

Note to readers: This manuscript is a partial report of a study currently underway. Both the research project and the manuscript should be regarded as incomplete works.

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## Breakdown of Meaning in Mature Vocational Decisions

### Introduction

While attending an international conference on vocational guidance and counselling last year I heard a Japanese researcher comment that if there is one term which characterizes present-day adolescent malaise in Japan it is "undecidedness." The researcher went on to speculate how the rapid change in Japanese technological life, and social life as well, has resulted in conditions of self-knowledge which make it very difficult for Japanese youth to decide with any confidence just what kind of vocational future lies ahead for them as maturing individuals.

As I reflected on the Japanese researcher's descriptions of "undecidedness" I remembered reading a passage from Tolstoy's autobiographical fragment, My Confession (1929) which reads as follows:

Five years ago a strange state of mind began to grow upon me. I had moments of perplexity. Of a stoppage, as it were, of life, as if I did not know how I was to live, what I was to do ... These stoppages presented themselves to me with the same question: "why?" and "what for?" ... These questions demanded an answer with greater and greater persistence and, like dots, grouped themselves into one black spot. p. 20

In a later passage and in the same vein, Tolstoy continues:

The question which in my fiftieth year had brought me to the notion of suicide, was the simplest of all questions, lying in the soul of every man from the undeveloped child to the wisest sage: What will come from what I am doing now, and may do tomorrow. What will come from my whole life?" otherwise expressed--"Why should I live? Why should I wish for anything? Why should I do anything?"...p. 185

While I do not have a research interest in adolescent vocational choice I have had frequent clinical contacts with mature adults for whom vocational decision has re-emerged as a problematic aspect of life, usually after many years of involvement in one or several "vocations." What seems to emerge, however, is not simply dissatisfaction with occupation, although that may be a critical factor, but a more general loss of purpose or a growing sense of aimlessness of life. For some mature individuals, there is the feeling that though they "... perspire in their work, they have nothing to aspire to." (Wolman, 1975).

I have begun an in-depth study of the experience of mature individuals whose lives appear to lose direction, meaning and sense of coherent purpose especially, but not exclusively, in reference to work life. It is not my intention to do duplicate developmental nor longitudinal research such as studies by Valliant (1977), Gould (1972), and Levinson (1978) but to examine in close detail the actual experienced life-world of individuals living through times of the breakup of meaning patterns related to work.

In the remainder of this paper I will explain my methodological approach and then present a partial analysis made of the account taken from one individual.

### Research Stance

What I wish to do in this research is to enter into the life-worlds (Husserl, 1954/1970) of individuals who are experiencing a crisis of meaning especially in reference to vocation or work life. "Life-world" refers to the taken-for-granted, everyday common sense activities and frameworks of meaning which make up the "world" of the individual.

Through this entering, I wish to develop a detailed understanding and explication of significant meaning structures of worlds-in-crisis with reference especially to vocation/work. The two basic research questions are: What is happening in this person's work-life world? and How is the person experiencing what is happening?

My inquiry is organized from the frame of reference of existential phenomenology, following the research traditions originally established by Kierkegaard (1846/1968), Heidegger (1927/1962), Sartre (1968), and Merleau-Ponty (1962) and more recently represented by Strasser (1963), van Kaam (1966), Fisher (1971), Colaizzi (1973), Giorgi (1975), Valle & King (1978), de Rivera (1981), Romanyshyn (1982), Fessler (1983), Aanstoos (1984), Wertz (1983), Giorgi (1985), von Eckartsberg (1986), and Aanstoos (1987).

### Methodology for this Study

Subjects. Subjects for this study are individuals already known to myself and who have expressed in previous conversations that they are experiencing dissatisfaction with their work life. Only persons who have had at least ten years of continuous tenure within their current

occupation are selected for study. I explain that I am interested as a researcher in getting more information and better understanding about the dynamics of vocational satisfactions and dissatisfaction as experienced by mature members of occupations. I explain that I am especially interested in the various aspects of vocational dissatisfaction: What is the nature of the dissatisfaction, what seems to precipitate it, how are they experiencing it, and so on. I explain that two interviews are needed, each of which may take several hours. I further explain that I am very much interested in getting a close understanding of just how they are feeling about their work life, and that I want to be sure that I come to see their situations through their eyes as best I can.

