

## Chapter 5. Spirituality

*Spirituality is theology on two feet.*

Bowe (2003)

One of the themes which were identified by the research community, was that meaning in life is often associated with the Divine.

This was languaged in different ways. The web page of UrCareer declares that God is always in control, thus creating a context within which, I believe, my fellow researchers felt more at ease to introduce the sacred and the divine into our conversations.

Some participants like Delicia, Mahlatse, Lee-Anne and Amorita referred to religion, and many mentioned Christianity (Delicia, Mahlatse, Millicinda and Lee-Anne). Mahlatse indicated that she wanted to “be like Christ”, thus suggesting a practical Christo-centric spirituality.

“God” was positioned as central to most of the meaningfulness conversations. Amorita referred to God in the context of his unchanging nature. Millicinda on more than one occasion attributed her purpose in life to God, suggesting that she believed he “pre-destined” her for a specific task. She also said that she believed we “need to acknowledge God in everything we do” in our pursuit of meaningfulness. Jurie mentioned how he committed himself to God as the centre of his life. His understanding of success and meaningfulness was often closely related to his relationship with God.

Although these narratives of God varied in the way God was portrayed, most of the fellow researchers associated meaningfulness with the divine or numinous. Seeing that these stories differed so much in terms of how God was “storied”, we decided to group the “God stories” under the theme of Spirituality. Spirituality according to the relational understanding of the discourse [see Carlson, Erickson and Seewald-Marquardt (2002: 216-236) and Griffith and Griffith (2003: 15) in this regard] is also better aligned with the post-foundational position which we have adopted and described in Chapter 3 of this thesis (see page 2-71 of this thesis).

### 5.1 The structure of this chapter

In this chapter we will journey in relationship with Spirituality. On our journey, we will depart from the base of our exploratory conversations on meaningful living, positioning this discussion within the bigger dialogue on meaning or a Life that Matters.

As was described above, we then reflected on the process and content of our general discussions, identifying the themes emerging from the pool of story lines and storied events. One of the prominent themes from these discussions as described in Chapter 4 was then named Spirituality.

Next the journey through this chapter will stop by our own understanding of Spirituality. Other perspectives of the discourse will be described and our choice of an understanding specific to the study or relevant to the study will be explained. Unfortunately the limited scope of this study did not allow a comprehensive study of spirituality, a discourse which is daunting in its scope and application.

The next section of the chapter will endeavour to link spirituality and meaningful living.

Once this context has been established, the research community will revisit the topic of spirituality reflecting on how our understanding of spirituality worked for us in the process of working towards a Life that Matters.

I will introduce a discussion on the ethics of including spirituality in a process like coaching or therapy to assess whether we are still congruent with the ethical position we adopted earlier in this text and the research process as a whole.

The chapter will be concluded and bridged to the next chapter by reflecting on the learning about a Life that Matters through the lens of Spirituality.

## 5.2 Spirituality and Meaning

Before we continue with our discussion of spirituality we may want to find out whether other voices share our proposition that a Life that Matters and Spirituality are in a close relationship with each other. In this regard we consulted the literature to determine what was written about spirituality and meaningfulness.

Frankl (2004: 115) posits that the meaning in life is to be found in what he calls “the self-transcendence of human existence” – a discourse which is often associated with spirituality (see for instance Louw, 2007:x). Although Frankl does not use the term spirituality, his understanding of a meaningful life is positioned within discourses which are closely related to some of the perspectives of spirituality described later in this chapter.

Seifert (2002) suggests that spirituality recently has started to become very prominent in meaning studies, taking precedence over other discourses like religiousness and religiosity. She relates this to

what she calls “the internal struggles in the search for meaning” (2002: 61). Harris and Purrone (2003) confirm this and add a relational dimension to spirituality. They quote May (1982) who suggested that meaning of life is an element of spirituality.

Valtners Painter (2007:1) boldly states that spirituality can be considered a search for meaning in life in her very interesting article on spirituality and creativity.

A scholar of management, Lips-Wiersma (2002a: 385), quotes Neck and Milliman (1994) linking spirituality and the search for meaning in life even in their “definition” of spirituality. Following Vaill (1996:218) she then proceeds to propose that spirituality is intimately involved in individuals’ fundamental perceptions about “who they are, what they are doing, the contributions they are making”. This also suggests that spirituality and identity may be closely related. This is confirmed by Thomas West (2001: 38) who associates this spiritual identity with *particular meanings*. This relationship is discussed further in Chapter 8 on page 8-188.

In another paper (2002b) Lips-Wiersma describes the influence of spiritual “meaning-making” on career behaviour, once again confirming the position of spirituality as meaning-making construct (2002b: 500). Spirituality is also said to be involved in “existentialist questions” in the workplace such as “*What is the meaning of my work?*” and “*Why am I doing this work?*” according to Krishnakumar and Neck (2002: 154). Referring to the work done by Burack (1999), they also suggest that spirituality is associated with an enhanced sense of personal fulfilment among employees (2002:153).

Another author who positioned spirituality in a meaning context was Canale (1993). Adopting a relational approach, he suggested that spirituality is a search for connection in two dimensions, namely with one’s self and what he refers to as “a core reality”. This is a quest for *value and meaning in life*. A Christian understanding of this description of spirituality would position God – as Father, Son and Spirit – as “core reality”.

Uncertainty and meaningful living share a tension filled relationship (see the chapter on Theology, chapter 2, for a more extensive discussion of certainty). The educationist, Webster (2002:1) describes how the significance of human existence has become more uncertain, despite advancing standards of living which have improved quantitative aspects of our lives like material wealth and longevity. Quality of life does not follow as a natural consequence of this improvement, though. In this context he then posits that spirituality is often understood as the search for meaning. In a discussion of uncertainty, Nolan (2006: 7) suggests that spirituality may even be an attempt to

escape the uncertainties and insecurity of the postmodern era (see the chapter on Theology in this regard).

Louw (2007:xi) links meaningfulness and the question about a meaningful life to spirituality. Joining Frankl, he refers to the meaning of life as *logos*, suggesting that *soul* and hence spirituality (see the next section in this chapter), is concerned with the meaning of life. According to him (2007: x) soul is a function of existence (“bestaansfunksie”) describing how we live meaningfully every day.

O’Connor and Chamberlain (1996: 462) describe how Tillich (1953) *perceived the loss of an ultimate concern (God) in the modern world as the ‘decisive event underlying the search for meaning and the despair of it.*

When I think about spirituality in such practical terms, I am reminded of Michael White’s conversation with Hoyt and Combs (1998: 33-59) regarding spirituality. In this interview White distinguished between three versions of spirituality, namely *immanent* spirituality, *ascendant* spirituality and *immanent-ascendant* spirituality. Ascendant spirituality in this context is explained to refer to forms of spirituality which are “achieved at planes that are imagined at an altitude above everyday life” (1998:35). This conforms to an understanding of spirituality as concerned with the Divine, the Sacred. According to White, *immanent forms of spirituality* refer to a process of reflecting on one’s true self, who one really is.<sup>46</sup> In very elaborate terms he describes this as being engaged by “descending the caverns that are imagined deep below the surface of one’s life”. Lastly *immanent-ascending spirituality* combines elements of the first two forms of spiritualities, describing a relationship both with something which is bigger than oneself and with oneself as relational being. In his own words White describes this as the process of “being in touch with or having an experience of a soul or the divine that is deep within oneself and that is manifest through one’s relationship with a god who is transcendent.” These three forms of spirituality he calls non-material or intangible and then proceeds to describe what he calls “spiritualities of the surface”. This is a *material* spirituality which he relates to people’s “identity projects” and which he explains as follows:

*when I talk of spirituality I am not appealing to the divine or the holy . . . or human nature . . . The notion of spirituality that I am relating to is one that assists us to attend to the material options for breaking from many of the received ways of life - to attend to those events of people’s lives that provide the basis for the constitution of identities that are other than those which are given. And in this sense it is a spirituality that has to do with relating to one’s*

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<sup>46</sup> In this context spirituality is therefore related to identity, a description which should be remembered when we discuss identity and meaningfulness in Chapter 8 on page 8-177.

*material options in a way that one becomes more conscious of one's own knowing (Hoyt and Combs, 1996: 36).*

Section 5.4 of this chapter will discuss the way that my fellow researchers experienced spirituality in their own lives. I will also try to apply the discussion above to indicate how some of the stories of spirituality related to an *ascendant spirituality* (in White's words) and some stories suggested a more *material spirituality* (once again White's terminology).

### 5.3 Our understanding of spirituality

Any discussion of Spirituality usually starts with a definition of the concept. Once again we will not attempt to "define" spirituality – thereby suggesting that we can delimit the meaning of the concept or implying ambitiously that we can have the final word on Spirituality. We would rather describe and share our relationally agreed understanding of Spirituality. We will however invite some other perspectives on Spirituality into this conversation.

Within the scope and limitations of this study I will not attempt to provide a comprehensive historical account of the construct of spirituality, including the history of the use of the term and the breadth of different understandings of spirituality. The paper by Principe (1983: 127-141) provides an insightful narrative of spirituality and is well worth reading as it bases spirituality within the Trinity discourse. It also provides a broad historical overview of understandings of spirituality over the ages.

Spirituality is derived from the Latin word *spiritus* meaning breath or the "animating or vital principle of a person" (Emmons, 2006: 63). Rolheiser (2004: 125) says that we and the whole universe are moment by moment *actively breathed into existence and held by God*. Briskin (1998: 17) introduces the Hebrew terms *ruach* and *nephesh*, describing the life giving process through which "breath of life" was literally breathed into the "dust of the ground" or *adamah* (compare **Adam** in this regard). *Nephesh* then refers to "living soul" or a human being animated by breath. Spirituality is therefore often understood as the result of the work of the Holy Spirit in humans. Louw relates *nephesh* (or *nefesj*) as a metaphorical inspiration or gasping for wind to the intuitive human focus on "that which is more than experience, transcendence, the quality of our relationship with God" (2007: x). Similar to Briskin's (1998: 17, 139) linking of soul, spirituality and meaningfulness, Louw discusses soul as an existential relational matter. In this regard he posits that we are our souls and that we reveal who we are through our attitude within our relational networks, through the way in which we interpret our lives as meaningful. This is important for our discussion because it creates a relational context

not only for spirituality, but also for identity and meaningful living. These constructs are therefore connected in the process. This positions spirituality and meaningfulness within the epistemology adopted in this study.

Nolan (2006: xviii) differentiates spirituality and theology, suggesting that spirituality concerns itself with experience and practice, whereas theology is focused on doctrines and dogma. This prepares the space to introduce spirituality into the discussion of practical living and meaningful living. This provides us with a link to the study topic under discussion in this thesis, namely meaningful lives.

## 5.4 Our stories of spirituality

As in the other chapters of this thesis the voices of the co-researchers will be heard. Although I have paraphrased some of our conversations, where possible the co-researchers will present their stories in their own words; this is done to be true to the ethic of participation we have adopted throughout the research process. Even when I am reporting their stories, my re-telling of their stories will have been confirmed by my fellow-researchers.

In our discussion on Spirituality we agreed to adopt Rolheiser's proposed understanding of Spirituality as what we do about our passions in life. Referring to ontological passions, Rolheiser uses the terms longings, fire, desires, energy and eros (1998:6-12, 2004:79). He proposes that we "define" spirituality as being "about what we do with the fire inside of us, about how we channel our eros" (1998:11, 2004:79).

I then posed the questions to my co-researchers whether they could tell me a story about their aspirations, ambitions or passions in life, what they did about this and what the outcome of these actions were. Verbatim my introduction and questions were as follows:

*Let us adopt Rolheiser's understanding of Spirituality. Just to refresh your memories: Rolheiser says that we all have a certain longing, a desire, an uneasiness, a passion (ambition, a need for meaning, to be successful, sexuality, to be a good parent, to do something for people in need, to name but a few). What we do with this or the way that we channel this then, he calls our Spirituality.*

(a) *Tell me about your longings, passions, desires, quests, dreams.*

(b) *What do you do about these? How do you live them / channel them?*

(c) *What is the effect this has on you? Does this leave you more peaceful, dissatisfied, liberated, entrapped...?*

In this way I invited my co-researchers to reflect on how spirituality enhances or detracts from their concept of Life that Matters. In their responses the fellow researchers oscillated between White's ascendant spirituality and his *spirituality-of-surface*. In this regard consult the section on Spirituality and Meaning from page 5-133 above. Most of my fellow researchers recounted their spirituality in terms of their relationship with the Divine or God, while a few related spirituality and their passions to relationships with valued others (like family).

I will now report some of the responses to the invitation and questions above.

Estelle responded to the questions indicating that personal growth is a passion in her life. She made value statements in this regard, relating the helping of people to personal growth and indicating that it assisted in making her feel more complete.

She said:

*My passion in life is helping people and through that enabling myself to become a richer person. I have a passion to grow as a person and to reach success – especially personal success. Not only having a good work but to feel complete.*

This reminds one of what may perhaps be considered the *heart of Biblical spirituality*, which is to love each other like ourselves.<sup>47</sup>

She was rather vague in relating this to a practical spirituality and I had to inquire about this in more detail.

*It's something that you always keep in mind – your passion drives you. I try to grow as a person as much as I possibly can and to learn as many things as possible.*

Her assessment of her methodology was that it was fulfilling and contributed to bring her closer to living her passion.

*It gives me a sense of satisfaction – knowing that the things I fight for in life along with the difficult situations I am in, all contribute towards my personal growth which brings me closer to reach my goals (passion).*

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<sup>47</sup> See for instance Mat. 22:39, Mark 12:31 and Luke 10:27 in this regard.

Jurie indicated that his longing is to serve God “*with all his heart, soul and being*” and *live the dreams and desires He has put into his heart*. He then indicated that he believes that he tries to live these passions by being in a loving relationship with God and listening to what He would like him to be, do and achieve. He concluded by saying that when he has done the things he believes God has asked him to do he feels peaceful and happy. In some *re-membering questions* (White, 1997), Jurie referred to significant relationships in his life, indicating that relationships are very important to him in living a meaningful life.

