

“Just a good place to be”: materiality, experience and the construction of a meaningful sense of self

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Abstract

Purpose – This study examines how meaningful work emerges through material and embodied engagement, arguing that the meaningful self is brought into being through work, rather than work merely reflecting a pre-existing self. We argue that materiality mediates between meaningful experiences and the meaningful self: through concrete interactions with bodies, objects and environments, fleeting experiences of meaningfulness are conditioned, recalibrated and gatekept, shaping enduring senses of self. Using a donkey sanctuary as a case, we explore how materiality shapes both meaningful experiences and the construction of a meaningful sense of self.

Design/methodology/approach – We draw on “events of significance” as a methodological and conceptual tool to capture moments when meaningfulness unfolds through material engagement. These events allow us to trace how meaningful experiences are mediated through material practices and incorporated into a meaningful sense of self. This framework is applied to ethnographic research at a Dutch donkey sanctuary.

Findings – Caretakers described meaningfulness as experiencing the sanctuary as “just a good place to be.” Materiality mediates this process in three interrelated ways: conditioning routines and practices, recalibrating ethical and value priorities, and gatekeeping participation by shaping who can meaningfully inhabit the sanctuary’s culture. “Good” captures a materially grounded prioritization of hands-on animal care, pragmatism and ethical commitment, while “being” reflects caretakers’ ongoing engagement with discomfort, dirty tasks and relational practices. Through these embodied engagements, meaningful experiences are transformed into a durable sense of who one is, demonstrating that the meaningful self emerges directly through doing.

Originality/value – This paper extends scholarship on meaningful work by theorizing materiality as the mediator between meaningful experience and the meaningful self. Drawing on the notion of events of significance, we show how ordinary objects, spaces and bodily practices anchor, stabilize and transform experience into a sense of a meaningful self. This illustrates how meaningful experiences can transform this sense of self, showing that work is not merely expressive of the sense of self but also constitutive of it.

Keywords Meaningful work, Materiality, Meaningful self, Events of significance, Donkey sanctuary

Paper type Research article

Introduction

Wiering: “So, what do you think about the meaningfulness of your work here with the donkeys?”

Daniel: “Well, I don’t know. *It is just a good place to be.*” [remains silent].

This fragment comes from an interview with Daniel, a caretaker at the Dutch donkey sanctuary where Wiering conducted the ethnographic research for this article. For Wiering,



Daniel's hesitation and the silence that followed were initially frustrating. He had hoped for reflection and elaboration, yet all he offered was: "*It's just a good place to be.*" For others, it may seem unimportant. Certainly, the ambiguity and uncertainty expressed by Daniel as to the meaningfulness of his work at the donkey sanctuary might leave some to overlook such a statement.

We argue, however, that such a statement is of utmost significance, for it illustrates a central challenge in researching meaningful work: the limits of language in expressing meaning. Indeed, over time, it became clear that this simple statement conveys much more than it first appears. To begin with, it gestures toward experience ("good"), materiality ("place") and a sense of self ("to be"). For Daniel then, the meaningfulness of his work at the donkey sanctuary emerges from its lived and felt experience rather than from a more abstract, future conceptualization of meaning that is bound to hope and aspiration, and which is so often encouraged by contemporary managerialism concerning organizationally designed roles (Costea *et al.*, 2012, 2015). Perhaps more importantly, Daniel's statement also indicates how the meaningfulness of his work extends beyond the nature and character of the activity to his very "being" and sense of self. That is to say, it is an environment that, for Daniel, is somewhere he can "be."

In this article, we explore the relationship between meaningful experiences and a meaningful sense of self as mediated through materiality. To study the meaningfulness of materiality, we bring together two branches of disparate but related areas of scholarship. First, we engage with a branch of scholarship that engages with work and a meaningful sense of self (Frankl, 1959; Busse *et al.*, 2018; Chalofsky and Cavallaro, 2019; Clur and Barnard, 2025). The second line of inquiry we engage with is scholarship that focuses on meaningful experiences of work. Scholars pursuing this line of inquiry focus on meaning *through* work (Wiering, 2026): the everyday, lived dimensions of work to consider how meaningfulness is enacted and experienced in practice (c.f. Bailey and Madden, 2017; Mitra and Buzzanell, 2017; Chalofsky and Cavallaro, 2019, p. 103; Florian *et al.*, 2019; Pavlish *et al.*, 2019; Shigihara, 2019; Symon and Whiting, 2019; Toraldo *et al.*, 2019; Robertson *et al.*, 2024). Such an approach is significant, for it enables our research to explore the interrelationality between how individuals agentively "seek" or "construct" meaning, and how such meaningfulness emerges through its lived experience.

In doing so, our paper contributes by asking: how does materiality mediate between meaningful experiences and the construction of meaningful sense of self? For example, how does work inform people's understanding of who they are? Are people working to live, or living to work (Yeoman *et al.*, 2019, p. 2)? And if it is the latter, how do the "ethics of self-work" (Heelas, 2002), which positions the lived experience of work as an opportunity of "self-discovery," "self-exploration," "self-cultivation" and "self-actualization" of one's "inner self," inform the construction of a meaningful sense of self (Chalofsky and Cavallaro, 2019, p. 103)? To explore such questions we draw on ethnographic research at a Dutch donkey sanctuary conducted by Wiering. In particular, we analyze meaningful experiences using the notion of "events of significance": a methodological and conceptual tool that enables social scientific inquiry into meaningful experiences (Wiering, 2026).

