The Meaning of Work among Nonstandard Workers: A Multifaceted Reality
Le sens du travail chez des travailleurs atypiques: Une réalité aux multiples facettes

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ABSTRACT

A sample of 100 nonstandard workers from Québec, Canada, completed a semistructured exploration questionnaire designed to investigate the significance work had for them, its centrality in their lives, as well as their expectations of and personal commitment to work. Our exploratory study revealed that even though work had a positive significance and constituted a central value for most of these participants, its importance in comparison with other life roles was less clear. Moreover, the participants' precarious situations seemed to colour their expectations of and commitment to work. The results are discussed, and implications for career counselling and research are provided.

RÉSUMÉ

Un questionnaire semi-structuré d'exploration a été administré à un échantillon de 100 travailleurs atypiques canadiens du Québec pour recueillir des données sur la signification qu'avait pour eux le travail, sa centralité, leurs attentes par rapport au travail, et leur engagement dans ce rôle. Cette étude exploratoire a révélé que malgré la signification positive et la valeur centrale qu'avait le travail pour la plupart de ces participants, son importance par rapport aux autres rôles dans la vie était moins claire. De plus, leur situation précaire semblait colorer leurs attentes et leur engagement. Une discussion des résultats est présentée, et des implications pour le counseling de carrière et la recherche sont dégagées.

The changes that have occurred in the work world and their ensuing consequences have been one of the most socially important themes in the scientific literature on work. The career trajectories of many workers are no longer linear, predictable, and long-term in that they now take place in a rapidly evolving global economy that induces changes and turbulence in work environments and organizations (Herr, as cited by Burnett, 2010). At the individual level, these changes are expressed through, among other things, the emergence of nonstandard work.

Without attempting to achieve a uniformity that would partially obscure the nature of nonstandard work, it is worthwhile to clarify the meaning at-

tributed to this term. Tucker (2002) reported that the notion of nonstandard work designates a part-time, nonpermanent job, but that definitions vary from one country to another. The term *peripheral workers* was used in reference to people "whose employment is contingent, free-lance, temporary, external, part-time, and casual" (Savickas et al., 2009, p. 241). As Dupuis and McLaren (2006) observed, the fact that workers can hold more than one job at a time can complicate the situation. By combining different analysis perspectives, Fournier, Bourassa, and Béji (2003) associated nonstandard work with employment whose length was limited or uncertain and whose status was either poorly or not at all defined. This phenomenon is sizable, as noted by Goguel d'allondans (2005), who, in his reflections on the metamorphosis of the work world, evoked the breaking up of the social body into three categories, namely employees with stable jobs, those with precarious jobs, and those excluded from the labour market.

Echoing ideas put forward by Richardson (1993), who underlined the importance of studying the reality of work in people's lives, Blustein (2006) stated that "there has been a notable lack of attention to the inner motivations, personal constructions, and the way in which people make meaning of working in the literature" (p. 66), and suggested that, if we are to understand this reality, it is imperative to examine the situations of people who have little or no control over the work-related choices they make. Accordingly, we believe it is important to comprehend the meaning that nonstandard workers attribute to work, considering the difficulty they have in keeping their jobs.

The exploratory study presented here was part of a larger research program focusing on career trajectories characterized by unstable employment (Bujold & Fournier, 2008; Fournier & Bujold, 2005; Fournier, Lachance, & Bujold, 2009). In line with Blustein's (2006) suggestion, our study set out to determine the meaning of work in the eyes of workers who had been in a nonstandard work situation for at least three years. We examined this meaning by looking at four aspects: the significance the workers attributed to work, work's absolute and relative centrality for them, their expectations of it, and their representation of their personal commitment to work. This article presents the literature review as it applies to the variables, methodology, and results of our study.

<center>LITERATURE REVIEW</center>

The four aspects mentioned above are examined at the conceptual and empirical levels with regard to work in general and to nonstandard work in particular. Furthermore, work by Mercure and Vultur (2010), which deals with both of these two categories, will be discussed at the end of this section.

Significance

Based on her examination of various studies on the subject, Morin (2004) drew out six characteristics of significant work. Significant work (a) is useful, (b)

is morally justifiable, (c) allows people to benefit from their accomplishments, (d) allows individuals to carry out socially acknowledged tasks, (e) is self-sufficient, and (f) permits the establishment of gratifying relationships with one's colleagues. The latter two characteristics were also mentioned by Blustein (2006), who spoke more of the functions of work than of its significance. He incorporated all of the experiences related to work into his taxonomy, whether it be as a wholly "wished-for" activity or a simple means of ensuring one's survival. Blustein assigned three functions to work that are closely akin to three significances: (a) to ensure the person has a means of survival and power, (b) to relate the person to his/her social context and the world of interpersonal relationship, and (c) to facilitate the person's self-determination.