Jurie indicated that his passion was to lead people to the Lord. He referred to people whose hearts were not always “in the right place”. His spirituality as expressed in living his passion is to be sensitive to guidance from God about the right place and right moment at work and wherever he goes to indicate the opportunities for witnessing. He trusts the Lord for guidance about when he should approach people and talk to them. The result as he experiences it as that he is blessed and this encourages him to be available to this passion. At UrCareer he often has opportunities to practice his passion. He believes that these opportunities happen for a reason. Quite often the result is that of being “*shaken out of your comfort zone*”!

Mahlatse had a more immanent perspective on spirituality relating how she desires to see herself being a powerful, humble and joyful woman. She continued to indicate that her passion is to help others and in return, learn from those others stories.

Lidia leaned more towards the *spirituality-of-the-surface* perspective of spirituality as she was telling how important her family was in her life. She told stories about how she wanted them to know that she loved them deeply, she wanted them to know that she delighted in them, treasured them and that they could rely on her. She continued to suggest that she wanted to see them happy, fulfilled, saved and serving God. She longed for them to be wise, make the right decisions, use their talents, and learn from their mistakes. She also wanted to live in a way that they will feel the same about her.

Then she reverted back to an ascendant approach to spirituality. She added that another passion of hers was that she longed to nurture an intimate relationship with God. She described how she longed to enjoy His creation and appreciate His gifts. She wanted to be thankful for His blessings, acknowledge Him in everything she does, concluding that He must always be everything to her.

Once again adopting a more material spirituality she added four wishes to personal growth in her life. Thus she described how she wanted to be successful and apply excellence in everything she



does. She also wanted to be able to say “no” without feeling guilty – be more bold, more daring, more brave, more assertive indicating that she was working on it.

Lidia then indicated that she wanted to be more organised – she hoped to achieve this by delegating more and developing people in the process. Then she finally added that she wanted to paint more often and be freer in her creativity - and less critical of her work!

The next participant to contribute some reflections on spirituality was Delicia. She also introduced relationships into the discussion of spirituality; this time though it referred to romantic relationships. Her approach to getting involved in romantic relationships supported a discourse of being provided for: she suggested that she was not *actively pursuing to getting married*. She immediately added that this did not represent her life philosophy as she did pursue some aspirations or ambitions *actively*, giving academic studies as an example.

Delicia then added some diverse passions to her list naming animals and music and reading as more things adding meaning to her life.

Spirituality as passion has also directed the discourses introduced by the fellow researchers. Following Carlson, Erickson and Seewald-Marquardt (2002:217) – who consider spirituality to be an ethic or a lived way of being - an alternative to this line of enquiry might have been to ask questions about what about their relationship with God added meaning to their lives, giving recognition to stories of spirituality and spirituality-in-relationship in a re-membering process as we did.

The stories of spirituality which my fellow researchers told were varied and included authentic accounts of their personal religious experiences as well as a number of records of how spirituality and relationships (with God, but also with their significant others) and material aspirations are intertwined. This suggests that the spirituality story is not a totalitarian story as it refers to a Life that Matters.

## **5.5 The ethics of including the spirituality discourse in this study conversation**

The reason for including this paragraph is an observation about the hesitation of professionals to include spirituality into social processes. Carlson, Erickson and Seewald-Marquardt (2002: 216, 219-220) discussed this at length in their paper.. Harris and Purrone (2003:1) suggest a certain

discomfort experienced by counsellors or professionals when they introduce spirituality into counselling conversations. Seifert (2002:62) describes how anyone introducing religion (and I suppose also spirituality) into a psychological discussion would be labelled as a meat-head; a mystic; an intuitive, touchy-feely sort of moron!

Heyman, Buchanan, Marlowe and Seely (2006: 3) on the other hand acknowledge that social work practitioners recognize that religion and spirituality may play an important role in practice. Quoting Walsh (1999), Blanton (2002: 292) suggests that increasingly, family therapists are embracing spirituality as an important dimension of and a powerful resource for family therapy.

Another very informative paper on the integration of spiritual experiences in counselling was written by Hinterkopf (1994). This paper introduces an experiential focusing method developed by Eugene Gendlin (1969, 1981). Hinterkopf (1994:165) suggests that spirituality is an integral part of psychotherapy, but that most counsellors lack the necessary training to include spiritual experiences in their work. Hinterkopf (1994:166) first presents an understanding of the spiritual experience. It is reported here as it has certain implications for our study of meaning and meaningfulness. According to her, the spiritual experience can be described as

- a) *A presently felt phenomenon,*
- b) *involving an awareness of the transcendent dimension,*
- c) ***bringing new meanings (my emphasis),***
- d) *that lead to growth.*

The experiential method developed by Gendlin (1969, 1981) facilitates these elements in the client according to Hinterkopf. She then proceeds to describe and explain the experiential focusing method. Hinterkopf (1994:167) explains how Gendlin based his method on a finding that clients who were successful in therapy were those who *paid attention to their internal bodily awareness in a special way*. Gendlin outlines 6 steps of focusing. These were (Hinterkopf, 1994:167-168):

- 1) Clearing the space, a process through which the clients starts by making an *inventory* of problems and issues, identifying the most pressing problem or issue as they do (this involves a certain externalising of these problems)
- 2) Next the client is encouraged to *get a felt sense* of the issues attending to emotional qualities, body sensations and felt meanings as they do.
- 3) *Finding a handle* suggests that the client finds words or images to describe the emotional qualities of the *felt sense*.

- 4) Subsequently in a step referred to as *Resonating*, the client would reflect on the words used in the description of the *felt sense*, ensuring that this is indeed the best description.
- 5) Still pursuing an externalising process, the client would now be asked to *Ask* the *felt sense* an open-ended question about the experienced feeling.
- 6) Usually this results in the emergence of a new meaning – a so-called *felt shift*. The client is now required to take time to integrate an answer that brings *a felt shift*. This step is referred to as *Receiving*.

Hinterkopf (1994:171) applied this to explore spiritual experiences with her clients and suggests that this has the potential to become a non-judgemental way to create space for a discussion of spiritual experiences in counselling.

A paper on the ethics of spirituality in counselling was written by Steen, Engels and Tweatt (2006). This paper explores the ethical implications of spirituality in the counselling practice in terms of the American Counselling Association's (ACA; 1995) *ACA Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice* and discusses the ethics with respect to the topics of (a) client welfare, (b) respecting diversity, (c) personal needs and values, and (d) professional competence. Their conclusion was:

*Our collective experiences, both as clients and counsellors, point toward spirituality as an integral part of personality development. Whether an individual finds himself or herself in existential angst regarding meaning in life, or in a spiritual realm of Jungian synchronicity, integration seems of primary importance for the person to continue to develop. It is not the counsellor's position to foster a particular direction for integration; it is of primary importance, however, that the counsellor helps clients integrate their beliefs (Myers & Williard, 2003). (My underlining)*

Spirituality and stories of God in the meaning stories of my fellow researchers entered the discussion of a Life that Matters spontaneously. Omitting spirituality from the conversation would therefore not honour the contributions of my co-researchers. On the contrary, it would therefore not be ethical to exclude spirituality from the research conversation. Spirituality was not included in a deterministic way as described by Northcut (2000) in his paper in which he explores and discusses ways of creating space for religion and spirituality in psychodynamic processes. Rather, instead of carrying God into the discussion of meaning, I encountered God there amongst my fellow researchers, in the way of the research ethos adapted from Bosch's perspective on a postmodern missionary stance as in the Third Perspective described in Chapter 3.

## 5.6 Spirituality and research

As an afterthought, we may have to reflect on the relationship between research and spirituality. Smith in Smith, Willms and Johnson (1997:189) suggests that the persistent quest for causal relationships so characteristic of many research projects and which is often associated with the need for measurable, objective, and provable facts may actually *divorce* spirituality from research and science. Along the same line of thinking, Harris and Purrone (2003: 3) quoting Dyson, Cobb, and Forman (1997) refer to how the *lack of definition of spirituality impedes research* (my own underlining). This is indicative of the quest to control meaning by means of definition which we so often encounter in modernist research.

Heyman, Buchanan, Marlowe and Seely (2006:4) indicates that despite the recognition and attention that spirituality got in terms of training and education, there has been limited research focusing on practitioners' attitudes towards religion and spirituality in practice.

## 5.7 The bridge to the other chapters

This chapter discussed the first theme identified by the research group, namely spirituality. First it provided our own understanding of spirituality. Other perspectives of this discourse were subsequently described and our choice of an understanding specific to the study or relevant to the study, was explained. We elected to support an understanding of spirituality as being relationally constructed and embedded in experience and practice.

We then investigated the association of spirituality and meaningful living as reported in the literature and established that there exists a vast corpus of research linking spirituality to meaning. This derives from an interdisciplinary community of authors and aligns this study well with some current research.

Once this context has been established, our research community revisited the spirituality discourse, reflecting on how our understanding of spirituality worked for us in the process of working towards a Life that Matters.

We concluded the chapter with a discussion on the ethics of including spirituality in a process like coaching or therapy to assess whether we are still congruent with the ethical position we adopted earlier in this text and the research process as a whole and confirmed that spirituality was not imposed on the research group as an external or foreign discourse, but rather presented itself spontaneously in the dialogical research process.

Spirituality is closely associated with most of the other discourses associated with a Life that Matters as identified by the research group. It is therefore appropriate to have started the discussion of the research themes or discourses with a discussion of spirituality as it refers to a Life that Matters.

## Chapter 6. Being meaningful in another's life

A theme which was identified by most of my fellow researchers, was involvement in other people's lives. This discourse was described in two ways by the research group: social involvement implied feeling that they meant something to other people, but also that they were appreciated by other people. This was usually expressed either as caring for others, helping others, bringing joy to other people or as "my life has meaning when I mean something to somebody else" or alternatively as feeling loved, understood, needed or appreciated. The referrals to being meaningful in another's life are quoted and discussed in Section 6.2 on page 6-146 of this thesis.

This theme therefore has two aspects to it:

- Being involved in some form of social relationship with other people.
- Associating a value perception with that involvement, that is, being involved in a way which is considered to add value either to the other person's life or being valued by the other person.

This chapter will therefore have to explore narratives of relationship and social involvement and discourses of value. Following Battista and Almond (1973), these constructs may be referred to as "interpersonal" and "service" life orientations.

### 6.1 The structure of this chapter

This chapter will initially explore stories of relationships as related by the research group. These stories will be expanded to create histories and "thickened" (Freedman and Combs, 1996: 232-236) and validated by inviting "outsider witnesses" (see inter alia White, 1997 and 2007: chapter 3) into the stories.

Once these voices of relationships have been heard, we will invite the voices of published literature as *propositional knowing* (Heron: 1996) into the conversation. This is another form of engaging "outsider witnesses" into the conversation.

In the next section I will reflect on the value proposition inherent to the perception that my involvement in somebody's life is making a difference to their lives, is important to them, adds value to their lives or means something to them. I will explore how my co-researchers described this

aspect of their social relationships and how they ascertained that those involvements were important in the lives of others.

The co-researchers will then reflect on “social involvement” again in a fashion reminding of the re-telling of preferred stories as described by White (2005).

Establishing these stories as intentional state understandings (White, 2007: 100-107) which enhance “personal agency”, among co-researchers, this is subsequently handed over to the next chapter as part of the multi-storied versions of a “Life that Matters”.

## 6.2 Our stories of relationships

As I indicated in the introduction to this chapter, all my fellow researchers reported that social involvement or relationships played a role in their experience of meaningfulness.

Once the central meaningfulness discourses were identified in the initial stages of the research process, we returned to these and reflected in more detail about the function these discourses had in our own meaning-making processes. I facilitated these reflections by asking the following questions:

- Think about how social relationships have played a role in your experience of meaningfulness so far.
- Have you played a role in somebody’s life which made your own life more meaningful? If so, please tell me the story<sup>48</sup>.
- How did that feel (even physically – did you perhaps get a warm feeling, a feeling of peacefulness, an affirmation of worth)?<sup>49</sup>
- What characteristic of yours become more visible in this story?<sup>50</sup>

These questions are an application of the narrative approach described in Chapter 1. Section 1.5 (page 1-42ff) in that chapter describes how externalising questions like these, as well as re-membering and landscape of action and landscape of meaning questions are utilised to facilitate the meaning enhancing conversation.

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<sup>48</sup> Landscape of action questions directed at re-membering and the involvement of outsider witnesses. In this regard, the reader is referred to page 1-40 of this document where re-membering is discussed in more detail.

<sup>49</sup> This question can be described as an anchoring question which may assist to *thicken* the relationship story.

<sup>50</sup> A landscape of meaning or identity question, aimed at *thickening* the story. This is also strengthening the identity story by inviting the co-researcher to reflect on identity elements.

In response to these questions, Delicia stated that relationships have been the most important factor in the meaningfulness of life. At some stage she asked what good it is if you are doing something, but it does not have a positive impact the relationship with others. She told stories about how even small things like a smile have played a positive role in other people's lives. In this regard she told a story about how she gave an assistant at KFC 5 gold bangles (which she bought cheaply in India) and how this had a profound impact on the lady's mood. Delicia described how happy the assistant became, and in turn, how happy that made her too. She left the shop *with a warm feeling inside*. According to her it means more to physically give something material to a person in need than donate money anonymously.

Amorita suggested that for her a *significant* life was all about *making a measurable positive difference in the lives of others*.

When asked about doing something which means something to others, Jurie responded by telling a story about a friend in Cape Town *who started building a house in a very nice Reserve*. Towards the end she started running out of money and he offered to help her on weekends to paint the house on the inside, put up blinds and assist in completing the building. He reported how good it felt being able to help someone who desperately needed to move into her new house when she needed the help. When *landscape of identity* questions were asked, he indicated that the characteristic that was illustrated in this process was

*to put my own wants and needs aside to help someone else who needed it more than I did.*

This reminds us of Jesus' words in Luke 22:26: "But ye *shall not be* so: but he that is greatest among you, let him be as the younger; and he that is chief, as he that doth serve." The quoted text from the gospel of Luke can be seen as a call to put someone else's needs before one's own needs.

