Journal of Agricultural Education, 58(3), 1-18.
https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.2017.03001

The Black Swans of Agricultural Education: A Glimpse into the *Lived Experiences* that Shape Urban Agricultural Educators' Meaning in Work

Richie Roberts[1] & Jon W. Ramsey[2]

Abstract

Urban agricultural educators face a number of unique challenges in performing their job duties. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to understand the essence of urban agricultural educators' meaning in their work by exploring their lived experiences. In this study, the essence emerged in the form of a metaphor: A Black Swan. The black swan represents a distinctiveness that urban agricultural educators possess in the agricultural education discipline. The black swans are guided by fusing (a) individualization, (b) self-connection, (c) contribution, (d) unification, and (e) coping abilities into a powerful construct identified as transcendence. By transcending ordinary levels of meaning, urban agricultural educators appeared to cope with their challenges in unique ways. Perhaps, the reason underlying the use of this coping strategy is the distinct population that urban agricultural educators serve since participants reported their programs were largely comprised of ethnic minority students living in low socioeconomic households. Urban agricultural educators might, therefore, continuously be faced with issues that remind them of the important role they play in their students' lives. Moving forward, the study's findings could be used as a foundation to explore and refine the discipline's current understandings of urban agricultural educators' meaning in work.

Keywords: meaning in work; teacher retention; urban agriculture; urban teachers

The discipline of agricultural education is struggling to keep qualified teachers in the profession (Kantrovich, 2010; Talbert, Vaughn, Croom, & Lee, 2007). Although efforts to get to the core of this issue should be commended (Mundt & Conners, 1999; Myers, Dyer, & Washburn, 2005; Roberts & Dyer, 2004; Torres, Lambert, & Lawver, 2009), the reality is this crisis only continues to intensify (Tippens, Ricketts, Morgan, Navarro, & Flanders, 2013). Clark (2013) suggested a deficiency in agricultural educators' ability to make meaning in particular areas of their career might be at the very heart of this issue. As such, meaning in work surfaces as a critical line of research for the agricultural education discipline (Clark, 2013).

Meaning in work refers to whether individuals can determine if their work is a fulfilling endeavor (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). The interpretation of work as meaningful can influence an individual's job satisfaction (Wrzesniewski, Dutton, & Debebe, 2003). In fact, meaning in work is often cited as a positive predictor of desirable job performance and promotion (Ryff & Singer, 1998). The literature (Frankl, 1997; Isaksen, 2000; Shanafelt, 2009; Yalom, 1980) also suggests this construct is deeply tied to purposefulness. For example, meaning drives an individual's will to overcome everyday obstacles and promotes a thirst for life that is key to achieving a healthy

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[1] Richie Roberts is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Agribusiness, Applied Economics, and Agriscience Education at North Carolina A&T State University, 242D Carver Hall, Greensboro, NC 27411, frichardroberts@ncat.edu
[2] Jon W. Ramsey is an Associate Professor of Agricultural Education in the Department of Agricultural Education, Communications, and Leadership at Oklahoma State University, 466 Agricultural Hall, Stillwater OK 74078-6031, jon.ramsey@okstate.edu

lifestyle (Frankl, 1997). Those who have purposefulness are often less affected by work-related challenges and find more value in their job duties (Frankl, 1997). Further, meaning in work reduces feelings of boredom and perceptions that job-related tasks are tedious (Shanafelt, 2009). Consequently, as individuals find meaning in work, their innate talents are better utilized and they discover a greater sense of self-fulfillment (Shanafelt, 2009).

The meaning in work literature spans an expansive terrain across various disciplines. However, scholars have largely focused their attention on the following themes: (a) where meaning can be found at work, (b) how individuals in similar careers arrive at different meaning, (c) inconsistent views regarding the role of meaningful work, and (d) the historical and cultural evolution of meaning in work (Berg, Wrzesniewski, & Dutton, 2010; Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001; Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997).

The literature also demonstrates interesting connections between meaning in work and key career outcomes. For example, in empirical studies focusing on individual employee factors, meaning in work has been shown to improve motivation (Roberson, 1990), attendance (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997), attitude (Berg et al., 2010; Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001), job fulfillment (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997), and professional growth (Dik & Duffy, 2009). Meaning in work has also been linked to lower levels of stress in the workplace (Elangovan, Pinder, & McLean, 2010; Locke & Taylor, 1990).

