

WOMEN AND MEANINGFUL WORK

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1987





WOMEN AND MEANINGFUL WORK

A dissertation submitted to the  
California Institute for Clinical Social Work  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in Clinical Social Work

by

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June 28, 1987

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We hereby approve the dissertation

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## ABSTRACT

### Women and Meaningful Work

by

Margaret Ann Kohls Cottle

This exploratory study addresses what makes work meaningful for women. Freud's alleged love and work description of healthy adulthood influenced subsequent theory and research on adult development. Research on women tells about the importance of attachment in relationships, but says little about the pleasures of task accomplishment and mastery in work. The literature on women and work tells of the impact of work on domestic roles and assumes women like men are motivated by the same drives for power and achievement. The social science literature says little about what makes women's work meaningful.

This research approached the question with a sample of twelve middle-class, mid-life women who reported work added meaning and purpose to their lives. The sample was obtained by a network approach and was selected by occupational diversity.

The findings revealed that participants organized their responses in the personal language of development rather than describing career tracks. These themes emerged:

1. Vision: Work is an extension of personal vision--the fundamental values and talents that constitute how each woman views the world and what she had to offer.
2. Power: Power as autonomy, leadership, and effectiveness was highly valued. Hierarchical power was viewed as potentially threatening to vision.
3. Competence, Belief, and Autonomy: Competence in work they believed in was highly valued. All considered autonomy an essential condition for competent work.
4. Coherence: Coherence between vision and work, between personal lives and work lives, and in the work itself was highly valued.
5. Growth: Meaningful work is a vehicle for personal growth.

"Work" and "job" were not synonymous. Work was the larger concept and has to do with vision. Job referred to a specific remunerated role.

Erikson's concept of generativity, rather than motivational concepts of success, power, and achievement, was most relevant for this research. Findings suggest further research on generativity for both men and women.

In memory of my father, Glen Milton Kohls

October 23, 1905 - August 3, 1986

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am very grateful to the twelve women who so generously gave of their time to participate in this study. Their curiosity and vitality made them a pleasure to interview, and their thinking stimulated and challenged my own.

I also extend my thanks to my committee: Judith Schiller, Gareth Hill, and Katherine Czesak. Each contributed in unique and timely ways and made it possible for me to complete a work that is meaningful for me. Judith Schiller, who served as chair of my committee, patiently helped me launch a series of trial balloons until I finally found one that I loved and that could fly. Gareth Hill has been supportive to me long before I began this research. I especially appreciate his ability to help me clarify the presentation of my ideas in this project. Katherine Czesak, the outside member of my committee, provided invaluable help with her extensive knowledge of qualitative research methodology and her quick grasp of what it was I was trying to do.

I extend my thanks to my friends in and out of the Institute, who supported me in numerous personal ways. I am especially grateful to George Simons, who patiently guided me through the foreign land of word processors and printers.

I want to thank my family for their support and belief in me. My parents closely followed the flights of my trial balloons and

the development of this project, even while my father was dying. My father was a man who loved his work. I hope I have inherited at least some of his incorrigible curiosity and my mother's courage. Finally, I thank my son, Chris, for his humor, affection, and high spirits. I hope he, too, will find work he loves.

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## INTRODUCTION

"One can live magnificently in this world, if one knows how to work and how to love, to work for the person one loves, and love one's work." (Tolstoy)

This research addresses the question of what makes work meaningful for women. Freud is alleged to have described the healthy adult as having the capacities to both love and work. He had little to say about healthy adulthood in general, and we cannot assume that his description would have been the same for both sexes. Certainly the population from which his patients were drawn and from which his theories emerged did not include large numbers of working women.

Nevertheless, Freud's thinking has influenced most subsequent theory and research on adult development. The notions of health, normalcy, and maturity found in the major life-span theories of Jung, Maslow, Erikson, and Loevinger include, among other qualities, an engagement with the world and a purposeful harnessing of one's energies, qualities that are most often found in the world of work.

