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(Master Level)**

# Pawnshop of hearts?

The dynamics of identification and meaning creation  
in a property management organization

Linnea Hansson 870203  
Mathilda Welin Brook 880909

Supervisors:  
Jens Rennstam  
Stephan Schaefer

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## ABSTRACT

- Title:** Pawnshop of hearts? – The dynamics of identification and meaning creation in a property management organization
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- Authors:** Linnea Hansson and Mathilda Welin Brook
- Supervisors:** Jens Rennstam and Stephan Schaefer  
Department of Business Administration  
School of Economics and Management, Lund University, Sweden
- Keywords:** identity, organizational identity, identification, meaningfulness, work, meaning creation
- Thesis purpose:** The purpose of our thesis is to create interesting theoretical and practical insights by exploring the dynamics of different sources of identification and meaning creation. Our aim is not to provide any generalizable “truths” of how identity and meaning creation “work” in a rational sense. We are more interested in how people relate to these concepts and how they might “work” in real life.
- Methodology:** Our research concerns an investigative study, conducted from an interpretive qualitative perspective.
- Theoretical perspective:** We examine and build upon existing literature on identity, identification and meaning creation and the link between the concepts in order to analyze and elaborate on our research findings.
- Research question:** How do individuals at GoodLiving experience identification and create meaning around their work?
- Empirical foundation:** Our research is founded upon an empirically driven case study within one of the 31 local autonomous organizations of GoodLiving, a Swedish non-professional cooperative service firm in the property management industry. Empirical material was collected through semi-structured in- depth interviews.
- Conclusion:** Employees seem to have an ambivalent relationship to the organizational identity and do not seem to establish meaningfulness through identifying with the organization as such. Meaning appears to be created by identifying with different aggregates and entities both inside and outside an organization. This leads us to speculate that meaning at work is a complex patchwork of identifications, resulting from the individuals negotiating different identities and meanings simultaneously.

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We hope that this thesis will provide you with inspiration and evoke the thoughts it has awakened in us.

*Dubium sapientiae initium – Doubt is the beginning of wisdom.*

*Linnea Hansson and Mathilda Wetin Brock*

Lund, 22<sup>nd</sup> of May 2013

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## IDENTIFICATION AND MEANING CREATION – AN INTRODUCTION

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*Would you be able to work somewhere else?*

Yes.

*You haven't pledged your heart to GoodLiving?*

No, no, no.

*You said before that the thing that drew you towards GoodLiving was the way they honored meaning before the means... Do you feel that you could have pledged your heart if that had been the case?*

You mean if it had...

*If the means hadn't turned out to be the main thing here.*

You mean... if I had still stayed?

*Well, do you feel that you would have been able to identify more with the organization?*

I don't know how to express myself so as to get it right but, I mean, I haven't sold my heart to GoodLiving I'm not even a member of GoodLiving because I don't feel that I have any reason to do so, I don't even live in a housing cooperative. My children are members of GoodLiving because they may need an apartment later on... But it's more like... I do professional work and that's it. (...) I mean one can be a supporter of Malmö FF without being a member of Malmö FF. I can vote for a specific party without being a member of that party. Seriously, I don't see the connection, but maybe that's just me. However, there may be a parallel: my father was one of the founders of a company within another business sector. My whole family lived and breathed it during the years when I grew up. Later on I took over, owned my own store, sold it and got a job with the worst rival, ONLY because they needed my competence and ONLY because the position triggered me.

*But you didn't give all of your heart away?*

No, I never did.

*Even though it was so rooted in the family?*

Well, of course, I owned the store and honored the sign outside. I mean, that was our trademark and, of course I spoke well of it. And that is also something I do here. I speak well about the company but...well...I wouldn't sell my heart to it.

*It gives me the impression that you find your work interesting and that you have a professional loyalty but that's it more or less?*

That's a pretty good interpretation (...) I like to use the example of professional football players. They may play in a red shirt one season, in a blue the next season, in a white the next and so on. They do it because they do what they are good at, and there is someone who wants them to play in the team. Of course, they probably receive considerable amounts of money for doing so as time goes by, but there are a number of other reasons. I mean, the reason he/she chose to play in a white shirt the last years of his/her career could be because this specific team has connections with a certain sponsor that could provide him or her and their families with a life afterward after football. I mean that there could be a number of reasons for not selling yourself as a person to a specific company.

*(Excerpt from one of the interviews at GoodLiving.)*

## **Identification and meaning creation in contemporary society**

“The nature of the relationship between the self – that ineffable source of subjective experience - and the social context within which it arises is, perhaps, the most enduring problem of social theory.” (Kunda, 1992: 161)

How individuals produce, sustain and modify their perceptions of self, other people, their organizations and their professions have long fascinated management scholars (Kreiner, Hollensbe, and Sheep, 2006). Collinson (2003) argues that traditionally, when people were living and operating in more collectivist cultures with moderately modest divisions of labor, identities were inclined to be attributed by birth and legitimized through religion and the social position of the family. This made the individual selves relatively constant and unambiguous. Following the development of a society in which the influence of the church and other societal institutions has declined, the conventional notions of a valued identity have been redefined in terms of ascending movement and material accretion. Instead of an identity ascribed by birth, people's identities are now realized through practice. This change has resulted in identities that are more exposed and reliant on the relationship between the

individual and his/her surroundings. It has led to greater freedom and choice for humans but has also ensued increasingly perilous, uncertain and insecure subjectivities. Other authors (e.g. Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008; Pratt, 2001) argue that when societies and organizations change the point of reference for meaning making and belongingness change when traditional anchorages become erratic.

### **Organizational identification – A significant point of reference for meaning creation?**

According to van Dick (2004), the notion that societies and organizations become more turbulent and individual – with organizational relationships becoming more fragile may result in people wishing to form organizational-based identifications in order to create meaning around their work. During the last three decades, the concept of organizational identification has become a prominent topic within organizational research following the publications of Albert and Whetten (1985); Ashforth and Mael (1989); and Dutton, Dukerich and Harquail (1994). Organizational identification has been conceptualized as: “an individual’s beliefs about his or her organization become self-referential or self-defining” (Pratt, 1998: 172).

According to Alvesson, Ashcraft, and Thomas (2008) the field of organizational identity and identification has been very much influenced by the technical interest (aligned with functionalist research) in organizational identities and identification. From a functionalist perspective, control over natural and social conditions can be achieved. Alvesson et al., (2008) and Alvesson and Empson (2007) among others claim that many quantitative studies have been carried out in order to develop knowledge about potential links, connections and even correlations, between organizational identity and different positive outcomes for organizations and their members. Albert, Ashforth, and Dutton (2000) and Haslam and Ellemers (2005) propose that, dissimilar from other relevant individual-level variables for the study of organizational contexts, identification has a natural link to collective-level outcomes because of its social nature. There are suggestions in a wide array of literature that organizational identification clearly is associated with different organizational outcomes such as cooperation and participation (e.g. Bartel, 2001; Kramer, 2006), intrinsic motivation (van Knippenberg & van Schie, 2000), task performance (e.g. van Knippenberg, 2000). Brickson (2005, 2007) and Cohen-Meitar, Carmeli, and Waldman (2009) propose that an individual’s perceived similarity between his/her identity and the identity orientation of their organization play a major role in the meaning individuals associate with their presence in a specific organization.

Debatably, there is an implicit, and to some part explicit, assumption in the mainstream literature on identification within organizations that organizational identification might be the “Holy Grail” for organizations, and that it is important for employees to identify with their organization in order to establish meaning for the former and guarantee success for the latter.

Arguably though, the processes of identification and meaning creation in contemporary organizations are, however, much more complex. For example, several authors argue that people actively pursue meaning in their lives, including in their work, although work does not have the same meaning for everyone and individuals find different meaning in different ways (Baumeister, 1991; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Wrzesniewski, 2003). It has been proposed that work can be seen both as a source of discomfort, drudgery and monotony, but also as a cradle of elation, vigor, and contentment, or a multifaceted fusion of all these elements. Which meanings people associate and create around their work is largely dependent on the active interplay between the individual, the organization and the work itself (Wrzesniewski, 2003). It can be argued that organizational identification could be one of the sources of meaningfulness at work. However, the introductory excerpt from one of our interviews at GoodLiving, outlined above, might show that identifying with an organizational identity may not always be the primary reason for people to establish meaning in organizations. Arguably, the interviewee doesn't find it necessary to pledge one's heart to the organization in order to be professional and create meaning around work.

### **Other potential sources of identification and meaning**

Research has shown that there might be a number of identities that people more or less identify with in order to create meaning in organizations. Some of these are related to different identifications within the organization, such as the nature of the work, one's role and work tasks, professional identity, colleagues, lunch groups et cetera (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001; Kreiner et al., 2006; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). According to Kanter (1977) and Zelizer (2005), the post-World War II era has largely been demarcated by the “myth of separate worlds” an assumption that “work” and “non-work” are blatantly segregated parts of life. We agree with researchers such as Alvesson (2000), Burke and Stets (2009) and Gioia, Shultz and Corley, (2000) who claim that identities are multiple and that different identities might be negotiated within the organizational context. Given this, organizational individuals may potentially identify with and negotiate other identities in the context of organizations, such as a parent, a passionate Star Wars fan, a hobby carpenter or a globetrotter. These identifications

could arguably also constitute and influence the way people create meaning in organizations. Debatably, there might be a number of ways that individuals can create meaning around their presence in organizations, not solely through organizational identification. Disputably, not many people can define themselves primarily through identification with their organization. However, as argued by Alvesson and Empson (2007) it might also be likely that few are entirely de-coupled from organizational membership either. As argued by Collinson (2003) people need points of reference, otherwise they would be forced to unceasingly renegotiate themselves and their meanings around work and consequently their whole existence. Arguably though, these points of reference for meaning might differ. Similar to the thoughts of Alvesson (2000), Hatch and Schultz (2002), Pratt (2000) and Pratt and Ashforth (2003) among others, we argue that the process of meaning creation through identification with different references is a dynamic, unfolding and renegotiable process.

### **Empirical and theoretical aims – Exploring the dynamics of meaning creation and identification**

Underpinned by what has been presented above our practical and theoretical aim is to explore the potential dynamics between meaning creation at work, organizational identification and other sources of identification. We chose to do our fieldwork at GoodLiving, a Swedish non-professional cooperative service firm in the property management business located in what could be interpreted as the middle ground of the organizational spectrum. The organization has approximately 110 employees and is an independent part of a national organization with the same name. As illustrated in the introductory excerpt from one of the interviews, organizational identity might not be the prime point for identification and meaningfulness in the organization. It might rather be interpreted that other points of reference for identification could be involved in the process of meaning creation.

Our empirical intention is to provide a credible account of how organizational members experience identification and how they create meaning around their work. In that sense, we are not on a quest or search for the “truth” of how identity and meaning creation “work” in a rational sense. We are more interested in how people at GoodLiving relate to these concepts and how they “work” in real life. By exploring and highlighting variations in identification and meaning creation at work our ambition is to investigate the potential dynamics, pragmatics and paradoxes potentially associated with identification and meaning creation in a contemporary property management organization. Doing so we wish to bring some nuances to

the understanding of the dynamics among different sources of identification in the process of establishing meaning at work rather than treating these concepts as black box processes where a given input lead to a predicted outcome.

### **Guiding research theme and research question**

The general purpose of the study, against the background of what has been stated above, is to explore the dynamics of different sources of identification and meaning creation at work. The guiding research question for our empirical investigation is: *How do individuals at GoodLiving experience identification and create meaning around their work?*

### **Outlining the structure of the thesis**

We begin with a thorough outlining of the guiding methodology and our research inquiry. The objective is to inform the reader about the ontological and epistemological contemplations of our research approach as well as providing information about the collection of empirical material and how we analyzed the latter. Furthermore, we will account for the concerns regarding our research's credibility and how reflexivity has been an important theme in the process. Subsequent to the methodology chapter is the literature review. In the process of analyzing and interpreting our empirical material we consult literature on the concepts of identity, identification and meaning creation in organizations. The aim of the literature review is to present a summary of the existing literature while positioning ourselves within these subject areas. Following the literature review our case analysis is presented. The aim of this chapter is to present the empirical findings from our case study at GoodLiving about how individuals experience identification and create meaning around work. We will further elaborate on the analysis in the discussion chapter. In this section we will encapsulate and discuss our research findings in order to develop possible answers to our research question and hopefully provide new insights to the field of identification and meaning creation. Finally we conclude and summarize our findings and their repercussions for theory and practice. We also highlight the limitations of our study and discuss possible directions for future research.

## **METHOD & METHODOLOGY**

### **MAPPING AND NAVIGATING THE NEGOTIABLE FIELD**

In this chapter the ontological and epistemological contemplations of our research approach will be presented. We will also outline the research process in order to provide information about the collection of empirical material and how the material was analyzed. Additionally, we will account for the concerns regarding our research's credibility and how reflexivity has been an important theme in the research process.

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#### **Ontological and epistemological framework**

According to Easterby- Smith, Thorpe and Lowe (2002), methodology is an amalgamation of techniques used to enquire into a particular situation. This amalgamation is underpinned by different ontological and epistemological considerations. According to Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2010) and Easterby- Smith et al., (2002) ontology is concerned with certain assumptions about the nature of reality and existence, as well as that of being and becoming. These considerations revolve around the questions of how the world is and, consequently, should be understood. Epistemology on the other hand is interconnected with the theory of knowledge, what knowledge is, how it is created and how we know what we know. According to Morgan (1980), there are different paradigms suggesting different answers to the questions of how social science should be carried out.

One of these paradigms, the functionalistic one, is based on the assumption that society has a tangible, concrete existence and an organized character concerned with the yielding of an "ordered and regulated state of affairs" (Morgan, 1980: 608). The scientific interest lies in what shows itself to the observer. Ontologically, reality is objective and external, encouraging a belief in the possibility of an objective and value-free social science. Epistemologically, knowledge is based on observation, describing reality as it is given. From this point of view, the only thing that can be investigated is what can be seen (Easterby- Smith et al. 2002; Morgan, 1980).

