Contrasting Perspectives on Work: An Exploratory Qualitative Study Based on the Concept of Adaptation

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Objectives. Objectives of this study were (a) to compare contrasting work experiences of five persons as alternative ways individuals select and use occupational opportunities available in their environments, and (b) to examine the adaptive significance of work in their lives.

Method. Five students in a graduate course on work and play as occupations each developed a work narrative for an adult of their choice that included how that person came to choose particular kinds of work, described the person's current work experience, and examined the adaptive significance of work in the person's life. Data were gathered through observations in the persons' work settings and through open-ended interviews. Comparative analysis of the five work narratives was completed by students and faculty members as a group.

Results. Work narratives of a fast-food restaurant manager, a life-flight nurse, a tennis teaching pro, a financial analyst, and a manufacturer's representative for oilfield equipment illustrate contrasting perspectives on work as "escaping from seclusion," "establishing life work," "enacting a family tradition," "getting stuck," and "rebuilding a life." The participants who modified or combined occupational opportunities in creative ways generally found their work more rewarding than those who accepted available work opportunities as unalterable "givens."

Conclusions. The adaptive significance of work for these persons had both short-term benefits, including intrinsic enjoyment of its activities and extrinsic benefits, such as social recognition and income, and long-term benefits of contributions to identity and contributions to purposes larger than oneself.

There is a long history of interest in the profession of occupational therapy in the adaptive significance of work as one of the fundamental forms of human occupation. Perspectives on work in the profession have evolved from an emphasis on modifying disorganized behavior, to an emphasis on fostering a sense of productivity in preparation for vocational training, to a focus on specific component job skills required for remunerative employment (Harvey-Krefting, 1985). In recent years, much of the literature on work in occupational therapy has addressed pragmatic issues, such as work capacity evaluation and work hardening, to the relative neglect of other issues related to successful performance of the worker role, such as psychosocial and environmental issues (Velozo, 1993). However, a few authors have examined broader issues, including the meaning of work, which reflects growing interest in the meaning of occupations in general and the significance of meaning as an essential aspect of what makes occupation therapeutic.
(Peloquin, 1997; Trombly, 1995). For example, Clark (1993) examined the meaning of academic work to Penny Richardson in her recovery from a stroke, and Helfrich, Kielhofner, and Mattingly (1994) examined the meaning of continuing a journalistic career to Tom, whose engagement in work was often disrupted by difficulty in managing chronic mental health problems.

We sought to contribute to the exploration of both "the doing" and "the meaning" of work by studying work as a process of adaptation that involves interactive relationships between persons and their environmental contexts. One underlying premise was that engagement in work is affected both by the occupational opportunities available in the local world of the person and by past experience and personal qualities of the individual that influence choice and performance of particular types of work. Another premise was that the significance of work to a person is shaped by environmental and personal factors as they have evolved over a lifetime of past experience.

**Literature Review**

There is a large amount of literature outside of occupational therapy that supports the premise that available forms of work are a powerful determinant of individual work experience. For example, Terkel's (1972) classic collection of interviews on working is based on the theme that most contemporary forms of work are fragmented and routinized, offering few opportunities for pride in one's efforts. At a theoretical level, Mitchell (1988) used Durkheim's classic theory of anomie and Marx's classic theory of alienation to describe a continuum of work situations, ranging from those that are so lacking in structure that they lead to disorientation and anomie to those that are so highly structured that they lead to regimentation and alienation. In this continuum, there is a middle ground of potentially more satisfying work settings that offer enough consistency in expectations to organize work effectively yet enough flexibility to make work challenging. There is a large body of empirical research that supports the idea that some forms of work are inherently more gratifying than others, as exemplified by a study by Allenson and Duncan (1988) which showed that professional women who had more challenge and degree of choice found their work a greater source of satisfaction than women who cleaned office buildings for a living.

Similarly, there is a large body of research indicating that the person's perception of available work options and his or her ability to find challenge and rewards in creative ways is a powerful determinant of the quality of work experience. Csikszentmihalyi (1975) developed the concept of "flow" to describe engagement in activity for its own intrinsic or autotelic enjoyment, a quality of experience characterized by a good match between the level of challenge of the activity and level of skill of the person. In this theory, anxiety results when the degree of challenge exceeds the person's level of skill, and boredom results when the degree of challenge is below the person's level of skill. Empirical research by Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi (1988) indicated that flow can be experienced in both work and play activities and that the person can influence the quality of flow experience by the way in which activities are approached. Hall's (1993) reflections on life work support his belief that, in addition to "absorbedness" in the activity of the moment, which is similar to the concept of flow, gratifying work reflects a sense of meaning that one's productive activities make a contribution to something larger than oneself and the immediate needs of one's self and family. That this quality of work experience can occur in what would generally be regarded as a routine and unchallenging form of work is illustrated by Terkel's (1972) interview with a grave digger who took great pride in the meticulousness with which he prepared grave sites as well as the satisfaction he derived from seeing his work as a contribution to funeral rituals that acknowledge and celebrate death as a part of life.

