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Research Article

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The lived experience of work fulfilment: A qualitative examination across groups

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Abstract

Work fulfilment is an important aspiration in career theory and practice, but despite extensive quantitative research, the lived experience remains underexamined. Through three qualitative studies, 60 participants were interviewed to explore how work fulfilment is experienced, within and across groups (midlife women, midlife men, and women in their 20s). Thematic analysis identified six themes: work fulfilment is making a positive difference, energising, authentic, connected, freeing, and life enabling, forming the PEACeFuL framework. Findings suggest work fulfilment may be more experientially shared than previously assumed and offer researchers and practitioners a richer description and framework for theory development and career interventions.

Keywords: Work Fulfilment, Qualitative Research, Vocational Psychology, Thematic Analysis

Introduction

The notion of work fulfilment has deep roots. The word fulfilment itself originates from the Old English 'fullfyllan,' which means to fill up or to make full (Oxford English Dictionary). Philosophers have long argued that fulfilment and work are important to the human experience. For example, Aristotle, contended the realisation of eudaimonia and deep flourishing comes from exercising one's capacities well and Dewey (1916) stressed the centrality of work or productive activity to fulfilment through growth and self-development. More recently, Gondek (2021) argued that human life depends on work to achieve self-realisation and fulfilment. Psychology theorists also support the centrality of work for fulfilment. For example, Blustein (2006) proposed that work is an essential aspect of life and an essential component of mental health providing a source of identity as well as fulfilling core psychological needs. Baumann and Ruch (2025) observed that work is an important source of fulfilment for a fulfilled life.

Whilst the term 'work fulfilment' is not specifically defined within career counselling, it is often considered, or inferred, as part of 'career construction' or decision making (Chen, 2017; Lent et al., 1994; Mainiero & Gibson, 2018; Savickas, 2005). A recent systematic review of career research highlighted 'the enduring quest for meaning, purpose, and fulfilment in the modern workplace' (Hasan, 2025).

Current definitions and conceptualisations of work fulfilment

The Psychology of Working Framework (PWF; Blustein, 2008) was developed to examine the role of social class, privilege and freedom of choice in career selection and fulfilment. It recognises that not all jobs can be a source of joy and satisfaction and sought to understand the experiences of people who must accept any viable or available job to support themselves. In doing so, the framework outlines three sets of human needs (survival and power, social connection, and self-determination) that can be fulfilled by working. Although the framework does not specifically define work fulfilment, a core premise is that understanding and addressing these needs can benefit individuals, organisations and society by making work more fulfilling.

Building on the PWF, the Psychology of Working Theory (PWT; Duffy et al., 2016), also aimed to expand the vision of career counsellors to the complex role of work in all clients' lives, not simply in the lives of the privileged. It operationalised the PWF, proposing how economic constraints, marginalisation, work volition and career adaptability predict the securing of decent work, which in turn provides the potential for work fulfilment and wellbeing when core psychological needs (for survival, social connection, and self-determination) are met. The authors defined work fulfilment as 'work that is personally satisfying and meaningful' (Duffy et al., 2016 p. 138) and suggested the experience is potentially available to all if decent work is attained and these needs met.

A further theory, the Strengths-Based Inclusive Theory of Work (S-BIT of work; Owens et al., 2019a), asserts that 'all people are deserving of fulfilling work, regardless of their identities and work context' and contends that fulfilling work is a higher-order end goal in work contexts and career counselling (Owens et al., 2019a p. 225). The authors assert that a diverse array of people can attain fulfilling work, citing evidence of unhoused people and people working in jobs viewed by society as 'socially, physically, or morally tainted' experiencing aspects of fulfilling

work, whilst individuals with a substantial salary and a high-status job may not experience a high degree of work fulfilment.

The Model of Fulfilling Work aimed to operationalise the S-BIT of Work and defined fulfilling work as the 'holistic and complete sense of wellbeing and flourishing in the work context' (Allan et al., 2019 p. 267). In validating the model, Allan et al. (2021) set out to clarify the relationship between four work well-being variables and fulfilling work. The variables used were meaningful work (to represent eudaimonic, cognitive wellbeing), work engagement (eudaimonic, affective wellbeing), workplace positive emotions (hedonic, affective wellbeing) and job satisfaction (hedonic, cognitive wellbeing). Having tested several models they concluded that a bifactor model was the best fit and that the 'four work well-being variables are not independent and, instead, tap into the overall experience of fulfilling work' (Allan et al., 2021 p. 431). In other words, the variables combine and interact to form an integrated overall experience.