On the matter of relationships and how meaning something to others enhance personal experiences of meaningfulness, Estelle wrote a long letter about her experience of helping others and the importance of relationships in meaning-making. She suggested that social involvement plays a very big role in a person's life. According to her it brings balance, which she considers being very important and contributes towards happiness. She proceeded to tell how she had been through very difficult stages in her life where she *questioned her purpose and meaning in life*. During those times she used to *shut herself out from people and social involvement*. She admitted that that was not the best thing to do at the time, because *everything that bothered her just kept on building up inside of her*. This caused anger and frustration *to turn inwards*, which resulted in depression and a low self-esteem. The more she avoided social involvement, the more difficult it became to do anything about



the depression and low self-esteem. She *became a very angry person who showed anger towards the world, people and life*. This changed her from being a caring person, but *made her a stronger person in the end*.

Although she could not recall a time when she made a difference in someone's life, she said that she knew that she had made changes in her father's, grandmother's and her friend's lives. She related this to having done things for them which showed that she cared about them. She was very modest about this, but also very sincere: she suggested that she *would go to the ends of the earth for the people that she cared about*. She concluded that

*knowing that I made a change in someone else's life is the best feeling, and this contributes to giving my life a purpose.*

Mahlatse responded to the questions about helping others or doing something which means something to them by suggesting that social relationships do impact her life; she did however indicate that she tried to "filter the positive ones only":

*I only focus on the people contributing productively in a positive manner in my life. I do though cut out the negative influences or negative people.*

Most of the co-researchers were hesitant to make any claims about playing a significant role in other people's lives. In this respect, I should have enquired about what discourses influenced this hesitancy. When this hesitancy is deconstructed, some powerful discourses may emerge: Here our Calvinistic heritage of humility<sup>51,52</sup>, discourses of being conceived in sin<sup>53</sup> (see Fig 3 below), and poor

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<sup>51</sup> *Therefore no one will weigh God's providence properly and profitably but him who considers that his business is with his Maker and the Framer of the universe, and **with becoming humility** submits himself to fear and reverence. Hence it happens that today so many dogs assail this doctrine with their venomous bitings, or at least with barking: for they wish nothing to be lawful for God beyond what their own reason prescribes for themselves. Also they rail at us with as much wantonness as they can; because we, not content with the precepts of the law, which comprise God's will, say also that the universe is ruled by his secret plans. As if what we teach were a figment of our brain, and the Holy Spirit did not everywhere expressly declare the same thing and repeat it in innumerable forms of expression.*

Institutes of the Christian Religion I.17.2 (*my emphasis*)

<sup>52</sup> *Dr Jack Arnold (1999) describes how on April 25, 1564, Calvin dictated his will. In it we see the marks of a humble Christian:*

*"In the name of God, I, John Calvin, servant of the Word of God in the Church of Geneva, weakened by many illnesses . . . thank God that he has shown not only mercy toward me, his poor creature, and . . . has suffered me a partaker of his grace to serve Him through my work . . . I confess to live and die in this faith which He has given me, inasmuch as I have no other hope or refuge than His*

self-image may be considered to contribute to a common hesitancy to accept that we have played a significant role in the lives of others. This should however be referred to and confirmed by the fellow researchers first.

Mahlatse was no exception in this regard: she suggested that she was not convinced that she did play a role in someone else's life. She bases this problem story on an experience she had when she was involved in a collaborative study between the University of Pretoria and Florida International University. The collaborators had to interact with high school teens from 14 – 17 yrs. They instructed them in safe sexual behaviours, lifestyle changes and health issues. Later, however, she has seen some of the participants on the streets, smoking dagga and other drugs. As a result of this, she felt like all the hard work they had been through was in vain; she also felt responsible because the research team was part of their lives for 2 years and then left them

*just like that with no hope and no mentors.*

When she was participating in the research project she did feel happy, full of peace and joy; although they themselves were studying, they were also imparting knowledge to others, especially to younger people.

If Mahlatse's words are understood to refer to humility, we should rather reflect on Matt 23:12 "And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted" as well as Matt 18:4 "Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven". This can be a virtue, but if it becomes entangled with the *responsibility discourse*, I have observed this to become totalising and as such, part of the

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*predestination upon which my entire salvation is grounded. I embrace the grace which He has offered me in our Lord Jesus Christ and accept the merits of His suffering and dying that through them all my sins are buried; and I humbly beg Him to wash me and cleanse me with the blood of our great Redeemer, as it was shed for all poor sinners so that I, when I shall appear before His face, may bear His likeness.*

*"Moreover, I declare that I endeavored to teach His Word undefiled and to expound Holy Scripture faithfully according to the measure of grace which He has given me. In all the disputations which I led against the enemies of the truth, I employed no cunning or any sophistry, but have fought His cause honestly. But, oh, my will, my zeal were so cold and sluggish that I know myself guilty in every respect; without His infinite goodness, all my passionate striving would only be smoke, indeed the grace itself which He gave me would make me even more guilty; thus my only confidence is that He is the Father of mercy who as such desires to reveal Himself to such a miserable sinner."*

<sup>53</sup> Most often reliant on Ps. 51:5 and the teachings of Paul in for example Rom 5:21 for its scriptural basis.

delimiting problem story. Therefore, in order for this to remain part of the multi-storied self, it must be read in the context of the “Love thy neighbour **like thyself**” (my emphasis) texts.<sup>54</sup>

Another question which should still be asked is how the decision about the significance of the role played in another’s life was made. This is discussed in Section 6.4 of this chapter.



Figure 4. Michelangelo's painting of the sin of Adam and Eve (the Fall)

Lidia associated her involvement with other people with learning relationships. She describes the significance of this learning as having a *rippling effect* on her life. She also associated helping others with enhancing life meaning: An event which had a lasting effect on her life and enhanced her own experience of meaningfulness occurred once when she was driving home, just having bought some take-away dinners for her family. Just then her phone rang. It was a friend who experienced a family crisis. She was distraught and was calling out for help. Without thinking twice, Lidia turned around and spent the evening with her friend, comforting her, prayed with her and cried with her. She describes this as an intervention from God, and she is still thanking God for using her in that way. For her it was a small sacrifice, but for her friend it was something very meaningful.

As is evident from these stories of social involvement my fellow researchers experienced service to others and relationships with others as some of the most meaning-enhancing experiences in their lives. Not only did they experience this as adding value to others’ lives, but in return their own lives were also enriched. This resonates strongly with the scripture quoted previously in which a service culture was proposed by Jesus.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Mat 22:39; Mar 12:31,33; Luke 10:27

<sup>55</sup> Luke 22:16

### 6.3 Relationships and Meaning – soundings from the literature

Perhaps the best known or most quoted reference to the relationship between a meaningful life and relationships with others is Victor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* (the 2004 edition - 2004:115). O'Connor and Chamberlain (1996: 462) indicate that Frankl (1963 translation) has stated that *meaning can be discovered by self-transcendence, by moving beyond concern for the self and focusing on other people and social and spiritual values.*

Gergen posits relationships within the meaningfulness conversation when he alludes to the individual *embodying polyvocal potentials* within which *each vocality carries traces of significant relationships* (2006:122).

Harris and Larsen (2008) describe the function of relationships in the generation of hope among people suffering from HIV/AIDS. In their research they identified five aspects of hope. These were (a) a future orientation; (b) drawing the past forward; (c) behaviours/control; (d) relationships; (e) meaning and purpose; and (f) hope as a process following diagnosis. They reported that Hope was also *relational*. Participants in their research revealed that an important aspect of hope was about their perceptions of, and experiences with, important relationships (e.g. *'The relationships, these are so important [for your hope]'*).

In a paper on psychologists' beliefs about meaning in their own lives, Kernes and Kinnier (2007) reports that intimate relationships, family and friendships brought most meaning to their lives. Rated fourth in this survey was helping others (2007:207). Quoting a number of authors (Baum & Stewart, 1990; Debats, 1999; DeVogler & Ebersole, 1981; O'Connor & Chamberlain, 1996; Taylor & Ebersole, 1993; Yalom, 1980), they report that relationships with people have consistently been identified as the most frequent source of meaning across the lifespan of respondents.

Debats (1999) did research on sources of meaning in people's lives. He reports that *meaningful* life is often used synonymously to *positive life regard*, a construct often assessed empirically by means of the Life Regard Index (LRI) – an instrument developed by Battista and Almond (1973). In his research relationships were suggested to be closely associated with such a *positive life* regard. Relationships here referred to commitment to family, lover/partner or friends. In this paper he also tested the hypothesis that relationships are the most frequent sources of meaning in life and reported that the category of relationships was found to provide the most frequent source of meaning for both patients and non-patients, thus confirming the hypothesis (1999:38).

Another finding of Debats (1999:46) related to the so-called altruistic orientation with specific emphasis on helping others (1999:38). This was voiced by his respondents in terms like

“Being there when people need me.”

“Helping others.”

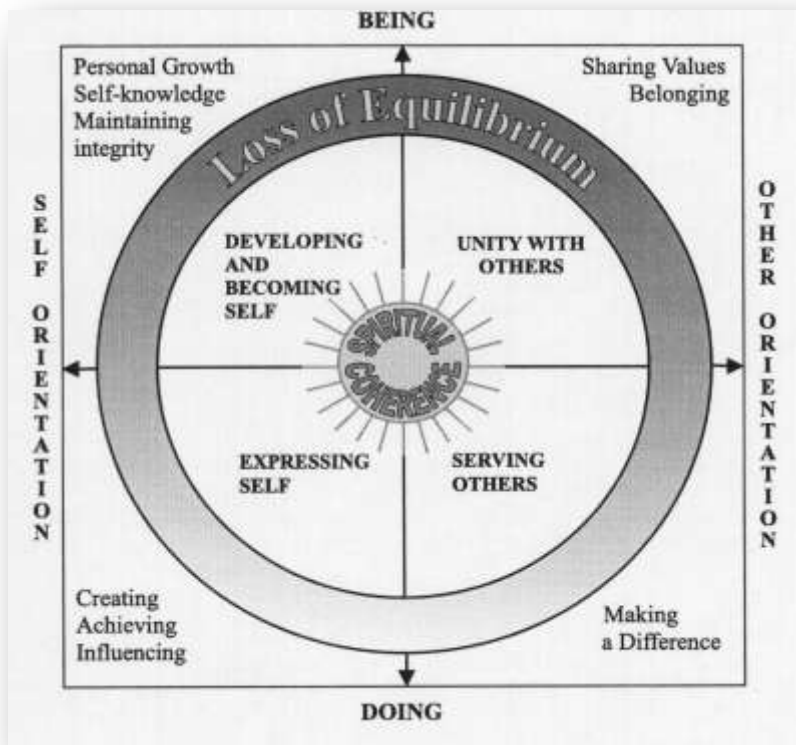


Figure 6. 1 Summary overview of findings (Lips-Wiersema, 2002b)

Although his respondents did not report this as frequently as in some other studies<sup>56</sup> (e.g. Kernes and Kinnier, 2007), this introduces another discourse into the discussion of a Life that Matters. Peterson, Park and Seligman (2005) distinguish between three different orientations to happiness and discuss the relationship between service to others and a meaningful life by means of the

*eudaimonia* discourse. *Eudaimonia* is a discourse developed by Aristotle (see Arrington, 1998:67) and is related to *virtue ethics*. *Eudaimonia* refers to “the good life”, “living well and doing well”, happiness, success and even *blessedness* (see MacIntyre, 1984:148), a construct which he associated with *phronesis* or “practical wisdom”. Because this is also said to link us to our *telos*, it is considered appropriate to mention this when a Life that Matters is discussed. Aristotle is said to have brought Plato down to earth (Arrington, 1998:63), and compared to Kant proposed an ethics of performance rather than intention (1998:68).

In a study of young political leaders in Europe, Bruter and Harrison (2009: 1264) report on the important role that *helping others*

*Beliefs about the importance of serving others*

“I want to create an environment in which people can be whole – where people can survive, create, be happy”  
 “It is about contributing my share to what I see as answering ‘that of God’ in people, I need to recognise that and build it up”  
 “I need to know that I am involved in doing something that I can identify as being worthwhile”

Figure 6. 2 Comment about serving others as part of the meaning-making process

<sup>56</sup> This was explained in terms of the age of the respondents: these respondents were generally of a fairly young age and according to the author, young people are often not overly concerned with helping others.

plays both in the way that these leaders perceive a meaningful life and in their own contribution to significance.

In his paper on meaningfulness and identity, Wong (2008) also associates meaningfulness with helping others. He is also quoted by Lips-Wiersema (2002b) in a discussion of how spirituality as meaning-making construct is associated with “serving others” as one of four career purposes (the others being “unity with others”, “expressing self” and “developing and becoming self”). Figure 6.1 illustrates a summary overview of her findings. From this figure it is suggested that serving others is associated with “making a difference”. One of the comments about serving others which was provided by the co-researchers in her action research is illustrated in Figure 6.2 above.

But service to others as a discourse associated with a good life, has a long history: even in Gal 5:13 we find Christians to be called up to serve one another

*Gal 5:13: For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another.*

Sacks (2000:57-58) describes the story of the creation of the world in the book of Genesis, indicating how everything which was created, was described as good... up to the surprising, perhaps shocking remark that God looked upon something and judged that not to be good. And that state which God perceived not to be good, was Adam’s state of being *alone*:

*(Gen 2:18) And the LORD God said, it is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him.*

Sacks proceeds to remark on two propositions which he suggests will frame the Bible’s entire framework of mankind. The first he proposes affirms the *sanctity* of the human individual as an individual created in the image of God. The second proposition he considers to be assertive of the incompleteness of the individual as individual (“*it is not good that the man should be alone*”). From this, Sacks suggests, is the human need for relationship derived. Later on (2000:61) he suggests that *relationship precedes identity*.