Chalofsky and Krishna (2009), for their part, distinguish between the meaning *of* work and meaning *at* work. With respect to the first aspect, significant work is one in which people invest themselves completely, which allows them to use, in particular, their creativity, thereby favouring a balance with their other life roles. As for meaning *at* work, it refers to the people's commitment to the organization or workplace. This aspect will be discussed further on in this article.

The significance of work for nonstandard workers was examined by Malenfant, LaRue, Mercier, and Vézina (2002) in a qualitative study with a sample similar to that of the present study. Considered to be a means of survival, work was also seen by their participants as a way of (a) structuring and organizing one's life; (b) being acknowledged; (c) creating links with others and being useful to the society; and (d) fulfilling oneself, using one's creativity. In another qualitative research focusing on 30 nonstandard workers aged 45 years and over, D'Amours, Lachance, Crespo, and Leseman (2002) studied what they labelled "the *meaning* of work" as a function of the material situation of these nonstandard workers. They drew up five profiles in which nonstandard work was seen as (a) a transition to retirement; (b) a stimulating opportunity to employ one's skills; (c) a life project to which people strongly commit, even with some sacrifices; (d) a consequence of the difficulty of being integrated into the labor market or a survival strategy; and (e) a synonym for considerable material precariousness, occupational disqualification, and a loss of meaning.

Centrality

There are several contrasting viewpoints to be found in the literature concerning the notion of centrality. For Hirschfeld and Field (2000), the centrality of work, which is a cognitive and normative attitude, represents the degree to which people identify with this role without ignoring their other life roles. Along the same lines, Sobel (2003) wrote that the term *work societies* "designates the fact that, in our modern societies, production activities, that is work, are central (but not exclusive) to the creation of a social link, notably in the construction of individual and collective identities" (p. 86, our translation). However, according to Freyssenet (as cited by Goguel d'allondans, 2005), insofar as work "is actually a historical and cultural product rather than a universal reality, we can logically think that it

will not play a central role forever and will even disappear from the societies that created it" (p. 24, our translation).

In a study conducted in Germany that focused primarily on professionals in the business world such as accountants, lawyers, engineers, and managers, Borchert and Landherr (2009) borrowed questions used by the MOW International Research Team (1987) to observe that the importance accorded to work surpassed, however slightly, that accorded to leisure. Family was accorded first place in terms of its importance in the lives of these participants. Referring to another study conducted in the same country in 2000, Borchert and Landherr observed that the importance of work increased as it became rarer. They also noted in their study that the centrality of work increased with age, whereas the centrality of leisure decreased.

In their study, D'Amours et al. (2002) noted that work kept its central place in the lives of most of the nonstandard workers of their sample when they became self-employed workers, micro-entrepreneurs, or nonstandard workers. Taking into consideration situations such as nonstandard work or the difficulty of managing one's career in a context where, among other things, the welfare state is in trouble, Fraccaroli (as cited by Gobbe, 2006) concluded, on the contrary, that work is slowly losing its centrality in the lives of people. It would seem, however, that the *meaning* and *centrality* of work were terms used by the author to denote the same idea.

Expectations

A review by Fraccaroli (2007) of studies in France and Italy revealed that, despite young people's disenchantment about work and their clarity about the uncertainty of finding stable work in their professions, they nonetheless considered work as an activity that allowed them to express their expectations and predispositions, develop their skills, and establish contacts with others. By contrast, attitude with respect to temporary work was generally found to be negative in a study conducted by Worth (2002) with 303 graduates of both genders from secondary schools in England. This attitude was particularly evident among those who had major expectations in terms of school performance. Nonetheless, the women were somewhat less inclined toward permanent employment. This suggested to Worth that an eventual pregnancy influenced the women's attitudes, but also that while the idea of a lifetime job is part of the traditional masculine ideal, the women are more flexible with regard to the work world. In their study of 748 self-employed workers in Québec, Beaucage, Laplante, and Légaré (2004) also observed differences between the two sexes, particularly in terms of the aspirations of those people who voluntarily moved toward self-employment. Among the women, this movement seemed to be based on a desire to help others, to meet challenges, or to exploit their talents, whereas the men were more likely to aspire to greater responsibilities such as supervision and management.

Commitment

There are several facets to this concept. Hirschfeld and Field (2000) stated that engagement (which has an emotional connotation) to the work role, and identification with the work role—which they call the centrality of work (a construct that comprises a cognitive and a normative aspect)—are two distinct aspects of commitment to work. On the basis of a study in which 349 workers participated, the authors suggested that people who are very committed to their work identify with the role, all the while being emotionally engaged.