In examining work as an adaptive process, it is important to recognize that it is both a short-term and a long-term process. As Frank (1996) pointed out, in occupational therapy the short-term process of adaptive response to an immediate occupational challenge has generally received greater attention, as illustrated in King's (1978) Slagle lecture in which she characterized occupational therapy as a science of adaptive responses. Schkade and Schultz's (1992) frame of reference dealing with occupational adaptation similarly focuses on the process of response to an immediate occupational challenge, though they also address the issue of whether such adaptive experience is generalized to other circumstances, which implies a longer term perspective. Frank provided a longer term view of adaptation as "a process of selecting and organizing activities (or occupations) to improve life opportunities and enhance quality of life according to the experience of individuals or groups in an ever-changing environment" (p. 50). This parallels the emphasis of Spencer, Davidson, and White (1996) on adaptation as "a lifelong cumulative process by which humans remember a repertoire of past occupational experience and...evaluate its relevance for envisioning and shaping the future, a way of linking memory and intention" (p. 533). Emphasis on past life experience reflects the ideas of Reilly and her students on a long-term process of occupational choice that begins with play and increasingly involves engagement in work occupations (Matsusuyu, 1971).

The purposes of this study were (a) to compare the contrasting work experiences of five persons as alternative ways individuals select and use occupational oppor-
tunities available in their environments and (b) to examine the adaptive significance of work in their lives.

Method

Study Design

This exploratory study was conducted as the research component of a graduate course on work and play as occupations that examined (a) the nature of work and play; (b) work, play, and culture; (c) work, play, and identity; and (d) work, play, and therapy. The five students in the course each observed and interviewed an adult of their choice at work, with the goal of producing a written work narrative that explored how the person came to choose particular kinds of work, described the person's current work experience, and examined the adaptive significance of work experience in the person's life. After obtaining informed consent, students were allowed flexibility in how they conducted observations and interviews (rather than using a common interview schedule) because a goal for them was to explore ways therapists might gain a sense of the significance of work in a person's life. Data were thus collected by five different researchers who each brought individual perspectives to the process on the basis of their prior knowledge, work histories ranging from professional human service to factory job, and personal life experience with issues such as managing work and family life. However, as occupational therapy students they shared a common mind-set that is based on beliefs of the profession about engagement in occupation and ideas such as the importance of balance in one's occupational configuration. The researchers also participated as a group in seminar discussion of the literature discussed in this article, which provided a shared mind-set in conducting the study.

Participants

Participants were selected by the student researchers on the basis of personal acquaintance; recommendations from others; and, in two cases, through working at the same setting as the participant. Group discussion of kinds of participants that would be desirable to compare resulted in a maximum diversity sample that reflected differences in gender, ethnicity, and type of work among study participants:

- Maria is a 30-year-old woman of mixed racial heritage who grew up as the sheltered daughter of a wealthy family in Sri Lanka, Zambia, and the United States. She was observed and interviewed at her work site, where she manages a fast-food restaurant.
- Malcolm is a 41-year-old African-American who was the first black man to graduate from his nursing school. He was observed and interviewed in a life-flight plane (not on an emergency flight), where he works as a nurse evacuating burned children to a specialized treatment center.
- Mark is a 33-year-old white South African man who came to the United States on an athletic scholarship and who earns his living as a tennis teaching pro at a local club. He was observed and interviewed at a tennis tournament in which both his club team, which he coaches, and his family members were competing.
- Betty is a 45-year-old African-American woman with an MBA in finance who chose her work as a financial analyst because of an interest in mathematics and a desire for financial security. She was observed and interviewed in her office in a large corporate headquarters on a Saturday.
- George is a 47-year-old white man who dropped out of college and tried a wide variety of jobs before he developed his own business as a manufacturer's representative for oil field equipment. He was observed and interviewed at his oceanfront home, which he uses as the headquarters for his business.

