

**NARRATIVE REFLECTIONS ON A LIFE THAT MATTERS**

**BY**

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## ABSTRACT

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This study was inspired by the ever growing need for significance expressed both by my life coaching and pastoral therapy clients as well as the need for existential meaning reported both in the lay press and academic literature.

This study reflected on a life that matters with a group of co-researchers in a participatory action research context. The study has been positioned within pastoral theology and invited the theological discourse into a reflection of existential meaning.

Adopting a critical relational constructionist epistemology, the research was positioned within a postmodern paradigm. The implications for meaning and research were explored and described.

My fellow researchers were invited to reflect on what constitutes a meaningful life or “a life that matters” to them personally. These stories of meaning were explored and situated within personal meaning histories. Meaning discourses introduced to the discussion of “a life that matters” were deconstructed, their effects externalised and embedded in life long meaning stories. In the process outsider witnesses were introduced to these stories, enriching these as we did.

Together the research community made up of me and my fellow researchers, reflected on the meaning discourses introduced to the conversation on a life that matters in this way. These discourses included spirituality, purpose, and being meaningful in somebody else’s life. Only then did the group decide that perhaps these discourses were complemented by identity discourses.

When we reflected upon the value of the research process as meaning enhancing action in their lives, my co-researchers suggested that it was the reflection process which added most value to their own experiences of meaningfulness.

Throughout the research process, the voices of literature were invited into the conversation, exploring their perspectives on existential meaning. These voices acted as outsider witnesses, authenticating the stories of meaningfulness which were introduced by my fellow researchers.

This study may serve to revive the conversation both in the practical theology discourse and the pastoral theology discourse. It positions existential meaning within an uncertainty discourse and suggests that reflexive co-construction in the manner suggested previously, can contribute to the meaning enhancing multilogue.

Meaning making is introduced in a non-totalitarian way, strongly suggesting that an experience of meaningful living is possible even in postmodern times often described as confusing and potentially relativistically or nihilistically meaningless.

This study creates space for spirituality in the existential meaning conversation; perhaps even strongly proclaiming that it should be part of any conversation on meaningfulness.

Meaningfulness has been introduced as a *local experience* devoid of the power discourses of meta narratives and do-it-yourself recipes. Local process rather than universal content was positioned as meaning enhancing in the study, thus opening space for local life knowledges and negating the need to conform to meta-narratives of meaningfulness which may in effect be alienating and disempowering in that they relegate the life knowledges of objectified people into anecdotal and fictional.

### Key concepts:

Existential meaning, narrative, participatory action research, practical theology, spirituality, relationships, purpose, identity, reflection, examined life

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## Chapter 1. Introducing some reflections on “a life that matters”

*Many major historical figures in philosophy have provided an answer to the question of what, if anything, makes life meaningful, although they typically have not put it in these terms. Consider, for instance, Aristotle on the human function, Aquinas on the beatific vision, and Kant on the highest good. While these concepts have some bearing on happiness and morality, they are straightforwardly construed as accounts of which final ends a person ought to realize in order to have a significant existence.*

This is how the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy starts its essay on the meaning of life (2007).

Wikipedia describes the meaning of life as

*... a concept that concerns the possible purpose and significance that may be attributed to human existence and/or one's personal life. It has been the subject of much philosophical, scientific and theological speculation, and there is a huge variety of views concerning this philosophical problem.*

*It is often expressed in various related questions:*

*\_ What is the meaning of life?*

*\_ Why are we here? What are we here for?*

*.....*

*\_ What is the purpose of, or in, (one's) life?*

*\_ What is the significance of life?*

... and so it carries on to suggest a long list of questions which are asked to reflect on the meaning of life.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The fact that the meaning of life is introduced in terms of questions which are asked in a reflection process will later resonate well with one of the observations made by the research panel. They suggested that the reflection process rather than the results of the process enhanced their life meaning.

This study will enter this conversation, or perhaps contemplation, by contributing a narrative approach<sup>2</sup> of reflecting on the meaning of life. The aim will therefore not be to *tell*, but rather to *engage* in a sharing of *contemplation* on the meaning of life. The result may therefore be *process* rather than *content*.

This study has explored whether a pastoral narrative process is able to enhance participants' experience of meaningfulness or significance in their work environment. In doing so, the researchers had a twofold objective, namely

1. to gain insight and experience in the topic of Meaningfulness (in personal and professional life); and
2. to facilitate participants' journey to "a life that matters".

The study has been positioned in a work environment, but the research process has introduced meaning discourses from other areas of life as well.

In this chapter, I will first provide a context for the study, suggesting that the voices of statistics, education, coaching clients, pastoral therapy clients, educationalists and philosophers alike proclaim a story of need for meaning in life. Once the framework of need has been provided as a preamble to the story of meaning, I will proceed to pay attention to epistemology and propositions.

The rest of this chapter will be dedicated to the development of a suitable epistemological context for the study, an epistemology which will be aligned with the work ethic within which the study will be positioned. The discussion of epistemology will start by discussing why it is so important to reflect on epistemology. The discussion of epistemology will include a description of modernity, postmodernity, social constructionism and critical relational constructionism. The philosophical context will propose and describe discourses which will facilitate the narrative approach adopted in the study. Included here will be a description of what is meant by discourse in this context and a discussion of discourses like externalization, deconstruction and unique outcomes.

In conclusion, the chapter will reflect on the propositions developed and indicate how these will be adopted and progressed in the rest of the thesis.

In integrity with the narrative context which will be introduced as an approach to the study, a conversational style will be adopted in this thesis. The reader will therefore be included in the discussion by use of the plural first person "we" and asking rhetorical questions as an invitation to participation.

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<sup>2</sup> The narrative approach will be discussed later in this chapter once an epistemology has been proposed.

## 1.1 Motivation for the study

*Human beings are meaning junkies. McNamee (2007)*

When I discuss the research process later on, I will indicate that the research will be qualitative in nature. I will therefore not attempt to motivate the study by convincing readers of this thesis that, say, 73.27% of all people consider their lives not to be as meaningful as they could be. Statistics, I would like to suggest, are narratives like all other narratives, founded in a certain paradigm and perspective and informed by frameworks of meaning. They are therefore not definitive and should be considered as suggestions in the same way as the other voices invited into this study are contributing meaning to the research. The figures quoted in the following paragraphs should therefore be considered within this context.

On February 4, 2009 Freek Robinson in his radio program on RSG, *Praat Saam*, quoted statistics indicating that 70% of South Africans consider their lives not to be meaningful (Afrikaans term used “sinvol”) and that 2 out of 5 South Africans are unhappy in their work environment.

Frankl (2004: 105) quotes surveys indicating that 89% of people polled in France admitted that people need “something” for the sake of which to live. In another statistical survey of 7 948 students at 48 colleges conducted by scientists from Johns Hopkins University, 78% of the respondents indicated that their first goal was “finding a purpose and meaning to my life” (:105).

Authors attribute the success of books like *The Purpose-Driven Life* (Warren, 2002) to the great number of people struggling with life’s big questions like “Why am I here?” and “How do I live a life that is significant?” (Miller, 2007). Taylor (1966:1) suggested that our greatest desire is to have a meaningful life.

Echoing these voices, in conversations with friends and acquaintances everybody seems to agree that their lives could be more meaningful. Experience from my own pastoral therapy and life coaching practice indicates that many of my clients struggle with the meaningfulness of their lives. These personal experiences are confirmed by research done by writers like Porras et al (2007).

Webster (2002) suggests that “the loss of traditional mythical metanarratives” has led to a quest for more meaningfulness in life. More specifically, he posits that the “significance of human existence and personal worth” have become more uncertain, thus leading to an enhanced need for more meaningful lives. He describes how in Australia despite improving standards of living in terms of material wealth and longevity, there has been no associated improvement in quality of life, even

calling the material affluence “a waste of time” after Adams (2000: 24). He continues to link this to “the death of God” and the “eclipse of modern authoritative traditions”. This also reminds of Rolheiser’s account of Nietzsche’s madman in *The Shattered Lantern* (2004:20-21). Rolheiser uses this story as the introduction to a text on the “rediscovering” of a “felt presence of God” – a text within which various discourses of meaning and spirituality are developed.

Webster’s proposals confirm what O’Connor and Chamberlain have reported (1996:461-462). They described the loss of a meaningful world and linked the lack of meaning to psychopathology, lowered well-being, substance abuse, and suicidal tendencies. To this they added neuroticism, anxiety, and anomia, whereas high levels of meaningfulness correlated with good self-esteem, control and extraversion, thus positioning meaningfulness as central to successful functioning.

In Part I of their book, Porras et al (2007: 33-83) describe how meaning precedes success, based on research of the lasting success of the lives of 200 people they call builders.

Perhaps one should add the famous quote of Nietzsche at this stage:

*He who has a WHY to live for, can bear with almost any HOW. (quoted by Frankl, 2004:109)*

Scott (2000) also quotes Bohm in stating that we are meaning-seeking beings (my own paraphrase), but the meaningfulness of our lives is “efficiency programs mainly for economic expansion”.

Table 1. Results from the 2001 Staying Connected Survey

	<b>Where do formers say they find meaning?</b>	
	<b>Very Meaningful Life</b> (123 out of total 230)	<b>Somewhat Meaningful Life</b> (81 out of total 230)
Spirituality	80%	53%
Relationships	79%	80%
Family	61%	64%
Community	51%	37%
Work	40%	35%
Self Knowledge	31%	43%
Dreams	24%	26%
Accomplishments	24%	20%

Divided between formers who claim to have a Very Meaningful Life or a Somewhat Meaningful Life.

**11% of the respondents said they had Very Little Meaning in their lives and 1% said they had No Meaning At All.**

In December 2001 Staying Connected, a publication designed for alumni of Catholic full-time volunteer programs published by the St. Vincent Pallotti Centres, sent a survey on the meaning of life to 700 former volunteers. The responses they got back were enthusiastic. 230 former volunteers took the time to take the survey and answer questions such as, *What defines meaning in your life?* and *What influences affected your decision making before and after volunteering?* The survey can be accessed on their website at: [www.pallotticenter.org/meaningfullifesurvey.asp](http://www.pallotticenter.org/meaningfullifesurvey.asp)).

Louw (2007: 9-11) relates the experience of a meaningful life to the Frankl's "barbed wire syndrome" – an experience of systematic classification and incarceration as in the prison camps of the Second World War. He brings a South African perspective to human experience of meaning in life by referring to Nelson Mandela's Robben Island experience and the Second Anglo Boer war. Making it more current he continues to describe the life on the Cape Flats. Giving it a more global perspective, he opens the conversation to include globalism, "Bush"-ism and the destructive use of religion to maintain the ideology of "barbed wire" classification as it is done between Christianity and the Islam. He posits that meaning in life is concerned with the ideology of cultural life systems, making the statement that a meaningful existence is inter alia a systemic matter (2007:11). As such, he suggests that the lack of the experience of meaning in life is embedded in global systems.

As is evident from the sources quoted in this section, meaningfulness and the quest for a meaningful life have remained a topic of discussion through the ages. And although it is an age-old topic of discussion, it seems as if it is now ever so important as a current life narrative discourse. This therefore is the conversation that this study would like to join, hoping to contribute even one paragraph to the narratives of meaningful living.

Seeing that my voice will be resonating throughout this text in the telling and retelling of contributions to the study, I consider it necessary that I provide the larger research community with an account of the "Who Am I" story. This will position my story within the multilogue of meaning stories in this text. Therefore, I will attempt to indicate how this study topic has been an integral theme in my life story.

## 1.2 Epistemology

### 1.2.1 An understanding of epistemology

This research thesis will still discuss epistemology, ontology and methodology in separate sections, but the thesis will be aligned with Foucault's thinking later on and discuss these constructs as meaning discourses.

Guba and Lincoln (1994: 108) provide us with a very useful understanding of the discourses epistemology, ontology and methodology. They categorize alternative inquiry paradigms according to their stance on the following three questions:

***The ontological question***

*What is the form and nature of reality and, therefore, what is there that can be known about it?*

***The epistemological question***

*What is the nature of the relationship between the knower or would-be knower and what can be known?*

***The methodological question***

*How can the inquirer go about finding out whatever he or she believes can be known?*

This not only provides a continuous story line through ontology, epistemology and methodology, but also makes mention of the relational nature of epistemology. This is well aligned with the ethical position of the study.

## 1.2.2 Why epistemology is so important in this study

Why is it important to reflect on epistemology?

Austin Cline (1998) at About.com offers the following answer to the question:

*Epistemology is important because it is fundamental to how we think. Without some means of understanding how we acquire knowledge, how we rely upon our senses, and how we develop concepts in our minds, we have no coherent path for our thinking. A sound epistemology is necessary for the existence of sound thinking and reasoning — this is why so much philosophical literature can involve seemingly arcane discussions about the nature of knowledge.*

Paul Roberts (2003: 222-223) provides a twofold response, the first of which is rather humorous or even cynical:

*A 'critical-cynical voice' responds: "Because in order to get your thesis you have to write a section on epistemology and show you know what you are doing here. Also, whilst we are talking about rules, real or imaginary internalisations, don't you have to write the thesis all in one type face which rather scuppers this little experiment?"*

He then continues on a more serious note to discuss the implications of positivism and empiricism, quoting Gergen. I include his response to our question verbatim, to indicate that it does not quite provide an answer. It leaves the reader with a feeling that he skirts around the point, much like the student who has to provide an answer to a question for which he or she has not studied and then tries to negotiate the dilemma by adopting some knowledge that he or she might have to fit the question!

*A 'scholarly voice' takes up this challenge for most of the remainder of this section.*

*Epistemology is important here because I see this thesis as an example of what Schon (1995) calls an 'epistemology of practice', in contrast to traditional views on epistemology, with its norms of, in Schon's words, "technical rationality". Traditional epistemology possesses what Ken Gergen at the September 2002 'ninth approaches to emerging inquiry conference' called the "commanding presence" of Cartesian-empirical-positivistic thought. This has dominated western thinking since the mid-seventeenth century and is generally considered to establish the philosophical basis of modernism. Such an epistemology assumes that there is an objective world, knowledge of which can be progressively gained by empirically verifiable methods that guarantee truth and objectivity independent of the knower of it. This knowledge can be cast in the form of timeless general truths, independent of social, political, and personal context.*

Not very convincing, we may have to agree.

This study is about meaningfulness, and if we would like to reflect on meaningfulness, it would be critical to reflect on the creation of meaning – and that is the realm of epistemology.

Furthermore, I would like to propose that we reflect on epistemology as the study of knowing, and knowing or knowledge is associated with Power. In this regard, see Wessels' (1999: 61-67) account of Foucault's power/knowledge discourse. According to this discourse, "a domain of knowledge becomes a domain of power" (Wessels, 1999: 61). Wessels quotes Kearins (1997:9) on Foucault, suggesting that "rituals of power are exactly what sets up the nonegalitarian, asymmetrical relations". I am concerned here with the power of exclusivity or centralization with regards to contribution to the research discourse. It is therefore important to reflect on epistemology, which will in turn encourage a participatory generation of knowledge during the research process. The epistemology selected should therefore be aligned with the research ethic.



### 1.2.3 Epistemology and ontology in a social constructionist context

There are however, strong voices emerging about the historical distinction between ontology, epistemology and methodology which is Cartesian in nature. Foucault for one, suggested that

*...we should ask: under what conditions and through what forms can an entity like the subject appear in the order of discourse; what positions does it occupy; what functions does it exhibit; and what rules does it follow in each type of discourse? (Foucault, 1977, pp.137-138).*

This will have to be accounted for in the thesis. Garry (1996: 102) disagrees with this perspective, indicating that she can see no good reason for “collapsing the epistemology-ontology distinction. Neville Spencer (2000) takes up the debate and concludes that ontology precedes any discussion of or reflection on epistemology.

*For any theory that we have about what knowledge is, we must have a presupposition about what the world is like. That is, we must assume that the world exists in such a way that it makes our theory of knowledge possible. There is no escaping having a theory of ontology; it is only a question of whether or not it is consciously acknowledged and studied or whether it is left as an implicit presupposition of one's theory of epistemology.*

He then introduces the postmodern position on the creation of meaning or truth, stating that relativism provides an insurmountable logical anomaly in the discussion of epistemology and ontology. This is a result of limiting the discussion of postmodernism to relativism. In this text we will argue that *relationalism* as an integral discourse within social constructionism and critical relational constructionism creates space within which these arguments can be considered in a more constructive manner. Spencer (2000) states that

*In the case of postmodernists, the dilemma of relativism always auto-subverts their philosophical position. Whilst they deny that there is such a thing as truth (clinging to the realm of epistemology and denying that ontology is even a legitimate subject) any argument they make must surely be making an assertion about the way things are (hence having a theory, albeit implicit and contradictory, of ontology).*

This however, sounds like an argument steeped in modernist discourses of theory and based on knowledge as received ideas (see his summary).

#### 1.2.4 The epistemology proposed for this study

My own understanding of epistemology is that it is that branch of philosophy concerned with the discourses of knowledge and knowing.

I align myself with Hosking (1995:7) when I adopt a relational epistemology, because it opens up space for a multi-meaning context, the relational development of meaning ethics and the associated ability to question what is taken for granted (often society discourses) and the elevation of suppressed meanings. In her own words:

*A relational epistemology greatly broadens the possibilities for meaning and disallows one true meaning. However, **there are socio-cultural limits to what will be allowed as real or true, right or wrong, desirable or undesirable; not anything goes. Limits are constructed and reproduced in multiloguing. In narrating [,] a particular text reference is made, usually implicitly, to a cultural context whose meaning is taken for granted. As a result its appropriateness for the reality constructed in the current text cannot be questioned. It is the unavailability for questioning the taken-for-granted context that preserves the status quo (Argyris, 1982; Schattschneider, 1960) and often leads to seeming changes that in fact are simply more-of-the-same (Watzlawick et al., 1974).***

*This muting of other possible meanings could be seen as an avoided sense-making process.*

*(My emphasis in the first paragraph).*

She then continues to indicate how a relational epistemology supports or even fosters a participatory ethos. On the same page she posits that a relational epistemology provides the necessary space within which identity (I/other) and relationship can be accommodated.

Hosking (1995: 8) then provides a profound suggestion about how a relational epistemology opens up possibilities for inquiry into meaning making, inviting an ethic of networking and negotiation “to be referenced to other contexts and so take on new meanings”.

In this way, the conversation is therefore expanded to other disciplines, allowing and inviting voices from a broader community of inquiry.

She consequently confirms the key premises of a relational epistemology to be

*The claim to know is a claim to be able to construct the meanings of a running text.*

Implied in this premise is the dynamic nature of the creation of knowledge. Furthermore it suggests a deviation of knowledge as a given, proposing that is constructed.

*Meaning making is a process of narrating and a reflection of the oppositional unity of text and context.*

A narrative epistemology is positioned and the dynamic relationship between what Bruner (1986: 14) referred to as the Landscape of Action and the Landscape of Meaning is engaged. Text in this regard may be considered as action and context may refer to meaning or identity.

*Text and context cannot be separated as if they were entities, since both entail each other and derive meaning only from their opposition or difference.*

This principle refers to the dynamic interaction between the Landscape of Action and Landscape of Meaning or Identity and can also be related back to the third order cybernetic discourse.

*Meaning is produced through multiloguing: an actively relational process of creating (common) understandings on the basis of language.*

In this premise the multi storied nature of meaning is introduced. Meaning as a language discourse is also proposed and relationality is suggested as the nature of the ethos of the meaning making process. Process is also key to this premise as it distinguishes our epistemology from those which are concerned with knowledge as content.

*Meaning can never be finalized, nor has it any ultimate origin; it is always in the process of making.*

This liberating principle opens space for deconstructing and reconstructing meaning discourses and provides the opportunity for development of meaning as a dynamic process.

*Meanings are limited by socio-cultural contexts.*

The relational nature of the meaning making process has as its logical consequence the implication that meaning will be delimited by its generative community. This implies that meaning cannot exist beyond its relational context. The consequences are multiple, but as long as one realises that the meaning which are perceived to be available are limited, it can be liberating; it therefore implies that there may be other meanings outside the local social-context.

In the next sections I will describe why I am positioning this study within a (Critical) Relational Constructionist paradigm, using a narrative approach.

### 1.3 Postmodernism

This study will be positioned within a postmodern paradigm. I shall introduce this section with an understanding of what postmodernity may be. The wording of the previous sentence was chosen to be as vague as to suggest the existence of different understandings. Terminology like “definition” will therefore never be used in the thesis.



Figure 1. "Man Drawing a Reclining Woman." From the second edition of Dürer's *Underweisung der Messung or Work about the Art of Drawing* (Nuremberg, 1538). Reprinted in and courtesy of *The Complete Woodcuts of Albrecht Dürer*, ed. Willi Kurth (New York: Dover, 1963).<sup>3</sup>

If we were to agree that postmodernity will refer to “beyond modernity”, it implies that we will first have to familiarise ourselves with modernity. I will therefore offer a “critical assessment of the claims of modernity”, spending some time on “profiling modernity”.

<sup>3</sup> “Symbolism of Figure 1 and relevance to Postmodernism: There are obvious problems of anachronism in using a Dürer woodcut from 1538 to exemplify issues of postmodernism; nonetheless, of all Dürer's work, this image may well be the most postmodern, however impossible such a statement may seem at first blush. The image has been analyzed in detail by theorists because of its supreme self-consciousness. Since it lays bare man's reliance on prosthetic instruments for representation, the image could be said to anticipate a number of issues important to postmodern theorists, particularly the extent to which humans are separated from the real because of tools like language, science, and artistic conventions of representation. That separation is literalized here by the screen separating the woodcut into two halves and it is underscored by the "real world" outside the window that the artist does not see. The artist here can only "see" by way of his grid, which could be read as a commentary on science's tendency to dissect, disinfect, and thus destroy the natural world of creation, sexuality, and reproduction. The woman and the natural world are here intimately aligned: they are both presented to the viewer as flowing horizontal lines that suggest a "natural" alignment. Creation here is taken away from the female or the natural and bestowed to the tool-laden man, here equipped with not one but three phallic devices designed for representation. The right half of the canvas, by contrast, is decidedly vertical (the man, the plant, the phallic pen and viewpiece, the containers). The power of the male creator over nature is further underlined here by the potted tree to the artist's right as well as the fact that the woman is made to lie in an apparently uncomfortable, constricted position; she is made to conform to the left-hand space of the canvas just as the artist here seeks to make the female form (with its curved lines and sensual corporeality) conform to the straight lines of a grid.”  
<http://www.cla.purdue.edu/academic/engl/theory/postmodernism/image/> last accessed on April 07, 2009.

The initial paragraphs of this section will concern themselves with the story of modernity. This will be followed by a description of the implications of postmodernity on ethics and epistemology. In conclusion I will spend some time on an impression of the advances and risks of postmodern discourses.

### 1.3.1 Modernity: An Understanding

If we were to agree that postmodernity represents a critique of the claims of modernity, it would require us to develop an understanding of the profile of modernity. I shall therefore attempt to position postmodernity within a flow from the premodern to the modern to postmodern.

Hatab (1997) suggested the following useful distinction between premodern, modern and postmodern ethics and I would like to posit that his propositions can be generalized to include epistemology and other research discourses as well:

*The premodern is that which sees ethics as adherence to a traditional pattern typically grounded in religious authority. The modern is that which sees ethics grounded in a rational theory typically implicated with a conception of the human person as a free rational individual. The postmodern questions all groundings, whether traditional or rational, and it especially questions the modern emphasis on subjectivity, independence, and mastery.*



Figure 2. Picasso: Woman in the Studio- a study of self-reflection

During the course of this section, some of these concepts introduced above will be rephrased in different language.

Modernity is essentially a historical period in Western culture and has its origins in the Enlightenment at the end of the 18th century. The Enlightenment and the historical era which it introduced, is most often characterised by three major features, namely the power of reason over ignorance, the power of order over disorder and the power of science over superstition (Burke, 2000). Modernity can therefore be said to be characterised by ([http://faculty.ccri.edu/paleclerc/existentialism/what\\_is\\_modernity.shtml](http://faculty.ccri.edu/paleclerc/existentialism/what_is_modernity.shtml)):

1. *Rejection of ancient cultural, literary and aesthetic models in favour of the superiority of modern models.*

2. *The emergence of an epochal self-consciousness and self-confidence characterised by a belief in the progress and improvability of mankind.*<sup>4</sup>
3. *The establishment of a bourgeois society and social life characterized by liberal democratic institutions, free market economy, a dominant middle class, and private property (capitalism, the modern nation state, political and legal egalitarianism)*
4. *Philosophical and scientific claims for superiority and enlightened maturity of critical reason over historical tradition, ecclesiastical authority, ancestral devotion, classical culture and pre-scientific superstition.*
5. *The emergence of modern humanism characterised by autonomous self-assertion, scientific naturalism, technological mastery of nature, the demystification of human nature and nature generally, the liberation of theoretical curiosity, liberal optimism about progress and the secularization of culture.*
6. *Philosophical, social, political and legal insistence on the autonomy, self-determination, rational independence, and natural rights of all individuals (especially the right of freedom).*
7. *Modernisation by means of technological and industrial developments and its consequent effects upon societies, customs, and individuals.*
8. *A social, political, and philosophical emphasis upon the autonomous individual in contrast to communal identity.*

Modernity thus corresponds to the era characterised by the ideals of the West, an era that is relatively recent. Of specific importance to this study are the claims to autonomy, self-determination, critical rationality, technological mastery and demystification of human nature, and individual rights. These have an influence on discourses of social connectedness, meaningful lives, and spirituality.

Richard Smith quotes Zygmunt Bauman in saying that late modernity came to be characterised by globalisation, which implied that our actions have *distant* consequences. We are therefore not immediately aware of the consequences of our actions. We are therefore also not immediately aware of the significance of our actions and thus their meaningfulness. This can therefore be

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<sup>4</sup> See the painting of Picasso, *Woman in the Studio*.

assumed to instil doubt about self worth where such a value judgement is based on achievement, performance or material wealth.

This is further strengthened by the division of labour which diminishes responsibility, or at least the individual's window on responsibility. Sometimes the occupation of roles is also so fleeting as not to make it constitutive of identity (compare military national service in this respect). According to Bauman (1993:18) traditional sources of moral authority (rules, principles, commandments) have also collapsed. This era therefore came to be associated with a certain disenchantment or a "loss of foundations".

From a research perspective, it may be said that modernity and its associated positivist paradigm is characterised by external realities, defined or bounded realities and scientific methodologies. According to Hosking positivist research is positioned in

*naïve realism (that real reality exists and can be apprehended);*

*dualist/objectivist epistemology (self and other are bounded and separate realities; empirical findings to be judged in terms of their truth), and;*

*scientific methodology (achieved in experimental manipulation and the verification of hypotheses (Hosking, 1996).*

Søren Kierkegaard (1813 – 1855) however was quite harsh in his evaluation of modernity. Based on the effects of industrialism and universalism, and its agents mass, herd (similar to the sentiments expressed by Nietzsche), crowd, race, public, (resulting in anonymity, impersonality, bloodless abstraction, numerical or statistical mode of being) he proclaims that

*"Modernity is a spiritless age plagued by the social-political, religious, and philosophical dissipation of the existing individual through a reductive levelling of spiritual tensions essential to authentic selfhood." and*

*...to be lost in spiritlessness is the most terrible thing of all.*

<http://faculty.ccri.edu/paleclerc/existentialism/kierk.shtml>).

### 1.3.2 Postmodernity

Traditionally every new concept or discourse introduced starts with a “definition” in modernistic terms or a description or understanding in late-modernistic or postmodern terms. This section will attempt to provide a better understanding of the postmodern dialogue or discourse.

As will become clear in the following paragraphs the postmodern discourse is perhaps better described in relational terms. As will be discussed later (see the section on Critical Relational Constructionism) meaning is often understood to be relationally constructed. In this regard it is also informative to refer to the paper by White (2000) in which he discusses the concept of absent-but-implicit. In this paper he refers to meaning as being constructed “in relation to” or “in contrast to” the meanings or descriptions of other things (2000:36).

In a similar vein Postmodernity will be described most often by contrasting it to Modernity. Therefore we are indicating that there exists a certain congruence in the postmodern epistemological ethos. This may therefore serve to respond to the criticism often expressed against postmodernity implying that is merely “against modernity”, thus trivializing postmodernity as epistemological discourse.

### 1.3.3 Postmodernity in relation to or in contrast to modernity

As Lowe (1991: 42) indicates, postmodernity is (true to its nature) not easily “defined”; it is sometimes used to signify “an intellectual or artistic movement”, and sometimes “to denote an historical epoch or culture. He continues to say that for some, “postmodernity is primarily a form of analysis or critique, while for others it is a contemporary experience.” As indicated previously, I shall use the term to denote “beyond modernity” and therefore pay special attention to postmodernity as a challenge to the claims of modernity.

Scholars from the Frankfurt School use the term to denote an epoch also defined as “late capitalism”. This refers to the last stage of the industrial society, society at the end of the century. They describe it as being characterised by the huge development of science and technology ‘which became its main value reference, which generates economic prosperity, but creates an “unidimensional man”, stripped of sociological imagination and the capacity to react creatively to the human challenges of the new society.’ The main social discourse of the “late capitalism” is “the language of the purpose” instead of “the language of meaning”. One might associate this with Kantian philosophy, especially with its teleological discourses. The scholars of the Frankfurt School “considered thus the postmodern society as an epoch of decadence” (Gitta Tulea and Ernest Krausz,



1997). It is clear that this view of postmodernity is actually a postmodernist evaluation of certain strong modernist trends (and failures!), which have been emerging in the latter part of the twentieth century (Tulea and Krausz, 1997).

Postmodernity and post-structuralism are sometimes used interchangeably. Post-structuralism, typically associated with French philosophers like Foucault, Derrida, Baudrillard and Lacan, most often refers to a movement away from the structuralist view that the individual is shaped by sociological, psychological and linguistic structures over which (s)he has no control, but which could be uncovered by using their methods of investigation (Piercy, 1996).

The French historian and philosopher, Michel Foucault, may be considered to be the most important representative of the post-structuralist movement. Having been regarded as a structuralist in his early life (Jones, 1999:1), he disagreed with the structuralists on two counts: Firstly, he did not think that there were definite underlying structures that could explain the human condition, and secondly, he thought that it was impossible to step outside of discourse and survey the situation objectively [compare positivism]. This is important for our discussion of epistemology and ontology.

Jacques Derrida, another philosopher, developed *deconstruction* as a technique for uncovering the multiple interpretation of texts. Influenced by Heidegger and Nietzsche, Derrida suggests that all text has ambiguity and because of this the possibility of a final and complete interpretation is impossible.

Roger Jones (<http://www.philosopher.org.uk/poststr.htm>, 1999), in his article titled 'Post Structuralism', proposes that post-structuralism and deconstruction can be seen as the theoretical formulations of the postmodern condition. He continues: 'Modernity, which began intellectually with the Enlightenment, attempted to describe the world in rational, empirical and objective terms. It assumed that there was a truth to be uncovered, a way of obtaining answers to the question posed by the human condition. Postmodernity does not exhibit this confidence; gone are the underlying certainties that reason promised<sup>5</sup>. Reason itself is now seen as a particular historical form, as parochial in its own way as the ancient explanations of the universe in terms of gods.' Postmodernism is therefore positioned as a respectful paradigm, not making claims to absolute knowledge.

