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The Moral Burden of Belonging in Purpose-Driven Organizations: A Narrative Review

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Abstract

Organizational purpose is commonly presented as a source of meaning, coordination, and prosocial commitment. Yet purpose-driven membership may also create a moral burden when employees experience belonging as an obligation to embody organizational ideals, accept sacrifice, suppress disagreement, or allow work to dominate identity. This narrative review critically integrates research on organizational purpose, meaningful work, identity regulation, calling, identification, loyalty, moral distress, occupational strain, work design, leadership, and employee voice. A structured search and selection process supported critical thematic synthesis rather than systematic effect estimation. The evidence suggests that purpose becomes consequential through interpretation and identity uptake, not through mission language alone. Moral alignment may support meaningfulness and prosocial behavior while also extending work, weakening detachment, or legitimizing excessive demands. Belonging can provide health-supporting social resources, but strong identification may narrow evaluative independence and intensify loyalty-based ethical risk. These tensions are organized through an original Bounded Purpose–Belonging Synthesis, in which purpose engagement remains sustainable when it is volitional, adequately resourced, open to plural identities, protected by meaningful voice, and constrained by credible workload and ethical boundaries. The synthesis is not a validated causal model or implementation framework. Much of the available evidence is observational, context-specific, or drawn from adjacent constructs and selected occupations. Longitudinal, multilevel, within-person, qualitative-process, and field-experimental research is required to distinguish selection, socialization, temporal burden conversion, and organizational-level effects.

Keywords: Purpose and identity regulation, Moral alignment and value overload, Belonging, loyalty, and role engulfment, Employee strain and moral dissonance, Future research, Moral

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Introduction

Organizational purpose refers to an organization's claimed contribution beyond immediate task completion or financial exchange. For employees, however, purpose matters only when it is interpreted as credible, personally relevant, and connected to daily work. Recent construct development presents perceived organizational purpose as multidimensional and potentially related to satisfaction, wellbeing, commitment, and work–life conflict rather than as an unqualified benefit [1]. This ambiguity is central to the present review. Purpose can provide direction and moral significance, but the same moral significance may enlarge what employees believe they owe the organization, its beneficiaries, and one another.

Evidence also cautions against treating purpose intensity as equivalent to organizational effectiveness. Archival and employee-survey research indicates that associations with later firm performance depend on clarity and organizational level,



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while generic workplace camaraderie does not perform the same explanatory role [2]. Such findings are consistent with purpose as an interpretive and organizational process rather than a motivational resource that operates uniformly. They also leave open reverse causality, selection, and the possibility that well-functioning organizations produce clearer purpose perceptions rather than the reverse.

Employees do not receive organizational purpose as a neutral message; they interpret it through sensemaking processes within a field in which meaningful work is simultaneously valuable, fragile, and paradoxical [3, 4]. Purpose claims can therefore strengthen coherence while generating contest over whose values count, which sacrifices are legitimate, and whether organizational conduct matches declared ideals. A narrative review is needed because these tensions are dispersed across research on purpose, calling, meaningful work, organizational identification, ethics, occupational health, and voice, with different units of analysis and evidential strengths.

The burden becomes especially visible when passion or devotion is treated as evidence that a worker needs fewer material protections. Experimental research shows that observers may regard poor treatment as more acceptable when workers are assumed to be passionate, partly because sacrifice appears voluntary or internally rewarded [5]. This review consequently asks how purpose is translated into identity, when moral alignment becomes excessive obligation, how belonging can shift toward loyalty and role engulfment, and which organizational conditions may preserve meaning without transferring responsibility for unsustainable work to employees. Its contribution is an evidence-bounded Bounded Purpose–Belonging Synthesis, proposed for empirical testing rather than presented as a validated causal model.

