Meaning in Work: Toward a Clinical Approach to Work Dissatisfaction

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with issues relating to the meaning of work for the worker
and clinical implications for the social worker intervening in the field of
industrial and occupational social work. The problems of work dissatisfaction
and alienation in work are analyzed. The author presents two concepts, work as
play and logotherapy, as being useful in the clinical intervention in work
related problems. It is concluded that the absence of work dissatisfaction need
not be the goal of intervention, rather the clinical encounter can strive for
meaningfulness, growth, and self-discovery.

There is a growing interest in social work intervention aimed at the working
person. This is evidenced by a growing body of literature dealing with social
services in the workplace and increased numbers of social workers finding employment
in industry and other work settings (Weissman, 1975; Skidmore et al., 1974;
Neyman, 1971; Carter, 1977). In Israel the rapid growth of this field is a source
of particular interest (Neikrug and Katan, 1980). However, it is mistaken to view
social work in the world of work as a radical innovation in the profession. Issues
relating to work cut across numerous fields of social work practice. Social work
with the aged requires an understanding of the meaning of retirement. Work with
the mentally and physically handicapped requires dealing with the problem of work
rehabilitation. Working in welfare requires understanding how the limited resource
of adequate employment is distributed in the population. Traditionally social
workers have intervened at the various points of entrance into and exit from the
world of work. Regardless whether the particular issues under consideration are
problems of aging, family, mental health, illness, rehabilitation, poverty, etc.,
the theme of homo farber, man as worker, cuts through all issues of human behavior.

In this paper we will deal with the various issues around the meaning of work
for the worker and the clinical implications inherent in the psychology of work.
We will review some of the pertinent literature regarding work in modern society,
satisfaction and dissatisfaction in work, leisure, and play, and attempt to relate
this literature to the issues faced by social workers intervening in the world of
work.

Freud touched briefly on the topic of work in several contexts. He believed that the ability to engage successfully in work and the ability to give and receive love are the twin hallmarks of the healthy individual (Erikson, 1950, p.265). Freud seems to have felt that the carrying out of certain types of work activities can be a narcissistically satisfying experience (Freud, 1938). While this may be true for some people, it is apparent that in complex technological societies work can be a highly dissatisfying experience for a great many workers.

It is not clear just how many workers are dissatisfied with their jobs. Different measures and sampling techniques render different results, however, in general, the figures on dissatisfaction are extremly high. Sheppard and Herrick report one study of blue collar workers in which less than half of the subjects reported predominant satisfaction in their jobs (Sheppard and Herrick, 1972). Another study indicates that only 43% of white collar workers and 24% of blue collar workers would choose the same kind of work, were they given a second chance. These statistics cannot be ignored. They demand a more detailed understanding of the phenomenon of work dissatisfaction and its relation to the critical issues of mental health and social adjustment of the worker, productivity in the plant, and even, the very future of work in technological societies.

It is not always clear how the various studies define the concept of dissatisfaction. Certainly in one sense it is not a negative factor. An amount of dissatisfaction is surely a positive thing and necessary to motivate the worker toward advancement and self improvement. Only the most orthodox disciple of Taylor's scientific management would see the "happy robot" as a desirable worker (Taylor, 1911). Most modern students of management are concerned with such problems as initiative, creativity, spontaneity within the context of competent handling of complex tasks. These work behaviors are not compatible with massive job dissatisfaction.

It is generally understood that there is a close relationship between job satisfaction and work motivation. However, it is not clear whether high satisfaction causes high productivity, whether successful work performance causes high satisfaction, or whether intervening variables effect both satisfaction and performance (Schwab and Cummings, 1970). What is certain is that the relationship between these variables is complex indeed, and that simplistic formulae are at best half truths. Brayfield and Crockett develop one of the more interesting theories (1955). They argue that high job satisfaction occurs concurrently with high performance when the worker perceives productivity as a means to achieving important individual goals. This demands that we consider what are seen as important goals by the worker.