Since we are interested in individuals' experiences of identification and meaning creation, we have chosen an interpretive approach to our research in order to account for the meanings and feelings people associate with identification and meaning creation at GoodLiving (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2010; Sandberg & Targama, 2007). Opposed to the ideas of the functionalist

paradigm outlined above, Morgan (1980) argues that the interpretive paradigm is based on the view that the ontological status of the social world is more of the precarious kind. What passes as social reality does not externally and objectively “exist”. It is rather the product of the “subjective and inter-subjective experience of individuals” (p. 608). From an interpretive perspective, society is understood from the standpoint of the individual. Epistemologically, knowledge is socially constructed and interpreted by individuals. Our aim is to better understand the process through which “shared multiple realities arise, are sustained, and are changed” (p.608). Contrasting the thoughts of the functionalist perspective, highly imprinted by the positivist skepticism of metaphysics and the sole interest in what can be learned by objective studies (Hacking, 1983; Morgan, 1980) we believe that very few things / phenomena (if any) mean anything without a context. As stated by Nealon and Giroux (2012):

“Subjects and their actions are not meaningful or describable outside a historical and social context” (p. 264) and “The context in which any particular agent acts and make decisions have a good deal of influence on those decisions” (p. 256)

In our research project we have looked upon ourselves as travelers, embarking on a journey leading to different tales to be told (Kvale, 1996). As travelers we have wandered through the field, entering into conversations and dialogues with the people inhabiting it. The aim of our journey has been to converse and create a dialogue about how people create meaning around their work through identification. As stated by Kvale (1996), the original meaning of conversation is “wandering together with” (p. 4). As travelers, we consider ourselves part of the field. For us, research is a journey that we embark on together with our interviewees.

### **Collection of empirical data: Semi-structured in-depth interviews**

“When you talk, you often repeat what you already know; when you listen, you often learn something”  
(Jared Sparks)

As in the quote, we believe that comprehension of how people understand their world and life begins with listening to what they have to tell. According to Kvale (1996) the qualitative research interview tries to comprehend the world from the subject’s point of view, to reveal the meaning of people’s experiences and to reveal the lived world preceding scientific elucidations.

The first step in the research process was establishing contact with the organization. Since Linnea was employed up until January 2013 she had good contact with the HR manager of the

organization whom was supportive of our idea. Access was granted during the first week of February after a briefing meeting with the HR manager and the manager for communication. In order to gain contact with potential interviewees we communicated with the HR manager who provided us with charts showing employees and how they were placed in the organizational structure. However, she had no influence on which individuals we chose to interview.

Our aim was to interview people from all parts of the organization in order to get a wide range of experiences and perspectives. Some of the interviewees had been in the organization for many years while others had only been there for a few years, or months. Our hope was that by interviewing people from different backgrounds, hierarchical positions, age and gender more multifaceted empirical accounts would emerge. Our choice of interview participants could best be described as being based on an iterative process in which we sought to maximize the depth and richness of the data to address the research topic (Kuzel, 1999). By looking at similar in- depth studies on Master level as well as taking into account our own time frame, we felt that around 15 interviews would be sufficient. In total we interviewed 16 individuals: seven females and nine males between the age of 28 and 64. After these interviews we felt that we had reached a point where no new categories or themes emerged, commonly referred to as saturation (e.g. Bryman, 2008; May, 2001).

The interviews were carried out over a two-week period during four full days (Monday-Tuesday). The time slots for the interviews varied from 08.00 a.m. to 14.30 p.m. Each interview lasted between 55 to 75 minutes and was carried out where the interviewees were working. In our case this involved two different locations. A separate conference room was provided at each location.

We decided to carry out the interviews in Swedish since all participants had Swedish as their mother tongue. We believe that this facilitated the respondents' ability to describe their feelings, thoughts and interpretations. We began each interview by introducing ourselves, asking the interviewee how the day had been, how she/he was doing et cetera. We then introduced the scope of our study and the interview as well as explaining that he or she would be anonymous and that we would do our best to ensure that their answers could not be traced back to them personally. We asked each person if we could record the interview and also requested their permission to translate espoused thoughts and experiences that we found interesting to represent. The interviews were semi-structured and oriented towards

encouraging discussion. We had a supreme agenda with a number of topics related to identification and meaning making. Because of the relative low degree of structure, we were able to open up for conversation with the interviewees as well as adjusting and adapting to the changing nature of the interview, pursuing emergent tracks of thoughts and experiences of our interviewees (Kvale, 1996; May, 2001). By discussing threads related to our themes we believe that the risk of wondering off topic, far from the research theme was decreased.

### **Analyzing the empirical material**

For us, analysis has been an ongoing process of constant reflection about the interpretations about reality that we have been creating together with the interviewees. Our process of analysis began already in the field. During the interviews we took notes and afterwards we discussed them. At the end of each day in the field we compiled our thoughts in a written research diary (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) we also recorded our own reflections. This provided us with an opportunity to take part in our own journey of reflections and sensemaking processes which we believe constituted an important part of our analytical process. As stated by Creswell (2003), data analysis and interpretation is not sharply separated from other activities in the research process. For us, analysis of the empirical data has been an ongoing process connecting the dots as we have gone by.

After each two day block of fieldwork we transcribed the performed interviews verbatim. We split the interviews between us, each doing eight in total. Since our empirical material was represented through the articulated thoughts of the respondents we found the hermeneutic reading of the transcriptions an appropriate tool for analysis (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2010). Our initial aim when reading the transcripts the first time was to get a grasp of the transcripts by reading them thoroughly; treating each as a story someone was trying to tell us. We tried to be open- minded when reading them, providing space for sudden connections, impulses and thoughts. We highlighted certain words and excerpts that we found interesting and used the margin to note the thoughts that came across our minds. We tried not to over-analyze the content during the first reading. When approaching the transcripts the second time, our aim was to make sense of our initial coding in order to create themes. Repetitions in the text and in our own notes were among the first things we looked for, similarities in expressions was another (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Seeing the transcript and its content as a sum of parts making up a whole made it easier for us to find salient themes and connections and make sense of them.

When we had finished the second round of analysis we put the transcripts aside for a couple of days before we approached them again. This time we switched transcripts, repeating the same procedure as outlined above with the new ones. We believe that this enabled us to add new thoughts, to discover new patterns, points of connection, similarities and differences in our interpretations. After this, we discussed and jotted down the most salient themes on a whiteboard. Through this process we created mind maps with our links, connections and our interpretations of the underlying meanings for our interpretations. Reflexivity was important in this step. By questioning ourselves: Why did we make that connection? And can anything else be read out of this? We helped ourselves reinterpreting our own assumptions as well as their impact on the analysis. When analyzing the empirical material, questions related to the sensemaking process of the empirical material were of importance. Questions like: Which theories/ concepts are useful in making sense? Do we open up for other interpretations? Which voices are included and which ones excluded? In the writing process the questions have circulated around how we present our findings to an audience. When we had finished with the transcripts we turned to consulting the existing literature in order to see if our explanations were theoretically interesting or novel. We treated the literature as a supportive source of interpretations, making ourselves open to new themes in the existing literature. This constant renegotiation between us, the transcripts and the existing literature bestowed the process with an iterative touch. All excerpts of the transcript that we used for the thesis were translated into English. When putting together the thesis we reflected upon the language used for our argumentation, which story we were telling and which story that could be told instead? As argued by Alvesson and Sköldböck (2010), we believe that language is a powerful tool and the use of it should be reflected upon.

### **Credibility and Reflexivity in relation to our project**

As stated by Creswell (2003) qualitative research is interpretive research. This implies that the researcher is typically involved in a continuous and intensive experience with participants. Subjectivity is inescapable, and no objective truth can be attained. Credibility is therefore argued an important trait in qualitative research and refers to the “trustworthiness, verisimilitude and plausibility” of a researcher’s findings (Tracy, 2010: 842). Credibility of research can be assessed by criticizing the sources on which it relies. We have evaluated our sources according to the criteria authenticity, bias, distance and dependence as elaborated by Alvesson and Sköldböck (2010) and used the credibility criteria described by Tracy (2010) in

order to provide a credible account of our findings. These refer to thick description, crystallization and multivocality.

### **Authenticity, bias, distance and dependence**

The criticism of **authenticity** concerns that researchers need to consider whether the sources they refer to are genuine sources of data. We do not believe, and to some extent presume, that none of our interviewees participated in our study with the direct interest of misleading us or manipulating their story to that extent that it was misinforming and not genuine. We would, therefore, claim our sources to be genuine in that sense. However, the discussion about genuine sources and authenticity is somewhat difficult when it comes to research within the interpretive paradigm. One of the guiding beliefs within interpretive research is that the world is socially constructed, subjective and ambiguously given (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2010) with this in mind it becomes challenging to judge what authenticity really is.

A potential limitation to the use of interviews is that our presence might **bias** the responses we receive. As the topic of our conversations was closely related to the interviewees themselves they might be inclined towards projecting a more satisfactory and advantageous image of themselves. This could be considered a form of bias from the informant, and one of the reasons for us taking on a hermeneutic approach in our analysis. Through this approach we look for underlying meanings and explanations, rather than more superficial and shallow responses. Linnea was employed by the organization up until January 2013 and this is relevant to mention as she was familiar with several of the interviewees. They might, therefore, be motivated to tell a story that she as researchers would like to hear in order not to impact the relationship. Because of this risk, Mathilda had the major responsibility during the interviews, asking the majority of the questions. Our hope was that the interviewees would not just say what they thought was suitable; we hoped that this would encourage the participants to explain themselves more explicitly.

A challenge we faced during the interviews was that people were not always equally articulate and perceptive. Some were very keen to talk and some were more reserved in their approach. We tried to handle this by adjusting to the shifting personalities and communication styles. Practically, this meant that our ways of conversing, the order of the topics or the conversation and the depth we gained were affected and dependent on us, the interviewee and the context with this potentially affecting the empirical accounts.

Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2010) discuss the criticism of **distance** referring to how distance and time can impact the value of a source. It is argued that the further away, in terms of distance and time, a source is from the event, the less adequate its value. They also mention the criticism of **dependence**, which refers to how many filters or hands, as Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2010) call it, the information from the original source has passed through. As we have gathered our empirical material through semi-structured, in-depth interviews talking directly to the people about their own thoughts, feelings and experiences, the dependence in our research is low. Some of the topics that we and the interviewees discussed during the interviews concerned things that happened during different periods in their lives, some going back to the time when they joined the company or from earlier working life situations, and distance could, therefore, potentially be considered high in some aspects. However, our main focus has been to acknowledge the interviewees' thoughts about themselves, their sources of identification and meaning creation in their context of work, concepts that could be considered both closer in time and distance.

#### **Thick descriptions, crystallization, multivocality and partiality**

For research to be credible, Tracy (2010) states that it should be characterized by “thick description, concrete detail, explication of tacit (non-textual) knowledge, and showing rather than telling.

**Thick description** is considered by Tracy (2010) as one of the most central means for achieving credibility in qualitative research. Drawing on the work of Geertz (1973) and Bochner (2000), Tracy presents thick description as “in-depth illustration that explicates culturally situated meanings” (p.843) and “abundant concrete detail” (p.843). Thick description entails that the researchers account for the multifaceted specificity and circumstantiality of their data. Our aim is to show the complexity of our data so that our readers can make up their own interpretation. As stated by Gonzalez (2000: 629): “Things get bigger, not smaller or tighter, as we understand them”. Our aim is, therefore, not to tell the readers what to think but to open up for new interpretations. Ideally, in order to attain and learn about the tacit, “taken for granted” (Tracy, 2010: 843) knowledge about identification and meaning creation, we possibly should have been in the field for a longer period of time. Yet, due to the limited time frame of this thesis project (earlier mentioned) this was not conceivable. However, during our interviews we tried to learn about the vocabularies of our participants and the potential differences in how they spoke of things in order to know more about their points of reference for identification and meaning. We found that these small

manifestations often brought even more depth to the interviews and often clued us in on feelings or thoughts not always articulated by the interviewee.

According to Tracy (2010) the aim of **Crystallization** is to open up a more “complex, in-depth, but still thoroughly partial, understanding of the issue” (p. 844) rather than providing a valid singular truth. Crystallization is achieved by either gathering various types of data, employ different methods, being multiple researchers in a project, or using several theoretical frameworks (Tracy, 2010). In our work, crystallization is represented through the use of different sources, represented by our different interviewees, two researchers and the several theoretical frameworks employed. As mentioned above, our aim is to account for the dynamic relationship between different sources of identification and meaning creation in order to bring depth and nuance to the understanding of identification and meaning creation in organizations. To do so, we have tried to include varied and multiple voices while reporting and analyzing our empirical material. This is commonly referred to as **multivocality** which is closely aligned to crystallization, and thick description (Tracy, 2010), mentioned above.

### **Reflexivity – About being part of the knowledge creating process**

"A researcher's background and position will affect what they choose to investigate, the angle of investigation, the methods judged most adequate for this purpose, the findings considered most appropriate, and the framing and communication of conclusions"

(Malterud, 2001: 483- 484)

As the quote demonstrates, a researcher's background, position and preconceptions can shape his/her research in a multitude of ways. As argued by Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2010), the world is not objectively and unambiguously given, it is rather experienced based on our preconceptions, experiences and subjective impressions. This demonstrates that the researcher cannot stand outside the world looking in. Researchers rather construct interpretations of the world that are already interpreted by the research subject. This implies that our interpretations are preliminary and need to be reflected upon.

To us, reflexivity is about being aware and creating awareness of the fact that we as researchers are active in the knowledge creating process. Our study of identification and meaning creation at GoodLiving is shaped by our explicit and implicit preconceptions about the world. As argued by Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2010), preconceptions are the backdrop that forms and permeates a researcher's interpretations. The preconceptions we have impact our

reasons for doing research, how we go about doing it and how we present our findings. For us reflexivity is a constant loop in which we as researchers alternate between different positions, understanding our pre-conceptions and choices in the light of us being part of the knowledge creating process. The project offers taking different positions, which we must be aware of. By questioning, for example, our understanding of the subject, our personal history in relation to the interest in this topic, our cultural/social and ethnical background, our personal value systems and areas in which we know we are subjective, and how these understandings may influence our positioning in relation to our topic and our informants, we believe our work becomes more credible.