Narrative review approach

The review used a structured narrative approach with explicit questions, bounded searches, transparent selection, critical extraction, and thematic comparison. This design treats literature reviewing as a research methodology while avoiding a claim of exhaustive retrieval or pooled effect estimation [6]. Searches combined organizational purpose, meaningful work, calling, identity regulation, identification, belonging, loyalty, moral alignment, moral distress, strain, autonomy, leadership, voice, and temporal-method terms. Eligible articles were peer reviewed, directly relevant to a planned claim or synthesis category, and sufficiently detailed to identify context, design, focal construct, principal finding, limitation, and permissible inference. Theory advancement was pursued through construct clarification, comparison of assumptions, preservation of contradictions, and integration across adjacent literatures [7]. Records were entered into a candidate log from publisher and DOI-indexed searches, targeted journal searches, and citation chaining. Duplicate versions were removed before title-and-abstract screening. Detailed assessment then considered direct domain fit, evidential distinctiveness, context, transferability, and whether a source added a unique claim rather than merely mentioning purpose or meaningful work.

Figure 1 reports the verified flow of records through identification, duplicate removal, screening, full-text assessment, exclusion, and final inclusion for this narrative review article.

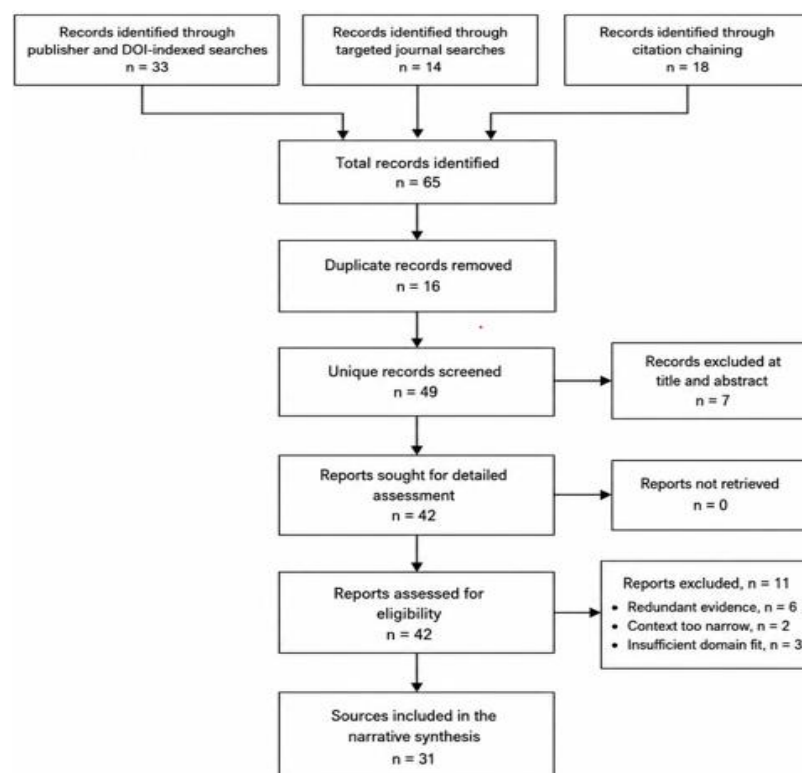


Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram for Evidence Identification and Selection

Critical synthesis compared whether claims arose from conceptual reviews, qualitative process research, experiments, cross-sectional surveys, longitudinal studies, or meta-analyses. No numerical quality score was imposed across unlike designs. Instead, appraisal focused on construct fit, temporal ordering, level of analysis, contextual transferability, alternative explanations, and the distance between reported evidence and proposed integration. PRISMA-compatible reporting is used only to make the selection pathway inspectable; it does not convert the article into a systematic effectiveness review.

Purpose and identity regulation

Identity regulation concerns organizational efforts that make particular self-understandings desirable, legitimate, or consequential, whereas identity work concerns how people accept, revise, combine, or resist such invitations. Organization studies portray identity as narratively and discursively constructed rather than simply possessed [8]. Purpose can therefore function as an identity resource by proposing who a worthy member is, which beneficiaries deserve commitment, and what conduct signifies belonging. It may also operate as a control medium when recognition, advancement, or moral legitimacy depends on demonstrating identification with the declared mission.