Despite differing definitions, there does seem to be overall agreement that work fulfilment is a holistic, subjective experience (e.g. Duffy et al., 2016; Owens et al., 2019; Allan et al., 2021) and that cognitive and affective components are involved (Baumann & Ruch, 2022; Allan et al., 2019; Allan et al. 2021). The main theories position work fulfilment as an important outcome but leave the experience of this outcome underexamined and underexplained.

The possibility of attaining work fulfilment may not be equal

Despite work fulfilment being theorised as potentially available to all, there is a body of evidence suggesting attainment can be influenced by a variety of contextual factors (e.g. economic constraints, marginalisation, social support, or work environment), with some groups more impacted than others.

The PWF prompted a number of studies exploring the notions of culture and work (Flores et al., 2011; Guerrero & Singh, 2013), the struggles of unemployment (Blustein, 2006; Lyons, 2007), and relational influences of working (Kenny & Medvide, 2013). The predictors of decent work in PWT have been tested with a variety of population groups, including workers of colour in the U.S. (Duffy et al., 2018), LGBTQ workers (Douglass et al., 2017), transgender and gender nonconforming workers (Tebbe et al., 2019), workers in China (Wang et al., 2019), college students in Korea (Kim et al., 2019), workers in the UK (Dodd, Hooley & Burke, 2019) and workers with chronic health conditions (Tokar & Kaut, 2023). In testing the Model of Fulfilling Work, Allan et al. (2021) also found that the latent factor was positively correlated with income and subjective social class, suggesting that economically marginalised groups may face barriers to obtaining fulfilling work.

In terms of gender, a study with women found that experiences of marginalisation and economic constraints impact women's ability to secure decent work and was a unique predictor of work volition and decent work (England et al., 2020). The broader literature also suggests that women face particular work-related challenges associated with the continual negotiation between personal lives and lives at work, multiple role management, difficulty in securing adequate mentoring experiences, sexual harassment, inadequate pay, job quality, workplace climate, and relational factors (Flores et al., 2021; Fouad et al., 2023). Gender and age can also intersect. Younger women are disadvantaged by being perceived as having less potential than younger men (Fouad et al., 2023; Young Women's Trust, 2024). Data suggests that whilst midlife men are 5-15% more likely to be employed (WEF, 2025), they can also face distinct

career challenges, often involving identity, role strain, and transitions (Eisler & Ragsdale, 1992; Kim et al., 2018;).

Whilst these contextual factors do seem to influence the possibility of attaining work fulfilment, the existing literature is unclear as to whether the experience of feeling fulfilled itself is influenced by contextual factors, and whether this experience differs between groups.

Work fulfilment is related to wellbeing

The key work fulfilment theories emphasise the role of wellbeing, but not necessarily in the same way. For example, the authors of the S-BIT of Work contended that fulfilling work is essentially all about work wellbeing, defining it as the 'complete, integrated, and comprehensive experience of well-being in the work context' (Owens et al, 2019a p. 224). Similarly, Allan et al. (2019 p. 267) described fulfilling work as a 'holistic and complete sense of wellbeing and flourishing in the work context'. When they operationalised the theory, however, they also used variables focused on attitudes to a job or work, such as job satisfaction and meaningful work. An alternative perspective on wellbeing was offered by the Psychology of Working Theory, in which Duffy et al (2019) positioned the constructs as related outcomes, and potentially overlapping. More broadly, Baumann and Ruch (2025 p.8) in their work into 'a fulfilled life', also concluded that 'although a fulfilled life is related to several well-being constructs, it remains conceptually and empirically distinct'.

