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The Meaning of Work During the Transition From Vocational Education and Training to Employment
Le sens du travail lors de la transition entre la formation professionnelle et l'emploi

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ABSTRACT
The authors of this article investigated the meaning of work for young adults transitioning from vocational education and training to employment. Meaning of work was operationalized as the combination of work centrality and purposes. Sixty-four young adults were interviewed at the end of their vocational education and training and after their integration into the labour market. Qualitative analyses indicated that the centrality of work ranged from high to low and that their work purposes were of five types: earning money, growing, structuring life, contributing to society, and socializing. Quantitative analyses showed that overall the meaning of work did not change through the transition process and that work had a higher relative centrality for men than for women. These results stress the importance of considering the variety of functions and degrees of importance that young adults confer to work when entering the labour market as well as the importance of integrating the concept of work meaning within counselling research and interventions.

RÉSUMÉ
Les auteurs ont étudié le sens du travail chez de jeunes adultes en transition entre la formation professionnelle et l'emploi. Le sens du travail a été opérationnalisé comme la combinaison entre la centralité et les finalités du travail. Soixante-quatre jeunes adultes ont été interviewés à la fin de leur formation professionnelle ou technique et après leur intégration sur le marché du travail. Les analyses qualitatives ont indiqué que la centralité du travail variait de faible à élevée et que les finalités que les participants associaient au travail étaient de cinq types : gagner de l'argent, grandir, structurer sa vie, contribuer à la société, et socialiser. Les analyses quantitatives montrent que, dans l'ensemble, le sens du travail n'a pas changé au cours du processus de transition et que la centralité relative du travail était supérieure chez les hommes que chez les

femmes. Ces résultats soulignent l'importance de prendre en compte la diversité des fonctions et les degrés d'importance qu'accordent les jeunes adultes au travail quand ils entrent sur le marché de l'emploi ainsi que la prise en considération du concept de sens du travail dans les recherches et les interventions en counseling.

Among the work transitions people have to cope with throughout their career paths, the shift from education to employment is particularly critical (Krahn et al., 2015; Masdonati et al., 2021), especially in view of increasing demands for flexibility and career self-management (Akkermans et al., 2015). The meaning that young adults confer to work plays a crucial role during the school-to-work transition (STWT) (Masdonati & Fournier, 2015). On the one hand, this meaning shapes people's first experiences in the labour market, but on the other hand, "the first experiences of young workers in the labor market may determine the meaning they themselves attach to work" (Harpaz et al., 2002, p. 232). This study provides new insights into the meaning young adults attribute to work within the context of contemporary careers. The focus is especially on the centrality and purposes of the work of "ordinary youth" (Roberts, 2011, p. 22) as they transition from vocational education and training (VET) to the labour market.

The Meaning of Work

The notion of the meaning of work involves "an individual's beliefs, values, and attitudes about the outcomes of work and the functions or purposes that work serves in life" (Shea-Van Fossen & Vredenburgh, 2014, p. 102). As Rosso et al. (2020) state, drawing on the earlier work of Pratt and Ashforth (2003), a conceptual distinction has to be made between work meaning and work meaningfulness: "when scholars refer to the 'meaning of work,' they are usually referring to either the *type* of meaning employees make of their work ('meaning') or the *amount* of significance they attach to it ('meaningfulness')" (p. 94). In line with this distinction, we conceive the meaning of work as the combination of work centrality (i.e., its meaningfulness) and work purposes (i.e., its type of meaning). An occupation becomes meaningful when it is both coherent with the centrality a person confers to work in their life and allows them to achieve the purposes they pursue through work. Research has shown that meaningful work is related to health in positive ways (Morin & Forest, 2007), predicts job satisfaction (Steger et al., 2012), mediates the relationship between working conditions and turnover intentions (Arnoux-Nicolas et al., 2016) while being influenced by task significance (Allan, 2017) and job-crafting possibilities (Tims et al., 2016).

Work Centrality

Work centrality, the first component of the meaning of work concept, is also referred to as work role importance (Warr, 2008), work significance (Harpaz &

Fu, 2002; Morin & Forest, 2007), or work's value (Hartung, 2014). It is generally divided into an absolute and a relative dimension (Meaning of Work International Research Team [MOW-IRT], 1987; Mercure & Vultur, 2010). Absolute work centrality consists of the degree of importance people attach in their lives to work in general terms (Fournier et al., 2020). Relative work centrality refers to the importance people confer to work in comparison to other life spheres such as family and leisure. Research shows that work centrality tends to decrease across generations while remaining higher for males, for full-time workers, for people in minoritized ethnic groups, and for adolescents of lower socio-economic status (Mercure et al., 2012; Warr, 2008; Wray-Lake et al., 2011). Work centrality is associated with work engagement, job satisfaction, and work role identification (Bal & Kooij, 2011; Tziner et al., 2014) and can differ according to culture (Harpaz et al., 2002).