Purpose does not stabilize identity in every setting. Comparative qualitative research in peacebuilding organizations shows that mission success can produce identity ambiguity because achieving the valued objective destabilizes assumptions about why the organization and its members should continue [9]. This finding complicates the idea that stronger mission accomplishment automatically secures belonging. Identity continuity may instead require reinterpretation, new temporal narratives, or redefinition of beneficiaries. Sectoral specificity limits generalization, but the cases reveal that purpose is an ongoing identity accomplishment rather than a fixed organizational possession.

Leadership can make a distant purpose intelligible by connecting ordinary tasks to valued collective outcomes. Historical process evidence from NASA illustrates how communication and organizational practices altered the meaning of routine work by linking it credibly to a larger goal [10]. The implication is not that inspirational language is sufficient. Purpose translation depends on whether work systems, resource allocation, recognition, and decisions make the claimed connection plausible. When practice contradicts rhetoric, employees may interpret purpose as symbolic management, hypocrisy, or a demand for belief unsupported by organizational conduct.

Employees also participate actively in constructing purpose-related identities. Ethnographic research among dangerous volunteers identifies helper, hero, and hurt narratives through which people sought meaningfulness and negotiated valued yet difficult roles [11]. The exceptional setting prevents direct prevalence claims, but it demonstrates that identity uptake is neither passive nor uniform. The proposed synthesis therefore treats identity regulation as an invitation-and-enactment process: organizations supply narratives, exemplars, rewards, and legitimacy standards; employees interpret them through prior values, occupational identities, nonwork commitments, and lived experience. Purpose may organize belonging, yet it does not erase plural identities or prove organization-level consensus.

Moral alignment and value overload

Moral alignment refers to perceived congruence among personal values, organizational purpose, daily conduct, and a valued beneficiary. Calling research helps explain why such alignment may generate commitment and meaning while also creating pathways toward workaholism, burnout, or exploitation when enactment is constrained or demands become excessive [12]. The review uses value overload as an original synthesis category for conditions in which moral significance expands obligation beyond sustainable discretion, resources, or recovery. It is not a validated scale, diagnosis, or demonstrated threshold.

Evidence from clergy indicates one plausible burden pathway. Stronger calling was associated with longer work hours, and longer hours were linked to poorer psychological detachment, sleep quality, and subsequent morning vigor [13]. The occupational context is distinctive because vocation is culturally and morally salient, and the design cannot establish a universal causal sequence. Nevertheless, it challenges the assumption that meaningful commitment naturally replenishes the resources it consumes. Work may remain deeply valued while undermining recovery.

Moral alignment also has constructive expressions. Research on corporate purpose suggests that employees who perceive a credible sustainability purpose may engage more strongly in sustainability-related behavior through identification-related processes [14]. Such behavior is evidence of possible alignment, not proof that motivation is fully voluntary, that workloads are sustainable, or that employee wellbeing improves. The same purpose can be interpreted differently across jobs, status groups, and local work systems, particularly when employees possess unequal discretion or face different costs for dissent. Qualitative evidence from sustainability practitioners further shows that meaningfulness may emerge through tensions in which organizational arrangements simultaneously enable and constrain valued work [15]. This finding resists a simple positive-versus-negative classification. In the proposed synthesis, value overload becomes plausible when high moral importance combines with expanding availability, restricted refusal, insufficient resources, purpose–practice inconsistency,

or recognition systems that reward sacrifice. Alternative explanations include occupational selection, personality, professional norms, labor dependence, and pre-existing calling. The evidence supports a conditional tension, not a universal point at which alignment turns harmful.

Table 1 organizes the evidence, constructs, relationships, uncertainties, and boundary conditions required for review design, evidence domains, and extraction framework for the moral burden of belonging in purpose-driven organizations.