According to Jones the postmodern subject has no rational way to evaluate a preference in relation to judgements of truth, morality, aesthetic experience or objectivity. As the old hierarchies of thought are torn down, a new clearing is formed on the frontiers of understanding: quite what

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<sup>5</sup> Certainty is discussed in more detail in the chapter on Theology.

hybrids of thought will metamorphose, interbreed and grow in this clearing is for the future to decide. These thoughts open up space for new constructions of meaning. The statement that ‘no rational way’ of evaluation is available in postmodernist thinking signifies a movement away from Descartes’ “cogito ergo sum” philosophy.

Post-colonialism and the advent of the so-called information age brought promises of openness and improved communication, thus having the potential to resolve conflict and facilitate peace. However, Habermas, speaking of the postmodern society, remarked that the extension of the means of communication allows not only a wide range of information but is also conducive to a permanent connection between different people, different cultures, different social discourses and thus facilitates a better general understanding, a blurring of real or apparent contradictions. But he warns, at the same time, that this process may become really positive, only when it is performed between equal members. In the end, in spite of its beneficial aspects, the globalisation of information doesn’t minimize the possibility of conflicts or terrorism, as long as the fundamental social problems are not resolved or at least approached in an active way (Gitta Tulea and Ernest Krausz, 1997). We only have to reflect on experiences of conflict and misunderstanding in the workplace, church, community and the world at large to appreciate the significance of this statement.

So what is the ‘postmodern world’? One short description is provided by the French critic Lyotard, who defines the postmodern as “incredulity towards metanarratives.” This breaks away from the traditionally “modern” ideas of linear progress, rational control, and one right (usually white, male, European) way of doing things. Let us attempt to bring these thoughts together by the following quote from Anderson: “What seems to bind these currents together, at the centre of the vortex, is a question that has no absolute answer - or the act of questioning itself” (Walter Truett Anderson, 1991:32). This has far reaching implications for a study of meaningful living. Not only does it suggest that there is no single absolute version of a “life that matters”, but it also creates the space for agency in creating meaningful lives which are local to our own life stories.

It can be underlined also, as a concluding remark that if the pluralist society and the pluralism of cultures of the postmodern era discarded ‘reason’ as a unique etalon of humankind, it also discarded its fundamental connotations: freedom, democracy, universal values of justice, truth and good, the ethos of the dignity of man beyond differences of race, sex, religion, national belonging and so on (see also Gitta Tulea and Ernest Krausz, 1997). It is, rather, in a postmodern paradigm that ethos and dignity move beyond a cultural definition and cultural rigidity to assume a negotiated meaning, built on similarities rather than differences.

Hekman quoted by Lowe (1991:43), suggested that modernism “insisted that knowledge can be founded upon or grounded in, absolute truth. It assumes that knowledge is ‘about’ something external to the knower, and can present itself objectively to the knower.” Postmodernity, however, “represents a radical questioning of the foundationalism and absolutism of modern conceptions of knowledge.” Lowe then adds another description of the implications of postmodernity, this time by Parker (1989: 133):

*“Postmodernity provokes an attitude of uncertainty, of studied doubt, and any attempt to gain knowledge involves a continual reflexivity which underlines the provisional and transitory nature of that knowledge. This doubt and reflexivity also informs and subverts self-knowledge.”*

It is with this uncertainty that the research panel will have to struggle, negotiating a path of meaning amidst the challenges of uncertainty. In the chapter on theology and spirituality, the discourses of certitude and security will be discussed again, attempting to bring these two narratives into the conversation on a “life that matters”. Reflexivity will be introduced as a meaning making process, suggesting a way in which the “continual reflexivity” can create a context for ever new meanings, thus subverting the tendency to get stuck in static and problematic perceptions of meaning or lack of meaningfulness.

Three postmodern themes discussed by Lowe, are worth noting:

1. The rejection of modern metanarratives,
2. The displacement of modern dualities and differentiation, and
3. The development of discourse-sensitivity.

### 1.3.4 Discourse

I have been using the term discourse a few times in this chapter already, without having provided a discussion of the concept. This section will provide an understanding of discourse within a postmodern context.

I will now provide a description of *discourse* in some detail because it will be central to some of the thinking introduced in the thesis. Lowe quotes Collins (1989) suggesting that one way of characterising postmodern experience would be to describe it as being discourse-sensitive (Lowe, 1991:44).

For our purposes and following Lowe, *discourse* may be taken to relate to the process of conversation and refers to *...a multifaceted public process through which meanings are progressively and dynamically achieved* (Davies and Harre, 1990:46 quoted by Lowe, 1991:44). Bearing in mind the postmodern ‘repudiation of a representational view of language’, this suggests that meanings are not dis-covered in conversation, but are ‘progressively made or fashioned through conversational action itself.’ Thus, discourse-sensitivity would refer to an emphasis on the ‘*constitutive force* of discourse, on the ways in which particular conversational practices fashion realities and set in train certain consequences’ (Lowe, 1991:45).

The second use of discourse relates to a broader and ‘more overtly political’ form of analysis according to Lowe. On page 45 of his paper, he refers to the tendency of post-structural theory to displace attention from language to discourse, which *historicises* and *politicises* the study of language use through emphasising the historical specificity of what is said and what remains unsaid (my underlining). Lowe then states the ‘definition’ of discourse which will be used in this study:

“..., discourses ... refer to *systematic and institutionalised ways of speaking / writing* or otherwise making sense through the use of language.” (1991: 45)

‘These discourses constitute knowledge, but none of the discourses is assumed to represent essential, fundamental realities; they are not pre-given, or *natural, but socially constructed*’ (my italics). Introducing a Foucauldian perspective, he continues by saying that “discourse refers not only to the actual words and statements themselves, but their connection with the complex of social and power relations which prevail in a given context and which constrain what is said.” (1991: 45)

As Ball (1990) said: ‘Discourses are thus about what can be said and thought, and also about who can speak and with what authority.’ Discourses thus constitute knowledge and confer power, implying that meaning results not from language itself, but from institutionalised discursive practices which constrain its use and pre-empt alternative uses. Thus, a discourse can be seen as a form of *rhetorical imposition*; and truth can be said to represent the unrecognised fiction of a successful discourse (Lowe, 1991:45 quoting Fowler 1987).

Thus, it is evident that postmodern discourses provide a critique to certain strong discourses which form the basis of modernity. Especially important are essentialism and the emphasis on representation, the definitive nature of truth and objectivity. These resulted in directive deductions, and empirical realities (which imply passive observation – compare this to positivism - and rational reasoning - see reference to the strong link to the Enlightenment).

The section on research ethics will expand on the implications of the adoption of a postmodern paradigm.

### 1.3.5 Postmodernism summarised

Adopting a postmodernist approach, I shall follow Freedman and Combs (1996:22) in positioning my epistemology and posit that:

*Realities are socially constructed;*

*Realities are constituted through language (to this Hosking (1999:117) adds “and other forms of action” and with Morley (2004: 318) include “conversations, conventions, and cultural traditions”);*

*Realities are organised and maintained through narrative; and*

*There are no essential truths.*

From this statement it becomes clear that I am positioning the study firstly within the postmodernist discourse, adopting a social constructionist approach and mediated by a narrative discourse. These concepts will now be investigated as they refer to meaning.

This conversation will be taken up again in Chapter 3 when the research methodology is discussed. In that chapter the ethical implications of the postmodern epistemology will be discussed at length. In the way that another little piece of the life song is encountered in every social connection that we make according to the lore of the indigenous Australian people<sup>6</sup>, we may also encounter another aspect of the postmodern discourse in every chapter of this thesis, hopefully adding some meaning and expanding our understanding of the study topic every time we do.

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<sup>6</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the *Songlines* as creative and navigational rituals for life stories, see Wikipedia at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Songlines> and Bruce Chatwin (1987).

*Also, since the Ancestors created all the land through song, and they walked while they sang, the Aborigines maintain a roadmap of the entire continent in song. You can get anywhere in Australia, know the waterholes and hunting-grounds along the way, if you learn the right songs. Apparently, an Aboriginal gone 'Walkabout' was doing just that, learning songs by traveling to the end of the song lines he knew and asking whoever he found at the end who could teach him the next few bars and whether he would have permission to sing them, to walk to the end of the new verse.*

<http://www.synaptic.bc.ca/ejournal/drmtime1.htm>

## 1.4 Social Constructionism

*The terms in which the world is understood are social artefacts, products of historically situated interchanges among people. From the constructionist position the process of understanding is not automatically driven by the forces of nature, but is the result of an active, cooperative enterprise of persons in relationship. Gergen (1985:267)*

In this paragraph, meaning as social construction will be expanded upon. Freedman and Combs (1996:1) refers to this suggesting that “[u]sing the metaphor of social construction leads us to consider the ways in which every person’s social, interpersonal reality has been constructed through interaction with other human beings and human institutions and to focus on the influence of social realities on the meaning of people’s lives.” Later on in the same text (1996:16), they provide this useful description of *social constructionism*:

*...its main premise is that the beliefs, values, institutions, customs, labels, laws, divisions of labour, and the like that make up our social realities are constructed by the members of a culture as they interact with one another from generation to generation and day to day. That is, societies construct the “lenses” through which their members interpret the world. The realities that each of us takes for granted are the realities that our societies have surrounded us with since birth. These realities provide the beliefs, practices, words, and experiences from which we make up our lives, or, as we would say in postmodernist jargon, “constitute our selves.”*

The progression from an objectivist approach, or perhaps more specifically, a cybernetics approach, is described by Hoffman (1990). She describes the process in terms of her own evolution from a so-called cybernetics approach, to a subsequent second-order cybernetic approach and then onto a social constructionist approach. The description given by her is useful for the distinction between a constructivist and social constructionist epistemology.

Hoffman (1990:1-2) describes cybernetics as the brainchild of Norbert Wiener; he called it the “science of communication and control”. It described the activity of feedback cycles, both in machines and human affairs. Through this metaphor, she ascribed to a theory (or better perhaps, a discourse) of family therapy in which a symptom was described as part of a homeostatic cycle that stabilised the family.

Quoting Hoffman, the following historical description of constructivism is given:

*Based on the work of the biologist Humberto Maturana and his colleague, cognitive scientist Francisco Varela, constructivism derives from the work of Kant, Wittgenstein, Piaget and*

*others. Von Glasersfeld formulated it as follows: "...constructs are shaped as the organism evolves a fit with its environment, and ... the construction of ideas about the world takes place in a nervous system that operates something like a blind person checking out a room. The walker in the dark who doesn't bump into a tree[,] cannot say whether he is in a wood or a field, only that he has avoided bashing his head."*

Efran and Lukens (1985: 24) single out six ideas important to an appreciation of Maturana's view of constructivism:

- a. Living systems are "structure-determined" - their operation is a function of how they are built, arrayed or put together.
- b. Living systems are "informationally-closed". Their autonomous organisations cannot be described as being simply "caused" by or directly "instructed" by outside forces.
- c. Organisms survive by fitting with one another and with other aspects of the surrounding medium – that is become "structurally coupled". When the fit of the organism and its medium is insufficient, there is disintegration - in our more usual language, the organism "dies".
- d. The career of a living system consists entirely of a purposeless "drift" in a medium. There are continual shifts in response to changes in both the external environment and internal perturbations until the point of disintegration, which can come at any time.
- e. Human beings are observing systems who describe, distinguish, and delineate in words and symbols (language). Without the observer nothing exists.
- f. We do not perceive an objective universe. The objects we think we see and study are products of the activities of our own nervous system. There is no objectivity, only "objectivity in parentheses."

As Efran, Lukens and Lukens (1988:2) suggest, "an objectivist enterprise... is built almost entirely on the belief that objective truth is discoverable" and can be "properly revealed". In an informative paper on constructivism, they refer to George Kelly who insisted that we do not "confuse our inventions with discoveries", suggesting that "any so-called reality is - in the most immediate and concrete sense - the *construction* of those who believe they have discovered and investigated it." According to them the "heart of constructivism is the recognition that our hypotheses about the world are not directly provable", implying that scientific hypotheses persist for two reasons, first, because of utility (they are useful in the scientist's work), and secondly, "because no one has yet been able to either disprove them or come up with a better alternative."

Efran and Lukens (1988:28) quote George Kelly (1969) stating that “none of today’s constructions - which are, of course, our only means of portraying reality - [is] perfect and, as the history of human thought repeatedly suggests, none is final.”

Furthermore, according to these authors (1988:28), Varela (1979) proposed that for a constructivist, ‘everything said is said from a tradition,’ and has meaning only within that tradition. Constructivism lays a strong emphasis on the value-laden nature of all human undertakings (1988:29). They also point out the following three positions taken in constructivism:

- a. Hard and fast boundaries cannot be objectively drawn around *any* particular social unit;
- b. Any unit of analysis selected for attention, no matter how arbitrarily chosen, has an impact on the direction our thinking takes and the problem-solving pathways that appear to open before us. New units suggest new possibilities.
- c. Language is the one essential that ...complex coordinations of action in a social community cannot do without, and that is why constructivists insist on talking about human lives as “conversations”.

Hoffman (1990:3) explains the difference between constructivism and the social constructionist discourse by indicating a departure from the positions held by constructivism: social constructionism sees the development of knowledge as a social phenomenon and holds that perception can only evolve within ‘a cradle of communication’. Furthermore,

*social construction theory posits an evolving set of meanings that emerge unendingly from the interactions between people. These meanings ... may not exist inside what we think of as an individual “mind”.*

Gergen (1994:49-54) posits the following suppositions as central to a social constructionist account of knowledge:

- a. *The terms by which we account for the world and ourselves are not dictated by the stipulated objects of such accounts.*
- b. *The terms and forms by which we achieve understanding of the world and ourselves are social artefacts, products of historically and culturally situated interchanges among people.*
- c. *The degree to which a given account of world or self is sustained across time is not dependent on the objective validity of the account but on the vicissitudes of social process.*
- d. ***Language derives its significance in human affairs from the way in which it functions within patterns of relationship.***



- e. *To appraise existing forms of discourse is to evaluate patterns of cultural life; such evaluations give voice to other cultural enclaves.*

In making the statement that ‘it is the form of relationship that enables semantics to function’, Gergen (1994:52) proposes that:

- a) *we find that propositions do not derive their sense from their determinant relationship to a world of referents;*
- b) *we find that the semanticist view can be reconstituted within a social frame;*
- c) *the semantic possibilities for word meaning are brought into being by following the treatment of reference as social ritual, with referential practices as socio-historically situated.*

Gergen continues to suggest that social-constructionism is a ‘congenial’ companion to Wittgenstein’s (1953) conception of meaning as a derivative of social use, with words acquiring their meaning within what can be described as “language games”. This term is also used frequently by Hosking (2005a: 609, 2005b: 271, 2007:3).

The view of meaning as derived from micro-social exchanges embedded within broad patterns of cultural life, as proposed by Gergen (1994:53), lends to social constructionism strong critical and pragmatic dimensions, by drawing attention to the way in which languages, including scientific theories, are used within the culture.

According to Hosking and Morley (2004: 318) Social Constructionism refers to those meaning frameworks which are founded in the constructive ability of human minds and their “origins in conversations, conventions and cultural traditions”. This therefore implies that meaning is socially constructed.

#### **1.4.1 Critical relational constructionism (CRC)**

Hosking (1999: 118) suggests that there are many forms of social constructionism. These forms differ with respect to their

- a) emphasis on socially constructed “products” or processes
- b) centring of individuals or communal construction processes and
- c) reflexive recognition of the researcher’s participation in construction processes.

I would like to align my epistemological position with her critical relational constructionism because of the implications it has for (participatory action) research. With regard to social constructionism, Hosking (1999:318) continues to position herself as taking a relatively uncommon approach by emphasising processes (and not products or content), by exploring the implications of viewing research processes both as processes of construction (rather than a means to produce data or to report findings) and as relational processes in which ‘the researcher’ is inevitably actively involved, co-constructing particular meanings, people and worlds. Thus researchers are invited to do something other than ‘report’ products and processes - *joining with* the co-researchers is now facilitated through some form of collaborative or participative action.

CRC suggests that processes are local and pragmatic (Hosking, 1999: 120) as compared to claims of global significance which may be associated with modernist approaches to research. She posits that

*Relational processes, whether constructed as development or therapy, or e.g., as action research... vary in whether or not they punctuate processes with conventions such as a before and after of e.g., ‘finding out’ and ‘applying’, with causal presumptions and the like, or try as much as is possible to stay in the moment of a particular coordination (e.g., Anderson 1997).*

Hosking (2005a: 609) distinguishes between three social constructionist discourses, which she calls a) entitative, b) constructivist and c) critical relational constructionist. The first narrates relations as existing between independently existing entities in subject-object (S-O) relationships. This is similar to what Hoffman (1990) calls an objectivist or first-order cybernetic discourse. Hosking (2005: 610) quotes Hermans et al (1992) to illustrate the role of language in this discourse:

*language is needed to express concepts mapped onto objects, properties and relations in a literal, unequivocal, context-independent fashion (Hermans, Kempen and van Loon, 1992).*

The role of language is therefore that of unique description or identification.

Hosking (2005: 612) describes social constructivist discourses by indicating that although reality cannot be known “as it really is”, external realities still remain the focus of modernist scientific interest in objective knowledge.

Compared to the first two discourses, Hosking (2005: 611) then continues to describe CRC as

*Instead of centring mind and ‘real’ reality, CRC centres language and discursive practices – and these are seen as constructing relational realities – including what is thought to be a person. This means that CRC is not talking about subjective interpretations and is not adopting idealism in place of realism. Rather, this is another ‘map’ about another ‘territory’ (to borrow*

*freely from Korzybski*) - where the objective-subjective, real-relativist dualisms are no longer relevant. This discourse centres construction, not discovery. CRC centres the construction of (what might be thought of as) objects – including the Self, including CRC, and including Science and its meta-theory.

Following this description, this study can therefore be expected to construct meaning by means of a relational process, rather than report pre-existing knowledge about what constitutes a “life that matters”.

#### 1.4.2 Discussing the “critical” in Critical Relational Constructionism

CRC needs to be positioned within the discourse of critical theory<sup>7</sup>. Wikipedia proposes the following description of Critical Theory within Social Theory:

*Critical social theory is, in contrast, a form of self-reflective knowledge involving both understanding and theoretical explanation to reduce entrapment in systems of domination or dependence, obeying the emancipatory interest in expanding the scope of autonomy and reducing the scope of domination.*<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> According to Wikipedia, *critical* is derived from the Greek word *kritikos*, meaning judgement or discernment. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Critical\\_theory#In\\_social\\_theory](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Critical_theory#In_social_theory)

<sup>8</sup> The initial meaning of the term critical theory was that defined by Max Horkheimer of the Frankfurt School of social science in his 1937 essay Traditional and Critical Theory: Critical theory is a social theory oriented toward critiquing and changing society as a whole, in contrast to traditional theory oriented only to understanding or explaining it. Horkheimer wanted to distinguish critical theory as a radical, emancipatory form of Marxian theory, critiquing both the model of science put forward by logical positivism and what he and his colleagues saw as the covert positivism and authoritarianism of orthodox Marxism and communism. Core concepts are: (1) That critical social theory should be directed at the totality of society in its historical specificity (i.e. how it came to be configured at a specific point in time), and (2) That Critical Theory should improve understanding of society by integrating all the major social sciences, including geography, economics, sociology, history, political science, anthropology, and psychology. Although this conception of critical theory originated with the Frankfurt School, it also prevails among other recent social scientists, such as Pierre Bourdieu, Louis Althusser and arguably Michel Foucault, as well as certain feminist theorists and social scientists.

While modernist critical theory (as described above) concerns itself with “forms of authority and injustice that accompanied the evolution of industrial and corporate capitalism as a political-economic system,” postmodern critical theory politicizes social problems “by situating them in historical and cultural contexts, to implicate themselves in the process of collecting and analyzing data, and to relativise their findings” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 52). Meaning itself is seen as unstable due to the rapid transformation in social structures and as a result the focus of research is centered on local manifestations rather than broad generalizations.

Postmodern critical research is also characterized by what is called, the *crisis of representation*, which rejects the idea that a researcher’s work is considered an “objective depiction of a stable other” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002:53). Instead, in their research and writing, many postmodern scholars have adopted “alternatives that encourage reflection about the ‘politics and poetics’ of their work. In these accounts, the embodied,

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Critical\\_theory#In\\_social\\_theory](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Critical_theory#In_social_theory)

From this proposed understanding, it is evident that the proposed epistemology, post-foundational practical theology as introduced in Chapter 2 and participatory action research which is introduced in Chapter 3 are all aligned with the motives, objectives and ethics of Critical Theory. Philosophers who are associated with Critical Theory include names like Derrida, Foucault, Umberto Eco, Althusser, Baudrillard, Deleuze and Guattari, Gramsci, Habermas and Hall.<sup>9</sup> This list reminds strongly of proponents of post-structuralism, action research and postmodernism, which serves to strengthen the integrity of the Critical Theory-Postmodernism-Participatory Action Research conversation.

Hosking (2005: 616-617) offers the following as key features of a relational constructionist orientation – and respecting her position as one of the important proponents of CRC, I will report it as she wrote it:

*Talk of the individual self, mind operations, and individual knowledge gives way to discourses of relational processes, viewed as language-based inter-actions.*

*Relational processes are seen as processes that (re)construct Self-Other realities as local ontologies<sup>10</sup> or “forms of life” (person-world making); and (re)construct mind - metaphorised, for example - as an imaginal space in which Self-Other relations are discourses (e.g., Hermans et al, 1992; Jaynes, 1976).*

*The unitary conception of Self is replaced by a dialogical conception of Self as multiple Self-Other relations such that Other, including the body, is no longer discourses as ‘outside’.*

*Relational processes have a local-cultural-historical quality such that discourses of the past and future are constructed and re-constructed in an ongoing present.*

*Relational realities are viewed as constructions such that subject-object relations may be constructed in particular relations (e.g., in ‘scientific’ inquiry) - but do not have to be.*

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collaborative, dialogic, and improvisational aspects of qualitative research are clarified” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 53). For an example of postmodern critical work, see Rolling’s (2008) piece, entitled *Secular Blasphemy: Utter(Ed) Transgressions Against Names and Fathers in the Postmodern Era*.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Critical\\_theory#In\\_social\\_theory](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Critical_theory#In_social_theory) last accessed on April 07, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.uiowa.edu/~commstud/resources/critical\\_authors.html](http://www.uiowa.edu/~commstud/resources/critical_authors.html) last accessed on April 07, 2009 provides a list of useful links to these resources.

<sup>10</sup> This will be important to the study in as far as this research will not attempt to provide global answers to the question of what constitutes a meaningful life; it will rather describe the process through which the co-researchers developed an enhanced experience of meaning in their own lives.

*Power is (re)constructed in relational processes e.g., by being linked to talk of crediting and discrediting knowledge/identity claims, closing down or opening up possibilities, creating (more or less) local realities and relations between them.*

#### **1.4.2.1 Local realities**

Central to the understanding of a meaningful life in this thesis will be the position of “local-ness”. This is a critical reflection on the suggestion of universal truths and meta-narratives. It is founded in the unique, multi-storied realities of participants. According to Hosking (2007: 3)

*... it centres the assumption that constructions of persons and worlds and their relations, including constructions of knowledge, truth and ethics, and including constructions of science, are local relational realities.*

#### **1.4.2.2 Power as it relates to meaning**

Furthermore, she suggests that this discourse is critical in its approach to power (2007: 5). It will therefore be suspicious of claims of superiority:

*[I]t is critical in the sense that it is suspicious about any claim to know what is and what is best for the other.*

It differs from other versions of critical theory in its narration of power. In this regard Hosking (2007:5) suggests that power is relational and not a one-way or “un-contested” construct:

*For a start, it is not characterised by the assumption that any particular form of life possesses power over other groups and certainly does not assume that power is one-way and uncontested. Rather than constructing a particular form of life as a stable entity with properties and possessions, a critical constructionism theorises power as a relational process. Power is an ongoing, relational construction, able both to open up and to close down possibilities. So all acts (texts) ‘act into’ processes that are already ongoing (con-texts) and so may contribute to the ongoing (re)production of power relations.*

#### **1.4.2.3 The researcher position in constructing meaning**

Another way in which this discourse is critical is in its narration of the position and action of the researcher. Hosking here suggests a reflexive position in which observer recognizes his or her intervention in the research process (2007: 5-6):

*One of the many ways in which a critical relational constructionism is critical is that it invites reflexive recognition of its own constructive potential and participation in power relations (Foucault, 1977, 1980). It assumes that the human scientist, who acts to observe Other, is*

*necessarily acting into some already ongoing processes and relations and is, in this sense, intervening. This re-constructs the (post) positivist science account of research design and procedures: research processes now are storied as power-full processes of social construction.*

#### 1.4.2.4 *Objective knowledge external to the knower*

In summary, she proposes (Hosking, 2007: 6) that CRC

*(1) cannot rest on any claim to know how things really are (2) is not defined in terms of an interest in challenging closure or dominance relations, and (3) does not limit itself to talk of knowledge, independently of power relations.*

Rather

*A critical relational constructionism collapses the process/product binary and views the process as itself the product (e.g., Brown & Hosking, 1986). Relations become significant, not as the instrumental means to achieving some rational ends, but for their moment-by-moment openness to and appreciation of other possible selves and worlds (e.g., Harding, 1986).*

## 1.5 Narrative Approach

*"..stories serve as meaning-generating interpretive devices which frame the present within a hypothetical past and an anticipated future."*

*(Freedman and Combs 1996:99 quoting Bruner 1986a: 18)*

Previously I have proposed that within a postmodern epistemology meaning is relationally or socially constructed. It was also suggested that meaning is mediated through language, language thus understood not only as descriptive, but also as generative of meaning. Flowing from these two premises, it is then suggested that these realities are organised and maintained through narrative (Freedman and Combs, 1996:22). This section will therefore revisit narrative and introduce a further discussion of the narrative discourse as hermeneutic meaning making discourse.

White (1992:3-4) describes the narrative discourse as derived from an interpreting process and states that:

*Human beings are interpreting beings – we are all active in the interpretation of, in giving meaning to, our experiences as we live our lives. An act of interpretation is an achievement. It is not possible for us to interpret our experiences in a vacuum. A frame of intelligibility is necessary for any interpretation of lived experience.*

This implies a *relational* and interpretative aspect to making sense, giving meaning to an experience (cf. social construction). Such frames provide a context for experience, and make the attribution of meaning possible. Meaning therefore does not pre-exist the interpretation of experience.

The meanings that we derive in the process of interpretation have real effects on the shape of our lives, on the steps that we take in life. Thus, such meanings are not neutral in their effects on persons' lives, but are constitutive of these lives. The **personal story** or **self-narrative** provides the principal frame of intelligibility for our lived experience. The personal story or self-narrative is not radically invented inside our heads. Rather, it is something that is negotiated and distributed within various communities of persons and in the institutions of our culture. The personal story or self-narrative also structures our experience. It is the personal story or self-narrative that determines which aspects of our stock of lived-experience are selected for expression (White and Epston, 1990:12).

It is also the personal story or self-narrative that determines the shape of the expression of particular aspects of our lived experience. We can say that it is the stories that we have about our lives that actually shape or constitute our lives. But, our lives are multi-storied. No single story of life can be free of ambiguity and contradiction. No sole personal story or self-narrative can handle all of the contingencies of life (White and Epston, 1990: 11).

As our lives are multi-storied, so are they multi-motivated. The act of living requires that we engaged in the mediation of the dominant stories and of the sub-stories of our lives.

Cochran (1997:5) adds to this, proposing that a narrative

*offers powerful resources for composition and for making meaning" by "providing a temporal organisation, integrating a beginning, middle, and end into a whole; in being a synthetic structure that configures an indefinite expansion of elements and spheres of elements into a whole (Ricoeur, 1984); and the plot of a narrative carrying a point.*

Stories teach us how to live, how to act. Alasdair MacIntyre says we can only answer the question "What am I to do?" if we can find the answer to the question "Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?" MacIntyre (1981: 216) asserts:

*We enter human society, that is, with one or more imputed characters – roles into which we have been drafted – and we have to learn what they are in order to be able to understand how others respond to us and how our responses to them are apt to be construed. It is through hearing stories about wicked stepmothers, lost children, wolves that suckle twin boys,*

*youngest sons who receive no inheritance but must make their own way in the world and eldest sons who waste their inheritance on riotous living and go into exile to live with the swine, that children learn or mislearn both what a child and what a parent is, what the cast of characters may be in the drama into which they have been born and what the ways of the world are. Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words. Hence there is no way to give us an understanding of our society, including our own, except through the stock of stories which constitute its initial dramatic resources.*

McAdams (1993:11) says that we each seek to provide our scattered and often confusing experiences with a sense of coherence by arranging the episodes of our lives into stories. His thoughts invoke the power of myth.

*This is not the stuff of delusion or self-deception. We are not telling ourselves lies. Rather, through our personal myths, each of us discovers what is true and what is meaningful in life. In order to live well, with unity and purpose, we compose a heroic narrative of the self that illustrates essential truths about ourselves.*

### 1.5.1 Narrative process

The narratives process which was adopted in this study started with the stories of meaningfulness of all the co-researchers. From within these stories we identified the dominant meaning discourses, externalising any internalised discourses as we did. In the process we did not focus our attention on problematic discourses only, but also externalised the positive discourses. As White has indicated, even “good” discourses can be totalising when they become single-storied (2000: 35). As these discourses were identified, they were named and subsequently deconstructed to surface the power discourses present in them. The deconstruction process allowed us to develop an understanding of what in our society maintained these discourses, who benefitted from them, who were marginalized by them and what the effect on agency was. In doing so, we engaged the absent but implicit values and passions at work in the research community.

The narrative approach which has been followed in this study included the discourses of de-centring, externalization, re-membling, deconstruction, unique outcomes and the discourse which White (2000) called “absent, but implicit”. Each of these discourses will be discussed in turn.



### 1.5.1.1 *De-centring*

The position assumed by the therapist or facilitator in a research process is not that of an expert. This suggests an ethos within which the knowledge of the therapist or facilitator is not considered to be superior or privileged in any way above that / those of the clients or co-researchers. Rather the facilitator is removed from the centre of the meaning making process and placed not outside as an objective observer, but in the circle of meaning making as a co-generator of meaning. In this regard, Speedy (2000: 364) refers to a position which is in opposition to a “posture of authoritative truth”.

In this regard, we should first consider the discourse of “not-knowing” as introduced by Anderson and Goolishian (1992:29). In this important chapter they propose not-knowing as an ethical non-privileged position for the therapist. This position is characterized by authentic curiosity and “being informed” by the client, thus de-centring the therapist who now relinquishes the expert status and the power associated with that.

If we relate this back to this study and the researcher as facilitator, it does not imply that the facilitator is not-knowing in the sense of not being able to contribute any meaning to the process, but is an equal contributor to the knowledge process. Knowing in this context rather refers to a pre-determined knowledge of what constitutes the problem and what the solution should be, mostly expressed in meta-narratives and “experience-distant” discourses. Speedy refers to local solutions and call them “experience-near” solutions (2000: 368).

### 1.5.1.2 *Externalising questioning (Carey and Russell, 2002:1-6; Morgan, 2000:17-32; O’Hanlon, 1994: 21ff; White and Epston, 1990:38)*

Carey and Russell (2002:3) position externalising as a vital aspect of the narrative approach. They suggest that

*Basically, externalising conversations are the doorway to preferred stories and all the delightful skills, ideas and knowledges that people have.*

The practice of externalising questioning is closely related to the premise that “the problem is the problem, the client is not the problem” (see for example Carey and Russell, 2002:1). This suggests a certain internalisation of the problem.