These theories make explicit the universal assumption of modern post-industrial society that work is a central component of adult life for males. This assumption is also central to the larger body of adult development research (Kohlberg, 1976;

Vaillant, 1977; Levinson, 1978) which has been criticized by feminist researchers such as Carol Gilligan (1982) and Emily Hancock (1981) for applying a male-biased theoretical framework in interpreting the data that is not valid for understanding women.

Traditionally, the young woman has entered into adulthood by assuming the domestic role in the world of love. Whether or not she also worked outside the home was primarily an economic issue until recent years. Lower and working-class women have had to work outside as well as inside the home to sustain their families. Until recent years, most middle-class women have not had access to this world of work outside the home. This body of theory and research on adult development reveals not only a gender bias but a class bias as well.

Contemporary research (Hancock, 1981; Gilligan, 1982;, Blumenfeld, 1983) on women has informed us that attachment, care, responsibility, and commitment are of central importance throughout women's lives. While this research adds to our understanding of women in the world of love, it has little to tell us about the importance and meaning of work in women's development.

The theoretical literature on work has been criticized as irrelevant for women because it is dominated by imagery, vocabulary, normative judgments, and timetables that are

male-biased and culture bound (Derr, 1980). Most of the research on women and work explores the impact of work on other dimensions of a woman's life, particularly her domestic role (Parun & Del Vento Bielby, 1981), or assumes that women are motivated by the same drives for success, power, and achievement as are assumed for men. Together, these bodies of literature yield a fragmented picture of working women. Values in the world of love appear to be at odds with values in the world of work.

The concepts of maturity found in the major life-span theories of Jung, Maslow, Erikson, and Loevinger present a more integrated picture of healthy adults. They also reveal another cultural and middle-class assumption: that we expect our work to have significance in our lives beyond providing a livelihood. Career counselors, employment agencies, and vocational experts all operate with the assumption that some work is more suitable than others for a particular individual, and the criteria for such suitability can be based on notions of ability and aspiration as well as the job market. I hold that we also want our work to be inherently meaningful, to provide a sense of purpose and fulfillment in our lives.

Just what makes work meaningful is not addressed in the social science literature. Certain underlying assumptions about meaning are embedded in adult development theory and research. Meaning is assumed to be found in such factors as ambition,

achievement, success, career development, and power, but whether these factors are in fact basic to meaningful work for both sexes is questionable. My own experience as a woman engaged in work I love and which provides a sense of purpose and fulfillment in my life leads me to believe there is another way of looking at women and work. My experience with clients and colleagues who are committed to work they love supports this belief.

To address the question of what makes work meaningful for women, I selected a group of chronologically mature, middle-class women who report they are committed to work they love and that provides a sense of purpose and fulfillment to their lives. Research (Bardwick, 1971, 1980; Barnett & Baruch, 1979) reveals that it is most often in mid-life that a woman's energies are sufficiently freed from family responsibilities for sustained, committed, and serious work. These findings are not generalizable to all working women, as the sample is limited to middle-class women. Nor are the findings generalizable to all middle-class working women, because the sample is limited to women who are committed to work they find meaningful and because of the small sample size. However, in spite of these limitations, this sample is appropriate for developing a beginning picture of what makes work meaningful for this segment of the population of working women.

The following concepts are central to this research:

Work: Work was broadly defined as that purposeful activity one does in the world for wages or expected wages. In our culture, remuneration is the most concrete sign by which work is recognized. To expect remuneration is to accept the "public" nature of one's work. I assume that the subjective experiences of volunteer work, the work of homemakers, and paid work are different. Work must be public to have been included in this research. For example, if a woman writes poetry, it must be poetry she submits to the world via publication or poetry readings so that it goes beyond personal expression for oneself. While she might not receive remuneration for her poetry, she does not consider it volunteer work and has hopes of being paid. Work is a more inclusive concept than is "job" and refers to a field of endeavor that can include several jobs. For example, "education" is a field that includes teaching, administration, and program planning.

