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THE MEANING OF WORK IN MALAŴI

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Abstract: Human resources are increasingly seen as vital to developing nations, but studies of work motivation remain focused on manager elites rather than the general workforce, and on motivation 'at' particular workplaces rather than the wider meaning 'of' work in societies at large. In an adaptation of Morse and Weiss's classic study on the meaning of work, one hundred Malaŵian workers from a variety of occupations were asked whether they would continue to work even if they were given enough money to retire comfortably. Sixty-four per cent said that they would continue to stay at work, predominantly for reasons of security, while the wider meaning of work might entail the narrative typology of owning one's own business. The Western notion of need hierarchy may be irrelevant to Malaŵian workers, many of whom can never be certain of basic security, while the common sense of purpose in owning a small business gives credence to the policy of bottom up, community-driven economic reform. © 1997 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

In the wake of various macro-economic reforms (e.g. Kiggundu, 1990b), development efforts are once again focusing on the human factor (Moghaddam, 1996). Naturally enough, the management of these resources has been accorded particular importance (Blunt and Jones, 1992). One of the most fundamental tasks in that regard is to develop an accurate understanding of work motivation (Kao and Ng, 1996) and demotivation (Carr, 1996). This may be particularly so in sub-Saharan Africa (Munro, 1986). Here, as Munene (1995) for example points out, there tends to be a dearth of empirical evidence. Instead we often find layer upon layer of anecdotal

prescription, each of which is reminiscent of Theory X (McGregor, 1960). Munro (1996) observes that international writers on African organizations locate the causes of alleged demotivation in the employees, rather than organizational demands and their interactions with wider socio-cultural factors. MacLachlan (1993) describes how senior expatriate managers often make disparaging remarks about the aptitudes of African management trainees. And following what is often a Western-style training (Jones, 1991), Kiggundu (1990a) reports that African managers tend to subscribe to a 'myth of worker indolence' about their subordinates (p. 148). Psychologists have investigated the accuracy of 'lay' theories (e.g. Furnham, 1988), warning in particular of a Western-style tendency to blame behaviour on people rather than circumstances (Smith and Bond, 1993). These circumstances may include aid and development settings (e.g. Carr, 1996; Carr, McLoughlin, Hodgson and MacLachlan, 1996). The present study therefore aimed to investigate work motivation in one particular African nation, Malaŵi.

Largely because of the dearth of reliable data, writers and practitioners are obliged to turn to the classic but rather well-worn cross-cultural studies by Hofstede (1980) and Haire *et al.* (1966). The latter in particular has been replicated in Africa, including Malaŵi (Blunt and Jones, 1980; Jones, 1988, 1991). Based on a survey of 105 middle managers, largely from the private sector, Blunt and Jones (1986) concluded that Maslow's (1954) notion of a 'need hierarchy' structure is relevant to Malaŵi. Like their counterparts from other developing countries, Malaŵian managers tended to report more dissatisfaction with the so-called 'higher-order' needs at work (Jones, 1988). Jones also suggested that contextual factors, such as the national stage of economic development, could influence the order in which Maslow's needs are arranged (1988). Compared with esteem and social needs for example, Malaŵian managers were relatively job dissatisfied with security, which is normally considered a basic 'lower-order' need in Western settings, while in 1986 Blunt and Jones also reported that Malaŵian managers, like Kenyans and Liberians, rated security as their most important job need.

Under the Scalogram-type logic implicit in such research, comparative dissatisfaction elevates the need in question. In any Malaŵian hierarchy of needs, security would be elevated above esteem and social needs. While agreeing entirely with Jones' general proposition that work motivation often reflects a dynamic interplay between 'etic' (universal) and 'emic' (local) factors (see for example, Carr and MacLachlan, 1997), we began to feel somewhat uncomfortable with the assumption of linear hierarchy implied by Blunt and Jones' model. Concern with security for instance might not be something that follows *from* the meeting of other needs (like 'esteem'), as a luxury so-to-speak. Even Maslow himself suggested that some degree of security is a precursor for beginning to address other needs in any kind of 'hierarchical' manner. Perpetual insecurity might therefore render the whole notion of 'hierarchy' groundless. Motivational pluralism would arguably become a much more adaptive way to live and work (Carr, McAuliffe, and MacLachlan, in press).