Examining and explaining the lived experience

Work fulfilment is already an important theoretical construct, but the nature of the experience (the outcome) remains underexamined. Quantitative studies dominate, with over 100 studies examining the various antecedents of work fulfilment, but not the outcome experience itself. Qualitative research is well suited to gaining a better understanding of holistic, subjective lived experiences, such as work fulfilment. It contributes to knowledge by way of 'thick description, critique, and theory-building' by clarifying meaning and providing readers with access to experiential realities; challenging assumptions, preconceived ideas about human experience, and dominant narratives; and moving beyond observable events to generate new data for testing existing theories, and offer insights into inner logic and sensemaking (Willing, 2019). This research makes an important contribution by examining the lived experience of work fulfilment, both within and between groups, and provides a framework for career practitioners based on this lived experience

The present research - Examining the lived experience

This research consisted of three separate, but related, qualitative studies examining the lived experience of work fulfilment for three groups; midlife women, midlife men, and younger women. Originally, the intention was to conduct one study, but it quickly became apparent that it would be useful to understand if the lived experience was shared with other groups. Initially interviews were conducted with midlife women, then midlife men – to explore whether the experience is similar or different for men, and with women in their twenties – to explore whether the experience was similar or different for younger women. Resource constraints prevented a further study with men in their twenties.

The studies used separate ethics applications, participant recruitment campaigns, data storage, initial inductive analysis, and participant de-briefs but the research questions and other

procedures were consistent. Subsequently, the data was also re-analysed to examine the experience across the three groups.

Specifically, this research addressed three key research questions:

- What does the lived experience of work fulfilment mean for participants?
- Is the qualitative experience shared within groups – do themes emerge inductively?
- How is the experience similar or different between groups?

The three groups

Exploring fulfilling work for these three groups allowed us to explore whether they have a different or shared understanding of work fulfilment. All three groups are important to the workforce. Midlifers, women and men, dominate many large economies such as China and India according to the World Bank. In the US they represent approximately 40 million people (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023), and over 50 million people in the EU are this age, with 95% employed (Eurostat report 2023). Women in their 20s typically constitute 10-15% of the workforce with an estimated global participation rate of 50-60% but this does vary significantly by region (WEF, 2025).

In a public policy context, midlife is identified as the gap between the end of youth and the start of old age, but what age this relates to does vary across countries. For example, the European Social Survey data suggests midlife could be 40 to 62. For the 'younger women' group, a clear age range (20s) was chosen instead of 'early career' which can be problematic. Conceptually, people of any age can be 'early career' if they change career direction, and the term is often associated with specific early career programmes such as graduate schemes or apprenticeships.

Method

Participants

The 'midlife women' group featured 20 participants ranging in age from 41 to 62 (M = 50.65, SD = 6.46), they all identified as women, and were working full-time (n = 13), part-time (n = 4) or transitioning between jobs / types of work (n = 3). Whilst there is a reasonable geographic spread, (including UK, USA, Canada, France, Spain, Switzerland, India, and Australia and Austria) it cannot be considered a global sample.

The 'midlife men' group also included 20 participants ranging in age from 37 to 61 (M = 51.35, SD = 7.53). They all identified as men, and all were working full-time (n = 19), apart from one who was transitioning after redundancy. There was also a reasonable geographic spread (including USA, UK, Germany, Canada, and Norway).

Finally, the 'women in their 20s' group consisted of 20 participants ranging in age from 23 to 29 (M = 25.05 years, SD = 2.13 years). They all identified as women and were working full-time. There was also a reasonable geographic spread (including UK, Australia, France, Canada, India, Italy, and Switzerland).

All participants were recruited through the lead researcher's extended LinkedIn network and could be considered professionally engaged, digitally connected, and relatively educated.

However, participants' educational attainment and socio-economic background were not recorded, so the extent of any potential sampling bias cannot be determined.

Procedure

The studies were advertised using a colourful flyer (one for each group)providing information about the project and asking potential participants to register their interest by email. They were then sent an information sheet and consent form. The information sheet included the core research questions for transparency and an invitation to identify a metaphor relating to their experience of work fulfilment. The inclusion of a metaphor was intended to address a potential risk that participants share a predominantly rational or rehearsed narrative of the experience.

Interviews were conducted online to maximise the possibility of geographic diversity. The University's Microsoft Teams account was used to record and transcribe the interviews. The duration of interviews ranged between 25 and 45 minutes. All participants were asked the same core questions, shown in table 1, with additional follow up questions where clarification was needed. The questions were written to ease participants into the interview by reflecting on their past work experiences before digging deeper and asking them to make sense of their overall experience of work fulfilment.