As mentioned above, significance *at* work refers, for Chalofsky and Krishna (2009), to the commitment of the person to the organization or workplace. It is worth noting that commitment, in these authors' terminology, comprises two aspects: commitment and engagement. The first refers to adherence to an organization's goals and values, to the congruence between the organization's goals and those of the employee, and to the internalization of the company's objectives. The second implies that engaged employees are likely to work harder to surpass the expectations of their organization. The relationship they establish with the organization is affective: they are proud to work there.

A few studies have looked at commitment to nonstandard work. Ying-Jung, Jyh-Jer, Yu-Shen, and Chun-Hsi (2007) found that part-time nurses in Taiwan were more stressed and felt less committed to their work and organization than did their full-time colleagues. In his examination of the scientific literature concerning precarious workers' commitment to organizations in comparison to that expressed by permanent employees, Fraccaroli (2007) noted contradictory results, however. This observation can be explained in particular by conclusions drawn from the research results of Broschak, Davis-Blake, and Block (2008), according to whom nonstandard work is not necessarily substandard work, insofar as some of the characteristics of the former (e.g., the possibility of attaining a permanent position through a nonstandard job) can compensate for inconveniences (e.g., a lower salary). Furthermore, Lowe and Schellenberg (2001) stated that a good employee-employer relationship constitutes the basis of a "good job," which led them to suggest it would be more appropriate to speak about good or bad workplaces than good or bad jobs. A study by Sinclair, Martin, and Michel (1999) also helps to understand contradictory and even surprising results with regard to nonstandard workers' commitment. Their study, which looked at unionized employees (864 full-time, 1,490 part-time), focused on certain characteristics such as commitment toward the company. In the terminology of Sinclair et al., affective commitment to the organization is defined as a worker's emotional attachment to the organization and as an identification to its values, thereby leading people to work harder to keep their positions. They observed in particular that part-time employees were more committed to the company than were full-time employees, and found differences between the various subgroups of part-time employees in terms of commitment. Sinclair et al. believed that these results could be explained by the fact that many of the employees had been working part-time for a long

time with that company and some of them were interested in full-time work or more hours there. They did go on to state, however, that this is not the situation for all nonstandard workers.

Jalonen, Virtanen, Vahtera, Elovainio, and Kivimäki (2006), who studied the organizational commitment of 412 part-time nurses (21 men, 391 women), pointed to other factors that can influence the commitment of nonstandard workers toward their employer. In their research, organizational commitment was essentially defined in the same way as by Sinclair et al. (1999). They observed that age, the participation in and degree of control of the task, the feeling of being justly treated, and a low level of psychological distress were predictors of commitment.

The Mercure and Vultur (2010) Study

Three fundamental dimensions—namely, the purpose of work, its centrality, and the workers' commitment—were considered by Mercure and Vultur (2010) in their vast study of over 1,000 Quebec workers of both sexes who were either in standard jobs, in nonstandard jobs, or unemployed. The purpose of work "refers to the significance of work, that is, on the one hand, the reasons for which a person works and, on the other hand, his/her aspirations with respect to work, in other words his/her model of ideal work" (p. 11, our translation). In regards to centrality, the two researchers spoke of *absolute* and *relative* centralities. The first involves the importance accorded to work in general, whether it be seen as a satisfying goal in and of itself, as a way of attaining extrinsic goals, or simply as a way of ensuring a person's survival. The second refers to the place of work in a person's life with respect to other life roles such as the spousal relationship, family, leisure, friends, and community involvement. As for commitment, it is understood as "one's attitude toward the dominant managerial standards in the work world" (p. 11, our translation).

Concerning the significance of work in terms of purpose, Mercure and Vultur (2010) noted that, for 58.4% of the participants, it was in the very nature of the work experience—namely, personal development, relationships with others, and the acknowledgment, significance, and usefulness of one's work—that its purpose was found. On the other hand, work's purpose was material and financial for 41.7% of the respondents. Nonetheless, its material significance was seen to be greater for workers with temporary contracts in comparison with those from other employment categories.

Considered from the angle of absolute centrality, work still held an important place in the study by Mercure and Vultur (2010), with 75% of all participants placing it among the most important values in their life and 7.4% ranking it as the most important value. The degree of importance was less among the different categories of nonstandard workers, with 52.3–56.2% ranking it among the most important values. This figure reached 70.5% for unemployed workers. With respect to its relative centrality, work was the dominant value for only 12.5% of all participants. For 45.8% of them, it ranked second among the most important values. This means that close to 60% ranked it first or second among their life

roles, placing it before leisure, friends, and social commitment in one form or another. However, 77% of the participants considered that the spousal relationship and family life were the most important life role. Nonstandard workers accorded more importance to work than did the other occupational categories, including unemployed workers, but accorded less importance to work than they did to social commitments.