Becker and Becker (1992:45ff) describes how early Christian ethics as represented by eminent church fathers like Augustine of Hippo (354-430) in his work *On the Morals of the Catholic Church* redefined the *cardinal virtues* as *loving service to God*. Also, in his book *Confessions* Augustine adds a neo-Platonic *telos* in which earthly life becomes a pilgrimage toward our *true heavenly home*. And as pilgrims we must serve God and our neighbour, taking the Bible as our *primary guide*. Sin as an

antithesis to spiritual well-being on the other hand, is described as excluding us from the community of God and the neighbour.

These voices from across an interdisciplinary spectrum of communities reverberate as outsider witnesses to the stories of my co-researchers, honouring and validating them as they do.

#### **6.4 My life becomes meaningful when I mean something to others – a discussion of the value proposition of our involvement in others' lives**

When asked about their perceptions about being meaningful to someone else, adding value to their lives or being important to them, my fellow researchers responded by explaining that these people thanked them, smiled or somehow physically indicated that these actions (service orientation) meant something to them. According to their own reports, it was not whether there was ever a formal inquiry about whether these actions brought about a *preferred reality* (Freedman and Combs, 1996:129-131), though.

Perhaps we should refer to this as what I suggest we call The Helpers Paradox or the Service Paradox: while we are helping others, we are benefitting as much if not more from the process. The serving process may be more meaningful or meaning-making to us than to the people being helped or served.

We may therefore have to ask ourselves about the ethics of the service process or the helping process. Reflecting more on therapeutic helping perhaps, Quixley (2008) suggests that ethical helping should conform to the following criteria: for helping to be ethical it should include being respectful (do no further harm, assume goodwill, do not rush to judgment, be in the other's interest), other-centred (understanding and valuing the other, be "for" the other, not imposing own solutions on the other's problems), a partnership (helping as a two-way influence process, share the helping process with the other person), authentic (friendly, flexible, with other's agency in mind), trustworthy (respecting privacy, consistent) and productive (assisting towards agency). Our stories did reflect some of these characteristics, but our helping was seldom formally directed at creating agency (Mahlatsé's story about the student perhaps being the exception). It seemed as if the service provided by the research group was always authentic and respectful, though. We have to remind ourselves though, that these were not counsellors: these were ordinary people with a heart for helping others in an authentic way.

I would like to suggest that we view the accusation of self-interest as motive in the helping process differently. Helping or serving others as meaning-making can be considered a relational process of meaning-making. We are therefore within the realm of social constructionism and the ethos of social constructionism. We can therefore pursue the argument to posit that I (as the helper) carry my own stories of helping into every helping situation in which I get involved. It is therefore impossible for me not to introduce self-interest into the service or helping process. Does that however, detract from the value of the helping process? I would like to suggest that the helping process is not necessarily comprised by my self-interest – if I am aware of my own helping stories entering the helping process every time I lend assistance, I am introducing a relational ethic into the helping process. It is once again only when my helping story becomes totalitarian, in other words, self-interest turns into selfishness, that I am centred in the helping process and the good of the Other is not considered in deciding the nature of the help being rendered.

I would therefore like to suggest that an ethos of helping should de-centre the helper and build in a means of confirming that the nature of the assistance being rendered, as well as the outcome of the helping process, constitute a preferred reality to the person or persons being helped.

Another possible speculation about an ethical framework for helping processes is that an association with spirituality may to some degree de-centre the helper in the helping process.

## 6.5 The bridge to the other chapters

This chapter discussed the theme of life meaning being enhanced by social involvement. Social involvement referred to having significant relationships with other people (interpersonal orientation) and to serving others (altruism or a service orientation). First the chapter once again started off by providing our own understanding of social involvement. We related our own stories of relationships and helping others.

We then investigated the association of relationships/serving others and meaningful living as reported in the literature and established that relationships are consistently the most frequently reported discourse associated with meaning. Helping others as languaged in a number of different ways was also commonly suggested to be associated with meaning-making. An interesting observation in this regard was that spirituality was often introduced into this conversation – often as context to the service orientation. This research derives from an interdisciplinary community of authors and aligns this study well with some current research.



Once this context has been established, the ethics of helping others was discussed. This derived from a reflection on who stood to benefit most from the helping process: helper or person being helped. The discourse of self-interest was thus introduced and discussed from a relational perspective. Suggesting the same ethic as for narrative pastoral practice, de-centring the helper was proposed as a means towards an ethical helping practice. It was also suggested that a periodic assessment of the helping process should be done, confirming that both process and outcomes are still part of the preferred reality for the person or persons being helped.

Relationships are key to the epistemology selected for this study as well as the research methodology. It is therefore considered to be congruent to the *philosophical infrastructure* of the study that social involvement was suggested to be one of the core discourses of a Life that Matters. Many of my fellow researchers as well as a large number of the voices from the literature associated a serving orientation and relationships with Purpose in life, and this will therefore be our next theme which will be discussed.

## Chapter 7. The teleological imperative or “my life has meaning when I have a Purpose”

*The **meaning of life** constitutes a philosophical question concerning the [purpose](#) and [significance](#) of human existence or biological life in general.*

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meaning\\_of\\_life](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meaning_of_life)

Another common theme introduced by the participants in this study was having a purpose in life. A meaningful life was often associated with having a Purpose in life.

It was however almost impossible to divide the meaningfulness discourses introduced by my fellow researchers into watertight compartments. Purpose was quite often associated with the Divine, which implied that there was a strong relationship between Spirituality and Purpose.

A matter which stimulated my curiosity was how we know our Purpose in life. This question was addressed to my fellow researchers. This led to a deconstruction of Purpose, exploring some of the societal discourses around the construct.

### 7.1 The structure of this chapter

*The value of the question pertaining to the purpose of life may coincide with the achievement of [ultimate reality](#), if that is believed by one to exist.*

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meaning\\_of\\_life](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meaning_of_life)

This chapter will initially explore stories of Purpose as related by the research group. These stories will once again be expanded to create histories and as with relationships before, “thickened” or enriched and validated by inviting “outsider witnesses” into the stories.

Once these voices of relationships have been heard, we will invite the voices of published literature across various disciplines into the discussion as *propositional knowing* (Heron: 1996). This was done by means of a literature search using the words “life meaning” or “meaningful life” and Purpose or Goal. The internet search engine Google (Scholar) as well as the UP databases were used for this exploration. (This may be considered as another form of engaging “re-membering” into the conversation.)

Next I will explore with the co-research team how Purpose is learned, developed and maintained through a process of deconstruction. In this process we shall explore those societal discourses which effect an understanding of Purpose, the effects of these discourses and how they are sustained.

Having discussed these aspects of Purpose as they refer to a Life that Matters, we will then reflect on the learning from our discussion of Purpose and how it enriches our understanding of a meaningful life.

## 7.2 Our stories of Purpose

*We are such stuff  
as dreams are made on, and our little life  
is rounded with a sleep...*

William Shakespeare, [The Tempest](#)

Initially Millicinda and Jurie introduced Purpose as a discourse in the Life that Matters conversation. Both Jurie and Millicinda mentioned Purpose almost in the same sense as calling or vocation, thus suggesting a spiritual context for Purpose. Millicinda proposed Purpose as a prerequisite for a meaningful life.

*Meaningfulness to me would be to identify and live one's purpose. I truly believe that each one of us has a specific purpose and usually this purpose goes hand in hand with your deepest desires. My purpose I believe was given to me by God and He pre-destined me for a certain task.*

Jurie suggested that finding one's Purpose in life, completes one.

This discourse was then opened up for discussion and reflection to the rest of the research panel. They can be compared to a reflection team acknowledging and enriching the story of Purpose as introduced by Millicinda and Jurie.

Estelle alluded to a certain mystical element of Purpose instilling a sense of satisfaction and peace in our lives when we discover it. She introduced discourses like "inner peace" and "acceptance" to suggest a certain personal nature to Purpose. As I introduce the narratives of Purpose from my fellow researchers, the local nature of Purpose will become apparent. This once again supports the locality of meaning as introduced in my discussion of the social constructionist epistemology.

Although Estelle like a few of the other co-researchers suggested that she had not found her Purpose in life; yet, she described a certain reassurance in her belief that

*whatever God has in store for me is already planned.*

She introduced a discourse suggesting that Purpose may only be known in retrospect or *in the future*. This will be discussed later again in the last section of this chapter.

Some other discourses introduced by Estelle included:

God has already planned our purpose in life

God will support this Purpose *every step of the way*

Some people may never find their Purposes in life

Purpose may inspire to greatness

Jurie associated Purpose with a living relationship with God. This he linked to love of our fellow human beings. He suggested that he knows this Purpose from God's Word. In no uncertain terms he stated that it is critical to know one's purpose for life to be meaningful.

I include an account of the discussion of Purpose I have had with Millicinda. In this discussion Purpose was externalised in order to prevent the Purpose story to become totalising. The relationship with Purpose was proposed as creative of meaning. During the discussion the experiences of Purpose (Landscape of Action narrative) were migrated to Landscape of Meaning or Identity narratives by inviting a re-remembering (questions about relationships' role in learning about Purpose and what values assisted her in this quest) and also by setting up *school* as metaphor for *outsider witness* practices. The conversation follows below:

**F: You have mentioned purpose a few times. How has "purpose" become a "life partner" in your "meaning story"?**

*M: I was very spiritual as a child and I believed that I would dedicate my life to my purpose which I believed was to work with orphans, now it seems a bit impossible. For now looking after my child day by day is my purpose. And, making a difference even if it is just seasonal in people's lives (I had plenty of that). Purpose helps you to pick up your life and continue.*

**F: What is your relationship with "purpose"?**

*M: I am not in sync with my original purpose.*

**F: Is "purpose" a kind partner?**

*M: I think living your purpose will be very fulfilling.*

**F: How have you learnt to be sure about the real “face” of purpose?**

*M: Not sure, I struggled for a few years now to find out what purpose is? What is the purpose of living? Been through a lot of tragic events, my sister died, I was extremely devastated. I lived for 3 years so close to the feeling of death, that purpose became absolute. I was only functional not purposeful. But finding purpose is vital.*

**F: What assisted you in this quest?**

*M: I am not there yet. I truly believe that the main reason for this because I am a bit confused about Christianity, I believe that Christianity became distorted by people. I don't believe in the latter day teachings of the charismatic, I believe if you take away a lot of these teachings and principals (prosperity and faith healing etc) people will not support Christianity anymore. I became confused about the role God plays in our lives. But having said that, I truly believe that if God wasn't with me I would never have survived. I believe that God created us for His purpose and His purpose will not be boastful, self gain, proud etc. I believe I must give and make a difference.*

**F: What can you teach us about “purpose”?**

*M: We can't live without purpose. Purpose is different for each one of use. I also think God created us for a purpose. If we do not live to achieve our purpose, life becomes empty.*

**F: Is “purpose” personal or does it link up with “significance” as you describe it in the last paragraphs of your letter?**

*M: It is personal but it can link up with significance. Think that living your purpose will make you feel significant.*

**F: What role do relationships play here?**

*M: Relationships can contribute but I think we mustn't rely on relationships to define our purpose or significance.*

In the Purpose conversation with Mahlatse she indicated that her understanding of her life purpose linked it to the altruistic orientation encountered in the previous chapter. She said that her purpose was to *help the needy*. Help in her story adopted many formats: it included spiritual advice, support and material relief. She confirmed Jurie's suggestion that we can know our life purpose and that the Bible is our resource for this knowledge. She went further and referred to serving and helping as *one common law*. She associated clarity of purpose with spiritual growth, intimating that God has many ways of revealing one's purpose. She surmised that Purpose and talents may be closely related.

The importance of Purpose was confirmed by Lidia. She bestowed existential importance to Purpose, suggesting that our life's purposes are to live aligned to God's divine plan for us. Like some of the other researchers she also indicated that she is still seeking guidance about her purpose in life.

Amorita indicated that her life purpose is to lead people to Jesus. She told us how for the year in which the research was done, she focused on praying for business leaders who did not believe. Furthermore her Purpose story included venerating God, to live according to his Will and to apply her talents to his honour. She did suggest that she was still not accomplishing all of this, but knew that God's grace was great enough not to punish her for her failures in this quest for purpose.

As was evident from the accounts of Purpose above, even though the same words were used to describe Purpose, it had a very personal or local meaning for each of the fellow researchers.

### 7.3 Purpose and Meaning – Soundings from the literature

*What is the purpose of life? I believe that the purpose of life is to be happy.*

Dalai Lama, Tibetan political and spiritual leader, Voices from the Heart; [The Art of Happiness: A Handbook for Living](#)

Purpose in life and meaning in life is often used synonymously. Examples from the literature are Moran (2001), Nair (2003), and Molasso (2006). Frankl (quoted by Molasso, 2006) referred to Purpose in life as *will to meaning*.

#### 7.3.1 Some philosophical perspectives

When we think of Purpose or goal, Aristotle (384-322 BC) invariably comes to mind. Aristotle's moral philosophy can be described as a teleological<sup>57</sup> metaphysics (Palmer, 2006: 79). Palmer describes how purpose or goal is the overriding discourse in Aristotle's moral theory. Aristotle posited that every act is performed for some purpose, which he then described as the *good* of that act. According to Aristotle, the totality of the purposes of all our acts is directed at some ultimate good. We should therefore try to come to know this ultimate good so that we can direct all our acts toward it in order to avoid a wasted or meaningless life.

Albert Camus (1913-1960), the French-Algerian philosopher, is well known for his Theory of the Absurd. According to absurdism, there is a fundamental disharmony that arises out of the co-presence of man and the universe. Man has a desire for order, meaning, and purpose in life, but the

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<sup>57</sup> *Telos* refers to the goal towards which all things (including actions and behaviours) move.

universe is indifferent and meaningless; the Absurd arises out of this conflict ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meaning\\_of\\_life](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meaning_of_life)). From this description of the Theory of the Absurd, it is suggested that a Life that Matters and Purpose in Life are often associated with each other.

According to secular humanism **people determine human purpose, without supernatural influence**; it is the human personality (in the general sense of the word) that is the purpose of a human being's life. Furthermore humanism seeks to develop and fulfil:

*"Humanism affirms our ability, and responsibility, to lead ethical lives of personal fulfilment that aspire to the greater good of humanity" ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meaning\\_of\\_life](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meaning_of_life)).*

This clearly contrasts with religious perspectives which support an understanding of purpose derived from divine inspiration.

