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Meaning of work as a personal emergent power[?]: developing theory based on a critical realist study of Sri Lankan workers

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Meaning of work as a personal emergent power: developing theory based on a critical realist study of Sri Lankan workers

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ABSTRACT
Research on the ‘meaning of work’, especially concerning the Global South, is scarce. This paper aims to reduce this scarcity by applying critical realist meta-theory to the work and life history interviews of workers in Sri Lanka. A key discovery is that finding meaning in life through work is a personal emergent power and that, as such, it explains the way that individuals consciously manoeuvre their life-journeys towards a desired end - a modus vivendi - in a dialectic which involves both emergent structural change (morphogenesis) and agency. This paper also reveals that Margaret Archer’s theory of reflexivity, based on interviews with Western individuals, cannot be transferred rigidly to the reflexivity of Global South individuals, and therefore more work on reflexivity within this context is required. This paper therefore makes a theoretical contribution to the existing meaning of work scholarship, and it extends existing understandings of the concepts of reflexivity and emergence.

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Introduction
The meaning of work (MoW) is becoming an increasingly relevant topic in research in the social sciences due to recent and current developments in attitudes towards, and understandings of, work and the work context (Pignault and Houssemann 2021, 1). These developments have seen work and its meaning come to encompass more than simply ‘employment’, but also a large tract of contemporary human life (e.g. Bailey and Madden 2017; Harpaz and Meshoulam 2010). Besides economic benefits, individuals also derive identity, self-esteem, happiness, fulfilment, and innermost feelings, such as meaning in life, through work (Deery, Kohlar, and Walsh 2019), generating a spectrum of experiences, ranging from exhilaration and contentment to disappointment and despair (Ardichvili and Kuchinke 2009). Also, MoW has become a critical concern among both practitioners and researchers due to its inevitable impact on rising employee dissatisfaction about work conditions and well-being (Taylor 2017). Hence,
MoW is ‘a topic of importance in core domains of human resource development (HRD) such as employee engagement, motivation, and personal development’ (Bailey et al. 2019, 83).

Although work and its meaning are closely interwoven with human existence, identifying definitional boundaries appears problematic: existing definitions of work range from restrictive definitions, such as paid activities to over-inclusive definitions, for instance, the opposite of rest (Pignault and Houssemand 2021). Identifying definitions for MoW appears even more difficult. Broadly, as Pignault and Houssemand (2021, 2) note, ‘In psychology, [MoW] refers to an individual’s interpretations of actual experiences and interactions at work… From a sociological point of view, it involves assessing meaning in reference to a system of values.’ Pignault and Houssemand emphasize, in the latter case, MoW as strongly shaped by socio-cultural differences.

Previously, MoW has typically been explored in a narrow fashion, siloed within specific disciplines, such as new technological developments (Marks and Huzzard 2010), work intensification (Granter et al. 2018), identity (Trusson, Trusson, and Casey 2021), dirty work (Deery, Kohlar, and Walsh 2019), HRM (Ardichvili 2005; Ardichvili and Kuchinke 2009), meaningfulness (Bailey and Madden 2017) and organizational psychology (Pignault and Houssemand 2021). However, MoW appears conflated with work values, attitudes, ethics, centrality and commitment (e.g. Gahan and Abeysekera 2009). Such work is overly empirical, lacking a robust (meta)theoretical basis. Hence, MoW remains a taken-for-granted phenomenon (Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski 2010) with its complex, causal nature overlooked. These observations have led scholars (e.g. Bailey and Madden 2017; Harpaz and Fu 2002; Harpaz and Snir 2003; Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski 2010) to declare sociology as failing to produce a well-articulated theory of MoW.

It is the absence of a systematic approach, or a robust theory to study MoW and understand its impact on individuals, this paper addresses, it aims to answer the following question: ‘Can MoW be considered as a personal emergent power that shapes individual (career and occupational) behaviour?’ A vigorous theory to study/understand what work means can yield deeper insights into how individuals consciously craft their biographies, in which work and careers play a significant role.

In developing a theoretical lens to study MoW, what follows is structured as follows. Firstly, previous studies on MoW are introduced and their limitations are identified. Secondly, the critical realist morphogenetic approach and ontological concept of emergence are discussed, including adjacent ontological concepts viz. emergent powers, personal reflexivity, emergent identities, mechanisms and causality, demonstrating how MoW can be conceptualized as personal emergent power. Next, methodology and fieldwork details are discussed, followed by an analysis of the findings, explaining how different reflexive modes are associated with, formulating MoW. The paper ends by presenting the conclusions and contributions of the study.

**Previous studies of meaning of work**

Even though attempts to theorize MoW date back to the 1950s, with Lottery Studies by Morse and Weiss (1955), MoW has drawn considerable recent attention. According to Pignault and Houssemand (2021), between 1974 and 2006, 183 studies were addressing MoW, but only a limited number of theoretical models were developed during this period.
For example, Meaning of Work International Research Team’s (1987) longitudinal study, Sverko’s (1989) work on the interaction among work values and socialization process, Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski’s (2010) development of an exhaustive model of sources and processes of MoW, and Lips-Wiersma and Wright’s (2012) study on pathways to meaningful work and validating Morin’s Questionnaire by Pignault and Houssemand (2021). Pignault and Houssemand (2021) and Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski (2010) point out, that the focus of the early attempts centred around definitions and theoretical underpinnings and later attempts focused on MoW in relation to individual perspectives such as perception of the work context. Yet, a precise definition or an adequate explanation of MoW has not resulted.

Although not all previous studies theorize MoW, an understanding of key empirical studies is vital. Initially, Morse and Weiss (1955), attempted to study the centrality of work in individuals’ lives by asking if they would still continue to work if they won a lottery. The findings revealed that individuals would continue to work despite the absence of economic necessity (Highhouse, Zickar, and Yankelevich 2010). Morse and Weiss concluded that people derive more from work than economic benefits. As Harpaz and Fu (2002) note, lottery studies later inspired the meaning of work international research team’s (MOWIRT) work.

The Social Change and Economic Life Initiative’s (SCELI) MoW study (1986–1987) also explored drivers of wanting to work (Noon, Blyton, and Morrell 2012). Based on 5000 respondents, the study identified 65% worked for money, but the most surprising finding was that 26% of respondents would choose to work for expressive purposes rather than money. Thus, a study by SCELI demonstrates that people work for intrinsic rewards, such as satisfaction, enjoyment and to gain a sense of achievement, besides extrinsic purposes.

The MOWIRT study (early 1980s and 1990s), is one of the most significant studies ever undertaken, a comparative study involving eight countries (Harpaz and Fu 2002). The study tested a hypothesis of the structure of MoW remaining stable over time (Harpaz and Fu 2002). MOWIRT study utilized work centrality and values as central measures of MoW (Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski 2010), which were conceptualized on five dimensions; ‘work centrality as a life role, social norms regarding work, valued work outcomes, importance of work goals and work-role identification’ (Harpaz and Fu 2002, 641). The results showed work was secondary only to family; however, in Japan and Yugoslavia, work was the most important aspect, taking precedence over family, leisure, community and religion, demonstrating the inevitable nature of MoW in the lives of people (Harpaz and Fu 2002).