The expectations for work, labelled by Mercure and Vultur (2010) as the participants' aspirations or their model of ideal work, were an enjoyable work atmosphere (72%), good relationships with colleagues (70.6%), interesting tasks (67.1%), the possibility for self-fulfillment (65.2%), independence (56.2%), and a reasonable work schedule (56.1%). Expectations related to well-being at work (e.g., reasonable schedules) were more appreciated by part-time and contract workers than by those in other employment categories. Finally, the two researchers observed a strong commitment to work and the company, with 90% of the participants feeling morally committed to the company for which they worked, and with close to 80% being ready to accept less interesting work rather than receive social security benefits. Temporary, contract, and part-time workers expressed a little less commitment in these respects.

The Meaning of Work: A Complex Reality

In the above review of the meaning of work in both regular and nonstandard work contexts, different terms are sometimes used to designate the same thing, and nuanced distinctions must frequently be made. Nonstandard workers and the active working population in general have similar opinions on some of the significances of work. Interesting differences were, however, observed between these two categories with regard to centrality. As for expectations, there sometimes seems to be a little confusion at the conceptual level between this term and the significance of work, for example with regard to work as a means of social integration. Finally, some useful nuances were proposed with regard to the notion of commitment.

In keeping with the earlier research, the exploratory study put forward in the present article hopes to contribute to a broader and deeper understanding of the meaning of work among nonstandard workers. To our knowledge, no research work, except that by Mercure and Vultur (2010), has focused simultaneously on the four dimensions examined above for this group of workers. We believe their simultaneous consideration is likely to contribute to a better understanding of various aspects of work in an era characterized by so many changes.

METHOD

Sample

The sample was composed of 49 men (49%) and 51 women (51%). All the participants were White French-speaking Canadians. Close to one quarter of them were from 21 to 30 years old (*n* = 22), another from 31 to 40 years old (*n* = 22), a little less than one third were from 41 to 50 years old (*n* = 32), and nearly one

quarter from 51 to 60 (n = 24). A very small number had only completed primary school (n = 3), a large proportion had a general or vocational high school diploma (n = 40), one fifth had a general or technical community college diploma (n = 19), one third had a bachelor's degree (n = 32), and fewer than one tenth had a master's degree or Ph.D. (n = 6).

Methodological Approach

To meet our selection criteria, the participants, who were from the greater Québec City area, had to have been without a permanent job in the last 3 years and to not have been out of the labour market for more than one consecutive year at a time. They also had to have experienced periods of unemployment or occupational training during the 3 years preceding the study. After an interview focusing on career trajectories conducted in the context of our larger research project, a semistructured exploration questionnaire specifically developed to be self-administered and to investigate the four above-mentioned dimensions of work (significance, centrality, expectations, and commitment) was given to the participants. They were asked to return it within 3 weeks in a prestamped envelope addressed to the researcher in charge. A total of 100 of the 124 questionnaires handed out were returned, for a response rate of 81.6%.

Data Collection Instrument

The semistructured exploration questionnaire was divided into four parts. A number of the questions and response choices were borrowed or adapted from various sources (England, 1990; Fournier & Croteau, 1998; Morin, 1993, 1997; MOW International Research Team, 1987). The first part attempted to determine the significance accorded to work. The respondents had to first classify six definitions of work by order of importance. They were then asked to state what working represented for them (there were 14 response choices, e.g., "Working allows me to contribute to society"; our translation for this and the following responses). They were likewise asked what bothers them in a job (11 response choices, e.g., "Working with people that I have little in common with"), and what characterizes work that has no meaning (9 response choices, e.g., "A job that has no advancement possibilities").

The second part of the questionnaire dealt with the centrality of work. The respondents had to first indicate, from among five possibilities, what they would do if they inherited a sum of money that would allow them to live comfortably without working (e.g., "I would stop working immediately"). They then had to choose which one of five statements best corresponded to the relative importance of work in their lives (e.g., "Work plays an important role in my life but no more or less than that played by my family, my love life, or my social life"). Finally, they had to rank, on a scale of 0–100, the importance they accorded to six aspects of their lives: leisure, community, work, religion, family, and studies.

The third part of the questionnaire attempted to determine the expectations for work. The respondents had to identify what they looked for in a job (10 response

choices, e.g., "Tasks that I like doing") and what motivated them to work (14 response choices, e.g., "Working allows me to have interesting contact with other people"). Finally, the fourth part addressed personal commitment to work. The respondents had to indicate what most characterizes people committed to their work (8 response choices, e.g., "They are people that you can always count on") and to compare their level of personal commitment to work to what they would like to have by choosing one of three statements that best corresponded to their situation (e.g., "I am as committed to work as I would like to be").

As indicated by the references cited above, the content validity of this instrument rests on comparisons of several instruments designed to measure various concepts related to work and on literature reviews. It likewise rests on consultations with experts in the field.