With regard to our research, we are aware of the fact that studying identity, identification and motivation requires some sort of “freezing” even though we are treating the phenomena as something fluid. As researchers, we are trying to capture phenomena that maybe could be described as polaroids, still-frames of something that is under constant reconstruction. Key questions for us have been to address how and if we are able to represent “who they are?” As mentioned, our aim is not to provide the “truth” of who they are as persons and what they identify with. Our aim is to interpret their interpretations of who they are, what they identify with and create meaning around. As argued by Malterud (2001), "Preconceptions are not the same as bias, unless the researcher fails to mention them" (p.484). For us, being reflexive is part of being open and ethical as a researcher. Steedman (1991: 53) argued that: “knowledge cannot be separated from the knower”. Similar to Steedman we believe that seeing research as a knowledge creating process, embedded in a larger context, brings originality, life and spirit to it. By being reflexive, we believe that our work will be enriched rather than flawed by our personal imprints. As we see it, the process of reflexivity is an attempt to recognize that the creation of knowledge takes place in the world and not apart from it.

## **IDENTIFICATION AND MEANING CREATION – WHAT HAVE OTHERS SAID BEFORE US?**

In order to analyze our empirical material and discuss our research theme we will draw upon literature of identity, identification and meaning creation at work. We will highlight our own interpretations and position within each subject area.

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### **Meaning creation, meaningfulness, sensemaking and the link to identity**

“Man’s search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life” (Frankl, 1984)

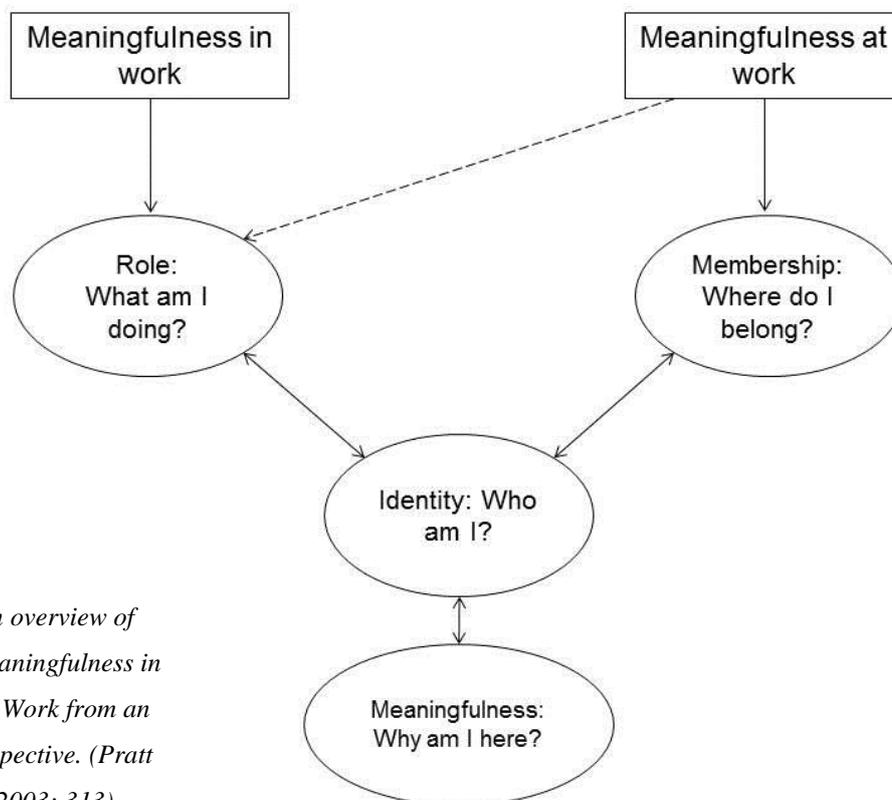
Lofland and Stark (1965) proposed that religious seekers are inclined toward finding meaning in life through religion. In the same manner, Pratt (2000) argues that seekership may also be present in organizations and that people may feel more or less inclined to seek meaning through the organizations that employ them. Baumeister and Vohs (2002) propose that meaning is a tool used by individuals for imposing stability on life. As a work life (or any domain of life) unfolds, individuals strive to fulfill the need for purpose, values, efficacy and self-worth (Baumeister, 1991). According to Wrzeniewski (2003), people in general need to find some way(s) of interpreting a deeper purpose, or meaning of what they do.

Some researchers view the process of meaning creation as a type of sensemaking (Starbuck and Milliken, 1988, Weick, 1995). Sensemaking has been defined as the ascription of meaning to particular objects or stimulus, work, for example, by inserting it into a present or evolving cognitive structure (Starbuck & Milliken, 1988). Accordingly, when an individual ascribes a social or other stimulus to a category, the individual has “made sense of” the stimulus, giving it significance and meaning. Pratt and Ashforth (2003) argue that merely assigning something meaning does not automatically make something meaningful. According to the authors, meaningfulness relates to the purposefulness and significance of the meaning assigned, and they argue that something becomes meaningful when it helps answer the question of “Why am I here?” They also propose that “meaning(fulness)-making” (p.303) is a subset of sensemaking and argue that it is sensemaking in the “service of answering a broader question about the purpose of one’s existence” (p.303).

According to Cartwright and Holmes (2006) and Wrzeniewski (2003) there is no broadly shared definition of meaning in the workplace, but meaning is said to symbolize the interrelationship between the inner world of the individual and the outer situation of the

workplace. Given this, the meaning(s) that an individual constructs at his or her workplace is impacted by the interactions between the individual and the context. We have interpreted “meaning of work” as an individual’s sensemaking processes related to the meaningfulness individuals create around, and place in, their work. Building on existing research we argue that these processes are impacted by the dynamic interrelationship between the inner world of the individual and the exterior.

Given that meaning creation is impacted by the interrelationship between the individual and his or her context, Pratt and Ashforth (2003) propose that the meaning people ascribe to their work and work setting may vary drastically. According to the authors meaningfulness arises through the incorporation of an individual’s identity with his or her role (e.g., work and tasks) and/or membership inside and outside the organization. The former is labeled meaningfulness *in work* and the latter meaningfulness *at work*. The ways in which identity and identification are linked to how individuals create meaning around their work and in their workplace is presented in Figure 1. The reciprocal arrows among the questions propose that these various integrations are dynamic and negotiated.



**Figure 1:** An overview of Creating Meaningfulness in Work and at Work from an Identity Perspective. (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003: 313)

The answer to the question: “Why am I here?” is said to be contingent on different aspects (as envisioned in Figure 1). Pratt and Ashforth (2003) propose that the “path to meaningfulness is through identity” (p.312). Similarly many authors have argued that how one makes sense of the world (at least in Western cultures) is inexorably entangled with one’s identity (Ashforth 2001; Pratt 2000; Weick 1995).

In order to understand the dynamics of meaning creation, meaningfulness and identification we will begin by presenting the concepts of identity and identification. We will then introduce meaningfulness in work and meaningfulness at work as different points of references for identification and sources of meaning.

### **Identity through identification**

According to Weick (1995) sensemaking and meaning creation is grounded in identity construction, which is argued to be characterized as enactive, social, ongoing, plausible and retrospective. He proposes that a person’s identity could be considered a lens through which one makes sense of the world. According to Alvesson (2004: 188) and Ashforth et al. (2008: 327) identity concerns how an individual constructs a certain version of him or herself and addresses the question “Who am I?” Researchers claim that an individual’s identity concept is said not to be derived only from their personal identity, encompassing salient, unique, personal characteristics, but also from their social identity(-ies), encompassing central, distinctive group characteristics (Abrams, 1992; Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Kramer, 1991; Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Alvesson (2000: 1105) argues that: “Identity is (...) best understood as something that is not monolithic and robust. (...) Identities are multiple and contextual”. Similarly, Stryker and Burke (2009: 284) argue that identity is those “parts of self-composed meanings that persons attach to the multiple roles they typically play in highly differentiated contemporary societies”. A person could potentially identify him or herself both as a teacher, a parent and a golf player at the same time. Ashforth (1998: 213) noted that “identity is a perpetual work in progress”. Hence, how people define and understand themselves is not static but rather emergent and fluid in character, as argued by Alvesson (2000) and Gioia et al. (2000). According to these authors, identity should be treated and thought of in pluralistic terms, meaning that identities can be varied and mixed. This implies that an individual might identify with different things at different or at the same points in time and potentially make use of different identities in order to create meaning.

The dynamic of identities is encapsulated in a quote by Jenkins (1996: 20):

“The self (is) an ongoing and, in practice simultaneous synthesis of (internal) self-definition and the (external) definitions of oneself offered by others. This offers a template for the basic model of the internal-external dialectic of identification as the process whereby all – identities- individual or collective – are constituted.”

This dialectic can be referred to the different influences mentioned by Kreiner et al. (2006). According to the authors, identity is subject to many types of influences, ranging from external as well as internal demands from the individual. Through this dialectic the identity of an individual adjusts and develops through identification. As stated by Scott, Corman, and Cheney (1998: 304), “identification is the process of emerging identity”.

According to Kreiner et al., (2006), the term identification is denoted by two meanings. The first presents identification as a state and the second as a process. Identification as a state commonly refers to that part of an individual’s identity that derives from his or her connotation with a social group or other entity (e.g. an organization or occupation). Tajfel (1982) argues that in order for an instinctive connection to develop between the individual and a group or entity of some kind, the identity of that group or entity must be both valued and emotionally significant for the individual. The second meaning of identification, identification as a process, refers to the procedure of aligning one’s identity with that of the social group or entity in question. Cheney (1983) defined identification as “an active process by which individuals link themselves to elements in the social scene” (p. 342). As proposed above, since both individuals and their social contexts are dynamic, so too will be the relationship between them (Kreiner et al., 2006). According to the authors, an individual’s level of identification (state) with any type of identity varies as different individual and situational factors influence identification (process), these factors are what comprise identity negotiation. We will now outline what different authors have suggested concerning the reasons for why individuals identify.

### **Introducing identity work**

As will be shown, different researchers suggest different motives for identification. Ashforth (2001) argues that the drives for identification are multiple. A first motive is argued to be self-knowledge, which is presented as locating the self within a context in order to define the self. A second motive is labeled self-expression, which refers to the enactment of valued identities.

Self-expression is related to a motive described by the author as self-distinctiveness in which the motive to identification lies in valuing a sense of uniqueness. A fourth motive for identification is presented as self-coherence, where the individual is concerned with the maintenance of wholeness across a set of identities. The final motive presented by Ashforth is self-continuity, where the reason for an individual to identify is because he or she strives to maintain unity across time. The process of achieving coherence in one's identities is argued to be a response to the dynamics of the social world as described by Snow and Anderson (1987). They propose that this response is best understood as identity work. Identity work is defined by Snow and Anderson as the "range of activities that individuals engage in to create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept" (1987: 1348). Identity work involves "people being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness" (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003:1165). Drawing on this it could be argued that individuals engage in identity work in order to "achieve the feeling of a coherent and strong self as a basis for social relations" (Alvesson, 2004: 190). Other authors also propose that identification with collectives and other entities reduces uncertainty associated with interacting in new environments or changes in existing and familiar ones. Hogg (2000; 2003) and Hogg and Mullin (1999), argue that the individual creates a sense of order in his/her world and reduce the uncertainty through the process of enacting deeper meanings, provided by the identification references an individual associate with.

Given what has been introduced above, we see identity as an emergent process of how an individual come to identify him/herself with different aggregates or entities to answer the question "Who am I?" and consequently "How should I act?". We interpret and make sense of identification as a process of crafting and establishing identities. Like other authors we argue that individuals may have multiple identities and that these are points of reference in different contexts. In order to make sense of the world and extract meaning out of different situations, we believe that individuals form a coherent sense of self through enacting different identities, which has been described as identity work. We interpret identity as both a noun and a verb, where the former represents a state of being and a sense of stability, representing an essentiality, whereas the latter depicts the process of becoming, representing variation, essentiality negotiated. Based on the literature, we are of the opinion that both concepts are equally important. What people identify with (the state) clearly depends and is a potential "result" of *what* people create meaning around and *how* they go about doing so.

As argued by Ashforth et al., (2008: 334), “Identification matters because it is the process by which people come to define themselves, communicate that definition to others and use that definition to navigate their lives, work-wise or other”. As stated, the identity an individual has, as a member of an organization, can be constituted out of many different aspects. In order to explore the dynamics of different sources of identification and meaning creation at work, we find it necessary to delve more deeply into the concept of multiple identifications as points of references for meaning creation.

### **Meaningfulness in work – Identification with work itself**

According to Pratt and Ashforth (2003), meaningfulness in work is derived from the relationship between what the person is doing and his/her identity. One’s self conception is argued to potentially be influenced by what the work involves vis à vis the meanings people create around what they are doing is related to their identity. Researchers have suggested that any task can be imbued with meaning and that the specific characteristics of a job can impact the meaningfulness experienced in work (Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Grant, 2008a; Wrzesniewski, 2003). It has been argued that the skill variety and the significance of the tasks may impact the experienced meaningfulness in work (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). According to Kahn (1990), one of the basic questions people ask themselves in work situations is how significant a task or a role is. Grant (2008b) has argued that work that promotes a sense of purpose and positive impact on others may contribute to a feeling of task significance and, therefore, potentially also impact meaningfulness.

Baumeister (1991) and Emmons (1999) propose that the intrinsic qualities of the work itself, the values, goals, and beliefs that the work is thought to serve are considered important factors for creating meaning in work. The values, goals and beliefs that individuals perceive as important to themselves i.e. connected to their own identity and self-concept might potentially impact the meaning people find in work. As Pratt and Ashforth (2003) argue, the character of the work itself might be a form of identification and, therefore, a point of reference of meaning. Meaningfulness in work therefore derives from the interrelationship between the individual and the work itself and is, as mentioned above, one of the ways in which authors suggest that an individual might create meaning around his or her presence in an organization.

## **Meaningfulness at work – Identification with social groups**

Meaningfulness at work is argued to address the question of “Where do I belong?” by linking the identity of the individual to the internal and external relationships of the workplace (Pratt and Ashforth, 2003). Identification with different groups has been said to essentially lie in the human desire to develop the concept of self to embrace relations with others and through this process establish a sense of belonging (Deaux, Reid, Mizrahi, and Cotting, 1999). Baumeister and Vohs (2002) propose that the essence of meaning is connection and different points of reference for belonging and may be found within and outside organizations. This implies that meaningfulness at work is related to a sense of membership and belonging in social aggregate(s) (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). We will now introduce different sources of belongingness i.e. different social aggregates that are said to be potential reference points for meaning in organizations.