Analyzing such experiences, we unpack the seemingly unrevealing emic notion of "*just a good place to be*" to argue that material routines, objects and dirt function as mediation points that enable experiences of, and discourse encountered through, work undertaken at the donkey sanctuary to be meaningful. Specifically, we suggest that the materiality of meaning encountered at the donkey sanctuary allows those interviewed to cultivate ways of being that are meaningful to them. Furthermore, we suggest that at this "good place," materiality functions in a number of meaningful ways – conditioning, recalibrating and gatekeeping "good" ways of being – that enable the caretakers interviewed to negotiate, experience and construct a meaningful sense of self. Drawing on these findings, we argue that meaningful experiences and a meaningful sense of self co-emerge in material practice: meaningful experiences of work are not only infused with a sense of self, but the sense of self is also shaped and constituted by work itself.

A meaningful sense of self and meaningful experiences

In recent decades, meaningful work has emerged as a central concern within management and organization studies (MOS) (Bailey *et al.*, 2019; Yeoman *et al.*, 2019). Considered by some scholars as a “fundamental human need” (Yeoman, 2014, p. 235), meaningful work carries both a theoretical and practical weight in organizational research. Practically, meaningful work is widely regarded as consequential for organizational life. In particular, meaningful work is widely considered to positively impact job satisfaction (Pratt and Ashforth, 2003), organizational loyalty (Marco Perles, 2024), productivity (Blustein *et al.*, 2023) employee engagement (Bailey *et al.*, 2019) motivation (Grant, 2008) and well-being (Lips-Wiersma *et al.*, 2023).

In addition to MOS scholarship that examines *why* meaningful work is useful to the achievement of organizational aims and objectives, theoretical research focuses on *how* meaningful work is conceptualized. Such research is typically concerned with what factors do people perceive as important in rendering their work meaningful (Pratt and Ashforth, 2003; Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2009, 2011; Laaser and Bolton, 2022; Bailey *et al.*, 2024). A clear illustration of this evaluative, more theoretical and narrative approach to studying meaningful work in MOS scholarship is perhaps the holistic development model developed by Lips-Wiersma and Morris (2011). Drawing on empirical research, Lips-Wiersma and Morris propose four subjective “pathways” to meaningful work: developing the inner self, expressing full potential, unity with others and service to others. What Lips-Wiersma and Morris draw attention to is how meaningful work often results from “an authentic connection between [an individual’s] work and a broader transcendent life purpose beyond the self” (Bailey and Madden, 2016, p. 55).

The predominance of such research reflects a broader historical dynamic within organizational scholarship – and indeed beyond – that subtly privileges language over experience (Latour, 1994; Orlikowski, 2007; Orlikowski and Scott, 2008; Fenwick, 2010; Leonardi, 2013; Bavdaz, 2018). As Phillips and Oswick (2012, p. 465) explain, this emphasis on language partly emerged as a corrective to earlier positivist approaches that narrowly focused on “concrete and material aspects of work-related experiences.” Though we do not want to diminish the importance of investigating what people consider meaningful work, and why, at the same time, we think that privileging discursive accounts risks overshadowing the significance of the experience of work (Bailey and Madden, 2017). Rather than emphasizing either discourse or experience, however, we aim to integrate both the experiential and discursive dimension of meaningfulness as co-constitutive and mediated through materiality (Hughes *et al.*, 2017).

The question of how to understand the significance of work is inherently entangled with who is actually performing it (Rond and Howard-Grenville, 2019). For example, as Heelas (2002) highlights, for some, work is performed purely as a means to the end of material security and, ideally, gain. For others, however, the nature and character of work is significant as a source of self-realization and personal flourishing (Heelas, 1996, 2002). It is this interplay between the lived experience of work and a meaningful sense of self that is the focus of what follows. In particular, we are interested in the question of how people understand the significance of their work in relation to who they are (Chalofsky and Cavallaro, 2019). To do so, we explore two different strands of scholarship on meaningful work – scholarship that focuses on the existential meaning of work and scholarship that focuses on the lived experience of meaningful work – before considering why it is beneficial to bring them together.

Concerning the inherently complex notion of “the self,” for the purpose of this article we define this as a multi-layered construct through which the individual is able to perceive and comprehend their beliefs, hopes and ideals, both for themselves and in relation to others. As Clur and Bernard (2025, p. 1411) state, “[t]he ideal self is socially constructed and based on one’s normative and socialized understanding of self-other expectations.” Such a definition is appropriate for this research as it accounts for both a cognitive, discursive element of socially

constructed ideals and values, as well as an experiential element of self-perception as informing the way an individual relates to the context in which they find themselves. Such a definition is useful for this research, therefore, because it helps to explain why people experience a meaningful sense of self when they “act in ways closely related to the ideal self” (Clur and Barnard, 2025, p 1411). Moreover, such a definition also accounts for the importance of other people in developing a sense self. It is particularly useful then, for research that considers the experience of meaningfulness at work in relation to its social dimensions, such as working toward a goal with other people (Busse *et al.*, 2018; Bailey and Madden, 2019).