Analysis Procedure

The analysis procedure was descriptive and exploratory in nature. Descriptive analyses were conducted to determine the perception of the sample group with regard to the various evaluated aspects. When a given question required that the participant provide more than one response from among a set of several possible responses (e.g., the best 4 out of 9), a multiple correspondence analysis was chosen to describe the relationships existing between the nominal variables (Tenenhaus, 2007). Once this analytical approach was applied, an ascending hierarchical classification was conducted to obtain the most coherent profiles (or classes) possible for the participants. These multivariate analyses were conducted using version 7.3 of SPAD (Coheris SPAD, 2008). This data processing software made it possible to single out better classifications (or partitions), their calculations being based on the factorial scores of the axes determined with the multiple correspondence analysis. The hierarchical classification was based on Ward's criteria, which made it possible to maximize the interclass variability while minimizing the intraclass variability. The typology choice was based on considerations related to parsimony (limited number of groups), the ease of interpretation, and the quality of the classification. The latter was evaluated using the quotient of the interclass sum of the squares over the total sum of the squares (Tenenhaus, 2007). The higher this value was, the more the participants formed homogeneous groups that were different from one another.

The SPAD program provided test values to identify the variable categories that best characterized each of the different profiles. These test values made it possible to determine the categories in which the percentage of participants for a given profile differed significantly from that of the total sample. It is important to note that the dichotomous variables for which there was a very unequal response distribution (e.g., 90-10 splits within categories) were not included in the analyses. Their inclusion might have had a distorting effect on the results since these variables can be considered as extreme values (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). The descriptive results related to these variables are nonetheless presented here, as they reflect a broad consensus in the participants' perception of these aspects.

Finally, these multivariate analyses were not applied to the items and the identified profiles as a whole because there were too many categories to take into consideration in relation to the size of the sample ($n = 100$). Chi-squared tests, t tests, and analyses of variance were conducted to explore whether the distribution of the respondents across the items and the workers' profiles showed any differences based on gender, age, and educational level.

<div align="center">RESULTS</div>

Significance

Generally speaking, work had a positive significance for the participants in the sample. As indicated in Table 1, it was associated for more than half (54.7%) of the nonstandard workers with a feeling of belonging and social usefulness (definitions 2 and 3), whereas for more than one third (35.8%), work represented an enjoyable activity (definition 1). Work was an inconvenient and rather disagreeable activity for only 9.5% of the sample (definitions 4 to 6).

Table 1

Distribution of Participants According to the Significance Attributed to Work

Significance accorded to work	%
Definition of work (1 item)	
Enjoyable activity	35.8
Activity which gives a feeling of belonging	46.3
Socially useful activity	8.4
Disagreeable activity	4.2
Physically and mentally demanding activity	3.2
Activity with scheduled hours	2.1
Representation of work (5 profiles)	
Contribution to the community, feeling of belonging, chance to learn and evolve	37.8
Carried out in a precise and stable context	27.6
Mentally demanding	12.2
Carried out under someone else's supervision	12.2
Being accountable	10.2
Disagreeable aspects of work (4 profiles)	
Feeling useless	38.0
Working under pressure	26.0
Not having a feeling of belonging	18.0
Feeling incompetent	18.0
Meaningless work (3 profiles)	
Precarious work conditions	48.0
No demands made on their skills	29.0
Useless and repetitive, with no effort required	23.0

Five profiles were identified with regard to what working represents. For 60.2% of the participants, this representation had to do with the work activity itself (profiles 1, 3, and 5), whereas for 39.8% of them, it related to the context and conditions in which this activity is exercised (profiles 2 and 4). Among the 14 response choices proposed, 3 were chosen by fewer than 10% of the participants and, as mentioned above for such cases, were not included in the analysis. These items referred to work as being physically demanding (6.1%), obligatory (5.1%), and unpleasant (1%).

Four response profiles stood out in the analyses concerning the various aspects of work that participants disliked. Three of them (profiles 1, 3, and 4) constituted 74% of the participants. For these nonstandard workers, the disagreeable aspects of work were related to feelings of uselessness, incompetence, and lack of belonging. One working condition (working under pressure) was the aspect disliked by the other workers (profile 2). Of the 11 response choices proposed, 4 were chosen by fewer than 10% of the participants. They were having to work full-time for many years (8%), taking orders from an employer (8%), exerting a substantial and continuous physical or mental effort (8%), and staying up to date with work-related knowledge (1%).

The last question concerning the significance of work was related to the participants' representation of meaningless work. Three worker profiles were identified. The first, which composed almost half the sample (48%), concerned precarious work conditions involving such aspects as salary and chances for advancement and development. For 52% of the workers, lack of challenges and uselessness were among the aspects mentioned in their representation of a meaningless job (profiles 2 and 3). Three response choices out of nine were chosen by too many or too few of the participants. Fewer than 10% of the workers considered that a meaningless job was one in which they were not socially recognized (9%) or for which they were overqualified (7%). A large majority of workers (82%) saw a meaningless job as being one that they didn't like and in which they were not appreciated.