Table 1. Review design, evidence domains, and extraction framework for *The Moral Burden of Belonging in Purpose-Driven Organizations*

Evidence domain or review construct	Review question	Eligible evidence type	Extraction fields	Appraisal or relevance criterion	Synthesis role	Main limitation	Interpretation boundary
Review design	How was evidence bounded and integrated?	Method papers [6]	Search, screening, design, inference	Transparent, reproducible logic	Methodological foundation	Not exhaustive	Narrative synthesis, not pooled estimation
Organizational purpose	When is purpose beneficial or burdensome?	Reviews, archival, and experimental research [1]	Definition, level, outcome, context	Direct employee or organizational relevance	Establishes the double edge	Construct heterogeneity	No uniform purpose effect
Identity regulation	How does purpose enter self-definition?	Identity reviews and qualitative processes [8]	Narrative, power, enactment, resistance	Explicit identity mechanism	Links purpose with belonging	Context-specific evidence	Uptake is negotiated, not automatic
Moral alignment	When does valued work expand obligation?	Calling, diary, purpose, and qualitative evidence [12]	Values, hours, recovery, behavior, tension	Mechanism and boundary visible	Supports value-overload proposal	Uneven causal evidence	Value overload is proposed synthesis
Belonging and loyalty	How can membership narrow identity?	Identity-process evidence [9]	Centrality, dissent, nonwork identity	Membership consequences explicit	Tests resource-constraint tension	Construct overlap	Role engulfment is proposed
Strain and sustainability	Which limits preserve recovery?	Diary and calling evidence [13]	Hours, detachment, sleep, discretion	Burden pathway visible	Grounds boundary questions	Occupation-specific evidence	Safeguards remain unvalidated

Note. Evidence-derived domains and limitations are anchored in the cited literature. “Value overload,” “role engulfment,” and the integrated safeguard configuration are proposed synthesis categories requiring empirical validation.

Belonging, loyalty, and role engulfment

Belonging denotes experienced acceptance, connection, and membership, whereas organizational identification concerns the extent to which organizational membership enters self-definition. The distinction matters because social connection can remain valuable without the organization becoming the dominant basis of identity. Organizational identification is consequential but conditional: it may provide health-supporting social resources while, under strong or morally permissive conditions, contributing to identity narrowing and unethical pro-organizational conduct [16–18]. Purpose-driven organizations intensify this ambiguity by attaching membership to a morally valued collective project.

Meta-analytic evidence generally associates social identification with better health, indicating that belonging can supply continuity, support, shared interpretation, and collective efficacy [18]. These benefits challenge accounts that treat deep attachment as inherently suspect. Employees may gain resilience because colleagues recognize their contribution and because collective identity reduces isolation. Nevertheless, average associations cannot establish that every form or intensity of identification is protective. Identification targets, status, leadership, employment security, and whether membership permits disagreement may alter its consequences.

A conceptual review of strong identification identifies pathways through which valued membership may encourage conformity, self-sacrifice, reduced identity complexity, and defensiveness toward criticism [16]. The review therefore proposes role engulfment as an excessive narrowing of self-definition around organizational membership. It is indicated conceptually when nonwork commitments are persistently subordinated, organizational evaluation becomes the dominant basis of self-worth, or psychological exit and dissent become morally discrediting. Role engulfment is not equivalent to commitment, long tenure, or occasional sacrifice, and it has not been validated as a distinct construct.

Ethical risk becomes clearer when loyalty is evaluated through conduct. Meta-analytic evidence links identification and other relational antecedents with unethical pro-organizational behavior, although the predominantly correlational evidence cannot show that belonging itself causes misconduct [17]. An employee may conceal problems because of anticipated sanctions, perceived reciprocity, competitive pressure, or leader expectations rather than identity centrality alone. The proposed synthesis

therefore locates burden not in belonging itself but in moralized belonging that weakens plural identity, evaluative independence, legitimate refusal, or the capacity to distinguish organizational interest from ethical responsibility.

A further distinction is required between belonging as an experienced relationship and belonging as an organizational expectation. Supportive membership allows employees to remain recognizable members while questioning methods, limiting availability, or maintaining commitments outside work. Moralized membership makes these actions evidence of deficient loyalty. Because most studies measure individual identification rather than enacted membership rules, the organizational production of this difference remains underexamined. Selection may also matter: individuals already disposed toward service, sacrifice, or collective identity may enter purpose-driven settings and later attribute their commitment to organizational purpose.