With this focus on the *sense* of self individuals construct through work (Chalofsky and Cavallaro, 2019), we explicate our focus on how people *think* about their themselves in relation to their work and its meaningfulness: are people are working to live, or living to work (Yeoman *et al.*, 2019, p. 2)? Is work, and in particular voluntary work as we explore here, a source of self-realization and human flourishing? This focus on the importance of work in relation to the meaning and purpose of existence and one’s sense of self is especially evident in research on work ethics (Heelas, 2002) and is a theme that remains pertinent to contemporary workers in modern, Western, liberal democracies regardless of metaphysical or secular beliefs (Robinson and Sage, 2025). Drawing on such research provides an interesting angle to explore not just how work can be experienced as meaningful, but also how a meaningful self might be constructed through work (Simpson *et al.*, 2014).

Second, we approach meaningful work through its lived experience, aligning ourselves with the strand of meaningful work scholarship that examines how meaningfulness is felt, negotiated and enacted in everyday practice (Lips-Wiersma *et al.*, 2015; De Boeck *et al.*, 2019; Pavlish *et al.*, 2019). Such scholarship, categorized by Wiering (2026) as exploring *meaning through work* focuses on meaningful experiences of work to suggest it is an activity of ongoing source of existential meaning (Bailey *et al.*, 2017) that attends to workers’ experiences of temporality (Bailey and Madden, 2017), and which is a source of significance, either through the status and honor its performance symbolizes (Ackroyd and Crowdy, 1990), or opportunities it presents for workers to encounter both ordinary and extraordinary moments (Pavlish *et al.*, 2019; Shigihara, 2019; Wiering, 2026). Moreover, such scholarship also explores how the meaningfulness of work is experienced through organizational discourse (Michel, 2011, 2014), societal context (Florian *et al.*, 2019), material technologies (Symon and Whiting, 2019) and morally charged labor (Robertson *et al.*, 2024). Together, these studies demonstrate that meaningful experiences are embodied and lived happenings, which are related, but different from understandings of meaningful work as such.

Perhaps more importantly to this present study, such research provides an alternative way of conceiving the meaningfulness of work that goes beyond scholarship that focuses exclusively on language. Indeed, by emphasizing the importance of everyday, lived experiences, such scholarship supports our argument that meaningfulness is embodied, mediated and constructed through practice, material engagement and physical presence rather than simply through reflection or verbal explanation (Shigihara, 2019; Wiering, 2026). Or, to put it differently, in line with (Hughes *et al.*, 2017) we assume that experience and discourse – and, by extension, meaningful experiences and a meaningful sense of self – are co-constitutive.

The materiality of meaningful work: events of significance

Scholarship that considers the materiality of meaning is far from new. Indeed, Weber’s seminal text *The Protestant Work Ethic and Spirit of Capitalism* (1905) captures how, since the Protestant reformation, the meaning of work has been infused with its material performance. As Weber highlighted here, the performance of one’s work symbolized the confidence one should have as to whether salvation awaited in the afterlife (1905). The significance of Weber’s contributions remains evident through the fact that, for many contemporary workers, work remains *the* means through which the meaning and purpose of their material existence can be experienced as a tangible, lived reality. More recent research that demonstrates this mediating

quality of work is that of [Costea and colleagues \(2012, 2015\)](#), who show how nonconceptual aspirations such as “self-actualization” become considered as attainable states of being through the lived experience of work and its performance. Such arguments are explored through what they term “the principle of potentiality,” which they define as:

a representation of the human subject as capable of becoming always *more* than what she/he [sic] is, and of work as a process of freeing up, liberating and mobilising her/his [sic] inner qualities always ready to be actualised. ([Costea et al., 2012](#), p. 26)

Through the principle of potentiality, [Costea et al. \(2012\)](#) illustrate how work is re-conceptualized through artefacts, such as job adverts, as a moral and ethical obligation to work on oneself and become who one *ought* to be. In doing so, they reveal how meaning and one’s sense of self are negotiated and mediated through the lived experience of work, and the expression of one’s inner values, beliefs and aspirations working facilitates. Importantly then, their analysis gestures toward the materiality of work: not only in the artefacts themselves but also the *spaces* in which work occurs. This is significant, for while [Costea et al. \(2012\)](#) focus on corporate work and work spaces where workers strive to “actualize” their “latent potentialities,” their analysis also speaks to the “place” that Daniel evokes when he describes his experience as “just a good place to be.” As such, their insights invite a broader consideration of materiality in the study of meaningful work. In the next section, we examine how meaningful experiences are enacted through material engagement and how such experiences can be studied ethnographically.

Although the contributions of Weber and Costea and colleagues concerning the materiality of meaning remain peripheral to contemporary MOS scholarship, the same is not true of Marx’s notion of commodity fetishism (1867). Here, Marx suggests that objects do more than merely exist: they mediate relationships between workers and the products of their labor, shaping perceptions of value and agency ([Fleming and Spicer, 2005](#)). Similarly, the Hawthorne Works studies, later famous for different conclusions, were initially designed to examine how material working conditions influenced motivation, efficiency and behavior ([Wickström and Bendix, 2000](#)). Even in seemingly mundane settings, Roy’s “Banana Time” (1959) demonstrated how small, object-centered rituals rendered repetitive factory labor more engaging and perhaps even delightful. Together, these early investigations highlight a central insight: work becomes meaningful not only through social relations or task content, but also through ongoing, embodied engagement with material objects and spaces.