Methodologically, Jones' sample contained 17 per cent government employees, a proportion that he would have liked to have been higher (Jones, 1988, p. 488). The Conference on Civil Service Reform (CCSR) in sub-Saharan Africa, which was organized by the Overseas Development Administration (ODA), identified the civil service sector both as a place of demotivation and as an intended 'motive force for development' (Blunt and Jones, 1992, p. 8; ODA, 1989). Civil servants apart, the

world of private sector managers still excludes the vast majority of employees, most of whom perform essential work for thankless pay. This same exclusionist focus was the basis for Herzberg's and possibly other 'humanistic' theories of motivation at work (Blunt and Jones, 1992). We therefore decided to survey a cross-section of Malaŵian workers, including civil servants.

With their focus on hierarchy and the meeting of needs, Maslowian-type theories and related research (e.g. Blunt and Jones, 1986) have tended to focus on motivation *at* work rather than the wider meaning *of* work (e.g. Munene, 1995; Simpson and Simpson, 1995). The former typically comprises tangible variables in the specific workplace, such as 'expectancy', 'incentive', and 'performance' (Henry and Stricklund, 1994; Locke and Latham, 1990), whereas the latter encompasses values associated with work in general, such as 'work centrality', 'success', and 'societal norms' (Richins and Rudmin, 1994; Ruiz-Quintanilla and Wilpert, 1990). Negligence of wider social norms in particular has been suggested to be a significant barrier to the sustainability of organizational development projects (Blunt and Jones, 1992), and in many African cultures, work is considered inseparable from outside life (Munro, 1996; Templer *et al*., 1992). Ahiazu (1986) describes empirical research into the meanings of work for Africans as a question of 'persistent interest'. Yet a 1995–96 search of the Psychlit database (search terms 'meaning of work' and 'work motivation') failed to reveal a single study on the meaning of work in Africa. We therefore decided to make meaning of work the focus of our assessment.

In that regard, it was decided to replicate a classic study of the meaning of work, originally conducted in the Western setting of North America (Morse and Weiss, 1955). Since the original study however, its basic methodology has demonstrated some validity and informativeness (Warr, 1982), and has subsequently been adopted as the standard in a wide variety of major international projects (e.g. Chan *et al*., 1992; Harpaz, 1989; Meaning of Work International Research Team, 1987). Most recently, the technique has been applied in Australia to expose a 'work motive illusion', whereby foreigners may be presupposing that the meaning of work for Australians is purely materialistic (Jones *et al*., 1995; see also, Williams, 1983). The potential parallels with a 'myth of worker indolence' and 'Theory X' are clear.

By asking people whether they would continue to work even in the absence of financial necessity, Morse and Weiss discovered that for most workers sampled, from various income brackets and occupations, their job served more than the single function of earning a living. Some 80 per cent of workers reported that they would continue working even if they had enough money to support themselves without ever working again. Other key meanings assumed at work included having the feeling of being tied into larger society, namely the social aspects of working; having something to do; and having a purpose in life. Similar findings, namely of non-financial employment commitment among the majority of workers, have since been obtained with wide consistency (Harpaz, 1989).

In their own discussion of culture and organization in Africa, and based on limited data about motivation *at* work, Blunt and Jones (1992) state that to 'workers from different parts of Africa ... the meaning *of* work is simply that of providing enough money to satisfy their needs' (p. 205, emphasis added). In their view, 'instrumental orientations to work are commonplace in Africa' (p. 205; see also Jones, 1991, for the same assertion in relation to Malaŵian workers). This financial and 'calculative' orientation to work (p. 205), Blunt and Jones hypothesize (p. 207), may be especially

true of lower-level workers. The whole 'instrumental' orientation to work, they imply, is detrimental to national development (see also, Schnake, 1991). We decided to investigate these rather strong propositions empirically. In addition to asking our Malaŵian respondents what key functions work served for themselves, we would also ask what they perceived to be motivating others in their work, notably those engaged in occupations often considered central to national development (e.g. teachers). Such an approach might provide further clues to the meaning of work in Malaŵian society at large.