### **The organization itself as a point of reference for meaning creation?**

If the individual identity answers the question of “Who am I?” the organizational identity answers the question “Who are we as an organization?” (Ashforth et al., 2008). Organizational identification is proposed to be a specific form of identification where the individual categorizes him-/herself into the social aggregate of an organization (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). Dutton, Dukerich and Harquail (1994) proposed that organizational identification could be defined as the degree to which an individual’s notion of self encompasses attributes equal to those of the perceived organizational identity. Ashforth and Mael (1989) argue that when organizational members take on key characteristics of the organization as defining characteristics for themselves, organizational identification occurs.

The concepts of organizational identity and identification have been proposed by authors to be an important factor in the meaning creation process of individuals and the success of the organization. For example Brickson (2005, 2007) and Cohen- Meitar et al., (2009) propose that an individual’s perceived similarity between his/her identities and the identity orientation of their organization plays a major role in the meaning individuals associate with their presence in a specific organization. According to Ashforth et al., (2008) organizational identification entails both a cognitive and an emotional aspect. Ashforth and Mael (1989) and van Knippenberg and Sleebos (2006) contend that as the individual’s identity and destiny become entwined with that of the organization the individual becomes a microcosm of the

organization. Accordingly, the organization could be considered to be a grand part of the employee's self-concept (maybe even the most salient as argued by Edwards, 2005).

However, the view of the organizational identity as a significant point of reference for meaning has been challenged. Ashforth (1998: 213) argue that many researchers view organizational identification and, consequently, meaning creation "in fairly static terms as the congruence or "fit" between fixed attributes and needs of a person and those of an organization" rather than in dynamic, process-oriented terms. Pratt (2000: 485) states that organizational identification:

"is not a one-time, all-or-nothing process whereby an individual comes to match his or her values with an organization. Rather, individuals can change identification states".

According to Pratt (2000), it is vital to comprehend how identity and identification can change and that people may draw on different aspects in order to create meaning in and at work. He argues that identity and meaning construction is cyclical and does not end when the individual initially identifies with an entity. Pratt argues that "fitting" refers to the ongoing and dynamic process of sense breaking, meaning seeking, sense giving, and sensemaking in the organization. Underpinned by this he argues that individuals might sometimes "fit" and sometimes not. As argued by Pratt and Ashforth (2003), identification at work and the meanings people create around it becomes dependent on an individual's identity constructs in relation to his or her work context, which also includes other points of reference for meaning, not only identification with the identity of the organization.

### **Reference points for belonging and meaning creation – work identities**

According to Dutton and Ragins (2007) the workplace could be seen as an arena in which diverse arrays of social relationships are formed, all of which have their own connotations of meaning for organizational members. Kreiner et al., (2006) propose that a person employed in a company can be both a member of an occupation, a department, a work group, a lunch group and so on. Many researchers have argued that an individual's connection to work groups may influence their perceived meaningfulness in work. In particular, individuals' roles in and sense of identification with the groups of which they are a part is proposed to impact the sense of meaningfulness (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Weick, 1995; Wrzesniewski, Dutton, & Debebe, 2003). According to Wrzesniewski et al., (2003) these relationships may potentially impact an individual's meaning of work as they establish a sense of belongingness and

connection. Drawing on the idea of sensemaking, the authors argue that employees draw cues about the meaning of their work from different persons in the workplace through observations, conversations et cetera.

Ashforth et al., (2008) argue that different sub-groups or collectives have their own, more or less, individual identity, which the individual negotiates with his or her self-concept in order to excerpt and create meaning. Ashforth and Johnson (2001) suggest that individuals have levels of self in organizations, ranging from lower level identities, such as colleagues, workgroup and division to higher-level identities such as the organization and industry. Many researchers (e.g. Johnson, Morgeson, Ilgen, Meyer, & Lloyd, 2006; van Knippenberg & van Schie, 2000) have claimed that individuals tend to identify more strongly with lower order identities than higher order. It is argued that lower order identities are more likely to constitute one's primary group, that is, the main foundation for task interdependence and collaboration. It is also proposed that individuals are more likely to have a noteworthy influence on – and be better informed about – the loci associated with lower order identities which is said to reinforce an individual's psychological engagement. Brewer (1991) argued that individuals, rather than being lost in large abstract collectives (such as an organization) balance opposing assimilation and uniqueness by identifying with more exclusive, relatively localized collectives.

### **Reference points for belonging and meaning creation – non- work identities**

Based on what has been presented above, belongingness could be related to many sub-groups within an organization. However, meaning at work has also been argued to be related to belongingness with groups outside the organization (Pratt, 2000). Identification is argued to include speaking to and acting with other individuals to make sense of one's self in the light of one's organization (Weick, 1995). Pratt (2000) proposes that these individuals are not necessarily only the ones in the organization, but could also be people from outside. By extending the idea of individuals having multiple selves, we find it interesting to note that people might not only draw on sources of belonging related to the workplace in order to create meaning in their job. Ramarajan and Reid (2013) argue that the blurred borders and distinctions between work and non-work life-domains result in a re-negotiation of the relationship between work and non-work identities. The authors propose that individuals in today's organization have the opportunity to define themselves through multiple identities and arguably go about doing so in the context of organizations. As stated before by Alvesson

(2000) and Gioia et al. (2000), identities could be considered in pluralistic terms. As proposed by Ramarajan and Reid (2013), individuals may find meaning in the context of work through identification with other sources that traditionally may have been considered non-work related, such as a being a father, scout, hobby carpenter, non-professional opera singer or such, identifications that potentially may serve as important sources of meaning for them. In this context, meaning at work could potentially not only be provided through the enactment of work-related identities, such as identification with the colleagues or work group, but also other forms of identifications as mentioned above.

### **Pulling the strings together**

As has been mentioned, there are a numbers of ways through which individuals might derive meaning at work related to one's identity and identifications. Pratt and Ashforth (2003) argue that words such as "alignment", "fit," and "match" are often used in order to explicate why and how individuals within an organization find meaning in their work and the organizations they are employed by. However, meaning creation, identity and identification are complex entities with no static end state. Based on what has been said, it could be argued that there are no universal laws to meaningfulness in organizations. Like other authors, we interpret the process of meaning creation as a kind of sensemaking in which people use different points of references in order to make sense of the social context they are in. Given the continuous enactment of identities through sensemaking, one can assume that there are multitudes of ways in which people make sense of their presence in organizations. However, we believe that there is a limited number of meaning archetypes in a given context and situation that organizational members build upon and that there are similarities in the processes by which meaning is created. Arguably, meaningfulness in work through identification with the work itself, and meaningfulness at work through a sense of belonging and identification with different groups are dynamic processes, which might be influenced by the negotiation of many different identities.

## **CASE ANALYSIS: IDENTIFICATION AND MEANING CREATION AT GOODLIVING**

The objective of this chapter is to present the empirical findings from our case study at GoodLiving about how individuals experience identification and create meaning around their work.

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### **GoodLiving - Presenting a cooperate**

As outlined in the introductory chapter, GoodLiving is a Swedish co-operative organization within the real-estate sector. Starting off as a cooperate in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. GoodLiving is now one of the larger actors in the Swedish property- management business. The organization comprises one national association and 31 autonomous local organizations. The national organization (executive committee) sets the overall framework, such as shared value statements, for the local organizations. However, the local organizations can freely choose their operative structure. We chose to do our case study at the local organization in Malmö, which employs around 110 persons. The spectrum of work tasks is wide, ranging from cleaners to office clerks. Around 30 % of the employees are working with what could be labeled as blue-collar work and about 70 % are employed with white-collar work.

### **Hopes from management – Pledging of hearts**

As noted in the introductory chapter and in the literature review, organizational identification has been introduced and is considered important as a way for individuals to create meaning in their work and for the organization to attain success. It is argued that individuals in organizations create meaning around their work (Brickson, 2005, 2007; Cohen- Meitar et al., 2009) as they become both cognitively and emotionally attached to the organization through linking their own identity to that of the organization (e.g. Ashforth et al., 2008; Dutton et al., 1994). In interviews with representatives for top management at GoodLiving they interpreted their vision of identifying with the organization as a matter of pledging hearts. As stated by one of the top managers:

“The organization’s power lies with its staff. (...) In this type of organization we work with relationships, we build relationships. That makes it very important to have the right person in the right place. (...) And for me, it is very important that you leave a part of your heart in pledge to the organization, that you represent what GoodLiving stands for.

## PAWNSHOP OF HEARTS?

### THE DYNAMICS OF IDENTIFICATION AND MEANING CREATION IN A PROPERTY MANAGEMENT ORGANIZATION

(...) If you have a choice, and you have chosen to work at the GoodLiving and continue to work at GoodLiving - choosing actively to keep working, it has to be because you believe in it, otherwise it won't be good. You leave a piece of your heart in pledge or you find another place to work." (Martina, manager, has been in the organization for one and a half years)

The significance of pledging a piece of one's heart for the sake of GoodLiving can be quite clearly seen. The manager emphasized the need to believe in GoodLiving as a company and stated that the consequences will be seen if this is not the case in that the results for both parties will not be satisfactory. This could mean that employees must be supportive of the organization and fully "live the organization" for the well-being of both the individual employee and the organization as a whole. To "live the organization" can arguably be related to organizational identification as it has been presented in the literature review as a way for an individual to categorize himself or herself into the social aggregate of the organization, as well as connoting an emotional connection to the organization. To pledge your heart for the sake of the organization does not only seem to be related to thinking of oneself as an affiliate of the organization, it also involves giving your heart away which arguably connotes deep emotions. Another top manager articulates his view:

"I think we work together in this company, and as an employee you have a responsibility to produce results. Either you work for the company's best interests, or you should look for another job. It's as simple as that but I know that not everyone has that attitude." (Holger, has been in the organization for six years)

The manager's view is clear: if you do not work for the best interest of the company you might just as well seek other employment. To work in the interest of the organization might not mean that you become a microcosm of the organization. However, based on their statements above it is clear that the top managers we spoke with were convinced of the importance of the pledging of hearts for the sake of the organization. This can be interpreted to mean, that people should breathe and live the organization when they work and, therefore, to some extent, incorporate the identity of the organization into their self-concept.

Yet, during our interviews with employees the incorporation of the organizational identity into one's own self-concept as a way of creating meaning at their work did not seem evident. In fact, there were clear discrepancies. Rather than embracing the organizational underpinnings, people actually felt somewhat disconnected from it.

## **Ambivalence of identification**

When we spoke to employees about their relationship with the organization we came to realize that they had difficulty identifying with its underpinnings. The organizational identity is said to answer the question of “Who are we as an organization?” (Ashforth et al., 2008). GoodLiving promotes itself as being a member-owned cooperative organization in which the cooperative aspect is given special emphasis. When we spoke to employees at GoodLiving about the organizational underpinnings an interesting picture emerged concerning their relationship with the identity of the organization.

### **The basic philosophy of a cooperative organization?**

“I can see the advantage of shared ownership and the cooperative idea. But I have difficulty with it ... it’s just not the way I think organizations work today (...) I would say that the cooperative way of thinking belongs to a past generation. Younger people... if you go out and ask them, not many of them know what GoodLiving is. Even less what it stands for.” (Benny, has been in the organization for three years)

Here Benny expresses his doubts regarding cooperative philosophy underpinning the organization. By emphasizing that the concept is disappearing and that younger people do not know what the organization stands for it seems as though he does not see a future for GoodLiving as an organization. Potentially Benny might experience difficulties identifying with the identity of the organization and creating meaning around that point of reference. Problems with the co-operative underpinning are also reflected in another of our interviews with Anders:

“Unless GoodLiving, and other cooperative organizations for that matter, you know, member-run organizations, if they don’t adapt the requirements of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it’s good night...I don’t know how much time it will take, but it will be a slow but steady downhill. It is not up to date.” (Anders, has been in the organization for six years)

It would seem that Anders does not believe in the cooperative concept, which potentially might make it hard for him to identify with the identity of the organization. The notion of not being able to identify with GoodLiving as a cooperation can be seen in the quote from Sofie:

“I feel that I can identify with GoodLiving on one level but perhaps not the cooperative philosophy. I wouldn’t describe myself as a cooperator. It’s not what I identify with (...) It’s a pretty old way of thinking (...) it feels like GoodLiving is holding on to what they

did when they started, something that's no longer here. I think GoodLiving in general have to come up with something new.” (Sofie, has been in the organization for a year)

Given what Sofie says, the co-operative idea might not be a central reference point of meaning to her. However, the notion of being able to identify to some extent could possibly be interpreted as a sign of the dynamic relationship between the identity of the individual and the external context of work (Cartwright and Holmes, 2006; Weick, 1995; Wrzeniewski, 2003). Sofie might create meaning around some of the targets of the organizational identity that may resonate with her notion of self. Yet, it is interesting to note that Sofie actively separates herself from the organization by speaking in terms of GoodLiving as a remote object. This way of speaking about the organization as remote from oneself is evident in another excerpt from one of our interviewees:

“I believe they should really rethink this whole cooperative thing. I mean, I’m old and I still think it’s an ancient way of approaching things. The times have changed... people are more ... they do not care about this stuff today.” (Ove, has been in the org for over 20 years)

Ove states that *they* (meaning GoodLiving) need to rethink the underpinnings of the organization as such. This remoteness and separation from the organization and its underpinnings is very interesting as it could be a potential sign of distancing oneself from the identity of the organization. Arguably, it could be considered to be a sign of ambivalence in the relation between individual and organization. The clear dividing line between me and they might suggest that there is a tendency towards treating the organization and oneself as separate entities, which possibly implies that the identities are separate.