Employee strain and moral dissonance

Employee strain refers here to impaired psychological or physiological functioning associated with sustained demands and inadequate recovery or resources. Moral dissonance denotes a perceived conflict among personal moral judgment, declared organizational purpose, enacted practices, and expected conduct. It is an integrative review category rather than a clinical condition. Narrative synthesis shows that moral distress has been defined inconsistently and cannot be reduced confidently to a single situation in which a person knows the right action but is prevented from taking it [19].

Qualitative evidence from critical-care nursing further distinguishes moral tension, uncertainty, constraint, conflict, and dilemmas as experiences capable of generating distress [20]. The healthcare context makes moral stakes unusually visible and limits direct transfer to other organizations. Even so, the distinctions clarify several purpose-related pathways. Employees may be unable to enact a valued purpose, may be required to enact it through practices they judge harmful, or may be pressured to exceed reasonable limits because refusal appears morally inconsistent with membership.

Ordinary work design remains an important competing explanation. A longitudinal meta-analysis of the job demands–resources literature indicates prospective relationships between demands, resources, burnout, and engagement, alongside reciprocal and heterogeneous processes [21]. Purpose may intensify an existing demand, alter its interpretation, or provide a resource, but it should not be credited with strain that is better explained by staffing, workload, insecurity, scheduling, role conflict, or deficient supervision. Conversely, meaningfulness does not neutralize excessive demands merely because employees endorse the beneficiary or mission.

Moral dissonance should also be distinguished from simple value incongruence. Employees may endorse the organization's stated purpose yet dispute how it is interpreted, financed, measured, or prioritized. The relevant discrepancy may therefore lie between formal purpose and enacted practice rather than between employee and organization. Individual reports can identify perceived contradiction, but they cannot alone establish organization-wide hypocrisy or objective ethical failure. Comparative evidence from decisions, resource allocations, and multiple organizational levels would be necessary before making those stronger claims.

The Bounded Purpose–Belonging Synthesis therefore proposes three forms of moral dissonance: purpose obstruction, in which employees cannot perform work they consider aligned with the mission; purpose overextension, in which moral commitment legitimizes unsustainable effort; and purpose contradiction, in which enacted practices violate declared values. These categories may overlap and require testing against established measures. Temporal ordering also remains uncertain: strain can weaken purpose credibility, morally dissonant events can increase strain, and distressed employees may evaluate organizational conduct more negatively. The review consequently supports reciprocal and context-dependent interpretation rather than a single causal chain.

Conditions supporting sustainable purpose

Sustainable purpose is defined as continuing engagement with valued organizational aims without systematic erosion of autonomy, recovery, ethical judgment, or identities beyond work. Self-determination theory distinguishes autonomous motivation from controlled regulation and identifies autonomy, competence, and relatedness as conditions supporting sustained functioning [22]. This distinction implies that visible dedication cannot reveal whether purpose has been internalized volitionally or is maintained through guilt, surveillance, status dependence, or fear of betraying beneficiaries.

Meaningful work is shaped by interacting individual, job, organizational, and societal conditions, indicating that purpose communication cannot compensate for deficient work design [23]. Sustainable purpose therefore requires adequate staffing, role clarity, discretion, feasible goals, recovery time, and correspondence between declared values and resource allocation. It also requires plural identity: employees should be able to value family, profession, community, or personal commitments without being construed as less devoted organizational members.

Psychological safety provides a further boundary because purpose remains corrigible only when employees can question its interpretation and expose harmful enactment [24]. Formal speaking channels are insufficient when disagreement produces reputational costs or no response. Safety should be inferred from enacted interaction and response patterns at the appropriate level, not from the existence of a policy or an isolated individual perception.

Table 2 organizes the evidence, constructs, relationships, uncertainties, and boundary conditions required for cross-study findings, mechanisms, convergence, and conflict in the moral burden of belonging in purpose-driven organizations.