Work Purposes

Existing research operationalizes work purposes through the notions of work goals (Harpaz et al., 2002; MOW-IRT, 1987), needs that work is expected to fulfill (Blustein, 2013), work finalities (Mercure & Vultur, 2010), or work orientations (Morin & Forest, 2007; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). Work purposes refer to the functions that work is expected to play in people's lives, regardless of the specific characteristics of a given job or occupation (Dik et al., 2013; Fournier et al., 2020). Blustein (2013) stressed the existence of three needs that work might fulfill: survival and power, social connection, and self-determination. Work is then qualified as "decent" when people are able to meet these needs in their everyday working lives (Duffy et al., 2016). In the same vein, Mercure and Vultur (2010) define five finalities of work: self-actualization, economic rewards, social recognition and status, sociability, and social usefulness. Recently, Willner et al. (2020) addressed five work orientations, workers being either job-, career-, calling-, social embeddedness–, or busyness-oriented. They showed that high levels of social embeddedness- and calling-orientation and low levels of job- and busyness-orientation are associated with work satisfaction.

School-to-Work Transitions and Vocational Education and Training

The STWT consists of young adults' movement from school to employment (Masdonati & Fournier, 2015). Within the contemporary configuration of careers, this process is qualified as complex, since it takes various forms, occurs over time, and involves people's subjectivity (Akkermans et al., 2015; Hamilton & Hamilton, 2006; Masdonati et al., 2021). The transition from school to work is considered a sensitive moment in the construction of the meaning of work (Harpaz et al., 2002). In fact, when they move from school to employment, young adults compare their expectations toward work with the reality of their labour market integration (Krahn et al., 2015; Masdonati & Fournier, 2015;

Wray-Lake et al., 2011). During the STWT, the construction of the meaning of work is influenced by contextual, psychosocial, and demographic factors such as people's educational level and path, socio-economic status and resources (Kenny et al., 2016; Mercure et al., 2012), labour market integration (Andersson et al., 2017), ethnicity (Blustein et al., 2010), gender and educational aspirations (Wray-Lake et al., 2011), and social norms and culture (Harpaz et al., 2002).

VET is a particular STWT path in which students learn a specific occupation and are socialized to it (Akkermans et al., 2015). At the end of a VET program, students already have a more or less accurate representation of their future occupation, the centrality they want to confer to work, and the purposes they aim to achieve through work. Investigating the meaning they attach to work and its possible change after integration into the labour market, therefore, seems to be a fruitful research avenue (Masdonati et al., 2016). However, VET does not cover the same issues and does not concern the same type of population, depending on the context where it takes place (Bosch & Charest, 2008). More specifically, national and regional contexts affect the popularity of VET and the types of students enrolling in it (Masdonati & Fournier, 2015; Masdonati et al., 2021). For example, in countries like Germany that have a strong tradition of VET, this educational option is socially valued and popular among young adults. In contrast, VET in the United States seems to concern mainly work-bound youth (Kenny et al., 2016). In other countries like Canada, the popularity and status of VET varies depending on the type and duration of a training program (Doray, 2010; Lehmann et al., 2014; Molgat et al., 2011).

The Present Study

Although the STWT process has largely been addressed, few studies have investigated if and how this process affects the meaning young adults attach to work (Harpaz et al., 2002). More research is needed to gain a better understanding of how and to what extent the meaning of work construction process is affected during this key moment of the career path (Akkermans et al., 2015; Guichard, 2015). Moreover, the meaning of work among VET students has not yet been explored, with attention having been paid either to university/college students or to so-called NEET youth—people not in education, employment, or training—rather than to "ordinary youth," also qualified as the "missing middle" (Roberts, 2011; see also Masdonati et al., 2016). Yet, as stressed by Roberts, "studying such seemingly ordinary young people can contribute towards developing a more holistic understanding of youth in the contemporary period" (p. 22). Finally, research conducted on these topics is based mostly on quantitative designs, leading to the assessment of levels of work centrality and the classification of work purposes (e.g., MOW-IRT, 1987; Mercure & Vultur, 2010; Steger et al., 2012; Willner et al., 2020). The literature remains scarce on how the meaning of work is embodied in people's lives and experiences and how people describe work purposes and

centrality subjectively. This leaves space for research prioritizing qualitative data, adopting longitudinal designs that cover the STWT process, and investigating the meaning of work for young adults who are neither NEET nor on a university track, such as VET students.

This research focused on the meaning of work for young adults who were in transition between VET and employment in the region of Quebec City, Canada. VET in the province of Quebec is divided into two options (Doray, 2010; Molgat et al., 2011). The first option is a basic VET, consisting of 1-year training programs that lead to the practice of manual occupations such as welders or hairdressers. The second option consists of 3-year technical training programs that are more socially valued and popular and that lead to more intellectually demanding occupations such as computer technicians or nurse technicians (Doray, 2010; Molgat et al., 2011). This study had three aims: (1) to describe the absolute centrality, relative centrality, and purposes that young adults in transition from VET to employment confer to work both before and after entering the labour market, (2) to verify if and how the configuration and salience of work purposes and centrality change during this transition, and (3) to investigate eventual differences in the absolute and relative centrality of work and work purposes according to gender and VET option.