Data Collection

Each student collected data through observing the participants at their work settings and through open-ended interviews that the students planned in advance. The duration of observations and interviews ranged from a single visit of 2 hr (two participants), to three visits totaling 5 to 6 hr (two participants). In one case, a single interview and observation of 1 hr were supplemented by written answers to some interview questions that were difficult to discuss while the participant was engaged in his or her work. Data from observations and interviews were documented in written field notes recorded during the process of the interview and supplemented by additions immediately following the interview. Two students also audiotaped their interviews and later added to their written notes from these tapes.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Data analysis and interpretation occurred in two stages, the first by the individual students and the second through group discussion. In the first stage, each student coded his or her notes from interviews and observations for themes that emerged from the data at a detailed level that has been referred to as microcoding (Patton, 1990). From this analysis, each student developed a written work narrative of the participant that represented both the themes that emerged from the participant's own words and the student's
reflections on this work experience. Various authors have pointed out that producing a narrative is typically a collaborative process between the teller and the listener that is shaped by both parties as the story is told, heard, recorded, and interpreted (Polkinghorne, 1988; Riessman, 1993; Widdershoven, 1993). Two voices are thus incorporated. In this article, the voices of participants themselves are reflected most directly in quotations from their interviews. To reflect the voices of the five students, an attempt was made in the work narratives that follow, which have been condensed from the students' longer written narratives, to retain the personal writing style and reflections of each student. Rather than imposing a common reporting format, this diversity illustrates different ways to represent findings of qualitative research in written form (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Van Maanen, 1988).

Trustworthiness of the process of producing narratives was increased by using member checks when feasible (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Three of the five students were able to have participants review their own work narratives in order to confirm the accuracy with which they represented the participant's perspective. For the remaining two participants, one preferred not to review her written narrative, and the other was not available for this step.

A second phase of data analysis and interpretation occurred through seminar discussion by students and faculty members to identify similarities and differences in the five work narratives. This comparison resulted in identification of common themes that emerged from the data and examination of alternative ways these themes might be interpreted using literature discussed in class. Results of this comparative analysis are discussed here as alternative ways persons select and use occupations in their environments and the adaptive significance of work in the lives of participants. Out of this process a schematic was developed that identifies potential adaptive benefits of engagement in work and relates them to adaptation as an interactive process between persons and environments and as a short-term and long-term process.

Contrasting Work Narratives

Maria: Escaping From Seclusion

The meaning of work for Maria has developed through a progression of experiences beginning in childhood. Her parents were strict and controlling and expected obedience from their daughter. She was to return home immediately after school and could seldom spend time with friends: "Every day my dad would have the chauffeur pick me up from school to be sure that I wouldn't take to any boys or bad girls." Maria's local world and perhaps her parents' cultural beliefs shaped her into a quiet and introverted person: "My father was sweet. He would give me anything I asked for, but he was also very strict, especially around boys.... We were not allowed to speak when other adults were at the house."

As she grew older, work would be Maria's escape from this sheltered, inhibiting life. Her first job as a waitress was taken without her parents' knowledge after she was sent to Scotland at the age of 21 to attend school. She wanted contact and communication with other people and thought this type of work would force her into conversation and expose her to others. As she stated, "I got a job to become outgoing, I didn't care about the money." In this way, work served as the means to attaining a goal: to increase her ability to begin forming relationships outside her sheltered home.

As Maria advanced in her career, she became the manager of a pizza restaurant. This led to her making more money, and work became a means to this end. In her words, "I like to take care of myself, I hate to scrounge off others." She is no longer dependent on her parents financially or otherwise and has a sense of freedom from her parents' control: "My mom still tries to control my decisions, but I've learned to ignore her....[She] wants me to quit my job, but I won't." Her work thus supports her current sense of agency that she can choose and make decisions for herself.

Maria describes many frustrations with the day-to-day activities of her job due to turnover of personnel, the need for constant recruitment and training of new staff members, and "lots of hassles" with scheduling. However, she is proud of the increased productivity she has achieved through hard work and demonstrated this by showing awards she has received from the company.

In Maria's life, play suffers because of work: "I hardly ever get to do what I want to do." Leisure time is not the escape it should be but, rather, a temporary distraction. Although Maria tries to separate work and play, and may do so physically, work dominates her thoughts throughout the day. She is at the restaurant 40 to 50 hours per week, but she never really gets away from it. She carries a pager that "constantly" goes off. She calls frequently to check the status of the business. Her mind is always thinking of what needs to be done next or how to improve some aspect of production. In her words, "My boyfriend tells me that I'm always at work, even when I'm not at the store...because I'm always worried about it.... As long as I'm here, I'll always be working too much."