Wikipedia ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meaning\\_of\\_life#cite\\_note-86](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meaning_of_life#cite_note-86)) describes the perspective of existential psychotherapy as *intensely personal* and reinterprets the question about a meaningful life as a matter of

*What is the meaning of my life?*

It avoids a *cosmic* or *overarching* (compare meta-narrative) source of purpose by suggesting that purpose remains a personal construct.

MacIntyre discusses meaningfulness in life as a function of predictability (1984:103,104). This predictability allows us to engage in future projects. This implies a certain purposive activity which suggests an intentionality in our lives. Purpose and intention (or intentional states as in White (2007:100-107)) thus become associated in the meaningfulness conversation. This begs the question about the failure of predictability and how that impacts on purpose (as Disillusioned Purpose or loss of congruence in the Purpose discourse). The discussion of uncertainty in the chapter on theology in this thesis addressed "uncertainty and the meaningful life" and the reader is encouraged to revisit that section in chapter 3. The challenge now becomes to still experience life as meaningful despite our experience of uncertainty or unpredictability. In this regard Delicia said something interesting, namely that Uncertainty becomes a Certainty, and in being a *constant*, it becomes something which we expect and *we go on with our relationships, lives in general, our futures* regardless.

### 7.3.2 Other voices from the literature

Life Purpose has been discussed in the literature by researchers from a wide variety of disciplines. These range from management theory to psychotherapy to healthcare and education.

Nair (2003) did research on rehabilitation. Describing Life Goals or Purposes as desired states that people seek to obtain, maintain or avoid, he reports that these goals may influence motivation to participate in the rehabilitation process. In this research Nair suggested that across the lifespan different life goals seem to become more prominent. In this regard Nair (2003:194) distinguished between Early Adulthood (Education, Finding Employment), Middle Age (Income, Meeting demands of parenthood) and Late Life (Health, Religion and Philosophy). He also proposed a hierarchical system of life goals, with life goals ranging from reference value or idealised self goals at the top to systematically more practical purposes or goals lower down. These lower level goals frequently facilitated the higher level goals, helping the individual to move closer to the idealised self-image according to Nair (2003:193).

Quoting Lucas (1998), Nair proceeds to posit that there is a meaningful life for every person, regardless of his or her life circumstances (2003:197). Purpose however, leads to expectation which facilitates motivation which improves commitment – and this commitment in turn, can improve willingness to participate in rehabilitation and hence also the success of such rehabilitation especially where rehabilitation goals correspond to life goals.

Lee (2004:221) writes from a perspective which attempts to combine the theological discourse and the psychological discourse. According to Lee, narrative theology allows the concept of an *intrinsic* human *telos*, a construct which he describes as

*A divinely created purpose which constitutes the perfection of life (2004:221).*

However, social constructionist perspectives which reject metanarratives<sup>58</sup> make it difficult for (narrative) therapists to consider this theological possibility. He tries to solve this potential stalemate condition by exploring the common *hard core* of assumptions supporting both narrative theology and narrative therapy. In the process he describes *human teleology* and *deity teleology*, constructs which were

The first core assumption, then, is that humans must organize experience meaningfully, which entails a telic relationship between cognition and behavior. A second assumption is that this cognitive organization is implicitly narrative in form. Humans appear to be biologically predisposed (suggesting Aristotle's categories of formal and material cause) to form narrative meaning structures (Newberg & D'Aquili, 2002).

<sup>58</sup>Lee (2004) on Purpose in life

<sup>58</sup> See for instance Freedman and Combs (199



developed by Rychlak (1994). Deity teleology here describes a theological claim of the operation of divine purpose and intention. The discourse of *telosponsivity* which was also coined by Rychlak is also introduced and described to indicate the final-cause account of the relationship between human cognition and behaviour. In our terminology this may refer to Bruner's *landscapes of action and meaning* (Bruner, 1986:14). Purpose is introduced when Lee (2004:224) suggests that a first core assumption may be that humans

*Must organise experience meaningfully, which entails a telic relationship between cognition and behaviour (my underlining).*<sup>59</sup>

Making an interesting remark about humans being biologically predisposed to form narrative

The question of "agency in a person" disconnected from contexts of meaning and relationship makes little sense to us. The question that fits better for us is this: What marginalized experiences speak of an alternative truth? . . . In this sense, "agency" means that each of us can play a part in choosing what to let guide us and in what contexts. . . This means working with clients to notice previously unnoticed aspects of their experience, occurring in either the landscape of action or the landscape of consciousness, that reflect personal agency in a preferred direction. (pp. 93-94)

<sup>6</sup>Zimmerman and Dickerson (1996) on agency

meaning structures (after Newberg and Aquili, 2002)<sup>60</sup>, he proposes a second core assumption that the cognitive organisation is done implicitly narratively<sup>61</sup>. Once again quoting Bruner (1990) Lee (2004:224) describes how these meaning structures are shaped by participation in the *symbolic systems*

*of a given culture*. He can therefore posit that *narrative accounts of human behaviour have an intrinsically teleological structure*.

Addressing the discourse of agency, Lee (2004:224) uses Rychlak's description to indicate that agency refers to *an ability to influence things over and above your biological inheritance and your sociocultural setting* (Rychlak, 1987)<sup>62</sup>. He then suggests that agency entails constraint-resilient *goal-directed intentionality*, once again establishing a relationship between Purpose and agency. On p.225 he refers to Zimmerman and Dickerson (1996) who related agency both to contexts of

<sup>59</sup> In our language this may be understood to refer to the hermeneutic relationship between *landscape of action* stories and *landscape of meaning* stories.

<sup>60</sup> This is further explained by reference to Bruner (2002) reporting that some evidence suggests a neurological link between the inability to tell and/or understand stories (dysnarrativia) and handicaps in the development of a sense of selfhood.

<sup>61</sup> The reader is invited to form his/her own opinion about the inherently modernist terminology introduced in this line of thinking, but it may generate a certain discomfort admittedly.

<sup>62</sup> I prefer and would like to suggest as an alternative understanding of *agency* proposed by Drewery (2005:315) when she suggests that *persons who are participants in the conversations that produce the meanings of their lives are in an agentive position*. This understanding also, in my mind, avoids any problem discourses around agency and narrative.

meaning and relationships (refer back to Chapter 6 for a discussion of relationships and meaningfulness).

Lee (2004:225) consequently asks the question whether this goal can be described as human teleology or whether there is a transcendent nature to it. He then explores the suggestions from MacIntyre (1984) in which MacIntyre develops a discourse of the good life based on a re-telling of the work of Aristotle. The conclusion is indicated to be that

*Without teleology, it becomes impossible to ask the question: What is it to live well? What is the nature of a truly good life?*

Gergen (2007b:69) also made a valuable contribution to our understanding of goal or purpose in our preferred stories or “agency” stories where he suggested that

*an acceptable story must first establish a goal, an event to be explained, a state to be reached or avoided, or more informally, a “point”. This point is typically saturated with value; it is understood to be desirable or undesirable.*

Rick Warren (2002) has written a very influential text on Purpose in life. This book has been on the New York Times Best Seller list for advice books for one of the longest periods in history, while also becoming arguably one of the best-selling non-fiction books of all time, topping the Wall Street Journal best seller charts as well as Publishers Weekly charts with over 30 million copies in print by 2006 ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Purpose\\_Driven\\_Life#cite\\_note-0](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Purpose_Driven_Life#cite_note-0)). The book's 40 chapters are divided into six major sections, with the following titles:

- What on Earth Am I Here For?
- Purpose #1: You Were Planned for God's Pleasure (Worship)
- Purpose #2: You Were Formed for God's Family (Fellowship)
- Purpose #3: You Were Created to Become Like Christ (Discipleship)
- Purpose #4: You Were Shaped for Serving God (Ministry)
- Purpose #5: You Were Made for a Mission (Mission)

His perspective on purpose can be described as a deity teleology (see Lee above). This implies that Purpose develops externally and is inspired by God. This is suggested by Lee (2004:229) as well, where he states that *calling comes from without, not within*.

According to Wikipedia (2009), since 2002, over 30 000 congregations, corporations and sports teams just across the USA have participated in a “40 Days of Purpose” event. In research conducted by George Barna in 2005, *The Purpose Driven Life* was the most frequently cited book when church

leaders were asked to identify what books were the most influential in their lives and ministries<sup>63</sup>. Billy Graham described the book as one that would *guide you to greatness—through living the Great Commandment and the Great Commission of Jesus*.

Adopting a human teleological perspective, Webster (2004) did some research on purposes of education and how these are related to life purpose and life meaning. In this paper he suggested that the purposes for teaching are derived from teachers' beliefs about life meaning and purpose. An interesting suggestion made in his narrative of life purpose and purposes of education is that the relationships one has with purpose are much more important than what those purposes are.

Webster (2004:84ff) continues to describe a proposed way of changing such purposes. This, he suggests, can be done through an existential crisis. Relying on the discourses of *how* developed by Kierkegaard, Webster describes how, being in relation, *truth* for the individual refers to *how one relates to what one understands*. Thus, he suggests, purposes should be understood to belong to individuals and because of the relational nature of beings, the understandings of one's purpose also contribute to one's sense of personal identity. Thus a relationship is suggested between purpose and identity **through the relationships** that we embrace with these constructs.<sup>64</sup> Webster develops an understanding of how personal identity is formed by

*How an individual relates and values his or her relations **and is not made through objective or abstract categories** which relate to the 'what' of one's being.*

The change in purpose and therefore life meaning which Webster is suggesting is mediated through a movement of inauthentic understandings to authentic understandings. He offers the following understanding of authenticity (2004:85): authenticity has two aspects to it, namely what we could describe as personal awareness of meanings and purposes and *owning* these (adopting these purposes to be one's own). Webster (2004:85) describes two characteristics which play an important role in creating the potential for change and *grounding*. These purposes are not isolated, but function *within a set of already interpreted relationships, a relational whole*. Furthermore meanings and purposes have a potentially hermeneutic nature. The change process subsequently proposed by Webster reminds one of a deconstruction process through which the individual is first encouraged to reflect on his/her purpose story and then to deconstruct it to prevent it from becoming totalising.

Sandage and Hill (2001) have done a study which explored the relationship of purpose in life and well being. They indicated that there is a strong association between a positive life perspective and

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<sup>63</sup> Warren's previous book, *The Purpose Driven Church*, was the second most quoted book.

<sup>64</sup> This will be discussed again in the chapter on Identity.

having a good understanding of purpose in life. Purpose in life is related to virtues and positive psychology in their study.

In a study of HIV-positive patients and wellbeing, Litwinczuk and Groh (2007) reported that they found a strong correlation between spirituality and purpose in life (see also Chapter 5 of this thesis).

In an interesting paper, Feldman and Snyder (2005) explored the relationship between “goal-directed” thinking and life meaning. They reported (2005:406) a relationship between one’s culture and the goals one chooses to pursue. They then suggest that one’s achievement or approximation of these goals *determines one’s sense of meaning in life*. Referring to “control theorists” Feldman and Snyder (2005:406) indicated that these theorists make use of purpose or goals to propose an understanding of life meaning as being derived from a perception that one can control the environment to achieve one’s desires. According to these understandings of life meaning, goals *become repositories of meaning* and their achievement brings purpose to life.

As was suggested by these voices from the literature across a variety of disciplines, purpose was recognised as being either instrumental in or closely associated with life meaning. Once again this validates the stories of a Life that Matters introduced by my co-researchers.

#### **7.4 Deconstructing Purpose – how is Purpose known and which social discourses influence this knowing?**

*Why is there something rather than nothing? We do not know. We will never know. Why? To what purpose? We do not know whether there is a purpose. But if it is true that nothing is born of nothing, the very existence of something – the world, the universe – would seem to imply that there has always been something: that being is eternal, uncreated, perhaps creator, and this is what some people call God.*

André Comte-Sponville, French philosopher, *The Little Book of Philosophy*

A question which can be asked about Purpose is how it becomes known. Quite a number of the participants to this study indicated that they still are not certain about their Purpose in life. Some even suggested that they may never come to know this Purpose. But even so, there was something of Daniel 3:18 in their faith about it making their lives meaningful<sup>65</sup>:

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<sup>65</sup> Refer back to Estelle’s story of Purpose in this regard.

**Dan 3:18<sup>66</sup>** *But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up. (my underlining)*

It is almost as if this confirms what Lee (2004) has written in his paper about the “what” of the Purpose not being as important as the relationship with that purpose.

There may be some metanarratives at work here, suggesting that Purpose becomes known by some special mystical revelation from God. This may be the topic of a research paper which could extend the narrative of this thesis.

Those participants who confirmed that they knew what their Purpose in life was, suggested that they knew this from the Bible or the word of God. Both Jurie and Mahlatse are examples of this perspective. Further research may explore the stories of the Bible in their lives and those stories resulted in them adopting these localised understanding of their life Purposes.

A further deconstruction of this discourse will have to include the effect of this understanding in their lives, how this resonates with their life values, how important this has become in their lives and who could be called in as outsider witnesses to this Purpose narrative.

## 7.5 The bridge to the other chapters

In this chapter we have entered into a Purpose / Life Meaning conversation. The introduction to this conversation was provided by the co-researchers who introduced Purpose as a deity teleological discourse.

When the voices of the literature were invited into the conversation, it became clear that Purpose has received a lot of attention in the meaningfulness debate. The constructs of deity teleology and human teleology were introduced at this stage. Some reservations about metanarratives and life purpose were expressed. These were addressed by exploring ways to enhance the individual’s experience of an authentic life purpose. Purpose in this regard was recognised to be local to the individual, but influenced by societal discourses. Authentication of the Purpose story was suggested to comprise of reflection and de-totalising (or deconstruction).

Other voices attested to the importance of purpose in wellbeing, motivation and goal-setting. This research derives from an interdisciplinary community of authors and aligns this study well with some current research.

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<sup>66</sup> King John Version of the Bible

Once this context has been established, a deconstruction of knowledge of life purpose was introduced. The hermeneutic character of Purpose presented itself in this discussion, suggesting that Purpose is aligned with the larger context of the individual's Bible narrative and even one's spiritual narrative.