Methods

Research Design and Paradigm

In order to address the three study aims, we opted for an embedded QUAL-quan mixed-methods design, which consists of embedding quantitative analyses within qualitative data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). We also took into account Maxwell's (2010) recommendations about how to integrate quantitative information into qualitative data. Mixed-methods research is usually associated with a pragmatic paradigm, which includes acknowledging the existence of both singular and multiple realities, embracing practicality to address research questions, and combining formal and informal rhetoric as well as quantitative and qualitative techniques. In the field of counselling psychology, our research paradigm may also be qualified as postpositivist, since we "acknowledge an objective reality that is only imperfectly apprehendable" (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 129), and we tried to preserve independence between the researchers and the participants and to reduce the influence of our own values on the research process.

Participants

The study involved two data collections (Time 1 and Time 2). Overall, 102 young adults participated in the first data collection. During this period, all of the participants were finishing a VET program in the area of Quebec City, Canada. This sample was composed of 49 women and 53 men aged between 17 and 25

years old (M = 21.03; SD = 1.91); of these, 56 were in a basic VET program and 46 were in a technical VET program. The inclusion criteria were being at the end of VET (i.e., 3 months from the end of a program), being aged 25 years or less, and intending to integrate into the labour market after completing VET. We set the age cut-off to 25 to ensure homogeneity among participants in terms of their developmental stage (i.e., emerging adulthood; see Arnett, 2006). We applied a quota sampling procedure to attain an approximately equal proportion of men and women and of basic VET and technical VET students.

Our analyses draw on the 64 participants who took part in both data collections, i.e., 30 women (47%) and 34 men (53%) aged between 17 and 25 years (M = 21.03, SD = 2.02) at Time 1. The second data collection took place 12 to 15 months after the participants' graduation. Thirty-three (52%) of these participants had completed training to pursue jobs from 11 basic VET programs as butchers, computer support people, draftspersons, construction painters, pastry chefs, pharmacy assistants, plasterers, tilers, salespersons, travel counsellors, and welders. Thirty-one (48%) of the participants had completed training to pursue jobs from 10 technical VET programs as childhood educators, display designers, fashion retail managers, firefighters, forestry technicians, graphic designers, informatics technicians, insurance agents, multimedia technicians, and police officers. At Time 2, 58 of the participants (91%) were employed, and 41 (64%) of these were working in the field they had trained for. The Time 1–Time 2 attrition rate was 37%, which, in line with Kleschinsky et al. (2009), can be considered acceptable given that our population may be qualified as difficult to reach at Time 2. Indeed, after graduation, most participants left Quebec City to integrate into the labour market throughout the province of Quebec. Members of the dropout group did not differ from the group of participants in terms of age, $t(101) = .01$, $p > .05$, sex, $\chi^2(1) = .09$, $p > .05$, or type of VET, $\chi^2(1) = .77$, $p > .05$.

Interview Protocol

We carried out face-to-face semi-structured interviews lasting from 45 to 90 minutes. All of the interviews were conducted in French, based on a four-section interview guide: (1) school path and socio-demographic information, (2) perception of the VET program, (3) meaning of work, and (4) labour market integration perspectives (Time 1) and process (Time 2). For the purpose of the present study, we focused on the meaning of work section. The following primary question was asked to explore absolute work centrality: "What importance do you confer to work?" Follow-up questions were asked when the interviewers considered it necessary to deepen the understanding of the participant's perspective, including "Would you say that work is very important, moderately important, or not very important in life? Could you explain your answer?" and "To what extent do you consider work as a factor of success in life?" Relative work centrality was explored

through the following primary question: "What importance do you attach to work in your life, compared to the importance of your family, girl/boyfriend, hobbies, and friends?" The follow-up questions included: "Can you rank your different activities and life spheres according to the importance you attach to them? How do you explain where you put work in the ranking?" Work purposes were identified through the following primary questions: "Basically, why do you aspire to work?" (Time 1) and "Basically, why do you work?" (Time 2). Follow-up questions regarding work purposes included: "If you won the lottery, would you still work? For what reason?" and "How do you explain the importance you attach to work?"

Data Collection

The data collection procedure was conceived in line with the American Psychological Association's ethical principles and with the approval from the ethics committee of Laval University. We contacted a range of institutions offering basic or technical VET programs in the region of Quebec City, and nine schools, providing 21 VET programs overall, agreed to take part in the study. Following the presentation of the study to students in their final year of classes, those interested in participating in the research were met in an isolated room at their own school and were asked to sign a consent form. Given that at Time 2 the participants had completed their program, Time 2 interviews were carried out in an isolated room at Laval University as well as by telephone or through video conferencing. All of the interviews were recorded, transcribed, and saved in a secure file.