The problematic discourse is therefore “separated” from the client through a series of externalising questions. Key words which mark the opportunity for externalising are “to be” (that is, words like

“am”, “is” and “are” as in “*I am a failure*”) and any verb describing a problem situation (like “the boys *are bullying* me”). The moment words like these are used, the therapist or research facilitator will have to recognise the opportunity to ask questions like

*What is this [name the internalized problem] doing to your relationship with your colleagues?*

*What is the bullying doing to your happiness at school?*

The client should be invited to provide a name for the problem at this stage. This name may be revisited throughout the process of research or therapy, making sure that it is still appropriate and descriptive, considering any growth or story development which might have taken place. This turning of adjectives into nouns is what Phillip Hart refers to as reification (2007:7). This is also a term commonly used by Wenger (2002: 55, 57-62). White and Epston (1990: 38) call this “objectification” of the problem.

Let us consider the implications of such externalizing. Not only will the problem now be identified as being distant from the client, but it has also been named and can be *deconstructed* to find out where its power base lies, what supports this way of thinking about such problems and its strengths and weaknesses. This also makes it possible to develop the story line of the problem as distinct from the story of the client. Even in the naming of the problem the “power balance” can be perceived to shift somewhat to the client. My experience has been that naming as a creative process, even if it is only to a small extent, is empowering and restores some agency to the client.

It is very important to heed Freedman and Comb’s (1996:47) reminder about externalising though:

*Externalization is more important as an attitude than as a technique.*

It is however important to reflect on the ethics of externalization. Does externalisation, for instance, not lead to the client no longer taking responsibility? In this regard, it is well worth spending some time on the paper by Carey and Russell (2002) as well as White and Epston’s discussion of responsibility and externalisation (1990:65). They indicate that externalising in no way excuses people from their responsibilities, but in the perspectives which are enabled during the externalisation process, the real effects of problematic actions on clients and other people alike are made more visible (2002:4).

Furthermore, externalising allows the therapist or facilitator to adopt a position of curiosity rather than expertise in the co-exploration process.

The tendency or temptation to blame self and others is also removed by externalisation. As the problem becomes externalised, the problem is “allowed” to be the problem again rather than the person assuming that role.

Carey and Russell (2002: 5) also suggest that externalisation is about power and politics. Instead of allowing problems to be internalised and thus wielding inherent power over clients, the client’s identity is now removed from the problem identity.

Externalisation of problems and strengths alike allow multiple stories to develop, thus reducing the risk of totalisation.

O’Hanlon (1994: 25) repeats the cautionary note from Freedman and Combs on the previous page, suggesting that externalisation should be adopted as a paradigm and not merely as a technique.

In the words of Carey and Russell (2002: 5)

*Externalising conversations enable me to be a part of the process of people reclaiming their lives from the effects of problems.*

### **1.5.1.3 Deconstruction (Griffith and Griffith, 2002: 151ff; Morgan, 2000: 45-51)**

Griffith and Griffith (2002: 151) describe deconstruction as a systematic inquiry process of the “interpretative assumptions” from which a belief emerges. This inquiry process has a twofold objective. The first is to identify the assumptions which form the foundation of the belief, and the second is to explore the cultural and societal politics supporting these. Invariably this will lead the explorer into the power domain.

Freedman and Combs (1996: 46) remind us that deconstruction cannot be discussed without mentioning Derrida. They describe how Jacques Derrida and other deconstructionists suggested that any symbol or text is as far as its meaningfulness is concerned embedded in its context. This opens space for multiple meanings instead of just one true meaning can co-exist within different contexts. They relate this to narratives and point out that all narratives are full of “gaps” and “ambiguities”. Focusing on these it becomes apparent that the “officially sanctioned meaning” of a text is but one of various possible meanings.

Deconstructive listening and questioning therefore inquire about the context in which the problem story (lack of meaning or an insignificant life in our case) exists, the ideas and beliefs that are sustaining the problem and the history of the ideas or discourses (Morgan, 2000: 46).

Deconstruction in the way that it has been introduced in this study has not been used to refer to a “breaking down” process. It is used to describe an opening up of space for multiple opportunities and possibilities, but exploring the origin of discourses or taken for granted truths. In doing so the pillars of such truths are identified to reveal the relational politics involved. The interests of various parties within the situational community are thus surfaced and a map of benefits and exploitation by such assumptions can be developed.

Once this is revealed alternative possibilities can be explored and re-embedded as part of the absent but implicit values available to the community.

#### ***1.5.1.4 Re-membering (Morgan, 2000: 77-84; White, 1997)***

As will become evident in the questions asked to my co-researchers, it was attempted to develop new histories and contexts for many of their experienced meaningful story events. In doing so, it is imperative to authenticate such new histories. This has often been done by inviting outside witnesses into the conversation. I would typically ask questions about where a certain unique outcome or positive story originated, who the influential agents were and who could attest to this positive attribute or value revealed in the client story.

The alternate story or meaning story is therefore populated by members who were witnesses of supportive events, hence the “re-membering” description of the process. Often these members of life stories were “significant others” in the lives of the clients or fellow researchers, some of them no longer alive.

In the re-membering process the client or in this study, the co-researcher, gets the opportunity to deliberately include or exclude members into or from their “life club” (Morgan, 2000: 77). Morgan refers to choosing to include or revising the membership or even revoking the membership of people. This is an act of empowerment already and restoring of agency as such.

#### ***1.5.1.5 Absent, but implicit***

*Meaninglessness is but meaning which has lost its bearings.*

Adaptation of Paolo Freire’s words in his book, *Pedagogy of Hope*

The phrase “absent, but implicit” which was coined by White, refers to that which is absent in the life stories, but implicit in the life expressions (2000: 36). This construct is particularly important

when life meaning is discussed as it was often employed by White to inquire about values, meaning and hope. That which is *absent, but implicit* describes the preferred reality, which is a) value indication or assessment, b) opens up space for the alternate story and c) becomes an ethics proposition as well. Quoting White, a typical question about the *absent, but implicit* would be:

*What does your dissatisfaction reflect about how you would prefer things to be? (Duvall, Beres and Bedauin, 2008: 10)*

Leading to rich discussions about what is important in life, this also served as an opening to explore links to traditions, cultures and people who shared such values, principles and commitments. Inquiring upon these, actions congruent with such “valued directions” could also be identified, explored and deconstructed.

In discussing life meaning, conversations about the *absent but implicit* could include “hopes that things could be different in one’s life”, prospects of better things to come, “dreams of a life lived more fully”, anticipations, visions, wishes and other meaningfulness discourses. Following White’s suggestions, the rich descriptions referred to in the previous paragraph could invite conversations “tracing the trajectory” of the absent but implicit in the lives of my fellow researchers as far as expressions of lives which could be more meaningful are concerned. These discussion could explore the relationships the fellow researchers had with the previously absent but implicit. Typical questions which could facilitate these conversations could include

*How did you manage to hold onto your life purpose or passion for so long, despite everything you went through which was so discouraging?*

## 1.6 The bridge to the rest of the thesis

Now that an epistemology has been described and the study has been positioned in the context of why it could contribute not only to the lives of the co-researchers, but also to the academic discourse around life meaning, a context and a challenge have been created. A context has been developed which will require reflection on the research methodology which would be congruent with this epistemology, and also a research ethics which will have to be negotiated and put in place to sustain the research process. The challenge will be to align this with a pastoral theological positioning in such a way which will be authentic, congruent and respectful of existing discourses while exploring the implications for life meaning.

## Chapter 2. Theological Positioning

*God reminded Job that anyone who was not around when the foundations of the universe were being laid, should be more filled with wonder and less with conclusions.<sup>11</sup>*

Rolheiser (2004:97)

This study has attempted to research and provide new ways of looking at existential meaning. It should therefore relate to discourses within theology which are engaged in conversations with existential meaning. Existential theology will therefore be examined to determine whether such a relationship exists.

This study is however positioned within the practical theology and pastoral theology discourses. In adopting a theological position, care will be taken to ensure an alignment and critical integrity between epistemology and ethos - as discussed in the previous chapter - and theology. The discourses of “not knowing”, multi-storied realities, relational realities and narrative unity are critical to the discussion of theology as it pertains to this study.

Within the limited scope and aims of this study the primary discourse will be a life meaning discourse. In this chapter I would therefore attempt to suggest how the study topic is positioned within existing practical theology discourses rather than propose a new theological paradigm. If the literature indicates that meaning is not well represented within the practical theology discourse, a supplementary understanding of practical theology will however be proposed. This understanding will explore existential meaning within the practical theology discourse.

### 2.1 Chapter overview

In this chapter, the conversation between (existential) meaning and theology will be explored to draw and initial framework around a discussion of practical theology and meaning. In this regard the work of some prominent theologians like Paul Tillich will be introduced and its implications for an existential meaning discourse in theology examined.

This chapter will next offer an understanding of practical theology. I will thus start by proposing an understanding of practical theology. This will be followed by an exploration of what the practical theology discourse has to say about meaningful living. As this study is positioned within a

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<sup>11</sup> Job, chapters 38-40.

postmodern paradigm, the conversation inevitably thus becomes a three-way discussion and the postmodern epistemology-practical theology relationship will be discussed. Based on this, I will subsequently attempt to establish a relationship between the study discourse and practical theology. Once that has been done, we proceed to position “a life that matters” or life meaning within the pastoral theology discourses.

Pastoral theology as part of the practical theology discourse will subsequently be discussed to explore how the pastoral relates to the meaning discourses.

Any critical tenets of postmodern epistemology and relational constructionist paradigm as proposed in chapter 1, will be identified and discussed at length in this chapter.

Care will thus be taken to discuss how “not knowing”, multi-storied realities, relational constructionism and narrative unity relate to and contribute to the discussion of practical theology and pastoral theology.

The chapter will be concluded with a discussion and enquiry about the way that these discourses and participatory ethos and postmodern (research) ethics are aligned, thus facilitating continuity within the thesis.

## 2.2 A conversation between Theology and Existential Meaning

In his book, *Jesus and the quest for meaning*, Thomas West (2001) refers to the multitude of books on the quest for meaning being published annually. In 2001, the *Books in Print* listed 267 books with the word *meaning* in its title. Most of these discussed the quest for meaning. An advanced search of Google Books of *meaning* and *theology* resulted in 160 hits, only 30% of which discussed life meaning or existential meaning. A meaningful life is therefore not that well represented in theology literature. The theologians included below were however identified in a search of the library databases accessible through the University of Pretoria, complemented by an Internet search via the Google search engine. The key words used in these literature searches were “theology” AND “meaningful”, “practical” AND “theology” AND “meaningful” and “pastoral” AND “theology” and “meaningful”.

Subsequently, in a reflection on the conversation between theology and existential meaning, Paul Tillich, Jürgen Moltmann, Ernst Bloch, Vincent Brümmer and Karl Rahner will be introduced and their views on theology and meaning described. These theological voices were identified and selected through the search process described in the previous paragraph.

### 2.2.1 Karl Rahner and the Graced Search for Meaning

Considered to be one of the most important theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Karl Rahner (1904-1984) was a member of the Jesuit community (see for instance the Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner edited by Marmion and Hines). Karl Rahner was influenced<sup>12</sup> by Heidegger and wrote a dissertation<sup>12</sup> suggesting that the human search for meaning is rooted in the *unlimited horizon of God's own being experienced in the world*. To the end of his life, Rahner was convinced that existential meaning was intimately related to the experiences, history, and sacramental life that are God's world of grace. In this regard Kelly (1993: 29) reports that

*Rahner portrays God as inspiring the world to shape human destiny and to liberate people to see God in all things, in order to know in that freedom that their search for meaning can only end in God.*



**2-1 Spes of Hope; engraving by Sebald Beham, c 1540**

This quotation immediately alerts us to the way that our narratives about God and the discourses which are informed by them will impact the quality of the existential meaning derived in this way. If our narratives of God are love narratives, we may experience an embeddedness and valued sense of meaning. If however, we have a dominant story of God as the Righteous Ruler who punishes sin – a story which renders low prominence to grace and care – the meaning we experience through our experience of God may leave us feeling alienated, deprived of a personal relationship with God and eventually positioned as individuals who have to comply with strict rules and commandments. Instead of an ethic of what a life within the grace of God may look like, the Ten

Commandments can then easily be perceived as rules which need to be complied with – leading to a compliance ethic which instils a culture of compliance to the minimum requirement of the rule. This does not suggest that the discourse described becomes a problem discourse – the individual's relationship with the

<sup>12</sup> This dissertation was initially rejected by his Catholic advisor, Martin Honecker, but was published in 1939 under the title, *Spirit in the World*.



discourse will determine whether it inspires a problem saturated narrative or whether it becomes a meaningful life narrative.

We will later see how my fellow researchers all indicated that God, the Divine or Spirituality effected their sense of meaning, typically stating that *God gives my life meaning*, initially as an absolute statement without elaborating how or what the nature of this existential meaning is.

Rahner, using Heidegger's notion that the question of the meaning of one's being is preceded by an *a priori* understanding of the world's horizon of meaning<sup>13</sup>, said that the search and longing of the human subject for meaning of experience is grounded in a "preconceptual" grasp of God's infinite horizon of being as a condition (and fulfilment) of the human search for meaning (Kelly, 1993:5, 7).

This suggestion sensitises us to our theological narratives as epistemological framework for "a life that matters". As suggested above this may leave us in a position of valued embeddedness or alienated anxiety. This is closely related to God being the origin and goal for both human beings and the world (*arche* and *telos*) (Burke, 2002: 81-82). *Telos* or life purpose will be discussed later on as a meaning discourse introduced by the co-researchers to this study.

### 2.2.2 Ernst Bloch and his *Revisionisme* – also of anthropology

In order to appreciate the work of Moltmann, we need to reflect on the life and life contribution of Ernst Bloch first.

Early in his life, Ernst Bloch developed the concept of anticipatory consciousness, a concept which became the cornerstone of his life's work (Lester, 1995: 19). Bloch suggested that hope or the human capacity to hope is the existential core of human existence.

His magnum opus was *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, which appeared in 1959 and contained his philosophy of hope. This philosophy of hope is founded in the proposition that humankind is not at peace with herself, but transcends herself and designs herself according to the future (Weiland, 1971 :29). Simplistically he posits humans as beings who hope. This philosophy drew lines to the theology of hope of described by theologians like Moltmann. Moltmann will be discussed in the next section of this chapter.

Bloch suggests that the mistake of psychology has been that she attempted to understand humankind in terms of our pasts, our personal historical narratives only, thus totalising persons by

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<sup>13</sup> See for instance *Sein und Zeit* (1927).

embedding them mostly within traumatic experiences from their youths (Weiland, 1971: 30). This hope, according to Bloch, expresses itself in dreams and fantasies, but also ultimately becomes the driving force of social re-visioning and every revolution. This it does by designing other, better possibilities and reaches out to *that which is not yet!*

It is however, also important to reflect on dreams and their potential to be mere castles in the air, thereby alienating us from authentic possibilities. In this respect, Bloch, turned to Marxism as a philosophy which he considered to be able to unite utopias and science, dreams and reason.

Although Bloch described himself as an atheist, he had an excellent knowledge of the Bible. He described our faith in God and our following of Christ as an everlasting exodus, characterised by an eternal act of rebellion. This exodus discourse was later taken up by Moltmann and developed further.

Weiland (1971:34) describes Bloch's philosophical journey as a demythologising, de-theologising non-religious interpretation of the Bible as the Book of the exodus, of the Kingdom of hope, which in Marx became "concrete utopia".

### 2.2.3 Jürgen Moltmann: Future, Hope and Meaning

*The meaning of each several present becomes clear only in the light of hopes for the future.*

Moltmann (1967: 176)

For Moltmann a meaningful life was inextricably related to hope as a life orientation directed at the future.

If hope was dependent on a perspective of the future, this implies that a certain life dynamic is required: life thus have to be dynamic with the potential of change over a time horizon. Moltmann (1967:79) refers to this requirement or assumption as an imperative *historical flux with room for open possibilities ahead*. This implies that Christian hope relies on the ability of Christ (as the source of hope) to change the world.

It comes as no surprise that for Moltmann the Bible was the Book of breaking and moving away, his religion of the Old Testament that of Exodus and his religion of the New Testament, that of the coming Kingdom of God (Weiland, 1971: 91-93). This illustrates Moltmann's perspective on faith as being directed to the future. This future expected by faith is a future of freedom. God's history with

humankind is thus a history of freedom or a history within which humankind becomes free - is liberated.

Moltmann (1967: 17-18) proposes that *hope's statements of promise anticipate the future*. Its meaning for our present lives derives from the position that

*in the promises, the hidden future already announces itself and exerts its influence on the present through the hope it awakens.*

But *hope* was not described in isolation in Moltmann's construction of the concept. Hope has an *inseparable companion* in *Faith* (Moltmann, 1967: 20). Thus Moltmann posits Hope as an agent which

*sets this faith open to the comprehensive future of Christ.*

Quoting Kierkegaard, Moltmann (1967: 20) eloquently describes hope as a *passion for what is possible*.

Positioned against Hope is Despair. This Despair is positioned as an obstructive force, not destroying Hope but as the sin which prevents access to the fulfilment of Hope (Moltmann, 1967: 23). Thus Despair would have us hope no more.

As a critique to Hope as living for the future, we should therefore ask whether Hope does not *cheat us out of the happiness of the present* (1967: 26). This may effect a life never lived, but hoped to be lived (1967:27). Not only can Hope thus cheat us out of the happiness of the present, but also of the God of the present, the eternally present God (1967:28). To this Moltmann (1967:28) responds by suggesting that Hope is not cheating us out of the happiness of the present; on the contrary it is (*my underlining*) *the happiness of the present* in that it makes the present bearable. He continues to argue that *expectation makes life good*

*for in expectation man (sic) can accept his whole present and find joy not only in its joy, but also in its sorrow.*

In this regard we are reminded of the Beatitudes, proclaiming apparent paradoxes. If we read them in the perspective created by Moltmann above, perhaps a new significance is added to the words.

#### 2.2.4 Brümmer on Meaning and the Christian Faith

Brümmer (2006: Preface, unnumbered) suggested that religious belief should be understood as a means for understanding the meaning of life and our experience of the world, rather than as explanatory theory. This enables us to direct our lives accordingly in a way which makes sense of our actions. Believers in the Christian tradition therefore claim that their lives are meaningful *because they seek to attain ultimate happiness in the love of God.*

Quoting Wittgenstein, Brümmer suggested that religious traditions provide conceptual models or “pictures” (we would perhaps prefer to refer to these as lenses) in which we could interpret our lives as meaningful (2006: 94). This also facilitates an understanding of the challenges encountered in life: (2006:99). If the Genesis narrative of the Creation of the earth is understood as a creative narrative, it provides a song of praise for the fact that the creation derives from the hand of God and is thus meaningful (2006:99). Furthermore, such religious traditions go further and provide us with suggestions of appropriate and meaningful behaviours and attitudes when we are confronted by such challenges (2006:94). Thus narrating our lives as “in the presence of God”, not only do we learn to understand ourselves, but also our relationship to the world. This then becomes what makes our lives meaningful. This religious interpretation bestows significance to our world of experience.

These religious traditions enable us to relate life and the world around us to God by means of the metaphors provided. Therefore, for instance

*My life is meaningful because God loves me and I am a child of God.*

And

*The world around me is meaningful because it has been created by God his wonders to proclaim. (Brümmer, 2006: 204).*

Once again, following Wittgenstein, Brümmer (2006:204) suggests that in order to participate in this paradigm, we have to be introduced to the language game expressing it.

According to Brümmer (2006: 206) meaning thus is effected by our experience of living in fellowship with God and by a belief that God is involved in what happens in the world in which we live. The presupposition in this position is therefore that God exists and His Kingdom and His Will are realities.

### 2.2.5 Tillich and the Anxiety of Non-Being

*Being religious means asking passionately the question of the meaning of our existence and being willing to receive answers, even if the answers hurt.*

Paul Tillich (1958)

*The courage to be is rooted in the God who appears when God has disappeared in the anxiety of doubt.*

Paul Tillich (2000: 190)

Paul Tillich (1886 – 1965), sometimes described as the “Apostle to the Intellectuals”, provided a *new vocabulary* to address *modernity’s confrontation with death and meaninglessness* and its so-called *discontents* (Tillich, 2000:xi, xiii).

In 1952 he published his landmark text on existential meaning, *The Courage to Be*. This text came to be referred to as an *indispensable* text in the theological conversation of the meaning of life (Gomes in Tillich, 2000: xii).

The search for the meaning of life, Tillich called his *ultimate concern* (interview with Tillich on YouTube, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1P9\\_9eXEJ6I](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1P9_9eXEJ6I)). Another strong statement in this regard suggests that we are human *only by understanding and shaping reality, both our world and ourselves, according to meanings and values* (2000: 50).

Tillich’s (2000:38) position on meaningfulness aims to dispel the anxiety of *ultimate nonbeing*. The description of nonbeing offered by Tillich (2000:40) juxtaposes it to being, in a way which reminds us of the *absent but implicit* introduced by White (2000). This discourse is intended to convey the understanding that in the expression of any experience of life, there is a discernment we make between the expressed experience and other experiences that have already been given meaning and provide a contrasting backdrop, which “shapes” the expression being foregrounded. Such ontological nonbeing therefore becomes a nothingness in contrast to the state and nature of being, or put differently (2000:40)

*Being is the negation of the primordial night of nothingness.*

This anxiety is described as threefold, appearing in the anxiety of death, the anxiety of meaninglessness and the anxiety of condemnation (2000:41). In this section we will focus only on the second appearance, namely the existential anxiety of meaninglessness. This Tillich (2000:46) suggests

*threatens man as a whole.*

This *whole* is suggested to span his *spiritual* as well as his *ontic self-affirmation*. This is achieved by **participating** creatively in the *various spheres of meaning*. Participation is key to the previous explanation, as it is in this participation that the affirmation is effected.

Anxiety of meaninglessness is described by Tillich (2000:47) as anxiety about the loss of an *ultimate concern*, of the loss of

*a meaning which gives meaning to all meanings.*

And this anxiety, he posits (2000:47), is aroused by the loss of *a spiritual centre*<sup>14</sup>, *the special contents of the spiritual life*, of an

*answer, however symbolic and indirect, to the question of the meaning of existence*<sup>15</sup>.

This occurs as a separation or the fear of a cut off from *creative participation* in activities of culture (think about perceived threats to one's home language), frustration about something which one *passionately* supports (a lifestyle, political model or basic right for instance) and being transferred from one object of devotion to another to another because their inherent meanings dissipates (think about anyone or object one loves, adores).

Tillich (2000:xvii) suggests that, against this anxiety, stands the courage to be which he posits as being

*rooted in the God who appears when God has disappeared in the anxiety of doubt (2000:190).*

This however, is not a simplistic proposition as it is positioned in the philosophical context of existentialism. Existentialism here is understood to be *a series of philosophical arguments about the relationship between the individual and God or the universe* (Gomes in Tillich, 2000: xviii). According to Gomes (Tillich, 2000: xix)

*the fundamental existential question has to do with the fundamental question of individual meaning and purpose in an existence from which God has been displaced as the source of meaning, purpose and order.*

Tillich (2000:139) calls existentialism *the expression of the anxiety of meaninglessness and of the attempt to transfer this anxiety into the courage to be as oneself.*

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<sup>14</sup> In this regard, also refer to the chapter on Spirituality and a Meaningful Life

<sup>15</sup> On page 51 of *The Courage to Be*, Tillich even suggests that *in the "first" meaningful sentence all the richness of man's spiritual life is potentially present.*

Then the courage to be becomes the courage *to accept oneself as accepted in spite of being unacceptable* (2000:164). This expresses a position of grace compared to sin, which Tillich described as *estrangement* or *separation*, and the *human condition* as *separation* from God, the self and community. This has significant implications for pastoral therapy where problems in my experience often present themselves to clients in such a way as to convince them of being separate or different.

When Tillich refers to courage *rooted in the God who appears when God has disappeared in the anxiety of doubt*, the transcendence implied refers to the transition beyond theism. That which is above the God of theism, has the ability to transcend the anxiety of doubt and meaninglessness, taken into the courage to be. Tillich (2000: 186) posits that while Mysticism takes in the centre of self and power of being, it fails to enter and accept the radical doubt concerning the concrete, *plunging directly into the ground of being*, yet leaving the world of finite values and meanings as concrete. Therefore it does not solve the problem of meaninglessness. This God above the God of theism, the power of being, does not devalue all concrete with meaninglessness, but accepts the doubt that allows their potential restitution. Absolute faith is found in mysticism that transcends the theistic objectivation of a God who is a being.

In conclusion, Tillich (2000:189) suggests that becoming aware of this state, the power of being or ground of our being, is to change the traditional symbols of theism to that of the God above theism. Symbols that promote theism, such as immortality, providence, judgment, inherited sin, remove the awareness of the power of being, the self-affirmation in spite of the threat of nonbeing. When the traditional symbols are changed to facilitate acceptance (of grace), they can enable us to become aware of the power of being to withstand and take in itself the anxiety of fate and death and that of guilt and condemnation.

### 2.3 Practical Theology: An Understanding

Various descriptions of Practical Theology and its domain of influence exist. Fowler (1983:149) describes practical theology as a “theological reflection and construction” which is critical and constructive of the praxis of the Christian community’s life and work in its various dimensions. This description is therefore broad enough also to include meaningfulness as one of these *dimensions*.

Hendriks (2004:19) focused on its hermeneutic nature, suggesting that it concerns itself with how the Word should be proclaimed in word and deed in the world.

Heitink refers to a theory of action, suggesting a role of mediation of the Christian faith in the praxis of the modern world (1999:6). He agrees with other practical theologians that practical theology deals with God's activity through the ministry of human beings or the church (1999:7).

Louw (1998:95-98) proposes an understanding of practical theology as the hermeneutic of God's encounter with human beings and their world. Elsewhere (2008:103) he suggests that praxis in practical theology has an intentional implication, as it refers to the *intention of human actions, and to the meaning of our engagement in life issues and to the quality of our being human within the systemic realm of human relationships*.

Magezi (2005:93) quotes Louw (1998) and indicates that the role of practical theology in South Africa may be described as *confessional, interactive and contextual*. *Confessional* here refers to the Scriptures being the only source of knowledge, while *interactive* links gospel insights to *empirical* insights from secular sources, and *contextual* links the situation aiming to generate transformation by means of situational analysis. This transformative praxis in a culture of reflection, as was suggested previously, potentially opens space for a process of reflection on life meaning and deconstruction of societal (including church) discourses of meaning. This will be an inference and not a direct reference though.

Heitink as translated by Bruinsma (1999: 266) posit that "the core question" which practical theology must address is the meaning of life, a question which they suggest, is "rooted in anxiety and despair"<sup>16</sup>. Ironically perhaps, this question is prevalent even in a culture which lacks nothing as far as material things are concerned and among people enjoying perfect health. This perspective then links practical theology to the discussion of a meaningful life. Section 2.4 will elaborate on this relationship.

The reference to *anxiety and despair* strongly reminds of the work done and the sentiments expressed by Tillich (2000: 32-63). Tillich concerned himself with the fundamental existential question of individual meaning and purpose in an existence from which God has been displaced as the source of meaning, purpose and order (2000: xix).

The voice of practical theology however has been found to be surprisingly "soft-spoken" in my literature searches, literally only providing two hits when a search for "practical theology" and "existential meaning" was done. This seems to suggest that this study is contributing to a hitherto vastly unexplored area of concern for practical theology.

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<sup>16</sup> This reminds of Tillich's description of the human experience of *non-being* or meaninglessness (Tillich, 2000: 32ff).



## 2.4 Practical Theology and a Meaningful Life

*To let God be God means not only that we do not set limits to the infinite, but also that we allow God to give us meaning, significance, uniqueness, and eternal life.*

Rolheiser (2004:106)

*The courage to be is rooted in the God who appears when God has disappeared in the anxiety of doubt.*

Tillich (2000: 190)

### 2.4.1 Positioning “life that matters” discourses within a postmodern practical theology

I will now proceed to position the study within a postmodern practical theology context by pointing out the relationship between Practical Theology and a meaningful life.

Heitink and Bruinsma (1999: 266) posit that “the core question” which practical theology must address is the meaning of life, a question which they suggest is “rooted in anxiety and despair”. Ironically perhaps, this question is prevalent even in a culture which lacks nothing as far as material things are concerned and among people enjoying perfect health.

Similar sentiments are expressed by a number of other authors (Van der Ven, 1990:45; Pieterse, 1993: 45, 135; Müller, 1996: 5, 97; Gay, 2006:305). But not only is Practical Theology concerned with meaningful living, it is also a transformative praxis (see among others Tracy and Cobb, 1984: Chapter 1; Browning, 2003: 317-322 and Pierce, 2007: 246). Transformative here opens the space for alternative stories about meaning and how it is informed by theological reflection.

In his book on Liberal Theology, Rasor (2005: xii) suggests that religion is fundamentally concerned with the problem of finding meaning and orientation in life. He quotes Tillich (2005: xiii) who referred to meaning in life as the “ultimate concern”.

Meaningful living and transformative praxis thus confirm the relationship not only to the topic of this study, but also to the research ethic selected, namely participatory action research.

## 2.5 The relationship between Pastoral Therapy and the study area

On the website of the Faculty of Theology, Louw proposes that for Pastoral Theology

*The main objective is to help people towards a meaningful life with the aid of an appropriate understanding of God and his presence.*

Botha (1998: 124) suggests that

*There is a vital link between pastoral therapy and theology. In the pastoral conversation, the pastoral therapist has to interpret, i.e. to theologise within the concrete situation of the individual seeking counsel (Veltkamp 1988:201). Clinebell (1984:50) stated: 'It is in this sense that pastoral care and counselling are ways of doing theology'. Pastoral therapy is probably the one situation in which the theological skills of theologians are tested to their very limits.*

This paragraph is included as an example of how the relationship between pastoral therapy and theology can be described. And we have argued that theology should concern itself with a reflection of existential meaning, or a life that matters.

Peterson (1992:1) says that

*Pastoral work takes Dame Religion by the hand and drags her into the everyday world, introducing her to friends, neighbours, and associates. Religion left to herself is shy, retiring, and private; or else she is decorative and proud – a prima donna. But she is not personal and she is not ordinary. The pastor insists on taking her where she must mix with the crowd.*

The relationship of pastoral care and meaningful living is proposed by Peterson (1992:76) when he suggests that pastoral care can assist people to “comprehend their lives as connected narratives that have meaning and makes sense”.

The relationship between pastoral care and meaningful living has been described by a number of other authors as well. Included in this list are Albers (1986: 214), Clinebell (1984:28), Evans after Kierkegaard (1995:79), Gerkin (1993: 198), Heitink (1979: 71, 75, 79), Veltkamp (1988: 20-21) and Wicks et al (1993: 42).

Louw (2007: x) says that care for human souls is concerned with human suffering, with compassion, quality of life, hope, future and **giving meaning to life**. This positions the quest for meaningfulness or “a life that matters” within the realm of pastoral care. He proceeds to introduce soul (*nepfesh*) as a gasp of air as a metaphor for our “intuitive” focus on something which is more than experience, which goes beyond, which transcends, on the quality of our relationship with God. Soul is

mentioned in this context because Louw then comes back to put soul in the context of a function of existence, describing how we live meaningfully every day. Soul therefore is associated with the meaning of life or *logos*. This is important because it introduces a relational approach to soul, which forms the bridge to Frankl's existential theory - discussed in the same book from page 126 onwards and also in Frankl (1992: 101ff) - on humanity and also to our adopted social constructionist epistemology.