In reflecting on Maria's life, there seems to be little balance among occupations. Work dominates each day, week, and eventually her life in general. Maria's own sense of overemphasis on work in her life is reflected in her statement, "I'd like to be able to work but not have to worry about it when I go home." She is the classic example of the "overworked American" as defined by Schor
(1992). Because work has become the central part of Maria's life, all other things fit in around it. However, Maria has seemed to set her life up like this on purpose. Work fills certain voids in her life. Work has allowed Maria to emerge from seclusion, to come out from her parent's shadow, and to stand on her own. Through work she has become independent and free. Although the activities involved in her daily work seem to offer more frustrations than sources of enjoyment, they are tolerated because work provides Maria with social recognition of her accomplishments as a manager and with financial independence and autonomy from her family.

**Malcolm: Establishing Life Work**

The pager at his waist 24 hours a day is a reminder to Malcolm of his job and what he is and does as a flight nurse, a job he has held for 12 years. As a kid, Malcolm wanted to be a fireman or a pilot, but when he was young he witnessed a house burning with five children inside. As he approached the house to help, the intense heat was a realization that fire fighting was not for him. During his adolescent years he did neighbors' yard work and chores at home, and in high school he worked as a hospital orderly: "I felt obligated to take on work and missed a lot of what the other kids were doing—I worked too much as a kid." On graduating from high school, Malcolm was drafted and became an Army medic. After being discharged from the military, he had to decide what to do with his life. Malcolm did not have many male role models to learn from, but he knew he wanted to be a professional and make his mother proud: "I'm grateful that I was raised by so many women; I learned more from them about being a man than I could ever learn from a man."

He was the first of his family to attend college and the first black man to graduate from his school of nursing. Early in his nursing career, Malcolm felt he had to prove himself because he was "black, male, and new," but now he is more confident of his skills and enjoys being an exception to the stereotypical perception of nurses.

Malcolm has arranged to combine working as a life-flight nurse with work as a floor nurse at the same facility. The things Malcolm enjoys most about being a flight nurse are the challenge and excitement of going new places and helping others. Malcolm openly discusses his sense of power derived from flying and from the independence and authority of his flight nurse role: "I had a hand in saving a life. People are in awe of you...when we arrive at the destination to pick up a child, I'm wearing my flight suit and 'being the expert'...the staff does whatever I ask, and I'm in control." As a floor nurse, he enjoys the special relationships forged with children and their families during their hospital stay, particularly those he has "flown in." He eagerly showed a box of mementos containing all the gifts he has received and cherished over the years. When asked what he would like his patients to say about him, Malcolm replied, "That I cared about them and that I had a good heart."

Malcolm has considered being a flight nurse full time but believes that the stress would not be conducive to a healthy lifestyle. He works on counteracting the effects of stress by relaxing and turning off the job when not at work. "The minute I walk out the hospital door I put work behind me." He states that nothing is more important than one's family, though he does not appear to have much time to spend with them. During his leisure time, he enjoys giving back to the community by speaking about his work at churches and schools (although this would appear to be more like work to some).

The thought of never nursing again is not a concept Malcolm is comfortable with: "Maybe I would semi-retire, part-time nurse and part-time rancher." His sense of self and role identity are enmeshed with his role of nurse.

In reflecting on Malcolm's life, work consumes much of his time and energy, but Malcolm sees it as a way to achieve his family goals, to help his children through school and to own a ranch. Not having a father himself to rely on may make these goals that much more important to achieve, and he appears to see the trade-off of work over time for family and friends as an unavoidable sacrifice. Although Malcolm loves his job, it comes at a price. Someone who works 12-hour shifts and is on call 7 to 12 days a month is unable to spend much time with family. The stress of frequently witnessing the aftermath of trauma must also take its toll on his emotions. His statement that he leaves work behind when he walks out of the hospital may be more of a goal than a fact. Malcolm's early commitment to working with burned children on the basis of his own childhood experience of witnessing a fire, his statement that he will always be involved in nursing, and his commitment to increasing public awareness of burn safety during his leisure time suggest that his work fits the notion of "life work" (Hall, 1993) as a source of meaning that is expressed through a lifetime of engagement in activities believed to have some larger significance beyond the individual.

**Mark: Enacting a Family Tradition**

Mark comes from a family in which his father was a member of the national soccer team, his mother played competitive club tennis, and his brother plays cricket on the professional level in his home country. Although Mark's family and their circle of friends place high value on participation in competitive sports, it is understood that sports-related careers in South Africa are very limited and it is generally expected that sports scholarships will be sought in the United States. Mark stated:
Mark played on the European tennis circuit before being recruited to attend university in the United States on a tennis scholarship. He then continued to play this circuit during the summers of his college years to improve his ranking, which would allow him to “get on with better clubs.” He met and married his wife, an American, who was also on athletic scholarship at the same university and who also comes from a sports-oriented family. Mark stated that “college tennis was work...they own you, but you can't get on without it.” He and his wife expect their young daughter to be actively involved in sports. “At least she'll be able to go to university with it”.