Data Analysis

Mixed-Methods Design

In line with an embedded QUAL-quan mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011), we first conducted qualitative analyses to qualify the absolute and relative centrality and the purposes that the participants attributed to work at both Time 1 and Time 2 (first study aim). Based on the qualitative categorizations, we then carried out quantitative analyses to assess possible evolutions of work centrality and purposes (second study aim) and inter-group differences (third study aim). Analyses were carried out with the help of QDA-Miner 3.2.3 for qualitative procedures and the SPSS 23 software for quantitative procedures.

Qualitative Analyses

Thematic analysis is considered an appropriate technique for research that aims to qualify a phenomenon (Vaismoradi et al., 2013), which is consistent with our first study aim. A six-stage inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was then carried out by a four-member research team: two career counselling professors who are experts in qualitative and mixed-methods research and two

junior researchers, specifically a master's student and a doctoral student in career counselling. The junior researchers were trained in thematic analysis by one of the two professors. All members of the research team were fluent in French, and all of the analyses were carried out in French.

The steps of the thematic analysis were as follows:

(1) Familiarization With the Data. One professor and the two junior researchers went through the interview transcriptions to identify and retain the interview sections that referred to the meaning of work and to its dimensions of work centrality and purposes. Initial ideas for coding that emerged were recorded on short synthesis notes.

(2) Creation of Initial Codes. The two professors, working separately, went through and inductively coded the retained transcription sections of 30 interviews.

(3) Search for Themes. The two professors met to compare and to discuss the results of Step 2. They collated the codes into potential themes and shared their reflections with the two junior researchers.

(4) Themes Review. The junior researchers coded the transcription sections of the 30 first interviews according to the themes identified during Step 3. A team meeting was organized to check the pertinence and solidity of these themes. Themes were adjusted according to the group discussion and resulted in a thematic map.

(5) Themes Definition and Naming. Using the thematic map and an initial definition of each theme, the two junior researchers, working separately, coded all of the material. Disagreements were discussed within the research team to reach a consensus or to refine the themes. One professor edited a final draft of the naming and definition of each theme.

(6) Production of the Report. We selected and translated from French "vivid, compelling extract examples" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87) while also trying to ensure variety and a balance of extracts according to gender, VET option, and programs. We then went back to our research aims and to the literature in order to produce the present manuscript. Thus, we translated into English only a selection of extracts that illustrated each theme in compelling ways. These translations were cross-checked by the team members to make sure that their initial meaning was not altered.

Quantitative Analyses

The quantitative procedure consisted of non-parametric analyses of the categorizations that emerged from the thematic analysis, which we considered dichotomous nominal data. McNemar's chi-square statistics were calculated to assess the Time 1–Time 2 evolution of the configuration and the salience of absolute and relative work centrality and work purposes. Pearson's chi-square statistics

were carried out to compare groups—men and women; basic and technical VET participants—according to work centrality and purposes, at both Time 1 and Time 2. We calculated odds ratios to estimate the effect sizes.

Trustworthiness

In order to ensure scientific standards, we adopted the four trustworthiness criteria for qualitative postpositivist research in counselling psychology: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Morrow, 2005). Credibility was guaranteed through the mobilization of peer researchers working on the same material and through the search for consensus between these researchers. Transferability was addressed in the description of the specific institutional context where the research was carried out, the characteristics of the targeted population, and the limits of the research transposition to other contexts and populations. Dependability and confirmability were ensured through a transparent description of the research process and of the coherence between the data, analyses, and findings. The use of synthesis notes during the data collection phase as well as the planning of regular team meetings and of double coding procedures during data analysis also contributed to dependability and confirmability.

Findings

We first report the results of our qualitative analyses, which address the study's first aim (i.e., to qualify the absolute and relative centrality as well as the purposes the participants attributed to work). Quantitative results are then presented to stress their possible change as well as inter-group differences, in line with the study's second and third aims.

Work Centrality

According to our conceptual framework, work centrality was divided into two distinct themes: absolute and relative work centrality. The analysis of the participants' statements highlighted the existence of two categories of absolute work centrality and two categories of relative work centrality, each divided into two subcategories (see Table 1). In terms of absolute work centrality, the participants were split between those who considered work to be highly important in their lives and those who considered it to be moderately important.

High Absolute Work Centrality

One third to nearly half of the participants ($N_{Time1} = 23$, $N_{Time2} = 29$) indicated that work was central to their lives, since it clearly contributed to their general life satisfaction. They argued that they would not stop working even if they could afford to do so, which indicates that their relationship to work goes beyond the

Table 1
Themes, Categories, and Subcategories of Work Centrality and Purposes

Theme	Category	Subcategory
Absolute work centrality	High absolute centrality	
	Moderate absolute centrality	
Relative work centrality	High relative centrality	Work as the most central life sphere
		Work among the most central life spheres
	Low relative centrality	Work among the less central life spheres
		Work as the least central life sphere
Work purposes	Earning money	Accessing consumer goods
		Becoming autonomous
		Investing in life projects
	Growing	
	Structuring life	Filling the temporal space
		Avoiding inactivity
	Contributing to society	Gaining social recognition
		Meeting social norms
	Socializing	

meeting of material needs. For example, Participant 2, a 23-year-old woman enrolled in a basic VET program in pharmacy assistance, stated the following: "Sure, if I don't work, I find I'm bored. I'm a bit crazy; I could say 'workaholic.' I like to go beyond my schedule."