Harpaz and Snir (2003) and Ruiz-Quintanilla and England (1996) attempted to measure MoW, based on the interpretation of work proposed by MOWIRT. This study identified four heuristic categories of MoW – Burden (e.g. if someone tells you what to do), Constraint (e.g. if it is physically strenuous), Responsibility and exchange rationale (e.g. if it is mentally strenuous or getting paid for) and Social contributions (e.g. if work is performed to contribute to society) (Pignault and Houssemand 2021, 4).

Nonetheless, Westwood and Lok (2003) note key dimensions identified to define MoW in the MOWIRT study were determined by antecedent factors, such as demographic and personal variables, immediate and past work/career experiences and factors in the wider socio-economic environment. However, antecedent factors, for example, the societal
context, were not adequately operationalized by the research team. Therefore, MOWIRT’s heuristic model of MoW is a result only of individuals’ choices and experiences (Harpaz and Fu 2002; Harpaz and Snir 2003). Also adding to the limitations of MOWIRT studies is the exclusion of emerging and significant economies in the study (Ardichvili 2005). Hence, studies conducted by England and Harpaz (1990) and Ruiz-Quintanilla and England (1996) extending MOWIRT work, also reflect the limitations of the original study.

Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski’s (2010) extensive, systematic study attempting to integrate a scattered, broad array of literature to conceptualize MoW, is another significant contribution to the field, being the first comprehensive literature review developing the most recent conceptualization of MoW. Rosso et al.’s study categorize existing literature under two broad themes: (1). the sources of MoW and (2). the mechanisms underpinning MoW. Rosso et al. identify four main sources of MoW: (i). the self (values, motivation, and beliefs of an individual), (ii). other persons (co-workers, leaders, communities and groups and family), (iii). the work context (design of job tasks, organizational mission, financial circumstances, non-work domains and national culture), and (iv). spiritual life (spirituality and sacred callings). Rosso et al. argue that although these domains have not been explicitly specified within the existing literature, they represent well-defined perspectives as to how each source affects MoW. In relation to the second emerging category within the literature, Rosso et al. identified seven constructs as mechanisms or processes through which work becomes meaningful to people: (i). authenticity, (ii). self-efficacy, (iii). self-esteem, (iv). purpose, (v). belongingness, (vi). transcendence, and (vii). cultural and interpersonal sense-making. These constructs are considered a core set of psychological and social mechanisms that establish an organizing framework to understand how MoW is constructed. A study conducted by Lips-Wiersma and Wright (2012) complements and extends Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski’s (2010) work, which adds four pathways to meaningful work: developing inner self, ensuring unity with others, offering service to others, and expressing one’s full potential.

Finally, perhaps the most recent noteworthy MoW study was conducted by Pignault and Houssemand (2021) in contributing to the field of organizational psychology. They aimed to validate a scale developed by Morin, Archambault, and Giroux (2001), known as Morin’s Meaning of Work Questionnaire, consisting of 30 questions: this questionnaire has become popular among scholars and practitioners who aim to measure MoW. As Pignault and Houssemand (2021, 2) claim ‘The statistical analyses needed to determine the reliability and validity of Morin et al.’s meaning of work questionnaire have never been completed’ except for some changes made to it. Therefore, in producing a more validated version of measuring MoW, Pignault and Houssemand produced a psychometric validation of Morin’s questionnaire, for measuring MoW. This final validated version of MoW is structured upon five dimensions over 13 questions: Success and recognition at work and from work, Usefulness of work, Respect dimension of work, Value from and through work and Remuneration. Pignault and Houssemond, recommend the validated Morin’s questionnaire as a viable tool for measuring MoW by the practitioners, such as career counsellors or HR professionals.

Even though a range of MoW studies could be identified, they are not without criticism. Therefore, the next section looks at the limitations of previous understandings, establishing a rationale for new, (meta)theoretically robust conceptualizations of MoW.
MoW scholarship has drawn criticism for lacking coherency and inadequate theorizing of what work means for (different) individuals (e.g. Bailey and Madden 2017; Harpaz and Fu 2002; Harpaz and Snir 2003; Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski 2010). The existing MoW Scholarship neglects the influence of intersecting variables, such as gender, race/ethnicity, class and culture, in shaping individuals’ work meanings (Trusson, Trusson, and Casey 2021). Another major criticism concerns an overly empirical, descriptive and cursory nature, lacking methodological grounding, particularly incorporating temporal (past, present and future), personal, occupational and sociocultural dynamics in the conceptualization of MoW (Ardichvili and Kuchinke 2009; Pignault and Houssemand 2021; Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski 2010). As such, it can be argued that extant MoW scholarship is simplistic, lacking a concrete ontological underpinning, and limited in providing explanations on its causal nature. Such work therefore tends to neglect implicit work meanings generated through the interaction between society and individual, for example, recognising meta-goals in life that shape one’s social position, status and identity through work (Bailey and Madden 2017; Trusson, Trusson, and Casey 2021).

Existing MoW scholarship, therefore, remains scattered, disjointed and inconsistent, and used for specific purposes within different fields, with literature sitting across largely incongruous fields. Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski (2010) and Pignault and Houssemand (2021) note, for example, substantial MoW literature is based on zorganizational behaviour (OB) approaches informed by psychological tradition, a perspective privileging individual subjectivity, granting primacy to agency. Focused on the individual and formal jobs at an organizational level, the OB tradition suggests MoW is the outcome of a person’s evaluative system and cognition, associated with (job) satisfaction and achievement (Ardichvili and Kuchinke 2009). In contrast, sociological approaches emphasize the ‘social’ (structure), for example, work as a religious calling or a birth-ascribed obligation in defining MoW (Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski 2010).

Therefore, a consideration of the limitations within the literature leads to the synthesis that existing MoW scholarship neglects the interconnected, dialectical nature of the individual (agency) and society (structure) that shapes social action. This observation is supported by an already established position of positivist traditions broadly underpinning the OB approach to MoW, prioritizing ‘agency’, and sociological approach to MoW, resonating with postmodern/social constructionist tradition giving primacy to the ‘social’ (e.g. Archer 2000, 2003; Wimalasena 2017; Wimalasena and Marks 2019). Thus, it is evident that existing MoW scholarship grants epiphenomenal status either to structure or agency, which critical realists recognize as elitionist approaches to social inquiry that commit the error of conflationary theorizing. The OB approach neglects structure (society), presenting an unreconciled dilemma of upwards conflation, while the sociological approach neglects agency (individual), committing the error of downwards conflation (Archer 2007). Thus, neither approach fully appreciates the reciprocal process connecting the individual through work to wider society (Ardichvili and Kuchinke 2009). The question of whether MoW is generated internally (cognitively), externally (influenced by the job/wider environment), or dialectically between individual and society, remains underexplored (Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski 2010). Hence, a solution appears to lie within the social theory developed by Archer that denies conflationary theorizing (e.g. see Archer 2003,
Developing from principles of critical realism, Archer’s theory – the morphogenetic approach (MA), is merited as an emergent ontology, an approach discussed herewith.