These statements indicate that Mark sees involvement in sports as a natural activity both for connecting with family members and friends and for achieving educational and career goals.

Mark’s description of his work is mixed with terms often reserved for play. He describes the interaction with the club tennis team as a chance to set up social events and travel to tournaments. In his words:

Making the members happy is what you work at...that means joining them in matches, setting up tournament play, organizing [social] events such as round robin, club parties, or barbecues. The members want to play, and they want to have fun...some of them take the matches very seriously, but it’s important to make sure they have a good time.

Mark distinguishes work from play by whether the activity is difficult or involves conflict (work) or is fun and rewarding (play): “There are certain times when I really think about my job as work.” The activities that make his job seem like work include giving lessons, moderating disagreements on the courts or about club policies, and hosting tournaments.

When asked what he does for play, Mark talks about playing golf and spending time with friends. Most of his friendships were developed through college athletics and international tennis play or through dealing with sports equipment representatives. Friends also include persons who have sponsored him or helped him make connections when he first came to the United States and when he first started as a teaching pro.

In reflecting on Mark’s life, his view of work as a family tradition seems well established not only in his family of origin, but also in the family into which he has married and among the circle of friends in his life. Sports appear to be a way Mark continues to live our experiences from his youth and the lens through which he envisions future possibilities for his own family. This work provides social recognition and income to support his family, benefits that seem to outweigh some aspects of his daily job activities that he describes as difficult, Mark and his wife expect their daughter to continue the tradition of sports as a means of achieving educational and career goals and of fostering connections with family and friends. This seems to reflect a view of work as contributing not only to one’s own identity, but also to the identity of a family over multiple generations.

Betty: Getting Stuck

Betty works as a financial analyst at a large oil corporation. She is married and has a teenaged son. Betty describes herself as “easy going and laid back...and shy around people I don't know.” She also said, “I am a high achiever when it comes to work, and I demand this of my son.” Betty says that she has a strong belief in God and in her family. She enjoys spending time with her son “keeping him involved in different activities” and says that she has “a supportive husband with good morals.” She has many photos of family members in her office, which indicates their importance to her.

Betty lost her father when she was 7 years old, leaving her mother to raise three girls as a single parent. She described her mother as “strict about us girls doing chores like cleaning and cooking.” Her most vivid memory from childhood was an accident that occurred at age 10 in which she and her sisters were playing in a closet and lit a kerosene lamp, causing a fire that burned their house down: “The house was completely destroyed, and the only clothes we had were the ones we were wearing. We were not wearing any shoes at the time.”

Betty chose her current work because she wanted an occupation that “made good money,” after earlier jobs as a clerk, waitress, and cashier. Having a good income is reportedly important to her in order to provide opportunities for her family, such as private school and music lessons for her son. In her work as a financial analyst, Betty oversees specific products where she reviews the books each month and reports on profits to the corporation. She described her job as “mostly routine and repetitive” and could think of nothing that she looks forward to at work each day. She and her coworkers in accounting are unable to take off the first 2 weeks of each month because of reporting deadlines. Most of what Betty does depends on input she receives from other persons. She said that “we are ‘peons’ in finance.” Betty describes her coworkers as “easy to work with and talk to….We joke and kid with each other from time to time.”

Betty has been with her current employer for more than 25 years, starting in an entry-level position doing sales, taxes, and inventory; progressing to supervisor; and
then moving to her current position, which she has held for 5 years. She has reached a point where there is no advancement and sees her opportunities as limited. In her words, “I am ready for a change.” When asked about the possibility of getting ahead, Betty laughed and said, “Chances are not good.” She thought that when she started her job she could move up to a management position, but she says that she has “reached a plateau both in salary and job level.” Betty believes that jobs are limited in her geographic area, and she is not willing to relocate. She also believes that she has no experience in other areas. She recently enrolled in computer classes in order to enhance her education.

Betty reports that she does not have a lot of leisure time. She goes to work at 6:30 a.m. and gets home about 6:00 p.m., and on the weekends she does household chores and shopping. When asked about leisure activities, she initially responded, “Nothing...I just lie around and watch television and sometimes rent videos.” Later, she indicated that she likes shopping, bowling, going to the movies, reading, and eating out with her family on Friday nights. She said, “I used to take walks with my husband, but we haven’t done that in a long time.”