Moderate Absolute Work Centrality

The remaining participants (N_{Time1} = 41, N_{Time2} = 30) did not associate work with life satisfaction or did not do it so directly or steadily. For some of them, work might contribute to their satisfaction with life at some periods in their lives but not permanently. Others described work as being an unpleasant aspect of their lives and assumed that they would stop working if they could. In both cases, work clearly did not play a central role in their lives. That was the case for Participant 11, a 23-year-old man enrolled in a basic VET program in welding:

> If I could afford to buy a big house with a spa and a swimming pool in the courtyard without working … and then go play golf every day, I would! I would not work, for sure: there's too much to do in life!

Regarding relative work centrality, the participants were also split into two categories, depending on whether they attached high or low importance to work in light of their engagement in other life spheres such as family life, leisure, partnerships, and activities with friends.

High Relative Work Centrality

About half of the participants in the sample (N_{Time1} = 32, N_{Time2} = 31) ranked work as the most important life sphere or among the most important life spheres—they considered work to be as important as family, for instance. That is what was stated by Participant 42, a 24-year-old man at the end of a technical VET program in policing: "At the moment, work is rather first or perhaps equal with the relationship with my girlfriend and my family, and then friends come after."

Low Relative Work Centrality

Participants in the other half of the sample (N_{Time1} = 32, N_{Time2} = 33) placed work at the lower parts of the ranking—i.e., after other more central life spheres, among the less important life spheres, or even as the least important one. In these cases, family was often considered to be a more important life sphere than work. Participant 31, a 25-year-old woman finishing a technical VET program in early childhood education, is an example:

> I think I wasn't born in the right period! I would have been OK at home, with 15 children. I would have been really good at it. But nowadays, it doesn't happen.… I want a big family; for me, it's important.

The fact that she said that, if she had a choice, she would stop working to have a large family indicates that work is definitely secondary to her family life.

Work Purposes

We identified five distinct categories of purposes that the participants attributed to work: earning money, growing, structuring life, contributing to society, and socializing. As indicated in Table 1, some of these categories covered distinct aspects and were then divided into subcategories.

Earning Money

Most of the participants (N_{Time1} = 51, N_{Time2} = 41) were motivated to work for the purpose of having a wage and earning money. Behind this motivation, we

found three types of needs: purchasing consumer goods (e.g., a car, holidays, video games), becoming independent and autonomous from parents (e.g., living alone) or from one's partner, and investing in long-term life projects (e.g., a house and a family life). Participant 43, a 23-year-old woman enrolled in a technical VET program in graphic design, was in the first subcategory: "Let's say I don't have an ideal wage. I just would like to be able to tell myself that I'm able to save money for 2 months and then that I'm able to go on a trip." Participant 8, a 21-year-old woman enrolled in a basic VET program in pastry work, addressed the second type of need related to the purpose of earning money:

> I still live with my parents, but I want to pay for my stuff to prevent my parents from having me on their backs. [I want to work] mainly to be autonomous, to be able to make my own way, to have my money, and not always ask for $20.

The latter case was illustrated by Participant 12, a 21-year-old man enrolled in a basic VET program in welding: "If you don't work, it's like you have no life. You have no choice: it's a fundamental basis if you want to have a family, a house, and then everything, later—you have to have a job."

Growing

For one third to nearly half of the participants in the sample (N_{Time1} = 31, N_{Time2} = 22), work should facilitate personal growth and development. Through work, participants aspire to be able to give meaning to their lives, to flourish, and to feel a sense of accomplishment. This category also includes young people who valued the fact that work provides challenges that increase their self-esteem and self-efficacy. For example, Participant 24, a 22-year-old woman enrolled in a technical VET program in policing, said:

> [I want] to be accomplished, basically. I want to do what I love. I want to be proud of what I've accomplished.… I don't need to have a lot of diplomas to be accomplished. [I need] to love what I do and then to be good at what I do.

Structuring Life

For nearly half of the participants (N_{Time1} = 29, N_{Time2} = 30), the purpose of work is to structure daily life. On the one hand, the time devoted to work in a day and in a lifetime made it obvious to them that work gives rhythm to their lives since it fills a sort of temporal space. That was the case with Participant 58, a 23-year-old woman finishing a technical VET in forestry:

> You spend three-quarters of your life at work, so I think it's important that it's something you like to do.… You could almost say that you spend your

> life there. I think it's important that you get up in the morning and then you feel like going there.