These insights form the backdrop for contemporary MOS research, where materiality is explored in various ways. Some scholars, for example, focus on physical work environments – the tangible structures, buildings and spatial layouts that shape productivity and experience ([Simonsen and Mossfeldt Nickelsen, 2013](#); [Byron and Laurence, 2015](#)). More recently, MOS scholarship has emphasized relational and sensory dimensions, exploring how environments generate “affective atmospheres” that shape employees’ experiences ([Bell and Vachhani, 2020](#); [Leclair, 2023](#)). Here, the workplace is not a static environment but a dynamic force that results from the interplay of objects, bodies, buildings, technologies and expectations, producing a wide range of work experiences ([Beyes et al., 2022](#)).

Despite this recognition of the importance of materiality to the formulation of meaning in MOS more broadly, scholars of meaningful work rarely examine how materiality relates to and informs meaning and meaningfulness. This is particularly interesting when one considers that the few phenomenological and ethnographic studies in the field do hint at its centrality. [Müller et al. \(2019\)](#), for example, show that blood bank employees derive a sense of meaning from direct physical contact with patients and experience a diminished sense of meaningfulness when such contact is absent. Similarly, Bailey and Madden explore how Refuse Collectors derive meaning when they encounter tangible evidence of the impact their recycling endeavors have ([Hughes et al., 2017](#); [Simpson et al., 2019](#)). And finally, in their research, [Pavlish et al. \(2019\)](#) recount a nurse’s experience of being guided into a camping chair by children part of the family she is caring for, which, through its positioning, materially constituted their recognition both of her, and her importance.

Despite the scholarship outlined above, the precise functionality of the materiality of meaning remains theoretically unexamined. In response to this gap, we explore the role of materiality in connecting discourse and experience. To do so, we draw on [Wiering's \(2026\)](#) notion "events of significance." Inspired by [Meyer's \(2006, 2010\)](#) concept of "sensational forms," events of significance are defined as moments in which meaningfulness unfolds, in this case the lived experience of work, which functions as a mediation point for the construction of meaning. As such, "event of significance" functions both as an analytical and methodological tool in that it allows researchers to study the moments in which meaningful experiences are encountered rather than relying exclusively on abstract, often linguistic, notions of meaningful work that occur after the event. Put simply, by focusing on moments when workers encounter meaningfulness (or its erosion), events of significance enable objects, bodies and spaces that give rise to meaningful experiences to be analyzed, and further contextualized and understood through linguistic evaluation and reflection during and after the event.

Events of significance thus pose a significant contribution to MOS scholars interested in examining meaningful work. First, they shift attention to meaningful experiences themselves. Rather than solely relying on reflective accounts of meaningful work that follow the meaningful event then, events of significance help to counter the field's overreliance on linguistic forms of analysis. Second, just as Meyer's sensational forms allow for religious experiences to be considered as everyday material practices that can be observed and studied ([2006, 2010](#)), events of significance enable meaningfulness to be studied as a tangible phenomenon co-constructed through everyday experiences of materiality.

Finally, unlike much of the MOS literature that explores materiality, events of significance takes little interest in ontological debates concerning the materiality of agency ([Barad, 2003, 2007; Orlowski, 2007; Leonardi, 2012; Jarrahi and Nelson, 2018; Galazka and O'Mahoney, 2023](#)). While such debates remain important, examining the specific roles of materiality in shaping experience provides a productive and somewhat refreshing alternative. Thus, while drawing on the new materialist argument that materiality should be taken seriously, events of significance explores the agential role of human and other-than-human materiality in shaping experiences related to meaningful work. However, a broader ontological examination of the materiality of agency lies beyond the scope of this paper. Conceptually, events of significance thus illuminate the material and embodied processes through which meaningful experiences arise, and methodologically, they enable researchers to study these experiences often perceived as elusive as they unfold in real time. Through this lens, we can trace how meaningful experiences emerge and how these are constitutive of a sense of self.

Methodology [1]

This paper draws on ethnographic research conducted in 2022, 2023 and 2024 at a donkey sanctuary, which is situated on the edge of a pine forest. As such, visiting guests can enjoy walks through the forest accompanied by donkeys. The sanctuary's grounds include a sandy area, a small house where the manager, Bart, resides, a shop, a courtyard, a restroom facility and three large buildings. These buildings house stables, a kitchen for preparing animal food, a canteen and an office. The sanctuary offers a refuge for animals: primarily donkeys, but also an ever-changing cast of other animals. Depending on the day, one might encounter tadpoles, turkeys, pigs, cats, chickens or even a cow, all displaced from their previous homes. Finding new homes for these animals can be challenging, leading some to reside at the sanctuary for years.

While there are paid employees such as Bart and Paul, the donkey sanctuary is a setting where most people work voluntarily and, therefore, for reasons beyond financial incentives ([Florian et al., 2019; Taylor and Roth, 2019](#)). This lack of financial motivation is significant, for as [Yeoman et al. \(2019, p. 12\)](#) argue, the volunteer sector offers an "ideal space for examining meaningful work, given its social, political, and environmental aims and its

assumed independence from state and market.” Work undertaken in this setting thus provides a particularly fertile context for exploring how the meaning of and for the self is constructed through its lived experience.

To avoid reinforcing a distinction between salaried and voluntary work, which implicitly devalues the latter, we intentionally refer to individuals as workers or donkey caretakers, rather than volunteers. Such concerns are supported by Hofmeister (2019, p. 304), who has argued that the question “do you work?” means “do you have a paid job?” – a framing that implicitly devalues a range of gendered nonwage labor, including activities that meet human needs or involve caring for animals. Referring to donkey caretakers as “volunteers” thus risks obscuring the diversity of roles they occupy (including interns, retirees and salaried staff), while reinforcing a paid/unpaid binary that we do not think is required for this article.