**The morphogenetic approach and the ‘emergence’**

The MA, predominantly developed by Archer (e.g. 2000, 2003, 2007), is based upon the fundamental assumptions of critical realism, including its emergent ontology. Emergence is fundamental to the realist account of cause (Elder-Vass 2005, 315). The MA grants reality status to structure, culture and agency, the fundamental elements of social reality, recognizing distinct emergent powers operating separately, and being irreducible to each other (Archer 2003). Society (structure and culture) and the individual (agency) are viewed as interconnected dialectically, operating independently in different timescales (Archer 2003). Three distinct types of emergent powers – structural, cultural and agential emergent powers, are identified (Archer 2007). Agency is assumed to be shaped by structural and cultural emergent powers, and, in turn, agential action (personal emergent powers) reproduces (morphostasis) and transforms (morphogenesis) structure (and culture), a dialectic known as the double morphogenesis (Wimalasena and Marks 2019). These processes, as Archer (2000, 2003) demonstrates, can be analysed separately (analytical dualism). Critical realism necessitates conceptualisation of social phenomena, and should not conflate structure, culture and agency, which essentially constitute the social reality (Elder-Vass 2010). Thus, the influences of the social order upon agency should not be located ‘fully within agents or entirely outside them’ (Archer 2010, 273). Personal reflexivity is the way this dialectical process is understood (Wimalasena 2022).

**Personal reflexivity – a personal emergent property**

Critical realism considers structure, culture and agency that constitute social reality, as stratified, possessing unique emergent powers at each level and are connected through reflexivity (Fleetwood 2013). Individual agency is understood as stratified (stratified human) and emerges through the stages of self (me), person (I), agent (we) and actor (you), with each stage emerging with different (personal) emergent powers (Archer 2003). Thus, the self is an evolving, emergent (morphogenic) phenomenon, possessing a continuous sense of oneness and the same throughout a life-course (Archer 2000). The acknowledgement of a continuous sense of self suggests individuals are reflexive, consciously craft their own life-journeys, and choose work and occupations constructing their own careers, rather than being linguistically formed gifts of society (Archer 2003). This notion of continuous sense entails how individuals, reflexively, move beyond their biological selves to acquire personal and social identities, and occupational and social positions to ensure their social becoming (Archer 2007; Beech et al. 2016). The two early stages of the stratified human being – the self and the person, in which she gains the first-person perspective and thus reflexive powers, which are considered an emergent power of the individual – are fundamental in developing a personal identity (Archer 2007). The latter two strata (agent and actor) – the social selves, are largely dependent upon the prior emergence of a personal identity, leading to achieving a social identity occurring ‘at the interface of the dialectic of ‘structure and agency” (Archer 2000, 255).
Acquiring a social identity is inextricably linked with structural, cultural and agential emergent powers: this social self is recognized as an emergent identity in which, work, its meaning and occupational identities play a significant role (Archer 2000). Therefore, a lifelong account of the human agent, as advanced by Archer, has the potential to explain dialectical relations between personal and social identity which shape life-long reflexive commitments and doings of individuals within society, for example, commitment to employment or career (Beech et al. 2016).

Archer’s (2000, 2003, 2007) notable contribution to reflexive theory considers ‘work and occupations’ as playing a dominant role in shaping biographies and identities. For example, consciously accomplished occupational identities as central in shaping social positioning, and in some cases, as counter identities in strategically challenging inferior or undesirable social identities (e.g. Wimalasena 2022). Archer’s theory explicitly makes connections with work. However, how MoW plays out in this process has been neglected. Further, the literature does not offer insights into the possibility of personal reflexivity being a part of another mechanism.

The MA advances that reflexivity is how individuals (agency) interact with society (structure) (Archer 2003). Reflexivity entails engaging in self-talk about situations, aspirations, values and behaviour (Elder-Vass 2010, 102). Individuals reflexively monitor themselves in relation to occupational, personal and social circumstances, by articulating life strategies, responding to life trajectories, satisfying ultimate life concerns and crafting a modus vivendi – a satisfactory life situation where ultimate life concerns are perceived to be lived out (Archer 2007). Reflexivity, thus, connects the concerns, projects and practices of individuals together (Archer 2000). However, there is further diversity in these reflexive endeavours, based on different modes of reflexivity practised (Williams 2018).

Archer (2003, 2007, 2012) identifies four dominant reflexive modalities – communicative, autonomous, meta- and fractured – which provide insights into the production of divergent responses to social influence. The outcome of practicing communicative reflexivity is socio-economic immobility (contextual continuity), as communicative reflexives stay close to family and friends (their ultimate life concern), effecting social reproduction. Autonomous reflexives, whose ultimate life concerns rest on work, strive for upward social mobility through occupational success (contextual discontinuity), resulting in social transformation. As Archer asserts, meta-reflexives’ life concerns are placed upon value-commitments: their actions transform and reorient existing social structures, generating a volatile pattern of social mobility. Finally, as Archer notes, internal conversations of fractured reflexives are not effective enough to ensure coordinated self-monitoring: they are unable to extricate themselves from circumstances or provide purposeful responses to opportunities, thus not establishing a unique patterning of life journeys. Situational and contextual variations add further diversity to the patterning of life-journeys, even among practitioners of the same reflexive modality (Archer 2012). Agents may also practice provisional reflexive modes, getting them closer to their modus vivendi (Wimalasena 2017). Individuals’ dominant reflexive orientation shapes their actions in society, for example, when choosing occupations (Williams 2018). However, individuals cannot operate completely in isolation, but must interact, negotiate, and mediate the emergent powers of the world around them, a key issue discussed next.
Mechanisms, events, interactions, experiences and emergent powers

The existence of structural, cultural and personal emergent powers afforded by the MA, ‘… provides a suitable platform for investigating causal [emergent] relationships between social conditions … and the actions of agents …’ (Næss 2015, 1228). Any account of emergence, also known as, becoming, coming into being or existent, entails a relational understanding of entities, mechanisms, events, interactions, absence as a cause and emergent powers (Elder-Vass 2007a; 2007b; Mingers and Standing 2017). Understanding causal relations also concerns the ‘real’, ‘actual’ and ‘empirical’ domains of (stratiﬁed) social reality stipulated by critical realism, that correspond with mechanisms, events and experiences respectively (Mingers and Standing 2017).

‘So it is natural to begin with the critical realist idea of emergence as ontologically real’ (Bhaskar 2020, 113). The philosophical concept of emergence can provide vital explanations on causality, i.e. how an entity generates causal powers that may create events impacting upon the social world (Wahlberg 2020). Fleetwood (2013, 127) explains emergence as, ‘[p]henomena existing at one level emerge from phenomena existing at a different level and have different [powers and] properties’. Realists consider, for example, phenomena such as family, marriage, friendship and organisations as ‘social entities’, the existence and continuation of which depend upon social (agential) action (Archer 2003).

Emergent powers are generated by entities, including individuals, through specific mechanisms, ultimately creating events (Elder-Vass 2010). As Mingers and Standing (2017, 176) explain, ‘[m]echanisms exist in a real, ontological sense independently of how they may be known or described by observers; they are stratified and exist as observable or unobservable, physical, social or conceptual forms. Mechanisms are what make things (events) happen (Fleetwood 2013), which as Price and Martin (2018, 90) claim, remain invisible and independent of our investigation of them. Mechanisms operate at the domain of the real, creating events in the actual domain, which are experienced in the empirical domain (Fleetwood 2013: Porpora 2015). For example, the feeling of discrimination or exclusion experienced by a female ethnic minority employee (empirical), may relate to the event of not getting a promotion at work (actual), as a causal effect of institutional racism, patriarchy, misogyny, and cultural stereotypes impacting upon her life as a series of mechanisms (real).

