Working for the Weekend is not Meaningful Work

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"Everybody's working for the weekend
Everybody wants a little romance
Everybody's goin' off the deep end
Everybody needs a second chance…"
---Loverboy.

The use of financial inducements to attract potential research participants is a long standing practice in research, but nevertheless remains controversial (Vanderwalde and Kurzban, 2011; Largent and Fernandez-Lynch, 2018). The predominant concern is that paying research subjects for their participation constitutes a form of 'undue inducement', whereby a large financial incentive compromises the voluntariness of a subject's consent to participate (McNeill, 1997; Grady, 2001; Emmanuel, 2005). Paying for participation may lead to subjects compromising strongly held values, misunderstanding or ignoring the risks of participation, or allowing themselves to be used 'merely as a means.' There is also a concern that financial incentives may be more attractive to poorer people (Elliot and Abadie, 2008). If so, paying research subjects may result in an already disadvantaged population bearing a disproportionate share of the burdens of research participation.

In the absence of regulatory guidance, various proposals for the ethical payment of research subjects have been offered, the most popular of which is to treat research participation as a form of unskilled labour (Dickert and Grady, 1999). According to this wage-payment model, research participation is morally indistinguishable from any other kind of legitimate employment. Thus, research subjects are entitled to the same rights as other unskilled labourers, such as the right to a minimum wage, the right to a safe working environment, and the right to form unions (Anderson and Weijer, 2002). For professional research subjects—those who are dependent on research participation as their primary source of income, and who are invested in research participation as a meaningful endeavour—this also includes a right to rewarding and meaningful work (Anderson and Weijer, 2002).

The supposed right to rewarding and meaningful work has been justified in a number of ways. Social theorists like Karl Marx and Charles Taylor have argued that an important function of work is as a means of developing and expressing capacities that are critical to our flourishing as human beings. Meaningless or 'alienated' work inhibits this function, and frustrates our ability to flourish. The social recognition that follows from achievement or valuable contribution has also been appealed to as grounding a right to meaningful work, insofar as it is a source of workers' satisfaction, social identity, and self-respect.

Paid research participation, considered as a form of unskilled labour, appears to be in tension with the idea of a right to meaningful work. As Malmgvist (2019) articulates, "research subjects are not

paid to produce or achieve anything, but to submit to the actions of others." The concern here is that the intrinsically passive nature of research participation is inconsistent with the goods of work. For Malmgvist, justice requires that workers enjoy sufficient opportunities to achieve excellence, social contribution, community, and social recognition, because these goods are important to leading a flourishing life. Research participation as a form of work is problematic because it does not in itself provide these opportunities to flourish. Overall, we are sympathetic to Malmgvist trenchant analysis. Here we briefly take issue with the separation of intrinsic and extrinsic opportunities, and end with the suggestion that research participant engagement and partnership ought not be dismissed hastily.

Malmgvist suggests that the non-monetary goods of work can also be achieved outside the context of work. Because most people must spend the majority of their time working—and thus have limited opportunity to achieve these goods outside of work—this is not possible. Research participation, on the other hand, provides subjects plenty of free time in which to pursue the goods of work, provided they also have the financial security to do so. Thus, for Malmgvist, paid research participation need not be meaningful or satisfying in order for subjects to achieve the goods of work; it must simply allow for the opportunity to pursue these goods elsewhere.

In this way, Malmgvist dissolves the apparent tension between the right to meaningful work and paid research participation; meaningful work is simply a convenient, but not necessary, means of achieving the goods of work that are important for a flourishing life. This dissolution of the problem is concerning, however, insofar as it reduces the right to meaningful work to a merely instrumental concern. Work is thus meaningful if it provides us with the means (goods or money) to satisfy our needs or wants; there is nothing intrinsically valuable about one's labour. We find this view problematic, particularly in the context of paid research participation, because it excuses the need to make research participation more intrinsically meaningful for participants. This is concerning for three reasons.

First, as Malmgvist notes, it is a requirement of justice not only that work provide opportunities to realize the goods of work, but also that the 'bads' of work be minimized, or at least fairly distributed. Work which threatens the basic requirements for a flourishing life (e.g., physical and mental health, relationships with others, self-respect), is unjust, even if it provides a level of compensation and sufficient time to pursue the goods of work outside of work. It is unclear if paid research participation—which has been described as 'dehumanizing' and 'being paid to endure'—is so meaningless as to undermine the very possibility of a flourishing life. Yet even if it is not, work that is unchallenging, unrewarding, or meaningless certainly detracts from a flourishing life, and it is not clear that increased compensation will address this problem.

Second, Malmgvist's view places insufficient weight on employers (or in this case, research funders) to provide opportunities to achieve the goods of work; the responsibility is entirely on workers to generate opportunities to achieve the goods of work for themselves. Conversely, we understand the right to meaningful work as entailing a responsibility on the part of employers to do more than offset the alienating or dehumanizing nature of work through some combination of higher pay, and increased time off to pursue the goods of work elsewhere. Rather, there exists a positive obligation to acknowledge the value of the labourer herself, as a person with goals and values, rather than

merely her labour as a commodity which can be assigned a particular monetary value. To put this idea in Kantian terms, indifference to the flourishing of another does not necessarily treat them as a mere means, but it fails to treat them as an end in themselves. Accordingly, if paid research participation is a meaningless activity, even if it allows for the pursuit of the goods of work in other contexts, research participants are not being treated as ends in themselves, and thus not being respected as morality requires.

Third, paid research subjects may not have the opportunity to achieve the goods of work, even if well compensated and having plenty of free time, without the structure that work typically provides. On the one hand, they may simply be unable to find other aspects of their lives which provide them with the opportunities to achieve excellence, social contribution, community, and social recognition that meaningful work can provide. On the other hand, studies have shown that extended periods of meaningless work can extinguish a person's desire and ambition to achieve meaningful life goals outside of the workplace (Schwartz, 1982). Thus, paid research participants may be actively hindered from flourishing outside of work, because their jobs provide them virtually no opportunity to rationally frame, pursue, and adjust their own plans.

An alternative solution would be to take steps to make research participation more intrinsically meaningful for participants, by engaging them as 'partners in research' (Anderson and Weijer, 2002). Malmgvist finds this proposal problematic because partnership:

> suggests a relationship between equals with shared goals and interests…[and this is] dangerous…because it hides the sources of subjects' vulnerability and enables the industry to pursue its own aims in their name but against their real interests.

But this analysis takes our proposal of partnership too literally. The relationship between healthy volunteer and researcher surely is one of inequality. Our proposal is not to make research participants equals, but rather to make them less unequal. Indeed, this suggestion is in keeping with recent laudable efforts to meaningfully engage patients and the public as partners in healthcare (Richards et al., 2013). The prospect of a stake in the research enterprise allows research subjects to provide input into the design and implementation of a study protocol, and the dissemination of its findings. As a result, the passive nature of their task is diminished and the relationship between the research subject and their labour becomes one of engagement rather than alienation.

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