Morse and Weiss also asked their interviewees about their job satisfaction, finding that 80 per cent of the various occupations were at least satisfied with their work. Almost half of the sample (45 per cent), however, would have changed their work if they could (if they inherited enough money to live comfortably without working). The most popular choice of new occupation was going into business for oneself. Would similar levels of satisfaction, and aspirations for self-employment exist in Malaŵi? The government at the time was encouraging growth in the self-employment, small business sector of the economy (Tellegen, 1992; Spore, 1992). Such growth has been described as integral to the 'bottom-up' industrialization of developing countries (Van Dijk and Marcussen, 1990).

METHOD

Subjects

A quota sample of 100 adults, selected in the town of Zomba, Malaŵi, 74 per cent men and 26 per cent women. The inclusion of women in this sample did not replicate the original study, but it did reflect the general change in *who* actually works (Harpaz, 1989). As the former colonial capital, Zomba retained much of the country's present-day administrative infrastructure, including Parliament itself. Therefore, we were assured of obtaining a reasonable proportion of civil servants in the quota. In fact, any 'clerics' sampled would invariably be civil servants.

Apparatus

Taken from the original study, the questionnaire contained the following basic items.

1. If by some chance you were given enough money to live comfortably without working, do you think you would work anyway or not?
2. Taking into consideration all the things about your job (work), how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with it? (Very satisfied, Satisfied, Dissatisfied).
3. If you would continue working, would you keep on doing the same sort of work you are doing now?
4. Why do you feel that you would work?
5. Suppose you didn't work, what would you miss *most*?

The questionnaire also contained 11 new items. These asked the respondent to estimate how many out of 10 workers in certain occupations would continue working even if they had ample money. These occupations were: teachers; engineers; managers; lawyers; medical doctors; nurses; priests; self-employed people; people

who work on aid projects; night watchmen; and Malaŵian farmers. Night watchmen have one of the lowest-paid jobs in Malaŵi, and would serve as a baseline for the other occupations. Farming makes up the most common occupation in Malaŵi, and it is virtually all subsistence farming. As such, farming resembles the very low-paid job of night watchman, with the critical difference that the farmers are *self*-employed. Would this discriminating feature change the perceived meaning in their work?

Procedure

The respondents were approached either in the street or at work itself. In a standardized manner, they were informed of the purpose of the research and who the researchers were (including, given the current political climate, stressing the non-governmental nature of the study); assured of confidentiality; informed of the time the interview would take (15 minutes approximately); and asked for their permission — which only 4 out of 104 people refused. The remaining 100 respondents generally appeared calm and relaxed during the subsequent interviews, which were conducted in the national language, Chicheŵa, by two Malaŵian nationals (Kachedwa and Kanyangale).

RESULTS

Students at the University of Malaŵi eventually take up management positions (Dubbey *et al.*, 1990), and when a class of 17 of these future managers were asked how many Malaŵians they believed would continue working even though they had enough money to retire, all 17 estimated that no one would continue working. In contrast to this estimate however, 64 per cent of the sample of Malaŵian workers answered for themselves that they would want to continue working. As in the original study, the quality of the responses by our respondents suggested that the question was not one for which they had a ready answer, but it was one which they took seriously and could answer personally.

The decision to carry on working was statistically independent of gender ($\chi^2 = 0.58$, *df* = *1*, critical value = 3.84, $p < 0.05$, two-tailed). With regard to age, we used three bands, namely 20–29, 30–39, and 40–49 years. In keeping with the life expectancy of less than 50 in Malaŵi (House and Zimalirana, 1992), the sample contained only one individual who was over 50 years old. Excluding this outlier from the analysis, the decision to carry on working was statistically independent of age band ($\chi^2 = 0.70$, *df* = 2, critical value = 5.99, $p < 0.05$).

Table 1 contains a breakdown of those who would continue to work or not by type of occupation. The 'unskilled manual' category included labourers such as wood sellers and night watchmen, and farmer (subsistence, $N = 1$), plus officer messenger. The 'skilled manual' category included occupations such as plumber, carpenter, tinsmith and cook. The 'clerical' category consisted mainly of the occupations of clerks, secretaries, and receptionists. These were civil servants working in local and central government offices. The 'professional' category contained not only managers, but also teachers, nurses and geologists.