Hence, emergence entails mechanisms and causal powers (Archer 2007). Mechanisms possess causal ‘powers or tendencies, by virtue of their structural properties, to behave in particular ways or have certain effects’ (Mingers and Standing 2017, 176). Causal powers (emergent powers) ‘are properties of entities that enable them to have an effect on events, and all events [and experiences] are caused by the interaction of such powers’ (Elder-Vass 2014, 7). For example, an incentive has the power to (de)motivate employees. Further, emergent powers remain unexercised or dormant unless activated by other countervailing mechanisms, such as human actions, with such interactions of mechanisms causing empirically observable (or unobservable) events (Porpora 2015). As Mingers and Standing (2017, 177) note, events are ‘occurrents’, with a specific start and finish time creating a change in something, ‘[t]hus events are just changes to existing entities’.

The realist concept of interactions is also vital in understanding how different elements within different entities operate formulating specific mechanisms to generate divergent
emergent powers. As Archer (2003) explains, in conceptualising the morphogenic cycle, social conditions and actions of agents interact: Individuals occupy pre-given social structures ($T^1$) that predate present social actions ($T^2$), which lead to the reproduction (morphostasis) and transformation (morphogenesis) of existing social structures ($T^3$) by their own actions. Through such cycles of reciprocal interactions and relations, pre-existing entities form new entities, possessing unique emergent powers (Donati 2015). For example, a workers’ union holds irreducibly more powers than individual employees in bargaining for better pay and conditions. Emergent powers vested in the union to influence the management cannot be reduced to individual employees. Critical realists consider absence (of things or events) also as having causality (Hartwig 2013). For example, a plant not watered dies (Mingers and Standing 2017). Similarly, a lack (absence) of qualifications, experience or informal contacts often leads to unemployment, which (absence of work) can cause depression, addiction to alcohol, drugs or self-harm.

Social emergence, thus, means that ‘... a thing … can have properties or capabilities that are not possessed by its [constituent] parts’ – the emergent-base (Elder-Vass 2010, 4), and is an interactive causal process that conceives real, irreducible wholes (Boutillier 2013). The conceptualisation of agency as consisting of unique personal emergent powers entails personal reflexivity interacting with other diachronic and synchronic structural, cultural and agential powers, to work as mechanisms with causal efficacy on their biographies (Archer 2007). For example, shaping work and occupational choices, linking to possibilities of MoW as an emergent power, the basis of the next section.

Understanding emergent powers within the ideally real domain – the case of meaning of work

Following the discussion of emergence, an unresolved source of debate among critical realists and beyond (Elder-Vass 2005), this section advances an argument that MoW, as a phenomenon existing within the ‘ideally real’ domain of social reality, is an emergent power. Critical realists recognise an ‘ideally real’ domain of social reality constituted by phenomena such as discourse, language, signs, symbols, ideas, beliefs, explanations, concepts, models and theories (Elder-Vass 2005; Fleetwood 2005). We argue, so is MoW – it entails reality status. Yet, existing critical realist explanations of emergence favour scientific principles, with no specific work considering how ‘concepts’ or ‘ideologies’ possess emergent powers with causal impact. Archer (2020, 141) for example observes, ‘[t]here are always such areas that have not previously attracted Realist research … [that] there is generally a large tract of issues that have simply not been investigated at all’ (Archer 2020, 141).

In advancing the MA, Archer (2007, 2020) asserts that identification of distinctive causal powers present within a given situation is fundamental in understanding social reality, and any social process capable of social change entails three conditions: Structured human relations (context dependence), Human actions (activity-dependence), and Human ideas (concept-dependence). These conditions allow producing non-naturalistic social theorising, for example, the case of MoW. Archer (2020, 138) emphasises that ‘... every theory about the social order necessarily ... must incorporate structure, agency and culture’. While all elements of social reality are indispensable, the matter at hand dictates which aspect may take priority, for example, agency in the case of MoW. Unlike
something directly observable at the empirical level, we argue, MoW operates at ‘the level of the ‘real’, which exists and can be known only by its causal influence, rather than by direct observation’ (Archer 2020, 139).

Critical realist conceptualisation of the morphogenic cycle (as discussed earlier), is the starting point to conceptualise MoW as an emergent power. While social reality consists of an infinite amount of morphogenic cycles, as Archer (1995, 2020) demonstrates, a single cycle in relation to a particular phenomenon, breaks the historical interplay of structure and agency into three phases: Structural Conditioning – T1, Social interaction – T2 – T3, and Structural Elaboration (morphogenesis)/Structural reproduction (morphostasis) – T4, allowing particular intervals between phases to be determined by the problem investigated. For example, the formation of MoW. Thus, as Archer (1995, 184) asserts, ‘[a]t any given T1, [emergent powers present] are the outcome of prior interaction in anterior socio-cultural contexts during previous morphogenic cycles’. An analytical separation of structure and agency to understand their interplay is not a case of how structure impinges upon agency but, ‘… it is a question of the confluence between two sets of emergent powers – those of the ‘parts’ and those of the ‘people’… ’ (Archer 1995, 184). Hence, we can consider MoW as a personal emergent power, a matter of the interplay between structure, culture and agency, constituting a morphogenic cycle.

Having established MoW as an emergent power constituting a single morphogenic cycle among the myriad of such cycles within social reality, it is vital to demonstrate how MoW relates to causation. While, the ontology of emergence is invariably linked with the ontology of causation, Elder-Vass (2005, 321) explains that the former ‘is a synchronic relationship between a whole and its parts’ and the latter ‘is a diachronic relation in which the powers of a group of entities at one moment causally determine the events which follow at the next’. Elder-Vass differentiates between ‘real’ and ‘actual’ causal powers, in that a combination of the former produces the latter. Actual causation, as Elder-Vass attests, depends upon four of five conditions of emergence: the existence of a set of parts, relations between them, mechanisms resulting from the combination of these parts, and morphogenetic causes bringing this configuration of parts into existence at the moment of causation. These four conditions, we argue, are also identifiable in the case of MoW. Only the fifth – the morphostactic causes maintaining the existence of a particular set of parts in a particular set of relations – is perhaps absent in MoW, as its constituents themselves may not consist of a persistent structure of interaction.

In relation to conceptualizing MoW as an emergent power, Elder-Vass (2005, 317) assertion that parts that constitute a whole (an entity), represent ‘objects’ or ‘things’ [but] this does not mean that they are necessarily material things’, for examples, theories, concepts, ideologies, are also important. Hence, MoW, conceptualized as an emergent property, can be considered as an entity – in much the same as ‘H2O’, but within the ideally real domain of the social world. Phenomena within the ideally real domain, unlike in the materially real domain, might only be a collection of parts lacking a significant structure (Elder-Vass 2005). In the same vein, MoW can be considered as an entity lacking a significant structure. Yet, no previous empirical studies conceptualise emergence of such phenomena lacking a significant structure.

Critical realists’ recognition of real and actual emergent powers informs how MoW is an actual second-order emergent power emerging from the interaction of the results of the results of actual and real emergent powers of the first-order entities, such as identity,
class and reflexivity. Such a position can be validated through Bhaskar’s (2008) assertion of the causal powers of entirely distinct entities, existing at different levels, may interact as a mechanism, to generate further emergent powers. As Archer (2020, 143) states, a generative mechanism driving the manifestations of a particular phenomenon ‘can combine with other mechanisms to produce a variety of new social formations’ (Archer 2020, 143). Indeed, the same is true with MoW. MoW itself or its constituents such as personal reflexivity, identity, class position, can simultaneously be parts of other mechanisms producing hyper-complex social situations.