Table 1. Core qualitative interview questions

	Core interview questions
1	When you look back over your career, do you feel you have experienced 'fulfilling work'? How did you know it was fulfilling?
2	Have you experienced work that definitely was not fulfilling? How did you know?
3	What is fulfilling about your current work?
4	In your experience, how similar / different is fulfilling work to meaningful work or satisfying work?
5	Can you say a bit more about the sensory experience of feeling fulfilled?
6	Do you believe your experience of fulfilling work has changed over your life so far?
7	For you, is a 'fulfilled life' different to 'fulfilling work'?
8	In one sentence what does the term 'work fulfilment' mean to you at this stage in your life?
9	Do you have a metaphor or an image that captures what it is to feel fulfilled to you?

In line with institutional ethics approval, minimal demographic data was collected, including age, gender, nationality, home country, and working status. All data was associated with a

code, not a name. A debriefing sheet was provided thanking participants for taking part, reiterating the purpose of the study, reiterating confidentiality, and signposting where to go if participants required further information. Data collection began in September 2024 for group one ('midlife women') and completed in May 2025 for group three ('women in their 20s').

Analytical strategy

The data was initially analysed separately by group, then compared across groups noting consistency and differences in emphasis, phrases, or perspectives.

Reflexive inductive thematic analysis (TA) was employed to support the exploration needed to address the research questions. As the focus was on exploring the participants' lived experience, understanding and sense-making of work fulfilment, it was important to examine their experience without relying on a particular theory from the literature. Braun and Clarke's (2021) reflexive TA approach was considered well suited to the experiential, subjective, holistic, and iterative nature of this research. The six steps and procedures outlined by Braun and Clark (2006; 2021; 2022) were followed, namely data familiarisation; systematic data coding, generating initial codes; developing and reviewing themes; refining, defining and naming themes; and writing the report.

More specifically, transcripts were read and re-read several times (Step 1). The anonymised and checked transcripts were then uploaded to NVivo, a software tool which allows researchers to create codes and add annotations directly to digital documents. Step 2 involved generating initial codes by working through the transcripts systematically and highlighting quotes relevant to the research questions. Coding was open and organic, without the use of a coding framework. Initial themes were then generated (Step 3). In constructing the themes, various factors including salience of participant narratives (e.g. directly discussing work fulfilment), language used (e.g. strong language, emphasised points), emotionality (e.g. high valence or intensity of emotions communicated), along with overall frequency. This differs from many quantitative and some qualitative (e.g. content analysis) approaches which emphasise frequency as the prime indicator of relative importance. It was also important to ensure codes were not merely descriptive or literal but rather captured the sense participants made of their experiences.

At this stage, theme review and challenge sessions were arranged with two junior and then two senior colleagues (Step 4). The transcripts were revisited several times to ensure the themes were true to participants' voices and experiences. This iterative process of reviewing helped to further define, reduce (where differences were unclear) and name the themes.

(Step 5) The names were again tested with two senior colleagues to ensure clarity and understanding. After each study, a summary was produced and shared with participants from that particular group (Step 6).

The analytical procedure was initially conducted for each group separately. Three further rounds of analysis were then conducted. The first involved reviewing the data at the theme level - positioning the group themes and re-ordering them as necessary to highlight potentially similar themes or different themes.

Table 2. shows the inductive themes by group side-by-side.

Midlife men	Midlife women	Women in their 20s
Knowing my efforts makes a difference	Making a positive difference; beyond me	Positively contributing
Freedom to make choices and progress	A sense of space and freedom	Having opportunities to grow
Exciting and gratifying	Vitality boosting	Energising
Using my unique skills, attributes, wisdom	Being naturally me	Becoming me
Supporting and providing	Connecting with others	Connected personally Being supported (in the right way)
Supporting other segments of my life	Respecting my 'interwoven' life	Life impacting

At a high-level, most themes appeared to align; as shown horizontally in table 2. For example, the first row seemed to be about 'making a positive difference' even if the theme was expressed slightly differently at the group level. Notably, for one group ('women in their 20s') seven themes emerged from the data, rather than six. So, two of their themes were tentatively aligned with one from the others and then investigated in further rounds of analysis.