In the agricultural education literature, evidence exists regarding the career benefits and challenges of school-based, agricultural educators [SBAE] (Clark, Kelsey, & Brown, 2014; Lambert, Henry, & Tummons, 2011; Talbert, Camp, & Heath-Camp, 1994). As a result, it has been well documented (Newcomb, McCracken, Warmbrod, & Whittington, 2004; Talbert et al., 2007) that SBAE instructors must demonstrate a unique set of skills to deliver a comprehensive agricultural education program's extensive features. For instance, SBAE instructors must not only teach classes, but they must also advise students through Supervised Agricultural Experiences (SAE) and activities associated with the National FFA Organization (Phipps, Osborne, Dyer, & Ball, 2008). Although agricultural education allows students to gain a multitude of experiences, the program's expansive features have also been shown to place additional burdens and stress on teachers (Clark et al., 2014; King, Rucker, & Duncan, 2013; Theiman, Marx, & Kitchel, 2014). Due to these challenges, SBAE instructors may struggle to find meaning in particular areas of their career, especially during events and episodes that induce stress (Clark, 2013).

Recent empirical evidence (Brown, Roberts, Whiddon, Goossen, & Kacal, 2015; Martin & Kitchel, 2015a, 2015b) complicates this issue even further. For example, Brown et al. (2015) articled that engaging urban youth in a comprehensive agricultural education program presents its own unique challenges. Martin and Kitchel (2015b) echoed these sentiments through a rich narrative of two urban agricultural educators who struggled to engage students in events and activities above the local level. Given the context of urban agricultural educators' workplace, therefore, they could face challenges that are unexperienced by rural or suburban SBAE instructors. Consequently, unique challenges might influence the meaning urban agricultural educators assign to particular aspects of their career.

Statement of the Problem

Urban agricultural education programs in the U.S. are expected to increase in size and scope in the future. As a consequence, Enns (2008) argued that urban areas are one of the ripest sources for growth for the agricultural education discipline and, therefore, deserve more attention in the literature. Currently, we understand urban agricultural educators face a number of unique

challenges in performing their job duties (Warner & Washburn, 2009). Those challenges include a heightened sense of pressure to implement requirements from legislative acts, students feeling disconnected from the program's agrarian focus, economic barriers, teaching students of different ethnic backgrounds, a lack of agricultural literacy from key stakeholders, and complications associated with engaging urban youth in FFA and SAE activities (Brown et al., 2015; Martin & Kitchel, 2015a, 2015b; Warner & Washburn, 2009). To address these issues, Warner and Washburn (2009) called for an examination of the careers of urban agricultural educators. It was vital, therefore, to explore how urban agricultural educators found meaning in their work.

Emergent Theoretical Frameworks

Rosso's, Dekas', and Wrzesniewski's (2010) pathways to meaning in work (PMW) theory emerged as a way to explore this phenomenon, i.e., we were able to gain a richer insight into urban agricultural educators' meaning in work. PMW suggests that personal idiosyncrasies in the work environment govern how individuals construct meaning in their career (Rosso et al., 2010). Rosso et al. (2010) distilled these individual characteristics into four pathways: individualization, contribution, self-connection, and unification. The four pathways are centered on a continuum of two key modalities: (a) one's inherent motivations in regard to the dichotomy between agency and communion, and (b) whether work actions are targeted towards the self or others.

In the first contrast, Rosso et al. (2010) asserted agency is represented by an individual's need to "separate, assert, master, and create" (p. 114). On the other end of the spectrum, individuals can also have a desire to "contact, attach, connect, and unite" in their job environments (Rosso et al., 2010, p. 114). The second contrast, self versus others, takes into consideration whether an individual's experiences are perceived as meaningful internally (self) or externally (others) (Rosso et al., 2010). These distinctions generated four pathways of meaningful work.

Rosso et al. (2010) offered the following definitions of the four pathways:

1. Individuation – reflects the meaningfulness of actions that define and distinguish the self as valuable and worthy.
2. Contribution – reflects the meaningfulness of actions perceived as significant or completed in service to another person, issue, or cause.
3. Connection – reflects the meaningfulness of actions that bring individuals closer into alignment with the way they see themselves.
4. Unification – reflects the meaningfulness of actions that bring individuals into harmony with other beings or principles. (p. 115)

Ultimately, Rosso et al. (2010) PMW theory helped explain the complicated and conflicting ways that urban agricultural educators experienced meaningful work. Additionally, the pathways allowed the sources of meaning that participants articulated to be categorized, compared, and contrasted during the analytic process. It is important to note that an individual may find career meaning in any of the four pathways. However, Rosso et al. (2010) theorized the intersection of the pathways is where an individual could experience the most heightened sense of meaning.

The first four themes in this investigation are viewed through the lens of Rosso et al. (2010). However, the fifth theme draws from Rotter's (1954) locus of control construct for interpretative value. Rotter's (1954) theory is grounded in the notion that individuals are largely in control of the outcome of their life. Daft (2014) explained the locus of control construct is based on whether individuals believe "they are the masters of their own fate" (p. 104). As such, an individual's locus of control regulates whether they place responsibility within themselves or through external forces

(Northouse, 2015). Individuals with a high internal locus of control believe they control what happens (Rotter, 1954). Meanwhile, those with a high external locus of control often believe external forces, often in the form of stress, determine how they *cope* with struggles (Rotter, 1954). Using the two theoretical frameworks, we were able to unveil the *Eidos* (Moustakas, 1994), or the essence of the phenomenon.

Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenology was to understand the essence of urban agricultural educators' meaning in work by exploring their *lived experiences* (Moustakas, 1994). Priority 3 of the *American Association for Agricultural Education's* National Research Agenda raised concerns about the number of qualified professionals available to address the issues and problems pervading the discipline in the 21st Century (Stripling & Richetts, 2016). One such issue is an increasingly urbanized population that is uninformed of agricultural practices (Brown et al., 2015). As such, understanding how urban agricultural educators find meaning in work may provide valuable insight into ways to better prepare and retain individuals seeking employment in urban locations. To accomplish this, the following research question guided this investigation: *In what ways do urban Oklahoma agricultural educators' lived experiences shape their meaning in work?*

Methodology

This study was positioned from the constructionist epistemology (Crotty, 1998). Constructionists maintain, "all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and the world" (Crotty, 1998, p. 42). Therefore, this worldview guided our journey to understand how urban agricultural educators constructed meaning from their career.

The phenomenological concept was first developed by Edward Husserl and later expanded through the works of Merleau-Ponty (Moustakas, 1994). Husserl used phenomenology to depict worldly human experiences, a notion he termed the *lifeworld* (Moustakas, 1994). However, it was Merleau-Ponty (1962) who operationalized this theory into a methodological tool by which the lifeworld of individuals could be used to extract a collective understanding of the human experience. Moustakas (1994) later built upon and expanded this concept.

The phenomenological approach is appropriate for investigating, "affective, emotional, and often intense human experiences" (Merriam, 2009, p. 26). To reveal the essence of such experiences, we chose to analyze the data through Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological model. Moustakas' (1994) model has four key elements: (a) *epoche*, (b) phenomenological reduction, (c) imaginative variation, and (d) a synthesis of composite textural and composite structural descriptions. To complement the phenomenological approach, we built the following standards for rigor and trustworthiness into this study: coherence, credibility, ethics, resonance, rigor, and sincerity (Tracy, 2010).

Reflexivity

To be *sincere* and *transparent* with our audience (Tracy, 2010), we believe it is important to acknowledge how our views might have shaped this study. For example, both researchers were SBAE instructors in Oklahoma where data collection occurred. Further, the lead researcher was a doctoral student during data collection and had conducted research with urban populations prior to this project (see Brown et al., 2015). The other researcher is an associate professor at Oklahoma State University and has worked in a professional capacity with each of the participants. We

attempted to bracket (Moustakas, 1994) these perspectives and experiences to reduce their influence on the findings of this study.

Participant Selection

A hybridized sampling procedure, consisting of both *criterion* and *purposeful* methods, allowed us to select participants that met the requirement of working in an urban school system (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014; Patton, 2002). For instance, we used 2010 United States Census data to identify current agricultural educators in urbanized areas. An urbanized area consists of at least 50,000 people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). In all, 19 ($N = 19$) agricultural educators met this criterion in Oklahoma. Polkinghorne (1989) recommended phenomenological investigations include at least five participants; therefore, we purposefully selected six participants ($n = 6$) we believed taught in a school system that reflected an urban culture.

Description of Participants' Schools

Although each urban agricultural educator worked in a unique school system, their districts also shared several key features. For example, each teacher worked in an urban school with large African American and Latino student enrollment. Further, the schools struggled with issues regarding racial tension, poverty, crime, and – with the exception of one school – chronically low-test scores. Consequently, the schools also had a high student transiency rate, a significant number of non-English speaking students, and high teacher turnover rates. We do not suggest that all urban school systems share these characteristics, however, this background of the participants' workplace should be examined to determine whether the study's findings could be *transferrable* (Tracy, 2010) to similar urban agricultural education programs.

Data Collection

To uphold the highest *ethical* standards (Tracy, 2010), we obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. Thereafter, semi-structured, open-ended interviews ranging from 45 to 90 minutes were conducted with each of the six participants. Follow-up interviews also occurred with some participants to clarify their statements and extend their initial thoughts. Interview questions were developed based upon the overarching research question of the study. However, additional probing questions were used in an attempt to unveil the essence of the phenomenon. Audio from interviews was recorded using an iPhone® application. Then, the audio was downloaded to a password-protected computer where it was transcribed verbatim. Interviews, observations, participant drawings, and other relevant documents helped triangulate the findings and achieve *credibility* by providing a more complete depiction of the phenomenon (Tracy, 2010).