When we attempted a χ^2 analysis on Table 1, one of the expected frequencies fell below 5. We were thereby obliged to collapse the 'unskilled' and 'skilled' manual

Table 1.   Decision to retire/continue working by occupational category.

Category	Would stop	Would continue
Unskilled manual	8	16
Skilled manual	5	7
Clerical	16	19
Professional	7	22
Totals	36	64

Table 2.   Satisfaction at work by occupational category.

Category	Dissatisfied	Satisfied	Very satisfied
Unskilled manual	5	14	5
Skilled manual	2	10	0
Clerical	16	16	3
Professional*	10	12	6
Totals	33	52	14

*1 respondent declined to answer.

categories into one. Inconsistent with Blunt and Jones' (1992) hypothesis that the meaning of work would become especially 'instrumental' for the 'lower' occupations, the decision to carry on working did not co-vary, overall, with occupational category ($\chi^2 = 3.21$, $df = 2$, critical value $= 5.99$, $p < 0.05$). Civil servants (i.e. our 'clerical' workers) were under-represented and not separately analysed in Jones' study, while the 'professional' category might be closest in character to Jones' sample as a whole (Blunt and Jones, 1992, p. 297). Consistent with the CCSR findings (ODA, 1989), our Malaŵian civil servants were significantly more likely than professionals to stop working ($\chi^2 = 3.21$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.05$, critical value $= 2.71$, one-tailed).

These findings are further corroborated by the data concerning satisfaction at work. From Table 2, the 'clerical' category is the only one where a modal response is 'dissatisfied' rather than 'satisfied'. Low expected frequencies (< 5) prevented us from conducting any chi-squared test of association. However, pairwise Mann–Whitney tests (dissatisfied $= 0$, satisfied $= 1$, very satisfied $= 2$) revealed a significant difference between the 'unskilled manual' and 'clerical' categories ($z = -2.10$, $p = 0.018$, one-tailed). The overall pattern in Table 2 indicates a *drop* in workplace satisfaction as we move from manual workers (unskilled and skilled) to clerics and professionals, and the latter combined are significantly dissatisfied compared with the manual workers ($z = -1.69$, $p = 0.046$, one-tailed).

The clerical and professional workers often volunteered reasons for their dissatisfaction. The causes consisted not only of being under-paid but also being under-trained and under-promoted, largely through corruption and nepotism. These complaints suggest frustration *at* work, under *Western*-style forms of work organization, rather than lack of meaning *of* work in the wider sense (see, Carr and MacLachlan, 1997). If these people were simply indolent, none of them would want to start their own business on becoming wealthy. Five clerics and five professionals reported that

Table 3. The perceived meaning of work in Malaŵi.

Occupation	Mean % who would continue
Farmers (subsistence)	63
Night watchmen	19
Priests	78
Self-employed	72
Lawyers	68
Medical doctors	64
Aid workers	61
Managers	58
Nurses	56
Engineers	55
Teachers	39

they would like to start their own business. Comparative figures for the other occupational categories were five unskilled and three skilled manual workers (some of these may already have been running their own business). In addition, of these 18 people who would start a business, five (a cleric, two managers, and two manual workers, one skilled and one unskilled), had already specified that they would *stop* working in the absence of financial necessity. This indicates that running a small business was not considered by them to be 'real' work. Starting a small business was in fact the one and only reported means of changing jobs, which in itself indicates a certain centrality for entrepreneurial activity.

Table 3 casts further light on the meaning of self-employment in the Malaŵian context. It contains the mean percentage of workers who, judged by our sample, would continue to work even though their monetary needs had been met. At baseline, the local farmers were clearly perceived to be intrinsically rather than financially motivated, whereas the night watchman was seen to be more instrumentally oriented. The critical difference between these two occupations, as we have noted, is the *self*-employment of farmers. Furthermore, from Table 3, self-employment comes second only to priesthood, an accolade indeed in such a religiously oriented country (Chiona *et al.*, 1992).