Identity was often mentioned both in the soundings from the literature and by the participants to the study. Identity will therefore have to be discussed and it just so happened that it is the next theme introduced by my fellow researchers.

## Chapter 8. Identity and meaning in life

*Answering the question “Who am I?” involves more than a superficial recounting of facts, dates, or statistics – though these elements are important. Also, it is not simply a theoretical question without concrete implications – to have theory without the concrete is to irresponsibly avoid being ethical in the first place and pragmatic in the other. To know who one is, is to live well. And, to know how to live well demands a reflective and critical understanding of one’s purposes and activities.*

Alfonso Damico

As an afterthought the research panel suggested that Identity precedes the previous three themes or discourses in any discussion of a meaningful life. It was introduced as the fourth theme in a study meeting one afternoon, when Bianca said that one cannot start to discuss Spirituality, Social Involvement or Purpose before one knew who one was. Thus another meaning story was called for: The “Who Am I” story.

The “Who Am I” stories for the research team have actually been told right at the start of the research process. This chapter may therefore be described as a re-telling of the identity stories.

*We tell stories because in the last analysis human lives need and merit being narrated.*

*Paul Ricoeur*

Introducing Identity as a meaning discourse was quite a daunting task. Complete theses if not volumes of encyclopaedias can be dedicated to a discussion of identity alone. Within the limited scope of this study we will not be able to do justice to such a vast topic of discussion and research. This chapter will offer a humble voice to be added to this ongoing conversation.

We will therefore limit our discussion of identity to how it relates to meaning, trying to link it back to the meaning discourses previously discussed in this thesis. We will propose a narrative understanding of identity, discussing it as a social construction and not a given label.

### 8.1 The structure of this chapter

This chapter will once again first introduce the stories of identity of my fellow researchers. These stories will once again be expanded to create histories and as with relationships and life purpose before, “thickened” or enriched and validated by inviting “outsider witnesses” into the stories.

Once these voices of relationships have been heard, we will invite the voices of published literature across various disciplines into the discussion as *propositional knowing* (Heron: 1996). This was done by means of a literature search using the words “life meaning” or “meaningful life” and Identity. The internet search engine Google (Scholar) as well as the UP databases were used for this exploration. (This may be considered as another form of engaging “re-membering” into the conversation.)

In this chapter I will attempt to delimit these voices from the literature and group them under different sections, first reporting what the literature says about the relationship between Identity and a Meaningful Life, then listening to narratives about Spirituality and Identity, followed by accounts of the relational nature of Identity and closing the outsider witness section by an account of the nature of the relationship between Identity and Purpose.

Having discussed Identity from these perspectives as it refers to a Life that Matters, we will then reflect on the learning from our discussion of Identity and how it enriches our understanding of a meaningful life.

## 8.2 Reflections on Identity by the research team

### 8.2.1 Multi-storied identities

The discussion started with a reflection on identities being multi-faceted and the group suggested that we are constantly *defining* (sic) ourselves. This is actually a constant *redefining* process. Hence it becomes impossible to require self-knowledge as a pre-requisite for entering into relationships with others. It may be suggested that we are forever learning about ourselves, and therefore never at any moment in time fully know all aspects of ourselves.

I then asked how this impacts on our sense of security: seeing that we are forever discovering, does this not lead to insecurity? The participants indicated that this does not lead to a loss of security. Millicinda told a story about how she previously was inclined to be “soft-hearted” and more of a “sucker”, and how she now could stand her ground a lot better. She indicated that this suggests that the change enabled her to be better equipped to manage challenges.

Upon this I asked what this teaches us about a world which is constantly changing around us. Quite often this change is experienced as leading to insecurity. The group responded by offering a suggestion that “small things prepare you for bigger things” (Millicinda, 2008). Amorita responded by telling a story of a school friend making a rather nasty remark of what she had learned from Amorita.



Mahlatse suggested that we are always growing and that different strengths develop over the years. She then made a very strong statement: she advised the group not to “give others the power to inconvenience you”. This said something very important about power, restoring agency in the taking back of power; power is thus established as being embedded in our relationships with others.

The group also suggested that we should acknowledge the difference between males and females, also bearing in mind the “male story” or the “female story” when we listen to the identity story of people.

The group confirmed that they appreciated the openness with which they could discuss these concepts of identity and meaningfulness.

### 8.2.2 Congruence and the identity story

In conclusion I invited the group to reflect on a story (an authentic story, meaning that it either has happened to themselves or to someone they know) where, despite apparent superficial changes, a person had acted according to a congruent / consistent value / identity story.

In response to this invitation, Jurie responded by writing:

*Hi Francois*

*Onlangs het ek 'n kliënt gehad waar ons 'n kandidaat geplaas het. In die 2de maand vandat die kandidaat begin werk het, bedank hy. Na verdere ondersoek blyk dit dat die kliënt vals inligting verskaf het in die onderhoud met betrekking tot salaris en ander feite wat nie waar was nie. Gewoonlik sou ek die kandidaat probeer vervang of die kommissie terugbetaal om die vrede te bewaar. Hierdie keer het ek egter gevoel dat ek moet opstaan vir wat reg is en die kliënt laat weet dat ons nie die kandidaat gaan vervang nie. Hierdeur voel ek dat my ware identiteit deurgekom het.*

*Groete*

*Jurie*

Upon this, I responded by saying:

*Jurie, baie dankie vir jou terugvoer.*

*Na aanleiding van jou respons, het ek oor die volgende gewonder:*

*Jy skryf: “Gewoonlik sou ek die kandidaat probeer vervang of die kommissie terug betaal om die vrede te bewaar.” Watter Jurie-waarde of –beginsel word hierdeur geïllustreer?<sup>67</sup> Watter belangrike karakter in jou lewensverhaal sou my meer hiervan kon vertel?<sup>68</sup>*

*Hoor graag van jou.*

*Groete*

The rest of the identity story is not reported here, but it flowed along a course heading towards intentional states of identity.

Another example of the stories of congruence was the one told by Estelle. She wrote about her parents’ divorce when she was still only 15. She never expected this to happen and was looking for someone to blame. She blamed her mother because she had filed for divorce, accusing her of not having worked on the relationship. She subsequently moved in with her father and did not have any contact with her mother for years. According to Estelle, her mother did not make any effort from her side to see Estelle either - even though this was the time of her life when teenage girls needed a mother most.

But then – despite her anger and disappointment – Estelle decided to *put the past behind her* and she started to work on their relationship “*because after all she is my mother*”. Nowadays they talk regularly and Estelle has accepted the fact that the past cannot be changed, *no matter how much I want it to*. She has decided to think about the future and *make the best out of the present*.

Although she suggested that she had changed to become a stronger person, in her opinion Estelle’s values and beliefs remained congruent. She has resolved that she can make a success of her life and will keep working towards that.

Referring to her account of the divorce and her reaction, I responded by inquiring into the values and beliefs which had become evident in her response. I subsequently expanded this line of questioning to explore the landscape of identity which was related to this story. We exchanged responses which not only explored the “not yet said”, but strengthened the identity story – despite some apparent superficial incongruencies – and also validated it.

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<sup>67</sup> This question was asked to invite Jurie to reflect on what happened and move from the Landscape of Action to a Landscape of Identity.

<sup>68</sup> The question was intended to introduce outsider witnesses into the identity story so as to validate and enrich it.

### 8.2.3 Comfortable in our skins

In order to explore the identity stories even further I also introduced a passage on identity from Velvet Elvis by Rob Bell (2005). I wrote to my fellow researchers:

*I came upon a very interesting view of identity. Rob Bell (2005: 150) writes about the image of God in us. He then observes that the Image of God has been scarred to such an extent that “we lose trust in God’s version of our story”. According to him, we then try to repair this on our own, embarking on an identity quest or search. We then look for identity in a series of frantic activities: “we achieve and we push and we perform and we shop and we work out and we accomplish great things, longing to repair the image. Longing to find an identity that feels right”!*

*This he then summarises this as a longing to “be comfortable in our own skins”.*

I then invited them into a discussion about this perspective of identity by asking some questions as listed below.

*This sounds as if it resonates with our conversations about meaning and then more recently how these stories of meaning visit Identity on its way to its destination. What do you think?*

- 1. Interesting remark that he makes about us “losing trust in God’s version of our story”, don’t you think?*
- 2. What do you think about the idea that our search for meaning is link to the story of God’s image in us?*
- 3. Do you recognise some of the items in his list of actions? Can you tell stories about these?*
- 4. What can you tell or perhaps teach the rest of us about being comfortable in your own skin?*

Estelle responded by writing:

*People become scared of what God actually wants us to be like. Think about what God planned for us (relationships with meaning and trust, love towards people close to us, etc etc.) Look at what the world has become. I think that God will forgive our sins, but we have to show gratitude for what He has done for us and try our best to do the right things. Humans aren’t perfect, but they can try to live the way that God intended them to.*

She then related God's story in us to our life purpose again (see the previous chapter):

*I think everyone wants a purpose in life and will search for it until they finally know what it is. Having a purpose gives us hope and makes us work harder, because we know that we are working towards something.*

This may allude to a discourse about humans' search for divine purpose and beliefs that such purpose remains largely un-known or un-discovered throughout our lives. Estelle managed to link this to a more physical sense of identity when she proposed that

*once you know yourself (what you want, what you believe in, your strengths and weaknesses, your goals, your needs) you become comfortable in your own skin. Once people can't hurt, insult or change you as individual and once you have found inner happiness- that's when you become comfortable in your own skin.*

Delicia chose to respond to the last question about being "comfortable in one's own skin" reflecting on how comfortable she was in the skins that she was wearing. She identified work, personal life and *physical self* as some of the skins currently present in her life. Illustrating how one can be at various levels of comfort in these "skins" she indicated that work skin and personal life skin were fitting comfortably, with perhaps some discomfort in respect of her physical self skin. She continued to relate landscape of action accounts illustrating her feelings reported previously.

Delicia subsequently introduced some further typical *identity markers*<sup>69</sup> into the discussion of identity. She suggested that age and *maturity* have the potential to be discourses influencing how comfortable one feels in one's skins. She localized these general statements by relating stories from her life about these discourses.

Responding to my invitation to reflect<sup>70</sup> on her account of *skin comfort*, she internalised these identity stories by proposing that

*I guess what I could teach someone is that, if you are not comfortable with yourself, who is going to be? If you are insecure or awkward, it really does not help others to be around you. I know I do not want to be with someone who is so uncomfortable with themselves that they cannot give their opinion about something, or someone who is so insecure they cannot go out and meet new people.*

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<sup>69</sup> See Webster (2005:7)

<sup>70</sup> This should be considered as a hermeneutic bridge to landscape of identity, valuing identity stories of agency and thickening the story by introducing the school metaphor as a process of re-membling and even including outsider witnesses.

## 8.3 Voices from the literature: A Life that Matters and Its Relationship to Identity

*“Only through the ongoing conversation with intimates does the individual develop a sense of identity or an inner voice!”*

Hoffman, 1995:116

### 8.3.1 Narrative identity

Maureen Whitebrook (2001: 4) suggests that identity can primarily be described as the stories we tell about ourselves as well as the stories others tell about us. She suggests that the conceptualization of narrative identity rests on the claim that *narrating is a basic human activity*. In the next section of this chapter, the contributions of Ricoeur, Taylor and MacIntyre to the discussion of narrative identity will be described.

Taylor (1989:47) claims that in order to have a sense of who we are, that is, to have an identity, *we have to have a notion of how we have become, and of where we are going; ... I understand my present action in the form of an “and then”*. Whitebrook also quotes Somers (1994) saying that:

*Social life itself is storied*

And

*Narrative is an ontological condition of social life*

Then

*In offering an explanation of what we are doing, we relate it to our own intentions and thereby present it under the aspect of a further episode in the narrative of our lives.*

Somers (1994:605) reports the statement by Law professor, Patricia Williams, about how narratives of our lives describe a multi-storied reality and need not be totalising:

*While being black has been the powerful social attribution in my life, it is only one of a number of governing narratives or presiding fictions by which I am constantly reconfiguring myself in the world. Gender is another, along with ecology, pacifism, my peculiar brand of colloquial English, and Roxbury, Massachusetts. The complexity of role identification, the politics of sexuality, the inflections of professionalized discourse - all describe and impose boundary in my*

*life, even as they confound one another in unfolding spirals of confrontation, deflection, and dream....*

Somers (1994:606) describes how earlier interest in narrativity focused on its representational potential, whereas more recent approaches understand narrativity and narratives as *epistemological and ontological concepts*. She confirms what some of the other contributors have suggested, namely that the narrativity concepts *posit that it is through narrativity that we come to know, understand, and make sense of the social world, and it is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social identities*. In a response to the potentially universalizing politics of narrative identity, Somers (1994:616) suggests that attention to time, space and relationship in narrative can avoid the risk of essentialism, thus positioning narrative as mediator of ontological identities:

*Together, these dimensions suggest narratives are constellations of relationships (connected parts) embedded in time and space, constituted by causal emplotment... Narrativity demands that we discern the meaning of any single event only in temporal and spatial relationship to other events.*

Bauer, McAdams and Pals (2008:81) describe narrative identity as the *internal, dynamic* life story *that one constructs to make sense of his/her life*. Thus they link narrative identity to a Life that Matters. According to these authors, a number of authors have proposed that *adults in modern societies* make sense of their worlds in terms of stories (these authors include Bruner, 1990; Giddens, 1991; McAdams, 1985; Sarbin, 1986; Singer, 2004; and Taylor, 1989). Bauer, McAdams and Pals (2008:82) attribute some important characteristics to the perspective of identity, suggesting that it provides life with unity, purpose and meaning. Referring to McAdams (1985) the authors describe how we use narratives to derive *some measure of unity and purpose* out of a potentially *incomprehensible array of life events and experiences*. It should now becoming evident that an integral part of the process of storying is the arrangement of these unattached events to create such unity and meaningfulness as described throughout this chapter. This selection of events into the life story obviously becomes a filtering process by means of which certain life events are given prominence and invited into the life story, while others are considered not to conform to the life story theme and are therefore excluded from the life story. This is a dynamic process and it is in this selection process that the very opportunity for re-selection lies – and in the re-selection lies the potential for agency and for re-storying lives. The power relations influencing or even effecting these filtering processes are invested with societal discourses, which should be re-visited and critiqued continually to prevent these stories from becoming totalising of our lives.