The second round of analysis involved re-visiting the coded transcript data. For this round, the data for each of the potentially aligned themes was re-examined, checking if the participant quotes from all three groups spoke to a consistent high-level theme or whether they were substantially different. From this examination it was evident from the participants transcripts that all these themes were about feeling connected with other people in a work context – as friends and as colleagues.

The third round of analysis involved a review and challenge session with an expert lab group comprised of fellow Psychology PhD Researchers and Senior Members of the Department. In this session the potential themes were reviewed together with lists of quotes for each from all three groups. This session confirmed the six themes, highlighted nuances between groups, and helped name the themes concisely and clearly.

Results

Across the three groups, six shared themes emerged. Making a 'positive difference' was an overarching theme and 'life enabling' underpinned the experience. Four themes ('energising', 'authentic', 'connected', and 'freeing') highlight the affective and psycho-physiological features of the experience. The initials of the six themes can also be combined to form an acronym – PEACeFuL - which also reflects the unforced character of the experience explained by participants as shown in figure 1.

Figure 1. The six shared themes summarised into the PEACeFuL Framework.



At a more granular level, nuances did emerge for the comparison groups, and these are briefly described below. These nuances were not considered to materially change the theme itself but rather be the next level of expression of the themes.

For each theme, illustrative quotes are provided using participants' own words. For clarity, instead of codes or pseudonyms, it is simply noted which group the participants were part of (i.e. MLW for midlife women, MLM for midlife men and 20s for women in their 20s).

Positive difference

For all three groups, making a positive difference is a key feature of work fulfilment – for others, to others, or with others. The nature of the difference made varies of course, but the power of knowing you are having a positive impact, along with the sense of achievement, is common. Conversely, work is unfulfilling when it feels pointless, boring, repetitive.

> The warm feeling you get in your heart when you know that was the right thing to do or it was well received. When someone comes to you with a highly sparked emotion of gratitude. (MLW)

> Noticing I had an impact on other people, that the work I'm doing was affecting them and possibly causing change in their lives. (MLM)

> When the projects I'm contributing to are meeting a goal for society that I would be happy to support. (20s)

For the midlife women group, the experience was usually about making a positive difference *for others* (and also themselves) – I feel fulfilled by helping you be more of you. For the midlife men, the emphasis was on having an impact *on others* – I feel fulfilled when I am useful, make progress, giving back. For the women in their 20s, their difference could be both *humble and purposeful* – I feel fulfilled when the work is helpful, useful, or valuable to their team or society in some way.

Energising

Work fulfilment is energy giving physically and emotionally - you feel uplifted, stimulated, boosted, blossoming. The experience is colourful, not dull or grey. It has the right kind of pressure and time flies. Sometimes the energy boost feels buzzing, other times it is calm. Unfulfilling work is draining, monotonous, and can cause resentment.

> I feel like I hear things better. You know I smell things. I see things. I appreciate things because I'm not distracted. (MLM)

> Unfulfilling tasks are draining and, you know, I feel quite burnt out after them. (20s)

> Feels like every cell is sparkling and alive. Feeling flexible, strong, and sparkling. (MLW)

Overall, for the midlife women, the emphasis was more on boosting their overall vitality – *lifting* my energy reserves. For the midlife men, it provided buoyancy, sharpening, awakening – *focusing* my energy. For women in their 20s, this work was stimulating, joyful, an uplifting experience – *giving* positive energy.

Authentic

Work fulfilment is also about being authentic to who I am or who I am becoming. It suits my values, strengths, skills, dreams, what matters to me. It feels natural, I can be myself, back myself, is not uncomfortable.

> Does it align with, my core values and who I want to be as a person? (20s)

> When you're doing fulfilling work, it just comes naturally. You're not struggling against yourself. (MLW)

> I couldn't continue with the work, defending what we were doing. I wasn't smiling anymore, and it wasn't fair to my family. It had to do a re-evaluation. (MLM)

For the midlife women, authenticity was often about accepting who they are now without having to be someone, or something else, to fit in – *I can be me*. For the midlife men, the emphasis was often about feeling they could share themselves, what they've learned, experienced, gathered – *I can offer me*. For women in their 20s, fulfilling work aligned with their values and supported them in becoming their future selves – *I can become me*.

