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COMMENTARY

Estranged, nauseated, or fulfilled? Existentialism as bridge between antiwork and I-O psychology

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In their focal article, Alliger and McEachern (2024) discuss how antiwork offers new opportunities for industrial and organizational (I-O) psychology. The present commentary agrees and proposes an existentialist perspective to build a bridge between antiwork and I-O psychology research. The focal article describes antiwork as a multidimensional concept representing a critical appraisal of work in and of itself. According to this perspective, work necessarily exploits individuals, robs them of freedom, and harms their health and life satisfaction. Instead of consisting of a clear measurable construct, antiwork is represented by tenets specifying how work harms people directly (e.g., physical and mental strain) and indirectly (e.g., restricting freedom, reinforcing inequitable social relations, imposing meaningless activities, and serving organizations' or managers' rather than individuals' goals). This commentary concedes to the antiwork perspective that work *inherently* lacks meaning, but counters that—following existentialism—individuals *can* experience meaning if their work aligns with their self-chosen values, needs, and aspirations. Within existentialism, work—like all that exists—has no meaning in itself and can thus harm individuals by consuming their limited time. However, unlike antiwork, existentialism posits that individuals are *fundamentally free* to assign meaning to anything in life. Applying existentialism to work thus enables researchers to study the relevance of antiwork's tenets by considering individuals' work-related thoughts and choices as relating to their concept of purpose in life. Building on the focal article, this commentary proposes approaches and research questions that centralize individuals' existential experiences to explore antiwork thinking and overcome its shortcomings using conventional I-O psychology methods. This existential perspective can help I-O psychology to address the current need for understanding sustainable employment that does not harm people but serves their self-defined purpose and needs (Fleuren et al., 2020).

Existentialism and applications in clinical and I-O psychology

Existentialism is largely built on the notion that *existence precedes essence* (Sartre, 1946). This principle suggests that nothing in existence has inherent value or meaning. Consequently, individuals must decide for themselves what they assign value and meaning to while fundamentally lacking any profound or conclusive guidance. Indeed, individuals are, in principle, free to choose and simultaneously condemned with the responsibility to choose right within their *limited lifetime*. Importantly, individuals face these conditions while being destined to die in a moment they cannot (perfectly) predict so it could always be too late to change choices.

Additionally, individuals live and choose in the presence of *others* who are equally free to assign value and meaning and can thus judge them (Camus, 1942). Sartre (1943) summarizes this idea as "hell is other people," meaning that others are individuals' worst sources of restriction and judgment. Similarly, later existential work recognizes that the freedom to act—as opposed to the freedom to be or value—is restricted by severe social constraints (de Beauvoir, 1949) such as situational, structural, and institutionalized power differences (see Langley, 2023, for a discussion). Even if individuals are situationally free (i.e., an individual can always choose within a situation to act according to their values), external factors might limit their possibilities of acting without undesired consequences.

Clinical branches of psychology draw on existentialist philosophy to explain and treat conditions such as depression and anxiety (Frankl, 1946; Yalom, 1980). These approaches, which emphasize individual freedom and the concomitant responsibility of crafting a life worth living, revolve around the idea that individuals inevitably contend with existential concerns. Congruently, how individuals live and manage confrontations between the profound yearnings for existential fulfillment inherent in human nature and the demands or constraints they encounter regarding this fulfillment in their day-to-day experiences significantly affect their health and well-being. Based on this foundational premise, Koole et al. (2006) identified five primary existential concerns reflecting different domains of tensions. These concerns consist of death (i.e., desire to live vs. inevitable death), identity (i.e., a desire for certainty vs. uncertainties around being and developing one's true self), meaning (i.e., need for meaningful experiences vs. randomness), isolation (i.e., need for connecting to others vs. never achieving full understanding), and freedom (i.e., free will vs. constraints and the burden of responsibilities). The framework by Koole et al. (2006) enables I-O scholars to capture individuals' existential struggles as relating to well-being in life systematically.

Existentialism and its applications in clinical psychology find surprisingly limited use in I-O psychology considering the central role of work in individuals' lives. Work represents a ubiquitous and often necessary human activity, consuming considerable portions of individuals' finite time (Schwarz, 2023). As such, work can become a subject of existential concerns—even among those not working—with individuals remaining free to define how it fulfills or harms them. Observably, working can offer individuals ways to enact or develop their identity (Watson, 2008), relationships with others (Ozer, 2011), meaning and purpose in life (Lysova et al., 2019), and freedom (Esser & Olsen, 2012). Complementarily, qualitative studies suggest work can also create doubts about the meaning of existence (Knights & Clarke, 2014) and the ability to be true to oneself (Watson, 2008). Although these themes are not absent in I-O psychology, and specifically meaningful work research (see e.g., Both-Nwabuwe et al., 2017 for a review), existentialism surfaces only to a limited and largely implicit or incomplete extent in the meaningful work literature. Appearances in the meaningful work literature typically allude to "existential meaning" but include predetermined forms of meaning (e.g., self-actualization, social relationships with others, and positive societal impact). Although these forms connect to existentialism, they rarely embrace existentialism's premise that individuals freely decide what they consider meaningful. Arguably, individuals could consider self-actualization, social relationships, or societal impact to be not existentially meaningful. In addition, needing to work under adverse conditions or against one's actual desires form realistic constraints many workers face. Therefore, a truly existentialist perspective facilitates understanding how work harms or fulfills people.