Whitebrook (2001:39) quotes the following from JM Coetzee:

*You tell the story of your life by selecting from a reservoir of memories, and in the process of selecting, you leave things out. To omit to say that you tortured flies as a child is, logically speaking, as much an infraction of truth to fact as to say that you tortured flies when in fact you didn't.*

In this paper by Bauer, McAdams and Pals, they describe how narrative identity can be related to what they refer to as eudaimonic wellbeing (see chapter 7 of this thesis). Referring to the work and ideas developed by Socrates, Plato and Aristotle they indicate how eudaimonia as *the good life* differs from *hedonia*. Hedonic wellbeing refers to the experience of pleasure while eudaimonia has an ethical dimension to it, referring to meaningfulness and growth.

The link to eudaimonia is established by means of narratives of meaningfulness, purpose and growth. They provide the following excerpts from narratives of major life goals. They emphasize the importance of personal growth, meaningful relationships, and helping society:

- *To be as integrated physically, emotionally, intellectually, spiritually as I can be ... exploring my own process and to develop/continue intimate relationships with family and friends.*
- *I would like to get married and have children.... I'm trying to learn about myself before I can begin learning how to make myself a part of another person. In my marriage, I want to be happy and use my marriage to continue to explore the world around me.*
- *My desire is to simplify my life in every way -- to sell our house and live in a place that requires less responsibility, to use fewer clothes, have less furniture, and striving for quality rather than quantity.*
- *I want to stay happy ... I want to get married. I want to have children. I want to give back to my community.*

It is interesting to note how these narratives resonate with the identity and meaningfulness narratives of the co-researchers in this study.

Bauer, McAdams and Pals (2008:89) describe how growth effects eudaimonia in identity narratives. According to these authors, the two great themes of life stories are agency and communion. They suggest that these hold different relations to well-being: communal themes often correlate with well-being, but agentic themes often do not (after Mansfield and McAdams, 1996; McAdams, 1985).

According to their experience, however, where agentic and communal themes involve intrinsic growth, a more consistent tie to well-being may be found.

The choice of life events for inclusion into our life stories alluded to above, introduces a suspicion of multiplicity and therefore also of uncertainty. Whitebrook (2001:5) therefore suggests that an examination of narrative and reading of narratives may suggest that identity may be uncertain: in being a selection process in an attempt to collate life events into some comprehensible life story, *narrative does not necessarily ensure unity*. On the contrary, narrative may actually *exhibit lack of pattern*, and as such *an absence of closure*. In this regard, she continues to suggest that identity can be *precarious* (2001:45). She does however, suggest that the coherence is in the telling:

*Uncertainty, fragmentation and disunity can be contained in the narrative by way of content and form, what is told and the telling of it (2001:5-6).*

Let us consider *narrative* unity again. If we follow White's description of a narrative (White, 2005), a story can be said to consist of events which are arranged sequentially over time according to some sustained theme. We can therefore expect a narrative identity to include life events which are arranged to form some congruent or consistent story about our lives. As has been described earlier in this chapter as well as in the previous chapter this is an attempt at congruence, which as Mitzen (2006) has suggested is often associated with ontological security (see section 8.3.6 of this chapter).

When we refer to *narrative unity*, we have to discuss MacIntyre's conception of narrative unity. Once again Whitebrook (2001:115) provides us with an account of MacIntyre's narrative unity. According to Whitebrook, MacIntyre claims that

*narrative history of a certain kind turns out to be the basic and essential(!) genre for the characterization of human actions; persons are essentially storytelling animals, telling stories that 'aspire to truth'; 'the concept of a person is that of a character abstracted from a history'; and thus to 'the narrative concept of selfhood'.*

And then regarding narrative unity, he adds:

*Personal identity is just that identity presupposed by the unity of the character which the unity of a narrative requires (MacIntyre, 1985: 217, 218).*

Thus unity is explained as the unity embodied in a single life (Whitebrook, 2001:115), a matter, therefore, of the *integrated, ordered life consequent on articulating that life in narrative terms*. Identity in conclusion to this argument therefore consists *in being able to give an account of oneself*.



Whitebrook (2001: 22) reminds us that narrative identity entails construction: quoting Randall (1995) she suggests that we *author ourselves into being*. She describes the following narrative development process:

*A life has a beginning, a middle, and end, like a story. A life is about someone doing something, as is a story. A life has a main person in the middle of it, as a story often has. A life can be fraught with conflict, can be seen as manifesting a set of recurrent themes, and can even be divided into certain chapters – again, as can a story. A life is a sort of world within itself, as is a story (after Randall, 1995).*

According to Whitebrook (2001:23) narrative identity is both embodied and embedded, referring to both the person as biological entity as well as the person storied into a culture (as Bruner suggested). Here we are reminded of MacIntyre's tradition positioning the person within both local setting and interaction with others (Whitebrook, 2001: 24).

### 8.3.2 Some philosophers' voices

Wikipedia ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Personal\\_identity\\_\(philosophy\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Personal_identity_(philosophy))) provides a description of identity as referring to the *numerical* identity over time, that is, the conditions under which a person remains identical to himself/herself over time. According to this understanding it appears as if *sameness* and congruence over time are closely related to identity. The description provided here is highly unsatisfactory as it appears to be using the construct to describe itself.

Problems which were discussed over time as they pertain to identity, include *the mind-body problem*, which concerned itself with the relationship between mind and bodily states or processes, a consciousness basis for identity<sup>71</sup>, the Bundle Theory of the Self<sup>72</sup>, personal continuity<sup>73</sup>, and ego identity<sup>74</sup>.

<sup>71</sup> John Locke concerned himself with this topic and posited that identity or the self is to be found in the consciousness and not in the soul or body.

<sup>72</sup> David Hume undertook a study of the mind/body problem, suggesting that *we are never intimately conscious of anything but a particular perception; man is a bundle or collection of different perceptions which succeed one another with an inconceivable rapidity and are in perpetual flux and movement (A Thesis of Human Nature, I, IV, vi).*

<sup>73</sup> In psychology, personal continuity, also called personal persistence, is the uninterrupted connection concerning a particular person of his or her private life and personality. Personal continuity is the union affecting the facets arising from personality in order to avoid discontinuities from one moment of time to another time ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Personal\\_identity\\_\(philosophy\)#cite\\_note-0](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Personal_identity_(philosophy)#cite_note-0)).

<sup>74</sup> Ego integrity is the ego's accumulated assurance of its capacity for order and *meaning*. Ego identity is the accrued confidence that the inner sameness and continuity prepared in the past are matched by the sameness and continuity of one's meaning for others, as evidenced for instance, in the promise of a career.

We will now invite the philosophers Paul Ricoeur, Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor and Michel Foucault into the discussion of identity.

A philosopher who has written widely about Identity was Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005). The kind of identity that the Ricoeurian self has is constituted by an inextricable tie between a selfsameness and a selfhood or ipseity. Following a distinction in Latin between *idem* and *ipse*, Ricoeur holds that the self's *idem*-identity is that which gives the self, among other things, its spatio-temporal sameness. As David Vessey (\_\_\_) points out however, *idem*-identity does not give us guidance for answering one crucial question of identity, "Who am I?" The answer to that question is *ipse*-identity: selfhood. In contrast to *idem*-identity, *ipse*-identity is not dependent on something permanent for its existence. That is, having a self over time does not necessitate having something the same, something perhaps metaphysical which grounds the identity of self.

Thus, its *ipse*-identity gives it its unique ability to initiate something new and imputable to himself or herself (Ricoeur, 1990:35). Without both types of identity there is no self. Because a self has both an *idem*-identity and an *ipse*-identity, it inhabits two irreducible orders of causality, namely the physical<sup>75</sup> and the intentional orders. A comprehensive account of any genuine action must express the way it is related to both of these orders.

At first these two characteristics seem to represent irreconcilable opposites, posing a deadlock for the discussion of identity. It is in narrative identity that we find a solution for this problem though (cf. Vessey). Vessey suggests that narrative identity has the ability to bridge the *idem* and *ipse* identities, but fails to indicate how. In my opinion, this ability derives from our multi-storied identities. *I*ipseity in isolation would have the potential of becoming totalising, but when we consider that storying is a process of making sense of events over time and that this sensemaking process necessarily leads to certain events being included and others excluded from the identity story, then the possibility of an intersubjective self presents itself as an agentive identity selected from those previously un-engaged events. The relational nature of the narrative identity facilitates this ipseity – the relationality allows detachment and externalised, non-totalised identities. This view of narrative identity providing a solution to the continuity imperative, is also supported by Ezzy (1998). Ezzy links this proposal back to Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative (1984, 1985 and 1988)*, suggesting that narratives provide a lived experience with a clearer, richer meaning (1998:251)

Alasdair MacIntyre's (1984:216-217) perspective on identity may be described as an ethical approach to identity. MacIntyre (born 1929) introduces his discussion of personal identity by

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<sup>75</sup> This reminds of internal states of identity as introduced by White and described by Carey and Russell (2003).

suggesting that we can only answer the question “*What am I to do?*” when we can answer the question “*Of what story or stories do I find myself a part of?*” Proposing that our stories must have a narrative structure, MacIntyre positions our actions as episodes in stories. He makes a profound statement regarding stories:

*Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words.(1984:216)*

MacIntyre concerned himself with the question of continuity of identity. Born from the need for congruence as explained previously, we would like to be ensured of persistence and continuity. MacIntyre proposes *narrative unity* as the solution to this problem. He posits that *personal identity is just that identity presupposed by the unity of the character which the unity of a narrative requires* (1984:218). Narrative unity here refers to what Maureen Whitebrook calls *not a unity of consciousness or perception or a state of being, but rather a matter of the integrated, ordered life, consequent on articulating that life in narrative terms* (2001:115). MacIntyre (1984:218) acknowledges that our life stories are part of *interlocking set* of life narratives. These narratives form a unity, combining in the life narrative of the individual as a multi-storied identity.

But he also alludes to a dynamic character of these life stories, referring to the *unity of a narrative quest* (1984:219). In this *quest*, the intentional nature of our identity is embodied (cf. Carey and Russell, 2003). The success or failure of these quests is related to the failures and successes of the implicit quest narratives which form the paradigmatic surface or ground for evaluation. Compare in this regard White’s discussion of the *absent-but-implicit* (White: 2000).

Referring back to the *sets of interlocking narratives*, MacIntyre (1984:221) furthermore posits that the stories of our lives are *always embedded in the story of those communities from which we derive our identities*. This suggests that social discourses effect and affect our identities and corresponds to Taylor’s perspectives on identity.

According to Weir (2009:533), Taylor’s identity project is founded in a tradition of *interpretation as recollection or restoration of meaning*. Taylor’s perspective is closely related to the need for *authenticity*. For Taylor (1992: 14) authenticity is related to everyone’s ‘right to develop their own form of life, grounded on their own sense of what is really important or of value’. This is related to the capacity to discover, create and affirm our own identities which *has developed historically with a liberation from fixed social positions* – and then Weir (2009:535) adds an important observation – *and entails our freedom and responsibility for the generation of meaning, for self-definition*. Weir (2009:537) reports that for Taylor, the ideal of authenticity is not about metaphysics, but rather

about ethics and an ethical relation to the self. Thus the often revisited question of “Who am I?” becomes a question about my *goods*: about what matters to me, what constitutes a good life to me. In this way, Taylor suggests, one develops an *authentic* relationship to oneself, to others and to ideals and purposes.

Although this perspective of identity is socially constituted and embedded in a sense reminding us of MacIntyre’s perspectives, this does not imply sameness or selflessness. In the relational nature of identity as understood by Taylor, unique relationships are formed and embedded in identity. Taylor also suggested that it is impossible to discover a self which is not socially constituted (Weir, 2009:537). In support Taylor posits that we are *dialogical beings*, forming our identities through both positive and negative relationships with others and with ourselves. These selves, according to Taylor, are created in *linguistic and cultural contexts of meaning* (Weir, 2009:538). Furthermore, these identities are created and related to *through our embeddedness in communities and background horizons of meaning* (see paradigm). The question about identity posed above, namely “Who am I?” thus inevitably invites the question “Who are we?” We therefore understand ourselves in the context and frameworks of shared identities and associations that *give meaning and significance to our lives* (compare A Life That Matters). Taylor posits that our identities are made up of two dimensions: *our commitments to our values, and our attachments to ‘defining communities’* (Taylor, 1989: 36).

Weir (2009:541) considers the strength of Taylor’s approach to be that we are ourselves *only through our connections: to others, to goods, to ourselves*. Contrary to Foucault’s perspectives (see later in this section), our identities are more than just the effects of our constitution through power regimes; on the contrary, our identities are our connections. As far as agentive identities are concerned, Taylor suggests that we are participants in this construction process. This participation takes the form of the interactions and dialogues in which we are involved (with others and with ourselves), and also through *engagement with questions about ourselves and our relationships* (Weir, 2009: 541).

Compared to Taylor’s approach to identity described above, Weir (2009:534) proposes that Foucault’s approach can be described as *interpretation as exercise of suspicion* (2009:534). Instead of perceiving identity as meaning-generating, Foucault questions the identity discourse and suggests that it can only lead to constraints on freedom through the power discourses vested in it. It only serves to support discourses and technologies of discrimination based on understandings of what is normal and what is deviant (2009:535).

Thus Foucault sees shared identities as boring and as oppressive sameness, rather than as connections to other people (2009:547).

According to Weir (2009:536) Foucault demonstrates clearly that when we ask “Who am I?” and engage in self-interrogation, *the self we discover is necessarily the sedimentation of normalizing and coercive regimes of power*. This requires us to evaluate our deepest desires and core values to determine whether we are *normal or deviant*. Therefore for Foucault, the idea that we can discover our authentic selves is the illusion of modernity. For Foucault, when we are exploring our selves and personal meanings what we actually find are *identity categories produced through power/knowledge regimes*, which once again only sustain the *boundaries between normalcy and deviance* (Weir, 2009:538).