Connected

Connectedness seems to go beyond just collaborating with other people, it is about being part of something bigger than me, a sense of belonging, and relating to others as human beings not just colleagues. In the context of work, feeling connected impacts how people felt about their work, team, and organisation.

> Co-creating something with people in a non-toxic environment, advocating across leadership at the same level or higher is very fulfilling. (MLW)

> Post uni, my social circles evolved. For me, I have found building new connections important. I have friends I can count on, so I am not alone, and I learned by working with them. (20s)

> Working with a great team of people around me is really nice and helps make me feel good, fulfilled. (MLM)

For this theme, the midlife women emphasised being part of a positive team, feeling part of something, working with others they respected – I stayed (or left) because of the people. For the midlife men, providing real support to those close to them connected to their sense of identity and purpose. For the women in their 20s, being surrounded by great people provided a vital sense of belonging, friendship, and joy – I feel at home, I belong here with these people.

Freeing

The experience of work fulfilment provides a sense of freedom, is opening and expansive, and not constraining. It offers a sense of space, movement, stretch, growth. You have the resources and enough autonomy to do a good job.

> I have the space to go learn things myself, the freedom to go learn and try. (20s)

> The ability to have an impact at a larger scope, actually make decisions about things and influence decisions versus roles which are more about just kind of taking orders. (MLM)

> Many women I know, including me, have been kind of bullied at work, I would say, and that's often through kind of micromanagement or kind of controlling behaviour which has made the job much less fulfilling. (MLW)

For the midlife women, the emphasis was on freedom *to be* – to breathe, be in the flow, space to stretch. For the midlife men, it was often freedom *to do* – to make decisions, choices, make this happen, not be micromanaged. For women in their 20s, it was freedom *to grow* – with opportunities to learn and try new things.

Life enabling

To experience work fulfilment, work needs to be life enabling. It recognises that work and life impact each other and feeling fulfilled in one aspect of work or life can boost others. Work provides financial independence and security for individuals and their families.

> For me I get fulfilment out of the fact that my work provides the lifestyle and experience I want for my family. (MLM)
>
> I'd like keep them more separate (like my boyfriend), but they spillover. (20s)
>
> They merge for me and has done for years. I can't separate the two because I get phone calls about mum in the middle of, you know, a work meeting and all those sorts of things. It respects my interwoven life – I've a lot going on. (MLW)

For the midlife women, the many parts of life and work were interwoven, not in balance – *fulfilling work doesn't just tolerate my other roles, it flexes and respects them*. For the midlife men, work was part of the puzzle, an enabler - *sometimes I make trades offs between work and life, shifting the balance*. For women in their 20s, they spilled into each other – *I spend a lot of my time at work, so it's an important part*.

Metaphors or images that capture what it is to feel fulfilled.

With a moment of reflection, almost all could share a metaphor, that captured the overall experience for them. Several shared more than one and only two people struggled to think of any. All the metaphors were important and evocative for that person. There were many references to nature; water, sunlight, trees, plants, sky, flowers, mountains, the countryside, beaches, or the ocean. There were descriptions of colour and vibrancy: colourful, sparkling, blossoming, nourishing, beauty, taste, music. Finally, there were feelings of peace, space and movement: breathing deeply, relaxing, smiling, laughing, walking, running, swimming, dancing.

Table 3. Illustrative example metaphors

Diving in Bali –the warmth, friends, immersed literately!	A runner sat on the doorstep after a tough workout.	A woman dancing. Her skirt is colourful, swaying. Her body elongated, there is space, not held back.
Being around a table having a great conversation.	Blossoming Pentecost roses, start tight then open. Layers of vibrant colour.	Riding my motorbike on an open road.

Discussion

The 'thick description' offered by these qualitative studies provides researchers and practitioners with a deeper understanding of work fulfilment from 60 diverse participants who have experienced it. The inductively derived data and emergent themes ask important questions of existing theories, adding support to some aspects whilst also highlighting important limitations.

Work fulfilment is widely considered to be a holistic, subjective experience with both cognitive and affective domains (e.g. Allan et al., 2019; Baumann & Ruch, 2022; Ryan & Deci, 2001). This study supports this assertion with participants explaining that 'everything comes together when they experience work fulfilment' with the use of evaluative judgements

about the experience (e.g. a positive difference, life enabling) alongside affective descriptions of the felt sense (e.g. energizing, authentic, freeing and connected). But is this experience understood uniquely or is there a shared understanding between people and groups?