In reflecting on Betty’s life, her work as a financial analyst was initially chosen as a way of cultivating a career that would offer financial security and ability to support a lifestyle that provided special opportunities for her family members. Her emphasis on security may have been shaped by childhood experiences, including loss of her father and her home. Her current disillusionment and loss of interest in her job can be interpreted as burnout. She has grown tired of the same repetitive activities and responsibilities. One theory that relates to Betty’s current experience is Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi’s (1988) assertion that involvement in activity is often controlled by external forces rather than being freely chosen. Betty describes her life as revolving around company schedules for reporting and projections. Csikszentmihalyi’s (1975) concept of flow also explains Betty’s boredom, which results when an activity does not sufficiently challenge the capabilities of the individual. She is hoping that her job description will change to allow involvement in other types of activities at work. She has started taking classes in hope that this change will occur rather than making direct attempts to advocate for revisions in her current job description or looking for another position. Betty feels “stuck” in her current work situation partly because of the high degree of structure in the organization and perhaps because of financial obligations that require maintenance of a particular income level, which seems to shape difficult decisions about taking risks.

George: Constructing a Self

George has worked as a carpenter, dishwasher, laborer, longshoreman, and sports equipment salesman. He went to junior college for a year and a half, doing better there than in high school “because I did it for myself and not for my parents.” When he was a child, George wanted to “play quarterback for the Green Bay Packers.” He played some football in college but quit after an injury.

George chose his current work as a manufacturer’s representative in the oil field equipment industry because he had difficulty with many other jobs and in “working with people, especially authority figures.” His father did a similar kind of work, which provided a model for George in deciding to set up his own business. George reports that he has some learning disabilities that result in his being “a very poor and slow reader.” He reportedly used alcohol and other drugs for many years to “self-medicate” his hyperactivity, short attention span, and fear of people. George says that he has learned to use the Alcoholic Anonymous program, which he joined 20 years ago, to cope with these challenges. Before he quit drinking and started in his current line of work, George never felt accepted: “I felt like I didn’t fit in anywhere.” Now George states that “having a white collar, suit-and-tie job where I deal with presidents of major companies makes me feel accepted.” George describes himself as “successful and productive” in his current work, which he calls “a reference point” for his self-esteem.

George’s home in which his office is located is on the water where he keeps his fishing boat. He enjoys taking business associates and customers fishing because it promotes a relaxed and comfortable setting for business. One of his hobbies is repairing musical instruments and then playing them. “I like to go to pawn shops and buy instruments that are broken and make them usable again.” The instruments that he had in his office included an acoustic guitar, electric guitar, mandolin, and banjo.

In reflecting on George’s life, he has chosen a type of work that he has been able to adapt to fit his needs, that matches his talents for solving mechanical and technical problems using hands-on experience, and that he believes is meaningful in his culture. George considers his current work successful because he enjoys the daily experience and because his business has been financially rewarding and has led to a good reputation in the field. He attributed his past failures in his work life to his cognitive, emotional, and psychological challenges and to his drinking. When he quit “drinking and drugging,” he reached a turning point in his life. In structuring his work, he has structured a new self. His hobby of repairing broken musical instruments and making them usable can be seen
as a metaphor for taking a life that was broken (his own) and making it useful again.

Selecting and Using Available Opportunities for Work

At the second stage of data analysis and interpretation, seminar discussion of the five work narratives by students and faculty members compared ways in which participants selected and used work opportunities available in their local worlds and examined factors that shaped their work experience and its meaning. In these work narratives, it is noteworthy that the participants who seem to find their work most rewarding and meaningful are those who have actively used, modified, or combined available work options creatively, rather than viewing such opportunities as "givens" to which the person must adapt. Malcolm and George, and to some extent Mark, have explored available work opportunities and combined these in novel ways. It is perhaps significant that the men in this study found this easier or more feasible than the women did. Although they do not value or enjoy their daily work experience, Maria and Betty have accepted available occupational opportunities because their work allows them to meet other goals such as financial independence and security.

An active process of adaptation that involves modification or combination of occupational options available in one's local world may require personal qualities such as creativity and ability to see things in new ways, flexibility and willingness to take risks, and a relatively high sense of self-efficacy. The inclination to modify occupational opportunities or to accept them as unalterable "givens" may also be influenced by the person's socialization. For many women, and particularly women of color, managerial and professional positions, such as those held by Maria and Betty, historically have not been available. This may make such positions seem more like distant goals to be sought rather than readily available types of work that can be altered by personal action. These contrasting modes of using available work opportunities in an active or passive way can be viewed in terms of the distinction made by Polkinghorne (1996) between narratives in which the actor considers himself or herself as agent or victim.