### Procedures

Each subject is engaged in an interview designed to help the subject "tell" his or her story in reference to present worklife. The researcher asks questions to clarify meanings, generally maintain a focus upon worklife conversation, and assist the subject to express him/herself in the interview. While the focus is upon the present, excursions into the recalled past and anticipated future occur--the past and future are held to be contexts for the present.

Following the audiotaped interview, a verbatim transcript is made and a "topic table" (see example below) is prepared. Topics are taken to be a good method of identifying focal meaning markers. However, it is not always clear just where one topic ends and another begins. Following the preparation of a topic table, meaning units from the full

transcript are grouped with a topic which appears to encompass the meaning units. The identified topics together with the associated meaning units constitute the researcher's "interpretations" of the subject's story. After this initial data analysis, a second follow-up interview is conducted. This second interview is a method of gathering more client data around topics which had emerged as especially pregnant with meaning based on the initial analysis. The second interview is also used to compare the interpretations of the researcher with the perceptions and interpretations of the subject on the analysis which had been done so far.

Two guiding procedural principles in this research project can be stated:

1. Final interpretations of what can be claimed as meaningfulness in the subject's story emerges from a fusion of the subject's and researcher's individual interpretations. Such fusions, which often require negotiation, permit the articulation of a coherent, agreed-upon description of the meaning structures of the subject's experience/meaning of being-in-a-worklife-crisis.
2. The process of arriving at interpretations is hermeneutic in the sense that each topic and each meaning unit can be perceived, described and articulated as a thing-in-itself and at the same time perceived as a figure of meaning against a background of contextual meaning--that is, as a figure against the background of the entire story.

Following the second interview, a review of the second audiotape is undertaken to enrich, correct, and verify (in other words, to "thicken") the interpretations made in the initial analysis.

A final summary of the meaning structures of being-in-a-worklife-crisis is prepared for each individual.

#### Sample section of transcript

The following brief section of (a cleaned-up) transcript is from an interview with a 55 year-old male teacher who has been in this occupation since 1963. Prior to that he had various jobs, none of them lasting more than three years. He had identified himself as being "in doubt" about whether or not he is going to continue in teaching. The sample transcript shows typical researcher /subject interview communication and contains the subject statements which form the basis for the "topics" which appear in the subsequent Topic Table.

R: So, what is your work like for you these days, anyway?

S: Oh boy that's a big one. I don't know where to begin. I've sure spent a lot of time thinking about it the last couple of years...yeah...where do I begin?

R: Well, Bill, we've got plenty of time to discuss whatever you want to about yourself and your work. As I said a few minutes ago, I'd just like you to feel free to tell your whole story. Maybe you could start with what you've been giving the most thought to lately.

S: OK, well here goes. If I picked out one thing that I find keeps cropping up in my mind is...one thing I think about a lot these days is what does this mean for me five years down the road...am I going to still be getting in my car every morning at 8:15 and heading off for good old RJH or what? What I'm saying is my future is not all that great--at least that's the way I feel a lot of the time and that's what I worry about. I guess I'll start with what is driving me up the wall about my

work...it's not all bad, you know...but somehow I've lost the magic I once knew. The other night I had this dream--it was about the first job I ever had. I was just a kid and the job was being a stock clerk in a men's clothing store. It seems like a joe job now when I think about it, but you know...I can remember how I just loved it...I was finally doing something, and getting my own money, and being someone...I didn't even mind that about all I did was stack boxes and stick prices on those boxes, but I'll tell you--I really felt alive. (long pause) You know, teaching can be great...I mean the greatest some days. I've got what I guess most people would say is a good deal. I'm teaching biology mainly and I have most of the really good students in my classes. But I just feel like the oomph has gone out of what I do everyday. I used to even go to school on Saturdays sometimes to keep my lab in good shape and take care of all the animals we have there--I mean I didn't just do it--I wanted to do it. It isn't the kids so much either--I get along pretty good with them and I think that they know that I really am good at making biology seem alive, at least I used to be.

R: Used to be . . . ?