As was stated in their different ways by Benny, Sofie, Anders and Ove in the excerpts from the interviews above, other employees have also given us the impression that the underpinnings of GoodLiving are problematic to identify with. Arguably, it seems that organizational members at GoodLiving cannot fully engage or take on board the “set” attributes of the organization and even distance themselves from it by speaking of it as a separate entity. They do not use the words *we* or *us*: they separate and distance themselves from the organization by using sentences such as: “Unless GoodLiving...” and words like “they”. When we asked interviewees how they perceived GoodLiving we experienced somewhat negative connotations and evaluations. Klaes explains the organization:

“It is a blunt, square-shaped colossus. It takes far too long to implement anything new here.” (Klaes, has been in the organization for one and a half year)

Expressions and descriptions like these came up very often during our interviews with employees. Like Klaes’s description of the organization, Benny told us that it could be compared to “a colossus on feet of clay”. This description of the organization might not be considered very flattering. When we asked other interviewees if they could identify with these descriptions of the organization they said that they could not. This seems reasonable considering the fact that the analogies were quite negative. Arguably, people might not wish to identify themselves in negative terms. As argued by Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003: 1165), identity work involves "people being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness". Therefore it does not seem likely that individuals will take on negative connotations of the organization as their own in order to “achieve the feeling of a coherent and strong self as a basis for social relations” (Alvesson, 2004: 190). Along with Klaes and Benny, Olivia fills in her view of the organization:

“It is a bit rigid... a bit unsexy, stable and solid...like a block of concrete really.”  
(Olivia, has been in the organization for nine months)

Given the previous statements, it seems as though the interviewees at GoodLiving cannot identify with the cooperative concept and that they view the organization in quite negative terms, potentially impacting their ability to treat it as a source of identification and, therefore, also impacts their ability to create meaning around it. However, some interviewees explained that they could relate to the organization on some levels, mostly regarding the shared values, although this relationship also seemed somewhat ambivalent.

### **Identifying with values – Fragmented bonds?**

“Maybe I can identify with the values... dedication, reliability, durability, and life interaction, yes... I imagine that I can stand up for the values and associate myself stronger with them than if you think about the heritage and history of the cooperation. To act in accordance with the values that this organization has set as its guidelines is important in order for us to speak the same language.” (Olivia)

The importance of the values espoused by Olivia could possibly mean that the latter may act as reference points or, as Olivia labels them, guidelines. As Olivia states, she can identify with

the values and associate herself with the latter. Arguably, the values could to some extent potentially work as a point of reference for connection as mentioned by Pratt and Ashforth (2003) and belonging (Baumeister and Vohs, 2002). Debatably, some sort of meaning might be extracted from the values, a meaning that cannot be established through the organizational heritage and cooperative foundations. An excerpt from Wilmer shows a similar trait concerning the importance of values. The trait of distancing is, however, apparent as Wilmer speaks of the organization as they:

“Firstly, it is important what they stand for. I like their values, all equal and this, they are very much for cooperation, get everyone into collaboration, integrate with each other. It is something that is interwoven in my principles too.” (Wilmer, has been in the organization for three years)

Wilmer states that it is what GoodLiving stands for is important. He says that he likes *their* values and that some of them are also interwoven in his own principles. Potentially he creates some kind of meaning around them because of the personal link he experiences. However, it is interesting to note that he speaks of the organization as *them*, separating himself from it. He is a part of the organization and he likes it but potentially he is not one with the organization. As noted above the use of the terms *them* and *I* when speaking of the self and the organization is interesting. This distance is also reflected in Anders’s reply below. When asked how he felt about the values and if he could relate to them he replied:

“Well, yes I guess so. But you don’t have to subscribe one hundred percent, about fifty percent is enough. Nothing in this world is one hundred percent (...) I think that if you break down what the letters stand for, I can feel that GoodLiving can stand for it and I can stand for the values considering what I do towards the organization and towards my clients. But I need to repeat them once in a while. They are not on the top of my mental short list.” (Anders)

Anders seems able to accept the values and incorporate them in his professional role but that appears to be the limit. Fifty percent seems enough for him in terms of subscription to the values as such and, maybe, also to the organization as a whole. During our interview with Anders he explained to us that identifying with the organization as such does not mean that much to him and that it is not of importance in order for him to create meaning around work.

Almost all of those we interviewed stated that the values of the organization made some sense to them although some also promoted a more distanced view:

“It becomes so pathetic when you are using the company’s values, but of course, it would be difficult if people didn’t stand behind them.” (Rickard, has been in the organization for seven years)

What Rickard says could potentially be interpreted as a kind of cynicism regarding the importance of the organizational values. For Rickard the values do not seem to bear that much importance when he does his job.

### **Ambivalence resulting in not finding meaning?**

Against the background of the above, it seems as though identification with the organizational identity at GoodLiving is problematic for the employees. It seems as if they cannot fully endorse the basic underpinnings of the organization. As argued by Tajfel (1982), an instinctive connection between the individual and an organization depends on that the identity of group or entity, in this case the identity of GoodLiving, must be both valued and emotionally significant to the individual. The results of our interviews with employees at GoodLiving indicate that the organizational identity does not seem to be the prime target of meaning creation for employees in the organization in terms of the identification being valued and emotionally significant. As stated by Pratt and Ashforth (2003), the process of meaning creation i.e. finding one’s presence in an organization meaningful, is essentially a form of sensemaking that responds to questions of “Why am I here?” which is contingent upon the identity of the individual. In the case of GoodLiving, its employees seem to experience an ambivalent and slightly disconnected relationship with the identity of the organization. They do not seem to provide an answer to the question outlined by Pratt and Ashforth (2003) and Weick, through their membership with GoodLiving as an organization. Some members of the organization seem to be able to connect on some levels, mainly by drawing some kind of meaning out of their connection to the values.

However, the seeming ambivalent relationship between individuals and the organizational identity does not appear to result in them feeling distaste for their presence in the organization. Quite the contrary:

“Even though I have some trouble identifying with the cooperative thought and all that it’s kind of insignificant to me. It doesn’t affect my feelings for working here. It’s not that I feel that “Oh I don’t want to go to work”, but I actually feel that I go to work with a smile on my lips every day. My job is fun and my colleagues are great.” (Therese, has been in the organization for three years)

“I actually feel that it’s fun to go here every day, it gives me a great feeling.” (Olivia)

It seems that even though individuals like Therese and Olivia, might experience problems identifying with the organizational identity, they apparently still go to work with “a smile on their lips”. Even though they apparently do not sense a feeling of closeness with the organization or see themselves as affiliates of GoodLiving, they arguably do experience their existence in the organization as meaningful in some sense. During our sessions, none of those we interviewed expressed antipathy towards going to work each day, nor did they express any negativity regarding their presence in the organization. Employees seem to create meaning around other things than building an emotional and cognitive relation to GoodLiving as an organization.

We will now introduce and analyze what sources of identification employees’ spoke of as important reference points for meaning.

### **Work as a reference point for meaning**

As argued by many authors, identification with the role can serve as a source of meaning for employees (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Grant, 2008a; Wrzeniewski, 2003). This was something we experienced during our interviews with people at GoodLiving. Most of them spoke about the identification with their work as significant for making meaning. We have outlined three sub-themes to meaningfulness in work. These are the role and tasks, accomplishments and purpose.

#### **Identification with the role and tasks**

“The reason I chose GoodLiving as an employer is not because of the brand or because of the cooperative background, but because the job itself is so very appealing, it’s something I can identify with (...) I look upon myself as a relation-building entrepreneur and I have chosen to work at GoodLiving because I have the opportunity to have the role I have.”  
(Olivia)

The role seems to be something that Olivia can identify with and potentially one of the things that she creates meaning around work given the way she expresses herself. Another employee who was about to leave the organization when we did the interview expressed her love for projects and stated that this love was one of the main reasons she joined GoodLiving but also one of the reasons for her now leaving the organization.

## PAWNSHOP OF HEARTS?

### THE DYNAMICS OF IDENTIFICATION AND MEANING CREATION IN A PROPERTY MANAGEMENT ORGANIZATION

“One of the reasons that enticed me to join the organization was all the projects (...) one of my former colleagues who had joined the organization spoke about all the so I applied. I love working with projects... I really like the feeling of delving deep into them...to lead projects... it’s fantastic to be in a project and experience the whole process. Seeing how things get started, how they develop and the follow-up. Everything from economics to seeing how all the material falls in place. But I should be frank; there haven’t been so many new projects for a while... I really would have liked it if there were more. And that’s one of the reasons I’m leaving, I wanted to pursue my interest in project management.” (Klara, has been in the organization for five years)

When we met with Klara, she had recently come back from maternal leave. During our interview she explained that there hadn’t been so many projects throughout most of her time in the organization. Klara said that one of the reasons for her joining the organization in the first place was to be able to work with projects and project management and that the reason for her now leaving was because her interest in project management could not be satisfied in her current position. Arguably, Klara identifies very much with the role of project leader, which potentially makes her pursue that identification in another organization.

Other employees spoke of their meanings at work as an outcome of specific interests and inclination towards specific tasks.

“I enjoy working with my hands; I like to do things with my hands, so the work suits me well. The reason that I am still here is partly because of me being able to do what I know I can do and the fact that I have been able to move around a lot, new challenges you know.” (Ove)

In the interview Ove explained that he always had been good working with his hands and felt that he had been able to pursue that interest at GoodLiving. During the interview he very clearly stated that he would never be able to perform what he called “office work” because it would not suit his personality. This notion of having tasks related to one’s personality is captured in the quote below:

“I’m curious you know, I see simple solutions in everyday life, I feel that I have the chance to pursue that interest in my work. It is an extremely free job and I have so varied tasks (...) I enjoy it, I can influence even if I’m not a frontline person. I have the possibility to help paint the map.” (Sten, has been in the organization for 28 years)

In this quote Sten talks about himself as being inquisitive and solution oriented, traits that he states he is able to further develop in his work. Similarly, Wilmer explains his deep interest in economics and relates this to his current role.

“I can say that I have always been interested in economics. It began in high school. Math and the economic perspectives of a company and all that stuff that has intrigued me (...) even at an early age I knew what I wanted to do.” (Wilmer)

In the interview, Wilmer told us that he knew what he wanted to do very early in life and that he wanted to be an accountant. Potentially, the role of being an accountant could be seen as an important reference for identification and meaning for Wilmer, given this background. Employment at GoodLiving gives him the opportunity to work in a role he identifies with.

Drawing on the excerpts from the interviews above and during our other interviews, we have found that one of the main things that people identify with and create meaning around at GoodLiving is related to their tasks and roles. As will be shown below, individuals at GoodLiving also create meaning around their work in the sense of what they can accomplish and through the work becoming a self-referent, which leads us in to our second finding concerning meaningfulness in working.

### **Accomplishment and self- reference as a source of meaning**

“I work for myself; I am not here in order to walk that extra mile for GoodLiving. I do not have that passion for this organization. I work for myself even though I work in the organization. My incentive has always been to perform... I do not compete with other people. I compete with myself. I want to develop.” (Margareta, has been in the organization for seven year)

In this excerpt from our interview with Margareta she states that her main incentive is related to who she is as a person and that she has always worked for herself. Arguably, Margareta’s will become better and achieve things that could potentially be seen as an important source of identification and, given how she puts it, also meaning. Her work might become a context where she can express her personality traits. Achievements and performance as reference point for meaning is also mentioned by Klaes and Olivia:

“Everything is a competition. I want to be good, I want to succeed and I want to do a good job. And I want to achieve results, that’s what drives me.” (Klaes)

“Different parts motivate me, but above all I like showing results. I think it's a blast to be part of things and have some influence.” (Olivia)

Both Klaes and Olivia explain that they are driven by results. Arguably, showing results and accomplishing things could potentially be a source of meaning, as they seem to be very much closely related to how Klaes and Olivia look upon their own driving forces. Anders draws on the metaphor of sports:

“There's an element of sport in this too. How many tasks can I succeed with? I will run this race, I have twenty tasks, how many can I do?” (Anders)

During the interview, Anders explained that he had always been active in different sports and still was very active during his spare time. Competition and accomplishment seemed also to be important factors for him at work. In the excerpt he speaks of running the race, treating each task as a challenge and each day as a competition between him and the tasks put in front of him. The meanings Anders create in the context of his work can therefore possibly be related to the way he makes sense of his work context as an arena for sports and challenges, aiming at winning every day. It could be reasoned that when people identify with certain traits and recognize those traits in their work, the work become self-referential, meaning that their individual characteristics are made sense of in the light of the work itself.

### **Purpose of work – Contributing, helping, building relationships**

Apart from the feeling of accomplishment surrounding work, people also seem to identify with their work as it provides a slightly “deeper” purpose. A purpose with the job seems to be important as a source of identification and point of reference for meaning creation for employees at GoodLiving. Almost all our interviewees mentioned that contributions, helping clients and building relationships was significant for them as it established a feeling of contribution to something beyond oneself.