The Adaptive Significance of Work

Comparison of the narratives revealed several common themes that represent potential adaptive benefits of engagement in work for different persons. These include (a) enjoyment of the activity in and of itself; (b) attainment of immediate extrinsic rewards, such as social recognition and income; (c) contribution to aspects of one's identity, such as accomplishment, independence, and attaining a valued lifestyle; and (d) belief that one's work contributes to purposes larger than oneself. These potential benefits can be organized in a schematic that includes benefits of the occupation to self and others and short-term and long-term benefits (see Table 1). The examination of benefits to self and others reflects a conceptualization of adaptation as a process involving both persons and environments, where benefits of engagement in work originate both within the individual as well as from other persons and organizations in the environmental context. The examination of short-term and long-term benefits reflects a conceptualization of adaptation as both a short-term process of interacting with immediate challenges and a long-term cumulative process that evolves over a lifetime.

Intrinsic enjoyment of engagement in occupation for its own sake, the importance of doing, is a notion that has long been valued in occupational therapy (Fidler & Fidler, 1978; Florey, 1969). This aspect of work is exemplified in the literature outside occupational therapy by the extensive body of research of Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi (1988) on flow experience in activities that are rewarding for their own sake. In this study, Malcolm, Mark, and George all reported intrinsic enjoyment of performing the activities involved in their work, whereas Maria and Betty often found their work activities demanding, frustrating, or boring.

Immediate extrinsic rewards that come from others, such as social recognition and income, have also been widely acknowledged as factors that shape successful work experience. In occupational therapy, Primeau (1996) has asserted that such rewards are often particularly important to women whose traditional work of household management and child rearing has long been undervalued socially and undercompensated financially. Terkel's (1972) interviews with a broad range of workers indicated that lack of social recognition and appreciation for the value of their work was a source of frustration and disillusionment for many persons. In this study, the extrinsic rewards of financial success were particularly important to Maria and Betty, whereas social recognition was cited by Maria, Malcolm, Mark, and George as a factor that strongly shaped their views of work.

The contribution of work to one's identity is reflected in achieving values such as a sense of accomplishment and independence or attainment of a valued lifestyle. Fidler and Fidler's (1978) notion of "doing and becoming" clearly reflects the central belief in occupational therapy of the potential for engagement in occupation to influence identity and development of a sense of competence and mastery. In the literature outside occupational therapy, this notion is exemplified by Kondo's (1990) research on the different ways work is used by men and women in a small artisanal shop in Japan in "constructing a self" that reflects traditional cultural values. In the present study, Maria and
Table 1
Potential Adaptive Benefits of Engagement in Work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of Benefit</th>
<th>Short-Term Benefit</th>
<th>Long-Term Benefit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self</td>
<td>Intrinsic enjoyment of activity for its own sake</td>
<td>Identity (accomplishment, independence), valued lifestyle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>Immediate extrinsic rewards (social recognition, income)</td>
<td>Contribution to purposes larger than oneself</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Betty valued work because it gave them a general sense of accomplishment and independence, though they disliked their actual work activities. Malcolm, Mark, and George saw work as a representation of their special knowledge and expertise.

Work has been viewed by some authors as having the potential to connect individual occupational engagement to purposes larger than oneself and, thus, to sources of life meaning. The poet and essayist Hall (1993) spoke of life work in this sense of connection with purposes larger and more lasting than the person's life. This theme has also been explored by some social scientists such as Coles (1993), who studied reasons people engage in altruistic kinds of work. In the present study, Malcolm seems to see his engagement in working with burned children as "life work," as reflected in his statement that he "wants to have done something and not just lived here." George also appears to be considering the larger significance of the business and the new self he constructed as a process that has potential application for young persons with similar disabilities.

For the participants in this study, work provided some or all of these potential benefits in different combinations. Trade-offs between conflicting benefits sometimes led to difficult circumstances and decisions for some participants. For example, Betty has chosen to remain in her current job to maintain financial security for herself and her family, although she reports no intrinsic enjoyment of its daily activities. Moving to a job where she would enjoy the activities more is a risk she chooses not to take because of its possible implications for loss in other areas of her life.