Meaningful Work: Meaningful work is work which a woman reports gives her life a sense of purpose and fulfillment, and is work she would choose to continue even if all her economic needs were met.

Committed: Commitment is defined as working in the field for at least three years in a more than a half-time capacity and with the intention to continue.

Chronologically Mature Woman: Chronologically mature women are women who are forty years old or older.

## CHAPTER I

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### Introduction

The question of what constitutes meaningfulness of work for women has not been addressed in the social science literature. To provide a context for addressing this question, I will review several related bodies of literature. The historical separation of love and work in Western society undergirds what has been written and researched. This separation has had profound implications for both men and women and can be discerned in the underlying assumptions in the literature on the psychology of women and the literature on women and work.

In his article, "Vicissitudes of Work and Love in Anglo-American Society," Smelser (1980) describes how industrialization, first in Europe and then the United States, has influenced the meanings that have been ascribed to Freud's "love and work" criterion of healthy adulthood. Industrialization hardened the divisions between the instrumental and expressive modes of behavior in the middle and lower-middle classes. It consolidated the polarization in marketplace and home and between men and women. As modes of behavior, there is no inherently necessary compartmentalization of work and love. A piece of work

can be lovingly executed and we work at our love relationships. However, the impact of industrialization on the lower-middle and middle classes has been to divide and consolidate gender roles, to allocate instrumental modes to men and the marketplace, expressive modes to women and the home, so that work and love were organized into overly tight compartments that render them difficult to integrate on both social and personal levels.

The first body of literature I will review addresses the concepts of maturity delineated by the major life-span theorists. Concepts of maturity are culture-bound and value-laden notions of the idealized adult and as such provide clues to cultural assumptions about what constitutes a meaningful life. The centrality of work in these theories underscores the cultural assumption that to be adult is to work, at least for males, and that more is expected from work than simply earning a livelihood. Also embedded in these notions of ideal adulthood are values that may provide clues about cultural assumptions of what makes work meaningful for adult males and perhaps for females.

I will then review the more current thinking and research on adult women. While this literature does not inform us about what makes work meaningful for women, it does inform us about women's values.

Finally, I will summarize the pertinent literature on women and work. This literature is heavily influenced by two assumptions: the primacy of the domestic role for women; and that working women are motivated by the same drives for success, achievement, and power as men.

### Psychological Theories of Ideal Adulthood

Rigid compartmentalization causes rifts in psyches as well as lives. Perhaps the excessive polarizations of love and work, masculine and feminine in Western society are compensated for by the concepts of maturity, or ideal adulthood, that we find in the growth models of Jung, Maslow, Loevinger, Erikson, and Hill, which emphasize interconnectedness and ego expansion. "Individuation" is the endpoint of development in Jung's model, and it means "becoming a single, homogeneous being" (Jung, 1972, p. 171). Mid-life is the period of individuation, marked by the necessity for integrating the inner polarities of masculine and feminine (Jung, 1970). Gareth Hill's model of maturity (1978) extends Jung's thinking. He conceptualizes maturity as flexible ego consciousness, comfortable in both static and dynamic masculine and feminine modes of consciousness. Maslow writes of "self-actualization" in adulthood, a process that gives wholeness to the adult personality. Loevinger's "integrated" person--the most advanced stage of ego development in her scheme--has the

capacity for reconciling inner conflicts and has a coherent sense of self (Loevinger 1976). Erikson writes of the task of generativity and its attendant virtue of care. He defines generativity as the concern for establishing and building the next generation, and extends the meaning to include productivity and creativity. Care is defined as "the widening concern for what has been generated by love, necessity, or accident" (Erikson, 1964).

However, these growth model concepts of ideal adulthood also imply an engagement with the world which has historically been unavailable to most women. Jung states, "Individuation does not shut one out from the world, but gathers the world to oneself" (Jung 1970, p. 226). Maslow (1970) argues for the necessity of sufficient life experience in order to find one's calling, the altar upon which to offer one's self (1970). His emphasis on using the fullness of one's capacities to engage in the "real world" is not unlike Loevinger's description of the "integrated" person's deep and vigorous involvement in purposeful work. Erikson's extended definition of generativity, which includes productivity and creativity, broadens the concept of purposeful work and perhaps, therefore, might be potentially more relevant for women.