Lawyers commanded at the time a good deal of respect, due to their prominence in the pro-democracy movement. With overwhelmed health services, doctors, aid workers, and nurses were understandably more often perceived to be intrinsically than extrinsically driven. Managers and engineers also seem to have been projecting intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivation. Teachers in Malaŵi are in very short supply (House and Zimalirana, 1992), and are arguably much underpaid for the valuable functions they are expected to perform (Shouksmith, 1996). Shortly after the time of our study, we heard rumours of corruption among some teachers, rumours that might partly explain their perceived financial or 'instrumental' orientation. Overall however, according to Table 3, the level of work motivation in our sample of Malaŵian workers (i.e., 64 per cent) matches the level typically attributed to medical doctors.

People's own reasons for continuing to work are content analysed by occupational category in Table 4. With the exception of professionals, the pre-eminent reason for continuing to work was 'money'. Professionals were less likely than manual workers and clerics to mention (versus not mention) money ($\chi^2 = 12.41$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.01$). A

Table 4.   Frequency distribution of reasons for continuing to work.[1]

Reason	Occupational category				Total /64
	Unskilled manual (N = 16)	Skilled manual (N = 7)	Clerical (N = 19)	Professional (N = 22)	
Money	14	6	15	9	44
Busy	1	1	8	12	22
Stimulation	1	0	2	4	7
Companionship	1	0	0	3	4
Food	0	0	0	2	2
Clothes	0	0	0	1	1

[1]Respondents were not restricted to one reason.

Table 5.   What would you miss most?

Reason	Occupational category				Total /63
	Unskilled manual (N = 16)	Skilled manual (N = 7)	Clerical (N = 18[1])	Professional (N = 22)	
Money	12	6	8	9	35
Food	8	2	6	3	19
Busy	2	0	4	8	14
Companionship	0	1	2	9	12
Clothes	5	0	4	2	11
Stimulated	0	0	3	4	7

[1]One respondent declined to answer.

similar pattern emerged when these respondents were asked to think what they would miss most if they were not allowed to continue working. From Table 5, the overall dominance of money was less clear, and we see that 'food' has moved up the hierarchy. This movement implies that it is often the security that money can buy, rather than money itself, that is the central motivating concern. Professionals are now joined by clerics in being less likely to miss money most ($\chi^2 = 7.61$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.05$). 'Companionship' too would be missed by Malaŵians. 'Stimulation', however, is not something that would be particularly missed. Lack of stimulation may therefore be a fairly common demotivator in Malaŵian workplaces.

DISCUSSION

A first reaction to the latter findings about money might be to question the basic finding that 64 per cent of people would continue working. The apparent contradiction between claiming that one would continue to work for money despite having 'enough' money to do so might simply reflect respondents' misunderstanding of Morse and Weiss's basic question. Several factors mitigate against this interpretation however. Many of the respondents were highly educated, some with degrees, and the decision to continue was largely independent of occupational category. Furthermore, all the respondents had a perfectly fluent understanding of Chicheŵa, and on probing quite clearly did understand the question. The very reason why the Morse and Weiss procedure has been adopted for international comparisons is its comparative brevity

and simplicity. It therefore seems unlikely that our procedure was simply too difficult to understand.

A second, more subtle reaction might involve interpreting the findings as further support for the notion that 'African workers' tend to have an instrumental orientation towards work. In an inherently insecure environment (Jones, 1988, 1991), it would be perfectly 'rational' and 'reasonable' to regard work as a means toward a much needed and basic end. And it was precisely in such insecure circumstances that McGregor (1960), and indeed Maslow (1954), implied that Theory X would be a viable proposition. According to the theory then, we should *expect* to find an instrumental attitude towards work. Our data could be seen as vindicating both Maslowian and lay theory in the Malaŵian context. We would then be just a short step away from completing the circle, by characterizing Malaŵians as instrumentally oriented yet understandingly and 'humanistically' excusing them as 'victims' of circumstance.

This interpretation is seductive because of its apparent consistency with some of the data. However it may be mistaken. There are a number of *in*consistencies between such an interpretation and the evidence. These include the satisfaction reported by manual workers; the frustration reported by clerical workers at Western-style work organization; the value evidently placed on entrepreneurial activity; the reverence for self-employed subsistence farmers (who also proudly sell produce even though they have barely enough for their own familial needs); the overall level of motivation in the sample, which was on a par with medical doctors; and indications that instrumentality was not the only orientation. Malaŵian civil servants may be demotivated *at* work, but still value the meaning *of* work that they (and other Malaŵians) hold. Such a view questions the instrumental orientation and 'worker indolence' interpretations which have been applied to African workers.