In addition to the potential adaptive benefits of engagement in work as an occupation in and of itself, another important consideration that emerged from this study is the examination of how work is related to the larger constellation of occupations of the person. In occupational therapy, this issue has traditionally been reflected in the notion of balance in one's overall occupational or activity configuration, although what constitutes a desirable balance has been notoriously difficult to identify (Christiansen, 1996). Scholars outside occupational therapy who have addressed this issue include Nippert-Eng (1995) who examined ways persons both establish and transcend boundaries between home and work. She found that there is a continuum ranging from complete separation of these domains to a high degree of integration of work with other aspects of life. In the present study, Betty maintained a high degree of separation between work and the rest of her life in an effort to reserve time for activities with her family. Work dominated Maria's life through her long hours and through intrusive extensions of the workplace, such as a pager, that made engagement in other occupations difficult. In contrast, Malcolm has purposely woven work into much of his home and leisure life, perhaps to an extent that his family may consider excessive. Mark and George could be said to purposely incorporate play into their work through personal engagement in sports in Mark's case and through leisure activities such as fishing with clients in his boat in George's case. The complex ways in which these persons orchestrated work and other aspects of their lives caution us to ask whether the concept of balance between categories of occupations is an oversimplification of a complex interactive process.

Implications for Occupational Therapy

In evaluating the significance and implications of this research, it is important to acknowledge its limitations as an exploratory study. The use of five different researchers to gather data and do initial data analysis can be viewed as both a weakness and a strength. Variability in the skills and perspectives of individual researchers introduces inconsistency, which can be seen as reducing trustworthiness. However, there is a long history of qualitative research conducted by teams of researchers in which differing skills and interpretive perspectives of persons are considered a strength so long as there are integrating processes to provide coherence and organization (Patton, 1990). In this study, integration occurred at multiple points in the process, including group discussion of a common literature base before data collection, joint planning for selection of participants and data collection, and data analysis and interpretation through group discussion.

Another limitation of this study was a time frame that did not allow multiple contacts with participants over time. Such prolonged engagement is commonly viewed as an important means of increasing trustworthiness of qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Methods to compensate for this weakness, such as member checks, could only be implemented partially in this study.

An additional issue is the question of how representative the five participants are of work experience in general. As is typical in qualitative research, applicability of findings to other persons and circumstances must be investigated in future research rather than being assumed on the basis of statistical sampling procedures.

Experience in this exploratory study has led to several
outcomes that can be incorporated into future research on the significance of work experience. These outcomes include identification of additional important research questions, such as examination of how persons make decisions about prioritizing different benefits of engagement in work and how they coordinate multiple kinds of occupational engagement. Outcomes also include identification of interview questions and observation guidelines that were most successful in eliciting useful information about work experience and its meaning and development of more extensive strategies for ensuring trustworthiness, such as member checks and the use of peer reviewers.

Findings of the study have several implications for occupational therapy. At a theoretical level, they support the great importance of considering both doing and meaning as fundamental aspects of engagement in occupation. In relation to current interest in the concept of adaptation and development of knowledge concerning this concept (Wood, 1996), the present study indicates the usefulness of considering adaptation as both a short-term and a long-term interactive process between persons and environments.

At a practical level, occupational therapists frequently work with clients who have experienced loss of work due to onset of disability or to changes in the environmental context of work, such as employee termination or obsolescence of the employee’s work skills. Newman’s (1988) research on this experience, which she calls “falling from grace,” indicates that loss of work can have very different meanings for different kinds of persons as well as for their families. The proposed framework for considering potential adaptive benefits of work could be evaluated clinically by therapists as a means to better understand the significance of loss of work in the lives of clients. Through such evaluation, therapists could be better prepared to help clients deal with both short-term pragmatic issues and longer term meaning-related issues of work loss. This framework could also be used in exploring alternative new work options with clients for whom return to previous forms of work is not feasible.

The work experience of persons in this study suggests that those persons who actively choose and use available occupational opportunities in creative ways appear to find their work much more rewarding than persons who choose forms of work almost by default and then accept them as given. The profession needs to better understand why some persons feel empowered to consider available occupational opportunities as alternatives, which they can actively adapt to meet their own purposes, and develop ways of fostering this sense of empowerment (Pollinghorne, 1996). On the basis of this study, we believe that occupational therapists may play an important role in fostering an active process of adaptation when working with persons who lack knowledge of a range of available occupational opportunities, persons whose socialization may encourage them to accept readily available options as unalterable givens, and persons whose own levels of creativity, risk-taking, and sense of self-efficacy may lead them to limit possibilities for their lives unnecessarily. By collaborating with clients in considering alternative work options and a broad range of potential adaptive benefits of these alternatives, therapists can help clients expand the range of possibilities for their lives. ▲

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