This resonates well with what Briskin wrote in 1998. Briskin refers to soul as a metaphor for "coping with the contradictions and limitations of modern life" as it struggles to "extract a deeper *meaning* from the ongoing feast of possibilities that lie before it" [my italics] (1998: 18). In a description of how "efficiency took things apart in order to control the fragments", Briskin (1998: 139) then indicates how soul seeks *logos*, which is associated with "meaning, understanding, voice, language, and expression" in a quest towards wholeness.

I will now invite the reader to reflect on the integrity of the proposed epistemology, practical theology and reflections on a "life that matters". This will be done by exploring the relationship these discourses have with some critical meaning discourses which were encountered in the research process. In the limited scope of this study only the discourses of "not-knowing", and narrative unity will be considered.

## 2.6 "not knowing" and theology

In chapter 1 we suggested that the not-knowing position opposes an expert position in the meaning making process. This is a discourse against a totalising or definitive knowing position. As such it would therefore oppose a foundationalist perspective in theology.

In simple terms "not knowing" as it refers to theological discourse would suggest that we do not have a final understanding of God. This may re-member our "God story" with some ancient "God stories". Nolan (2006:140) describes how mystics<sup>17</sup> refer to God as *unknowable*. He describes a process he calls *unknowing* which refers to abandoning all our preconceived ideas about God. He posits this within a context of transcending our models of knowing – unknowing these in order to experience God. This may also be described as a de-objectifying of God. Nolan (2006:141) introduces the thinking of God as no-thing, contracted to a discourse of God as "nothing". Resolving that God cannot be an object of our knowing, he reverts to a position appreciating the mystery of God.

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<sup>17</sup> See also the discussion of Mysticism in the section on Tillich previously.

In this context we are reminded of Brueggemann's *imaginative* knowing. Reminding us of the human ability to constitute realities as we converse, he posits that knowing does not consist in settled certitudes, *but in the actual work of imagination* (1993:13). In a statement which is well aligned with the objectives of this study, Brueggemann first shows that imagination does not provide certitude (which is so often required as essential to the security discourse in our society), but does

*yield a possible "home" when we accept a **participating**<sup>18</sup> role as "home-maker"(my boldfacing).*

Later Brueggemann (1993:16) elaborates on the imagination process and quotes Kearney (1987:39-58) in indicating that the imagination needs to be *critical*, and *poetic*, and then *ethical*. Critical to this social *shaping of reality* are the modes of discourse and the nature of the questions introduced into the process of imagination.

### 2.6.1 Imagination as a discourse within theology

It is important that we learn more about the nature of the *imagination* proposed by Brueggemann. Brueggemann (1993:16) describes imagination as the process of organising social reality *around dominant, authoritative images*. Reflecting on the assumptions that we hold and utilise in our social discourses, he then reframes these as

*Sturdy, powerful acts of imagination, reinforced, imposed and legitimated by power.*

Once again, this resonates well with the epistemology that we have described in the previous chapter. In describing CRC, we indicated that it was *critical* in that it

*does not limit itself to talk of knowledge, independently of power relations.*

Thus, Brueggemann (1993:17) concludes, postmodern imagination in displacing the imagination of modernity, is

*Less sure and less ambitious and which more modestly makes a local claim.*

It is however, important to note what Rolheiser says about imagination. Rolheiser (2004: 87, 103) cautions that we cannot simply imagine the existence of God. Reminding us of our relational constitution of meaning (White, 2000:36) he explains that any attempts to form pictures of God and to understand him rationally or intellectually would be doomed to failure and even disillusion

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<sup>18</sup> See Tillich above.

(Rolheiser, 2004:103). We would be resorting to our finite means to try and explain or describe God as Infinity. We would be looking for consistencies with our own lives and resources of experience,

*An enterprise that, by definition, undercuts our ability to believe in God.*

We should therefore be sensitive not to limit the Infinite and thus our faith in God by resorting to only familiar discourses. We should therefore revisit Brueggemann's position on imagination and reflect on his understanding of imagination as knowing or meaning making. In doing so we will have to ensure that we adopt a relational understanding of imagination which will not be limiting of our perception of God. As long as we consider imagination to have limitations in its being dependent on our *absent but implicit* discourses and therefore always understating our understanding of God, we would be congruent to our adopted epistemic and ethical position. In telling our God stories we would be wise to contemplate Brueggemann's proposal of local knowledges, contextual realities and pluralistic knowledge narratives.

The last word in this paragraph belongs to Rolheiser:

*The God who is met in the measured expectations of our own desires and imagination dies in his own impotence and irrelevance.*

Rolheiser (2004:121)

If we adopt a position of not-knowing, we are clearly deprived of certainty. How will that impact a meaningful life though?

### **2.6.2 The postmodern position and certainty: uncertainty as pastoral challenge in the generation of meaning**

*It may be that the demand for certainty is an unreasonable demand for a form of security that we cannot possess.*

William Valicella (2006)

The "not knowing" discussed in the previous paragraphs can clearly strip us of our preconceived knowing and therefore of our certainties. This quest for certainty as a proxy for security (compare Valicella, 2006 quoted above) becomes visible in traditions and other institutions which may include ceremony<sup>19</sup> (Griffith and Griffith, 2002: 171-172), institutions like delineated roles<sup>20</sup> and

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<sup>19</sup> Griffith and Griffith (2002:166-172) contrast ritual and ceremony, suggesting a certain liminality characteristic of ritual whereas ceremony is, according to them, associated with order, control and stability. Both are symbols, but ritual is participatory in nature and therefore invites its participants into a transforming

individualism (Wheatly, 2007: 205), religion<sup>21</sup> (Baker, 1999:34-48, Masih, 1991: 35) and myth (Nolan, 2002: 53).

Why is it important to dedicate one section of the chapter on the theological discourse on certitude or certainty in the context of a “life that matters”? This question will be addressed from a philosophical, theological and pragmatic perspective.

### 2.6.2.1 *A philosophical perspective of certitude*

Allen and Springsted (2007:129) indicate that epistemology is the primary concern of modern philosophy. They then proceed to describe the search for certainty and the grounds for certainty as the driving force behind epistemology. Kate Kirkpatrick (2008) observes that René Descartes – whom she calls the “father of modern western philosophy” – has established the demand for certainty and immunity from doubt as the basic rules for philosophical investigation. Not only did this have implications for philosophy, but also for the sciences **and for religion**. Masih (1991:35) claims that the very nature of religion is that it excludes any doubt. Kirkpatrick continues to describe these implications, suggesting that foundations which were laid in this manner were considered to be unshakeable. Thus human knowledge came to rest on the *certainty of the 'I'* - the self became more authoritative than established teachings or the authority of others, including the Bible. Certainty therefore came to be considered a worthy goal, and a strong discourse developed which supported a quest by individuals searching for truth *with fear and trembling*. But there is more to it than we can find in ourselves – even in this demand for certainty or quest for certitude did modernist thinking fail in its endeavours.

*I think, therefore I fear. (Yeong, 2008:24)*

### 2.6.2.2 *The pragmatic view of certitude*

Apart from its relationship with security alluded to above and described later in this section, certainty also provides a reference framework which facilitates judgement, assessment and evaluating – actions which have attained value status in our metric-centric world (Du Toit, 1997: 939).

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dynamic. They use the metaphor of the theater to describe ceremony as inviting an audience, which may then rather be constitutive of stability (and therefore certainty and security). In summary they suggest that ceremony *indicates*, while ritual *transforms*.

<sup>20</sup> This Wheatley links to control which becomes isolating into individualist discourses in society and corporate institutions.

<sup>21</sup> Baker (1999: 37) proposes an understanding of *religiosity* as a common tendency to negotiate security “from God, the gods or something that acts as a god in our lives.”

Security and feelings of certainty or certitude have become almost synonymous in our society. The modernist tenet of “knowing” was an attempt to reduce the anxiety of not-knowing or uncertainty<sup>22</sup>. In our desperate attempt to know, we most probably became victims of the way that Paré (2002) describes discourses as delimiting, blinding us to more possibilities (see section 1.3.1.3 in Chapter 1). In order to know we adopted a scientific position of objectivity and invested it with a powerful ethic of positivism, reifying the expert knowledge in the process. We often form an understanding of a discourse by exploring its opposite. Often the opposite of certainty is understood to be doubt. Doubt is invested with pejorative sentiment and to discuss doubt in the context of theology may easily lead to the conversant being labelled a heretic.

Wheatley (2007: 112-134) describes how the fear of uncertainty leads to a loss of security. She continues to indicate how this anxiety leads us to specific behaviours to “fund” – to use Brueggemann’s (1993:20) term - our security. She refers to a certain *surrendering* of personal freedom to gain security. This *surrender* most often plays out in our demands that leaders, the church, Others *rescue us, save us, provide answers and give us firm ground or strong life rafts* (This may be described as entering the realm of foundationalism of course.). We only have to think about accusations that the *church is quiet* about issues ranging from Harry Potter and the Da Vinci Code to gay membership of the church to appreciate this statement. But this surrender goes beyond the mere appeal for answers: it can be described as placing us under *bondage* (Du Toit, 1997: 939). But what is the nature of this bondage? Apart from being a delimiting discourse in the manner described in the previous chapter, it is also a political act steeped in discourses of power and control.

Perhaps the consequence should be restated as subjection to control by the certainty discourse. Hendryx and Pitchford (1) recall the work done by Foucault on knowledge and power, indicating that knowledge as the result of epistemologies is driven by the demand for certainty. Certainty and power are therefore closely related. Applying this to the modern church, they proceed to suggest that the church may be *big on certainty, but low on humility and faithfulness*. They therefore advise that we should rather replace our certitude with a willingness to become learners and seekers instead. According to them certainty puts us in control; but to be a faithful Jesus follower we must be willing to let go so we can discover a new level of dependence on God. They posit that the true Jesus follower will begin to see how deeply immersed he/she has become to a narrow set of rules, firmly entrenched in a limited Enlightenment epistemology: an outdated way of knowing the world, they claim. Du Toit concurs and describes what he calls “the government of truth” which is bound up with the drive for mastery and control (1997:947).

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<sup>22</sup> Nolan (2006:132) refers to an obsession with absolute certainty.

### 2.6.2.3 *Theological perspective of certitude*

Du Toit (1997) writes an article about Truth. Without caution for any loss of generality, truth (as a form of certainty) can be replaced by certainty in this paper and it would still be an informative commentary on certitude. In this paper he suggests that truth is linked to the notion of being (1997:939). In a statement which may provide us with another perspective on certainty, he suggests that *a lie is considered to be a truth for the time it is believed in* (1997:941). Applying this to certainty, it suggests that certainties remain certain while they are considered as such. We may therefore not be faced by the challenge of the loss of certainty, but by the realisation of transient certainties.

Owens (2000:53, 64, 179) suggests that the demand for certainty is motivated by a *desire for reflective control over belief*. This *desire for control over belief* may be understood as fundamentalism (Hendryx and Pitchford, 1). We may therefore expect to observe a growth in support of fundamentalist religions in times of uncertainty like these (Webster, 2002:1).

Nolan (2004:132) points at the failure of the attempts of modernity to provide security through certainties and alludes to the experience that many of the things we previous took for granted are now being questioned. He describes how even scientists are admitting that they do not have the answers to many of the questions we are faced with these days. Suggesting that the *obsession with certainty* is nothing more than slavery similar to the other materialistic forms of slavery like clinging to possessions. In a very challenging statement he declares that this liberation from slavery may even require us to lose our certainties about God. Referring to the inadequacy of our thinking about God and the practices associated with our worship of God, he proposes that we need the freedom to abandon some of these certainties including some of our ideas and practices about God and worship. Proposing the practice of detachment he suggests that we should become detached from devotional practices and contemplation alike. Further discussion of detachment unfortunately falls outside the scope and ambit of this study.

Supporting Nolan's views above, in the Episcopal Press and News of March 08, 2005 the presiding bishop has declared that *certitude is the enemy of truth because God's truth, which was given human form in Jesus, who declares himself to be the truth, and continues to dwell among us in his risen reality through the agency and driving motion of the Spirit of truth – God's truth is larger, stranger, wilder and infinitely more paradoxical than anything we can understand or imagine or contain within our tidy notions of righteousness. Furthermore, God's truth is always unfolding and being enlarged.*

Brueggemann is quoted to have said that



*We all have a hunger for certitude, and the problem is that the Gospel is not about certitude, it's about fidelity. So what we all want to do if we can is immediately transpose fidelity into certitude, because fidelity is a relational category and certitude is flat, mechanical category. So we have to acknowledge our thirst for certitude and then recognize that if you had all the certitudes in the world it would not make the quality of your life any better because what we must have is fidelity.*

(quoted by Hjalmarson, date unknown).

Brueggemann (2002a: 527) continues to list the reasons for the loss of the text which result from a quest for certainty. He proposes that we have lost the text to a degree because of our attempts to force the text to yield dogmatic certitudes, because we have become self-sufficient and affluent, because we have become too knowing and technologically competent and we have *willed that the text should be relevant*.

Rolheiser continues the discussion, providing us with some invaluable insights in his preface to his book *Against an Infinite Horizon* (2001:9). He starts off by saying that faith is *to see everything against an infinite horizon*. And then he proposes in a memorable quote which links this section to the study topic and the theological conversation, that faith is not a matter of *basking in the certainty that there is a God and that God is taking care of us*. *Seeing against an infinite horizon*, faith as a way of seeing, enables us to see the divine within the ordinary and the ordinary in the context of the infinite.

We end this section with these words from Karl Rahner quoted by Rolheiser (2001:11):

*In the torment of the insufficiency of everything attainable, we come to understand that here, in this life, all symphonies remain unfinished.*

## 2.7 Narrative unity and theology

In this section I will discuss narrative unity as introduced by MacIntyre (1984) and Taylor (1989) and reflect on its significance for the theological position proposed previously. It will explore unity in the context of meaningfulness requiring continuity and of Christian identity<sup>23</sup> and the power relationships invested in the offices of the church.

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<sup>23</sup> Refer to the chapter on Identity and a life that matters later on.

This paragraph will therefore introduce a discussion on the positioning of the theological dialogue in the context of time and society. Does the locality of theology narratives proposed earlier extend to the time dimension? Therefore, is all that matters in our narrative context only the immediate presence?<sup>24</sup> This section will also ask the question of exclusivity: “Who can and may discuss theology?” and “Where should theology be discussed?” Can life therefore be classified into a secular compartment and a theological compartment?

### 2.7.1 Narrative unity

*"making sense of one's life as a story is also, like orientation to the good, not an optional extra. ... In order to have a sense of who we are, we have to have a notion of how we have become, and of where we are going."*

Taylor (1989: 47)

*Humans "make sense of their lives as an unfolding story in a way that gives meaning to their past and direction to their future"*

Abbey (2000: 37-38)

I will first discuss narrative unity, indicating how it pertains to the discussion of theology as I do.

Taylor (1989: 528, 38) posits that a reflection on our lives suggests a *narrative unity*, which he describes as a *thematic unity* as opposed to the *mere sameness of the human condition*. This discourse is therefore concerned with our lives *as a whole*. This argues against the divisory practice of categorising a life into a professional life, a church life or religious life, and similar societal classifications. This can easily lead to a variety of ethical systems and even epistemologies being supported. This can become a cacophony of voices competing with each other in the quest for meaning.

MacIntyre (1984: 218) supports Taylor's description of the unity of human life and its narrative embodiment, but adds a moral perspective to this unity. He proposes that a “good life”<sup>25</sup> has narrative unity. This unity goes beyond individual unity and extends to the human narrative.

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<sup>24</sup> Refer back to Moltmann and his *historical flux mentioned above*.

<sup>25</sup> The “good life” or eudaimonia reminds us of Virtue Ethics with Socrates, Plato and Aristotle as some of its main proponents. In our study this may translate to a meaningful life.

Another perspective he adds to narrative unity is that it becomes the unity of a *narrative quest*, which he then links to *telos*.<sup>26</sup>

Narrative unity is important to this study in that MacIntyre (1984: 217) explains

*that some people who complain, sometimes before attempting or committing suicide, that their life is meaningless are actually saying that their narrative unity has ceased to make sense to them and that, in their perception at least, their life no longer moves toward a telos, or good.*

In describing the Biblical text as narrative, Brueggemann (2007: 31-32) provides a perspective which accommodates theology as discourse within a narrative paradigm, and therefore opening space for a theological discussion of narrative unity.

The discourses of tradition and interdisciplinary conversation bridge onto MacIntyre's discussion of how narrative unity expands to include not only individual unity, but also the unity of humankind as discussed above.

## 2.7.2 Temporal unity

When we discuss the implications of the locality of knowledge and Brueggemann's *timeliness* (1993:5-7, 9) we may well reflect on the question of temporal locality. Does locality of knowledge negate the past and future?

In this respect it is important to observe what Brueggemann (1993:55) refers to as "telling a past, and dreaming a future" or as a *counterimagination* to:

- *Remember a rich past in the face of entrenched amnesia,*
- *Entertain a covenantal<sup>27</sup> present in the face of a regnant commoditization*
- *Hope a marvellous future in the face of an established, resigned despair.*

In this description, the opportunity to create a narrative unique outcome embedded in a local history and proposed as a lens to a preferred future reality is once more presented. Müller (2008:7) describes this by saying that "where harmony exists between yesterday, today and tomorrow, there

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<sup>26</sup> This is also important for this study as it was one of the themes identified by the research group and as such becomes the topic of a later chapter in this thesis.

<sup>27</sup> Refer to our discussion of Sacks' description of covenant earlier in this chapter

will be integrity, wholeness and maturity – the basic ingredients of spirituality”. This is important for the narrative themes which will be discussed later in this thesis.

### 2.7.3 Inclusivity

Narrative unity with regard to inclusivity addresses the questions of “Who can and may discuss theology?” and “Where should theology be discussed?” Can life therefore be classified into a secular compartment and a theological compartment?

If we adopt the post-foundational theology position, one of the premises of our theological position becomes the interdisciplinary dialogue. This opens up the theology conversation to previously excluded conversationalists. If we were true to our epistemological and theological position, we should therefore create space for the so-called lay community. In this “interdisciplinary” conversation our stories of faith and believing may therefore be enriched or thickened in the narrative metaphor.

What would the role of ministers, pastors and theologians be within this understanding of the theology discourse. I would like to suggest that we adopt the proposition by Brueggemann (1993:19-20) in this regard. Brueggemann introduces the discourse of *funding* in this regarding. Latching onto his imagination metaphor, Brueggemann suggests a role of *funding postmodern imagination*. It is important that we understand this as a facilitating role: the church is encouraged to provide the resource in basic building blocks and not full constructions of discourses. Brueggemann describes a process of supplying *little pieces* which can be used *in different configurations* (once again supporting the position of a multi-storied reality).

I would like to add another ethical context to this process: I would like to add the first four of Bosch’s seven perspectives on missionary work (see Chapter 3) as an ethic to the role of the minister, pastor or theologian. This implies that – once again adopting the conversation metaphor – different perspectives co-exist in the theology discourse. Secondly a genuine dialogue presupposes and implies a commitment to one’s own theological tradition, epistemology and ethical position. As a third perspective, *dialogue...is only possible if we proceed from the belief that...we are not moving into a void, that we go expecting to meet God who has preceded us and has been preparing people within the context of their own cultures and convictions....We do not have him [God] in our pocket, so to speak, and do not just ‘take him’ to the others*. This anticipates the fourth perspective which proposes that we can only do this in a spirit of humility.

Narrative unity in this context proposes the creation of narrative space for some voices which were perhaps previously silenced by privileged “expert” voices in the theology conversation, rejecting the temptation to divide our lives into watertight compartments of theological life spaces and non-theological life spaces.

## 2.8 The bridge to the rest of the thesis

In inviting the theology conversation into the discussion of “a life that matters”, we have indicated that it is aligned with the epistemology and study area which were proposed in the first chapter, and in turn it has introduced the discourses of uncertainty, purpose and spirituality which will have to be taken up as conversation points in later chapters of this thesis.

The voice of Theology has been invited into the meaningfulness conversation. To this effect Rahner suggested that meaningfulness is intimately connected to our experiences of God in the world and links the meaning conversation to Grace and God’s Purpose for human beings.

Hope was introduced into the conversation as a meaning discourse by Bloch and Moltmann, proposing that what the capacity to anticipate, wish for and hope may be central to our life meanings. Hope here is understood as a life orientation directed at the future, the passion for what is possible. His theology thus became an exodus theology, a quest toward hopeful futures.

Brümmer suggested that theology may provide the pictures of life within which we can position our lives meaningfully. Meaning thus is effected by our experience of living in fellowship with God and by a belief that God is involved in what happens in the world in which we live.

When we invited the voice of Paul Tillich into the meaning conversation, non-being or rather the anxiety of non-being was posited as the primary concern in the quest for meaningful living. Creative participation in meaningful living was indicated by Tillich to be key to existential meaning. Tillich concludes that that which is above the God of theism, has the ability to transcend the anxiety of doubt and meaninglessness, taken into the courage to be.

## Chapter 3. Research Methodology

Willms in Smith, Willms and Johnson (1997:7) describes the traditional connotation with research as that of scientists in laboratories with white coats, microscopes and computers: the domain of scientists and academics. Inevitably one would expect this perspective to support certain power discourses about who should be doing research and whose research would “carry weight” in academia and science alike. I would, however, like to align my thinking of research with Willms’ perspective of research as a process of rediscovering and recreating personal and social realities.

By way of introduction, I would like to refer to the phrase “to look at again” (that is, to reflect on or afford another thought): in Old French the verb for “to look at again” *recherchier*<sup>41</sup> gave rise to our word *research*. The Latin for “to look at again” or *respicere*<sup>42</sup> became the root for *respect*. I would like to posit that this is no coincidence and that research should never be done without respect. Research should always be done within an ethos of respect, that is, research and ethics go hand in hand and this chapter will therefore have to discuss both discourses.

Perhaps we should first establish what the relationship between the research process and the study of meaning in life is. In this regard, Dane (1990) has suggested that research is a natural human phenomenon, which in its broadest sense is humankind’s continual attempt to discover the “why’s” and “wherefore’s” of life. And is that not the study of a meaningful life in broad terms?

### 3.1 Overview of the structure of the chapter

This chapter will provide a map for the research methodology which was adopted in this study. It will take care to indicate how this methodology is aligned with and is actually a product of the ontology and epistemology which forms the context for the study.

Research will also be discussed within a (practical) theology context, verifying that practical theology has an interest and will be able to inform the research process.

Participatory Action Research (PAR) as the research methodology facilitating the study will be described at length in the earlier part of the chapter. PAR will be discussed from a critical relational constructivist perspective.

The research ethics within which the study is positioned will be introduced next. The story of ethics will be related by tracking its history from the pre-modern, throughout the modernistic era and into

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<sup>41</sup> Willms in Smith, Willms and Johnson (1997:7)

<sup>42</sup> The Free Dictionary: <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/respect>

the postmodern. Care will be taken to describe the role of power within the research process. The privileging of voices in particular will be discussed and an ethic proposed to de-centre the researcher's voice.

The chapter will conclude with a detailed description of the actual process, paying attention to the negotiated nature of the process and suggesting how research reporting may be aligned with the research ethics proposed in this chapter.

The following paragraphs will indicate how our research methodology, ontology and epistemology are all aligned with a participatory ethos, thus preserving the integrity of the study.

### 3.2 Participatory Action Research

*Those promoting participatory action research believe that people have a universal right to participate in the production of knowledge which is a disciplined process of personal and social transformation<sup>43</sup>. In this process, people rupture their existing attitudes of silence, accommodation and passivity, and gain confidence and abilities to alter unjust conditions and structures.*

Paolo Freire in the Foreword to *Nurtured by Knowledge* (Smith, Willms, and Johnson, 1997: xi)

Seeing that a participatory ethos has been adopted in this study, the research methodology used has been Participatory Action Research (PAR). The reason for choosing PAR as the preferred research methodology should be considered within the context of the aims, objectives and epistemology framework of the study. These were described in chapter 1 of this thesis. These included not only gaining insight into what constitutes "a life that matters", but also an active facilitation of participants' journey towards such "a life that matters" or meaningfulness.

Hosking (1999: 118) suggests that in positioning the study within this context, the research practice will attempt to move **beyond** the restrictions of *modernist research methodologies* that

*give central significance to the presumption of a real world, and so*

*centre the researcher as a knowing subject who should strive to be separate from knowable objects and who – in so doing - can*

*produce knowledge (about the world) that is probably true and a matter of fact not value .*

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<sup>43</sup> Refer back to the chapter on Theology for references to transformation in the description of the tasks of Practical Theology.

Hosking (1999: 123) offers the following understanding of PAR:

*As we understand it, participatory action research (PAR) involves working with others as co-researchers and co-subjects, dialoguing multiple **local realities** and **relations between realities** (not seeking resolution or consensus), and constructing power to [as opposed to “power over”, for instance]. “Participation” is intended to reference a relational ontology i.e., that self and other only exist in relation i.e., participation is not ‘just’ a method, a form of governance in a knowable right-wrong world. Dialogue (we prefer to say **multilogue**) is central to heterarchy and power to. (My boldfacing and comment in square brackets)*

I want to position the research as a congruent real-life process by adopting as dictum the text provided by Peter Reason (1994) when he quotes Marja-Liisa Schwantz stating that

*I do not separate my scientific inquiry from my life. For me it is really a quest for life, to understand life and to create what I call living knowledge—knowledge which is valid for the people with whom I work and for myself.*

John Heron describes PAR by saying that

*the aim of participatory action research is to change practices, social structures, and social media which maintain irrationality, injustice, and unsatisfying forms of existence. (Reason, 1994).*

Reason (1994) provides a working definition for action research when he describes it as a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview. He continues by stating that it seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the growth and flourishing of individual persons and their communities.

According to Blake (2007), PAR “seeks to embrace a locally specified problematic and prioritises local knowledge developed in a relational setting”. Quoting Benhabib (1990), she draws a very important distinction with most of the research done in the West, which according to her assumes a “Hobbesian ontology and rationalist epistemology” – essentially a Hobbesian ontology is empiricist, materialistic and characterised by self-interested individuals, every man [sic] against every man with a right to everything, even to one another’s body (Miyakawa, 1999: 189).

This will be very important for the positioning of this research in that it will seek locally significant outcomes which will be important to the participants, potentially enhancing the meaningfulness of



their lives. No global truths based on or supporting metanarratives will therefore be established. Relationality is key to this research approach. As will become clear when the themes of meaningfulness are introduced in chapter four of this thesis, not all participants to this study shared the same meaning-generating discourses. Meaningfulness was shown to be such a local truth in their lives.

Blake (2007) continues to describe PAR as a political process in that “[s]ignificantly, PAR diverges from the scientific tradition through the subjectivity of the researcher and the relationships that form between the researcher and the researched. The work of doing PAR involves regular interaction and participation in the activities of the community with which the researcher is doing work. By working with community members in collaboration, PAR researchers engage with a subject position that identifies them as simultaneously researcher and community member.” This has important implications for the relationship with the co-researchers, especially as far as a sensitivity for power relationships is concerned. Another very important observation she makes, concerns the mutual impact the study will have on study facilitator and fellow researchers alike:

*This involves not only encouraging researcher reflexivity, but facilitating the researcher’s personal engagement with the study, including a recognition that the researcher and her or his social milieu impacts on the other participants and findings and is, in itself worthy of being researched. In contrast, the scientific traditional [process] emphasises objectivity through social distance between researcher and research subjects.*

This will have to be accounted for in the study process and the research contract between research facilitator and fellow researchers.

In conclusion, PAR may result in some problems within an academic context. A potential problem faced by PAR in an academic context, is the decision about what the research topic and research question should be. Because of the participatory nature of the research process and the democracy suggested by Reason (1994) above, it is clear that the (academic) needs and requirements of the study facilitator cannot be the only needs satisfied by the research process. It may therefore be necessary to revise the study objectives in the course of the study.

Hagey (2002:1) lists seven characteristics of PAR. These will be reported here, but at the end of this chapter we will have to assess the research design and process to verify that we have indeed been doing participatory action research. The characteristics may be described as 1) the study problem should be identified by the community or workplace themselves; 2) the research goal should be to “improve” the lives of those involved; 3) the (research) community should control the research

process; 4) the focus should be on *oppressed* groups (here she includes issues of oppression like *inaccessibility, colonization, marginalization, exploitation, racism, sexism, and cultural disaffection*); 5) empowering or restitution of agency should be strengthened by making people aware of their own capabilities; 6) the people themselves are the researchers in association with the research facilitators; and 7) research facilitators may be outsiders to the community, but should be committed learners in a process that facilitates change.

Furthermore, she suggests (2002:2) that the research process should always start with a survey of the political environment within which the research process will take place.

Hagey (2002:4) comments on the credibility of PAR, proposing that PAR will be gain credibility by honouring the extent to which the research process is actually a political process and *by working out the terms of relations as the process goes along*. As such PAR relies on honesty and veracity in declaring agendas and in carrying out the research and implementing its goals.

### 3.3 Research ethics

*No science is immune to the infection of politics and the corruption off power.*

Jacob Bronowski in O'Leary (2004:42)

O'Leary (2004:42) describes how research and therefore researchers are responsible for the *shaping the character of knowledge* and this has led to a growing recognition and acceptance of the need for ethical and political awareness in research. She expresses this even stronger, suggesting that ethics is *foundational* to all research (2004:50).

Hagey (2002:1) describes the fate of a vast number of studies which end up as “dead reports on dusty shelves”. According to her these research projects are seen to be reporting on needs with no intention of doing anything to address those needs. This contrasted to participatory action research which is set on empowering co-researchers as research communities to be able to “transform their lives for themselves”.

Before I describe the research ethic adopted in this study, I would like to elaborate on the implications of postmodernism on ethics and more specifically, research ethics.

#### 3.3.1 Postmodern ethics

With the advent of postmodern thinking a major shift was signalled, the shift from the modern to the postmodern world. This was a move from an emphasis on *being* in the premodern world, to *knowing* in the modern world, to *meaning* in the postmodern world (Sire, 2004:214-219).

Postmodernity signalled the Death of Truth: if independent human *knowers* are incapable of arriving at truth on their own, then the truth about the reality is forever hidden. All we can do is to tell stories about the truth (Du Toit, 1997: 939-940).

Then there is the epistemological movement (see also Chapter 1 in this regard) from the

*premodern* which is characterised by believers (like Christians) with God and a revealed biblical narrative that explain the nature of reality to the *modern* idea of the independent human knower, rationalist or empiricist, with the capacity to know truth, and then to the *postmodern* notion that reason and human knowledge are fallible, and all we can do is create our own stories out of language to create meaning to serve our own purposes (Sire, 2004:223).

All discourses (including identity and ethics) are political. This follows from Nietzsche's claim in the Genealogy of Morals that self-knowledge, particularly in the form of moral consciousness, is a strategy and effect of power whereby one internalizes social control (Best and Kellner, 1991: 50-51). This was later adopted and generalised by Foucault. We can therefore reflect on language as power. All narratives make a play for power (Sire, 2004: 224). Any one narrative or story used as a metanarrative or master story is oppressive. Sire (2004:224) suggests that within a postmodern paradigm there are only stories which, when they are believed (and as long as they are believed!) give the storyteller power over others. He then describes how we can follow the course of 1) a premodern acceptance of the scriptural story of creation, the fall of mankind and its redemption as revealed by God in the Bible to 2) the modern story of the epistemological and scientific powers of humanity which can discover truth about reality to 3) a postmodern reduction of all stories, premodern and modern, all as power plays.