It is generally agreed, today, that money alone is not the primary motivation for work. Morse and Weiss found that 80% of workers sampled would continue to work even if they were to inherit sufficient funds to meet all of their needs (1955). Even among disadvantaged workers, money and other extrinsic rewards were

found to be less valued than the intrinsic rewards from a job well done and satis-
factions of the work itself (Champagne and King, 1967). Thus it seems that even
though workers report that they are predominently dissatisfied with their jobs,
they prefer work to idleness and seek intrinsic reward in their labor (Herzberg,
Mausner, and Synderman, 1959).

While both middle and lower class workers may value intrinsic factors over
extrinsic factors, it is clear that neither intrinsic nor extrinsic factors are
distributed equally in society. Various studies have shown that jobs that offer
intrinsic rewards are distributed according to the occupational hierarchy. Morse
found, for example, that 41% of workers doing repetitive clerical work had low
intrinsic satisfaction as compared to only 7% of the high technical level group
(Morse, 1953). In general, the literature indicates that workers wish to use their
skills more fully, to develop their work abilities; to make decisions and be res-
ponsible for their work, but a great many blue collar and low level white collar
jobs deny such opportunity.

Argyris states the problem as a conflict between the needs of the individual
and the needs of the work organization. He argues that in this culture the
individual strives to move toward adulthood along seven lines of development:
1. from passivity to action; 2. from dependence to independence; 3. from
limited behavior alternatives to many; 4. from short term, erratic, interests
to long term coherent commitments; 5. from disconnected activities to major
challenges; 6. from impulsive self awareness to integrity and self worth; and
from the low status of childhood to ever increasing status and worth. On the other
hand, Argyris states that needs of the organization for specialization, rationali-
zation, supervision, etc., place an arbitrary ceiling on the amount of growth
possible along the various lines. Growth is choked off and persons appear dependent,
passive and subordinate. What is more, the incongruity between human potential for
growth and the arbitrary limits of the organization increases; 1. as the worker
is more mature; 2. as the organization is striving for efficiency; 3. as you go
down the hierarchy; and 4. as jobs become more mechanized (Argyris, 1954).

Good work which is intrinsically satisfying and allows for individual growth
seems to be an extremely limited commodity and reserved for a small number of high
level workers. The great majority must accept working in conditions which deny
intrinsic rewards and limit human potential. While the idea of a guaranteed income
is considered by many to be the right of every citizen in a progressive society, it
is not also recognized that people have the right to equal access to jobs that allow
growth and satisfaction. On the contrary, there is a general belief that since work
organizations as we know them, are necessary to the society, workers must adapt to
the demands of the system. Extrinsic compensations may appease the worker for
surrendering his individual satisfaction and relinquishing his adulthood but can
society compensate itself for this loss of potential and can it tolerate alienation
of large numbers of workers?

Alienation in Work

Marx postulated that in work man can achieve self realization, but in capitalist societies; private ownership of the means of production, the division of labor and the process by which labor becomes a market commodity so alter the nature of work that it becomes not self-realizing but alienating (Burns, 1969). Israel has shown that this idea has its precursors in the writings of Rousseau, Hegel, and others (Israel, 1971). Hegel saw the machine as the great potential threat to satisfying work. Before the machine, work was the process of transforming nature's materials into man satisfying objects. Work was the medium for man's enlarging his subjective universe, but the machine created work conditions which result in boredom, monotony, and coercion. The mechanical process results in labor or toil, not work.

Hegel's theories are developed further in the writings of Jacque Ellul. Ellul argues that technology or "technique" may have begun with the machine, but today technique is applied to every area of human activity (Ellul, 1976). Technique in economics controls labor and other resources in the production process. The technique of organization is used to administer and control large masses of people. Human technique (in which category he includes education, social work, medicine, etc.) applies technique to the very nature of man. Technique, according to Ellul, is a way of thinking and acting which eliminates all non-technical activity. Its major victim is spontaneous interaction between man and man and between man and nature.