Once a week, Wiering conducted four hours of participant observation at a donkey sanctuary in the Netherlands. During Wiering’s ethnography, the sanctuary had about 100 workers, most of whom contributed a few hours each week. There were four paid staff members: an overall manager, two day managers and one secretary. The group of donkey caretakers was diverse, including retirees, interns and individuals unfit for other salaried positions. As a result, the composition of the caretakers was constantly changing. In total, he participated on 40 mornings, accumulating 160 h of observation until data saturation occurred. After each morning, Wiering documented the events in a field report. During these mornings, Wiering had informal conversations with the caretakers, often arising spontaneously while they were cleaning the visitor square or the donkey enclosures. These routine cleaning activities fostered relaxed, unforced conversations similar to interview settings.

In addition, Wiering also conducted 10, 1-h semi-structured interviews. Six were recorded and transcribed. Four were held during work practice and could not be recorded. For these interviews, Wiering took detailed fieldnotes during the subsequent break, which were refined and evaluated when he returned home. The participant observation reports and interviews were coded inductively, eventually leading to axial codes as “pride” and “droppings.” As happens frequently in qualitative research, the specific research focus on materiality developed only during data collection and analysis (Müller et al., 2019, p. 722). In the findings section that follows, we draw on both the interviews and ethnographic data to analyze the events of significance introduced below in response to our research question: how does materiality mediate between meaningful experiences and the construction of meaningful sense of self?

Just a good place to be

As mentioned in the introduction of this article, one of the contributions of this research is methodological in nature. This is because it quickly became apparent that the formal interviews Wiering conducted to explore whether, how and why donkey caretakers found their work meaningful were ambiguous in the sense that they were insightful and limited at the same time. The primary challenge related to this limitation stemmed from the abstract nature of the term “meaningfulness” [“betekenisvol” or “zinnvol”], which often proved too vague for practical use among the donkey caretakers. Moreover, many caretakers seemed perplexed or even amused by questions of this nature introduced in an interview or conversation. As one donkey caretaker remarked: “It [my work here] is not about a higher purpose or blind love for animals or anything. *I just like being here.*” Similarly, two others, interviewed separately, both literally described the sanctuary as “*Just a good place to be*” [“het is gewoon een goede plek om te zijn”]. This straightforward sentiment featured in all ten interviews conducted, and many more informal chats.

When Wiering prompted further, he received brief and, at first glance, not very illuminating elaborations. Take, for example, the fragment from the next part of the interview with Daniel, quoted in the introduction of this article:

Wiering: “So what does that mean, ‘just a good place to be’?”

Daniel: “I think it’s also about the fact that I do something. I do something with donkeys and I really like them and I think that I just . . . Well, I always take care of their food . . . I know it sounds strange, but we just have a standard structure of things here that I know and that I appreciate. I don’t know, it just happens to make sense what I do. I know how it works here and it simply *is a good place to be.*”

Despite these brief and somewhat unembellished responses to Wiering’s question, as his ethnographic study unfolded, Wiering felt there were many meaningful experiences among the donkey caretakers that did not necessarily lend themselves to verbal explanation. Rather, the most appropriate means of accessing them lay in ethnographic observation. In the following pages, therefore, we build on Wiering’s participant observations to shed more light on this seemingly simple phrase “*just a good place to be.*” To do so, we will present two events of significance and analyze these. In doing so, we seek to show that to fully appreciate the phrase’s meaning, and to better understand how it relates to the notion of a meaningful self, it is helpful to explore the experimental and material dimensions of the phrase.

Event of significance 1: coffee in the canteen

“Good morning,” says Paul, the manager for the day, as he notices me entering the canteen. “Morning,” I reply, quickly scanning the group of donkey caretakers seated around the table. About eight of them are gathered, all dressed in worn, practical clothing. The canteen itself is a makeshift structure: a large table dominates the space, surrounded by mismatched chairs, while various animal-related objects fill the room. A birdcage draped with a blanket sits in one corner, protecting the birds from the sanctuary’s roaming cats. Cat trees, small houses, baskets, and scratching poles are scattered about. In another corner stands a massive papier-mâché donkey (Figure 1), a leftover from a wedding party held months earlier. Alongside these, the canteen holds damaged lockers, a coat rack, and a whiteboard listing workers’ birthdays.

Every morning, the caretakers gather here for coffee or tea, preparing for the day ahead. On this day, Amber, a 36-year-old volunteer recovering from burnout and seeking to “re-find herself”, shares distressing news: her colleague from another job had a stroke. “He’s in the hospital, and things are not looking good,” she says. “I’m having a hard time dealing with it, so I might act a bit off today. I appreciate your understanding.” A brief silence follows, then the others respond with concern, asking if there is any way they can support her.

Later, while removing donkey droppings outside, I check in with Amber. She reflects:



Figure 1. Picture of papier-mâché donkey, picture taken by author

Yes, it's not easy. But everyone is so kind to me. That really helps. I'm only here for a couple of weeks now but I can already feel myself changing. Their response in the canteen meant a lot. I wasn't sure how I'd be doing today, but now I know I'll be all right. I actually prefer being here now: it's a good distraction.