Table 2. Cross-study findings, mechanisms, convergence, and conflict in *The Moral Burden of Belonging in Purpose-Driven Organizations*

Construct, mechanism, or relationship	Representative context	Reported finding	Evidence design	Convergent evidence	Conflicting evidence	Methodological concern	Review interpretation
Purpose clarity	Corporate employees	Clarity varies by organizational level [2]	Archival survey	Meaning may coordinate work	Performance may shape purpose	Endogeneity	Purpose is conditional
Passion and sacrifice	Worker judgments	Passion can legitimize poor treatment [5]	Experiments	Moralized work may expand demands	Scenarios differ from practice	External validity	Exploitation is plausible
Calling and recovery	Clergy	Calling relates to hours and detachment [13]	Survey and diary	Valued work can consume recovery	Occupational specificity	Self-report	Burden is not universal
Meaningful tension	Sustainability work	Enabling and constraining conditions coexist [15]	Qualitative	Meaning survives difficulty	No prevalence estimate	Specialist sample	Tension may be constitutive
Belonging and health	Organizations	Identification generally supports health [18]	Meta-analysis	Membership provides resources	Effects are heterogeneous	Construct variation	Belonging is not inherently harmful
Loyalty and misconduct	Employees	Identification predicts pro-organizational wrongdoing [17]	Meta-analysis	Loyalty may narrow judgment	Causality unresolved	Correlational studies	Ethical risk is conditional
Moral conflict	Nursing	Several moral events generate distress [20]	Qualitative	Purpose–practice conflict matters	Sector limits transfer	Small sample	Moral dissonance is proposed
Demands and resources	Work settings	Demands and resources predict strain [21]	Longitudinal meta-analysis	Capacity and recovery matter	Reciprocal effects	Variable lags	Purpose cannot replace resources
Autonomous engagement	Work organizations	Motivational quality shapes functioning [22]	Integrative review	Volition supports sustainability	Purpose not isolated	Construct adjacency	Controlled commitment may burden
Psychological safety	Teams and employees	Safety supports risk taking and voice [24]	Meta-analysis	Dissent can protect purpose	Level varies	Common-method evidence	Permission must be enacted

Note. Reported findings remain bounded by the cited designs. “Moral dissonance,” “controlled commitment,” and the integrated interpretation of sustainable purpose are proposed synthesis categories rather than validated causal mechanisms.

Boundaries become especially important when exceptional sacrifice is sometimes unavoidable. A temporary increase in effort may be experienced as legitimate when the need is specific, decision processes are transparent, burdens are distributed fairly, recovery is protected, and refusal remains possible. The same demand becomes less defensible when urgency is chronic, beneficiaries are invoked to silence limits, or dedication substitutes for staffing and planning. The synthesis therefore distinguishes episodic, reviewable sacrifice from normalized sacrifice embedded in the employment relationship.

The proposed safeguards are credible enactment, autonomous participation, material capacity, protected recovery, plural identity, and consequential dissent. They are evidence-informed design principles, not necessary-and-sufficient conditions established by intervention trials. Their adequacy must be assessed through employee experience and organizational response rather than policy language alone. Sustainable purpose accordingly concerns the governance of limits as much as the communication of aspiration.

Leadership and organizational implications

Purpose leadership should be evaluated through conduct, work design, and accountability rather than moral vocabulary. Meta-analytic comparison shows substantial overlap among ethical, authentic, servant, and transformational leadership, limiting claims that a particular label uniquely produces desirable outcomes [25]. Leaders may speak persuasively about service while rewarding availability, suppressing disagreement, or withholding resources. Credibility therefore depends on whether decisions distribute burdens consistently with declared purpose and preserve legitimate limits on employee sacrifice. Observational research suggests that ethical leadership may relate to engagement and identification through meaningful-work processes, with emotional-regulation conditions shaping associations [26]. The evidence supports a plausible leadership pathway, not definitive causal ordering. Identification is also an ambiguous outcome: it can strengthen coordination and

meaning while increasing susceptibility to loyalty pressure. Leaders should consequently avoid treating maximal identification as the objective of purpose communication.

Voice research further indicates that speaking opportunity is not equivalent to consequential influence. A process study of healthcare teams shows how voiced ideas may survive initial resistance through collective cultivation and eventually reach implementation [27]. Purpose governance should therefore include traceable reception, reasoned response, revision routes, and protection against retaliation. Employees need not prevail in every disagreement, but they should be able to understand how concerns were evaluated and why action was taken, deferred, redirected, or rejected.