Thus it becomes clear that Foucault did not perceive the social nature of identity formation as allowing any space for freedom. Whereas Taylor’s philosophical project was meaning-directed, Foucault’s was a quest for freedom. For Foucault language was sustaining of power and not of meaning (Weir, 2009:540).

In a comparison of these two philosophers, Weir then suggests that we move beyond Foucault’s suspicion and Taylor’s uncritical connection with shared communities, to include a continuous critique of these connections of which we find ourselves part of, but also to transcend above to relations with the selves – which makes both these philosophers’ perspectives of identity *oddly asocial* (Weir, 2009:550) – to include what we could refer to as a spiritual dimension in our stories of identity.

### 8.3.3 What do the non-philosophers say about identity?

Let us look at a few descriptions of identity suggested in the literature. Castells (2000:6) describes identity as people’s source of *meaning and experience*. Gary S Greg (2007:83) provides a rather complex understanding of identity which is included here because it contains a number of important discourses of identity:

*Identity resides in a nexus of relations at the intersection of paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes of meaning: It is defined (sic) by a paradigmatic “surface structure” of homologous concrete contrasts that represent a deep abstract opposition, mediated by a third, emergent category, which is developed by an implicit syntagmatic plot line...identity entails the creation of meanings.*

Just reading this, leaves one gasping for air! Not only does this allude to the complexity of the identity discourse, but it also refers to some of the other discourses associated with identity. It evidently alludes to the relational nature of identity as well as to the ontological implications in being generative of meanings. The use of the intersection metaphor referring to “plot lines” reminds us of Bruner’s landscapes of action and identity (1986:14).

The educator, Webster (2005:5) describes how, when we are asked *who* we are, we often respond by telling *what* we are. I would for instance reply by saying that I am a male, in my late forties, married and busy with a PhD. That would however, address the question of *what* I am and as such, really be an identification rather than an identity. Webster refers to these identifiers as *superficial markers*.

Suggesting that personal identities are socially constructed, Webster (2005:6) then continues to posit that identity should be understood to be spiritual in nature. Thus, instead of conforming to a labelling culture of essentialist identity creation, this offers *spiritual freedom* and prevents identity from becoming totalising. Quoting Heidegger (1969) Webster suggests that the word *is* signifies sameness rather than identity. Identity therefore is found in the relationship between the person and the label or the category; in other words, how the subjective self relates to the object.

According to Webster (2005:7) Søren Kierkegaard also passionately supported this view of identity. He went to great lengths to explain how identity lay in this relationship rather than in, what Heidegger called, *facticity* (which refers to the objects of identification). Inviting Frankl (2000:84) into the discussion of identity Webster (2005:8) reports how he proposed that our personal identity becomes possible only through relating to our life purposes<sup>76</sup>. In a similar vein Kierkegaard is quoted to have said (Webster, 2005:8):

*The human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation which relates to itself, or that in the relation which is its relating to itself. The self is not the relation but the relation’s relating to itself. (Kierkegaard, 1989: 43)*

In this paper, Webster strongly opposes the view of identity as essence (which we might refer to as modernist). He proceeds to develop an understanding of identity which is both spiritual and existential. The essentialism view of identity derives from an understanding that meaning is essential and grounded in essential properties of substances. As such categories of what *is* can be defined (!). When this is applied to identity, this therefore signifies what is and refers to sameness and *not to identity* (Webster, 2005:7). Then identity becomes a matter of labelling. Instead,

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<sup>76</sup> See the section on identity and purpose later in this chapter.

Webster (2005:9) proposes that personal identity is constituted by *how an individual relates to and values his or her relations*.

On the discourse of being *authentic* (compare Taylor earlier in this chapter), Webster (2005:11) suggests that therefore, making meaning and sense of one's self-identity, involves one being able to *articulate* (Taylor, 1985: 26) what one stands for, and why one values one's position. This articulation is one important aspect of becoming *authentic*, which is argued by Webster to be necessary if the personal identity of individuals is to avoid being essentialised and rather to become spiritually based<sup>77</sup>.

### 8.3.4 Identity and a Meaningful Life

Meaningfulness and identity are often associated in the literature. See for instance Webster (2002, 2003, 2005, 2007), Taylor (1985, 1989), Weir (2009), Gubrium and Holstein (1994: 697), and Gregg (2007:83) in this regard.

In her paper comparing Foucault's and Taylor's perspectives of identity, Weir (2009:534) discusses identity as a source of individual and collective meaning that *enables one to be oneself*. An identity which is shared with others is here associated with Taylor's perspective on identity and is proposed as *fundamental to a meaningful life*. He observes that the identity question of how we are moving in relation to the good – a question demanding a Yes/No answer – is the crucial link between identity and the notion of a worthwhile life (Taylor, 1989:45).

Furthermore, Weir (2009:543) indicates that the relationship with self in a consideration of identity is an ethical relation in that it focuses on the question of a meaningful life. For Taylor our lives have meaning only in that we experience ourselves as being importantly connected to our *defining communities, to our background horizons, to our ideals and goods* (Weir, 2009: 544). Being connected in this way means *identifying oneself with*:

- With a past or tradition,
- With defining communities, with values or ideals and
- With a future one can imagine or foresee.

Perhaps that is why so many people are currently experience lives depleted of meaning (see Webster, 2003:9; 2002:1).

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<sup>77</sup> This will be discussed later in the chapter on Reflecting.

Wong (2008) in the abstract to his paper on Meaningfulness and Identity lightheartedly suggests that a life becomes meaningful when one considers that it contains material for an autobiography that is considered worth writing about others consider it worth reading.

Sigelman and Rider (2009:323) discuss the narrative identity approach. In their discussion they posit that we use life stories to *reconstruct personal histories and imagine our futures*. Quoting McAdams and Pals (2006), they suggest such stories provide coherence that gives lives meaning and purpose. The matter of coherence deserves closer examination and will be discussed again (see also McAdam, 2006).

Dan McAdams (2005: 241) suggested that a life story provides us with possible versions of “who I am, how I came to be, and where my life is going in the future”. According to him, we start narrating our lives at age 2 and our structuring of these life stories improves over the years. Emerging adulthood (18-25 years) appears to be the prime time for generating life stories that provide life purpose and direction – *as well as for achieving a sense of identity*. Another important characteristic of life stories is also introduced when he indicates that these life stories are revisited, reflected upon and adapted over the years to provide a dynamic, non-stagnated life script.

McClellan and Pratt (2006) have done research on identity statuses and meaning making. In this paper they reported a few very interesting findings. Their research suggests that achievement stories are negatively correlated with meaning. According to McClellan and Pratt (2006:715), one of the major characteristics of well-formed life stories is a sense of meaning or integration of one’s experiences and therefore of oneself. They confirmed that meaning making is strongly related to (narrative) identity. Individuals, who made progress in exploring identity from the baseline age of observation to the last interview, told more reflective turning point narratives.<sup>78</sup> This strongly suggests that forming an identity and constructing a meaningful life story are related.

Castells (2000: 6, 7) adds his voice to the discussion of identity within the context of a meaningful life. Castells (2000:6) contends that identity is one’s source of *meaning* and experience. He goes on to say that by identity he understands the *process of construction of meaning on the basis of a cultural attribute ... that is given priority over other sources of meaning*. He also supports the understanding that there may be multiple or a *plurality of identities*. Castells (2000:7) refers to the process of individuation through which identities are constructed. Castells makes a number of comments regarding identities which deserve our attention. These will just be listed here and discussed due to the far reaching extent of each of these. Castells suggests that:

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<sup>78</sup> Meaning-making was agreed to be a connecting of the turning point to some aspect of or understanding of oneself.



- Identities are stronger than roles in as far as meaning is created, because of the process of self-construction involved in identity development
- Identities organize meaning, while roles organize the functions
- Meaning is understood as the symbolic identification of a social actor / person of the *purpose of her/his action*
- Meaning is organized around a primary identity
- The social construction of identity always takes place in a context marked by power relationships (compare Foucault's perspective on identity above)

### 8.3.5 Identity, Purpose and Spirituality

Webster (2003) has proposed a framework for spirituality development in education. In this thesis he proposes that the *spiritually-educated* person will recognise his/her own spirituality and develop a sense of personal identity (2003:15). He also links this to a sense of life meaning and purpose (2003:9).

In his seminal paper on Spirituality and Uncertainty, Webster (2002:1) proposes that meaning-making and (self-) identity both are embedded and fostered from within one's spirituality. Webster then responds to the continuity or unity problem in the identity discourse when he refers to Hill (1990:11, 13)<sup>79</sup> suggesting that spirituality focuses on the *unity* of the self. In a discussion of spirituality and identity (2002: 8) Webster refers back to the notion of categorization in answering the question "Who am I?". Common responses to this question involving various categorizations, respond to the *what* and not the *who*. Quoting Taylor (1989:34) Webster describes how a list of attributes cannot provide an understanding of the personal identity. These attempts at answering the question above, may only offer us some reference, but do not provide answers about what makes us different from each other. Webster then proceeds to describe that Taylor argues that personal identity is also spiritually dependent.<sup>80</sup> Acknowledging this relationship between spirituality and identity does not, however, lead to a positional state of identity which constitutes a totalising view of identity with an over-emphasis on sameness once again. Contra this position, Webster quotes Morgan (1996) proposing that when one claims to be a different person to what one was

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<sup>79</sup> Hill (1990: 11, 13) states that the term 'spiritual' "spotlights the *unity* of the self" [Webster's emphasis] and argues that it draws upon the distinctive human capacities or powers which include transcendence (and a sense of personal identity), reflection, a moral sense and a religious urge "to search for ultimate meaning, purpose and deliverance in the midst of our ambiguous environment."

<sup>80</sup> Taylor's notion of spirituality is described as a 'strong evaluation' and it is 'strong' or 'deep', because the individual "goes deeper" and "characterizes his motivation at greater depth" (Taylor, 1985: 25). A strong evaluation generally refers to the quality of motivations, and can be differentiated from 'weak evaluations', which focus only on outcomes (Taylor, 1985: 16).

previously, one is not referring to the metaphysical continuity of the person but instead to a decision to differentiate the emphasis on certain ethical and spiritual traits used to ground one's evaluations and intentions (Morgan, 1996: 242-243).

Poll and Smith (2003: 129) propose that spiritual identity, which can be described as an individual's belief that she or he is an eternal being and connected to God, is an aspect of human spirituality thought to be effective in protecting and restoring psychological health (after Richards & Bergin, 1997). If we use this line of thinking about identity and we were to explore an understanding of identity *as the way that God sees us*, we will experience a certain freedom and creativity in that this also can never just "be" in a totalising sense: if we accept that we can never fully "know" God and that in the Foucauldian sense any attempt at "knowing" God would equate to an attempt of exercising power over God or an attempt to categorise God as being "good" or "not good" (think "absent", uncaring, even cruel!), we will also never be able to fully "know" how God sees us. Our identity-through-spirituality will therefore become a dynamic construct engendered in our relationship with God.

In proposing that identity is existential and not essential, Webster (2005:5) relates identity (or the *who* in the *who am I?*) to spirituality through life purpose. But he also introduces a very important facet to identity, namely that this happens through how one relates, therefore confirming the relational character of identity.

Frankl (2000:84) proposed that our personal identity becomes possible only through relating to our life purposes.

### 8.3.6 A Relational Perspective on Identity

As was described in section 1.3.2 above, both Taylor and Foucault alluded to a relational nature of identity. As did MacIntyre, Taylor suggested that identity is embedded in the relationship with self and other from some engaged identity community, whereas Foucault focused on the relationship with self. Weir (2009) suggested that these perspectives may benefit from an extension to the relationship with that which is transcendent, which we may perhaps understand as the spiritual.

Hoffman (1995:19) suggests that the socially constructed self presents a picture of individual identity which is not within the individual or any other unit, but which is rather a temporal flow – "a stretch of moving history like a river or stream".

Mitzen (2006:344) describes identity as a dynamic process from which action flows, and which in turn, sustains identity. If this flow of action is consistent or congruent, it has the potential to

facilitate agency. Put differently, Mitzen suggest that individuals value their sense of personal continuity because *it underwrites their capacity for agency*. She then posits that it is important for ontological security<sup>81</sup>, that individual identity is formed and sustained through relationships. Actors therefore achieve ontological security especially by routinising their relations with significant others. Then, since continued agency requires the cognitive certainty which these routines provide, actors get attached to these social relationships (Mitzen, 2006:342).

### 8.3.7 Identity and Purpose

In proposing that identity is existential and not essential, Webster (2005:5) relates identity (or the *who* in the *who am I?*) to spirituality through life purpose. But he also introduces a very important facet to identity, namely that this happens through how one relates, therefore confirming the relational character of identity.

Frankl (2000:84) proposed that our personal identity becomes possible only through relating to our life purposes.

## 8.4 The Bridge to the Other Chapters

All that remains now is to reflect on the chapter making sure that we did discuss everything we set out to examine at the start of this chapter, and then decide what we can carry over to the next chapters.

This chapter confirmed the vital role identity plays in constructing a Life that Matters. Both the stories of identity told by my fellow researchers as wells as the identity narratives from the authors invited into the conversation from the literature strengthened the story of meaningfulness effected by identity.

Once again the stories of the co-researchers were supported by accounts of identity from the literature.

Spirituality offered itself as a context for unity of identity. Unity was often tabled in the discussion of identity and various authors suggested approaches which could help surmount this problem. It was Webster (2002, 2005) though who introduced spirituality as a means of providing unity to the identity discourse.

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<sup>81</sup> Ontological security refers to the need to experience oneself as a whole, continuous person in time – as ‘being’ rather than constantly changing – in order to realise a sense of agency (Giddens 1991:282)

Spirituality as mentioned in this context was introduced as a process of meaning making, identification and reflection. It is this reflection which will be introduced and discussed in the next chapter.