Centrality

The workers were questioned about the importance of work in their lives and with respect to their other life roles. The results (see Table 2) showed that, for 62% of the participants, work constituted an important value, even though more than half of those believed the job they had at the time of the study was uninteresting. For 38% of the sample, however, work was an unimportant value.

In comparison to the other life roles, the importance of work was somewhat less clear. Work played a clearly central role for only 16% of the sample. For more than half of the other participants, it was either central on an irregular basis, namely when other life roles were less important, or it held an important place that was equivalent to that held by family, love life, and social life. For 26% of the sample, its importance was lower than that of the other roles. However, when workers were asked to give a score from 0 to 100 to different aspects of their lives, the greatest importance was attached to work.

Table 2
Distribution of Participants According to the Centrality of Work

Centrality of work	%
Importance of work (1 item)	
Important value but uninteresting	33.0
Important value to which one is attached	29.0
Unimportant value	38.0
Role played by work with respect to other life roles (1 item)	
Central role	16.0
Central role but on an irregular basis	38.0
Important role equivalent to that of other life roles	20.0
Of secondary importance	17.0
Quite unimportant	9.0
Importance out of a combined score of 100 given to different aspects of life (1 item)	
Work	30.4
Family	27.5
Leisure	17.5
Studies	13.0
Community participation	6.6
Religion	5.0

Note. For the five possibilities regarding the importance of work, seldom-chosen answers were grouped with other answers that they resembled.

Expectations

Three profiles stood out (see Table 3) with regard to what participants were looking for in a job. More than half of those workers (profile 1) were looking for good work conditions (e.g., a good salary, holidays). The second and third groups

Table 3
Distribution of Participants According to Expectations for Work

Expectations for work	%
Expectations (3 profiles)	
Good work conditions	57.0
Chance to develop oneself personally and contribute socially	27.0
Immediate results	16.0
Sources of motivations at work (5 profiles)	
Possibility to achieve long-term personal projects and be autonomous	26.0
Possibility to be creative, use one's talents, and contribute to the community	26.0
Financial security and the chance to satisfy basic needs	19.0
Personal well-being and the possibility to fulfill oneself	15.0
Meaning given to life and genuine contact with people	14.0

(43%) brought together the participants who were more interested in aspects related to the work activity itself (e.g., a job that gave immediate results and provided a chance to develop personally and contribute socially). Three response choices out of ten were dropped from the analysis. Indeed, only 10% of the participants indicated that they were looking for social recognition via their work. Conversely, a large majority of the participants were looking for work that corresponded to their abilities, values, and expectations (88%) or that was conducted in an enjoyable work climate (87%).

The participants were likewise asked to explain their motivations at work. Five profiles were drawn up. For 81% of those nonstandard workers (profiles 1, 2, 4, and 5), aspects of work such as the possibility to achieve long-term personal projects, to be creative, to find one's work fulfilling, and to have genuine contact with people constituted the main sources of motivation. Fewer than a fifth of the participants (profile 3) were motivated by financial security and the chance to satisfy their basic needs through their work. Of the 14 response choices proposed, 3 were chosen by fewer than 10% of the sample. They were status and prestige (6%), keeping oneself busy (5%), and being part of a group (5%).

Personal Commitment

Workers were also asked what they thought characterized a committed person at work. As can be seen in Table 4, four profiles stood out in the analysis. Being dedicated, displaying good team spirit, and being loyal to one's employer are among the characteristics that were mentioned by workers in one or the other of the first three profiles, which constituted 81% of the sample. The participants in the last profile (19%) considered that a person committed to work is always ready to meet challenges.

Table 4

Distribution of Participants According to Personal Commitment to Work

Personal commitment to work	%
Characteristics of a committed person (4 profiles)	
Dedicated, gives the best of him/herself, and expresses a very high degree of responsibility	33.0
Good team spirit and collaboration	25.0
Loyal to employer	23.0
Always ready to meet challenges	19.0
Level of commitment to work (1 item)	
Current commitment corresponding to desired commitment	42.4
Current commitment lower than desired commitment	40.4
Current commitment higher than desired commitment	17.2

The participants were also asked to compare their current level of personal commitment to work to that which they would like to have. As can be seen in Table

4, 42.4% indicated that their current level of commitment was exactly what they would have wished for, whereas 57.6% revealed that they were either less or more committed to work than they would have liked to be.