For Marx it was capitalism, for Argyris the large organization, for Hegel the machine, for Ellul the rise of technique; each identified a major force in the social system that robs work of its creative essence. This approach is questioned by Blauner in his study on alienation (Blauner, 1964). He argues that alienation is the product of the intimate involvement with the specific work situation and not a characteristic of industrial work per se. Depending on the nature of the specific job, some work is more satisfying and some is more alienating. Blauner attempts to prove this theory through empirical research and he uses four of the five dimensions of Seeman's theory of alienation: powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation, and self estrangement (Seeman, 1961). Blauner argued that different industries differ in terms of: the technologies used, the nature of the division of labor, the social organization of the workplace, and the conditions of their markets. These differences result in different amounts of alienation. Indeed he finds that while most industrial work may have generally alienation tendencies, in specific industries these conditions are modified producing more positive results for the worker.

Lastly we refer to the results of Goldthorpe's study of automotive workers (1966). He develops the hypothesis that workers do not necessarily become alienated as a result of their work and indicates that the reverse may be true.

He found that alienated individuals sought work that did not demand investment of
self nor promise psychological satisfaction in return. To the extent we accept
Goldthorpe's findings, we must realize the importance of Ellul's thesis. The most
frightening aspect of Ellul's construct is that technology tends to force people
to serve its own needs and eventually people neither demand nor expect any human
rewards. Indeed, Goldthorpe's findings show the basic paradox of alienation:
technique devalues and rejects the belief in human rewards and therefore the
worker accepts employment based on its extrinsic rewards only to suffer, thereafter,
the effects of labor without intrinsic value.

Alienation is not only a function of the world of work. Work is perhaps only
one aspect of society that often encourages alienation and limits meaningful growth.
A full discussion of alienation should include other institutions such as:
education, government, family, and even leisure. Leisure in particular is of inte-
rest to our topic. Various students of work suggest that the developmental role of
work (to provide an arena for developing human potential) has been supplanted by
other central life interests, particularly leisure. Indeed social status today may
be as greatly influenced by what one does in his non-work activities as by what he
does in work. More and more of societies resources are being spent in the develop-
ment of leisure activities. Free time itself is increasing. Kreps and Spengler
indicate that the average worker has gained 1220 hours of non-working time annually
since 1890 (1973). But leisure is not a quantitative problem. The real issue
today is the productive utilization of non-work time rather than the increasing
of free time _per_ _se_ as it was during the early period of unionization. Scientists
and creative writers alike indicate the coming of a second industrial revolution. [1]
While the first industrial revolution instituted the machine in place of hand
production, the second revolution is making the monotonous tedious task of machine-
tending itself unnecessary. Cybernetics, feed-back loops and the computer are
pushing us into a new era of industrialization wherein machine tends machine and
the worker is superfluous. Many doubt if the leisure of the future can compensate
man for the ever increasing devaluation of his work role.

Ellul warns that it is pure idealism to expect that man will be able to use
increasing leisure time for the cultivation of self in a spontaneous relationship
with environment. He argues that technological society has so limited his creative
powers by forcing workers to conform to the postulates of technique that spontaneity
is impossible in any life area (1976,401-402).

Leisure often becomes amusement and diversion rather than active cultural
pursuit. Ellul points out that amusement seeks to distract the victim of
technology from his "phantom", from an awareness of his dehumanization. Diversion,
such as in the cinema, obviates the need to hope that things will ever be different.
"On the strip of film what ought to change has already changed. And the flight of

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[1] For example, see Kurt Vonnegut's novel Player Piano.

cinematic dreams has nothing to do with the inner life; it concerns mere externals.
When people leave the movie theater they are full of the possibilities they
experienced in the shadows; they have received their dose of the inner life."
(1976: 375-382).