What the data suggest to us is motivational pluralism, with frustrated intrinsic motivation existing alongside extrinsic motivators. In the Social Sciences, there is a growing awareness of the powerful motivating role often played by narrative typologies, such as myths, legends and dreams (e.g. Bowles, 1989; Kashima, 1997). These may include for instance resistance against a neo-colonial pattern of work organization (Carr, 1996). The literature also contains the warning that collectivist, community-oriented motivation (such as running a local business perhaps) should not be reduced to simple cost–benefit calculations (Shamir, 1990). Just as managers in the West, and Western expatriates in Africa, may have their Theory X myths of worker indolence, Malaŵians are entitled to their dreams too! On the available evidence, one of these, existing *alongside* the pragmatic financial concerns of everyday life, may be the aspiration to run a local business. Our undergraduates may have been thinking of the pragmatics when they told us that everyone would stop working. If they were subscribing to Theory X, attributional training in social psychology might in future be of some use, both to them and to expatriate managers (Wang, 1994).

As well as colonizing African settings with Theory X, Westerners have also argued for the relevance of Maslow's (1954) notion of 'need hierarchy'. Predicated on this Western management edifice are Herzberg's (1966) 'motivation-hygiene' theory, and McGregor's (1960) 'Theory Y' (Katzell and Thompson, 1990), as well as a great deal of development assistance in practice (Dorsey *et al.*, 1989; Porter *et al.*, 1991). Axiomatic to all such models is the notion of quiescence. Before a 'higher-order' need can begin to motivate behaviour at work, the 'lower-order' need must be quiesced. That is why workers in the industrialized West, in their materially secure context, are

unlikely to be motivated by material 'hygienes', preferring instead to seek 'personal growth'. *Without* a basic sense of security, the whole edifice might have no foundation, and therefore no real validity. As we have seen, life in Malaŵi is an inherently insecure business, even for relatively privileged managers (Jones, 1991). As evidence of this, Malaŵian (and Kenyan and Liberian) managers consistently rank security as their number one preoccupation (Blunt and Jones, 1986; see also, Munro *et al.*, 1996). Munro (1996) argues that this perpetual insecurity may partly motivate the comparatively high rates of conformity widely observed in cross-cultural social psychology (Smith and Bond, 1993).

Further signs of the inappropriateness of the notion of need hierarchy can be found in the cross-cultural literature on 'motivation-hygiene' theory. In Zambia (Machungwa and Schmitt, 1983), Nigeria (Jibowo, 1977), India (Lahiri and Srivastva, 1967), and the Philippines (Tiglao-Torres, 1990), material factors reportedly acted both as demotivators (when absent) and motivators (when present). Literal preoccupation with security might account for this pluralism. In a fundamentally insecure context, one can be terrorized by the complete absence of material necessities, and relatively (insatiably?) gratified by their presence. As several of our respondents remarked, there is a Malaŵian adage 'Rich once, but begging now'. Thus, Malaŵian workers may prefer employers to assume a protective role (Jones, 1991, p. 240), while vexing certain expatriate managers perhaps, by appearing to have a comparatively instrumental attitude towards the company itself.

In conclusion, the meaning of work among our Malaŵian sample appears to have been double-tiered. On the one, practical level, people saw work as providing the ongoing and perpetually needed material means to survival, even to the extent of wanting to continue working when comfortably placed. In parallel, and on an aspirational level, a sizeable proportion of people may have been intrinsically motivated by a narrative typology, the fabric and substance of which is the dream of a more fulfilling occupation in their own local business. This intrinsic rather than purely 'instrumental' motivation gives cause for optimism with regard to the emphasis on encouraging the development of small business enterprises there (Tellegen, 1992, Spore, 1992). It may also encourage ourselves and others to question the appropriateness of notions like Theory X and 'need hierarchy'. What if these are just invasive Western myths, obscuring as they apparently did at Magarini (Porter *et al.*, 1991), an irrepressible and perhaps a-hierarchical motivation towards cultural identity?

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