Data Analysis

The analytic process began by recognizing how our past experiences might have influenced our inferences and conclusions through a technique known as *epoche* (Moustakas, 1994). Through this practice, we sought out our biases (Moustakas, 1994). For example, our experiences as agricultural educators in Oklahoma and our previous work with urban populations had the potential to cloud our perspective as we analyzed the data. To set aside these personal assumptions and beliefs, we bracketed our identified biases by: (a) being aware of our preconceptions, and (b) analyzing significant statements from multiple vantage points (Moustakas, 1994). These techniques also allowed us to achieve *sincerity* when offering an explanation of the essence of the phenomenon (Tracy, 2010).

After understanding and putting aside our biases, we entered an incubation period to reacquaint ourselves with the participants' lived experiences (Patton, 2002). Therefore, we analyzed each transcript and artifact and returned to audio recordings of participants' interviews to understand the inflection expressed in each statement. This period of incubation allowed us to become more in touch with the data, which was necessary before initiating the *phenomenological reduction* phase (Moustakas, 1994). We then revisited the data corpus to identify *significant statements* representing how participants experienced meaning in work (Moustakas, 1994). In this step, we analyzed all artifacts and "treated the data as having equal weight" through a technique called *horizonalization* (Merriam, 2009, p. 26). From the data corpus, we identified 486 significant statements and assigned each statement to a *horizon*. Then, through an intense deductive phase, we clustered the horizons into 111 *delimited horizons* (Moustakas, 1994). When analyzing the *delimited horizons,* we noticed a parallelism between their meaning and numerous theories associated with the meaning in work literature. To uphold the highest *ethical* standards, we moved forward by *working against ourselves* through a process known as *imaginative variation* (Moustakas, 1994). As such, we analyzed the data though numerous vantage points using guiding analytic questions.

Through the imaginative variation technique, we considered a range literature to explore alternative explanations for our findings. However, Rosso et al. (2010) *PMW* demonstrated the greatest *theoretical fit.* To further scrutinize the theory against our data and achieve standards for *rigor* (Tracy, 2010), the 111 delimited horizons were reduced into five non-overlapping, *invariant themes* (Moustakas, 1994). Therefore, our conjecture that the data could be anchored in Rosso et al. (2010) PMW gained empirical grounding. One theme, however, did not support the theory. Therefore, we pondered counter-narratives and other alternatives. Initially, we noticed significant statements connected to the incongruent theme had been coded with a negative connotation such as: stress, student problems, controlling stress, or dealing with problems, etc. However, upon a deeper analysis, we began to understand participants were not simply venting about their challenges. Instead, they were explaining how they found meaning by *coping* with these challenges. Through our journey to understand this theme, we discovered Rotter's (1954) *locus of control* construct. This theory provided a broad framework to analyze the themes inconsistencies and, therefore, was used to interpret the final theme. Each of the five themes provided insight for developing the composite *textural* and *structural* descriptions of the participants (Moustakas, 1994).

The individual descriptions helped explain *what* meaningful work was to the participants and *how* it was experienced (Moustakas, 1994). Reaching this level of understanding was possible through synthesizing and integrating the individual textural and structural descriptions of participants (Moustakas, 1994). As such, the final element of Moustakas' (1994) model, the synthesis of composite textural and composite structural descriptions, ultimately became the key to unveiling the essence of the phenomenon in this study (Moustakas, 1994).

To emphasize *coherence* (Tracy, 2010) of the findings, we chose to *break away* from the traditional ordering of research manuscripts. This technique allows us to achieve *resonance* by presenting our results more evocatively (Tracy, 2010). Also, through this tactic, we hope to encourage our readers to assess the congruence of two theoretical frameworks with the findings. Therefore, we will introduce the participants of this study, the essence of the phenomenon, the themes of meaning, and end with a discussion of the conclusions and implications of this study. Through this purposeful scheme, we hope to convey the complexity, layers, and nuances of the findings by *beginning with the end in mind.*

The Black Swans – A Formal Introduction

During the time spent with participants, we noted that each held a passion for and dedication to the agricultural education profession. They also appeared to embrace the idiosyncrasies that distinguished them. By integrating our observations of participants into the analysis of multiple forms of data, the essence of the phenomenon emerged in the form of a metaphor: *A Black Swan.* We urge our readers to analyze critically the following descriptions of each black swan to determine if their insights might be transferred to other urban agricultural education populations. To protect the participants' identity, pseudo-names were used throughout the study.