We suggest this vignette captures an event of significance for Amber. It begins with a key practice at the sanctuary: gathering for coffee twice a day, each session lasting approximately 45 min (. . .) Drinking coffee together for such a long time fosters familiarity, and as we see, provides a space where people can open up.

Importantly, the canteen itself is far from a neutral backdrop: its objects and arrangement shape not only conversation but also the broader work experience at the sanctuary. Take, for example, the papier-mâché donkey. Although several caretakers – including Wiering – questioned its presence regularly, it remained in the room for three months, subtly embodying the sanctuary's values. It materially symbolized a blend of care, practicality and humor (it was admittedly quite ugly), values which are central elements of the sanctuary's organizational culture. Its presence during the long coffee gatherings thus worked to reinforce these values by making them materially tangible and shared among the caretakers.

Similarly, the canteen's broader environment communicates the sanctuary's approach to work. Its frequent odors and perpetual mess, including the impractical covered birdcage, function as implicit signals that pragmatic animal care takes precedence over strict rules, cleanliness or aesthetic order. As Anouk, an intern with a background in horse care, explained:

We are very different from horse people. They follow strict principles and hygiene standards and don't even try to do things differently there! We're more relaxed, with a hands-on approach.

Together, the papier-mâché donkey and the canteen's messy, lived-in quality convey a culture of animal care, pragmatism and humor. As such, during these coffee gatherings, the sanctuary is materially experienced by the caretakers as "just a good place to be": a space where the needs of both animals and caretakers are prioritized, official procedures are approached pragmatically and unconventional ways of being – such as showing up unshaved or in dirty clothing – are accepted, normalized and welcomed [2].

Let us now turn to a second event of significance to explore how meaningful experiences and a sense of the meaningful self are mediated through the sanctuary's materiality.

Event of significance 2: scooping donkey droppings

It's my second day at the sanctuary. After coffee, Paul, the day manager, asks me to clean the outdoor donkey area. "You'll need a 'shit boy'", he says, pointing to a long-handled dustpan. "Scoop up what you can and dump it in a wheelbarrow." With that, he's off, leaving me to figure things out.

I notice other caretakers doing the same, silently scanning the sand. I join them near the visitor bench, where two people watch me. One comments, "Yeah, that's got to be done too . . ."

Half an hour later, Paul returns. "You've been working hard," he says, eyeing my full wheelbarrow. Then, with a grin, he leads me to a large container. Inside is a towering pile of donkey droppings. "Drive it to the back: we're paying for the space." I manage to follow his lead and, upon doing the job, feel a sense of pride.

But Paul's not done. "We need to compact the pile. We do that by jumping on it." He climbs up, turns to me, and adds, "Don't be embarrassed if it's too much." Feeling brave, I join him. We jump. The moment we land, white vapor rises, and the smell hits me like a wall. I don't feel it in my nose but deep in my lungs. Gagging, I sprint back to the canteen.

Paul appears, laughing. "I don't mind jumping on it," he says. "I actually kind of enjoy it. In fact, I love doing this with the new volunteers 'cause it shows what we do around here. Here, at the donkey sanctuary, we do not mind a bit of dirt, you know. It's what we do and why we are here."

Like coffee in the canteen, we argue that this vignette captures an event of significance. This claim is strengthened through the interview conducted with Paul a couple of months later, where Paul recalled this moment himself and referred to it as an example of a meaningful experience in his work because: “I could teach someone something. In this case, *you*.”

To better understand the significance of the event and why *this* particular lesson stood out to Paul, it is important to consider the practice of scooping donkey droppings outlined in the vignette. On the surface, it could be seen as an insignificant event. Indeed, it is a task that all caretakers engage in daily. Moreover, because of its simplicity and dirtiness, the task of collecting donkey droppings fosters an atmosphere where conventional hierarchies and markers of prestige are somewhat diminished. At first glance then, there is nothing remarkable about it. In a group clad in ugly, uniform clothing and immersed in this repetitive, dirty and never-ending work, no one stands out. And yet, it is precisely through such an activity that individuals such as Paul are able to truly flourish.

This is arguably because the practice of scooping droppings allows for the embodiment of one of the sanctuary’s core values: that caretaking requires, or at least appears to require, the setting aside of personal disgust in favor of animal welfare. That is to say, it materially communicates, to both oneself and others, a willingness to forgo disgust for the good of the animals in one’s care. Indeed, based on Wiering’s ethnographic observations, the work is experienced as especially significant when performed in front of visitors, who sit comfortably on nearby benches and make remarks such as, “Well, somebody has to do that work, right?” Such moments highlight a social dynamic in which caretakers willingly forgo social prestige for the sake of the animals. Certainly, the pride Paul expressed afterward attests to the argument that this form of labor confers a certain prestige. The ability to suppress aversion is not only normalized within this sanctuary, then: it is admired. In this context, the act affirms a commitment to and respect for the donkeys whereby caretakers prioritize the needs of the donkeys over their personal comfort or public image. Put differently, the material act is meaningful as a tangible demonstration of care through discomfort, and a willingness to engage in what many would rather avoid.

Understood in this light, the meaning of the events of significance experienced by Paul and Wiering as they climbed the pile of donkey droppings is grounded in a specific, embodied engagement with muck rather than through words. Indeed, we see how the sanctuary’s culture of care is performed through engagement with materiality: work tasks that cultivate a particular mode of being. Donkey caretakers are expected to be hands-on, disregarding conventional markers of prestige and unafraid of discomfort in the name of doing good.