Bell also presents little hope for the future of leisure. He suggests that
industrial society has set up a myth of joy in leisure as a mechanism of social
control. The worker works to satisfy his desire to participate in the "consumption
society" at the price of a mortgaged future (Bell, 1960: 227-272). It is as though
workers will continue to endure unsatisfying work wherein they produce the play-
things of a leisure oriented society so as to earn the resources to consume those
same toys.

Work as a Game

Concepts such as free time, leisure, relaxation, and play should not be used
interchangeably (Bell, 1960: 258). Free time and relaxation are interruptions in
the ongoing cycle of work and are part of that cycle. Leisure relates to Ellul's
concept of time spent in the cultivation of the spirit and the arts. Play, however,
is a different issue. Play is the process of investing energy and resources in
developing the art of living. In play we find many of the same functions that we
find in work. In both work and play man tests his prowess against his fellowmen
and against his environment. In both cases he engaged in a process of self-dis-
covery and self-testing. He grows through competition, through the process of
struggle, success or failure, and trying again.

The major difference between work and play situations is to be found in
different subjective realities experienced in both activities. The sense that it
is "just a game" is absent from work situations. In play, regardless how great
the investment and how important it is to win, there persists an awareness that
the consequences of failure are not catastrophic. In this awareness there is free-
dom. In work situations we are struck by the predominance of the fear of failure
and belief that work is a deadly serious business. This perception often encourages
the development of a conservative stance which dictates that one should never risk
too much, that minimal success is adequate and failure must be avoided at all costs.
Because the worker receives so few intrinsic rewards from his work he is too poor
in resources to tolerate risk, and takes refuge in conservation.

We see a parallel between the conservative stance on the part of the worker
and Thompson's view of innovation in organizations (Thompson, 1972). He shows that
the common element among innovative organizations is the existence of "slack" (i.e.
uncommitted resources of personnel, finance, material, etc.). He points out that,
just as the rich gambler can afford to lose, the "rich" organization can tolerate a
riskier game for higher stakes and this leads to innovation. Perhaps, in the same
way, the individual worker who has developed "slack" (i.e. a resource bank of
psychological, social and economic resources) can afford to play in work. The fear

of risking limited resources results in the inhibition of energetic investment of self and precludes the experience of joy in both work and play.

It is instructive to consider the worker who invests little in his job, thereby risking little and minimizing both gains and losses. Katz and Kahn argue that workers tend to perform at minimally acceptable levels when "legal compliance" is the primary motivational pattern employed at the workplace (1966: 347).Legal compliance is defined at a system of management wherein norms, rules and sanctions indicate and enforce worker behavior. These may encourage minimal compliance but offer no reason for excelling. As they point out, one can either follow or not follow a rule but one cannot follow a rule exceptionally well.

While this may be true it is mistaken to blame rules and norms for dissatisfaction in work. Legal compliance is as much a fact of play as it is of work. All organized play is based upon rules. Clearly these rules are not enforced by time clocks or conveyor belts and other devices which are beyond the control of the individual but they are rules nevertheless. In play the norms, rules, and sanctions are often no more flexible than in work, but the player complies to the legal structure because he wants to play the game.

The conservative stance not only restricts output, its major effect is to limit input. The worker who wants, above all, to protect his gains from loss; believes deeply that his work is no game and desires a condition wherein there is neither reward for success nor consequence for failure. He desires, instead, compensation for his loyal service. Like his Victorian counterpart who worked in domestic service, he derives his status from his master and not from his accomplishments. His master, be it government agency, major corporation, large university, etc. rarely requires more than minimally acceptable performance. So the worker maintains a low profile, invests little of himself and has little expectation of intrinsic reward. Since his status is attached to his position rather than his accomplishment, he often attributes an inflated value to the importance of his job. This is another major difference between work and play. In play, in order to risk, one often debunks the value of both game and result. This allows the individual to increase his input of limited resources, play for higher stakes and reach for greater rewards.