Reiterating the position of fallibility afforded within critical realism, Elder-Vass highlights how unlike in natural sciences, sociological understandings of phenomena may only be incomplete accounts. Elder-Vass terms this as ‘incomplete sub-sets of the complete multi-layered account’. Therefore, to defend our theory building, we argue MoW can be considered, as per Elder-Vass (2005), as a ‘fleeting or temporary personal emergent power’, resulting from non-linear interactions between structural, cultural and agential entities that generate a process of ‘actual causation’. This account of fleeting emergent powers suggests if emergent properties are the consequence of the existence of a particular set of entities organized in a particular way, then the presence of emergent powers need not depend on that configuration persisting for an extended period. ‘The distinction between a ‘persistent’ or recurring whole and a ‘fleeting’ one, is of course a matter of degree’ (Elder-Vass 2005, 336), hence, MoW might be a relatively enduring or only a fleeting occurrence in the lives of different individuals, generating actual causation, interwoven with real causal mechanisms.

An emergent account, as discussed in this section, thus, provides a framework to explore the realities of individuals’ personal, social and occupational journeys informed by MoW.

**Methodology**

This paper is based on the stratified emergent social ontology of critical realism, assigning reality status to structure, culture and agency, which are considered analytically distinct, emergent and inevitably interconnected (Wimalasena and Marks 2019). The study draws on Archer’s morphogenetic standpoint, incorporating methodological viability of people’s everyday reflexivity in sociological inquiry (Wimalasena 2022) and the ontological concepts of morphogenic cycles and emergence (e.g. Archer 2003, 2007, 2010; Elder-Vass 2007a, 2007b, 2010; Fleetwood 2013). The analysis is inspired by the epistemological positions of abduction – studying the facts to devise an explanatory theory, as well as retrodiction and retrodiction, considering diachronic and synchronic aspects of social action (Lennox and Jurdi-Hage 2017; Mingers and Standing 2017).

**The research ground: Sri Lanka**

Fieldwork was conducted in Sri Lanka. Specifically, Sri Lankans are subject to unique tensions stemming from complex socio-cultural systems, with distinct expectations of work. Here, some social segments are bound by the feudal caste system and obligations, with superior or inferior social bonuses of wealth, identity, status, and recognition as well as caste-based traditional occupations known as ‘king’s duty’, while others are driven by
mainstream occupations, constituting an occupational rank-based social class system (Wimalasena and Marks 2019). This complex societal configuration is a co-creation of its precolonial traditional social elements of caste, religion, agriculture and gender ideologies, intersected by a modern class system resulting from Portuguese (1505–1658), Dutch (1658–1796) and British (1796–1948) colonial rule and influence (Jayawardena 2007; Lynch 2007). While the self-sufficient traditional social system did not promote a need for breaking away from the bonded nature of labour for some social groups, this feudal caste-based social system was weakened by newly introduced mechanisms of colonial capitalism, mercantile economy, civil service and English medium education (Matthews 2004; Wimalasena 2022). However, a range of occupations and opportunities emerged for social mobility, particularly for suppressed groups, allowing an occupational hierarchy based on economic and occupational standing: a situation offering opportunities for all castes, classes and ethnicities (Jayawardena 2007; Silva 2002; Wickramasinghe 2006). With the post-independent era (1948-) and free market economic policies from 1978 (Gamburd 2000; Perera 1996), many moved away from traditional occupations, farming and self-sufficient lifestyles. While the Covid-19 pandemic and present turbulent political conditions have unsettled socio-economic sphere, the quality of pre-pandemic Sri Lankan life is regarded as satisfactory compared to other South Asian countries. Yet, Sri Lanka is currently experiencing an economic crisis with historically high cost of living and emigration levels (Central Bank of Sri Lanka 2023).

Participants, data gathering and analysis

The study is based on biographical narrative interviews (n = 75), allowing insights into reflexivity and complex life and occupational journeys. Such techniques elicit free-flowing rich narratives of work-life histories, exposing subtleties associated with reflexive orientations and endeavours (Wimalasena and Marks 2019). Also, this technique exposes occupational projects individuals create in strategically mediating social constraints and enablements, leading to Modi Vivendi (Archer 2007). The interviews combined three themes of MoW, plus pre-determined criteria of reflexivity and emergence inspired by a critical realist standpoint (e.g. Archer, Elder-Vass and Fleetwood). Theme one included: personal history (natal context, family history, class/caste background, childhood, ambitions, constraints and enablements, educational and occupational attempts); two: work history (current work, reasons for choosing, previous work and reasons for leaving, future ambitions, occupational strategies, constraints and enablements associated with working, work attitudes, ethics, centrality, loyalty); and three, reflexivity (social mobility intentions, ultimate life concerns, nature of self-talk, modus vivendi, decision-making, mediation of constraints and enablements).

Institutional ethical approval was obtained prior to fieldwork. The aims, use of interview data and right to withdraw were explained to interviewees, complying with good ethical practices. Participants were recruited through convenience and snowball sampling. Participants were largely employed in mainstream occupations, but some were traditional caste-based occupation holders, representing context-bound perceptions, interpretations and hierarchical status of work and its meaning. As no consistent occupational classification exists in Sri Lanka, the eight occupational classes of NS-SEC (National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification) were applied. Participants included
men (n = 49) and women (n = 26), ranged from 18 to 86 years of age, and included various castes, classes and ethnicities, and geographical areas (rural, semi-rural and urban). Overall, the sample reflects a cross-section of contemporary Sri Lankan society. Interviews lasted 30–100 min, averaging approximately 60 min each. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interviews conducted in Sinhala were translated into English. When transcribing interviews, participants were given pseudonyms and wider identifying direct and indirect information was removed. All transcriptions were coded using the qualitative software, NVivo. A thematic approach was used to analyse data to identify common themes and patterns of meaning in qualitative data. The data analysis involved two stages: categorizing participants by dominant reflexive orientation, and understanding how MoW is formulated, including which structural, cultural and agential factors dominate in its formulation. As such, analysis identified participants as: communicative reflexives (n = 17), autonomous reflexives (n = 35), meta-reflexives (n = 20) and fractured reflexives (n = 3).

**Findings and analysis**

An analysis of the findings is presented in this section, using the data from the 75 work-related biographical accounts summarised/categorized in Table 1. Table 1 is based on participants’ occupation, and the three dominant modes of reflexivity (see columns A, B and C). Fractured reflexivity does not feature because of inadequate substance in the interviews, an omission commensurate with similar studies (e.g. Archer 2007; Wimalasena 2022). The analysis resulted in the identification of inter alia seven key (non-exhaustive) structural, cultural and agential elements as the dominant constituents (the emergent base) (see rows numbered 1–7 in Table 1), interacting with reflexivity to formulate a mechanism generating MoW. MoW appears to be a personal power of individuals shaping their (occupational) behaviour. Table 1 also provides insights into the present life conditions of individuals (phase 1 – structural conditioning (T\(^1\)) of the morphogenic cycle). Combining key (structural, cultural and agential) elements with reflexive orientation allows an understanding of variations associated with the way work meanings are formulated by different individuals practicing different reflexive modes. The grid-presentation of data allows the generation of a powerful and effective summary of an extensive dataset, plus it eases comparison and clarity in understanding. Table 1 should therefore be consulted based on each row at a time, starting from row no.1 and following the order – 1A, 1B and 1C, along each reflexive mode. The following sections explore how each element of MoW works differently, yet, jointly as a mechanism to generate unique work meanings pertaining to different reflexive modes – social interaction (T\(^2\) – T\(^3\)) phase of the morphogenic cycle. Table 1 also helps understand how MoW might vary among individuals, even those practicing the same reflexive mode owing to their differential, personal, educational, occupational and socio-cultural circumstances (structural position).