Connecting I-O psychology and antiwork via existential perspectives to work

Readers of the focal article may notice several connections between antiwork and existentialism applied to work. Centrally, antiwork asserts that work inherently entails the submission of one's will and thus affects individuals adversely. This assertion mainly holds significance because it assumes that individuals desire self-definition and thus implicitly highlights work as existential

problem. Additionally, the various antiwork tenets implicitly condemn the manifestation of the five aforementioned major existential concerns in work. The antiwork statement that "Work is objectively meaningless due to the intentional generation of inconsequential needs in the consuming public and hence ultimately absurd products and services" (Alliger & McEachern, p. 59), for example, matches existential meaning concerns as featured in existential novels with protagonists experiencing common human activities as estrangingly absurd (Camus, 1942) or nauseatingly banal (Sartre, 1938). Moreover, antiwork's positioning of work as servitude requiring individuals to set aside their desires and the discussion of internalized norms surrounding "work as way to live" connect to existential concerns of freedom, judgment by others, and identity (Koole et al., 2006). Lastly, antiwork's positioning of work as waste of time aligns exactly with existential concerns surrounding death and limited time to achieve self-defined purpose.

Beyond connecting to antiwork, applying an existentialist perspective to I-O psychology enables delving into antiwork critiques while centralizing individuals and their thoughts and actions. Although antiwork points out work's potential to seriously harm individuals, it leaves little room for different experiences at the individual level. Arguably, antiwork could be considered paternalistic as it tends to absolve individuals of responsibility within workplace power dynamics (Weil, 2001, p. 62) and sometimes question their abilities to identify managerial manipulation (Lordon, 2014, p. 7). Although recognizing several of the constraints individuals face in life, existentialism emphasizes individuals' agency to define and ascribe meaning (Wild, 1960). Applied to work, employment should thus not be flatly condemned without considering individual workers' perceptions, thoughts, and experiences. Additionally, beyond being aware of external influences and constraints and experiencing existential concerns, individuals can consciously make career choices and adopt various coping strategies to navigate constraints to the best of their abilities.

Existential thinking can connect antiwork and I-O psychology by offering tangible ways to study antiwork's premises at the *individual level*. Alliger and McEachern argue that antiwork's multidimensional and abstract nature complicate generating measurement instruments for antiwork. Moreover, they recognize that individuals are not psychologically identical. We agree with both ideas and argue that thoughts, experiences, and outcomes at the individual level should be considered when studying antiwork in I-O psychology. Rather than presuming that work is meaningless in totality or meaningful in specific ways, this allows for studying how individuals derive meaning and value in life from work (or not) and how work can create or help in navigating life's existential challenges. Here, the big five existential concerns can serve as key variables in quantitative studies (e.g., as mediators between work variables and well-being or health outcomes) or as areas of narrative interest in qualitative studies (e.g., phenomenological approaches to describing individuals' thought processes; e.g., Thompson & Bunderson, 2001). These concerns, along with the broader existentialist perspective, delineate the tensions highlighted by the antiwork critique and provide a framework that can be examined using I-O psychology methods.

Concrete areas of application

Occupational health is a first area where the existentialist perspective can be applied. Following the idea that work should not harm people, which antiwork suggests is unavoidable, studying existential concerns can offer insights into individuals' thoughts on the role of work in their lives and its potential benefits or adverse effects. Studies could investigate the existential thoughts individuals have, how they shape individuals' work and nonwork choices, and how they relate to (experienced) dignity, health, and well-being. Naturally, studies may extend to performance, engagement, and career success, but antiwork (Mumby, 2019) and critical perspectives to I-O psychology (Bal & Dóci, 2018) emphasize dignity, health, and well-being as deserving prioritization in their own right. The existential concerns may offer an important mediating

Table 1. Overview of Example Research Questions Derived from Applying Existential Thinking to I-O Psychology and Antiwork