On the other hand, working prevents idleness, inactivity, and passivity, as stated by Participant 70, a 20-year-old man in a basic VET program in meat processing:

> I don't like to sit and do nothing. I like to move.… [Even if I won the lottery,] I would work anyway.… I don't want to stay at home all the time, sit around doing nothing.… I really want to work. I like to work.

Contributing to Society

Around one out of three participants (N_{Time1} = 17, N_{Time2} = 24) asserted that working is a fundamental way to contribute to society. Some intended to work simply to meet a social norm because "everybody has to work." Participant 13, a 21-year-old man enrolled in a basic VET program in construction painting, illustrated this purpose of work:

> Is it fun watching your flowers, relaxing, reading all day? But if at 9 a.m. you wake up and everybody works all the time, do something during that time.… Work is important to be.… The whole society functions like this.… [You need] to be in the same mode as everyone else.

Others aspired to be recognized by their peers, to be considered full members of their community, and to contribute to society as a way to move society forward. That was the case with Participant 36, a 19-year-old man completing a technical VET program in firefighting: "[What stimulates me] is to help people.… Just do something small that will change a person's day or that will improve it.… People are happy when you arrive. So just that—it's fun."

Socializing

A smaller number of respondents (N_{Time1} = 11, N_{Time2} = 6) claimed that work should make it possible for them to socialize with other people. Work is a unique place to meet people who are similar and who share the same values and to maintain daily social contacts. For example, Participant 45, a 19-year-old woman finishing a technical VET program in graphic design, stated the following:

> Almost half of my friends work with me. It's the most important thing; some even ask me: "How do you get there? You have school, work … then your social life—you neglect it." But when I go to work, I have my social life!

Table 2
Evolution of Work Centrality and Purposes During the STWT

	Time 1	Time 2	χ^2
Absolute work centrality			
High	23	29	1.64
Moderate	41	30	1.64
Relative work centrality			
High	32	31	.05
Low	32	33	.05
Work purposes			
Earning money	51	41	4.17*
Growing	31	22	3.24
Structuring life	29	30	.04
Contributing to society	17	24	2.13
Socializing	11	6	1.92

Note. $N = 64$. McNemar χ^2 statistics were not corrected for continuity.
*$p < .05$.

Evolution of Work Centrality and Purposes

Overall, work centrality and work purposes did not evolve during the transition from VET to the labour market (see Table 2). The only change we identified concerns the work purpose of earning money, which was evoked less frequently after participants' integration into the labour market than at the end of their training. Despite this decrease, earning money was the most frequently mentioned purpose of work at both Time 1 (80%) and Time 2 (64%). Socializing was mentioned less frequently by the participants (9 to 17%), whereas growing was ranked second at Time 1 (48%) but only fourth at Time 2 (34%).

Inter-Group Differences Regarding Work Centrality and Purposes

In terms of gender, men attributed a higher relative centrality to work than women (see Table 3). This represents the fact that the odds of participants affirming that work had a high centrality, as compared to other life spheres, was 4.28 (Time 2) to 4.88 (Time 1) times higher in men than in women. Men and women did not differ in terms of work purposes, except that female participants evoked more frequently the purpose of growing at Time 1. At Time 1, the odds of participants mentioning this purpose of work was 3.17 times higher for women than for men. That was no longer the case at Time 2, which can be explained

Table 3
Inter-Group Differences of Work Centrality and Purposes

		Gender			Type of program		
		Female (N = 30)	Male (N = 34)	χ^2	BVET (N = 33)	TVET (N = 31)	χ^2
Work centrality							
High absolute centrality	Time 1	11	12	.01	10	13	.94
	Time 2	12	17	.64	10	19	6.19*
High relative centrality	Time 1	9	23	9.03**	22	10	7.57*
	Time 2	9	22	7.69**	18	13	1.02
Work purposes							
Earning money	Time 1	23	28	.32	27	24	.19
	Time 2	17	24	1.34	25	16	4.05
Socializing	Time 1	7	4	1.50	3	8	3.14
	Time 2	5	1	3.53	3	3	.01
Growing	Time 1	19	12	5.02*	12	19	3.98
	Time 2	11	11	.13	11	11	.03
Structuring life	Time 1	12	17	.64	17	12	1.06
	Time 2	15	15	.22	16	14	.07
Contributing to society	Time 1	7	10	.30	8	9	.19
	Time 2	8	16	2.83	11	13	.51

Note. BVET = Basic Vocational Education and Training. TVET = Technical Vocational Education and Training.
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

by a significant Time 1–Time 2 decrease of women stating that growing was a purpose of work, McNemar $\chi^2(1) = 5.33$, $p < .05$.