**Ultimate life concerns and meaning of work**

As the findings suggest, meanings the participants attach to work seem to result from a combination of factors, i.e. the dialectical workings of structural and agential elements together as a mechanism. Representing the agential aspect of this dialectical process,
### Table 1. Selected findings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structure, culture and agency elements</th>
<th>Communicative reflexives (A) (example quotes)</th>
<th>Autonomous reflexives (B) (example quotes)</th>
<th>Meta-reflexives (C) (example quotes)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Ultimate life concerns</td>
<td>… my son … [and] the family, the unity of the three of us. (Udesh, 37, development assistant – postal department)</td>
<td>… my job … because more than anything, if you do your job well, everything else will be successful … I am highly committed to my job. (Yohan, 51, General Manager)</td>
<td>Career will never be a concern in my life … [because I don’t have … a need or an attachment to money … What matters is my freedom. (Sanjaya, 43, Airline Pilot)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Identity intentions</td>
<td>One must have a desire, an attachment to [work] and really commit. We need to take pride in what we do … I am dedicated to my duty and to ensure these duties will continue once my time is over … (Kamaladasa, male, 58, Drummer)</td>
<td>[All] I knew was I was in love with [a bank] from the time I was going to school. All I wanted was to get in there and be a part of them. (Charu, 30, female, Senior Bank Manager)</td>
<td>Due to our caste difference (low caste) the officials stop all the … benefits given for farming such as water supply … we formed a … farming society [and] made two lakes … I was the president of the farming society … Also, we formed a thrift society, I am the treasurer … I joined the cultural centre to teach dancing and drumming. Active member in school development society too … demonstrated good leadership … was involved with social service in the village. I am a powerful member in the temple too. (Sumanadasa, 56, Drummer)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Work attitudes and ethics</td>
<td>I am so fortunate to have this opportunity to serve the noble Tooth Relic … In the past, only a King performed these duties … this service has been continuing ever since, it is great to be doing this. (Bandara, 37, Kariya Korala)</td>
<td>When it comes to work, you must put everything out there and do what you must do. I believe my task is to make my boss looks good … I would just give it 110% if that meant boss never has to ask me twice … You should just do whatever you have to do, as much as you can. (Charu, 30, Senior Bank Manager)</td>
<td>I don’t have a separate life outside my profession … The most favourite hobby is my job … I like to be a surgeon again in my next life … [The job] gives me enormous satisfaction … (Wijaya, 49, Surgeon)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Social mobility intentions</td>
<td>I graduated but stayed at home unemployed. There were good private-sector vacancies but only in Colombo. I didn’t like to go away. What I wanted from childhood was to stay at home peacefully … . Finally, found this job I can travel from home … (Udesh, 37, Development Assistant – Postal Department)</td>
<td>My first job was an audit-firm internship … Salary was Rs.1500 … I left that place, [for] Rs.15,000 … then joined [another company] for Rs.25,000 … as an accountant … Next, I joined [a company] for Rs.40,000 … I joined [present employment] in 2007. Today, my perks amount to 325,000rs, plus 18,000rs fuel a month … (Yasantha, 36, Finance Manager)</td>
<td>I was a [University] lecturer … I started doing an MBA, was also doing law. Both law college finals and MBA exams fell on the same month. I asked for three weeks’ no-pay leave, which wasn’t approved but I didn’t go to work. When I returned … the Head … scolded me … I just threw the keys on his table and left that job saying, ‘you keep it’. (Channaka, 42, Senior Lecturer)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) The stance taken towards the socio-cultural influence</td>
<td>A big problem … is the lack of money, you can’t earn enough to live a normal life like others do … There are</td>
<td>I realised how poor and rural our lives were … the only way-out was to study well and get a good job … I have enough freedom to do as I like … I am not scared. I live on, if the path I tread on is correct why should I be</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Continued)
as the findings show, one of the dominant constituents of MoW appears to be the individual’s (1) Ultimate life concerns (see row 1 of Table 1). Individuals’ orientation to practising different reflexive modes relates to different life concerns, as previously established by Archer (2007), which seems to shape MoW strongly but differently for individuals. For example, for communicative-reflexive, Udesh, his family is the ultimate life concern (see quote 1A), but for autonomous-reflexive, Yohan, it is work (see quote 1B). In contrast, meta-reflexive, Sanjaya, places freedom as the ultimate life concern (see quote 1C). As such, divergence associated with ultimate life concerns strongly influences the meanings placed upon work by different individuals practicing different reflexive modes, with identifiable patterns of similarity among those individuals belonging to the same reflexive orientation.

Identity work and meaning of work

Another key element representing the agency aspect that seems to constitute the MoW emergent-base is the (2) Identity intentions (see row 2), where individuals consciously engage in accomplishing personal and social identities (Beech et al. 2016; Trusson,
Trusson, and Casey 2021), reflecting social positions they aspire to, in realising ultimate life concerns (Archer 2007). As Table 1 indicates, participants engage in reflexive identity work in creating, re-creating and sustaining or consciously erasing (birth-ascribed) identities, which appear to considerably impact upon MoW. For example, communicative-reflexive, Kamaladasa, strives to reproduce and sustain existing (low) caste-identity and social conditions, irrespective of inferior recognition in society (see quote 2A). For autonomous-reflexive, Charu, a professional identity clearly matters (see quote 2B). In contrast, meta-reflexive, Sumanadasa, creates counter identities, such as being president of a farming society, resisting and erasing low caste identity (see quote 2C). Therefore, complemented by ultimate life concerns, identity intentions also appear to significantly shape what work means for individuals. However, common patterns of how identity work is conducted and for what purpose can be observed among those practicing similar reflexive modes.

**Work attitudes, work ethics and meaning of work**

Further representing agency, as the findings demonstrate, (3) Work attitudes and ethics (see row 3) also shape MoW. While communicative-reflexive, Bandara (see quote 3A), is devoted to work, as it is a caste-specific family tradition, autonomous-reflexive, Charu (see quote 3B), places work above her personal life, fully committed to her job with a strong work ethic. Meta-reflexive, Wijaya (see quote 3C), in contrast, finds his work an outlet to live out his value ideals of serving society. The findings indicate attitudes and ethics differ among reflexive modes, with similar patterns among the members of each sub-group, suggesting it may shape an individual’s MoW.

**Social mobility intentions and meaning of work**

Individuals’ (4) Social mobility intentions (see row 4) are another dominant constituent of MoW. Communicative reflexives, as they commit to reproducing existing social contexts, endeavour to stay put. This is demonstrated by Udesh’s long voluntary unemployment period following graduation until he found a commutable job avoiding the need to relocate (see quote 4A). Yet, autonomous reflexive, Yasantha, who migrated from a rural setting to the city for education and employment, demonstrates ‘contextual discontinuity’ committed to upward mobility (see quote 4B). However, Channaka, effected lateral social mobility whenever his value commitments were threatened, a position established by Archer (2012), involving meta-reflexives asserting value commitments before work (see quote 4C). Social mobility intentions, a key characteristic that distinguishes between the life journeys consciously crafted by individuals, therefore seem a dominant factor shaping MoW. This finding reiterates an already established position (e.g. Archer 2007; Wimalasena and Marks 2019) that common social mobility intentions can be observable among individuals practicing similar reflexive mode.