This in itself does not signify the failure of postmodern ethics; rather if we are sensitized to this and we were to invite it into our discussion of ethics, we would enter the dialogue as worthy contributors. This potential risk is not to disempower and leave as lame and disillusioned, but provide us with an awareness of power and motive (whereby our agency is actually reinforced). Our ethical discourse then becomes one of many powerful discourses in the (research) ethics dialogue.

Postmodernity could also lead us to question identity. What is a person? What is a meaningful personal existence? According to Sire (2004:225) within a postmodern paradigm, “human beings make themselves who they are by the languages they construct about themselves.” This results in the death of the substantial self. In this regard, we can now observe the movement of the 1) premodern theistic conception of the person as made in the image of God to 2) the modern notion of the person as the result of random evolutionary processes to 3) the postmodern notion of the insubstantial self created by language in a powerful social situation (2004:225).

Perhaps Nietzsche’s Parable of the Madman anticipates the question, “Can we be good without God?” (see Sire, 2004: 226ff). Like naturalism and existentialism, postmodernity realizes that ethics are a human creation, especially through language. Ethics, like knowledge, is a linguistic construct. Social good, therefore, is whatever society takes it to be. Premodern ethics are based on the goodness of a transcendent God who has revealed his moral will to humanity in scripture; modern ethics is based on the idea of a *universal* human reason and experience and the human ability to determine right and wrong; the postmodern notion is that morality is grounded only in the language of a culture which is free to legislate any form of morality, especially by those in power (2004:215).

Smith (<http://www.dur.ac.uk/r.d.smith/pmethics.html>) describes Bauman’s views on the “essence” of the postmodern approach to ethics (“essence” here is of course rather ironic in that the postmodern position is turning from essentialism). Bauman explains that this approach lies not in the abandoning of characteristically modern moral concerns, but in the rejection of the typically modern ways of going about its moral problems (that is, responding to moral challenges with coercive normative regulation in political practice, and the philosophical search for absolutes, universals and foundations in theory). Following Smith it therefore seems as if the postmodern thus becomes “morality without ethical code”. The following quote explains what is meant by the previous statement:

*Human reality is messy and ambiguous – and so moral decisions, unlike abstract ethical principles, are ambivalent. It is in this sort of world that we must live .... Knowing that to be the truth ... is to be postmodern. Postmodernity, one may say, is modernity without illusions (the obverse of which is that modernity is postmodernity refusing to accept its own truth). The illusions in question boil down to the belief that the “messiness” of the human world is but a temporary and repairable state, sooner or later to be replaced by the orderly and systematic rule of reason. The truth in question is that the “messiness” will stay whatever we do or know, that the little orders and “systems” we carve out in the world are ... as arbitrary and in the end contingent as their alternatives” (Bauman, 1993:32-33)*

However, agency and responsibility is actually restored to human beings by his views when he states that

*It is society, its continuing existence and its well-being, that is made possible by the moral competence of its members – not the other way round .... Rather than reiterating that there would be no moral individuals if not for the training/drilling job performed by society, we move toward the understanding that it must be the moral capacity of human beings that makes them so conspicuously capable to form societies and against all odds to secure their – happy or less happy – survival .... [I]t is the personal morality that makes ethical negotiation and consensus possible, not the other way round. (1993: 32, 34)*

### 3.3.2 Michel Foucault and Ethics

If we use Foucault as an example of postmodern or more specifically post-structuralist thinking, we come to appreciate a number of interesting positions with significant implications for ethics and moral philosophy. According to Best and Kellner (1991:51), Foucault followed Nietzsche in claiming moral consciousness to be strategy and an effect of power. Foucault concerned himself with power throughout the first phase of his life. His perception of power was that of “a multiple and mobile field of force relations, where far-reaching, but never completely stable effects of domination are produced (Best and Kellner, 1991: 51).

During the course of his active life, one can distinguish two shifts in Foucault’s work: from the archaeological focus on systems of knowledge in the 60’s, to the genealogical focus on modalities of power in the 70’s, to the focus on technologies of the self, ethics and freedom in the 80’s (Best & Kellner, 1991: 59).

Best and Kellner describe the respect of differences as being the guiding motivation of Foucault’s work (1991: 39). This is indicative of the movement from the totalizing and universalizing so characteristic of modernity. In the place of absolute moral principles, ***this approach opens space for difference in ethical norms.***

In his later work, Foucault studied premodern Greek, Roman and Christian cultures. In his reading of Greco-Roman culture, ethics is the relation an individual has with him/herself (Best & Kellner, 1991: 62). In this period of his life Foucault spent a lot of time on ethics as care of and mastery over the self. The mastery referred to here was intended as mastery over one’s desires. In this period he also wrote a lot about freedom, but not the freedom which is so popular in DIY literature. This freedom was discussed once again as a discourse. Best and Kellner phrase it very well when they refer to

“ethics [as]... the deliberative component of free activity and the basis for a prolonged practice of the self whereby one seeks to problematise and master one’s desires and to constitute oneself as a free self” (1991: 62). This freedom was also meant to be freedom of the common nostalgia we feel for “lost worlds” and “past normative models”. Foucault was clearly adamant in supporting a non-normalising morality.

Postmodernity as represented by Foucault is often appealing for a non-universalising and non-normalising ethical practice, which is “attentive to individual practices, while emphasizing individual liberty and the larger social context of the freedom of the self” (1991: 64). He distinguishes liberation from liberty, which he describes as an ongoing ethical practice of self-mastery and care of the self, or put in his words, liberty as the “ontological condition of ethics” and ethics as the “deliberate form assumed by liberty” (1991: 64).

A very important point made by Best and Kellner (1991: 64) is that ethics does not require that we continually discover ourselves and our “secret inner beings”, but that we continually produce ourselves. Although the subject is still *discursively* and socially conditioned and situated within power relations, (s)he now also has the power to define his/her own identity, master his/her body and desires, and forge a practice of freedom through “techniques of the self”. It is important to note these practices will still be socially constituted. Once again this becomes possible because these discourses are not only constituted in power relations, but in themselves are recognized to be power-wielding. This will be discussed in the section on advances and risks of postmodernity as one of the most important advances of postmodern ethics.

### 3.3.3 Power and Knowledge

*Knowledge is full of politics and dreams and actually arises from rebellious struggles to change the world and ourselves.*

Paolo Freire in the Foreword to *Nurtured by Knowledge* (Smith, Willms, and Johnson, 1997: xi)

In the discussion of the role that power plays in the research process, I will refer to Foucault’s approach to power as being relational and closely associated with knowledge in a power/knowledge symbiotic discourse.

Best and Kellner describe Foucault’s discourse on power as a “relational” power that is “exercised from innumerable points”. Furthermore it is highly indeterminate in character, and is never something “acquired, seized or shared”. There is no source or centre of power to contest, nor are there any subjects holding it; power is a purely structural activity for which subjects are anonymous

conduits or by-products. (1991: 51-52). Foucault saw power and knowledge to be so closely related that he often contracted this into a single discourse and often referred to the “indivisible amalgam” power/knowledge (West, 1996: 171). This refers to the power relation which develops in the discourses defining subjects.

Foucault’s analytics of power has important implications for ethics. Compared to the understanding of power as an external force defining us as subjects, Foucault is attentive to every human relation to be some degree of a power relation. “We move in a world of perpetual strategic relations” (Best and Kellner, 1991: 54). But does that leave us exposed or helpless? On the contrary, apart from discourses being formed by power, power is a discourse per se (see the paragraph on discourse). And in its very character, lies the potential for resistance. Best and Kellner describe Foucault’s perspective here where he claims that “as soon as there is a power relation, there is a possibility of resistance. We can never be ensnared by power: we can always modify its grip in determinate conditions and according to a precise strategy” (1991: 55). This can facilitate the liberation from the oppression of the subject, both as underling “by control and dependence” and confined identity “by conscience and self-knowledge” (1991: 50).

Smith in Smith, Willms and Johnson (1997:173-225) describes the role of power in PAR at length in the chapter *Deepening Participatory Action-Research*. She develops three power discourses which she calls *power-over*, *power-with* and *power-from-within*, terminology gleaned from work by Starhawk (1987).

*Power-over* refers to the power relationships characterised by people exercising power over other people, using Physical, economic or social (potential) penalties as the means of control. Smith (1997:190) continues to describe *power-from-within* as arising from relationships with other people: the bonding and connecting that occurs when people are connected to a common cause which awakens their abilities and potential. This is associated with *power-with*, a form of shared social power meaning people’s relationships with each other. This she characterises as power shared among people *who value each other as equals*. *Equals* does not imply identical capabilities or the same personalities though; it should rather be understood from a political perspective aimed at providing space for equitable or fair relationships and opportunities.

Smith’s proposition as it refers to PAR is therefore that PAR facilitates a shift from *power-over* to *power-from-within* through *power-with* (1997:192). In doing so, it should reach its goal of *achieving states of being in which people are more aware, heard, capable and productive*.

My own power position in this research derived from a number of social discourses. These included, but were not limited to gender (being a male), qualifications (having post graduate degrees), alignment with the owner of UrCareer (being a friend and training partner), age (being older than most of the participants), race (being white) and language or terminology (being familiar with “meaningfulness speak”). In the research process these discourses were tabled and discussed in order to expose and hopefully disarm them. I took special care not to use academic language during the process, externalising any academic terms and references to “cleverness” introduced by the research participants.

### 3.3.4 The Advances and Risks of Postmodernity

The risks of the postmodern position include the fact that postmodernity’s rejection of all metanarratives in itself becomes a metanarrative, the criticisms of master stories becomes the master story itself. Hence, beware! Postmodernity’s notion that we have no access to reality is a claim about reality - it is really real and true that we can’t get to what is real and true! Then also postmodernity’s critique of the autonomy and sufficiency of human reason is based on the autonomy and sufficiency of human reason. The irony is this: if reason itself can’t be trusted, how can it be used to make the critique?

The most common argument against postmodern ethics is relativism. If postmodern ethics is relegated to become merely relativist reflection, it will lose any motivational power it might have had (see Furrow, 1995: 19 in this regard). Relativism here is used to refer to the impossibility of using any moral language at all **and not (as I would like to use it) to the impossibility of a universal ethics**. If postmodern ethics is accepted to be only relativist it will therefore not be as influential as virtue ethics for instance. Virtue ethics in being characterised as aspirational ethics would be significantly more motivational. If security (refer back to Chapter 2) were a value construct required by a society, postmodern ethics understood as relativist ethics will find it hard to convince that it could make any significant contribution. This study will have to discuss the possibility of “a life that matters” or a meaningful life altogether within a postmodern paradigm!

In being “incurably aporetic” (see Smith, 1997), postmodernity may risk positioning itself against everything that is associated with modernity. This is similar to the position of political parties which do not aspire to become anything other than opposition parties! If we do not proclaim the advances of postmodernity, the space for diversity, the possibilities for resistance and continual reinventing of the self, postmodernity will fall victim to its own discourses and reduce itself to insignificance.



The strongest contribution and advances of postmodernity in ethics in my opinion, is the space that it creates for diversity or alterity, the reverence for different positions, the potential to create and recreate new positions and the perspectives on power it has brought about. In ethical discourses postmodernity in its truest form should accommodate contributions from the premodern, the modern and postmodern alike. This could harvest the riches of difference. The perspectives on power and knowledge could assist to reduce the risk of colonizing meaning.

I conclude this section with the words of Foucault (Best & Kellner, 1991: 34):

*[T]he impression of fulfilment and of end, the muffled feeling that carries and animates our thought, and perhaps lulls it to sleep with the facility of its promises.. and makes us believe that something new is about to begin, something that we glimpse only as a thin line of light low on the horizon – that feeling and impression are perhaps not ill founded.*

### 3.3.5 Relational ethics and a participatory ethos

Building on the opportunities generated by the postmodern paradigm described above, a relational research ethic will be honoured in this study. This implies that the research ethos will be participatory and the ethics negotiated and agreed by the research participants. This should never be confused with a relativist or laissez-faire ethic (an accusation often lodged against postmodern ethics), as the work ethic will be mutually agreed among all stakeholders or participants to the research process. These stakeholders will include the dialogue with the academic requirements from the University of Pretoria and Department of Practical Theology.

The research ethic will be sensitive to power discourses as described above. These power discourses will include the power relationship between the company management from the company where the participants are employed, and study participants potentially influencing the freedom of expression and silencing of voices of the fellow researchers, the power embedded in the relationship between study participants and study facilitator, and the power relationship between the study process and the academic discourses.

As far as influencing and power are concerned, the following text from Hosking (1999: 122) confirms the suggestions above and should be taken into consideration:

*... relational constructionist arguments make it possible to view research as a process of social construction and to view researchers as part of the relational processes they narrate themselves as studying. The questions raised include those that can be asked of any relational process, including:*

- *what kinds of relations are in ongoing construction e.g., hierarchical or heterarchical;*
- *what gets locally warranted as real and good, and how?*

*These can be viewed as questions both of knowledge and of power. Further, since relating inevitably combines both knowing and influencing, research processes necessarily join inquiry and intervention. This, in turn, opens up the possibility to give a different and more significant role to the influence - we might say change or intervention - potentials of inquiry.*

In the light of the previous (critical) relational ethics position, seven principles have been identified and proposed as an ethical context for the study:

### 3.3.6 Seven perspectives of research ethics

In this regard I have adapted Bosch's (1991:483-489) seven perspectives of a dialogical missionary stance to develop a research ethic. The motive for doing this will become clear in the following adaptation:

#### 3.3.6.1 *First perspective: diversity happens!*<sup>44</sup>

Following Bosch (1991:483-484), I would like to propose the first perspective to be the acceptance of the co-existence of different meaning discourses, values and beliefs in a postmodernist world and in the global village, because we cannot possibly enter into any dialogue with or present our case to people if we resent their presence or the views they hold.

#### 3.3.6.2 *Second perspective: the validity of adopting one's own viewpoint*

Secondly, a genuine dialogue presupposes and implies a commitment to one's own theological tradition, epistemology and ethical position<sup>45</sup>. If this is not the case, dialogue would be superfluous. Compare Bosch's argument about faith in this context:

*Without my commitment to the gospel, dialogue becomes a mere chatter; without the authentic presence of the neighbour it becomes arrogant and worthless. It is a false construct to suggest that a commitment to dialogue is incompatible with a confessional position (Bosch 1991:484).*

Relational constructionism creates the space for this perspective in that it invites different voices into the conversation, without the requirement to abandon or sacrifice any personal discourses.

<sup>44</sup> Similar to the manner described in the movie *Forrest Gump!*

<sup>45</sup> In this regard, the reflection on "not-knowing" in chapter 1 needs to be revisited

### 3.3.6.3 *Third perspective: privileging of knowledge*

This perspective flows from the previous perspective and qualifies it.

In the third perspective, Bosch (1991:484) criticised the exclusivism of Karl Barth's theology and proposed espousing a compassionate and eschatological mode in our dialogue.

*Thirdly, dialogue...is only possible if we proceed from the belief that...we are not moving into a void, that we go expecting to meet God who has preceded us and has been preparing people within the context of their own cultures and convictions....We do not have him [God] in our pocket, so to speak, and do not just 'take him' to the others; he [God] accompanies us and also comes toward us. We are not the 'haves', the beati possidentes, standing over against spiritual 'have nots', the massa damnata. We are all recipients of the same mercy, sharing in the same mystery. We thus approach every other faith and its adherents reverently, taking off our shoes, as the place we are approaching is holy.*

Adapting this perspective to research ethics, we can now say that we as researchers to not carry some superior or preferential knowledge into a void. I as researcher will have to take off my research shoes when I enter the research conversations.

### 3.3.6.4 *Fourth perspective: the researcher's position of humility*

Bosch (1991:484) proceeded in his fourth perspective to elaborate on the nature of the Christian witness as weak and vulnerable. Therefore, true mission and dialogue can only be conducted in an attitude of humility and never in arrogance.

And I would like to propose that this goes for the researcher's position of humility as well.

### 3.3.6.5 *Fifth perspective: the interdisciplinary dialogue*

In his fifth perspective, Bosch (1991:485) rejected an excessive holism (for example the New Age Movement) as an attempt to accommodate various different beliefs. He also rejects a simplistic pluralism where rival truths are simply part of the mosaic, where there is no such thing as orthodoxy, where we are all heretics in the original sense of the word. In either case (i.e. in holism and pluralism), the **creative tension with a theological tradition is not honoured** while such a **tension** is the genuine **indicator of a postmodernistic paradigm shift**. For Bosch (1991:486), authentic faith in a postmodernistic culture neither fist into pluralism, nor into holism.

In the case of research I would like to posit that participatory research will accommodate and foster such creative tension.

### 3.3.6.6 *Sixth perspective: the action imperative in action research*

In this perspective on true dialogue and mission, Bosch (1991:487) reminded us that dialogue cannot be a substitute for mission. Dialogue cannot be an attempt to dodge mission. Bosch (1991:487) reflected on the relationship between dialogue and mission and said:

*They [i.e. dialogue and mission] are neither to be viewed as identical nor as irrevocably opposed to each other. It is fallacious to suggest that, for dialogue to be 'in', mission has to be 'out,' that commitment to dialogue is incompatible with commitment to evangelism....Neither dialogue nor mission is moving along a one-way street; neither is stubbornly dogmatic, bigoted, or manipulative. In both, faith commitment goes hand-in-hand with respect for others. Neither presupposes a 'completely open mind' - which, in any case, is an impossibility. In both cases we are witnessing to our deepest convictions whilst listening to those of our neighbours.*

If we were to substitute “action research” for “mission” in the paragraph above, it will describe the research community’s commitment to the outcome of the research process.

### 3.3.6.7 *Seventh perspective: an ethos of awe and wonderment*

In this perspective, Bosch (1991:488-489) affirmed the **mystery of the paradox** of God’s universal will to save the human soul, that is the possibility of salvation outside the church on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the necessity of Christian missionary work. He acknowledged the **tension** between Christianity’s claim of Jesus Christ as the only way and at the same time he states that Christians cannot set limits to God’s saving power and that God is constantly at work in ways that pass human understanding, even outside Christianity. Bosch (1991:489) commented:

*Such language boils down to an admission that we do not have all the answers and are prepared to live within the framework of penultimate knowledge...This is not opting for agnosticism, but for humility. It is, however, a bold humility - or humble boldness. We know only in part, but we do know. And we believe that the faith we profess is both true and just, and should be proclaimed. We do this, however, not as judges or lawyers, but as witnesses; not as soldiers, but as envoys of peace; not as high-pressure sales-persons, but as ambassadors of the Servant Lord.*

This is proposed to be a unique position for pastoral narrative research, which I would like to carry into the research process.

### 3.3.7 Informed consent

Part of the research ethos concerns the matter of informed consent. A participatory process has some implications for ethics approval of the research and consent to the use of interview material. Blake (2007) suggests that informed consent (and copyright) is a challenge. Informed consent and the eventual reporting or communication of the process will have to protect the integrity of the relationships among fellow researchers and researchers and research facilitator alike. Ownership will have to be discussed and understanding agreed. Blake refers to Howett and Stevens (2005) when she proposes that ‘negotiated authorisation’ replaces the traditional *a priori* signatures and autonomic anonymity. Descriptions of the process are advised to be both verbal and oral. Permission should be obtained for any interviews and the participant’s right to withdrawal should be explained and respected. Only once the participants had the opportunity to familiarise themselves with the content of such recordings and any other reporting and interpretation of conversations should they be required to sign the consent forms. At such time preferences about anonymity and use of voice recordings should be discussed and agreed. Blake suggests that the advantage of such post-participation discussions would be that *at this stage people know what they have said and have a better idea of the process involved*. This will ensure that they can make informed decisions about how their words and other languages are used. Unfortunately this implies that the research participants may withhold consent, which however, is not different from some current ethics procedures. The likelihood of this happening is actually reduced if participants are better informed.

Should interim reports or conference papers be written part way through the research process, care should be taken to obtain prior permission for the use of research information in such communications. Additionally, and particularly relevant to PAR, the community group or partner organisation could also act as a steering committee for the research project and as part of their remit oversee ethics procedures.

In the light of this suggestion, it was decided to have two letters of Informed Consent - a preliminary document of Informed Consent and a Confirmatory Informed Consent which is to be signed by participants at the reporting stage of the research process. These documents are included as Appendices 1 and 2.

## 3.4 The Process

Initially it was planned to approach and recruit a company with an interest in a staff development program with a specific focus on living more meaningful lives, to participate in the study. The nature

of their business was not considered to be critical to the inclusion of such a company in the study. More important however, was a willingness to

- engage in a participatory process and
- become part of a doctoral study with the academic rigour and exposure of personal narratives which invariably will be part of such a process.

It was considered advantageous if such a company could be a small to medium sized enterprise where a certain work community will already be established. Such a community may be more open to relational processes.

Another advantage though not a requirement would be if the company's personnel could be diverse in its constitution as far as gender and ethnicity are concerned. This is not a requirement as the intention is not to produce generic representative truths which would be globally applicable. This would revert back to a modernist approach to research and support the discovery of meta-narratives.

I was subsequently approached by a staff recruitment agency which is owned by a friend. She learned about the study while we were jogging together and was immediately interested in making the program available to her own staff. Her company has about 7 employees, some of whom left and were replaced during the process of the study.

It was explained to her that the candidate co-researchers (see Epston, 1999) would be introduced to the study topic, its aims and objectives and what would be required from them by means of the Informed Consent letter attached as Appendix 1. Another letter of Informed Consent which will confirm that the transcriptions of interviews are accurate and may be used in the research is included as Appendix 2. See the section on Ethics and Informed Consent above.

The process proposed for this research started with a general introduction to the research topic, its context, the academic context including this thesis, some personal experience from the study facilitator, and the intended research process. The co-researchers were invited to propose changes to this process and set a time frame for the study, including dates and times for individual and group meetings. The process has been mutually agreed at this meeting.

In the sessions following this introduction, the participants have been invited to relate their life stories as these pertain to meaningfulness. These interviews have been done individually. Externalisation (see Freedman and Combs, 1996: 47-48, 58-63; White and Epston, 1990: 16, 38-76) and deconstruction of discourses (Freedman and Combs, 1996: 120-121) have been used to facilitate

the process and to identify the prominent themes of meaning stories. Power relationships were explored as part of the deconstruction process. In the process, the meaning stories were expanded from “thinly described” to thickly “described stories” - see among others White (2005: 10).

In these interviews the co-researchers were asked to assess the meaningfulness of their lives and to assign a metric to this value. This metric was determined by the co-researchers and has been anything from the size of the centre in a flower of their choice or a number on a self-determined scale. This metric was used to determine a value which could be used as a reference point; this was revisited during the course of the research process to assess the progress made.

Once these interviews have been conducted and reflected upon mostly by means of letters or e-mails written to the co-researchers, the meaning discourses from these conversations were collated and returned to the group. The group then reconvened and reflected upon the discourses identified during the initial exploratory story telling phase of the research. The group was now invited to make changes to this list of discourses, adding any other discourses they might consider critical to the process or even deciding that some of the discourses could be disregarded.

Another dialogue was then started – the dialogue between the participant discourses and published texts. I now researched the discourses in the literature, reporting the findings back to the research group as I did. Once again, no artificial boundaries were introduced to the research process: the texts were sourced from any relevant disciplines and not only from Theology or Practical Theology for that matter. Thus a multi-disciplinary conversation will always be taking place.

The research group was invited to reflect and comment on what the published literature had to say about these discourses they have identified. Once again, power relations have been managed very carefully, sensitizing the group to the value and the validity of their contributions to the process. This dynamic process have been maintained until the dynamic had been exhausted, at which stage this study report was prepared and handed over to the academic process for its own dialogue with the text.

### 3.5 Reporting the research – some ethical implications

*It says to the audience ‘here is my story of the good’ as opposed to ‘I proclaim the universal good’.*

Reason and Bradbury (2008:165)

As far as the reporting ethic is concerned, Hosking (1999: 122) comments that PAR as relational process does not proclaim universality, offering research reports as a representative record which

can be replicated and generalised to non-local settings. This results from it being inherently a relational local process which does not depart from a starting point with constructions of *ontologically independent persons and a natural world*. We are therefore not suggesting that the ongoing process of reflection on meaningfulness as instrumental means to some non-local end.

The construction derived from this research process may have some potential *legitimacy* outside the relational setting of this study, but we do propose that the process of the research could become interesting in its own right. In Hosking's words:

*In other words, the research process can be viewed as a way of 'going on' in relation, constructing knowledges, doing things, and socially validating them as e.g., good, relevant, and useful...*

According to her proposition, research in being construction, may be constructed in relation to the standard or received view of science, or may be constructed in relation to other game rules (see e.g., Woolgar, 1996).

Reason and Bradbury (2008:165) suggest that reporting action research *illustrates values in action* and becomes more like storytelling than like *sermonizing*. Shotter (1999) has written on this topic suggesting a culture of "witness-writing" rather than "aboutness-writing". Reporting should therefore, as all the other processes within the research project, be controlled by the research community.



## Chapter 4. Voices that matter – introducing the stories of the co-researchers

**“GREAT THINGS ARE NOT DONE BY IMPULSE, BUT BY A SERIES OF SMALL THINGS BROUGHT TOGETHER”**

UrCareer slogan

Now that the context of the study has been described in the first chapter, an epistemology has been adopted in chapter two and the research methodology has been described in the third chapter, it is time to invite the voices of the co-researchers into this study conversation. The first three chapters created the ethical framework or context for the study, arguing the points of why this study was considered to be necessary, how the knowledge process would constitute new relational realities and how the research process would be conducted and managed. But now centre stage will be occupied by my fellow researchers, introducing their stories of meaningfulness and authenticating the research process as they do.

In this chapter, a record of the conversations which formed the fibre of the research process will be provided. The introductory paragraphs will create a work context by telling the UrCareer story. This together with the individual stories of the co-researchers from UrCareer can be seen as the company identity. Before any of the personal stories and the company narrative were included in this thesis, all the co-researchers first had to approve the content. Their consent was obtained and any modifications they suggested, was introduced.

Following this section, the fellow researchers will tell their life stories of meaningfulness. They will start to tell their stories, after which I will respond with some questions which will reflect on the discourses within these life stories. Externalising and deconstruction will be used to identify the discourses, reflect on the power relationships involved in these discourses and understandings. Once they have had the opportunity to respond to my reflections, we identified the key meaningfulness discourses present in the conversations, naming them “themes of meaningfulness”. The chapter will be concluded with a list of these themes which have been identified in a participatory process.

Every organisation has a story – as for individuals, company identity can also be thought of as storied.

Our research was done with UrCareer, a small recruitment agency. Here is UrCareer's story.

#### 4.1 The UrCareer Story (In their own words – excerpts from their website)

UrCareer believes a company is as good as its people. Remaining competitive and managing resources in a fast changing environment is becoming increasingly difficult. To complicate this even further is the adherence to South Africa's strict and complex labour laws, which not only proves to be time consuming but also distracts management from focussing on the company strategic objectives and targets.



We also believe that at the end we are all just human. We all have a need to succeed, to belong, to grow, to be loved and believe God is always in control. The only thing we can offer is opening doors and creating opportunities to great people who take ownership of their own careers.

We have a proven track record of going the extra mile. Our team is highly dedicated and committed to the task at hand.

UrCareer is a recruitment agency, doing things a bit differently. Although we are still relatively young (established in June 2006) we do recognise that excessive economic inequality affects stability of society and hampers economic growth.

#### 4.2 The Co-Researchers from UrCareer

These are quotes taken from the official UrCareer website and are quoted as they appeared on the web page.

##### AMORITA MALAN »



Managing Member has been involved in businesses (Small to Medium in size- & Corporate Companies) for the past 22 years. She started her career at the Armscor Group, later moved to Momentum Life who gave her a strong base to build her career on. She worked in Communications, Media & Medical industries for a couple of years but always felt drawn to her passion: Recruitment. Amorita enjoys outdoor sport, travelling and supports the Cheetahs!!!

**JURIE VENTER »**

Pretoria.

Jurie has been involved in business consulting for the past 12 years with special emphasis in the advertising, media & marketing fields. He has special interest in the arts & vintage cars. After living in Cape Town for 8 years he returned to his roots in

**LIDIA COETZEE »**

UrCareer provides the perfect environment to express my passions and values. Other interests are art, music and enjoying quality time with my family”.

When I ventured into the recruitment consulting industry in the 80's I realised that this is the field in which I wish to spend the rest of my career. My passion for building lasting business relationships, focus on service delivery and playing a positive role in assisting people to reach their career goals kept me in recruitment for all these

**ESTELLE HURN »**

Her hobbies include living life to the fullest and reading (Human Science and Behaviour).

Interested in Business Management, has a passion for Customer Service and enjoys matching candidates to her clients' profiles. Her dream - to be a successful career woman by helping as many people as possible. Honesty and integrity are 2 attributes that are very important to her. Estelle desires a foundation for success, not just in

**MILLICINDA VORSTER »**

Currently studying towards her CRM diploma through UNISA to broaden her knowledge on managing customer relationships and effective service delivery. Proud mom of little freckled face Jayden.

Passionate about service delivery. Serious about consistency and the need to establish our customers' requirements. She will endeavour to deliver what was promised. For the past 15 years she has worked in the Sales & Marketing Industries.

**MAHLATSE MATLALA »**

world.

Loves and is crazy about Ballroom and Latin dancing. Enjoys taking challenges head on and is passionate about recruitment. She holds a B.Soc.Sci degree and is currently studying BA (Hons) specializing in Industrial Psychology. Her next goal is to travel the

### **DELICIA PILLAY »**



Has lived in 4 countries but don't get confused by the American accent – she is full blown “Proudly South African”. Delicia holds a B.Soc.Sci Degree and is currently tackling her Honours. She has also completed a specialized course in Human Resource Management. She is a people's person who is passionate about her candidates and clients. Delicia enjoys travelling and is eager to add to her list of countries visited.

### **SHARON MEULENBELD »**



Happily married to Frank, a chaplain in the military. They share the same goal which is adding value to people's lives. Sharon has been in the banking industry for about 16years which has developed a strong customer care focus. During her spare time she enjoys scrapbooking, embroidery, reading and entertaining. Her eagerness to learn and willingness to help others makes her a much loved team member. She enjoys travelling especially within Africa and has the passport stamps to prove it!! She has been to Uganda, Swaziland, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Lesotho and Botswana.

### **LEZANNE BOTHA »**



Proudly from the States (Free States!!!) had to settle down in Blue Bull territory. Balance plays an important role and she loves nature and the outdoors. Lezanne has been in the Customer Care Relations field for the past 7 years, more specifically on recruitment past few years. She is focused on building strong relationships with her clients and has a passion for Labour laws.

## **4.3 My own story and how it relates to this study**

My personal relationship with this study has a binary character. It involves both my story of academic personal development and my own quest for a more meaningful life, a life which I personally can consider significant.

When I was 13 years old the seed was first planted that I might have the ability to obtain a postgraduate qualification and more specifically a doctoral qualification. This was part of the story which developed around academic achievement and suggestions by teachers, even at primary school level. Throughout my high school career this story added events to its story line to become more embedded in my life story. It culminated in me being placed 4<sup>th</sup> in the then Cape Province in my Matric exams. This generated a certain expectation of where my academic career could go, both personally and in the verbalised and more subtle suggestions from important others - like parents and teachers - in my life throughout my formal full-time academic career.

Certain discourses in society – academic and non-academic – led me to believe that a doctoral qualification was the only logical apex of academic progress. It was also suggested to me that a doctoral degree was the only means to academic credibility.

Thus, obtaining a doctoral degree has been an integral part of my (knowledge) story for almost as long as I can remember.