Two significant links were found when comparing VET options. First, at Time 1, participants in basic VET more frequently associated a high relative centrality to work. This means that the odds of participants stating that work had a high relative centrality was 4.20 times higher for basic VET participants than for technical VET participants. Second, at Time 2, participants coming from technical VET claimed more frequently that work had high absolute centrality. The odds of participants attributing high absolute centrality to work was 3.64 times higher for technical than for basic VET participants. No difference

between basic and technical VET was found in terms of work purposes, although McNemar's statistics indicated a significant Time 1–Time 2 decrease in technical VET participants evoking the work purpose of growing, $\chi^2(1) = 5.33$, $p < .05$.

Discussion

In order to address the first study aim, our qualitative procedure stressed the existence of different degrees of centrality that participants assigned to work. Some of them considered work to be among the most important life spheres, whereas others prioritized spheres of life outside work such as family, leisure, and friends. Moreover, work seemed to hold five distinct purposes in the participants' lives, ranging from concrete and instrumental (earning money, structuring life) to personal (growing) and social (socializing, contributing to society). Concerning the second aim of the study, the quantitative results pointed out a global stability of the configuration and salience of work centrality and purposes during the transition from VET to employment. As for the comparisons between subgroups of participants, which dovetail with the third study aim, results indicated that men associated a higher relative centrality to work than women. Also, at Time 1 only, women mentioned growing as a purpose of work more frequently than men. Finally, the relative centrality of work was higher for basic VET students (Time 1), and the absolute work centrality was higher for young people who had graduated from technical VET programs (Time 2).

From Living for Work to Working for Living

The existence of different degrees of centrality assigned to work suggests that work plays a more or less important function in the construction of people's general identity. If work plays an essential identification role for some participants, others considered that they could live without working if they could meet their survival needs by other means. This result suggests that the same relatively homogeneous population can have variations in the "amount of significance" (Rosso et al., 2010, p. 94) or meaningfulness people attach to work. Such variations imply that the relationship between work and life satisfaction not only might be mediated through the type of needs that work is expected to satisfy (Duffy et al., 2016) but also might rely on the changing role that work plays in people's lives and the degree to which work contributes to their identity (Bal & Kooij, 2011; Tziner et al., 2014).

As for the purposes of work, our qualitative results confirm that the "type of meaning" (Rosso et al., 2010, p. 94) people make of their work might vary within the same population (Mercure & Vultur, 2010). Our typology partly supports Blustein's (2013) postulatation about the needs that decent work might fulfill: *earning money* to fulfill survival needs, *socializing* and *contributing to society* to meet social connection needs, and *growing* to meet self-actualization needs. The

same can be said regarding the typology of work finalities proposed by Mercure and Vultur (2010): *earning money* might be related to the work finality of economic rewards as well as *socializing* to sociability, *growing* to self-actualization, and *contributing to society* to social recognition and usefulness.

The Hidden Purposes of Work

At the same time, three original features emerge from the present research. First, to our knowledge, no previous studies have addressed the work purpose of *structuring life*, with the exception of recent research stressing the existence of a "busyness" orientation to work (Willner et al., 2020). Work might then be associated not only with social, personal, and instrumental functions but also with the need for a life sphere that gives a sort of rhythm and a structure to people's lives. This expectation toward work deserves particular attention in a socio-economic context in which organizations are less steady points of reference and an increasing number of people are experiencing precarious career pathways (Guichard, 2015). In such a context, contemporary organizations might indeed fail to meet workers' important expectations, which could affect their insecurity within the working sphere and compromise their access to decent work (Duffy et al., 2016).

Second, our qualitative material enabled going behind extant typologies and offered a better understanding of what a specific type of purpose might precisely hint at. This applies particularly to the instrumental purpose of work (i.e., earning money). If work has an economic function for many young workers, this function might serve distinct purposes. Working to access consumer goods does not have the same meaning as working to invest in long-term emancipatory projects from either a temporal perspective or a symbolic viewpoint. In the second case, work is expected to play a more fundamental identity-related role in people's lives. These situations should then be addressed distinctively, since they are related to different expectations toward work.

The third original feature concerns the absence, in our material, of work purposes related to power (Blustein, 2013), advancement (Morin & Forest, 2007; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997), or status/prestige (Mercure & Vultur, 2010; MOW-IRT, 1987). This absence might be specific to our population and typical of the so-called "missing middle" (Roberts, 2011), a term referring to people whose chances of experiencing an upward career and accessing power positions are perceived as lower than those of people with longer and more prestigious educational trajectories, like university students (Masdonati et al., 2016). Indirectly, this interpretation could stress the influence of education level on the meaning of work, with less educated people being less likely to consider socially powerful and prestigious career options. It also tends to support Rosso et al.'s (2010) supposition that "different levels of employees … tend to … experience different types of meaning in their work" (p. 117).

Putting Work Into Perspective

The general stability of the configuration and salience of work centrality and purposes during the STWT suggests that the experience of labour market integration did not affect the meanings attached to work or its meaningfulness in significant ways (Rosso et al., 2010). This result confirms the general stability of the meaning of work highlighted in previous research (Harpaz & Fu, 2002). It could indicate that these facets of the meaning of work concept are somehow stable factors and might characterize people's relationships to the working sphere in the long term. Work centrality and purposes seem, then, to function differently than other close variables such as work values, which are more dependent on situational influences, particularly during life transitions in adolescence and emerging adulthood (Jin & Rounds, 2012; Masdonati et al., 2016).