- **Allen –** As a white fourth-year teacher, Allen has a burning passion to make an impact on his students' lives. In his program, over 90% of students are low-income and of African American descent. Despite facing a number of unique challenges, he has embraced his role as a school-based, agricultural education teacher in an urban area.
- **Amy –** After growing up on a dairy farm and moving to Oklahoma for college, teaching in an urban location was a big transition for Amy. However, after seven years she now feels as though she is finding her stride after deciding to view the downsides of teaching agricultural education as something "cool and beautiful" rather than a challenge. Since the collection of the primary data for this study, Amy accepted an opportunity in her home state, which allowed her to launch a new urban agricultural education program.
- **Chase –** With a high-achieving, confident personality Chase was drawn to teaching so that he could inspire students to become passionate about agriculture. He accomplishes this by encouraging students to compete at a high-level through the various Career Development Events available through the National FFA Organization. After data collection, Chase pursed graduate studies as a full time student.
- **Danny –** After growing up in a low-income, transient home Danny was able to find his place after enrolling in an agricultural education course. Now, with 17 years of experience, he helps his diverse, low-income students find their place in his program.
- **Sarah –** With a recent transition to a teaching position in an urban location, Sarah has been experiencing major changes in how she perceives herself as an agricultural educator. For example, after seeing students struggle with meeting basic needs such as food and shelter, Sarah now feels as though she is starting to understand how her job can create lasting change.
- **Scarlett –** As a career teacher with 16 years of experience in multiple states, Scarlett pursued an urban teaching position so she could work with diverse students. Although she is native to Oklahoma, Scarlett enjoys being untraditional in her traditional state.

The Essence of Urban Agricultural Educators' Meaning in Work

The black swan represents a distinctiveness participants conveyed that urban agricultural educators possess in the agricultural education discipline. For example, the black swans in this study felt they belonged to a larger *flock*, the agricultural education discipline. However, through the analysis of their shared experiences, it was revealed that they may possess a *rarity* that distinguished them. This uniqueness is not viewed as a negative, or marginalizing. Instead, the black swans take pride in standing out. As such, the black swan metaphor served as the structural frame for the discussion of the study's findings.

After grounding the 111 delimited horizons into Rosso et al. (2010) PMW and Rotter's (1954) locus of control construct, the inner-structure of the essence emerged: *transcendence*. As

such, data from this study suggested urban agricultural educators uniquely transcend normal levels of meaning in their career by coalescing the two aforementioned theories into the structural frame of a black swan. To enhance clarity, we offer a visual representation of the essence in Figure 1. The figure illustrates the structural frame of a black swan that is guided by fusing individualization, self-connection, contribution, unification, and coping, into a powerful construct identified as *transcendence*. Each element of the transcendence construct served as a theme in this study.

Figure 1: The essence of urban agricultural educators' meaning in work.

Findings

Five *themes of meaning* (Moustakas, 1994) drove the discussion of results for this study. Each theme reflects the lived experiences that shaped urban agricultural educators' meaning in work, as depicted in Figure 1. In this section, we have identified participants' words by providing the line numbers from the corresponding interview transcript from which they originated.

Individualization from the Flock

The black swans expressed that individuals in their flock (i.e. teachers, students, and others players in the agricultural education discipline), often viewed them as *different*. Allen explained:

> I will be honest with you, being an urban Ag teacher is kind of like being a woman back in the seventies and eighties. A lot of times working with a different set of kids, you are looked at differently. Sometimes other ag teachers think that because you are in an urban ag program, you are not as good as they are. When in reality sometimes you do twice the work for half the recognition, because you are dealing

> with students who work forty hours a week and are coming in and taking night school classes to graduate. [3087: 3096]

The black swans perceived they were viewed as different. However, they did not interpret this as a marginalizing feature. In fact, they seemed to view this aspect of their career in a positive way. For example, participants reported making meaning by helping to "break the stigma" [Danny, 2133: 2134] associated with urban agricultural programs. In their minds, the black swans were helping other agricultural educators, school administrators, and even state agricultural education staff to recognize the unique roles, positions, and challenges urban programs face. In fact, all participants expressed a desire to stand out and be acknowledged for their unique idiosyncrasies. Though this fulfilled desire, the black swans were able to activate Rosso et al. (2010) first meaning in work pathway.

Birds of a Feather — The Importance of *Self-Connection*

The black swans are unique. Despite their distinctiveness, however, they seem to crave *connections* with others in their flock through shared experiences; similar to the age-old adage, "*birds of a feather flock together*." The black swans' self-connection with peers and students ultimately appeared to promote a richer sense of career meaning. Further, participants also explained their professional connections, with urban and traditional teachers, were critical to helping them mature as an educator while also growing professionally. For example, Danny found meaning by sharing his experiences with peers in regard to strategies for engaging students of a low socio-economic status in his program. He explained:

> When I get together with urban Ag teacher friends and colleagues, I'll start telling them, 'Well, man. I had this student do this,' and they'll say, 'I've had that.' However, when I talk to more traditional Ag teachers, they're like, 'I've had these kids that come in and they can't afford to be involved, 'So, what do you do?' Where the traditional ag teachers might say, 'Well, it's only one or two kids. I'll give them a worksheet and work with these other kids. "I'm like, 'Well, what if your whole class was like this? You just can't push them aside and only work with your upper class kids.' [Danny, 2010:2021]