Together, these studies challenge a prevailing assumption in career counselling that what people find fulfilling is unique to them. The emergence of six highly consistent themes across three distinct groups suggests a shared understanding of the construct overall, but with different nuances for individuals and between groups.

Whilst there are several definitions in the literature, do they fully capture the holistic, subjective nature of this lived experience? The PWT describes work fulfilment as 'work that is personally satisfying and meaningful' (Duffy et al., 2016 p. 138) which seems to speak to the cognitive aspects more than feeling energised, authentic, connected or free. The S-BIT of work asserts that work fulfilment is 'the complete, integrated, and comprehensive experience of wellbeing in the work context' (Owens et al., 2019 p. 224) and the Model of Fulfilling Work defines it as a 'holistic and complete sense of wellbeing and flourishing in the work context' (Allan et al., 2019 p. 267) which does allude to the energising and freeing nature of the experience but potentially misses its impact beyond the work context and overstates the completeness. In this study, participants had experienced work fulfilment but also did not expect to experience it all the time. Also, many described finding certain aspects of their work fulfilling but not others. In practice then, a complete sense may not be necessary, achievable, or sustainable.

At a more granular level, several of these qualitative themes do seem to resonate with aspects of existing theories, but there are also important gaps. For example, making a 'positive difference' does align conceptually with 'social contribution needs' in PWT (Autin et al., 2019). Initially, Duffy et al. proposed 'social connection' as one of three core psychological needs but later supported Autin et al.'s amendment to 'social contribution' (Duffy et al., 2024). For participants in this study, their 'positive difference' was sometimes about contributing to the 'greater social good' or the 'welfare of communities' as proposed by Blustein (2006) but was often more humble or immediate, such as a simple thank you from a client or team member.

Several other themes from this study speak to the innate needs outlined in Self Determination Theory (SDT) i.e. autonomy, competence, relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2001) along with the later addition of value congruence (Blustein, 2008). In SDT, autonomy is defined as one's need to be able to act freely and with a feeling of ownership and control over choices that are made; relatedness as the need to feel close to others within one's community, to care for, and feel cared for by, others (Ryan & Deci, 2017); and competence as the need to develop relevant skills and a feeling of mastery in one's environment (Broeck et al., 2016). The theme 'freeing' aligns well with autonomy. The theme 'connected' also includes this closeness and care with others as human beings associated with relatedness. and when combined with value congruence (Blustein, 2008) there is some resonance with the theme 'authentic'. This study, however, also highlights the importance of being authentic to who I am naturally (without struggling against myself) and an aspirational dimension (authentic to who I am becoming), so maybe broader than being motivated to do tasks that are authentic to who I believe I am now.

The theme 'energising' seems to be alluded to, but not fully represented in the existing literature. The S-BIT of Work does emphasise the centrality of work wellbeing (eudemonic and hedonic) to work fulfilment (Owens et al, 2019a) and Allan et al. (2019) included positive workplace emotions in the Model of Fulfilling Work. Whilst the 10-item Positive Affect Subscale they used to test the model does include 'excited, enthusiastic, active and strong' (Watson et

al., 1988), it does not t specifically speak to joy or more psycho-physiological aspects of the lived experience such as feeling calm, peaceful or uplifted or able to breathe.

The theme 'life enabling' is potentially the least represented in the current literature. The PWT theorises that survival needs (represented by basic human needs for food, water, a safe place to live, and social capital) are predictive of work fulfilment and work wellbeing (Duffy et al., 2016). Autin et al. (2019) cited studies outside of the work domain which demonstrated that survival needs satisfaction is connected with both domain-specific and general well-being (e.g. Sirgy, et al., 2001; Tay & Diener, 2011). In this research, life enabling is much broader than survival needs, emphasising how work fulfilment is interconnected with life and how feeling fulfilled in one aspect of work or life can boost others. This theme also questions the popular notion of work-life balance, particularly for women. Career histories of women are sometimes described as 'relational,' with their career decisions part of a larger and intricate web of interconnected issues, people, and aspects that had to come together in a delicately balanced package (Leonard & Burns, 2006). Some writers suggest the notion of a life blend is more useful (Sirgy & Lee, 2018; Steffens et al., 2023) which resonates more with these studies.