Meaning of Work According to Certain Sociodemographic Characteristics

No significant differences were observed in the results with regard to the participants' gender or age. The only significant differences with respect to education level concerned the representation of meaningless work [χ^2 (2, N = 100) = 9.45, p = .009] and work motivation [χ^2 (4, N = 100) = 10.23, p = .037]. Indeed, less educated participants were more likely than community college or university graduates to relate meaningless work to precarious work conditions (65.1% vs. 35.1%), whereas the opposite was observed concerning work that did not require them to use their skills (16.3% vs. 38.6%). As concerns work motivation, the less educated participants were less likely than the others to mention the possibility of using their talents, being creative, and contributing to the community (11.6% vs. 36.8%), whereas the opposite was observed with regard to personal well-being and self-fulfillment (23.3% vs. 8.8%).

DISCUSSION

Comparing our results to the scientific literature on the meaning of work for permanent and nonstandard workers revealed both similarities and contrasts. Our results showed that, all told, work has a positive significance. Working is enjoyable, it helps people to feel useful, and it plays an important role in feeling socially included. One or the other of these last two characteristics are in keeping with those identified by Morin (2004), Blustein (2006), Fraccaroli (2007), and Mercure and Vultur (2010) in their studies of workers in general, and other researchers (Malenfant et al., 2002) with regard to nonstandard workers. However, the precarious conditions (promotion and salary) in which work was exercised seemed to be a major concern for many of the nonstandard workers in our sample and drained work of its meaning. This is similar to an observation made by D'Amours et al. (2002) in their work with nonstandard workers over 45, and also by Mercure and Vultur (2010) in their study of temporary contract workers.

The portrait that emerges regarding the centrality of work in the study participants' lives must be interpreted with some caution. As seen above, work was important for close to two thirds of our participants, and, on a scale of 0–100, the value attributed to work surpassed that attributed to the family, leisure, studies, the community, or religion. However, when it was a question of the place of work in their *present* life in comparison to their other life roles (e.g., family, leisure), work was rated higher than other life roles in fewer than 20% of the cases. The central place that work held for 38% of the participants in their present life was notably a function of the lack of commitment to other life roles, which suggests the irregular nature of the centrality of work.

As mentioned above, this irregular aspect of work has been highlighted by Borchert and Landherr (2009), who noted that the centrality of work increased with age. Another study, by Jaufmann (cited in Borchert & Landherr, 2009), revealed that the importance of work also increased as it became rarer. It likewise bears repeating that, in the study by Borchert and Landherr and contrary to what was observed in our study, family came before work in its importance in the lives of the participants who were working. This reinforces the hypothesis that the centrality of work depends on its rarity and on the conditions in which it is conducted. The hypothesis concerning rarity is also supported by Mercure and Vultur (2010), who reported that 70.5% of unemployed participants ranked work among the most important values, which was the case for only 52.3–56.2% of the nonstandard workers. These percentages were likewise lower than those of the whole sample (75%). It is noteworthy that, in the study by D'Amours et al. (2002) of nonstandard workers over 45, the central place that work held in those workers' lives was not greatly modified by their movement toward nonstandard work. Finally, in a comparison of our results to those of Mercure and Vultur concerning the relative centrality of work, we see that there is a similarity between the place of work as the dominant value in their total sample and in our group of nonstandard workers, since work was a dominant value for fewer than 20% of the participants in each study. It should nonetheless be noted that the nonstandard workers in Mercure and Vultur's study accorded more importance to work than did all the other professional categories, including unemployed workers, and less importance to social commitment. In short, no clear portrait seems to emerge concerning the centrality of work in nonstandard workers' lives in comparison to the working population with the exception, perhaps, of the irregular nature of this centrality.

With respect to expectations for work, we observed that the participants were for the most part looking for advantageous work conditions to ensure their financial security, which contrasts with the concern for developing one's skills and relationships with others that were expressed by young people in France about their work, despite their disenchantment with this activity (Fraccaroli, 2007). These expectations are also similar to those observed by Mercure and Vultur (2010) among part-time and contract workers. It is, however, worth noting that the motivations of our participants with regard to work were linked more to the opportunity to achieve personal projects, be autonomous, use their creativity, and contribute to their community. Only one out of five nonstandard workers said that they were essentially motivated by the financial security that comes from work. And somewhat paradoxically, despite the fact that the participants in our study reported having such motivations as personal development and community service, it seems that nonstandard work led them to being more concerned about the material aspects of this activity, which is in keeping with what was previously mentioned about the significance of work among this group of workers.

Regarding commitment to work, no clear representations of people committed to work stood out in our group of nonstandard workers. It was almost as much the fact of being dedicated, displaying good team spirit, or of being loyal to one's

employer that constituted the heart of their representation. For almost 60% of the respondents, their actual commitment to work did not correspond to their expectations, as 40.4% wished that they were more committed to their work than they actually were, whereas 17.2% actually felt more committed to work than they wished to be.