Danny conveyed he was able to offer traditional agricultural education teachers a unique perspective that strengthened their connection. On the other hand, Scarlett explained building relationships with her urban students served as a critical meaning-making technique she utilized. As an illustration, many of her students did not have a great home life; therefore, by giving advice and providing an adult perspective, she seemed to play an important role in their lives. Scarlett clarified:

> As an urban teacher you have to recognize that there are certain issues going on with your students. They may be working a late job or not have enough food to eat. You just have to connect with them and build a relationship. [257: 260]

Through building and maintaining relationships with their peers and students, the black swans found meaning by cultivating a deep sense of self-connection.

Contribution to the Flock

Though proud of their distinctiveness, the black swans also strive to make significant *contributions* to their flocks – the agricultural education discipline. For instance, participants

described guiding their students toward discovering a passion for agriculture as a source of pride in their careers. In fact, the contributions they conveyed seemed to be deep personal victories. Amy clarified:

> I love providing an opportunity for kids that they wouldn't get in an English class, a science class, or a math class. With our population being primarily urban, they don't have the farm experience to fall back on. So just being a member in the class and in the program they get an experience that they wouldn't have elsewhere. [32:35]

Sometimes the black swans even contributed by assisting students through troubling times. Sarah explained: "I keep crackers in my desk, which is something that I never did when I was elsewhere [teaching], but these kids, that may be the only thing they get to eat besides school lunch" [2468: 2470]. Chase also took his role of contributing to the lives of his students seriously. For example, inspiring his students helped him feel more prideful about his work and gain a deeper sense of career meaning. When speaking about his contributions, Chase elucidated:

> If there's some student that we [ag teachers] just don't think is really living up their potential, we'll pull them into our office and ask them questions to try to figure out what is wrong and help them through the situation. [Chase, 1467: 1470]

By supporting and guiding their students through the twists and turns of life, the black swans seemed to feel as though they were making significant *contributions* to their flocks.

Free Bird — The Power of *Unification*

For the black swans, having the *freedom* to uphold their values in their role as an urban agricultural educator seemed to stimulate a powerful *union* between their work and personal lives. This factor appeared to be deeply embedded in their personal frame of reference and even permeated their entire sense of work being. This was especially prevalent for Allen, a passionate young teacher who felt empowered by his ability to uphold his values in his role as an urban agricultural educator. He described being able to help those less fortunate than himself as a unification of his values and career. Allen expressed:

> A lot of these kids will look at you as mom or dad, and so I may give them a ride home after school. I had a kid last year, he could not afford to eat, and his parents did not get the free and reduced lunch filled out so he walked around for three days without eating until I had to put money on his account. [Allen, 3138: 3143]

On the other hand, Sarah unified her work and personal needs by recognizing how her job allowed her to fulfill an important role in society. Sarah recognized many urban students often do not feel as though they have the ability to obtain a quality job. Further, many of her students do not see college as an option. Nonetheless, she was impassioned by the opportunity to open her students' eyes to their potential. Sarah professed:

> I think we're molding students into what we would hope they would become. I want them to go out and get a job and pay social security. I want my urban students to break the stigma by being contributors to this society and not a hindrance to it. Therefore, I think being an urban agricultural educator is a noble and honorable career. [Sarah, 2601: 2604]

By analyzing personal and career needs, the black swans were able to attain a powerful sense of *unification* in their lives. With the addition of the fourth theme, the black swans uniquely activated all four of Rosso et al. (2010) pathways to meaningful work.

A Bird's Eye View — *Coping* though Self-Awareness

The first four themes of the study highlighted important sources of career meaning for the black swans through the lens of Rosso et al. (2010) theory. However, the final theme offers an interesting departure. Data from this study suggested that *challenges* urban agricultural educators faced were important sources of meaning for the black swans. Although the term challenges hold negative connotations, and rightfully so, it appears to lay the foundation for the black swans to experience a heightened sense of meaningfulness. For example, the participants seemed to view challenges in their career as times when their locus of control (Rotter, 1954) shifted from being internally to externally controlled. However, participants explained that while learning to navigate the struggles of their career is stressful, it could also be exhilarating to learn to take control. Allen clarified: "[Teaching] is kind of like that non-stop whirlwind. And I love that now" [3338: 3339].