A reviewable governance process would periodically compare purpose claims with staffing, promotion, workload, reward, and grievance data. It would ask whose interpretation of purpose dominates, which groups bear its costs, whether dissent changes decisions, and whether employees can disengage without moral penalty. These questions are diagnostic rather than certifying: favorable answers would not prove that purpose is harmless, while unfavorable answers would identify issues requiring investigation rather than automatically demonstrating exploitation or misconduct.

The review proposes bounded-purpose governance as an original organizational synthesis. Its principles are purpose contestability, credible purpose–practice correspondence, workload and availability limits, plural identity, protected refusal, and consequential voice. These principles place responsibility on organizational decision makers rather than assuming that committed employees will absorb resource deficiencies. They do not constitute a universally validated programme. Organizational size, occupation, national institutions, labor-market dependence, beneficiary vulnerability, professional authority, and crisis conditions may alter which safeguards are feasible and which forms of sacrifice are legitimate.

Future research

Testing burden conversion requires designs that capture fluctuation, sequence, and multiple levels. Experience-sampling and within-person research can examine whether daily purpose salience predicts autonomous engagement, guilt, extended work, impaired detachment, voice, or recovery, provided timing, burden, and analysis are carefully designed and transparently reported [28–30]. Stable between-person differences should be separated from within-person change, and purpose exposure should not be inferred solely from individual endorsement.

Longitudinal research should distinguish selection into purpose-driven work from subsequent socialization. Repeated measures could examine whether purpose clarity precedes identification, whether identity centrality precedes sacrifice, and whether purpose–practice breaches produce withdrawal, protest, or stronger compensatory effort. Multilevel designs should distinguish formal purpose, enacted practices, team interpretation, and individual meaning rather than aggregating perceptions without justification [29].

Field experiments could vary purpose framing separately from workload, discretion, recognition, and voluntariness. Qualitative process research should investigate how employees narrate refusal, loyalty, beneficiaries, identity alternatives, and organizational hypocrisy over time. New measures of value overload, role engulfment, purpose obstruction, purpose overextension, and purpose contradiction require content validation, discriminant validity, temporal sensitivity, and testing across occupations and national contexts.

Cross-context research is also necessary. Purpose may operate differently in healthcare, education, charities, public service, professional firms, commercial corporations, and precarious platform work because beneficiary proximity, occupational norms, authority, and exit costs differ. Comparative studies should test measurement equivalence before interpreting mean differences. They should also examine whether national labor protections, collective representation, and cultural expectations moderate the conversion of meaningful belonging into controlled commitment.

Experience-sampling studies should justify prompt timing and protect participants from excessive measurement burden [28]. Reports should disclose sampling, exclusions, measures, temporal assumptions, and analytic decisions sufficiently for readers to inspect inferential choices [30]. The proposed synthesis should be revised or rejected if its constructs lack distinctiveness, temporal precedence, incremental explanatory value, or contextual robustness.

Conclusion

Purpose-driven membership can provide meaning, social connection, and a credible account of why work matters. Its moral value does not, however, remove ordinary organizational obligations concerning resources, recovery, autonomy, ethical conduct, and response to employee voice. The central contribution of this narrative review is to connect purpose interpretation, identity regulation, moral alignment, belonging, and strain through a Bounded Purpose–Belonging Synthesis. The synthesis proposes that burden emerges when valued membership becomes controlled obligation, narrows identity, weakens evaluative independence, or legitimizes demands that exceed sustainable capacity.

The evidence does not establish a universal sequence or imply that strong purpose and belonging are inherently harmful. Findings arise from heterogeneous designs and include occupationally distinctive settings, adjacent constructs, observational associations, conceptual reviews, and qualitative processes. Sustainable purpose is therefore treated as conditional on credible

enactment, volitional engagement, adequate resources, plural identity, recovery protection, and consequential dissent. These conditions remain evidence-informed propositions rather than validated managerial instructions. The framework's value lies in making the double edge of purpose inspectable and in defining questions through which future research may test, refine, challenge, or reject its central relationships.

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