Topic area	Example research questions
Existential concerns at work and occupational health	1. How does work enable or hinder individuals in manifesting or developing a desired identity? 2. How does work enable or hinder individuals to relate to others in valued ways? 3. How does work enable or hinder individuals to live a life that they themselves consider meaningful? 4. How does work fuel or alleviate individuals' thoughts about death and their limited lifetime on earth? 5. How does work enable or hinder individuals to act freely in accordance with themselves and to feel free? 6. How do existential concerns concretely arise within the context of professional activity, and how do they evolve over time? 7. How do existential concerns within the context of work and career development affect health, well-being, and experienced dignity? 8. What interventions can help workers who might be burdened by existential concerns that have a detrimental effect on their psychological health?
Engagement/managerialism	1. How do individuals possibly reconcile their quest for existential meaning with their commitment to work and the organization? 2. How can work be designed and organized to enable fulfillment and genuine engagement? 3. How can genuinely fulfilling (vs. socially desired/sanctioned) engagement be measured?
Organized labor	1. How do labor unions navigate the existential needs of their individual members? 2. How can labor union membership and solidarity address isolation and identity concerns among workers?
Will to work	1. How do power inequalities at work and submission of the will to organizations shape individuals' existential concerns? 2. How do constraints (e.g., financial, educational opportunities) individuals experience in their lives shape individuals' choices regarding work and how does that shape their existential concerns? 3. How do others influence individuals' choices regarding working, employment, and jobs, and how does that shape their existential concerns? 4. How do ideologies influence individuals' choices regarding working, employment, and jobs, and how does that shape their existential concerns? 5. What coping strategies do workers use to navigate constraints on free will?

mechanism via which work helps or hinders individuals in pursuing and achieving these desired outcomes. This idea can be applied broadly to develop novel research questions in I-O psychology that draw on the existential perspective. Based on this perspective, Table 1 presents an overview of potential research questions in multiple topic areas that are elaborated in the remainder of this article and can help to centralize individuals' interests over managerialism (Alliger & McEachern).

The existentialist perspective can be applied to generate a more fine-grained understanding of the antiwork idea that workers' engagement is an illusion fed by powerful stakeholders. Existentialism agrees that work has no inherent meaning and is not inherently engaging. However, the nuance that individuals can choose to assign meaning to states, outcomes, and beings associated with work may enable the achievement of positive and genuine engagement at work. Consequently, at the core of evaluating engagement lies the recognition of individuals' subjective experiences, such that whatever an individual deems engaging—be it work or something else— should be deemed intrinsically valid. Importantly, individual freedom and genuine engagement can still be jeopardized by management, as actualizing one's self-chosen values, identities, and relations can clash with work-induced constraints and professional role expectations. Arguably, such clashes become more pronounced when time spent at work starts hindering fulfillment in

other life domains. Because genuine engagement via work might be impossible without careful reconsideration of expectations across life domains, research could explore how management practices and work design affect existential concerns and genuine engagement. In this context, it can be challenging to discern genuine work engagement from socially sanctioned or desired engagement. Accordingly, new measurement instruments that differentiate between types of engagement might be needed.

The focal article forwards labor unions and worker solidarity as important future research areas. As unionizing and solidarity are inherently social phenomena, the existential perspective can guide future research here as well. Although unions aim to serve employee interests, they might imply new power structures and social forces that could limit individual freedom and identity (e.g., balancing personal identity, professional identity, and identity as union member; e.g., Petriglieri, 2011). Conversely, they can represent opportunities for creating meaning (e.g., initiating change and generating social impact) and fostering connections to others, potentially via experienced and actualized solidarity. Given tensions between the desire to belong to valued groups and the associated social demands, an existentialist perspective can unravel how labor unions and worker solidarity affect existential concerns and worker outcomes.

Finally, the existential perspective can expand the research suggestions regarding the will to work mentioned by Alliger and McEachern. The focal article discusses the antiwork notion that working implies a submission of the will to the organization. However, as the decision to work is made within a broader social context and under constraining circumstances, the submission is likely to be to more than only the organization. For instance, individuals' decisions regarding the area/sector and specific jobs they work in are arguably influenced by relevant others (e.g., family, friends, partners) around them. Here, ideologies that individuals, or relevant others, subscribe to might play a particularly relevant role in guiding choices that are ideologically rather than, for example, identity driven. As work is central in many individuals' lives and work choices are not easily reversed, not making such choices freely in alignment with one's (desired) identity (e.g., for the fear of isolation or judgment) might profoundly affect individuals' life satisfaction. Therefore, existentialism opens up the possibilities for I-O psychologists to investigate and understand whom individuals submit to, how and why they submit, and how (partial) submission and individuals' associated (existential) thoughts relate to health, well-being, and (experienced) dignity.

Conclusion

The antiwork perspective as discussed by Alliger and McEachern can inspire I-O psychology to ask new questions of how individuals can become fulfilled via work, rather than in spite of it. Applying existentialism to work as a common human activity can focus these questions at the individual level to achieve the tangible answers I-O psychology seeks. Antiwork and existentialism can agree that work may lack inherent meaning, but existentialism acknowledges that individuals may ascribe and find meaning themselves. By centering the individual experience, the existential perspective may help the field move from studying work in ways that primarily serve powerful stakeholders (i.e., organizations and management; Bal & Dóci, 2018) to the existential needs of individuals and how these can be achieved through work. As existentialism, like antiwork, is humanistic and emphasizes the primacy of individual freedom, this implies quantitative and qualitative methods with room for individual consideration. Rather than encouraging individuals to "lie flat," such research might identify ways of creating work that enables individuals to conquer their existential struggles and inspire beneficial action above resignation.

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