Beyond a general stability, our analyses also showed a decrease in the number of participants who evoked earning money as a purpose of work, although this purpose was the most frequently mentioned both before and after the transition from VET to employment. The salience of the work purpose of growing also tended to decrease during the transition process, although not significantly, since it ranked second at Time 1 and fourth at Time 2 and since it decreased significantly for women and for students in technical VET. These results could be interpreted as a sort of gradual balancing and diversification of the purposes of work. We suppose that through actual experience in the labour market, some participants somehow put work into perspective: they have learned that work does not always enable fulfillment and self-realization—which can represent a sort of disenchantment—but also that it does not serve survival or material needs exclusively.

As for inter-group differences, the fact that male participants attached a higher relative centrality to work than female participants tends to confirm previous research (Warr, 2008; Wray-Lake et al., 2011) and might indicate the existence of a gendered relationship to work, which would deserve further investigation. The influence of education type on the meaning of work is less clear. Our results suggest that educational level might have an influence on work centrality, although this influence was more difficult to detect and interpret in our sample than in previous research (Mercure et al., 2012; Warr, 2008; Wray-Lake et al., 2011). One possibility is that basic VET and technical VET are not contrasted enough to identify the possible effects of education factors on the meaning of work.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

The present study entails some limitations corresponding to perspectives for future research. First, the lapse of time between the two data collections was quite short. Given the increasing complexity of the STWT process, it would be appropriate to create a Time 3 measure and to compare the evolution of the meaning of work of young adults experiencing floundering vs. successful transitions (Krahn et al., 2015). Second, we opted for a group-level assessment

of the evolution of the meaning of work, focusing on possible changes between Time 1 and Time 2 in the frequency of work purposes and in degrees of work centrality. Future research could complete these results with individual-level analyses investigating the evolution of the meaning of work within cases, which would allow accounting for specific events in the lives of interviewees. Third, our independent variables were limited to gender, type of VET, and time. Additional variables could be taken into account to assess variations in the meaning of work of young adults entering the labour market such as socio-economic status and other educational factors (Kenny et al., 2016; Mercure et al., 2012). The same can be said for the quality of integration into the labour market, since we can expect that the construction of the meaning of work might be destabilized among young adults having difficulties with finding a stable position in the occupation they were trained for (Andersson et al., 2017). Fourth, this study focused on two central but specific features of the concept of meaning of work: work centrality and purposes. The concept could be completed with other components such as work values (Masdonati et al., 2016) as well as work entitlements and obligations, which would add a normative dimension to the construct (Fournier et al., 2020; Harpaz et al., 2002). Proceeding in this way could lead to the identification of more articulated typologies of work meanings. Fifth, our study focused exclusively on students completing VET in a specific context; caution should be exercised when transferring the results to other populations or to different institutional contexts (Morrow, 2005). In this sense, the ambiguous results concerning the differences between basic and technical VET students invite researchers to compare more contrasted populations of youth in terms of education level, ranging from NEET to university graduates (Krahn et al., 2015).

Implications for Career Counselling

Overall, this research stresses the pertinence of career counselling interventions that take into account the meaning clients attach to work. First, the meaning of work should be assessed carefully through quantitative and qualitative techniques. The complementarity of the information from both techniques is indeed highlighted here for research purposes and could be translated to practice. Second, counsellors should consider what a client's specific relationship to work implies in terms of career plans. They should also pay attention to potential discrepancies between their own meaning of work and that of their clients. Third, the feature of working life might be systematically situated according to its relationships with other life spheres. This point emphasizes the pertinence of life-designing interventions (Guichard, 2015) and systemic approaches of career counselling (Patton & McMahon, 2006), which invite counsellors to focus on subjectivities as well as to integrate the articulation of their clients' life spheres into a holistic counselling process. Fourth, an intervention based on the meaning of work could complete practices aiming at promoting decent work (Blustein et al., 2016). Besides the

crucial promotion of decent objective working conditions, counsellors could integrate into their processes what makes work decent for their clients, considering their subjective perspective. Accordingly, specific interventions should also be conceived for people experiencing work transitions that might threaten the centrality they attach to work in their lives, such as job loss and underemployment (Allan et al., 2020).

These implications might also concern Canadian career development practitioners more specifically in their challenge to assess students' and workers' relationships to working (Fournier et al., 2020), to promote clients' access to meaningful work and career engagement (Neault & Pickerell, 2011), and to help them identify meaningful activities within and apart from their working lives (Borgen & Edwards, 2019). All in all, according to recent reflections on the importance of exploring people's representations of meaningful work (Allan et al., 2017), we recommend including meaning of work among the key factors to account for in career development processes.

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