This portrait would seem to confirm the contradictory results reported by Fraccaroli (2007) concerning precarious workers' commitment to an organization compared with that of permanent workers. But it might also bear witness to the somewhat complex character of the concept of commitment, as Hirschfeld and Field (2000) illustrated in their research. Indeed, these authors suggested that a high level of commitment to work stems from both an attachment to and identification with this role. The distinction made by Chalofvsky and Krishna (2009) between the significance *of* work and significance *at* work (the latter referring to a person's commitment to an organization or workplace) is likewise a pertinent point in this discussion, insofar as commitment, as conceived by these two authors, implies that a person adheres to an organization's goals and takes pride in working there. We can thus hypothesize that while commitment to work could have an organizational dimension, the nonstandard workers in our sample, given the temporary nature of their job, were not encouraged to strongly commit themselves to their work. This hypothesis is to a certain extent supported by the results of Mercure and Vultur (2010), who noted that the part-time and contract workers in their study were somewhat less committed to their work and company than was the whole group of workers.

CONCLUSION

What stands out in this analysis is that even though work had a positive significance for our nonstandard workers and even though their motivations concerning this activity were more related to personal projects, autonomy, creativity, and service than to concerns for financial security, their precarious situation seems to colour their expectations for and commitment to work. It likewise seems that the centrality or importance that work might have had was irregular and was particularly due to a lack of commitment in other life roles.

A few differences were observed with respect to workers at different education levels, which appears to be in keeping with what we could logically expect and in agreement with the findings of the MOW International Research Team (1987) study, namely, that less-educated people tend to accord more importance to extrinsic aspects of work, such as its financial and material conditions.

Implications and Limitations

The above-mentioned complexity of the meaning of work is evident in our examination of this concept and its various aspects and dimensions. The semistructured exploration questionnaire used to collect our study data could prove to be a practical tool in career counselling. As mentioned in the methodology

section, several aspects of work are examined with this instrument (e.g., how work is defined, what bothers someone in a job, the importance of work in comparison with other life roles, what is looked for in a job, and one's conception of commitment to work). In short, this instrument could be used to examine the diverse facets of people's representation of work and their contrasting, even contradictory, viewpoints in this respect, whether these people are in nonstandard jobs, in work transition, or in preparation for their entry into the work world.

Other implications can be derived from our observations with regard to counselling for nonstandard workers. Career counsellors should be aware that when work lacks meaning for their clients, this may be due not as much to its lack of positive significance as to its lack of appeal—for example, in terms of salary or promotion. Along the same line of thought, counsellors should be careful to distinguish between the importance accorded by these workers to work in general and the place it presently has in their life, when comparing work to other life roles like family and leisure. Indeed, a minority (16%) of our participants rated work higher than the other roles, whereas over one third of them saw it as central but only on an irregular basis, namely when other life roles were less important. In short, the irregular nature of the centrality of work must be taken into account when counselling nonstandard workers.

Our results also suggest that counsellors working with this clientele should bear in mind the distinction between expectations for work and motivations with regard to work. While nonstandard workers may be motivated, as we have seen, to pursue such goals as achieving personal projects, being autonomous and creative, and contributing to society through their work, they may at the same time expect to find work conditions likely to ensure their financial security.

A similar consideration would be appropriate with respect to commitment, since the work commitment of nonstandard workers may not correspond to their expectations for work, as suggested by the data presented above indicating that an appreciable proportion of workers may feel less committed to their work than they would like to be, while others may be overly committed. Another aspect worth considering for counsellors working with nonstandard workers is that, as hypothesized in the discussion of our study results, temporary jobs may not encourage commitment among these workers, inasmuch as commitment to work has an organizational dimension, as suggested by Chalofsky and Krishna (2009).

With respect to future research avenues, we noted that the differences in findings among the three sociodemographic variables were practically nonexistent. The sample size may have limited the investigation of this aspect. Indeed, employing the questionnaire with a larger sample of nonstandard workers over the whole range of employment statuses (e.g., permanent part-time, contract, self-employed), while taking into account their reasons for engaging in nonstandard work (e.g., choosing permanent part-time work to balance work and family responsibilities, preferring contract work) could make it possible to refine the examination of the various aspects of the meaning of work according to gender, age, and education level. The use of this questionnaire in research with people from cultures other

than that of the dominant culture in a given population could also significantly enrich our understanding of the meaning of work.

Another research approach would be to look at the relationships or interactions between the various dimensions of the meaning of work that were considered in the present study, whether it be through a quantitative approach or through qualitative techniques such as those used in the large field of career development. In view of what our exploratory study has revealed, the latter approach should be able to draw a more complete picture of the reality of work in people's lives.

Acknowledgements

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