Embedded in these idealized concepts of the adult self are values of personal integration, interconnectedness, and an engagement with the world that provide an opportunity for not only

developing one's gifts but also transcending one's personal limitations and particular life span. We find a mix of fluidity and focused energies. To what extent these values are those of the particular theorist or are in fact germane to either sex is open to speculation. However, they can provide a provisional backdrop for the next body of literature to be reviewed: the major work on what constitutes adulthood in women and current research on female values.

#### Adulthood in Women

Explicit formulations of what constitutes adulthood in women are late arrivals in psychological and social science literature. The earliest work on women assumed as pivotal such biological events as menstruation, childbirth, and menopause and such sociological correlates to reproductive role events as marriage or children leaving home. Bernice Neugarten (1968) strongly repudiated the usefulness of such concepts for understanding adult behavior in both genders. Instead, she asks us to turn to socially determined concepts of age-expectations in our understanding of both adult men and women. She calls for a shift of focus from these predictable events to greater cultural relativity.

Judith Bardwick (1971) grounds femaleness in the primacy of the body-events of bearing and rearing children, but also includes the powerful forces of social learning. She contends that both men and women are acculturated to the dominant American cultural value of achievement, which includes assertiveness, competition, and egocentricity. As girls reach puberty, the cultural ideal of femininity presents profound conflicts. Most frequently, the girl temporarily resolves the conflict by adhering to the idealized model and setting aside achievement aspirations. This "traditional core" of women's identity, which consists of the responsive, nurturing, other-related aspects of the female self, is consolidated with marriage and maternity. However, when the issues of marriage and maternity are settled, the more egocentric aspects of the self, perceived by a woman as conflicting with her domestic roles, may re-emerge. Her traditional core can then expand to include and develop achievement needs that were set aside.

Bardwick's concept of the traditional core is not unlike Gutman's (1965) description of the feminine ego style as empathic, intuitive, and person-oriented. He, too, describes a filling out of the woman's personality in mid-life by what he calls "the return of the repressed," where capacities that were dormant during the reproductive years are once again available. Both Bardwick and Gutman stress the fundamental importance of

attachment for women, but also include the importance of the more egocentric traits such as the assertion and autonomy necessary for achievement.

Carol Gilligan's (1982) landmark research on women's self-concept and moral reasoning sharply called attention to the differences between masculine and feminine self-concepts and modes of being in the world. She underscores the primacy of attachment, responsibility, and care throughout female development. The maturation process consists of learning to include responsibility to oneself with responsibility to others. Gilligan's heavy emphasis on attachment throughout the female life course may be reactive to the works of Kohlberg, Vaillant, and Levinson with their equally heavy, yet unspoken, anti-attachment bias. Gilligan places little or no emphasis on task accomplishment, mastery, and competence as ends in themselves.

Emily Hancock's (1981) exploratory study on women's development in adult life builds on Gilligan's concepts. Her subjects reported feeling "adult" when they left their homes of origin following marriage to "independently" chosen partners. A finding which corroborates Bardwick's notion of identity consolidation via mate selection was that throughout the vicissitudes of their lives, attachment, responsibility, and care were highly valued by this group of women. Hancock also found that the maturation process was set in motion when the care and

attachment the woman assumed would be continuous in her life were disrupted and no longer there. Maturation consisted of actively rebuilding their relational lives. Several of her subjects reported experiencing a resurgence of the perceptions and feelings of the more autonomous, active self they had been as girls.

Elise Blumenfeld's (1983) exploratory study of maturity in women in their early fifties also revealed that attachment, care, and responsibility were highly prioritized even as these women became more sure of themselves and not so ready to please within their relationships.