Conclusion, implications and future directions

This research presents an empirical description of participants' narratives, describing work fulfilment in their own terms. In doing so, it extends the current literature by providing rich descriptions grounded in the lived *experience* of 60 men and women. Through inductive thematic analysis, six consistent experiential dimensions emerged: positive difference, energising, authentic, connected, freeing and life enabling, summarized in the PEACeFuL framework. Together the studies offer a rich, more holistic account of this important construct, challenging writers to better represent the felt-sense of work fulfilment, particularly the psycho-physiological aspects and to take a broader perspective of the relationship between work and life. These insights offer theoretical and practical insights for scholars and practitioners in career development, vocational psychology, and organisational leadership.

Theoretical implications

While existing theories conceptualise work fulfilment as a holistic, subjective experience that is an important, central outcome, they rarely assess the experience itself. This research addresses a critical gap in the literature by examining the lived experience of work fulfilment directly and inductively – led by the experience itself rather than theorised understanding. The metaphorical representations provide an alternative, holistic perspective.

The findings from these studies offer additional support to several other theories particularly relating to the importance of psychological needs, including social contribution needs within the Psychology of Working Theory (Autin et al., 2021; Duffy et al., 2024), and autonomy and relatedness from Self Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Also, the role of psychophysiological aspects including energy supports a relationship with wellbeing highlighted by the S-BIT of work (Owens et al., 2019b) and the Model of Fulfilling Work (Allan et al, 2019).

Additionally, it asks questions about how well existing theoretically-derived definitions represent the lived experience, inviting theorists to extend their descriptions to aid understanding. Also, these participants take a broader view on survival-related needs, than that suggested by the Psychology of Working theory, which may of course be a result of them having fulfilled these needs and being more concerned with how work enables their lives

more broadly. This broader perspective could potentially help broaden the relevance of the Psychology of Work Theory beyond the initial audience.

Finally, this qualitative insight complements quantitative approaches by providing quantitative researchers with a rich foundation for creating new measures and survey items that reflect the authentic language and experiences of people and underscore the importance of sustaining it through longer careers.

Practice implications

Practitioners can use the six identified themes - positive difference, energising, authentic, connected, freeing and life enabling – summarised in the PEACeFuL framework to help clients reflect on their current work experiences and career aspirations. These themes offer a holistic lens that goes beyond traditional metrics like job satisfaction or salary. The use of metaphors in the study revealed rich, emotional insights into work fulfilment. Practitioners might invite clients to describe their work using metaphors or sensory language to uncover deeper feelings and values that may not surface through rational analysis alone. Rather than promoting a strict separation between work and life, practitioners can explore life integration—how work can enable or support broader life goals. This is especially relevant for clients managing multiple roles or seeking meaning across domains. Finally, helping clients recognise and appreciate moments of fulfilment, even if not constant, may help foster resilience and realistic expectations.

Limitations and future research directions

The study recruited participants exclusively from the researcher's extended professional LinkedIn network, which likely resulted in a sample composed of professionals already interested in the topic of work fulfilment. They were also unpaid volunteers, which may have influenced their willingness to reflect positively or deeply on their work experiences. Although participants came from various countries, this cannot be considered a globally representative group. Thematic analysis inherently involves subjective interpretation. While peer review and supervisory input were included, the coding and theme construction were primarily conducted by the lead researcher, which may introduce interpretive bias despite efforts to ensure rigor. Finally, the study captures a snapshot of participants' retrospective and current experiences. Nonetheless, the coherence between the research questions, inductive design, iterative analysis, and repeated checking of themes against participants' accounts supports the methodological integrity and trustworthiness of the findings (Levitt et al., 2017).

To address these limitations, future research should examine how work fulfilment is experienced in different cultural contexts or occupational sectors (e.g. healthcare, education, gig economy), or how specific organisational practices contribute to or hinder the experience of work fulfilment.

AI use declaration

No AI was used in this research or the writing of the article. Copilot was used within word for spelling, grammar and APA formatting checks.

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