**Stance towards the world and meaning of work**

An individual’s (5) stance towards the socio-cultural influence upon their lives (see row 5) also appears to shape MoW. As Archer (2003, 2007) established, communicative reflexives, autonomous reflexives and meta-reflexives, tend to be evasive, strategic and subversive
towards the social influence upon their lives respectively. Communicative reflexive, Bandara, (see quote 5A) consciously evades lucrative job opportunities and strives to continue familial heritage, ensuring social immobility. Autonomous reflexive, Sakunthala, (see quote 5B) born into poverty, is strategic in mediating life constraints in becoming a teacher. In contrast, meta-reflexive, Padma, (see quote 5C) perseveres to be single to avoid male dominance and continues in an unorthodox occupation as a money lender, being subversive within a patriarchal context. Therefore, one’s outlook towards the world, how an individual negotiates with the world, also contributes to the formation of MoW, with members in a similar reflexive group demonstrating a relatively similar outlook towards social constraints.

A modus vivendi and meaning of work

The final agential aspect (6) a modus vivendi (see row 6), also appears to play a key part in contributing to the formation of MoW. Communicative reflexive, Yahampath, (see quote 6A), who left the natal context (temporarily) for education, has since returned, evading lucrative jobs, something Archer (2007) termed, ‘returning to the base’. Autonomous reflexive, Sayuri, (see quote 6B), plans for further work upon retirement as her modus vivendi relates to working. Meta-reflexive, Prabha, (see quote 6C) moreover, finds a modus vivendi in helping others. Evidently, all participants therefore desire a satisfying future life situation, with those who practice the same reflexive mode showing relatively similar modi-Vivendi, representing a further/key contributing factor to MoW.

Socio-cultural influence in shaping the meaning of work

The (7) Socio-cultural influence (caste/class position, occupation, and involuntary life circumstances) in an individual’s life (see row 7) appears to also shape MoW strongly. Acknowledging the critical realist position on double morphogenesis that structure shapes agency and vice versa (Archer 2003), the six agential factors identified are already shaped by structure (socio-cultural influence) impacting upon the way individuals generate MoW. However, the divergent nature of socio-cultural influence upon different reflexive modalities could be further elaborated. Communicative-reflexive, Kamaladasa (see quote 7A), devotes his entire life to fulfil family and (lower) caste expectations of sustaining caste-specific drumming and dancing duties. Autonomous-reflexive, Jayasri (see quote 7B), comes from an under-privileged rural background, thus, a need to do well in life through education strongly shapes his MoW. Meta-reflexive Sumanadasa, (see quote 7C) in contrast, is subversive towards lower caste identity: he aspires to emancipate his daughters and fellow villagers from generational caste-related discrimination in which work and its meaning play a dominant role. Thus, besides specific agency-related factors, socio-cultural influence on an individual’s personal and occupational life also represents a key factor in MoW. Those oriented to the same reflexive modality, seem to confront socio-cultural influence in a similar fashion by being evasive, strategic and subversive (e.g. see Archer 2007; Wimalasena 2022).

Discussion

The main aim was to by drawing on Global South working contexts, advance sociological understandings of MoW, and add to critical realist understandings of emergence.
Specifically, the findings demonstrate MoW emerges as a personal power, through a complex mechanism constituted by (but not limited to) seven structural, cultural and agential elements, intersected by reflexivity. The study shows MoW is emergent as a response to socio-cultural influence upon employees’ lives, which could be understood and explained through a critical realist morphogenetic conceptualisation of emergence. Critical realists believe ‘...entities at many levels can simultaneously have causal powers, and that these powers may interact [as mechanisms] to produce actual events’ (Elder-Vass 2007b, 471). These mechanisms exist in observable/unobservable physical, social, psychological or conceptual forms: mental states therefore operate as emergent powers (Mingers and Standing 2017, 175). Such mental states, for example, as Fleetwood (2005) suggests, entail reality status, within the ideally real domain of social reality. Thus, work meanings, the findings affirm, are also mental states operating at the ideally real domain and become ‘...emergent properties of the human individual...and they have causal effects – in particular, effects on our behaviour’ (Elder-Vass 2010, 91).

Realist assumptions that 'reality consists of different strata, where new properties and causal powers 'emerge' at each stratum, compared to the stratum below' (Næss 2015, 1231), infers MoW emerges as a new property, through a mechanism consisting of elements from different levels of social reality. The emergence of MoW therefore is the outcome of social interaction (T2 – T3) phase of the morphogenetic cycle. However, this conceptualisation contrasts from a strict scientific notion of entities and emergent powers, in that the structure of the constituents of MoW may not hold what Elder-Vass (2005) calls a significant structure. The seven (non-exhaustive) structural, cultural and agential elements identified, together with further contextual and contingent elements intersected by reflexive modes (Elder-Vass 2007b), coalesce to form a whole. That is to say, MoW emerges, at least as a fleeting or temporary emergent power as noted by Elder-Vass (2005), with properties not possessed by its constituents taken in isolation. We argue, those seven elements operating independently with unique emergent powers of their own, thus interact through reflexivity, formulating a mechanism producing unique work meanings with causal efficacy. The possibility of accommodating further variations in intensity and form, according to individuals’ differential diachronic (temporal) and synchronic (contingent) life and occupational circumstances afforded within this novel emergent account of MoW, makes it a non-deterministic approach.

As multiple causal powers constantly interact and interfere with each other (Elder-Vass 2010), MoW may be subjected to further variations when interacting with other emergent entities to create actual events. As structural, cultural and agential elements are in a constant reciprocal relationship with other elements (the double morphogenesis), they constitute endless morphogenic cycles of stasis, transcendence and change (Archer 2020), generating divergent work meanings for different individuals leading to diverse behaviour. Further, critical realists (e.g. Elder-Vass 2007a; Hartwig 2013) emphasize the absence of something also as causes: thus absence also shapes MoW, such as the absence of educational qualifications or social networks, a common theme of the findings, for example in the case of meta-reflexive Sumana, who initially failed to secure employment due to the absence of connections with local politicians.

Furthermore, the mechanism of MoW, similar to Elder-Vass (2007a) and Price and Martin’s (2018) observations, are not (necessarily) visible as they operate at the stratum of the real. However, as realist meta-theory suggests (e.g. Elder-Vass 2005; 2007a;
2007b), the events (MoW generates) within the actual domain may be observed, for example, as dissatisfaction at work or occupational choices. For example, in the case of meta-reflexive Channaka, who gave up a lucrative job as it was dissatisfying and constraining his ambitions in life. Therefore, such outcomes, in terms of attitudes, actions or beliefs generated by MoW, can be experienced, understood and described or even tested and measured within the empirical domain (Mingers and Standing 2017). An emergent account of MoW can, thus, provide explanations for why people do what they do in (work) life, why an individual may consciously strive to stay put in the same job, evading progress or lucrative benefits.