The phrase “just a good place to be” captures more than a simple sentiment then. Indeed, for caretakers like Paul and Amber, it signals how they are encountering and constructing meaning relative to themselves through embodied, material engagement at the sanctuary. As such, their use of “good” not only reflects the prioritization of animal care and a pragmatic approach to official procedures rather than strict adherence to rules. It also indicates the moral imperative “to be good” that is made possible through work performed at the donkey sanctuary. This moral imperative informs how caretakers inhabit the sanctuary: allowing themselves to get dirty, taking pride in the work and embracing tasks that would elsewhere be considered unpleasant or low-status, while conventional markers of prestige – salary, neat clothing – become secondary.

Quite simply then, the phrase “*just a good place to be*,” illustrates how materiality mediates meaning and meaningfulness. For Paul, physically engaging with donkey droppings creates a space to teach, lead and demonstrate competence, reinforcing his sense of meaningfulness, as reflected in his remark about “why we are here.” Similarly, for Amber, sharing coffee in the canteen with fellow caretakers allows her to reconnect with a more meaningful sense of self after burnout. In both cases, the sanctuary’s materiality serves as a bridge between these broader ideals of the self and the concrete, embodied practices through which they are realized.

“Just a good place to be”: materiality, experience and the construction of a meaningful sense of self

We began this article by noting that much scholarship on meaningful work, like the Wiering’s question to Daniel, tends to rely on evaluative or narrative accounts, asking participants why and how they perceive their work as meaningful (Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2011; Bailey and Madden, 2016; Shigihara, 2019). Offering a different approach, we examined how meaningful experiences and the sense of self are mediated through materiality. To access this materiality, we drew on events of significance, using them as windows into how meaningful experiences and a meaningful sense of self are mediated through materiality.

By analyzing these two events of significance, we learned that the emic expression “*just a good place to be*,” condenses an intertwined set of experiences in which materiality (“a good place”) and a meaningful sense of self (“to be”) converge. Put differently, our research indicates that meaningful experiences emerge through an enmeshment of material experience with one’s sense of self. Materiality – coffee, manure, papier-mâché donkeys – mediates how caretakers live their work and how they construct a meaningful sense of self and being through it. From our research, we note three different ways in which this mediation happens.

First, materiality “conditions” (Bell and Vachhani, 2020, p. 690) a sense of self by signaling what is valued and shaping how caretakers physically inhabit their work. The messy canteen, papier-mâché donkey and unstructured stables communicate that hands-on animal care, pragmatism and humor matter. Physically demanding tasks, such as climbing the mound of manure with Paul, as well as informal moments in the canteen, foster care and support. And, the materiality of the sanctuary clearly sets the tone for a particular, arguably desired, sense of the self to flourish. Indeed, it is through dirt that Paul is able to teach, and it is through the repeated coffee gatherings that Amber is able to experience herself recovering and reconnecting with herself.

Comparable examples where materiality “sets the tone” appear often in new materialist discourses (Bell and Vachhani, 2020; Leclair, 2023, p. 813), but rarely does analysis consider how materiality influences and informs meaningfulness, or meaningful work. There are, however, nontheorized examples: a Public Health nurse describing an empty living room as meaningful in that it informs her sense of being needed (Pavlish *et al.*, 2019), the meaningfulness encountered by festival workers socializing around a bonfire that enables them to reframe their work as meaningful (Toraldo *et al.*, 2019), and solitary shifts alter nurses’ sense of engagement (Müller *et al.*, 2019).

Second, materiality *recalibrates* the sense of self. While diverse in nature, it is the materiality of these events of significance that not only shapes these people’s experiences but also a particular sense of meaningful self. Indeed, practices such as climbing manure piles or sharing prolonged coffee breaks allowed Amber and Paul to reframe “who they are” *beyond* their caretaking role and identity. This is perhaps particularly explicit in the meaning jumping on donkey droppings had for Paul because its transgressive nature opened space betwixt and between what is conventionally considered socially acceptable behavior and that which is considered deviant. Our research demonstrates, therefore, how recalibration through materiality helps caretakers understand what matters, what does not and who they want to be, embedding meaningfulness in the sense of self. As such, through work experience, materiality mediates not just a sense of self, but also a *reconsideration* of the sense of self (Ackroyd and Crowdy, 1990; Simpson *et al.*, 2014).

Moreover, the meaning Paul derived from teaching others through the act of jumping on donkey droppings also carries with it a transformative potential for others to recalibrate, reimagine and reinterpret themselves through their participation. This extends traditional accounts of recalibration in dirty work, typically framed as cognitive or discursive reframing (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999), by showing that materiality itself participates in ethical and relational recalibration (Hughes *et al.*, 2017). Again, studies of other organizational contexts, also within the field of meaningful work, illustrate similar processes of relational recalibration of meaning through materiality: a festival bonfire differentiates and unites employees

(Toraldo *et al.*, 2019), and participatory video prompts reassessment of long hours at work (Symon and Whiting, 2019).

Third, our research highlights how materiality functions as a *gatekeeper* of and to meaning. For example, the dirty aspects of the material space and the work involved naturally filters out those who can and are able to participate. Volunteers unable or unwilling to adapt to physically demanding or unstructured work often leave shortly after arriving. Reminiscent of Mary Douglas' claims that dirt "is always a moral as well as a physical matter" (1970, p. 20), the sanctuary becomes "a good place to be" precisely for those whose dispositions and capacities align with its material and cultural demands. This gatekeeping role highlights that meaningful work is not universally accessible; material conditions select a particular sense of the self, and thereby exclude others.