“If you cannot motivate yourself, no one else can do it. You have to find what you're passionate about. (...) And the reason I work with what I'm doing now is because I like the interaction with clients. I like working with clients and helping them (...) it makes you feel important... it gives me the feeling that if I do not come to work one day someone will be affected, maybe even negatively because I didn't show up. The needs of the client are an incentive for me to come to work each day. I want to do as well as I can to make sure they are happy. “ (Therese)

Therese explains that the reason she is working at GoodLiving is because she likes the interaction with clients and the feeling of making others happy. She states that it makes her feel important and that the needs of the client is a motive for her to go to work. Meaning for Therese is potentially gained through the interaction and the ability to help a client. During the interview Therese spoke of herself as wanting to feel needed. As the quote shows, the significance of feeling important could be interpreted as a source of meaning for Therese. Possibly, this could be related to the deeper needs for her as a person. Similarly Esther says:

“There are a lot of people calling us (...) and many times they don’t know what to do and it feels good to be able... almost a social institution...helping them (...) It always feels good to give them what they need.” (Esther, has been in the organization for more than thirty years)

Esther, like Therese, points to the act of helping individuals as a source of meaningfulness. During the interview Esther talked a lot about being able to be there for the clients. She explained that she often takes on a helper role even off work. The feeling of being able to help can, therefore, be seen as an indication that Esther incorporates into her work as well. Both Therese and Esther project and draw upon their personal traits and characteristics as sources of meaning in their work. The tasks they perform might enable a greater sense of purpose precisely because of this. To be able to contribute based on the negotiation of one’s personal traits is shown in the quote from our interview with David:

“I have always looked for and worked with service (...) this thing with helping someone, I like it and it gives me something more. It doesn’t have to be a huge thing... you can help an old lady with a tap that is dripping or simple things like that. It still gives me something. The gratitude and the happiness, it makes me feel good.” (David, has been in the organization for four months)

It seems as though the task itself or the grandness of the service is not the most important thing for David. Just being able to help appears to give him something more. Potentially the act of helping becomes a reference for meaning. The fact that he has been drawn towards service work can, of course, be related to many factors, yet, the very act of helping other people seems important for him. As stated by Wzreniewski (2003), almost any task can be imbued with meaning. The task of helping an old lady with her dripping tap might not seem so significant. It could be drudgery for some, but for David it is a joy. Possibly, David identifies himself as a helper, an enabler which gives him a sense of meaning and acts as a

point of reference in his current work even though it may not be considered “prestigious” from an external perspective. The excerpt from the interview with David also shows the importance of social contact and relationships with the client, apart from only being there to help. This theme was also apparent in other interviewees:

“I enjoy the social side, the contact with people, especially the contact with clients. I was a salesman before so I’ve always been good at talking to people. I like building relationships.” (Benny)

Benny reflects on his earlier role as salesman and states that he likes building relationships, especially with the clients. This recollection might be interpreted as Benny identifying himself as a builder of relationships and potentially extracting meaning from this. Similarly, building relationships seems important to Rickard:

“The client is important. I think it’s great with relationships. If I was to mention something that really motivates me, it’s relationships. However, I sometimes feel that in the pursuit of money we forget this relationship. (...) when the phone rings and the piles get bigger, it might be hard to ask old Greta how she really feels and it’s a pity. Because I do think that part of GoodLiving’s recipe for success is to make connections and it’s hard to do when you have so little time.” (Rickard)

Rickard contends that relationships are something that motivates him. Seemingly, he sees building relationships as something not only important to himself but also to the organization. During our interview Rickard explained that being social is a “cornerstone” of his personality. In Rickard’s case the establishment of deeper relationships, being able to connect with clients and satisfy their needs seems to be an important source of meaning. In the interview he reasoned that his ability to create relationships and nurture them is hindered to some extent by the pursuit of money and effectiveness.

As stated in the introduction to this sub-section, work itself seems like one important reference points for identification and meaning. People seem to use their work, their role and their tasks as sources for self-reference. They possibly interpret and extract different meanings of “Who am I?” As argued by Pratt and Ashforth (2003), meaningfulness in work is established through the negotiation of individual’s own identities with their role at work. Arguably, people identify with different aspects of their role, interpreting their own identities and needs, projecting them into the role and making sense of the parts about the role they find

meaningful. However, meaningfulness in work seems to be closely related to the meaning at work as will be elaborated on below.

### **Meaning through belonging**

Almost all of the employees we interviewed at GoodLiving stressed the importance of belongingness in different contexts and situations. Apart from emphasizing the work itself as a point of reference for identification and meaningfulness, departments, work groups and colleagues were also discussed during our interview sessions.

Many of those we interviewed claimed that they felt more associated with the group than the organization, as illustrated in the excerpt from Klaes below:

“I identify very much with my group... much more than I do with the organization. I feel good about my work because of them. They provide me with a positive feeling...we work together, I feel a strong relationship there.” (Klaes)

The strong relationship with his colleagues seems important to Klaes as he explains that they provide him with a positive feeling, which seemingly creating meanings for him in his work. He points out that he has strong relationships within the group and during the interview he talked about the group as meaning most to him because they are together every day. Another of our interviewees expressed a feeling similar to that of Klaes:

”I really feel good here, I really do and once again, it is because of the people that work here. I have experienced such a good reception. I have been trained and shown around. It is very important to me. Believe me, I have seen both sides... I mean there have been other times in my career when I have just been thrown the keys and told where to go... and I've sorted out those situations as well, but it's so much more fun when you get the briefing and a warm welcome. It makes you feel like you're part of the group and that you matter as a person.” (David)

David explains that one of the reasons why he thrives at GoodLiving is because of his colleagues. He explains that being part of a group results in him feeling that he matters as a person. Potentially, his colleagues provide him with a sense of belongingness, possibly through the feeling of being valued, not just because of what he does in his job but also for whom he is as a person. This is in line with what was presented in the literature review concerning the group being an important reference for identification and meaningfulness (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Kreiner et al., 2006; Weick, 1995; Wrzesniewski et al., 2003).

Belongingness seems to be important on many levels for individuals at GoodLiving, not only in the context of the organization. Rickard says that being part of something bigger than him is important and that he does not like to do things alone:

“Belonging to a group is extremely important, it has always been important for me to be a part of something, a bigger context. I am not the guy who...and my colleagues always tease me for this, but I cannot eat lunch on my own. Sometimes, when we are separated I always go out to grab a pizza and go up to the sixth floor. I don't lunch on my own, I don't go to the cinema alone, there are a lot of things I don't do on my own. I'd rather do things with other people, than I feel most comfortable.” (Rickard)

Being part of a bigger context could arguably be a source of meaning for Rickard. That, linked to what he states about his social personality could potentially be interpreted to mean that Rickard needs to belong to a group in order to create meaning. The idea of the group being important is captured in a quote by Klara who speaks of her team as a “super group”:

“My team is one of those super groups (...) I feel that we are all very close-knit and we have lots of fun, lots of laughter, even if it is very serious sometimes. Since I decided to leave the organization my colleagues have been the prime source for meaning, they were important before but even more now.” (Klara)

Klara states that after she decided to leave the organization her main source of meaning has become her colleagues. She argues that the group is very close-knit which might be a sign of identification between members of the group. Her connection with the group seems to be quite strong, and Klara appears to get a lot out of her membership. As mentioned earlier, Klara saw little possibilities in identifying with her current role as the tasks were not associated with project management, a role that she found significant for her own identification. In the quote above she clearly states that since she decided to leave the organization her colleagues have been the prime source for meaning, potentially filling the identification gap from the role itself. This is interesting as it might indicate that individuals actively seek meaning in different situations and that reference for meaning may change due to external circumstances.

As seen from the quotes above, belongingness is experienced as important for individuals at GoodLiving. Some of our interviewees stated that their closest colleagues mean a lot for them in creating meaning around work:

“It’s tough sometimes. Right now it’s very tough, but because I have colleagues whom I feel comfortable with it works. We support each other and encourage each other. It’s really important! You can have great tasks and if you don’t have any colleagues that support you, it’s no fun.” (Esther)

Esther explained to us that her colleagues help her in tough situations at work. The relationship with colleagues is clearly valued by Esther. Similarly, Wilmer talks of his relationships with his colleagues as friendships:

“If you thrive with your colleagues, is it easy to go to work. (...) I do have a close relationship with many of my colleagues, we are friends. I feel attached to the department and my closest colleagues. I think that our department is amazing.” (Wilmer)

Seemingly Wilmer’s relationship with his colleagues becomes something deeper than merely a matter of collegiality, he sees them as friends. During the interview Wilmer explained that he and three colleagues recently did a trip together. Arguably, the meaning he creates around the relationship with his colleagues seems to expand the context of work. The close relationship with colleagues as a source of meaning is also illustrated in a quote from our interview with Therese:

“You have to have an income of course, but that is not why I come here. You can get income anywhere and one can get work anywhere. If I put it like this, even if I felt that I didn’t need to work for money, that money wasn’t a problem, I would probably still come here (...) it’s partly because of the close relationship that I have with work colleagues.” (Therese)

Therese states that even if she had the opportunity not to go to work she would probably still do so because of her colleagues. Arguably, the close relationships Therese experiences provide her with a meaning that extends beyond money. As discussed by Baumeister and Vos (2002), the essence of meaning might be related to a sense of connection. A sense of meaning, belonging and connection through relationships with colleagues came up during almost all of our interviews. As argued by many authors (Ashforth and Johnson, 2001; Johnson et al., 2006; van Knippenberg & van Schie, 2000), there are different levels of self-identification in an organization, where colleagues and work groups might be considered a so-called lower-order identity.

As has been shown, identification and meaning can arise from different sources in an organization. Yet, as stated by Dutton and Ragins (2007) the workplace could be seen as an

arena in which diverse arrays of social relationships are formed, all of which have their own connotations of meaning for organizational members. Similarly, Pratt (2000) argues that identifications with groups outside an organization can also act as source of meaning for individuals. This is something we encountered in our case study.

### **Work as enabler for other sources of identification and meaning**

Apart from identifying and extracting meaning from work itself and/or their belongingness to a work group and their social relationships, employees seem to see work as an enabler of other identifications outside of work. When doing the interviews we came to understand that there are many things other than work that they are identifying with and that they cognitively and emotionally attach themselves to. Working at GoodLiving seems to provide organizational members with the time and flexibility needed to do and be other things. This flexibility seems to be a source of meaning, potentially developed by their ability to identify with identities that are normally categorized as non-work identities.

“Relationships, comfort and well-being are important in life. There must be a balance. I mean, my friends and my family, they are my loved ones and to be able to spend time with them is what matters. That’s the meaning of life. At work I am also into relationships but, like I said, here I see myself more as an entrepreneur who likes to create relations that bring results. That’s not who I am at home (...) you know people spend a lot of time at work, seventy, eighty percent of one’s waking hours. I think that my job provides me with the chance to be both. If I can lay my life puzzle that is a good thing, then I actually want to deliver more at work.” (Olivia)

This excerpt shows that Olivia seems to think upon relationships with friends and loved ones as her greatest meaning in life. She argues that relationships are important even at work, but more in “professional terms”. Relationships at work seem to mean something different. Arguably, to spend time with the people she loves, potentially extracting meaning from those relationships seems to make her able to do things better at work. During the interview, she returns to speaking of her family and friends as important sources of belonging. She spoke of them as being her main anchor in life.

Wilmer also emphasized the importance of his family and friends as a source of meaning. Before he came to GoodLiving he had worked at two of the larger accounting firms. He explained to us that there was a lot of prestige and individuality there. He said further that he did not enjoy his work there because he could not identify himself with the climate. He argued

that it consumed too much of his time outside work and decreased his ability to be the “real Wilmer”.

”Either you focus on your career or you think of family, girlfriend and friends. And I chose the latter (...) Free- time means a lot to me, it keeps me motivated at work. (...) The fact that my work at GoodLiving enables me to have a balance in life, a balance that I didn’t have before, that’s the most important thing for me. I have time for my friends and my wife in the evenings. That is very important for me, at least for now.” (Wilmer)

The employment at GoodLiving seems to provide Wilmer with the opportunity to extract meaning from other sources of belonging, such as friends and family. The ability to spend time with the people who provide him with meaning seems to be something he did not experience before. It appears that his work provides him with an opportunity to live his life outside where he seemingly extracts a great deal of his meaning from.

Apart from family and friends, other sources of identification seem to be important for employees. Margareta explains that she establishes meaning through her travels:

“I love travelling. I like seeing new places, I consider myself a traveler. And my work allows that, I work a lot and then I travel (...) I feel more comfortable when I know that I have a trip booked. I need something to look forward to, otherwise I don’t know if I would have been able to work as much as I do.” (Margareta)

For Margareta, travelling is something important that brings her joy and, to some extent, also provides her with the energy to cope with working as much as she does. Her employment at GoodLiving seems to make it possible for Margareta to be the traveler she wants to be.

Another example of other identifications made possible through work at GoodLiving is illustrated in a quote from Esther:

“I have been single for the last eight years and I have started to develop interests of my own. My passion is line dance. I am actually secretary in the local association. I am going to Ireland and Spain soon to dance. I am very active during my time off work (...) I am very social, I like doing things when off work and I want to do many things, it is important for me. I am grateful that I have a job so I can do all of these things.” (Esther)

According to Esther, line dance is a passion. Potentially the ability to identify herself as a line dancer might provide her with meaning that expands to the context of work. As mentioned, we have experienced a wide range of identifications among our interviewees that are related

to what they enjoy doing when off work. Both how work enables these sources of identification and also how these identifications are related to their meaning creation at work. Anders explained to us that he is very interested in sports and that he has a big heart for non-profit work, something that his work makes possible and that he seems to extract meaning from:

“If you look outside my work I would say I have a rather big heart for non-profit work. I have been engaged in sports associations where all my boys have been active. And I am also a doer; I like to work with different things, fix things. I have lots of projects at home, that’s primarily where I find meaning and the flexibility in my work enables me to do those things.” (Anders)

Benny also expressed non-profit work as a source of meaning. During our interviews, he talked a lot about his great interest in scouting. He explained how much he enjoys going away during weekends and how much he enjoys being out in the forest. He argued that when people take on their scout shirt they are no longer defined by their titles or where they live:

“What I’m really passionate about is the scout association. To get children and young people out in the forest for a whole weekend without television, telephone and computer, I think that is absolutely fantastic. It gives me a break from the stress at work. And then there is this part about being yourself, once you get to wear your scout shirt, it doesn’t matter if you are the CEO, a cleaner, a plumber or whatever, because you are you are as a person and not a position.” (Benny)

Benny states that his membership of the scout association provides him with a break from the stress at work. During the interview he emphasized being able to be himself and not a title once out in the forest. Obviously he likes the feeling of being “yourself”. During weekends he might be able to “be himself” among other scouts, extracting meaning from that.

It seems that individuals at GoodLiving tend to identify and extract meaning from other sources outside the context of work, and that their employment at GoodLiving enables these sources of identification. Given that identities are multiple (Alvesson, 2000; Gioia et al., 2000) and that the organization is a context where different meanings and identities can be enacted (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003) the dynamics between different identifications become interesting. This leads us in to the final part of our analysis.

## **Multiple selves – An extension and incorporation of meaning creation**

When we spoke to employees at GoodLiving about their different identifications and how they create meaning, many of them began speaking about themselves having separated and, to some extent, partly incorporated identities. Rickard had a pin with the GoodLiving logo on his jacket when we meet him and when we asked about what that pin meant to him he explained:

“I believe that it’s important to represent the company while I am here... I am not in favor for having corporate costumes or anything like that, but I don’t think it is wrong to have a pin with GoodLiving’s logo. It is the least one can do... it shows that I am proud of my organization, which I am.”