While this literature on women's adulthood underscores the centrality of attachment, care, commitment, and responsibility within the world of relationships, there are differences between those views that include needs for more egocentric aspects of the female self which are necessary for focused work and those which pay little attention to these qualities. While our knowledge about women's self-concept and values has grown over the last ten years, we know very little about this female self in the context of work.

### Women and Work

Assumptions underlying the extensive psychological body of literature on women and work include: (1) the primacy of the

reproductive role; (2) women work primarily for economic reasons; (3) women who work for other than economic reasons work for personal reasons, and their work is therefore not serious; (4) women are motivated and constrained by culture-bound notions of success, achievement, and power which are assumed to have the same meanings for both sexes. Work as vocation or "calling," inherently meaningful work for both men and women, is rarely addressed in the social science literature. An exception is found in contemporary organization theory (Peters & Waterman, 1982) where the need for meaning is assumed as part of human nature. Yet meaningful work is a common theme in literature, autobiography, philosophy, and in the media.

In "Women in the Middle Years: A Critique of Research and Theory," Barnett & Baruch (1978) point out that in the literature on women's development there has been too much emphasis on chronology and reproductive roles and too little on work. They noted that working women have frequently been excluded from research samples as "non-representative," and that work has been ignored as a central variable in women's lives despite the growing number of working women. Even in more contemporary research which includes working women of all ages, the focus is primarily on how their work affects their domestic roles.

Most of the psychological studies of women and work have focused on concepts of achievement and success and have been

conducted with samples of college women. In Sara Yogev's (1983) summary of research findings from the 1960's and 1970's, she criticizes the research instruments and methodologies as biased, not consonant with cultural change, and inappropriate for studying subtle, complex aspects of women's work lives. Perhaps even more relevantly she notes that there are far too many complex variables to permit generalization from the college years to the ensuing years of adulthood.

Matina Horner's (1972) research on internalized barriers to success is probably the best known piece of work in the field of women and achievement. Her research has been criticized on several fronts, but most relevant for the purposes of this study is the observation that she assumes "success" has the same meaning for women as it does for men. In 1970, Bardwick commented that fear of success is a relevant concept for college-age women but should not be generalized beyond the years of mate selection and childrearing. Her thinking followed Baruch's (1966) Radcliffe study which found that the need to achieve became stronger in women fifteen years after graduation from college. She postulated that energies can be freed for expansion only after the issues of mate selection and childbearing are addressed and resolved (1971). Bardwick (1980) updated her thinking to include the powerful cultural forces in the women's movement and our changing economy that account for contemporary women's more continuous work

patterns. However, she postulates that the "traditional core" remains central, and she addresses the profound schisms which are a part of women's lives as they struggle with these new values.

Two papers in the psychoanalytic literature on internalized barriers in women address the importance of understanding women's work functioning. Alexandra Symonds (1975) and Adrienne Applegarth (1977), both psychoanalytic clinicians, emphasize the fact that work as an important variable in women's lives is virtually ignored in the psychoanalytic literature and that when it is mentioned, it is often presented as deviant from "normal" femininity and a manifestation of misplaced masculine strivings. Both Applegarth and Symonds attribute this narrow perspective on women to the strictures of psychoanalytic developmental theory and to the unquestioned impact of the culture on both clinician and patient. The Applegarth and Symonds papers both focus on the problematic aspects of work--issues of work inhibition and reduced pleasure in highly successful women. The relevance of these papers for this research lies in their explicit emphasis upon the importance of understanding a woman's functioning at work in as much depth as her functioning in her relational life.