Amy described a similar experience when working with her students. For example, times when students do not follow through with projects can frustrate her because she feels as though it negatively reflects on her abilities as a teacher and leader. When these challenges begin to influence her career life, however, Amy has made a purposeful attempt to balance her locus of control by stepping back and taking a *bird's eye view* of her position. She revealed:

> At times, it's just like a mess. But it's a mess in which something meaningful that comes from it. The kids grow, even a situation that you don't think turned out the way you envisioned, the kids still love it. When I say, 'mess' that seems negative, but I don't mean in a bad way, but sometimes messes can be pretty cool and beautiful. [Amy, 565: 570]

Amy was not alone in how she chose to cope with her challenges. Through in-depth observations of the participants, we noted that most participants appeared to make meaning through this particular coping strategy. To more deeply understand this finding we asked participants to visually depict how they made meaning in their career. In these moments of self-construction, the black swans portrayed a range of activities. For example, students, teaching, the *whirlwind* of possibilities available in agricultural education, and other aspects of the job were all illustrated. However, the unique feature emerging from this process was that each of the black swans articled they found the greatest sense of meaning when they had the ability to *balance* the various activities and duties of their career as an urban agricultural educator. By achieving this sense of balance, the black swans activated multiple pathways to meaningful work and began to transcend normal levels of meaning. We offer Amy's, Danny's, Allen's, and Sarah's visual depiction of how they found meaning in their career in Figure 2.

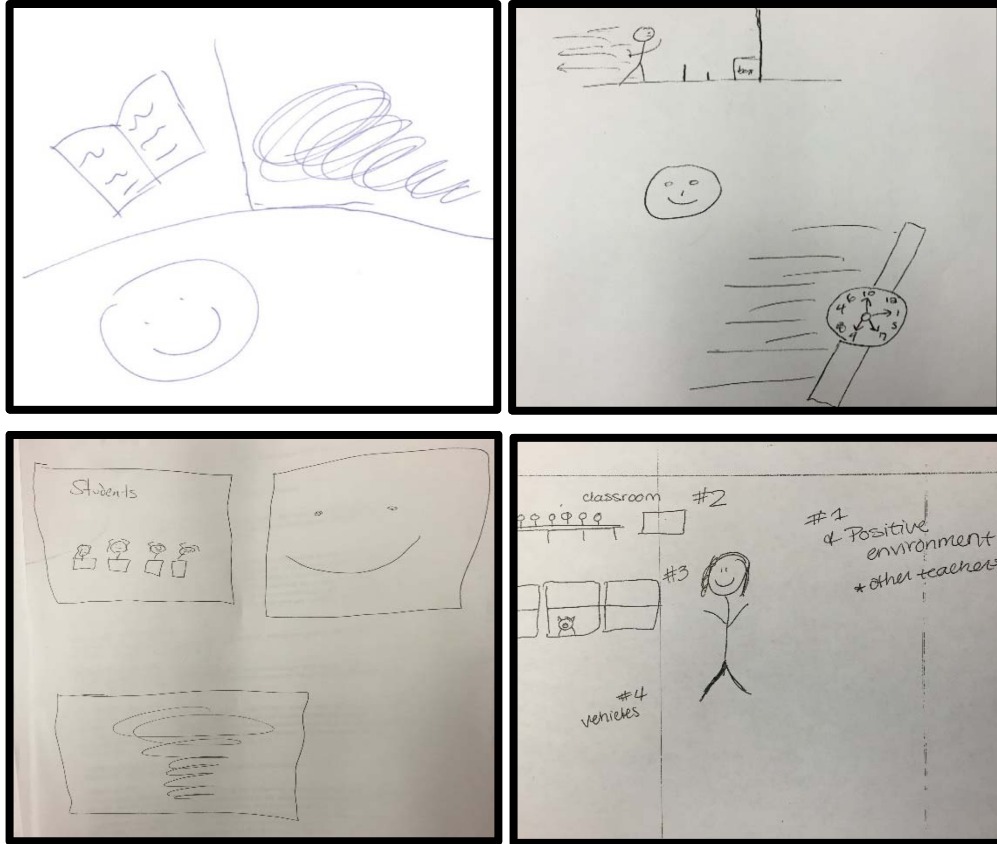

Figure 2: Amy's (Top-Left), Danny's (Top-Right), Allen's (Bottom-Left), and Sarah's (Bottom-Right) visual depictions of how they find meaning in work as urban agricultural educator.

Although the black swans experienced various challenges, a deep sense of career meaning appeared to be gleaned by learning to offset negative thoughts and regulate their locus of control. Ultimately, the black swans appeared to achieve this feat by maintaining a *bird's eye view* when they sensed they were beginning to lose control.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to understand the essence of urban agricultural educators' meaning in their work by exploring their lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). In this study, participants found meaning in their careers through five key sources: (a) individualization, (b) self-connection, (c) contribution, (d) unification, and (e) coping with challenges. Therefore, the findings of this study revealed urban agricultural educators do not find meaning in work through a single factor. Instead, their meaning is complex and experienced through multiple sources (see Figure 1). This concept is not yet reflected in the agricultural education literature.