When we then asked him in what terms he would describe himself Rickard stated:

“I’m not sure that I would have used GoodLiving as the prime marker of my identity. I’m not even sure that I would have used my professional role. I would rather have said, struggling parent of toddler or something like that (...) I do not identify with my work, I’m proud of working here but that’s it.”

Rickard’s clarification could be interpreted as a sign of individual identities potentially being pluralistic (Alvesson, 2000; Gioia et al., 2000), and that people may not draw on their organizational or professional role as the strongest marker of identity. However, it also shows that organizational members might not be totally detached from the organization either. Rather, Rickard’s statement shows that people might collect different identity markers and that these identities might be considered more as a jigsaw puzzle that constitutes individuals. As Rickard stated later on in the interview:

“I’m either private Rickard or job Rickard. And sometimes I am a mix of them.” (Rickard)

Drawing on the notion of multiple identities, the dynamics of the latter becomes interesting. This parted but also fused view of oneself is also found in an excerpt from Klara. She explained that she somewhat lost track of her professional self when she became a mother, using motherhood as an identity tag in many daily situations. She explained that it somehow felt good coming back to work and to be able to identify with something else again:

“I am a mother now and that is super cool. So well, to be honest, I believe that I have lost track of who I am professionally because I have started to identify myself more as a mother. Nowadays, I mostly identify myself as a mother, in all aspects and situations. But

somehow it feels good to be back and to be able to present myself as Klara at GoodLiving, that I have a role here with what I do and my professional title.” (Klara)

Klara explains that she mostly introduces herself as a mother and that she has a “role” in the organization that she takes on when she comes to work. Potentially, this could be interpreted as meaning that Klara has multiple identities, which she adopts depending on situation and context. Olivia explained that she experiences herself as different at work and at home and that these two identities might sometimes be very separated:

“I’m pretty different here and at home, I think many of my friends find it hard to see me in a professional role. And as I stated before, in my professional role I am an entrepreneur building relationships. Privately, I am much more of a family person. There, I am a cozy girl; I am very fond of home (...) Way back I used to be a party princess and I also played handball so those things very much constituted whom I was back then. But things change of course... as life goes by layers are added with some becoming more or less relevant.”  
(Olivia)

Building on what Olivia says, it seems as though her identity has been shaped and reshaped during different periods of her life. Assembling these fragments, or layers as Olivia calls them, constitutes who she is and who she has been. Building on the sensemaking aspect of identity and meaning making, it could be argued that both Klara and Olivia make sense of themselves in different ways in different contexts. At home they might incorporate the layer of motherhood to a larger extent whereas at work they might draw on other points of reference, such as their role, in order to make sense and create meaning out of that specific context.

As has been illustrated by the quotes above, as well as in our literature review, there is a great deal of complexity and ambiguity in the concept of identification and meaning creation. The dynamics of meaning creation will be central themes when we now proceed to the discussion.

## **DISCUSSION – IDENTIFICATION AND MEANING CREATION, AN ATTEMPT TO ELABORATE**

In this section we will summarize and discuss our research findings in order to formulate possible answers to our research question: *How do individuals at GoodLiving experience identification and create meaning around their work?* In addition we wish to provide new insight into the field of identification and meaning creation by introducing the concept of buffering identities.

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### **Necessity of pledging hearts to GoodLiving for the sake of meaning?**

The existence of a strong organizational identity that is congruent with the identities of the members of the organization and to which they, therefore, can closely associate themselves has been argued to be one of the underpinnings for a successful organization (Brickson, 2005, 2007; Cohen- Meitar et al., 2009; van Dick, 2004). In the case analysis, the management of GoodLiving is quoted as stating that it wants or expects employees to pledge a “piece of their hearts” to the organization both for their own good and for the benefit of the organization. Management seems to be of the opinion that if people do not pledge their hearts they are not able to work in the best interests of the organization. They also seem to believe that if employees dedicate a piece of their hearts in the interest of the organization they will also find more meaning in their work. To stand behind and “live” the organizational identity seems to be perceived by the management at GoodLiving as an important factor.

However, according to the interviewees’ own accounts they experience difficulties in identifying with the organizational identity of GoodLiving. As we have stated, we have interpreted the individual’s identification and relationship with the organizational identity as ambivalent. People may identify with some targets (e.g. the values) but the organizational underpinnings are argued to be outdated. As has been shown in the analysis, those we interviewed often used words like *their*, *they*, *them* and *GoodLiving* when speaking about the organization. They seemed to actively separate themselves from the organization thereby emphasizing the difference between I and They. This is something that we find interesting, as it may potentially be a sign of the position people might take when experiencing difficulty identifying. Yet, we do not interpret the ambivalence in the relationship between the individuals and the organizational identity as a non-disputable sign of dis-identification which

is described by Elsbach and Bhattacharya (2001: 397) as “self-perception based on [...] a cognitive separation between one’s identity and one’s perception of the identity of an organization [or] negative relational categorization of oneself and the organization” (for example as opponents or enemies). We do not suggest a simple black or white relationship between the individual and his or her relationship to the identity of the organization where he or she on the one hand fully embraces the organizational identity or, on the other hand, totally disassociates him or herself from it. We argue that labeling the relationship as ambivalent opens up for many interpretations and nuances of identifications. As argued by Pratt (2000) and Ashforth (1998), the process of organizational identification should not be treated as an all or nothing process whereby an individual comes to match his or her values with an organization but rather as a dynamic process in which the individual can change identification states. This dynamic and changing nature of identification states is perhaps illustrated by the way individuals at GoodLiving choose to partly identify with some targets related to the identity of the organization whilst omitting others. Therefore, organizational identification in the case of GoodLiving does not become a question of congruence or “fit” between fixed attributes and needs of an individual and those of GoodLiving as an organization. The ambivalence makes the relationship dynamic.

Several authors who have a more technical knowledge interest tend to view organizational identity and organizational identification both as sources of meaning for individuals and as a source of success for the organization, leading to loyalty, motivation, task performance et cetera. This is considered to enhance the outcomes for the organization at large (Bartel, 2001; Haslam & Ellemers, 2005; Kramer, 2006; van Knippenberg, 2000; van Knippenberg & van Schie, 2000). Arguably, the organizational identity may not be the prime object for meaning creation and meaningfulness for employees at GoodLiving and very few seem to use the identity of “employee at GoodLiving” as their prime identity tag when speaking about themselves, other than in a work situation, as many stated. Yet, employees at GoodLiving seem to be loyal to the organization and work in the interest of it. They also give the impression of enjoying their presence in the organization. However, the prime reason for this does not seem to be because they can identify fully with the identity of the organization as such. At GoodLiving people seem to enjoy their work and do a good job even though they have not pledged their hearts to the organization. Arguably, this may also be the case in many organizations.

We want to make it clear that our aim is not to reject the idea of organizational identities and identifications as sources of meaning, rather we wish to support the view that there are other reference points of meaning in organizations that may be more “appropriate” for people to draw upon in their identification and meaning creating processes. Given that meaning is an active interplay between the individual his or her work and the organization (Wrzeniewski, 2003) through the process of sensemaking (Weick, 1995), people may interpret different sources of identification in different ways. The meanings people create around different identifications become dependent on an individual’s sensemaking in relation to his or her work context, which also includes other points of reference for meaning, not only identification with the identity of the organization. As stated by Pratt and Ashforth (2003) and Weick (1995), meaningfulness arises in the sensemaking process of answering the question “Why I am here?” Even though employees at GoodLiving seem to be able to partly connect themselves to the organizational identity, they formulate an answer to the question “Why am I here?” through other points of reference. These will be discussed below.

### **Identification and meaning by connecting to work itself**

As stated, many of the persons we interviewed seemed to identify with the role itself and the tasks that it involved. As presented in the literature review, the characteristics of the work appear to be an important source of meaning (Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Grant, 2008a; Wrzeniewski, 2003; Wrzeniewski & Dutton, 2001). The view that individuals may imbue any task with meaning, and that the specific characteristics of a job can impact the experienced meaningfulness in work, seems relevant. However, work seems to connote different meanings for different people, and individuals appear to extract meaning from diverse cues in work. Amid identifying with the role and the tasks, people appear to extract meaning through seeing their work as something purposeful. This seems to be in line with what Baumeister (1991), Emmons (1999) and Grant (2008b) proposes regarding the importance of values, goals, and beliefs that the work is thought to serve as points of reference for meaningfulness.

Starbuck and Milliken (1988) propose that sensemaking should be defined as the ascription of meaning to particular object or stimulus, for example work, by inserting it into a present or evolving cognitive structure. In the case of GoodLiving, we have experienced that employees seem partly to make sense of their work by inserting work into the cognitive structure of their own identity. In the process of meaning creation, employees at GoodLiving seem to interpret their own traits of identity in their work i.e. they seem to find meaning through enacting their

own individualities. Similar to what Pratt and Ashforth (2003) propose regarding meaningfulness in work, namely that meaningfulness to some extent is derived from the relationship between what the person is doing and their identity, we would argue that people at GoodLiving seem to connect with different entities in the work itself that are related to their own way of being. Arguably, even though identities and meaning creation should be seen as dynamic and relational processes, people might have some point of reference in order to manage their processes of meaning creation. We argue that identity to some extent is essential and that it is this essentiality that is negotiated in different contexts. We do not claim that identity is a fixed entity but arguably, an individual might have some kind of reference point when negotiating meaning through identification. Some parts of the self- concept may be more or less interpreted into ones work, potentially making it an extension of one's own identity, interpreted into a given situation.

### **Identification and meaning through connecting to social aggregates within the organization**

As demonstrated in the analysis, another source of identification and meaning for employees at GoodLiving seems to stem from the social relationships inside the organization. Many of our interviewees appear to extract meaning by identifying with their closest colleagues or workgroup, thereby establishing meaning through a sense of belongingness to different entities inside the organization. Some researchers (Johnson et al., 2006; van Knippenberg & van Schie, 2000) have claimed that individuals identify with smaller collectives or lower order identities, such as the work group or the department, because these identities are more likely to constitute one's primary group. We argue that this might hold true to some extent and that employees at GoodLiving may find it hard to connect to the identity of large abstract collectives, such as the whole organization. Instead, they can create meaning through connecting and identifying with groups closer to them. Arguably, they may identify more with their closest colleagues or work groups than with GoodLiving as an organization since they are interacting with these groups on a daily basis. As we have stated in the analysis, belonging to groups and / or departments at GoodLiving is something that those we interviewed spoke a lot about. Our interpretation is that relationships and identifications that are in a sense "closer" to the individual might be loaded with more meanings as they are more related to the individual's self. This reinforces the view that an individual's connection to smaller collectives inside an organization may influence their perceived meaningfulness in work as argued by Ashforth and Kreiner (1999); Weick (1995) and, Wrzesniewski et al., (2003).

As outlined in the analysis, we have interpreted the feeling of belongingness and connection as an important source for identification and meaning creation at GoodLiving. According to Deaux et al., (1999) the motive for identification with different groups lies in the human desire to develop the concept of self to embrace relations with others and through it achieve a sense of belonging. According to Baumeister and Vohs (2002) the essence of meaning is connection to some aggregate. Given what has been outlined in the analysis, meaning through connection seems also significant for individuals. As stated, relationships seemed to be a recurring theme regarding how organizational members spoke about their meaning creation. Arguably a sense of connection might be established through these relationships.

### **Identification and meaning through connecting to identities “outside” the organization**

Apart from identifying with groups inside GoodLiving, our analysis shows that employees also seem to look upon work as an enabler of other sources of identification and meaning creation. It seems that people identify with a number of other identities, normally defined as non-work, and creates meaning around them. This reinforces the view that people do not only draw on their sources of belonging inside the organization in order to create meaning in their work. Ramarajan and Reid (2013) argue that the blurred borders and distinctions between work and non-work life domains results in a re-negotiation of the relationship between work and non-work identities. Given what has been presented in the analysis, we are inclined to agree. It seems that people at GoodLiving also tend to extract meaning from other identifications and that these identifications seem to be a major part of what individuals create their meaning around in the context of work.

As outlined in the analysis, our interviewees’ spoke of differentiating between something we interpret as “me at work” and “me at home” although; these identities did seem to interrelate (sometimes). As proposed by Stryker and Burke (2000: 284), identity is those “parts of self-composed meanings that persons attach to the multiple roles they typically play in highly differentiated contemporary societies”. Collinson (2003) proposes that multiple identities and, consequently, identifications “may be in tension, mutually contradictory and even incompatible [...] thus reinforcing ambiguity and insecurity” (p. 534). He further states that different parts of oneself may interact in complex, and maybe even in complementary ways. We agree with Collinson on this when discussing the dynamics of multiple sources of identification and meaning. We recognized the negotiation of identities and meanings as

something inherent to organizational life and meaning creation. While meaningfulness may derive from identity and different identifications, the process of finding meaning may concurrently alter that identity. Different sources of identification and meaning creation may interact, fueling new meanings that may potentially also interact within the context of work. Drawing on this, there might be interplay between the composed meanings of “me at work” and “me at home” described by some of the employees at GoodLiving. We argue, from our interviews, that seeing identity as a perpetual work in progress, as noted by Ashforth (1998), creating meaning also becomes a unending work in progress that is impacted by the many different sources of identification that exist inside and outside the organization. In the same manner as identities can be varied and mixed (Alvesson, 2000; Alvesson et al, 2008; Gioia et al., 2000), so could arguably also meanings, given that meaning, identities and identification are interrelated. The self and the meanings attached through identifications with different targets therefore possibly become synthesized.

Drawing on what has been presented in our analysis and discussed above; we reason that it is likely that employees at GoodLiving establish meaning around different sources of identification. These different sources can be found both inside and outside the organizational context. Debatably the employees’ process of making sense of their presence in GoodLiving as an organization is multifaceted. Therefore we argue that people create a patchwork of identifications related to making sense of their own identity in the context of work. The possible interrelationship between answering the question “Who am I?” (Alvesson, 2004; Ashforth et al., 2008) and “Why am I here?” (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Weick, 1995) will now be discussed more depth.