Gilligan's (1982) research does not directly address work. Perhaps her most useful contribution to our understanding of women and work is her sharp reminder that we cannot assume that words have the same meaning for both sexes. Achievement, success, and

power are culturally loaded words, and most frequently in research on women, these words are undefined. Gilligan reviewed Hennig's and Jardin's The Managerial Woman (1977), which is based on research with a sample of women who had held their relational lives in abeyance during their early years of achievement. They temporarily left work to marry and then frequently resumed their careers, backed up by supportive husbands. Gilligan interprets these women's career shifts into and out of the labor force as being a response to the loss of attachment. Many of their male mentors and peers were moving up the corporate ladder during and prior to this period. She states that "for these women of remarkable achievement, their identity remained relationally defined; they knew themselves not through social recognition but as they were known by the men in their lives." Her emphasis on the personal attachment aspects of work reveals her assumption that it is the quality of attachments that work affords which renders it meaningful for these women. While this assumption certainly calls into question other assumptions about the centrality of ambition, power, and achievement, it suggests another theoretical framework, which, when applied to interpret these data, curtails rather than enhances our understanding of what makes work meaningful for women.

Hancock's (1981) major finding about the place of work in the lives of the women in her sample was the severe schisms these

women experienced between their work and familial responsibilities. Her subjects valued the competence and mastery they gained through work. They were also overwhelmingly committed to their domestic relationships. Attempts to balance these realms rendered them vulnerable to guilt and fears of selfishness. All these women had discontinuous career patterns, and only one subject, a seventy-one-year-old writer, had found a satisfying balance for herself.

The most extensive body of research on women and work has been conducted by Grace Baruch and Rosalind Barnett (1983), who have studied such variables as role strain, role discontinuity, expectation of self-support, economic dependence, multiple roles and psychological well-being. Their research reveals both the complexity of the issues and the fact that our limited knowledge about women and work is highly specific and not generalizable across boundaries of age or social class. Although they acknowledge the oversimplification of dividing instrumental and expressive modes of behavior along work and family lines, their research explicitly accepts the categorization and works with it. They found that the mastery, control, and competence gained in the world of work served as a sturdier buffer against depression than did the pleasures of the family (1983). They also found that certain aspects of work status, such as level of occupation and commitment, appear to have a strong impact on women's well-being.

The issue of what makes work meaningful for women is not addressed in this body of research. We learn how the interaction of work with domestic roles makes for career discontinuity in women. We learn which work conditions enhance a woman's well-being and which conditions erode it. Most of the research is based on an unquestioned dichotomization between love and work, job and home, and focuses on the problematic aspects of their integration. There is no research that addresses what makes work meaningful for women, and while this body of literature provides clues in its underlying assumptions--such as attachment, competency, and mastery--these assumptions may have biased the findings and may not be relevant for women.

## CHAPTER II

## METHOD

Introduction and Methodological Considerations

This is an exploratory, descriptive study using a qualitative research approach, which was judged as most appropriate for investigating the research question. Qualitative approaches are particularly well suited to areas of inquiry where little is known. There is no theory which addresses the issue of what makes work meaningful for women, and no research has as yet addressed that question.

Instead of beginning with preformed categories which might or might not be relevant, this approach begins with questions directed towards the concrete experience of the participants. The initial questions in this study evolved from my own experience and the related literature. The aim of these initial questions was to open up areas of concrete experience through participant self-reflection and collaborative dialogue with the researcher. The themes which emerged were then tested in the interviews. My goal was to develop a beginning picture of what makes work meaningful for women.

The qualitative research approach of this study was a dialectical, mutually-informing process. Together, the participants and I evolved a set of understandings rather than conclusions. The interplay between researcher and participants, which qualitative research allows, provides for unpredicted findings (Weskott, 1979) and new categories, and therefore was particularly appropriate for this unexplored area of inquiry.

Parlee's (1979, p. 129) statement that "the methodology of a field delineates the range of explanatory concepts and the domains of permissible types of explanations" may help us understand the curious fact that neither the literature on women and work nor feminist research on women's values and self-concepts contributes to our understanding of what makes work meaningful for women. Traditional psychology and sociology have approached the data with pre-existing abstractions and categories such as "job satisfaction," "role strain," and "dual career marriages," an approach not suitable for subjectivity and complexity of meaning. The body of feminist research which has used qualitative methods has studied samples of women for whom work is not central. (Blumenfeld, 1983) or has focused on other issues such as self-concept (Hancock, 1981; Gilligan, 1982; Plessner Lyons, 1983).