As I grew older in my school years, my career dreams systematically changed from the illustrious to the significant, which I defined for myself as a career which could benefit others. When achievement threatened to let me lose my focus and become the sole objective of my studies, I reflected on where my (academic) career was heading and did the very unpopular thing to stop my studies in the middle of my first year at university and take a six months' break from studying.

When I went back to university the next year, I was committed to become more socially involved and although my academic achievement remained fairly consistent, I experienced my university life as more meaningful. Unfortunately my choice of a study area did not meet the significance criteria I set for myself.

I qualified as a statistician, which may seem as a paradox, seeing that it is not a career with a high level of social involvement. The fact that I lectured mathematical statistics at the University of Port Elizabeth (now the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University) did however provide me with the opportunity to help develop students - even if it was only academically.

However, I have always had the desire to become more directly involved in helping other people and eventually an opportunity arose in 1997 when I was accepted into an MTh program in pastoral therapy at Unisa. This also served to give me exposure to the narrative approach, an event which proved to be the Rubicon of my own meaning making story. This study is the direct result of the seeds which were planted during my MTh studies and of my ever inquiring nature with a very strong desire to always learn more.

In choosing a study topic, formulating the objectives and adopting an epistemology, I was guided by a personal ethic which required that the research should not attempt to generalise or categorise - or put people in boxes - (see the opening quotation in the opening pages of this thesis); it should really make a difference *as assessed by the stakeholders of the study process*; its outcome should not merely be a document which will gather dust on some academic department library shelf; and it should be a text which I will be proud to add to my own personal story.

Henceforth I will refer to myself as research facilitator or study facilitator, indicating the (de-centred) role in which I would like to position myself during this study.

#### 4.4 First letters (e-mails)

I have asked my co-researchers to introduce themselves and tell us their stories about meaningfulness. The e-mails are posted verbatim as they were forwarded to me. I have responded to some of the statements made by the co-researchers, asking some externalising questions and exploring the discourses which were present in their responses to my initial request for stories. As will be clear, some of these discourses were deconstructed in the process.

All the e-mails were preserved in the original language preferred by the fellow researchers.

In reporting my co-researchers' conversations I will often use italics to indicate my questions and responses, which normal fonts and style will report my fellow researchers' words.

##### 4.4.1 Delicia's Story

Dear Francois

How are you? Sorry it has taken me so long to reply, this week has been hectic after the breaks! I hope my feedback to your questions below is relevant and you can use it, if not feel free to let me know.

**Intro** – My name is Delicia Pillay. I was born in South Africa and moved to the states when I was 16 months old. I have lived in America, Nigeria and Uganda. I am a proud South African however I also very patriotic to my indian heritage and the cultures of the countries I grew up in. I studied Psychology and would like to continue on and obtain a PhD; my dad is a Geneticist with a PhD and I would like to follow in his footsteps in terms of education. I am still working in my first job as a Recruitment Consultant and I do enjoy it immensely. I believe I am an easy going person though I know I can have an 'attitude' at times. I think a major factor in my story has to do with other peoples thinking. I am very interested in how we are all the same and yet there is so much ignorance and hate towards people. Living with other cultures has made my interest in psychology grow. I am most concerned with racism and cruelty towards animals.

**A life that matters** – I believe every life matters. I believe in Karma and even an animal deserves to be treated with respect that we should give each other. I guess a life that matters is a very personal opinion as some people are very focused on their career for example and would look down on someone with less ambition or on a garbage man. However the garbage man might be more

content and happy with his life than the businessman. Therefore I suppose as long as your life has meaning for you and you are generally happy with your situation then you would feel your life matters.

**Words to describe meaningful/success/significance** – content; happy; to feel wanted; feel loved; feel needed; many of us equate success in terms of money however I also think of being successful in terms of having a rich life full of friends, family, laughter and love. Success can be passing exams. Significance can be your meaning in other peoples lives. Its important to have other people in your life that make you feel wanted and loved. It's a very lonely life if you do not have that significance to others.

**Meaningfulness in my life** – I know my life is meaningful as I am happy. My family is very important to me, I have 2 younger brothers and my parents who I know love me and only want the best for me. I have a lot of relatives however I choose not to incorporate my life with them as I have different views and beliefs that clash with theirs. Being around people like that only irritates me and shows me how many people there are in this world who lead sad and miserable lives because they only see the doom and gloom in the world. Instead I have friends that are my family; i am still in touch with childhood friends and my friends are loyal and genuine. I have been very successful in my work this year... not so successful in my driving license but I am on a mission for it and I will get it. I strive to feel good about life and the only way to do that is to make the right decisions and make others feel good about themselves. When someone is rude to me I take it very personally because I know I do not treat people the way I don't want to be treated. The excuse of a 'bad mood' is the most useless idea ever. I hate when people use their bad mood to bring other people down or get others to be in a mood as well!

**Progress** – the biggest thing in my life at the moment is obtaining my license and a car. I also need to get started with my honours as time is going by... I also want to continue with my placements because in this line of work no placements can give the impression that you are not pulling your weight. I take my work very seriously and I want my colleagues to know I am a hard worker who is serious about getting far in my career. Placements can be very unpredictable and you can put in a lot of work and at the end of the day a client can hire someone else. On a more personal note I would like to lose weight that I have picked up since graduating.

**Reflecting** – since I have had time to reflect on my life I have realised there is a major factor in my life that I choose to not think about as it brings me down. My boyfriend of 4 years is back in uganda

and though we are not together anymore we chat every day online. We are still friends, however I know my parents do not approve. My mom was fine with us, but my dad did not even give him a chance. Since the incident we have not brought it up and when I am with them we act as though it never happened. I sometimes wonder if they now know they behaved rashly and regret words spoken, but I will never ask. This is probably why the theme of racism and psychology is so strong in my life. An insight would be that I do not think about it or dwell on this because it just brings me down and I hate feeling low. Even if someone is rude or I see something unfair, it sits with me a long time and I have that gnawing feeling.

It was interesting to know everyone's definition of meaningfulness in their lives. We are all so different and I know my views are different from my colleagues however I think we are able to respect each other and not be judgemental. My views on meaningfulness will probably adjust as I get older and it's interesting to see how the younger people's views compare to the older ones in the office. I also know that religion is a sensitive topic in our office and my ideas may not be what the other Christians believe is right. I am a Christian however I do not believe that people of other religions or faiths are doomed to hell. I know this is not what is preached in most churches and I don't agree with it as I believe that is a man-made idea.

Hope this helps. Enjoy your weekend!

regards

**delicia pillay**

#### **4.4.1.1 My responses to Delicia's story**

- 1. I was wondering whether you could tell me more about the story of "Attitude"? Has "Attitude" ever played a role in your specific understanding of a "life that matters"? Has it ever strengthened your respectful bearing towards other people? How has "Attitude" affected your position on people who differ or other cultures? Has "Attitude" ever come in the way of "a life that matters"?*
- 2. You mention "content", "happy" and "meaning" when you are referring to "a life that matters"; would you care to elaborate on what makes you feel content? How is happiness understood in your own life? What gives meaning to your life? How do you create space for these "significance partners" in your life? What in your experience, helps to sustain these "partners"?*



3. *Am I right in hearing from the paragraph above that meaning in your life is closely associated with the **relationships** that you form and maintain? How do you know when you have “meaning in other people’s lives”?*

4. *Do I detect “Attitude” coming out to assist you in making a deliberate decision not to associate with the “doom and gloom” crowd? Is “bad mood” one of the adversaries of the “significance partners” (including “Attitude”)? How do you manage to refuse “bad mood” a place in your “life that matters”?*

5. *Perhaps you could on a scale from 1 to 10 indicate how far you are with each of these projects (perhaps you could draw a line 10cm long and mark with a “X” where you are at the moment). What **one** thing could advance you by at least 2 cm on these progress lines for each of the projects?*

6. *How is the “sitting with you” affecting your “happiness”, being “content” and being meaningful in others lives? Is “sitting with you” ganging up with “bad mood” against your “significance partners”?*

*How is “I will never ask” aligned with “Attitude”? Is prejudice or racism silencing you here?*

*How is your position about meaningfulness reflected in your position on religions?*

#### **4.4.1.2 Delicia’s responses to my questions**

1. “attitude’ refers to my short temper with people who are rude or do not treat others the way they would like to be treated. I demand good customer service; it’s just the way I think. However to some this can be construed as being snobby or stuck up. Attitude plays an important role in a life that matters, because a person’s attitude says a lot about them. It really can show you if they also believe your life matters, in the sense that they will respect you. My attitude is usually not affected by people who differ from me or by different cultures; I tend to get an attitude when someone gives one. So it can be someone from any culture.

2. Little things make me content; I always try to be optimistic about things. I failed my license for the 3<sup>rd</sup> time on Saturday. I felt like such a failure... I have spent a huge sum of money on this process and that to me is actually worse. To throw money away is something I hate. However I have to believe there was a reason for this otherwise I would go crazy. I didn’t dwell on it or shed a tear (though I felt like it). Instead I went out with my friends and had fun. I can be content with a good book and some cheesecake! For me to be happy, I don’t need to win the lottery. I also refuse to let

my weight bring me down; I do sometimes think I will be happier when I am my normal size... but who wants to say no to KFC? I like to laugh, I think when you are laughing there is no other way to feel but happy. I like comedies and stand up comedy. I also have friends who are hilarious and who can cheer you up in an instant, for that I am grateful. Friends, family, work, these all give meaning to my life. I create space for these things in my life by making plans with friends, going to visit my family for long weekends and of course I am at work during the week. Sustaining friendships is a 2 way thing; friends who make time for you also see you as a significant factor in their life. Friends who say 'let's meet up' but never attempt to I would rather do without. I have a ton of friends, however I also have a ton of 'acquaintances' or people I like to be around but they are not likely to be in my life for the long run. Making an effort to me is important to sustaining relationships.

3. You are right in saying relationships are very important to the meaning of life to me. Don't get me wrong; I am not a needy person who cannot be alone, or for something to matter someone has to see or know about it. I enjoy my own company, I go to the movies alone, have coffee and read a magazine at a coffee shop, shopping, etc. just because I am alone does not mean I am a loser or lonely. I think one can feel when they have meaning in others lives. There is a saying that people don't remember what u say to them, but they remember how u make them feel. Therefore I can feel when I am important to someone. They may send you an sms or email or just a look from them; however the way you feel lets you know as well. Some people are more expressive in their emotions or thoughts; this also shows meaning.

4. I suppose my attitude does assist me in making a decision not to associate with down in the dumps people. My relatives probably think I have an attitude, am a snob, or that I think I am better than them. However this is not the case at all. I suppose my 'attitude' can also be because I hate being fake. I would rather not go to Durban than to go and pretend, do the fake laugh and fake smiles and ask the fake questions. If I do not like someone I will be polite to them; but I will not go out of my way just to appear friendly and likeable. I suppose my attitude allows me not to care what others think or say!

Refusing 'bad mood' is a conscious effort. Of course it's easier to wallow in ones misery... on Saturday after my failed test I could have easily told my friends, let's sit at home, am not in the mood to get dressed up and go out, or to lie in my pajamas and sleep! But I consciously made the effort to do the exact opposite. And the rest of the day I didn't think about failing the test.

5. With my license I would say I am 8 cm in. The ONLY thing I can do to achieve those last 2 cm is to pass my test! It's very frustrating because I have been driving over a year now and I know I can drive, I can park and I can do an incline. However in the testing situation I make a mistake.

Placements wise or work wise, I would say I am 6 cm in. To gain an extra 2 I have embarked on making an HR presentation about cultural diversity in the workplace and if it goes well we can offer it to clients as a service. This is a big challenge for me; I will have to work very hard on it as it can bring in extra income for myself and the company.

On the weight loss side... Well I can say I am 5cm in. I drink over 2 litres of water a day; I don't have too much sugar, red meat or bread. However to increase 2 cm I should exercise more. In fact, any exercise at this point will make a difference.

6. The "sitting with me" definitely affects my happiness. It is a lot harder to just forget someone being rude to me than it is for me to get over my own shortcomings. (License) at times this will affect my whole mood and then I would rather read a book in bed than to be social.

The 'I will never ask' is not aligned with my attitude. My 'attitude' would tell me to question my parents, to ask them if they even thought it through before saying such harsh words to me. And in fact that night my attitude did question them but they were so angry they were not listening to me. I would rather just not bring it up because I am probably afraid my parents will say something that I would never think they could say. That is what happened last time and it was a shock to me that my dad had prejudiced views. My perfect dad who I look up to and admire so much could think in such a small minded way was something I had to deal with. However since that time my parents have met my brothers black girlfriend and they were perfectly ok with it. I am not sure if it is just because he is a guy or because they have had time to realize what a mistake they made in my case. And the fact my mom still asks about Baker also tells me she regrets what happened.

I think my position on meaningfulness does reflect with my position on religions. Meaningfulness is very personal to me; meaning two people can have completely different views but we are both right. In the same way I believe religions really all have the same core but is just externally different. Who is to say one is completely wrong? I knew a girl in America who was agnostic however she had such a good heart. She was kind, and to me was more of a Christian than many of the teens at my church. Therefore I see religion as a personal thing; this may not be too 'Christian' of me but in my heart I know God and that's all that matters to me!

#### 4.4.2 Mahlatse's Story

Hi Francois

Hope you had a great weekend, apologies for getting back to you this late.

- Could you please provide me with an introductory paragraph which I could use to start the account of your story in the study document?

Mahlatse, born and bred in Limpopo, grew up in a village Jane Furse. Always want to be a top achiever in everything she does. Her passion is research and development especially in the economic sector. She would love to see SA being one of the top countries in the world in terms of their economic status. Passionate about helping other people as well, find joy in people happiness. She is a God-fearing woman, loves prayer and loves to sing, talk and motivate others.

- Please confirm your unique version of "a life that matters"

Being happy in everything that one does.

- What words have you used to describe meaningfulness / success / significance?

Achievements, happiness,

- What will make up / constitute this meaningfulness in your life?

Top achiever, financial freedom and being happy.

- How will you know that you are making progress towards this more meaningful life?

All my dreams must come true.

My life keeps changing everyday, I like giving out to see more people happy, and I always look back everyday to see what difference I have made in others.

I did get insights but I would really keep them private now as I am still trying to evaluate them.

Being happy, and making everything surrounding me part of my life, more natural

No, people tend to put material things first as their meaningful life whereas there are more important things to cherish that will really give meaning to one's life.

Thanks Francois, hope everything is in order.

#### 4.4.2.1 *My responses to Mahlatse's story*

1. *I was wondering whether you tell me a few stories about you helping other people, "finding joy in their happiness". How about adding a few "motivate" stories? How do you enter the lives of other people? How do you know what will help them?  
You use a very specific phrase to tell me about your religious position – would you care to elaborate on "God-fearing"? How is this understanding affecting your "life that matters"?*
2. *What does this understanding of "a life that matters" feed upon? What are its worst enemies? How do you sustain being happy? If I could call in a witness about your happiness, who would that be? What would he/she be telling me about Mahlatse The Happy One? What role has s/he been playing in your story of happiness?*
3. *What achievements have formed part of your happiness? How do you decide that something you have done is an achievement?*
4. *When you say "Top Achiever" who decides that? When would you be financially "free"?*
5. *What are these dreams that you referred to at the moment? How important is it for you to dream?*
6. *You mentioned people putting material things first: this sounds interesting. What did you have in mind? Why?*

#### 4.4.2.2 *Mahlatse's response to my questions*

1. Firstly I help by being at their service. E.g. When I was doing my 3<sup>rd</sup> year in varsity I was approached by thus older lady who had no work, money and proper winter clothes. She asked if I had at least a job for her, I then remembered that I had 2 months laundry that have been piling. I asked her to do washing for me on a Saturday, she did. I could see that she was happy that at least she was doing something to put bread on the table for her grandchildren. Initially I wanted to pay her 250 but when I told my granddad about the whole thing he offered to pay extra and in turn paid 550 for the lady. She was so happy; the look on her face was incredible.  
Secondly, motivating people is when I talk to anyone I meet in taxi or a bus or even while shopping and I get to talk to people. I share knowledge I have about jobs, or anything I can remark on positively.  
To approach or enter in people's lives I smile. Sometimes people approach me.

I do not what will help them I just say what's in my heart and they tend to add some advice I gave them to their own solutions.

I got saved in July 1999 while I was in high school. God has been the centre of my life because I would not do anything without consulting him first through His word. As much as I trust God, I fear Him as well. He is marvellous, but the one thing I do not want is His wrath falling upon me. Therefore that is why I use God-fearing.

A life that matters to me is being happy in anything that one does. God provides for all my needs, he supports me, he comforts, He guides me and He literally does everything for me. I believe without Him in my life there is no life that matters. It is by His grace that I am able to do anything I want.

Religious position- I call myself a Christian as I just want to be like Christ.

2. A life that matters feeds upon the knowledge that one possess, could be limited could be unlimited. I go by the phrase what you see is what you get. I do sometimes tend to study the underlying features into a situation, but they come up to be the worst enemy at that point however realize that I have the power within to really up root any uncomfortable situations. This power comes from the knowledge I have.

Always positive and rejoicing every day.

Anyone who knows me, but my **granddad**. They will probably tell you that I am always happy, energetic, stubborn and if I am not happy about something I tend to withdraw from that for a while.

3. Getting my degree from a university, being able to sustain myself and both of my brothers as well as upgrading my grandparent's house. Anything that feels good to me and it is visible and also making others close to me happy.
4. I decide that I am a top achiever. When I start to Nett R1 million rand per annum.
5. I dream of being an extra ordinary woman. Now this is based on Prov 31: The Virtuous woman. She was a woman of God, a woman with many talents. She was domesticated, business minded and compassionate. I want to be just like her. That is my dream, and it is important to dream as I draw energy from that, as well as perseverance to become what I have dreamed of. At the moment I want to be a top biller at work, grow spiritually, meaning spending more time meditating on the word of God and letting Him reveal what He wants me to do more in His kingdom.

6. Well for starters, life is more important than money, clothes, cars and being famous (wanting everyone to notice you). Yes all this are necessary to have but should not rule your life.

Love, Caring, compassion, supportive, passion, knowledge (positive), understanding of other people, peace, these are the terms I would have to always have first as they really are the cornerstone of a meaningful life and they bring happiness in one's life.

#### 4.4.3 Amorita's Story

Amorita used the original e-mail that I had sent to them as the framework for story and in a cryptic manner filled in her story after the paragraphs which she considered important. The introduction is therefore the original request by e-mail that I have sent to the co-researchers.

Meaningfulness: Being the salt and light to a dark and insecure world

Success: Safe and sincere relationships with all & being financial independent

Significance: To make a measurable positive difference in the lives of others

*What will make up / constitute this meaningfulness in your life?*

Too be 100% sure that I will go to heaven!

*How will you know that you are making progress towards this more meaningful *life?**

Inner peace

The way I handle conflict and disappointments

Have deep meaningful relationships (with my staff, friends, boyfriend(s))

Making the right choices (business, love life, friends, etc)

*I am also curious about:*

*What has been happening now that you have had time to reflect on your life and the lives of your colleagues?*

I am more relaxed with them; there is a certain calmness and compassion when dealing with my staff. E.g. I know now how important is success in my company is to them

*Did you get any new insights which were valuable to you and which you could perhaps share with the rest of the group?*

I definitely understand my colleagues better – the fact that they trust the team by showing their vulnerable side was extremely special to me

*Did you notice any "themes" common to our understanding of "a life that matters" or meaningfulness?*

Not really – maybe – everyone here is quite people orientated – making a difference in other's lives (get them a better job etc)

*What is behind our understanding of meaningfulness?*

Should I die tomorrow – I will leave a huge empty space in other's lives!

*Do you buy into what is generally understood as "meaningful"? Why or why not?*

My perception is that most people I know really want to make a positive difference around them

#### **4.4.3.1 My questions about Amorita's story**

- 1. You use a few interesting metaphors / symbols when you refer to meaningfulness, Amorita. How does the Bible influence your understanding of meaningfulness?*
- 2. How does the "dark and insecure world" influence you? And then, how do you influence the "dark and insecure world"?*
- 3. When you talk about success, you mention relationships. How strong is your relationship with "meaningfulness"? Who could be witnesses to this relationship? How have they become role players in your meaningfulness story?*
- 4. How did "safe" and "sincere" enter the relationship story?*
- 5. How will you know that you are financially independent? Who will decide that? Independent as compared to what?*
- 6. You describe significance in terms of being "measurable". What measures would you be using? How will you know that these measures agree with the difference the other people want or prefer?*
- 7. Where are you on your way to 100% certainty? How will you know?*
- 8. Please tell me about conflict and disappointments. What are your relationship with these characters ("conflict" and "disappointment")?*



9. *How will you decide that a choice was “right”? What role do “choices” play in the meaning story?*
10. *How can we go on to ensure an environment which would sustain this trust?*
11. *You mention “making a positive difference”. How will they know and who decides that their contribution is making a “positive difference”?*

#### 4.4.3.2 *Amorita’s responses to my questions*

1. I use the Bible as my base
2. Tend to make me negative and focus more on the uncontrollable. I don’t always feel safe in this country (sometimes I am scared during night time when I hear noises or something woke me up, also need to stay alert for false teachings or insincere people around me) In business people are not always trustworthy, battle to get my money out of them. The media and movies make fun of religion or Jesus, I hate that
3. (Trying to be light and bring fun to them, want to make people laugh and trust me, and know that I care. In my work I try to contribute in terms of their careers)
4. Hopefully – very strong, but I know I am not there yet, not sure if I will ever get to that place, but that’s not important, what is more important is that I’m trying
5. Rina, Hannah and Christa, my best friends. Jannie, my ex-boyfriend, still a good friend, Annatjie, our talks in the morning is extremely valuable to me – more than the exercising
6. We always talk about meaningfulness and some of us are on the same page, I trust and look up to them. If we not always on the same page, it’s also okay because the respect still remain
7. People are not always who they seem to be, it’s not their fault, only God is unchangeable. Initially I took it very personal if people hurt /lied / cheated on me – but I’ve realised that it’s their character – not who I am and that we are all just human, I myself are not always 100% honest as well, which I’m not proud of. Bottom-line – we should forgive others and not judge them or make them feel guilty about mistakes.
8. Although I don’t feel safe with people I can’t trust, it doesn’t mean I don’t want them to be part of my life or I hate them, just won’t expose myself to them. Was disappointed in previous romantically relationships where guys haven’t been always honest and exclusive – which made me feel vulnerable and insecure. These days I try not to “put” myself out there and am much more “picky” with the friends (any kind of friend) I am close with
9. For me, being in a situation where I am back in the property sector, lives in my own home, and if I do not bring any new business in for 3 months I will still be financially stable. Not to

have any debt in my bank accounts. Everything in a plus on all my bank statements – no overdrafts!

10. Measurables – 80% of my relationships to be strong and trusting (including my clients). I will experience sincerity and trust with those around me when I reach my goal.

11. I'm handling disappointment better than conflict. Will deal with conflict, but will delay it first and strategise a way to deal with it. With disappointment, I take time out, spend time alone, avoid others for a while – don't want to be bad company during disappointing times. For me I made a right choice if it was a win-win situation for both parties. When trust between people has been established. When I can laugh, be silly and talk deep stuff with the same person, trust them with my opinions (sometimes not so logically!!) and not judge me by doing things a bit different

#### 4.4.4 Millicinda's Story

Brief on my Life Story:

[I] grew up in a very strict conservative family

Dad's militaristic approach to upbringing was suppressive

Couldn't live out my own interest and develop my talents

Was shy as a kid and a big part of my adult life

Taught myself to overcome shyness and built "self confidence" which I only got much later in life

Enormous milestone in my life was when I moved to Cape Town. It gave me a chance to get to know myself properly and to discover my strengths and weaknesses. Helped me to overcome a lot of my reservations and it challenged me and it developed me as a person. It changed my perspective of myself.

Another big event in my life was the birth of my son. It moved my focus from me to my child and it changed my whole life. Decision making was different, even my friends changed. It was very challenging and I sometimes struggle to find balance in my life.

I am currently very career and success focused. I am determined to succeed and strive to reach my goals. I am still focused on my child's happiness and development something I will find very hard to compromise on because his well being is also partially fulfilling my purpose.

I haven't had much "time" to focus on meaningfulness and purpose lately because I don't want to lose focus. I try and live out certain values in my journey to succeed in what I'm currently doing.

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.

Success is to achieve my goals without compromising myself.

Significance – There is always people making a significant difference in one's life but I try not to rely on that. The faith and believe of one person in your life can make all the difference (Amorita for instance believes in me and that makes a huge difference). Significance is the difference I can make in other peoples' lives because their presence in your life is not accidental. By that I do not mean that we have to be people pleasers.

In our pursuit for meaningfulness I believe we need to acknowledge God in everything we do.

Progress? Contentment and peace?

This session is a reminder that we must be careful not to get so caught up in life and achieving goals that we miss the target and lose focus of our purpose.

#### **4.4.4.1 My response to Millicinda's story**

*Dankie vir jou terugvoer. Dit het my regtig aan die dink gesit.*

*Omdat ek met jou wil gesels om die res van die gesprek met die res van die groep te deel, sal ek hiervandaan in Engels voortgaan.*

*I would like to pick up on 3 or 4 things you mentioned in your story, namely "suppressive" upbringing, move to Cape Town, purpose, and other people's belief in you.*

*You mention that the strict upbringing you had was suppressive. What passions and talents did it suppress? This relationship between you and "suppressive upbringing", what influence did it have on you? What influence did you have on "suppressive upbringing"? What "voices" in society supported "suppressive upbringing"? How was your own voice silenced in the process?*

*What did the move to Cape Town symbolize? What did this say about you? Have there been similar events since then. What does this say about a "meaningful life" or future?*

*Tell me more about this move please. Did some people close to you oppose this? What advice did you get about this? What values and principles are illustrated by this move of yours? How do these strengthen your resolve for your “purpose”-driven life in the future?*

*You have mentioned purpose a few times. How has “purpose” become a “life partner” in your “meaning story”? What is your relationship with “purpose”? Is “purpose” a kind partner? How have you learnt to be sure about the real “face” of purpose? What assisted you in this quest? What can you teach us about “purpose”? Is “purpose” personal or does it link up with “significance” as you describe it in the last paragraphs of your letter? What role do relationships play here?*

*What do you think people like Amorita see in you that allows or convinces her to believe in you? Are there more stories like that? What does this say about you? If you use this like a filter which you can fit onto a camera lens, what does the world look like through this new filter?*

*Thank you for participating.*

*Regards, François*

#### **4.4.4.2 Millicinda’s response to my questions**

Francois, I don’t really want to share all these things with my colleagues. I am selective about what I share mostly because I have made peace with a lot of things in my life and I find it almost negative to revisit (Subsequently, Millicinda agreed to share her story with the rest of the group).

*What passions and talents did it suppress?*

I was very creative as a child, dreamt of being a fashion designer. I had to do accountancy and science, even registered for BSc. on my dad’s persistence (hated it) Dad reckoned that there is not a place in the world for artists. (To his absolute horror, I bunked my whole 2<sup>nd</sup> year and in the 3<sup>rd</sup> year I changed to BA. Arts – they took it so badly that I couldn’t finish my first year and I had to move out of home)

*This relationship between you and “suppressive upbringing”, what influence did it have on you?*

I didn’t develop my own character, was always quiet and subdued. I was also fearful. Didn’t want to try anything for fear of not succeeding. Things easily made me nervous and I suffered from very bad migraines since Gr.1 (I was very scared of my dad as a child – he was very agro. He worked very hard and he had to take care of a lot of people not just our immediate family). The relationship between me and my mom was very bad (she was physically abusive when I was a baby and became

verbally and emotionally abusive as I grew up. Could never understand why she didn't love me). I really had no self image as a child and a greater part of my adulthood. Through the years I have reasoned out most of these to myself (My mom was a good person but I was an unplanned baby, my brother was only 3 months old when she fell pregnant with me. She already "had" to get married, she tricked my dad into marriage by falling pregnant and falling pregnant with me was not welcomed – we just never had any bond whatsoever)

*What influence did you have on "suppressive upbringing"?*

I eventually became rebellious and I suppose stubborn. I actually just wanted to leave home. I know that I was fairly intelligent but I didn't make much of it. I mostly did work where I didn't get noticed much.

*What "voices" in society supported "suppressive upbringing"?*

Rest of family / First serious relationship

*How was your own voice silenced in the process?*

I didn't have much of a voice ...

*What did the move to Cape Town symbolize?*

(I just turned 30) I had to overcome most of my fears. I had to overcome my shyness as well. I just had to succeed. (and luckily I did achieve my sales targets for the first year, wasn't easy but I did it) It was my first sales job and I always thought I would be a terrible sales person but I end up enjoying it. I actually find out that I am a people's person where I always believed that I am a loner. I also had to travel far distances by car on my own which I have never done before and that also was a great challenge at the time. I discovered that I love travelling and I love exploring new things.

*What did this say about you?*

I proved to myself that if I put my mind to it I can succeed.

*Have there been similar events since then?*

Yes, my decision not to get married when I fell pregnant and raise my child by myself.

*What does this say about a "meaningful life" or future?*

I haven't really focused on a meaningful life – more on survival. I sincerely hope that the future will bring me closer to a meaningful life.

*The move:*

Nobody really interfered, I was sad to leave my sister behind. I didn't have a boyfriend at the time. Some friends said that I will be back in two months, I stayed for four years.

*What values and principles are illustrated by this move of yours?*

Values and principals??? I wanted to see what I was capable of and I wanted to break away from everything I knew and try something new. The move wasn't planned at all. I have never been to Cape Town.

*How do these strengthen your resolve for your "purpose"-driven life in the future?*

I have come to learn that I am very strong and that I can face challenges. My purpose, I am not sure about that. I in a way I believe that my God given purpose and what I am doing now is not related. I am focus driven – maybe survival driven – not my Godly purpose driven.

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

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.

*What is your relationship with "purpose"?*

I am not in sync with my original purpose.

*Is "purpose" a kind partner?*

I think living your purpose will be very fulfilling.

*How have you learnt to be sure about the real "face" of purpose?*

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.

*What assisted you in this quest?*

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.

*What can you teach us about "purpose"?*

*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.*

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

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

*What role do relationships play here?*

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

*What do you think people like Amorita see in you that allows or convinces her to believe in you?*

Commitment maybe?

*Are there more stories like that?*

Don't think so

*What does this say about you?*

I am not focused currently on what difference people can make in my life (and I know people do), I am more focused on the role I have to play to make things work.

*If you use this like a filter which you can fit onto a camera lens, what does the world look like through this new filter?*

I've got mixed feelings about this. I have come to learn that life can be very hard especially if you "fall" out but I also believe that life can be very rewarding (I have a zest for life, I appreciate the fact that I am alive).

Having said all off the above it might create the impression that I am negative but I am a very enthusiastic person. I look for the positive and try and not surround myself with negative depressed people. Small things excite me and I create little opportunities to make life interesting for myself. I try to reason things out for myself.

#### 4.4.5 Estelle's Story

Estelle preferred to write her story in Afrikaans:

Ek was gebore in Klerksdorp. Kort daarna het ons Pretoria toe getrek. Ek is die oudste van drie kinders. Ons het baie rondgetrek toe ek in die Laerskool was as gevolg van my pa se beroepsontwikkeling. Ek was altesaam in ses Laerskole en het dit baie geniet om te trek en nuwe mense te ontmoet. Ek het die Kaap vreeslik geniet! Ons het daar gewoon vir twee jaar. Ons het na Pretoria toe getrek toe ek met Hoërskool begin het. Ek het darem vinnig vriende gemaak. My ouers het geskei toe ek in my st.6 jaar was. Ek bly by my pa, en my boeties by my ma. Na Matriek het ek besluit om Sielkunde te swot by die Universiteit van Pretoria. Ek wou nog altyd Sielkunde swot, maar

het in my eerste jaar besef dat dit nie vir my was nie. Ek het werk gekry by UrCareer en geniet dit vreeslik baie.