### **Buffering identifications – A way of securing meaning?**

Based on our analysis our interpretation is that employees at GoodLiving build upon many sources of identity in order to create meaning. Given what has been outlined above concerning the multiple identifications and point of references for meaning in GoodLiving, we argue that employees within the organization might engage in a process of buffering different identifications as a way of securing meaning. Arguably, linking one’s meaningfulness to one sole source of identification, such as GoodLiving, the work or the identity of the work group does not seem evident in the case of GoodLiving. Instead, meaning is distributed among many sources of identification, both in and outside the organization. We interpret meaning creation through identifying with multiple aggregates or entities both as a

way of establishing meaning in the context of one's work through what we call "cherry picking", where individuals at GoodLiving "pick" certain reference points of identification, and also as a way of securing meaning and minimizing the risk of ruptured identities and meanings through the creation of a "safety net" of identifications and meanings. These two metaphors are dimensions of buffering identifications in order to secure meaning, and even though they are separately described below, they are interconnected as we have stated above.

### **Buffering identities through "cherry picking"**

We argue that the way people at GoodLiving extract meaning from different identifications could be seen as a process of "picking" different valuable and significant cues from a wide range of possible identifications. Weick (1995) argues that a person's identity can be considered a lens through which one makes sense of the world. Debatably, the process of "cherry picking" is an active way of establishing meaning by choosing the sources of meaning and identification that are deemed to be most relevant and significant to the individual, based on that individual's identity. We consider picking "cherries" as a part of an individual's identity work where the dynamics of the social world, mentioned by Snow and Anderson (1987), is represented by the dialectic between potential sources of meaning in and outside the workplace and the inner world of the individual. Like Snow and Anderson (1987), Alvesson (2004) and Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003) we believe that the identity work is a process of creating, presenting, and sustaining identities that are consistent with and supportive of the self-concept. In the same way as individuals engage in identity work in order to "achieve the feeling of a coherent and strong self as a basis for social relations" (Alvesson, 2004: 190) we argue that individuals at GoodLiving engage in "cherry picking" as a way of establishing meaning related to their own identities and interpretations of their work and work context; a kind of "meaning creating work". Furthermore, if the motives for identification can be related to the enactment of certain valued identities and maintaining wholeness across different identities, as argued by Ashforth (2001), meaning creation could potentially be related to the meaning that these enacted identities provide. It is possible that a strong coherent sense of meaning might develop simultaneously with a strong coherent self by picking the cherries of meaning in the context of work that "look" and "taste" in a favorable way.

### **Creation of a safety net - Minimizing the risk of rapturing identifications and meanings**

Apart from seeing buffering identifications as a way of establishing meaning through "cherry picking" we argue that buffering identities can be seen as a way of minimizing the risk of

rapturing identities and meanings through the creation of a “safety net” where many identities providing meaning are incorporated. Employees at GoodLiving might draw upon diverse sources of identification both inside and outside the organization in order to minimize the risk of rapturing identities and meanings. By distributing meaning among different identities the risks of losing meaning through a lost identity might not have such a negative effect as if individuals only ascribed meanings to one source of identification. As suggested in the discussion above: if instead of linking his or her meaning to the identity of the organization an individual identifies more with his/her work, colleagues and a role outside the organization, such as being a scout leader or a mother, meaning is buffered through various sources. As proposed by Ashforth (2001), possible motives for identification are self-coherence and self-continuity, where the former is concerned with an individual’s maintenance of wholeness across a set of identities and the latter a striving to maintain unity across time. If identifications and meanings are raptured, the risk of non-self-coherence and dis-self-continuity might increase.

Related to the argument by Hogg (2000; 2003) and Hogg and Mullin (1999) that individuals create a sense of order in their world and reduce uncertainty through the enactment of the deeper meanings provided by different sources of identification, employees at GoodLiving may also identify and extract meaning through different aggregates and entities in order to reduce the risk of identities and, thereby, meanings being raptured. By pledging all of their hearts to an organizational identity individual might be seen as placing all their “eggs of meaning into one basket”, or “betting all their meaning on one horse”. Many baskets could be considered more appropriate in order to secure connection and meaning in the context of work.

### **Insecurities resulting in artificial or deep connections and meanings**

Referring back to the introductory chapter of this thesis regarding the shift in the way identities are formed: if identities of our contemporary society are more exposed and reliant on the relationship between the individual and his/her surroundings, as argued by Collinson (2003), we believe that a way of securing meaning might be through buffering identifications. If people’s identities are established through practice this might lead to greater freedom and choice but as stated by Collinson it also entails increasingly perilous, uncertain and insecure subjectivities.

According to researchers such as Capelli (1999), DiTomaso (2001) and Kalleberg (2009), the psychological contract between the organization and individuals has changed during the last

decades partly due to the deterioration in job security leaving the nature of work unwarranted. It is argued that the nature of lifelong employment has subsequently moved from employment by a single organization (Whyte, 1957) to sequential employments with many organizations (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Briscoe, Hall, & Demuth, 2006), interspersed by shorter or longer periods of unemployment (Kalleberg, 2009). Similarly, Sennett (1998) and Strangleman (2007) argue that society is facing an erosion of work identity as such through the impact of lay-offs, contract work and temporary jobs. Given these insecurities, it can be argued that the connections and meanings individuals establish in organizations are shallow and superficial. If people feel that the psychological contract has been breached it may result in them not engage in deeper meanings at work. However, as we have seen in the case of GoodLiving employees seem to form fairly emotional and deep bonds whilst at work. Not to the organization employing them but to different sources of identification both inside and outside that seem to interact in the process of meaning creation. The idea that people might buffer alternative sources of identification in order to secure meaning in the precarious context of work seems at least considerable. Buffering identities might be a way of coping with the insecurities inherent not only in work but also in society at large. Baumeister (1991) argues that individuals strive to fulfill needs for purpose, values, efficacy and self-worth as a work life (or any domain of life) unfolds. Without anchors of meaning individuals might be lost, not only at work but also as a whole. By anchoring meaning at different spots individuals may be able to handle the insecurities (Collinson, 2003) and blurred borders (Ramarajan & Reid, 2013) between work and other domains of life.

In line with what is argued by Frankl (1984), we suggest that individual's search for meaning in different situations is essential to life, both in and outside organizations. As we have stated, we interpret meaningfulness around work at GoodLiving as the employees' processes of making sense of their presence in the organization based on connecting themselves with different aggregates and entities that bring them significance and purpose. We propose that meaningfulness in a complex world might be achieved by drawing on several complex formations of identifications, negotiating them inside the organization. Ramarajan and Reid (2013) argue that the myth of separate worlds must be dismissed and that the organizational arena is a place where many identities and meanings are created and conveyed. We are inclined to agree.

## **CONCLUSIONS – IDENTIFICATION AND MEANING CREATION, MOVING BEYOND THE EXPECTED**

In this final chapter we summarize our research and findings and discuss the practical implications and the possible theoretical contributions of our work. In addition, we reflect on the research process, discuss its limitations and propose directions for future research.

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In our research we set out to critically assess organizational identification as a source of meaning by exploring the dynamics between different sources of identification and meaning creation at work. This was done in a case study at a non-professional service company in the property management sector. Our guiding research question was: *How do individuals at GoodLiving experience identification and create meaning around their work.* In the research process an interpretive perspective was employed as a way of providing in-depth understanding of the dynamics of different sources of identification and meaning creation. By this contrasting more mainstream functionalist studies that emphasize the importance for an individual to identify with an organizational identity in order to create meaning.

Our study was based on a qualitative research approach, which was characterized by a cyclical and iterative process moving back and forwards between empirical and theoretical findings. This proved to be a suitable and successful method. Our overall aim was not to arrive at empirical generalizations, rather we set out to develop practical and theoretical insights concerning the dynamics of identification and meaning creation around work.

### **Main findings**

Our two main findings are presented below. These are quite broad as we wish to encourage the reader to make his or her own interpretations and connotations.

#### **Pledging of hearts necessary in order to create meaning?**

Our research has pointed towards the ambivalence of organizational identification as a source of meaning. We found that employees at GoodLiving did not appear to primarily extract meaning through their presence in the organization by forming an answer to the question “Why am I here?” by identifying with the organization. Our interpretation is that employees

find it problematic to relate to the organizational identity and that they, to some extent, tend to distance themselves from the organizational identity. To be able to identify with the organization and through this create meaning around one's presence in the organization; consequently working in favor of the latter has been proposed by authors with a more technical knowledge interest. We have found that the relationship between the individual and his or her identity and that of the organization is not as straightforward and unproblematic as sometimes assumed by researchers within the functionalistic approach. We have found that meaning creation seems to be more dynamic and open to negotiation.

### **Patchwork of identification and meaning creation**

Employees at GoodLiving seem to find meaning through multiple sources of identification both inside and outside the organization. This leads us to suggest that meaning at work is a complex patchwork of identifications, resulting from the individuals negotiating different identities simultaneously. It seems that individuals identify both with the work itself, different social aggregates within the context of work and with identities normally considered outside the context of work. The identification with different identities seems to be rooted in a rather deep and emotional way. Individuals appear to negotiate the essentiality of who they are and their needs of connection and belongingness with different targets and entities. Together, they seem to make up a patchwork of identification and meaning creation where different sources of identification and meaning creation interact, fueling new meanings that may also interact within the context of work.

### **Practical implications**

Based on our findings, it does not seem that GoodLiving's employees have "pledged" their hearts to the organization in order to create meaning at work. The notion of individuals ascribing very much of their meaning by identifying with the identity of the organization that employs them might be overestimated. By embracing the notion that identification and meaning making are dynamic processes, in which identification can change and that meaning creation is negotiated between the individual and his or her context, paves the way for a more realistic view concerning how meaning is created in organization. As has been argued by Pratt (2000), our research has confirmed that identification is a dynamic process of sense breaking, meaning seeking, sense giving, and sensemaking in the organization.

Following the findings of our study we consider that the idea of a need to create a strong organizational identity in order for individuals to create meaning and act in the interests of an organization might be contested.

Reducing complexity in organizations seems to be an attractive objective in many organizations. This also seems to be the case at GoodLiving. However, we think it might be more productive to explicitly recognize the complexities around how people identify and create meaning at work. Moreover, we suggest that a deeper understanding of organizations and the different processes of sensemaking and meaning creation inside them can be attained by recognizing the dynamics, negotiations and pragmatics which, by suggestion, are inherent in most organizations. Instead of aiming at reducing complexity, effort should be directed towards understanding the dynamics and paradoxes of meaning creation at work, making these perceived “problems” sources of deeper knowledge and progress.

### **Theoretical contributions**

“Actors do not behave or decide as atoms outside a social context, nor do they adhere slavishly to a script written for them by the particular intersection of social categories that they happen to occupy. Their attempts at purposive action are instead embedded in concrete, ongoing systems of social relations.” (Granovetter, 1985: 487)

As stated at the beginning of this thesis, the field of identification within organizations has largely been dominated by authors with a technical focus in the study of identity and identification in organizations. As presented research with a technical knowledge interest aims at developing knowledge of cause- and- effect relationships through which control over natural and social situations can be accomplished. Granovetter (1985) argues that researchers may succumb to the view of organizations as rational entities existing in a context of irrationality. In general terms we would argue that organizations comprise human beings who interpret and make sense of the systems in which they are embedded. Based on our study it might be suggested that the establishment of cause-effect relationships may not make significant contributions to enhancing the theoretical understanding of how meaning creation occurs in contemporary organizations. As has been stated, we argue that meanings and identifications from different social systems might interact in complex ways.

Drawing on the findings of our study, the relationship between different sources of identification and meaning creation is more complex and dynamic than studies based on a

more functionalistic approach may suggest. We have tried to envision how individuals experience identification and create meaning around their work, and our findings suggest that organizational identification and meaning creation should not be treated as a black-box process where identification with an organizational identity automatically leads to a predicted outcome, in this case meaning.

As was argued in the introduction we adhere to the more interpretive approach where input does not routinely lead to output through a non-complicated, controllable process. We suggest that there may be a need to re-evaluate the view that organizations as rational entities in which decisions and meanings are rationally arrived at. A view that still, almost 30 years after Granovetter wrote his article might be inherent to some perspectives within the field of organizational research. We recommend that researchers (including ourselves) should be careful before repeating and accepting axiomatic truths about how organizations may or may not function and how organizational members may or may not behave. By critically assessing these axiomatic assumptions about how organizations and the processes in them are constituted, we argue that both theoretical and practical perceptions might be expanded. We hope that our findings could lead to a more nuanced understanding of *how* identification and meaningfulness might “work” in real life and possibly contributing to the progression of both practical and theoretical conceptions.

## Reflections and Further Research

During this project we have had several reflections concerning our own work and directions for future research. Firstly, we suggest that the dynamics of “identity and meaning work” in the work context are topics worthy of further study. In this study we have mainly focused on how individuals experience identification and create meaning around their work. We recommend more exploratory studies of how meaning creation through identification occurs in the context of work meaning, and how different identities are negotiated by organizational members in order to establish meaning. As stated in the discussion section, the notion of buffers of identities in order to secure meaning could be an interesting topic for researchers interested in identification and meaning creation.

Alvesson and Sköldböck (2010) argue that the world is not objectively and unambiguously given, it is rather experienced based on our preconceptions, experiences and subjective impressions. We have pointed to the problems in treating organizational processes, such as identification and meaning creation, as black box processes. And our findings might support

that the concept of organizational identification as a prime source of meaning for people in organizations may have to be rethought. However, we were only able to interview a small group of employees at one local GoodLiving office. This might off course be considered a limitation when drawing our conclusions. Yet, we do not consider that this makes our findings irrelevant or less important, but we do, however, want to stress the prospective in a comparative study between different organizations as well as diverse industries. In the light of our study we suggest that it might be productive for future researchers to pursue research in a broad spectrum of organizations to see whether our case is an exception or if it is indicative of a broader phenomenon. Such research might also enhance a deepened understanding of identification and meaning creation in different contexts.

In general, we think that future research on identification and meaning creation could advance theoretical and practical evaluations by talking to people about what organizational identity and other sources of identification mean to them. We suggest that the source of enhanced understandings springs from interpreting people's own accounts of how they make sense of their presence both inside and outside organizations. By doing so, we suggest that more profound insights into the dynamics of identification and meaning creation could be attained, insights that move beyond the expected.

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