 2022; Prado *et al.*, 2021; Medeiros *et al.*, 2018; Petri and Vaz, 2018) has been used in several qualitative studies. This is an academic incentive that encourages the use of local theoretical viewpoints to develop research and knowledge production in relation to this construct, relating it to its impact on human capital management in organizations and informed decision-making for public policy related to the world of work in the region.

Finally, reflexive theoretical and applied scholarship in the field of the meaning of work has not ended. The results suggest that, in the future, qualitative research studies will be performed considering the views of other participant groups such as highly qualified workers and those whose jobs are jeopardized or challenged by automation and the emergence of artificial intelligence and other new technologies. Research into these aspects can help understand how workers adapt to job market transformations, and how the meaning of work adopts new shapes in a digital, automated era. The proposed research will help guide a better formulation of public policy and business strategies for human resource management adapting to the changes in the job market and promoting workers' personal and professional self-actualization in the new world of work.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Author contributions

José Eduardo Bringas-Acevedo (lead author): formal analysis, research, methodology, supervision, validation, data visualization, writing (original draft, reviewing and editing).

Brando Boza Ccoyllar (co-author): conceptualization, formal analysis, research, methodology, project management, software, supervision, validation, data visualization, writing (original draft, reviewing and editing).