My doel op die oomblik is om hard te werk, ondervinding te kry en as persoon te groei. Ek glo dat die Here 'n plan het met almal se lewens. Ons almal maak deel uit van Sy groot raadsplan. Ek glo en vertrou dat die Here my sal lei en my sal help om my doel in die lewe te bereik.

Ek hanteer konflik baie sleg, maar werk nog daaraan! Ek geniet dit om te werk en het altyd geglo ek kan onder druk werk.

Dit is vir my lekker om in 'n warm atmosfeer te werk. Wanneer ek iets bereik, moedig dit my aan om harder te werk. Ek kry maklik seer, maar steek dit goed weg.

Ek glo dat die Here niks op mens se pad sal plaas as Hy nie dink jy sal dit kan hanteer nie.

Die mense in my lewe beteken alles vir my!

Warm regards

Estelle Hurn

UrCareer

#### **4.4.5.1 My questions about Estelle's story**

*Seeing that Estelle wrote her story in Afrikaans, I respected her language preference and responded in Afrikaans. This is an example to staying with the client's (or in this case, the co-researcher's) experience-near language.*

*Estelle, baie dankie vir jou lewensverhaal wat jy bereid was om met ons te deel. Dis altyd 'n voorreg en ook iets kosbaars as mense hulle lewensverhale op hierdie manier deel.*

*Ek het gewonder wat jou siening oor 'n "betekenisvolle lewe" is.*

- *Watter woorde gebruik jy gewoonlik as jy oor sinvol leef dink (byvoorbeeld "n lewe wat saak maak", suksesvol, gelukkig, tevrede)?*
- *Waaruit bestaan so 'n "lewe wat saak maak" vir jou?*
- *Wie het 'n rol gespeel in jou verstaan van 'n betekenisvolle lewe?*
- *Waar staan jy op die oomblik op die pad na so 'n "lewe wat saakmaak"?*
- *Hoe sal jy weet jy is daar?*



*Jy vertel dat jy glo dat die Here 'n "plan met almal se lewens" het en dat ons almal deel uitmaak van sy Groot Raadsplan.*

- *Hoe weet ons wat die Here se plan met ons is?*
- *Watter rol speel dit in jou eie siening oor Lewensin of 'n "lewe wat saakmaak"?*

*Wat is jou doel in die lewe? Wat is die verhaal agter hierdie doel?*

*Jy skryf: "Ek glo dat die Here niks op mens se pad sal plaas as Hy nie dink jy sal dit kan hanteer nie."*

*Het daar al sulke dinge oor jou pad gekom? Hoe het jy dit hanteer? Het jou lewe steeds sinvol gebly te midde van die uitdaging?*

*Verder sê jy "Die mense in my lewe beteken alles vir my!"*

*Watter mense speel sleutelrolle in jou lewe? Wat sou hulle ons van Estelle kon vertel?*

#### **4.4.5.2 Estelle's response to my questions**

1. Ek sou se dat sukses sal wees wanneer ek 'n werk het waar ek gelukkig is en my volle potensiaal kan bereik. Wanneer ek as mens ontwikkel het en tevrede voel met wat ek tot dusver bereik het. Wanneer ek weet waarheen ek oppad is met my lewe.
2. Jy vra 'Waaruit bestaan so 'n "lewe wat saak maak" vir jou?' Dit bestaan uit mense wat positief bydra tot my lewe. 'n Gemaklike werksomgewing, sukses en tevredenheid met wat ek bereik het.
3. Op jou vraag oor wie my verstaan van 'n betekenisvolle lewe beïnvloed het, kan ek as volg antwoord: My pa het my nog altyd aangemoedig om hard te werk en my beste te gee in alles wat ek doen. Hy het vir my baie riglyne gegee. Almal het maar 'n eie idee van wat 'n "betekenisvolle lewe" moet wees.
4. Waar ek staan op die pad na 'n betekenisvolle lewe? Ek sou sê dat ek nou 10% daar is. Ek het nou begin met my werk ens.
5. Ek sal weet ek is daar wanneer ek gelukkig en gerus gaan voel.
6. Hoe weet ons wat die Here se plan met ons is? Ons weet nie. Ons moet maar net glo en vertrou. Ek plaas my vertroue in die Here en glo dat Hy my sal help en lei.

7. My doel in die lewe? My doel op die oomblik is om as mens te groei, en om goed te doen in my werk.
8. Ja, daar het al moeilike dinge oor my pad gekom. Ja. Ek kon dit beter hanteer het. Ek reageer te vinnig. Ek het my lewe bevraagteken maar het uit al my ervarings geleer.
9. My pa, en my vriende speel sleutelrolle in my lewe.

#### 4.4.6 Jurie's Story

Hi Francois

Jammer ek antwoord nou eers! Laat aande gehad om op te vang met al die emails. Hoop my antwoorde help.

Hiermee my antwoorde:

*Could you please provide me with an introductory paragraph which I could use to start the account of your story in the study document?*

My name is Jurie Venter. I was born in Ladysmith Natal, the eldest of 5 children. I had a very happy childhood and grew up with my father being a Minister and my mother a housewife. We moved quite a lot which I believe also brought a sense maturity in having to adapt to new environments.

After I finished school I had to National Service. I joined the Police Force where I was stationed in the PRO division of the Computer Division. A lot of my foundation in my life was build there. With the knowledge and experience I gained in the Police Force, I started my own business and was working for myself since then up to June 2005. My mother passed away in 1991 which was a huge event in my life. It took me years to accept her death but was also the reason I committed myself to God. He's now the centre point of my life.

*What words have you used to describe meaningfulness / success / significance?*

Meaningfulness - Able to help and be there for other people.

Success - To discover the purpose God has for your life.

Significance – In making a difference in other peoples lives.

*What will make up / constitute this meaningfulness in your life?*

To discover the purpose God has for your life – When you discover that you feel complete.

*How will you know that you are making progress towards this more meaningful life?*

In growing in yourself through your relationship with your God your Creator.

*What has been happening now that you have had time to reflect on your life and the lives of your colleagues?*

To look at your life and see what you **have and haven't accomplished**. I think so many of us has a passion to do or accomplish certain things in life and never take the time to actually sit down and work out a plan to accomplish those dreams or goals.

*Did you get any new insights which were valuable to you and which you could perhaps share with the rest of the group?*

I definitely have a better understanding of the rest of the group and that also help to know how to approach or handle people better and with more consideration.

*Did you notice any "themes" common to our understanding of "a life that matters" or meaningfulness?*

Each person wants to be loved, understood and appreciated.

*What is behind our understanding of meaningfulness?*

To know what it is and what it takes in making your life meaningful.

*Do you buy into what is generally understood as "meaningful"? Why or why not?*

No. Everyone perception of meaningfulness is so different. What one person see as meaningful might be very "un-helpful" to another person.

regards

**jurie venter**

#### **4.4.6.1 Some questions I asked Jurie about his story**

*Beste Jurie*

*Dankie vir jou respons. Ek het oor 'n paar dinge gewonder en sal dit baie waardeer as jy dalk daarop sou reageer. My kommentaar en vrae is in kursief hieronder.*

- 1. I am curious to know to what extent "adapt" became a theme of your life story. How were you able to hold on to meaningfulness while you are adapting?*

*It sounds as if your mother played a major role in your life. What would your mother have witnessed about your meaningfulness story?*

2. *Most people are more concerned about their own lives when it comes to meaningfulness. Has this been your experience as well? Is it not strange then that you associate meaningfulness with being “able to help and be there for other people” and “making a difference in other people’s lives”? Where do you think this originated? Did somebody play a role to this effect in your life? Was this an example set by anybody? Please tell me more about this?*

*How do you think we can learn the purpose God has for our lives?*

3. *What will “complete” be like for you? How far are you on the road to “completeness”? How will you know you are there?*
4. *Can you tell me a little more about this please? What is growth in your life? Are there any voices in the community or society telling us what this growth looks like? Do you support these?*
5. *If you talk about “accomplish”, how would you describe such accomplishment? Accomplishment relative to what would that be?*

*Why do you think we never “actually sit down” to plan our lives and dreams?*

*Have you got “accomplishment tips” which you could from experience share with the rest of the group?*

6. *Do you associate with these sentiments? How are these linked to stories from your own life? Has anybody played a significant role in this understanding of meaningfulness?*
7. *You said: “Everyone perception of meaningfulness is so different. What one person see as meaningful might be very “un-helpful” to another person. How is this insight helpful?*

#### **4.4.6.2 Jurie’s response to my questions**

When I asked Jurie about his mother’s role in his life, directing a re-membering question to him about what his mother would have witnessed about meaningfulness in his life, he responded by saying that it was difficult to single out something. He had been living in Pretoria while his parents were in Potchefstroom and therefore did not see them that often. She would however have been able to tell me about his helpfulness and told me about how he helped his grandmother move house.

When we discussed people's pursuit of meaningfulness Jurie agreed that most often these endeavours are self-centred. According to him people were not interested in what value they could add, but rather what they could get out of life. Frankl on the other hand suggested that meaning was not derived from what life offered us, but rather what we offered to life (2004:85). Or stated differently: not what we expected from life, but what life expected from us.

Jurie indicated that he considered himself to be somebody whom one could wake up at 2 in the morning and he would be willing to help. The fact that he derived meaning from "making a difference to somebody's life" could be the result that he was brought up like that. Although his father was away a lot, he did the best he could for his family. Hence the helpfulness discourse may be considered as the way he compensated for this, Jurie suggested.

When asked about "completeness" which he mentioned in the original interview, Jurie indicated that for him it meant to be in peace and harmony with God. The relationship with God and communication with Him was what life purpose was all about for him. He was reminded of a story of somebody who had a special relationship with God and when he had to enter a place about which he had certain forebodings, he just prayed "Lord, would you please go in first?" That was the type of relationship with God he thought of as complete.

At some stage in our conversation, "Not understanding" entered the discussion. When I asked Jurie whether not understanding did not reduce his experience of meaningfulness, he replied that trust made it possible for him still to experience even misfortune as meaningful. He told me how sometimes when he almost felt like giving up, a small event like a word or a sermon was enough to inspire him with trust and meaningfulness again. He concluded this thought by remarking that God is good.

Jurie's meaning story is closely related to Purpose. He compared it to people sometimes reducing their quest for meaning to a hunger for material things. In this regard he suggested that we are given our talents with a purpose. He told a story how he depends on God for even the small things in life like buying clothing. He commented that the guidance we receive are aligned with God's promise to make his will known to us, "directing our ways" (Prov 3:6).

He did mention that he did not "spend as much time with God" as he would like to. In this regard he agreed that he thought of spending time with God in the traditional formal way as in prayer and meditation or Bible study.

#### 4.4.7 Malcolm's Story

A life that matters is a life that is not restricted by anything and can do as much as to Fly in their mind, a life that matters is a life that makes a difference to others but before so achieves in its own first. A life that matters is a life that can put others success and dreams before its own and still feel accomplishment.

Reaching the pinnacle of success, freedom and peace will constitute meaningfulness in my life.

If my life is not stagnant and it keeps throwing new things at things and challenges at me and I strive in all I take upon I will know that my life is making progress in terms of a meaningful one.

The term of meaningfulness has changed since we had the two sessions with my fellow staff members, from person to person the term has a different meaning and it has shown me that life is a whole lot more than what the eye can see. Success, Happiness and freedom are words that were mostly used to describe meaningfulness. This also made realise that success differs from person to person and we can all use the same word in a sentence but all mean different things.

It has made it better for me to communicate with my fellow workers and easier to understand a lot of things that did not make sense before.

I do not buy into what is generally understood as meaningfulness simply I have been unique my whole life believe strongly that if people are thinking the same thing a lot of people are not thinking. I see meaningfulness differently from other people and the way by which I will achieve it will also be different from others.

##### 4.4.7.1 My questions regarding Malcolm's story

1. *How will you know that you are making a difference in others' lives? Who will decide what difference is needed?  
Who has been instrumental / influential in this understanding of "a life that matters"? What would s/he be telling me about your life that matters?*
2. *What will be the elements of "success", "freedom" and "peace" as you describe them above? What stories affect our understanding of what success is? What is your relationship with each of these characters of your meaning story?*

3. *How far are you on this unique path that you have mapped out for yourself? Is there one thing (perhaps one thing in respect of each of the elements you mentioned in the previous paragraph) which would take you strides further on this path?*
4. *Why do you think these terms were used most often (“Success”, “happiness” and “freedom”)?*  
*What was it like for you realizing that there are multiple stories about what success for instance is? How could this multi-story success assist you to move beyond “restriction” as you have mentioned in the first paragraph, allowing you to “Fly” indeed?*
5. *How has his uniqueness benefitted you in your life so far? How did it partner with you in living a meaningful life? Has it ever become a “nuisance” rather than assisting your life towards significance?*

#### **4.4.7.2 Malcolm’s response to my questions**

1. Bringing joy and laughter into people’s lives, nobody will decide what different is needed but I will give them and help the best way I know how to and if that doesn’t make a difference to them then I will move to next person and try to make a difference in their lives cause there is only so much one can do and whole lot one cannot do and at the end of the day I always keep in mind that I cannot make everybody happy. If the person could talk, I would know what they would say but he can’t. It’s my little brother I go out of my way to make sure he is happy and will do anything to ensure I make a positive difference in his life.
2. If my life is not stagnant and it keeps throwing new things at things and challenges at me and I strive in all I take upon I will know that my life is making progress in terms of a meaningful one.
3. The term of meaningfulness has changed since we had the two sessions with my fellow staff members, from person to person the term has a different meaning and it has shown me that life is a whole lot more than what the eye can see. Success, Happiness and freedom are words that were mostly used to describe meaningfulness. This also made realise that success differs from person to person and we can all use the same word in a sentence but all mean different things.  
 It has made it better for me to communicate with my fellow workers and easier to understand a lot of things that did not make sense before.
4. I think the word success is used a lot because people believe in order to be significant in anybody’s life you need to have made a success in yours first therefore one will be taken

seriously. I believe happiness was used a lot because if one is not happy then one cannot make another happy there as one cannot make others happy, I say this because I believe in order to make people happy you, yourself has to be happy first. Freedom was used a lot, but in all cases for different reasons, some wanted financial freedom and some wanted spiritual freedom. Some all went as far as saying they want both...

Well it was something I have always known that people have different views of what success and freedom are. So it was something I expected cause all of us are individuals that are very different in our own right, I wouldn't say it surprised me or any feeling like that. This multi-story has helped let loose and take things very easy and not put myself under immense pressure because all of us have different views of what success so now I am more open minded about doing things and tackling different situations.

I do not buy into what is generally understood as meaningfulness simply I have been unique my whole life believe strongly that if people are thinking the same thing a lot of people are not thinking. I see meaningfulness differently from other people and the way by which I will achieve it will also be different from others.

5. Being unique has benefited me in both good ways and bad, reason being there are stereotyped people out there who rebel against people who are not the same as everybody else and there are also people out there who are intrigued by a person that has their own qualities and stands out where ever present. It has in some instances become a "nuisance" because some places I have been to are filled with people that are resilient to different people which makes almost impossible for me to take the next step towards significance.

#### 4.4.8 Lee-Anne's story

Lee-Anne joined the group later during the course of the research process. She was briefed about the objectives of the study and decided to participate in the study. I have unfortunately only communicated with her via e-mail and never met her personally.

The correspondence follows:

15 May 2008

I was born in Pretoria

( I'll never be a Blue bull...)

I had a wonderful childhood.



We lived in Natal and I fell in love with the ocean everyday day for fourteen years. To my advantage God blessed me with a talent and passion for swimming. Since I could remember I dedicated my time to sport. My dream was to become an Olympic Athlete. Unfortunately my mind and body was separated at the age of 14 when I was forced to quite sport due to a bad injury. I entered my teenage years with a lot of disappointment. I rebelled against my faith at that stage and made things very uncomfortable for myself.

From 2004 – 2008 I was formally introduced to God and the world.

Realizing the difference between my fantasy of life and reality, I would say that was the most important lesson I had to learn in life.

In 2006 I studied photography and ended loving it more than I thought I was capable of...I've always been playing instruments, but when I started understanding and practicing art, the music came naturally. The Arts & Music have always been a big passion, but I never realized that it would become so attached to me...

My dreams have changed a lot this last year, for good I presume. At the of the day I'll be making my own biscuits.

Life motto: *"Live everyday as if it is you last."* - Personally, that still remains a challenge for me

If I had the opportunity to say one last sentence before I leave this planet, it would be:

*"Love God, Love yourself and Love those around you!"*

My weakness - I get bored easily

My strength - I'm very committed

The thing I am the most grateful for - The love, support, understanding, respect and wisdom my parents raised me with.

*"Treat people like how you would be like treated."*

Thank You

#### **4.4.8.1 My initial response to Lee-Anne's letter**

*Dear Lee-Anne*

*I haven't met you formally, but let me start off by saying that it is a great privilege to be entrusted with your life story. Thank you for joining our group.*

*Seeing that you haven't had the chance to tell your story to the rest of the group, would you be willing to tell the story at our next meeting – please do?*

*I would be curious to know how it was for you to tell your story (in this letter). Did it bring any new insights or open up new meaning for you? Did you have a sense of connectedness?*

*You write about creativity in various forms. How was your creativity stimulated in telling your story?*

*You say certain things with a definite touch of humour. How was telling your story instrumental in strengthening this sense of humour?*

*Did it take courage to write your story and send it to a stranger? How did that affect your confidence?*

*I have a few more specific questions about your story below. My questions and comments are in blue bold italics.*

*Kind regards*

*François*

The more specific questions are reported below.

- 1. You have a very interesting way of describing the consequence of the accident. Has mind and body been remarried ever since the tragic event?  
How did “rebellious” affect your life? Was “rebellious” always an enemy, an adversary, or has it ever joined forces with you? What did “rebellious” tell you about your faith at the time? What supported these allegations? Did you buy into these stories?*
- 2. Tell me more about these twin sisters, “Fantasy” and “Reality”. What lesson did you learn about life? Is there a lesson in this for the rest of us as well? If you could teach us one thing, what would that be? What would this life school be called?*
- 3. How did photography give you a new lens to look at the world? What does the world look like through the lens of your camera? Are there other lenses we could use to look at life differently?*
- 4. Would you care to share your dreams and current fantasies with us?*
- 5. Does the “one sentence before leaving the planet” describe your understanding of meaningfulness? Who played a role in this understanding? What would they/he/she be able to tell us about your meaningfulness story?*

6. *How has “boredom” played pranks on you? Were there times when you could outwit him? How did you do that?*
7. *If they could be present at our storytelling sessions, what stories do you think they would be telling us about you? What does this say about you?*

#### **4.4.8.2 Lee-Anne’s response to my questions**

What follows is Lee-Anne’s response to my introductory letter to her.

I’m not very good at presenting myself; I’d rather just email my story to the group. I’ve already spoke to the team about it and they all said its fine. I think it’s also going to speed up the process. If it interferes with your plans, I’ll obviously do it, no questions asked.

*Did telling your story bring any new insights or open up new meaning for you? Did you have a sense of connectedness?*

I am a very shy person and I prefer writing than speaking. Telling the story is fun, I think the group has a right to know who their colleagues are and vice versa.

*How was your creativity stimulated in telling your story?*

Mostly expressing my feeling and thoughts through words, especially English words.

*How was telling your story instrumental in strengthening this sense of humour?*

I think the humour eased the story telling.

*Did it take courage to write your story and send it to a stranger? How did that affect your confidence?*

Yes!!!! My life is my life and luckily every ones different, but yes it affected my confidence in a positive way.

Her response to the more specific questions:

1. Not in the way that I imagined it, no... but yes I have recovered to a point where I can move on with my life. I never found a sport to replace swimming, but I call myself an all-rounder at the moment.
2. Rebelling was my choice, but if I had another opportunity I would rather walk the other way. Between the age of 13 and 16 I lost track of any religious views, I experimented with all types of things, everything except the truth. I had very dark teenage days. I don’t want to elaborate too much, but yes it was a scary time in life. I ruined a lot of relationships. Events that were out of my control, I dealt with causing self inflicted pain and self pity. More emotionally than physically. I rebelled against Christ. Tried different religions. I can honestly say, it was, at the end Jesus who answered my questions and heard my prayers, no

other God. Growing out of that “faze” was a hard road to follow, it’s something I had to do alone and proof myself towards the ones I loved. I learnt a lot about myself and life. I gained my wisdom the hard way..

3. I don’t want to sound too philosophical, but to answer your last question first. That is exactly what I call it –

Life = School - As we educate ourselves for 12 years to enter the “big world”. I believe we do the same in life to prepare ourselves for eternity/after life.

I believed that my fantasy was my reality, but when my eyes opened...I was discussed with myself and the world. It suddenly made sense why we never could get along. I was always fighting against the natural flow of things.

Reality was a big shock for me, that’s where I realized how strong love can be and how powerful our minds are. Your hero’s become normal human beings, like you and me. Your friends become family and your heart learns how to deal with everyday emotions. You warm up towards people around you, start trusting. Start believing. Reality is hard, but I would say worth every second.

After I changed my view of life, my way of coping with life changed as well. Instead of punishing or being disappointed in myself for the wrong I have done, I rather see it as lesson that has to be learnt. I would recommend that mind set to people.

Another thing that has been helpful for my recovery is knowing that we have freedom of choice.

4. My philosophy of art is freedom. The freedom to be an individual. Photography is a good example of “the freedom to be an individual”. Two different people can photograph the same object/subject and both of the photographs will be completely different.

At the beginning I took photos of the dark/evil in the world, representing a portfolio of fear and warning signs. Now I portray truth and peaceful imagery. Something’s that comfortable on the eye and soul.

No lessons here, except... when you enjoy what you do , you automatically work hard.

If you are I a position where you don’t like your situation, make a choice and move on..staying in that situation, you are only fooling yourself, the world is not going to wait for you!

5. Sure, I'm not going to share it in detail, otherwise you'll be reading a book with chapters. I want to start my own business and grow with in that business. I'll give you more information as the plan falls into action.
6. Yes, this is my understanding of meaningfulness. I'm sure when reading the previous answers above you realized that I did everything except the quote above. Life is worth living when you have love! A lot of people will be able to tell a story, my history involved a lot of people who got hurt and supported me in my change for good... Living the way I mentioned/Quoted works for me.
7. Yes! It's funny that you ask that. It play's pranks on me. When I get bored I start brain storming on what I'm going to do with my situation. My outcome is usually a big project. In the middle of completing my project I get bored once again or I have something more important to do. That's why there is so many unfinished art lying around in my house.
8. I think they would speak of me growing up...the "cute" things I did. I think It says that somewhere deep down inside I still have a very innocent side.

Unfortunately Lee-Anne left the company before the research process was completed. Her initial contributions are included in the chapter, because they did form part of the conversation on meaningfulness at the start of the process. Unfortunately I was not able to contact her to confirm her understanding of the key discourses which were identified in the study.

#### 4.4.9 Bianca's Story

My whole life starts in 1985 to two wonderful people my mom and dad. I am an only child and if people ask me was it lonely I always answer no because I have never knew how it would have been. I have was the star pupil at school from the first day I arrived in sport and academics never not made it into a team and never failed a test but was a rebel when it came to taking direction from anyone trying to stop from achieving what I wanted to. So I do not have stop button until I crash and burn like people have told me will happen. I am very hard headed person I cannot take criticism. After school I got in university with a full scholarship and I turned it down just too much expectation on an 18 year as I thought. I moved to PE two weeks later and worked and partied there for 6 months and nearly killed myself in the process. Once I moved back I met my husband to be and he was the first love of my life ever. I then decided to become a flight attendant not to see the world just to do something different. I then started living all over Africa in SA for 2 weeks and out for 6 weeks. The

last contract I did I had to cut short because I was very sick or was I? No it was my daughter making herself known. I had found a job in SA and starts doing the things big people do house children and husband. I worked for 1time but being a flight attendant and mom was just not working out my child was more important to me than anyone and anything else. 6 months went by had a new job settling in when I had my first miscarriage. Then 6 months later had my second miscarriage and then a year later my third miscarriage. I had come to a stage of my life where I blamed my work my environment the people I worked with and decided to make a change and here I am today. I have a beautiful daughter a wonderful husband and a with a new start at new job with new people. So in a nutshell my constant in my life is my family they are the reason I am here they are the reason I live.

#### **4.4.9.1 My questions about Bianca's story and her responses**

Bianca's responses are included after each question for the sake of the integrity of the process.

*Bianca, thank you for sharing your life story with us.*

*I was wondering what it was like to share your story. I had no problem just strange looking into your life.*

*Did it evoke new ways of thinking about your life? It has changed the way I look at myself the fact I put a lot ahead of.*

*Was the telling of your life story a meaningful activity in itself? It was more eye opening*

*What is your view of a meaningful life? Can't put in any other way but Fulfilment*

*What words do you usually use when you think about meaningfulness (e.g. "significance", "a life that matters", "success", "happiness")? Fulfilment*

*What makes up "a life that matters" to you? My family*

*Who has played a role in this way of thinking about meaningfulness? My family*

*How far are you down the road towards "a life that matters"? I would say very far away*

*How will you know when you are there? When I have fulfilment*

*In your experience, how does one sustain a meaningful life (even through adversity)? You have to live a life the way you feel is the most stratifying*

*Thank you for your contribution so far.*

*Kind regards*

*François*

Unfortunately Bianca left the company shortly after this communication and therefore she did not participate in the rest of the process.

#### 4.5 Identifying the themes emerging from the stories told by the co-researchers

Once all the interviews had been conducted and the externalising questions and deconstruction of discourses had been done, a list of all the discourses or (as we subsequently called them) themes was compiled. I drew up a list of themes to act as agenda or “seeding list” for the identification process. This list was tabled at the next discussion of the full research group. Together we then agreed upon a list of the core themes which emerged from the research process.

The initial list is reported below.

Discourse / Theme	Participant
Happiness (own and other people’s), happy in everything one does	Delicia, Mahlatse
Content	Delicia
Optimistic	Delicia
Friends	Delicia
Feeling loved, understood, appreciated	Delicia, Jurie
Feeling needed	Delicia
Having meaning in other people’s lives, caring for loved ones, making a difference in others’ lives, helping other people, bringing joy to other	Delicia, Millicinda, Mahlatse, Malcolm, Jurie, Amorita
Doom and gloom vs. motivating	Delicia, Mahlatse

<b>Discourse / Theme</b>	<b>Participant</b>
Religion	Delicia
Rebelling	Lee-Anne, Millicinda, Malcolm
Freedom, financial freedom, financial independence	Lee-Anne, Malcolm
Love God	Lee-Anne
Love yourself	Lee-Anne
Love those around you	Lee-Anne
Survival	Millicinda
Purpose	Millicinda
God-given purpose	Millicinda, Jurie
Spirituality	Millicinda
To God every life matters	Mahlatse
Achievement	Mahlatse
Passion	Mahlatse
Success	Malcolm
Peace	Malcolm
Completeness	Jurie
Being the salt of the earth, lights in a dark and insecure world	Amorita
(Safe and sincere) relationships	Amorita

Having considered this list of potential themes the group subsequently agreed that the list could be summarised in three core discourses or themes. The group clustered the themes into Social Involvement, Purposeful Life and Spirituality.



Once these three were identified, Bianca proposed that we could not begin to consider these themes if we did not know ourselves. It was therefore decided to add Identity to the core themes.

This finding was consistent with what is reported in the literature: according to Kaufman (1986), most people express four to six main themes in their life stories.

These discourses will be discussed as the core themes in subsequent chapters of this thesis. These discussions will be introduced by the co-researchers stories of each of these themes, after which the literature will be invited in as the academic voice as another equal partner to the research process.

## 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.*

Mahlatshe 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.”

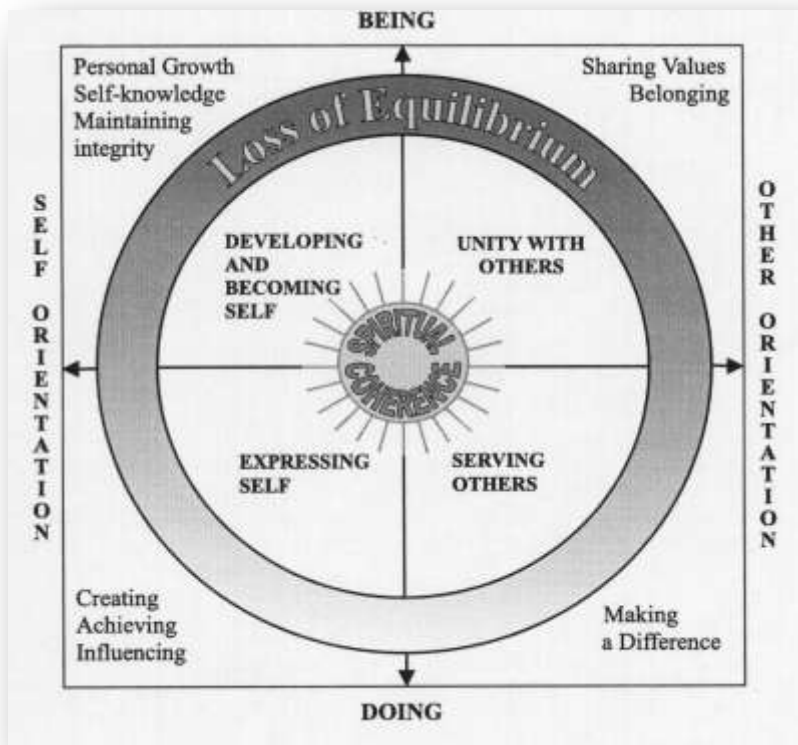


Figure 6. 1 Summary overview of findings (Lips-Wiersema, 2002b)

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

<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.

## Chapter 9. The Examined Life – Process, Perhaps Not Content

*“The truth is my fellow Athenians, that only God is wise. What the oracle meant was that what we know is little or nothing. Apollo didn't just mean me; I am just an example. What God means is, “The wise know their own wisdom is worth no more than anyone's.””*

*The unexamined life is not worth living. (Socrates, as quoted in Plato's Apology)*

Having discussed the four main themes (the content of our research conversation) emerging from the research process, it may seem out of place to introduce a process discussion only at the end of this thesis. The unique outcome in this research project, in my mind, however was introduced when Millicinda remarked that *what really enhanced their experience of meaningfulness was the reflecting process itself*. Therefore, it seems as if the emerging content was of interest, but what really made the difference – the *action moment* in the action research process – was the very process of reflection, the examining of our own lives.

### 9.1 Overview of the chapter

In this chapter, reflection as meaning making will be discussed from a narrative perspective, exploring whether narrative meaning making and reflective practice are congruent. Next, the chapter will report the voices of the research participants on reflecting as a process of creating a “life that matters”.

Once the researcher narratives have been reported and discussed, the voices of “outside witnesses” will be invited in. This will take the form of listening to published reflection discourses.

In conclusion, the objectives of the chapter will be revisited and the conversation handed over to the next chapter.