To play in work it is essential to overcome self importance. One has to "see through" the austere seriousness of work and find that it is just a game before it can be played. This is true for the gray flannel suited "yes man" as well as for the hostile bolt-tightener on the conveyor belt.

Yet what game can be played on the production line? Repetitive work is hell, not fun. Indeed in Greek mythology, the regions of the damned are plagued by meaningless, repetitive work. The daughters of Danaus draw water in a sieve and Sisyphus pushes his stone endlessly uphill. To play, one needs to develop a particular mind set to one's activity. Sisyphus is condemned to his condition, but

in play one has to be free to define one's own condition. The nature of this freedom and the ways in which it can be developed are areas of central importance for social workers who deal with the problems of meaninglessness in work and life.

The nature of this mind set is well described in the Oriental proverb:"In times of famine when many are starving some are able to fast." To fast is not the same as to starve. To fast is to be active in the definition of one's own condition. To fast is to accept the limitations of reality as well as the responsibility of finding an avenue of individual activity within that reality. One does not play at fasting, rather fasting is one way of playing the reality. Fasting is the expression of an active stance to life without denying the basic nature of reality. The active stance demands of the individual that he define his reality. Once he has done so, he can play his own game. Such a player knows that the only ultimate meaning to be found in his work is the realization that it is he who is the actor and that his value is separate and distinct from his productivity. He can now take his game very seriously and concentrate on it the maximum of his energies and abilities. During his play he will experience the thrill of victory and the pain of defeat and through it all he will know that it is he who bestows meaning and value on his activity and not the other way around.

Logotherapy in the Work Place

It seems that regardless of whether we approach the problems facing man in work from sociology, psychology or philosophy we continually return to the question of meaning in work. Indeed it may well be that in the search for meaning we find the link between the theoretical-philosophical approach and the therapeutic approach to the human condition.

Much has been made of the destructive qualities of automation, mass-production, and work in a capitalist market economy as sources of alienation. While there is some validity to this direction it is clear that were industrialization to give way to a return to craftsmanship and were the worker to regain control of his work from the machine, the existential questions would remain. We have seen storekeepers describe the tyranny of the retail trade and tell how the shop can be a cruel taskmaster. Would it help them to know that "being one's own boss" is the great fantasy of millions of workers? We have seen small farmers and craftsmen of obsolescent skills struggle on the edge of poverty. Would they find comfort in the fact that they are coveted by their fellowmen on the assembly line for having whole and meaningful work and not just turning endless screws into anonymous parts of some unseen product? Beyond the psychological and sociological meanings of work is the existential level of meaning. No work is good until it is meaningful and no work is so vile that no meaning can be found in it.

This is not to argue that there is no value in interventions aimed at changing the conditions of the workplace. Such is far from the case. Social workers operating on the "macro" level can make a great impact on the development of manpower policy, especially in the case of vulnerable workers (i.e. minorities, older workers, women,

disabled, etc.). Social workers in places of employment offer a growing range of services which modify many of the negative forces that we have identified. As pointed out by Blauner, the nature of the work organization is not a given function. Management can be worked with to alter the division of labor, supervisory styles, work rythms, etc. in the light of a greater appreciation of human needs. Rather than minimize the importance of such interventions, if space allowed, we should like to develop them even further. However, it is clear to us that in the most ideal of work conditions, as in the most hostile of conditions, man's phantom follows after him. Every now and then, because he is human, man will turn and face his phantom. What does the social worker have to offer in that confrontation?

A large and rich practice literature has developed dealing with man's search for meaning. We refer to Victor Frankl's logotherapy. Frankl has succeeded in reifying existential philosophy to a practical therapy with both a cogent theory and specific techniques. To attempt to summarize Frankl's school of psychiatry would only be to do it a disservice, especially since a considerable amount of Frankl's work is now available to English readers. [2]

What has become clear to us, as an outgrowth of this literature, is that the individual who suffers and exhibits clinical symptoms is often experiencing a noogenic neurosis (to use Frankl's concept); a neurosis of meaninglessness. He is experiencing not the conflict of diverse and opposing intrapsychic drives, but the conflict of diverse and opposing values. This is a spiritual, philosophical dilemma.