These three different but overlapping ways of how materiality mediates between experiences points to an overarching interesting observation: where soft-capitalist managerial approaches need to "bring life back to work" (Heelas, 2002) in order for organizationally designed roles to be meaningful, we observe how forms of work whose nature and character is experienced meaningful to the individual undertaking the activity, such as donkey caretaking, naturally infuses the sense of self with meaningfulness. The meaningful sense of self emerges, or is reconfigured, through meaningful experiences at work. Of course, work is also brought to life – most of the people drawn to donkey caretaking arrive there because of similar conceptions of meaningfulness – but it is through sustained, engagement with the sanctuary's material environment that these orientations are deepened, and, most importantly, made experientially real. In this sense, the meaningful self is cultivated through the material practices that shape how caretakers come to experience themselves.

The co-constitution of meaningful experiences and a meaningful sense of self, mediated through materiality, carries several implications for the study of meaningful work. First it challenges the field's prevailing emphasis on evaluative and discursive accounts by showing that meaningfulness is not only something people articulate or interpret, but something they undergo through embodied, material engagement. This shifts the analytical focus from what workers articulate about meaning to also considering how meaning is lived in practice, and how both are entangled (Lips-Wiersma *et al.*, 2015; Shigihara, 2019; Wiering, 2026).

Second, our analysis foregrounds materiality as a complex and crucial, yet still under-theorized, dimension of meaningful work. Building on our findings, we show how materiality conditions, structures and gatekeeps the emergence of a meaningful sense of self by signaling what is valued and shaping how work is inhabited, providing the objects and spaces through which meaningful practices unfold, and filtering who is able to participate in and sustain such a meaningful sense of self. Rather than treating material contexts as mere background conditions, we thus demonstrate how objects, spaces and bodily practices actively participate in the production of meaningful experiences, and, in turn, meaningful work.

Third, our observations call for a reconfiguration of the relationship between meaningful work and the sense of a meaningful self. Whereas much of the literature focuses on how individuals bring meaning to their work or how work can become more meaningful through the idea of work (Costea *et al.*, 2012, p. 26), comparatively little attention has been paid to how the experience of work can shape or reconfigure the self. The sanctuary's meaningfulness as "just a good place to be," however, illustrates how meaningful experiences can transform this sense of self, showing that work is not merely expressive of the sense of self but also constitutive of it. More than the "ethics of self-work" where work constitutes an opportunity of "self-discovery," "self-exploration" and "self-actualization" (Heelas, 2002) then, the sanctuary shows that the experience of work is a means through which individuals can mediate meaning relative to their lives.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that meaningful work is not solely a matter of perception or narrative reflection, but is experienced through material and embodied engagement. At the donkey

sanctuary, the seemingly simple expression “just a good place to be” encapsulates a deeply intertwined set of experiences in which materiality and a meaningful sense of self converge. Through mundane yet significant material practices – handling manure, sharing coffee and caring for both co-caretakers and donkeys – caretakers experience meaningfulness and cultivate a meaningful sense of self.

Materiality shapes the meaningful sense of self in three interrelated ways. First, it conditions being by signaling what is valued and shaping how caretakers inhabit their work. Second, it recalibrates the sense of self by redefining which practices, dispositions and forms of engagement matter. Third, it gatekeeps the sense of self by selecting who can participate fully in the sanctuary’s culture. Together, these roles show that meaning and selfhood are enacted in the doing, rather than only projected onto work from abstract ideals or reflective accounts. In this way, the sanctuary exemplifies a reversal of conventional understandings of meaningful work: here, it is the work itself that brings the self into meaningful being, rather than the self bringing meaning to work.

By foregrounding materiality and embodied experience, this study contributes to the field of meaningful work in three ways. First, it extends understanding beyond evaluative and narrative accounts to capture how meaning is co-constituted through lived experience. Second, it demonstrates how materiality actively shapes meaningfulness by conditioning what is noticed and valued, recalibrating what counts as worthwhile and gatekeeping participation. Finally, it shows that work is not merely an expression of the sense of self, but a site of its ongoing formation, suggesting that alongside asking how work can become more meaningful, we can also ask how work is making the sense of self more meaningful.

These insights open up several avenues for future inquiry. How might different material environments – such as highly digitized or remote workplaces – enable or constrain the emergence of meaningful experiences? In what ways do power relations shape who is able to access or endure the material conditions through which meaningfulness is enacted? How stable are the forms of self that emerge through material engagement, and what happens when individuals move between contrasting material contexts? And finally, how might organizations intentionally design or intervene in material arrangements to cultivate meaningful work, without instrumentalizing or undermining the very experiences they seek to foster? Returning to the sanctuary, the phrase “just a good place to be” reminds us that meaningful work is not only about what work represents or how it is evaluated, but about how material and embodied conditions bring people and their meaningful sense of self into being.

Notes

1. Some parts in this section overlap with Wiering 2026 as it concerns the same research project.
2. During his ethnographic fieldwork, Wiering had just welcomed his second child and endured many sleepless nights. He experienced the donkey sanctuary as one of the few places where his disheveled appearance was not regarded as unprofessional, but appreciated as authentic and genuine.

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