### 9.2 Narrative perspective on reflection

Although we did not intentionally set out to confirm that narrative reflection would contribute to an experience of meaningfulness, in retrospect I suppose we should not have been surprised that the reflective process was identified as being meaning making or meaning enhancing in itself. Our research process was conducted as conversations interspersed with times for reflection, much like the self-reflecting in the process of narrative therapy as described by Freedman and Combs

(1996:191-193). They describe how such a self-reflection would *flow among deconstruction, openings, preference, story development and reflection*. In this way they (1996:192) propose that the participants become *an audience to themselves*, performing meaning on any emerging stories as they do. It should be evident from the descriptions of our conversations how these elements were recruited into the research process described in this document.

The complete narrative process may therefore be described as a linguistic dance of co-reflection breaking away into self-reflection only to meet up again in ever growing rhythms of meaning. This suggests that alongside Bruner's landscapes of action and meaning we may have to consider another hermeneutical dimension – that of reflection. In both our co-reflections and self-reflection we should therefore be sensitive to our landscapes of action and meaning as they are storying meaningful lives.

When reflection as questioning is introduced into the narrative conversation, one has to mention the work of Karl Tomm (1987, 1988). In his three part discussion of Interventive Interviewing, he discusses various questioning approaches available to the therapist. In parts 1 and 2 of this series, he discusses reflexive questioning. Tomm (1988: 8) draws attention to the facilitative intention of reflexive questioning. The role of the therapist (or in our case the facilitating researcher) is described as similar to that of a guide or a coach. In this fashion, the resources of the clients or co-researchers are acknowledged and allowed to *be mobilised*. He (1987b: 169) also alluded to the circular effect of the reflexive process – meanings generated in one iteration turn back to inform the next iteration in a cyclical fashion. Throughout this paper the relationship between reflection and meaning is strongly suggested.

Lyle (2009) discusses narrative reflection from a *becoming* perspective. Quoting Bloom (1998), she (2009:294) describes this meaning making process as a *journey of becoming*. The outcome of this process is then described as a *deepened self-knowledge*. Building on her proposed use of narrative as research methodology, it may then be suggested that narrative provides the understanding or meaning framework for our reflective inquiries. Lyle (2009:296) describes the interaction between narrative and reflexive inquiry as requiring three things. Applied to our quest for a Life that Matters, these may explained as follows: first there is the reflection on historical events which may have informed a meaningful life; second, these moments are described as mediated in language; the last requirement is then the *unpacking* of these events, *accounting for them* and reflecting upon the language used to describe them.

During these periods of reflection, my fellow researchers were invited to respond on some questions directed to explore further some of the discourses arising from our conversations. This reflective process may be described as a guided reflection, as I facilitated and directed to a large extent what we were reflecting on. As such the reflective process may perhaps be considered not to have been fully democratic or participatory.

### 9.3 The voices of the research participants on reflection and meaning

Once the suggestion that the reflective process or examining process was actually experienced as meaning enhancing by the study group, I invited them to reflect on this and sent the following e-mail:

What was the most meaning-enhancing aspect of the process so far? Was it the findings or was it the reflective process?

Millicinda replied as follows:

*I think both were meaningful. I did find some new things about myself in the findings, but also the reflective process got me thinking about certain topics that I normally would not say aloud or share with others. I believe this is healthy for everyone to go through.*

Estelle on the other hand posted the reply underneath:

*I would say that it was the reflective process. The reflection shows a broader opinion on the subject with different views and experiences. This creates more subjects concerning the findings which could even lead to more findings.*

As is suggested by these two examples of the replies from the study group, learning from each other what constituted meaningfulness in their lives, did enhance their experience of meaningfulness in their own lives, but the process of reflecting in itself also became a meaning making process.

Perhaps we can associate this with Bruner's landscapes again: meaning making seems to take place in the interaction which hermeneutically happens between or connects the landscapes of action (*reflection* on meaningful lives in our study) and landscapes of meaning or identity (the *themes* or discourses identified to be involved in the constitution of meaningful lives or *a Life that Matters*).



My fellow researchers furthermore indicated that their lives are so directed at going forward, being busy, making progress, that we never take time to stand still and reflect (on the meaning of our lives). In this study, they were actually *forced* to contemplate what constitutes meaningful lives.

#### 9.4 Other voices on reflection and contemplation as meaning making practice

*Perhaps most important, as teachers, we can honor the quest of each student to find what gives their life meaning and integrity, and what allows them to feel connected to what is most precious for them. In the search itself, in loving the questions, in the deep yearning they let themselves feel, young people will discover what is sacred in life, what is sacred in their own lives, and what allows them to bring their most sacred gift to nourish the world. (Kessler, 1999, p. 33).*

In order to include the voices from other disciplines, I did a literature search starting with Google Scholar and expanding the search to the E-Journals available through the library of the University of Pretoria. The key words initially included combinations of “examined life”, unexamined life”, “meaningful”, meaning and “reflect”. These searches did not produce much information. Later I stumbled across some references to *existential phenomenology*<sup>82</sup> and *reflexive inquiry*<sup>83</sup>. These

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<sup>82</sup> Edward Tiryakian (1965) describes Existential Phenomenology (EP) as the synthesis of existential philosophy and Husserl’s phenomenological method. According to Yalom (1980) the four main areas of examination within existentialism are meaning (vs. meaninglessness), freedom (vs. confinement), death (vs. life), and isolation (vs. inclusion) - our study of meaningfulness is therefore related to one of the main discourses in existentialism.

The early 19th century philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, posthumously regarded as the father of existentialism, maintained that the individual solely has the responsibilities of giving one's own life meaning and living that life passionately and sincerely.

Other philosophers associated with Existentialism include Nietzsche, Kafka, Dostoyevsky, Sartre and Camus.

According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/phenomenology/>), Phenomenology may be understood initially as the study of structures of experience, or consciousness. Literally, phenomenology is the study of “phenomena”: appearances of things, or things as they appear in our experience, or the ways we experience things, thus the meanings things have in our experience. Phenomenology studies conscious experience as experienced from the subjective or first person point of view. This field of philosophy is then to be distinguished from, and related to, the other main fields of philosophy: ontology (the study of being or what is), epistemology (the study of knowledge), logic (the study of valid reasoning), ethics (the study of right and wrong action).

Frankl (1988:7) captures the idea of meaning making through phenomenology in the following quote:

resulted in more hits, but not many of these were associated with “life meaning” or generally the experience of meaningfulness.

Dan Haybron (2006: 109) suggested that we can reflect on our lives from different perspectives and these perspectives can result in different outcomes to these reflective processes. In the paper on Life Satisfaction, Ethical Reflection and the Science of Happiness Haybron specifically referred to different levels of satisfaction resulting from the perspectives premising these processes.

Hartman (2008: 315) goes beyond the well-known Socratic philosophy of “The unexamined life is not worth living”. He suggests that the unsuccessfully examined life is not worth much either. This is of course introducing a value judgement into the discourse of the examined life. The question that now needs to be answered is “How do we understand ‘success’ in a successfully examined life?” My view about this matter is that we will be generating only more and more questions and fewer answers as we pursue this line of thought. The process of reflection is in my opinion more important than the actual outcome of the process.

Socrates made his statement above in a context of virtues or a virtue ethics, and perhaps more specifically aimed at the eudaimonia which was introduced in Chapter 7. Eudaimonia as a reference to the *good life* is a reference to a Life that Matters, a meaningful life. The focus is therefore not a successful life, which will invariably be categorising and invoking various power discourses into the discussion, but a consideration of meaning.

Nozick (1989:276) suggests that it may be somewhat harsh to imply that the *unexamined life* is not worth living at all, but he contends that examining one’s life may lead to a more fully lived life. By examining his own life, he intends *taking it off auto-pilot*. According to Nozick to live an examined life is to make a *life portrait*. This process of examination or reflection becomes an act of appropriation, becoming agentic in painting an authentic life portrait. In narrative terms we would perhaps prefer the metaphor of an autobiography and authoring our own lives. Reflecting, according to Nozick, therefore transforms the process of having life happening to us to being a participant in our own

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*Phenomenology is an attempt to describe the way in which man understands himself, in which he interprets his own existence, far from preconceived patterns of interpretation and explanation such as are furnished by psychodynamic or socio-economic hypotheses.*

Wikipedia ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Existential\\_phenomenology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Existential_phenomenology)) describes EP as follows:

*Existential phenomenology is a **philosophical** current inspired by **Martin Heidegger**'s 1927 work **Sein und Zeit** (Being and Time) and influenced by the existential work of **Søren Kierkegaard** and the phenomenological work of **Edmund Husserl**.*

<sup>83</sup> Reflexive Inquiry (RI) draws on the spirit of five overlapping theoretical traditions--systemic, social constructionist, critical, appreciative, and complexity.

lives. Nozick proposes that in this process of examining our lives, we come to care not only about the *amount and distribution of happiness* but also about the *content of the life story, the narrative direction of life moving in the right direction* (1989:100-101, 112).

In an interesting discussion of Jewish Bioethics, Knobel (2001) suggests that Judaism is about personal and collective meaning of life, that it begins with a reflection on texts and that this takes the form of a *conversation between texts of our people and the texts our lives*.

In her book on phenomenology, Barbara Couture (1998:100) suggests that *phenomenological reflection* is the way through which we experience our lives as being meaningful<sup>84</sup>. She describes reflection as *the means through which we establish a relationship* with the world, but then she adds that it is also an *act through which we understand the world*. She posits that meaning comes about only as the result *perpetual, persistent and mutual conscious reflection of individual agents* (1998:102). Elsewhere though (1998:101, 102), she does allude to the relational or social nature of reflection, saying that reflecting is *fundamentally social* which cannot develop meaning through *detachment*. Couture then describes how reflection *culminates ideally in a shared consciousness* with others (1998:109). This corresponds to the thoughts on reflection expressed by Teilhard de Chardin (1964: 133) which are discussed later.

Couture proceeds to posit that phenomenology describes how *truth is experienced as a psychical phenomenon through our reflection* upon our subjective experiences (1998:99). She also posits that our understanding of reality resides in our reflective processes (1998:90). The aim of reflection, she proposes, is to achieve a unity with others – *with all living things and with God* (1998: 106). Reflection is a dynamic process and as we continually reflect, new worlds keep opening up to us (1998:77). This is not merely a cognitive process, as it involves sharing of reflections and in the process learning to understand ourselves in speech acts, rather than in thoughts (1998:80). Throughout her book, there are 10 examples of how narrative is used as the epistemology and also the context within which this reflective process takes place.

In his book *The Future of Man*, Teilhard de Chardin (1964:133) states quite unequivocally that reflection should not be an individual process. He suggests that it can only be developed *in communion with others*, referring to it as a *social phenomenon*. Later on (1964:158) he adds another dimension to reflection, referring to *the spiritual phenomenon* of reflection. He attributes some important qualities to reflection, suggesting that it has the potential to draw us closer to one another, assisting communication, and ultimately of uniting us.

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<sup>84</sup> Meaningful is understood by Couture (1998:171) to refer to that which we value in our own lives.

Roebben (2002) quotes two Dutch researchers Janssen and Prins (2000) who indicated that there seems to exist

*a primacy of action over reflection and of annexing religious traditions as a 'toolkit of symbols' (2000:12)*

In this paper Roebben (2002:8) suggests that young people are not looking for meaning of things, but that they are *using meaning*. This suggests a consumerism of meaning as compared to a production of meaning.

What this seems to suggest to me is that we are living in a society where movement and action are associated with powerful discourses of progress, achievement and identity, and as a result we do not allow ourselves the "luxury" to stand still and reflect. This leads to both a certain discomfort with reflection as well as the assumption that we do not really know how to reflect on life discourses. Naturally we therefore need to be guided by someone in the reflective process.

## 9.5 Conclusion

In this chapter we set out to explore a unique outcome resulting from the research conversation. Reflecting on one's own life was identified as one of the main contributors to my fellow researchers' experience of meaningfulness. Listening to their stories of reflection it was suggested that reflection and new knowledge about meaningfulness complemented each other in the creation of existential meaning.

This led the study group to reflect on narrative as a methodology and epistemology for reflection. Our examination of narrative suggested that it seems to be congruent with a reflexive inquiry process, generating new life meanings through a process of interpretation. Humankind as interpreting animals has received some attention in the literature. One interpreter of Nietzsche has for instance suggested that he portrayed humankind as *homo hermeneuticus*<sup>85</sup> (Green, 2000: 186). The processes of reflection and hermeneutics therefore seem to be intimately involved in narrative reflexivity.

When we extended the conversation to also include voices from other disciplines, the relationship between examining, reflecting or reflexive inquiry and meaningful living was strongly supported by voices from phenomenology and existentialism (or combined as phenomenological existentialism).

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<sup>85</sup> See also "Homo Hermeneuticus: The Location of Language in Human Agency," in *Philosophical Anthropology: Reviewed and Renewed*, L. Moss/M. Guttmann (eds.), The MIT Press.

Although these philosophical discourses might at first not have seemed to be compatible or congruent with the narrative approach, it was indicated that in their base arguments they share a common quest.

In our last chapter which follows, I shall invite my fellow researchers to have the last say in this discussion before we hand the conversation over to a wider audience.

## Chapter 10. Handing the story over...

The last words belong to my fellow researchers. I have asked them for their comments and reflections on the research process or aspects of the process which were meaningful to them. Here are some of their reports:

### 10.1 Estelle on Externalizing

*Personally, I found externalizing very useful. It is a great way of separating yourself from the problem and realizing that you are not the problem. I found that it gives you a better perspective on the situation. When you separate yourself from the problem, you feel that you have the power to solve it.*

*I have been depressed for a few years now, and I have to drink Anti-Depressant pills. This is due to a chemical reaction in my brain. My mother and grandmother suffer from depression as well. At first I couldn't understand what was wrong with me. I had to see a psychologist, but didn't feel the need for continuing my sessions with her. I felt that I knew it was my low self-esteem and pressure that caused this and that only I could fix it. Soon I started feeling that I'm not capable of dealing with my emotions, and started doubting myself.*

*When I started externalizing the problem (it is a chemical reaction) I felt that there wasn't really something wrong with me. The depression is the problem. When you can find out what causes the depression for instance, you can externalize that, seeing that depression is anger turned inwards (internalizing). Today I have a positive outlook on it. I am in control of the depression and even though I can't make it disappear, I understand it better and handle it better.*

*By practicing to externalize a problem, you can handle situations better and get a better perspective on it. When you externalize yourself from something, you don't get emotionally involved in the situation. When you get too involved emotionally, you lose certain outlooks and perspectives. We all know that there is a big difference between being in a certain situation and seeing a certain situation take place.*

She also offered the following feedback:

*I found yesterday's meeting very helpful – especially the part about difficult situations that occur in our lives – we absolutely control the outcome. If you see yourself as a failure you only make life harder for yourself. People and circumstances can bring someone down – in the end,*

*the outcome lies with you. You have to stick with what you believe in and not let people's words or comments affect you. When we go through difficult times we search for our purpose and self worth in life. You should determine your values and standards and keep it in mind the next time you go through a difficult time or when someone makes a comment on you as person.*

## 10.2 Jurie's last comments

*Francois's "Meaningfulness in Life" sessions made me to start thinking again about my dreams and my purpose in life. It made me even more aware how much meaningfulness we can add to other people's lives through appreciating them, sometimes just a smile to bright up someone's day or to take a bunch of flowers to a close friend or relative.*

*It was inspiring to see someone (Francois) with so much passion in what he's doing. A dream he's pursuing and that the end result will be so rewarding.*

*It made me more aware of my colleagues' needs.*

*We as human beings all wants to be loved, appreciated and encouraged.*

*I prefer one on one sessions much more that group sessions even though I've learned so much more about my colleagues during the group sessions.*

*Thank you Francois for all the value you've added to my life through living your dream to find the meaningfulness of life.*

And also

*The research process has had the result that he was encouraged to think about things.*

*Too often one just carries on day after day in a mindless way, not knowing where one is heading. This study has had the effect that I became more open and sensitive to other people and their input.*

### 10.3 Millicinda's poem

**KEEPING THE FAITH**

*I have seen how fragile life can be,*

*And I have seen how short life can be,*

*I have seen happiness,*

*I have seen sadness,*

*I have had hell and heaven,*

*I have seen how in a wink of an eye everything can change,*

**BUT**

*I have learned, above all to be grateful ...*

*I have learned to treasure even the smallest of things,*

**AND**

*I pray that God will continue His work in me,*

*And I pray that He will show me the way all the way,*

*And reveal His ultimate plan for me,*

**ABOVE ALL**

*I believe all things will come to pass*

**GOD IS ALWAYS IN CONTROL**

But some of the co-researchers also expressed experiences of meaninglessness. An example of such an experiences is described by Millicinda below:

*I was just thinking while we were in our meeting today that we strive to find meaningfulness in everything that happens and my experience is just that sometimes things do happen which to me are totally UNmeaningfull – we mustn't have the false expectation that all things can be explained and boxed into a certain meaningfulness.*



*I didn't find any meaning in my sister dying at the age of 27 – still today. I know that some people's death can mean something to other people, can even be the turning points in their lives but for me her death was totally meaningless and me trying to find the meaning in her death for the last 4 years only had me feeling miserable. I am not going to go with a just any explanation of meaningfulness to ease my pain, I want something authentic, and I have learned only to accept the fact that she died without personal meaning to myself. I realise that God's plan will determine the outcome, whom am I to question Him, because doubting this event and the fact that it had to happen will make me doubt whether God is really in control or not.*

But why would we include accounts of meaninglessness in a study of what constitutes a Life that Matters or a meaningful life then? Even as our problem stories should never become totalitarian, so will our preferred stories never be totalitarian. Our multi-storied realities will always include *discordant* or UNmeaningful events. It is our relationship with these events, though, which will change. Our intentional states of identity (White, 2007:103-106) are created by the *choices* we make from these multi-storied possible realities. Thus meaning becomes an intentional state understanding.

## **10.4 Personal reflection on my co-researchers' stories of meaningfulness**

### **10.4.1 Local treasures of meaning**

As I indicated previously, we as a co-research team agreed on what narrative discourses originated from the original personal conversations. In the process, though, part of the richness of individuals' own narratives of meaning was lost. For me, those individual stories of identity, spirituality, purpose or relationship were local treasures of meaningfulness. Those stories once again underscored the local aspect of constructs. Even though most of the fellow researchers suggested that their lives were meaningful when they meant something to other people, their local understandings of what that meant to them individually all differed, and in this difference the precious narratives were grounded.

### **10.4.2 Not-Knowing**

The benefit of entering the process not-knowing was made possible by a research approach (and perhaps even an epistemology) which paid more attention to process than to content or "models". In the process of adopting a not-knowing position, I am convinced that more space was created for my fellow researchers' stories. This also constructed an ethic of respectfulness and appreciation.

### 10.4.3 Power Relations

Although I was always sensitive to power discourses, the not-knowing position also assisted in both sensitising all the participants to power relations – like the power potentially positioned in the research facilitator’s position.

### 10.4.4 De-centred position of the research facilitator

My experience in the research process was that de-centring myself in the research process by

- Not adopting an expert position;
- Introducing any references from the literature as “outsider witnesses” rather than totalising, definitive knowledge, thus
- Using (these) references as acknowledgement and appreciative texts;
- Adopting a position of facilitator and co-researcher and not that of the objective observer;
- Using reflective questioning in supporting dialogues which opened up meaning making narratives, rather than administering questionnaires for instance and
- Maintaining a culture of curiosity rather than testing preconceived hypotheses about “a life that matters”,

Opened up space for multi-loguing in a respectful manner in which all my fellow researchers felt safe enough to voice their opinions on what constitutes a life that matters. This not only wove a lattice of narratives on existential meaning, but also sometimes allowed the voices of some of the co-researchers to be heard for the first time. A general ethic of appreciation, affirmation and recognition spontaneously evolved as a result of this.

### 10.4.5 Externalisation

Externalisation was adopted by the co-researchers as a social skill which they could introduce into their workplace and also their personal lives. They expressed appreciation for the difference externalisation made and told landscape of action stories in support (see Estelle’s letter above).

Externalisation allowed us to introduce sensitive and controversial stories into the conversations in a safe and non-offensive way.

## 10.5 Reflection on the voices of literature in the discussion of meaning

The only learning about existential meaning did not come from the co-researchers though. The voices of the literature added more meaning discourses to the meaningfulness conversation. In the

chapter on a theological positioning of the study, we listened to the voices of Rahner, Bloch, Moltmann, Brümmer and Tillich, introducing their own meaningfulness stories.

To this effect Rahner suggested that meaningfulness is intimately connected to our experiences of God in the world and links the meaning conversation to Grace and God's Purpose for human beings. Purpose was later taken up as a meaning discourse introduced by my fellow researchers as well. This was discussed at length in Chapter Seven. Hope was introduced into the conversation as a meaning discourse by Bloch and Moltmann, proposing that the capacity to anticipate, wish for and hope may be central to our life meanings. Brümmer suggested that theology may provide the pictures of life within which we can position our lives meaningfully.<sup>86</sup> According to Brümmer, meaning thus is effected by our experience of living in fellowship with God and by a belief that God is involved in what happens in the world in which we live. Paul Tillich suggested that non-being or rather the anxiety of non-being was the primary concern in the quest for meaningful living. Creative participation in meaningful living was indicated by Tillich to be key to existential meaning. Tillich concludes that that which is above the God of theism, has the ability to transcend the anxiety of doubt and meaninglessness, taken into the courage to be.

As is suggested by the footnote below the discourses of meaning introduced in the literature resonated well with the meaning stories of my fellow researchers. Inviting the voices of the literature into the research conversation in this way provided outsider witnesses who confirmed, authenticated and respected the stories of the fellow researchers.

### **10.6 A proposed methodology for facilitating participants' quest for meaningfulness**

The praxis which was co-developed by my fellow researchers and me in this study in our quest for a more meaningful life, started off as a story gathering exercise. All the co-researchers were encouraged to bring along their stories of meaning. This was done in personal interviews with individual participants to the study. These stories were then collated and introduced to the research group. This group functioned as a reflective team, acknowledging the stories brought along by their fellow researchers. This process then proceeded to group the stories into meaning discourses. These discourses were subsequently thickened by means of landscape of action stories and a re-

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<sup>86</sup> Here we are reminded of a landscape of meaning against which we position our actions in a meaningful way. This is facilitated by what I refer to as a hermeneutical bridge, or a process of reflection – the topic of Chapter Nine.

membering process. This acknowledged the landscape of identity implicit in the stories. The discourses eventually exposed intentions to meaning in the lives of my co-researchers.

In an individual process with one client at a time, the process can unfold as follows:

- Mine the stories describing the meaning discontents in the life of the client
- Name these discontents in “experience-near” language
- Explore what the effects of these discontents are; journey through the landscapes of relationships, spirituality and any discourses the client wishes to introduce
- Venture cautiously into the “absent-but-implicit”, the not-yet-said in the meaning conversation: this can take the form of co-examining the intentions and hopes, the wishes and desires which in their absence created the anxiety or frustration which necessitated the conversation in the first place
- Re-member these intentional positions by means of outsider witnesses; invite witnesses to the nature of these intentional positions into the conversation, physically or symbolically.
- Create histories for these meaning discourses
- Make sure that these new meaning discourses are preferred realities for the “meaning” client.

This process may potentially extend over a number of conversations and these physical appointments should be connected by means of reflective and reflexive communication in between.

### **10.7 How I perceive the contribution this study may have made to the broader narrative of meaningfulness**

This study may serve to revive the conversation both in the practical theology discourse and the pastoral theology discourse. It positions existential meaning within an uncertainty discourse and suggests that reflexive co-construction in the manner suggested previously, can contribute to the meaning enhancing multilogue.

Meaning making is introduced in a non-totalitarian way, strongly suggesting that an experience of meaningful living is possible even in postmodern times often described as confusing and potentially relativistically or nihilistically meaningless.

This study creates space for spirituality in the existential meaning conversation; perhaps even strongly proclaiming that it should be part of any conversation on meaningfulness.

Meaningfulness has been introduced as a local experience devoid of the power discourses of meta narratives and do-it-yourself recipes.

Local process rather than universal content was positioned as meaning enhancing in the study, thus opening space for local life knowledges and negating the need to conform to meta narratives of meaningfulness which may in effect be alienating and disempowering in that they relegate the life knowledges of objectified people into anecdotal and fictional.

### **10.8 My own experience of the study**

My own need to experience the research of which I was a participant as meaningful was satisfied and confirmed by my co-researchers' narrations of how they experienced the research process. My trust in the ethic evolving from the participatory action research process as well as the critical relation constructionist epistemology I adopted as a paradigm for the study, has been strengthened and my intentional position rewarded or acknowledged by the appreciative and affirmative responses of my fellow researchers.

For me, doctoral studies have always been part of a personal meaning story in the space that it creates for growth and respectful curiosity. I can therefore call it a life ambition fulfilled.

Even if this study does not lead to academic recognition in the form of a post-graduate degree, I will be content with the function and position I have been privileged to have in a community of practice which embarked on a journey to explore what makes life more meaningful.

I would therefore like to thank everyone who helped to make this such a meaningful process.

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## Appendix 1. Letter of Invitation

### A Life That Matters

Some call it a “life that matters”, others prefer to think of it in terms of “making a difference”, “contributing something to life”, the “significance of everything I do”, a “meaningful life” or being happy or content with one’s life. The point is: it seems as if we all have a desire to live meaningfully or significantly...

I am busy with a doctoral study about what makes life meaningful or significant for people. But being true to what the study is all about, I want this study to be meaningful... to make a difference in people’s lives; this should never be a piece of research which will just lie on some shelf gathering dust as it does. The study therefore has to be action-oriented: in studying the topic of meaningfulness or significance it should generate knowledge which will make a difference in the lives of those who feel that their lives have started to run rather low on the significance scale!

I am therefore inviting people who would like to participate in the study, being interested to contribute their stories of meaningfulness or the lack of significance so that together we could build a resource which could empower ourselves and others to live more significant lives. The study will be narrative; therefore we will be working with life stories. The study will also be participatory, meaning that you will all become co-researchers or fellow researchers. And then, it will be action research, requiring that it will need to make a (“meaningful”!) difference to our own lives.

So what would it require of me? you would be asking. I would like you to become involved in interviews (individual or group; in person or by means of a suitable communication medium, depending on the circumstances) through which we would be sharing stories of significance. Once these stories have been recorded, I would share them with your consent with the rest of the group for everybody to reflect on everything which was told. The group would also be invited to do their own research on the topic, contributing these stories to our own as they do. Through a process of

researching, implementing and reflecting in a cyclical fashion, we would therefore be developing our own resource of meaningful living knowledge, applying it in our own lives and moving towards meaning or significance ourselves. Altogether you should not be spending more than 24 hours over 8 months on the project.

If you are interested to become involved in this study, do contact me on 082 920 0481, or send an email to [stories@kune.co.za](mailto:stories@kune.co.za).

I am looking forward to your responses.

Yours in significance,

François Wessels

## Appendix 2. Preliminary Informed Consent Form

# PASTORAL NARRATIVE MEANS TO A LIFE THAT MATTERS

### PRELIMINARY INFORMED CONSENT FORM:

Research Facilitator: François Wessels

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study which will take place from April 2008 to November 2008. This form outlines the purposes of the study and provides a description of your involvement and rights as a participant.

The purposes of this project are:

- 1) to gain insight and experience in the topic of Meaningfulness (in personal and professional life);
- 2) to facilitate participants' journey to "a life that matters";
- 3) to fulfil the course requirements for a PhD in Practical Theology (Family and Personal Therapy), through the University of Pretoria.

The methods to be used to collect information for this study are explained below. Your stories will be included in the Doctoral Thesis.

We shall collaborate in this participatory action research project to explore ways of enriching the meaningfulness in people's lives. The group will decide collectively how we shall know that we have progressed in our quest for meaningfulness, describing measures of meaningfulness as we do. The process will be narrative in nature. We shall start with our own life stories, sharing meaningful episodes and events with each other. I shall respond to individual stories, reflecting on certain significant themes and discourses. These will be interrogated by us (individual participants and me) and the shared learning will be communicated to the rest of the research group. They will in turn be invited to reflect and apply some of the learning in their own lives. I shall then invite all participants to share their experience, exploring how these "knowledges" enriched their lives or facilitated meaningfulness in their own lives. This cyclical process will continue until the group decides that we have met our own expectations as per the meaningfulness measures defined upfront.

You are encouraged to ask any questions at any time about the nature of the study and the methods that I am using. Your suggestions and concerns are important to me; please contact me at any time at the address/phone number listed above.

I will include the information from this study in a doctoral thesis. This thesis or at least the relevant chapters of the thesis will be read by you, my internal promoter and any co-promoters, and optionally, by one other person if you give permission, in order to check on the accuracy of your stories. The stories will not be available to any other person to be read without your permission.

I guarantee that the following conditions will be met:

The University of Pretoria requires that a record of all research data needs to be stored on CD in UP appointed archives.

Your real name will not be used at any point of information collection, or in the written thesis; instead, you and any other person and place names involved in your case will be given pseudonyms that will be used in all verbal and written records and reports.

If you grant permission for audio taping, no audio tapes will be used for any purpose other than to do this study, and will not be played for any reason other than to do this study. At your discretion, these tapes will either be destroyed or returned to you.

Your participation in this research is voluntary; you have the right to withdraw at any point of the study, for any reason, and without any prejudice, and the information collected and records and reports written will be turned over to you.

You will receive a copy of the final thesis before it is handed in, so that you have the opportunity to suggest changes to the researcher, if necessary.

You will receive a copy of the thesis that is handed in for publication.

Do you grant permission to be quoted directly?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Do you grant permission to be audiotaped if necessary?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

I agree to the terms

Co-researcher \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

I agree to the terms:

Researcher \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_



## Appendix 3. Confirmatory Informed Consent Form

# Narrative Reflections on a Life that Matters

Research Facilitator: François Wessels

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for agreeing to review the account of the study which took place from April 2008 to November 2008. This form invites you to reflect on the description of the process and comment on whether it accurately describes the process and content of the research process in which you participated.

The purposes of this project were:

- 1) to gain insight and experience in the topic of Meaningfulness (in personal and professional life);
- 1) to facilitate participants' journey to "a life that matters";
- 2) to fulfil the course requirements for a PhD in Practical Theology (Family and Personal Therapy), through the University of Pretoria.

The methods which were used to collect information for this study are explained below. Your stories will be included in the Doctoral Thesis.

[The actual research process is described here – this may differ from what was planned, because of suggestions by the co-researchers.]

I will include the information from this study in a doctoral thesis. This thesis or at least the relevant chapters of the thesis have been read by you, my internal promoter and any co-promoters, and optionally, by one other person if you give permission, in order to check on the accuracy of your stories. The stories will not be available to any other person to be read without your permission.

To the best of your knowledge, have the following conditions been met?

“The University of Pretoria requires that a record of all research data needs to be stored on CD in UP appointed archives.

Your real name will not be used at any point of information collection, or in the written thesis; instead, you and any other person and place names involved in your case will be given pseudonyms that will be used in all verbal and written records and reports.

If you grant permission for audio taping, no audio tapes will be used for any purpose other than to do this study, and will not be played for any reason other than to do this study. At your discretion, these tapes will either be destroyed or returned to you.

Your participation in this research is voluntary; you have the right to withdraw at any point of the study, for any reason, and without any prejudice, and the information collected and records and reports written will be turned over to you.

You will receive a copy of the final thesis before it is handed in, so that you have the opportunity to suggest changes to the researcher, if necessary.

You will receive a copy of the thesis that is handed in to the instructor.”

Have you been quoted correctly?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Do you grant permission for the texts to be included in the thesis as reported?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

I agree to the publication of the text

Co-researcher \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

I agree to the publication of the text

Researcher \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_