Applied to the problems of man and his work, "illness" is a very poor term. Considering the dehumanizing pressures operating in the work place, it is absurd to view as pathological the conflicts of an individual striving to find meaning and value. The absence of this conflict, the succumbing to unperturbed stability seems far more pathological.

The struggle to find meaning and value in the human condition and the role of the therapist in that process is different from the role of the therapist who is dealing with illness. Frankl points out that logotheraphy is less introspective and retrospective than analytical therapies. In logotherapy the therapist emphasizes the future. The therapist is a guide who leads his client to face the meaning of his life and directs him toward that confrontation. While the therapist may have access to certain techniques his task is not technical. Frankl's psychology is based on the concept that the person can define himself. In defining himself the person sets his path and his fate. Herein is the major difference between this approach and the analytical psychotherapies. Here the emphasis is not on what has made the person, but rather on what the person can do to make himself.

Meaninglessness in general and lack of meaning in work in specific are only infrequently used to explain the etiology of clinical symptoms, yet it is possible that this is more due to the diagnostic process used by the therapist and less an

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[2] Three works of Dr. Frankl are cited in the references.

indication of where the client hurts. Indeed diagnostic manuals often have no category for existential suffering. This situation forces the therapist to lump this problem together with the psychoneuroses (emphasizing the role of anxiety) or to include it with the situational adjustment reactions (emphasizing individual environmental maladjustment). Neither diagnostic compromise is adequate.

Social workers who have a broader view of etiology are nevertheless guilty of a similar bias. They often are sensitive to the disruptive ramifications of existential distress as it is played out in the family, the marriage etc. Yet to see it as a "family problem" or a "marital problem" is to widely miss the mark. The problem presented here is not of diagnostic nomenclature per se, but of a mind-set predominant among psychotherapists which views clinical symptomatology as expression of intrapsychic conflict or environmental stress and does not often entertain the prospect of existential conflict.

Perhaps the main problem relates to the therapists' discomfort with the role of "doctor-to-the-soul." Indeed, the therapist may feel that such concepts as soul, values, purpose, and meaning are within the realm of the clergyman or philosopher and may argue that therapeutic competence is based on science and not on theology or philosophy. However, the potency of the problem as described above makes such a claim irrelevant. Like it or not, therapist is clergyman to a secular congregation. Through him his client seeks comfort of spirit. True, his message is not the revelation of Devine purpose, but this is not what is being asked of him. He is being asked if there is meaning in life and he will hear the question ever more often as he becomes sensitive to it. The clinician must realize that this question is deeply tied to the performance of the work role and he must be prepared to relate to the question. If this is a source of role-strain for the therapist then he must be prepared to deal with that too and to raise the question of his own frustration and doubt.

Conclusion.

The helping professions have been criticised for concentrating on the mini-mizing of pathology rather than maximizing health. To a great extent this is due to the fact that our very conceptual base relates to illness and positive health is only poorly understood. In this paper we have attempted to deal with psycho-logical health in the workplace as more than the absence of pathology. The con-cept of play-in-work, albeit rudimentally developed, suggests that absence of work dissatisfaction is not the necessary end goal of clinical intervention. Play-in-work suggests that absence of dissatisfaction is the zero point from which positive growth can develop. The crux of this growth lies in the problem of meaning. The active stance toward work, described above, is predicated on the individual's know-ledge that his ultimate value is not dependent upon the product of his labor. The contrary is true. When the person is aware of his ultimate value he can define the meaning of his reality freely and genuinely. It is then that his play-work becomes

the expression of his psychological freedom and his essential value. As the
therapist becomes more adept in dealing with issues of existential meaning and
suffering, the clinical arena will become the locus for this aspect of human growth
and self-discovery.

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