S. Yeah, well I still have my days, but it's a bit like pulling myself up and making myself get with it. On the whole, though like I said, well I've had my coffee--do I really want to go out and get in the car and go to work. Of course, one part of me doesn't say that. For Christ's sake, I need my paycheck, my job--but do I need this job? But oh shit, I do find that some days I just don't want to go out and get in the car and go to work--just one more damned day.

R: Is that what your job means to you now--a paycheck?

S. Laughs. Well, yes. Of course it does, but that's not what I am really talking about. Oh money. I've never had a really big hangup about money. I've always been able to make enough to make ends meet. I've never taken any job just for the money. I make it--it just goes through me like I was a channel or something. But this year I've found myself a little on edge about will I have enough to live on when I can't work anymore.

Topic Table

Digital Topic (Focal meaning markers) How topic comes up counter

075	Future	S	"One thing I think about a lot these days is what does this mean for me five years down the road."
090	First job	S	"The other night I had this dream about when I was a stockclerk, that was my first job you know, almost thirty years ago."
225	Present job	S	"I find that some days I just don't want to go our and get in the car and go to work--just one more damned day."
265	Money	S	"Oh, money--I've never had a big hangup about money--I've always seemed to be able to make enough to make ends meet--I've never taken any job just for the money. I make it, it goes through me just like I'm a channel or something. But this year I've found myself a little on edge about will I have enough to live on when I can't work any more."

Note: The "money" topic is clearly related to the "future" topic, yet it can be treated as a topic on its own. Is future an underlying theme and money a manifestation? This is an interpretation which bears discussing with the subject.

etc. . .

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### Data analysis

In this research project, the task of the researcher in data analysis is construed as "let(ting) the world of the describer (subject) . . . reveal itself through the description" (Giorgi, 1975, p. 74). This means that the researcher attempts to maintain an attitude of "open-ended presence to the phenomenon that is unfolding" (Giorgi, 1976, p. 113).

In this research project there are three different sets of data. First there is the "living text" of the interview conversation driven by the "question and answer dialogue" of the subject and researcher. Second there are the protocols of the tape and transcript. Third, there are the moments of question and answer negotiations of the second interview which are themselves committed to tape.

The data analysis steps taken by the researcher are:

1. Remain attentive to any tendencies on own part to impose bias on what is being heard and read.
2. Cultivate an empathic receptivity to what is heard and read and intend to understand, comprehend, grasp what one becomes aware of during the moments as the thing it is in itself, as it is showing itself.
3. Think, write(work) descriptively, being guided by "what is . . . and how is . . ."
4. Maintain a reflective dialectic between any specific meaning (topic, description, interpretation) and the totality (interview/protocol) which is the background/context within which the specific phenomenon appears.

5. Negotiate fused interpretations, combining the understandings of the researcher the understandings of the subject to arrive at coherent meaning structure which, in the end, are sensible to both.

The task of negotiating the meaning of phenomena is crucial for the understanding of the researcher or the subject alone is usually insufficient to uncover the phenomena being studied. As Heidegger pointed out, covered-up-ness is the counter concept to phenomena. Any phenomenon is typically only proximally given and what is to "become the phenomenon" is frequently hidden. A phenomenon can be covered-up in at least three ways. It can be undiscovered, that is, it is neither known nor unknown. Second, it can be buried over. That is, it was at some time discovered but with the passage of time has been lost from active consciousness. Third, a phenomenon can be disguised. Being disguised frequently means that something which was once known is now apparent only as a semblance. There is the difficulty, then, in reestablishing what is essential to the phenomenon and distinguishing what is essential from what presents itself only as a semblance. According to Heidegger, it is this "covered-up-ness" of phenomena, this character of "not-being-fully-given" which constitutes the primary need for phenomenology as a method of inquiry in the first place (Heidegger, 1926/1962, pp. 58-62).

6. Write up the results clearly and descriptively in language which tries to convey the essential dimensions of experienced meanings

which the describer has given, together with interpretations which give coherence, depth, and extension to the meaning structures.

The writing up of the results may include situating the findings of the study in already existing and relevant psychological theorizing and research data as well as literary texts (or each descriptive paradigm case example may be allowed to stand on its own, leaving extrapolations to readers).

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