While emergence of MoW can be explained through the workings of (but not limited to) seven structural, cultural and agential elements, individuals’ dominant or provisional reflexive orientation also generates further variations generating a range of aggregate outcomes of social reproduction, transformation and reorientation in the third phase of the morphogenic cycle – structural elaboration (morphogenesis)/structural reproduction (morphostasis) (T4).

Communicative reflexivity and meaning of work

Critical realists (e.g. Archer 2003; Williams 2018) observe work as an anchor binding communicative reflexives to their natal context, effecting contextual continuity, as depicted in the biography of Bandara, who consciously attempt to hold on to a traditional occupation with apparent difficulties within a fast-changing social context. Therefore, communicative reflexives’ MoW complements this intention of staying put by contributing to condition the choices of work through which they consciously evade lucrative job opportunities that may challenge their family commitments. Hence, MoW supports communicative reflexives choosing modest occupations, as demonstrated in the communicative reflexive biographies of Udehs, Kamaladasa, Bandara and Yahampath, with minimal or no progression affording personal time to be invested in familial relations. What is more, communicative reflexives embrace jobs of familial heritage. For example, Bandara, inherited his current occupation as a cast-duty. MoW seems to causally affect communicative reflexives to consolidate such an evasive stance by employing voluntary unemployment or underemployment strategies (Archer 2012): Udehs has stayed at home being voluntarily unemployed until he found a job he could commute to from family home. While modus vivendi of individuals plays a part in forming MoW, in turn it may causally affect the end-states communicative reflexives desire, by contributing to shape them forming micro-worlds (Archer 2007), mirroring intentions to stay socially immobile. For example, Bandara, in fulfilling familial duties and considering his occupation as a noble and rare opportunity despite low income, and Udehs, his peaceful life with his wife and son, consciously giving up on opportunities to earn more money, suggest, MoW for them is a combination of inherent obligation and commitment to tradition.

Autonomous reflexivity and meaning of work

In contrast, autonomous reflexives’ formulation of MoW seems to complement their intention to effect contextual discontinuity in pursuing their ultimate life concern of
work. For example, Jayasiri, Yasantha and Yohan, who are successful professionals, have migrated to urban centres from rural villages very early in life, as their predominant focus in life is education and work. Through Work they pursue upward social mobility (Archer 2012): most of the autonomous reflexive participants, including Jayasiri, Yasantha and Yohan have involuntarily inherited less-privileged life circumstances and have effected upward social mobility through education and work. MoW is a causal enablement in consciously gaining social and occupational identities and strategically counter, challenge or erase birth-ascribed undesirable identities (Wimalasena 2022). Such a finding is evident in Jayasiri’s biography, that his occupational identity as a qualified chartered accountant is a counter identity allowing him to mediate some of the challenges he encounters within the middle-class urban social context he now inhabits, against his rural identity. MoW shapes autonomous reflexives’ orientation to work, in that they believe hard work leads to occupational success, particularly through qualifications, training and experience, which for example, has been the prime focus in life for Yasantha, who committed his life to not only gain skills and qualifications including the English language skills but also even consciously learning middle-class mannerisms to operate in the urban space, he has migrated to. As such, MoW enables autonomous reflexives to establish a strategic stance and be strategically sensitive towards social influence upon their lives and grasping opportunities for progress (Archer 2012). With this strategic approach readily supported by their MoW, autonomous reflexives work towards a modus vivendi that affords them with educational and occupational success, material wealth and (perceived) upward social mobility, revealing another dimension of MoW with inimitable causal influences. Indeed, Yohan, Yasantha and Sakunthala, repeatedly mention the life situation they have managed to accomplish, their material gains in terms of property, businesses and perks.

**Meta-reflexivity and meaning of work** In contrast to communicative and autonomous reflexives, meta-reflexives represent a further take on MoW. Supporting Archer’s (2012) findings, meta-reflexive participants’ ultimate life concerns were formulated upon value-commitments, which strongly shaped their MoW; that is through work they seek to express value-commitments. For example, Padma, Channaka and Sanjaya, all find ‘freedom’ as their ultimate life concern. For these Meta-reflexives, MoW seems an indicator of whether to stay or effect lateral social mobility in finding better outlets to live out their value ideals and in attempting to challenge, resist, transform and reorient existing socio-cultural and occupational conditions for a better life (Archer 2007). Meta-reflexives find constant incongruity between their contexts and concerns, for example, Sanjaya found the bureaucracy within his military organisation as constraining his freedom and Padma found employment in the middle-east with a lucrative salary as not worth the restricted living conditions. They both ultimately gave up on such occupations and decided to pursue their ultimate life concerns through different occupations: This subversive critical stance towards social influence is also a key driver in the way MoW is formulated in the lives of meta-reflexives, which is also symbolised in the social identities they desire, shaping their unique Modi Vivendi, which concerns religious, philanthropic, spiritual and philosophical states. This study finds meta-reflexives aspire to reorient existing constraining social conditions through work.
Conclusions

This paper addressed the question: Can MoW be considered as a personal emergent power that shapes individual (career and occupational) behaviour? To address this question, the study adopted a critical realist morphogenetic perspective acknowledging the usefulness of human reflexivity and emergence in sociological inquiry. This non-conflationary methodological perspective inspired the analysis of the biographies in the paper, developing a novel theoretical position to conclude MoW becomes a personal emergent power shaping work and life journeys of individuals. This new emergent account of MoW represents a move beyond the taken-for-granted existing assumptions that either commit downwards conflationary error (in sociological approaches), or the upwards conflation (in OB approaches), as it extends the understanding of how mechanisms and emergent powers operate in the ideally real domain of social reality.

The paper contributes to the sociology of work and methodology in three ways. Firstly, and broadly, an empirical contribution is made in that the findings were generated in Sri Lanka, thus addressing global bias in MoW research. Secondly, the findings demonstrate how an emergent account of MoW can explain causality that shapes (occupational and career) behaviour. Thirdly, this account of emergence extends the critical realist understandings of emergent powers, particularly adding to the absence of empirical research that demonstrates how ‘ideally real’ entities come into being with reality status. Indeed, the findings enhance knowledge of hidden social realities with vital implications to the way work meanings are understood in social contexts in the Global South, but at the same time have potential to be applied to Global North contexts. This emergent account, therefore, explains how MoW causally affects the way individuals consciously organise their life journeys that entail educational, career/occupational and personal choices and aspirations. An emergent account thus helps further yielding of explanations on how the unobservable, but real mechanisms that operate independently of human knowledge, generate actual events, causing empirical experiences, e.g. educational, career and occupational choices and journeys. MoW as a personal emergent power can, therefore, explain how individuals consciously strategize towards the achievement of a desired end – a modus vivendi – and in so doing engage in a dialectic of structural change and individual agency.

Given the context to the paper, further research should seek to replicate in some way the approach taken in a wider range of socio-political-cultural contexts. The application of a Western methodological approach – namely reflexive theory – in the Global South generated mixed experiences of viability to uncover hidden realities as well as rigidity in adjusting to local conditions. The viability of methodology related to the vast tract of an uncovered world of reflexivity. The rigidity of reflexive theory related to how the theory was developed using a sample of Western individuals, where their ultimate life concerns may not mirror the Global South individual, and therefore, more work in the area of reflexivity within this context is required. Further research should also aim to test out and develop the theory formulated in this paper across a range of more specific industrial and industrialized settings. Future research should also draw on a wider use of methodologies, including for example, ethnographies and netnographies, as well as diary-based methods.
Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

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