As demonstrated in the first theme, participants experienced a heightened sense of meaning in work by embracing their unique qualities. The emergence of *individuality* as critical factor in the meaning in work literature might seem unusual at first glance. However, empirical evidence demonstrates *the self* often dictates career meaning by governing beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes in the workplace (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Bono & Judge, 2003; Shamir, 1991). Therefore, for participants in this study, a sense of self was crucial to the construction of meaning.

Establishing a *self-connection* with co-workers, teaching partners, and students also emerged as an important meaning-making technique for participants. We conclude as participants came to terms with working in an urban environment, their peers provided an important support network as they struggled with the demands of their careers. Rosso et al. (2010) argued positive relations with peers are critical in the construction of meaning in work. However, building peer relationships has been identified as a major *challenge* for beginning agricultural education teachers (Myers et al., 2005).

Mentoring students played a crucial role in helping urban agricultural educators feel as though they were making a valuable contribution through their career. For example, participants explained that instilling a passion for agriculture in their students allowed them to see how their work was making a difference. Similarly, Roberts and Dyer (2004) also identified that effective agricultural educators "encourage, counsel, and care for students" (p. 85).

In the fourth theme, participants expressed a need to uphold their values through their careers. For example, participants narrated the importance of building their students' capacity to become contributors to society as an important mechanism for meaning making. Similarly, Roberts and Dyer (2004) noted the significance of setting a positive professional example for students as an essential characteristic of an effective agricultural educator. Therefore, we conclude that by building their students' capacity, participants were able to set a positive example for their students in regard to maintaining a professional image in the workforce. Consistent with current literature (Brown et al., 2015; Matin & Kitchel, 2015b; Warner & Washburn, 2009), therefore, we found urban agricultural programs might face unique challenges because of the populations they serve. This finding was especially true regarding the lack of agricultural knowledge among urban agricultural education students and stakeholders (Brown et. al, 2015; Warner & Washburn, 2009).

The findings of this investigation also suggested that urban agricultural educators might *cope* with their challenges in unique ways. In the literature, Lawver and Smith (2014) reported agricultural educators use three major approaches to cope with stress: (a) distancing, (b) confrontive actions, and (c) a combination of both the distancing and confrontive methods. However, participants in this study seemed to find meaning by coping with their challenges through self-awareness methods and techniques.

Recommendations, Implications, and Discussion

The findings from this study hold interesting implications for the agricultural education discipline. For example, the black swans found meaning by embracing their unique qualities. We, therefore, encourage teacher educators, state agricultural education staff, and local administration to promote a culture in which urban agricultural educators feel valued for their distinctiveness. To accomplish this, perhaps pre-service teachers should spend time observing and teaching in urban settings. Through this experience, a greater understanding of the advantages and challenges of urban programs might be reached.

By identifying key elements of participants' meaning in work, we were able to elucidate meaningful insights into the transcendence construct. However, it was also important to understand *how* these factors combined holistically to shape the urban agricultural educators' meaning in work. We recommend pre-service teacher programs highlight the five sources of meaning identified so that individuals seeking employment in urban locations might be better equipped to recognize and celebrate meaningful work in their careers. To accomplish this, teacher educators should also be transparent about the advantages and challenges of working in an urban setting. If pre-service

teachers are provided with an honest depiction of the features shaping these programs, they may be able to pursue resources that can help lay a foundation for meaningful work in the future.

Participants stressed the importance of building relationships with peers and students. However, Myers et al. (2005) suggested beginning agricultural education teachers have challenges associated with cultivating professional relationships. We recommend additional research be conducted to explore how urban agricultural educators build and maintain professional relationships in their careers. Perhaps, this insight could even be used to better prepare beginning agricultural educators for overcoming this challenge.

This study expanded Rosso et al. (2010) PMW and Rotter's (1954) locus of control construct. However, it should be noted that meaning in work is a highly subjective phenomenon (Rosso et al., 2010). In the current study, participants' beliefs and views seemed to be influenced by cultural and social forces. Existing literature, however, suggests individuals are the primary determinate of meaning construction (Clark, 2013). Therefore, more attention needs to be placed on understanding how the urban environment may shape the meaning making of agricultural education instructors.

One major finding of this study was the unique way that urban agricultural educators coped with their challenges. Perhaps, the unique populations urban agricultural educators serve could contribute to their coping mechanism. For example, participants reported their programs were largely comprised of ethnic minority students living in low socioeconomic households. Therefore, urban agricultural educators might continuously be faced with issues that remind them of the important role they play in their students' lives. As such, we recommend future studies seek to better understand urban agricultural educators' mechanism for coping with stress. We also recommend that researchers use this study's findings as a foundation to explore and refine our current understandings of the black swans of agricultural education.

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