### Validity in Qualitative Research

Steiner Kvale (1986, p.1) states that "in scientific endeavors, the truth and trustworthiness of the results is a main concern." He describes how qualitative studies have been particularly remiss in addressing the issue of validity, or truth, and therefore their results are often dismissed as subjective and unscientific.

Just what constitutes validity in the human sciences is an ongoing debate, and as yet there is no agreement on the issue. To understand the complexity of this debate we must first grasp the context, the "conversation," in which the debate takes place. Donald Polkinghorne in "Changing Conversations about Human Science" (1986) defines "conversation" as the dialogue that takes place among participants who share a common tradition about their goals and purposes. He defines two conversations, the Enlightenment, which he believes has dominated social science scholarship, and the epistemic or postmodern. It is within the context of the Enlightenment conversation that most of the charges against qualitative research are levied. The common tradition within this conversation is a belief that objective knowledge is the ideal, whether or not it is attainable. The basic question is whether truth about reality can be known through human reason. Within this conversation stand two groups, the protagonists and the subjectivists. The protagonists believe objective knowledge

is possible or at least can be approximated. The subjectivists hold that in the human realm objective truth is not attainable. The protagonists evaluate methods on their efficacy at getting at objective knowledge; the subjectivists tend to get lost in the issue and are better at the critique than at providing alternative validity criteria.

Within this larger Enlightenment conversation, not only is the issue of validity debated, but there is an ongoing debate on what human phenomena are appropriate for study. At one extreme, the protagonists advocate the study of only those human activities that are observable and quantifiable. The subjectivists argue that the limitations imposed by empiricism eliminate from study that which is most essentially human--issues of meaning and intent. But fundamental to this debate is a world view holding that something called "truth" exists, and the knowledge that most closely approximates truth is the best knowledge.

Certainly the major advances in the physical sciences have developed within the Enlightenment conversation. Social sciences have aimed for the credibility of the physical sciences and have developed standardized criteria for validity based on that model. However, even within the physical sciences, belief in an objective truth has eroded as we have learned more about the physical universe and the impact of the observer on what is observed. Polkinghorne (1986) states that similarly, in the human sciences,

the subjectivist position has gained ascendancy. Certainly IQ testing is a fine example of empirical research based on the assumption there is an existing entity called "intelligence" which can be tapped by quantifiable procedures. Subjectivist critiques and practical application within varied social contexts have revealed not only the fallacies in the assumptions underlying intelligence testing but the considerable social abuses emanating from such unquestioned assumptions. Although the view of the subjectivists has gained recognition, the debate still centers around the notion of an objective reality and its relevance to social science research.

Polkinghorne goes on to describe a post-modern conversation that he calls "epistemic." This conversation asserts that knowledge is not a representation of an objective truth. Instead, the focus is on the human as knower and the degree of confidence humans place in their various forms of knowing. Humans work to develop the most reliable knowledge they can achieve, accepting that such knowledge is embedded in social context and cannot be divorced from social values, and that it is unfinished and open to revision. This conversation bypasses the protagonist/subjectivist debate as irrelevant.

It is within this conversation that Marcia Salner (1986) places the human sciences. She holds that the charges levied against validity in human science research from within the

epistemological conversation are not only not useful but, because based on the presupposition of "objective truth," irrelevant to human science research. Human science operates in the socially constructed domain of human experience which is neither "objective like a rainstorm or an outbreak of malaria" (p. 110) nor reducible to individual subjective experience. Our questions about validity, or how to evaluate knowledge claims, must be relevant to this conversation and should not emanate from a framework of empirically oriented assumptions. Instead, human science researchers within this tradition find the goal of pure observation, free from theoretical and cultural bias, to be unrealistic. They reject the notion that an observational "span" exists between researcher and the objects of study, as both are part of an interactional system in which neither can be defined without reference to the other. The important question for human science research within this conversation is how, then, can we decide among competing and fallible knowledge claims?

Salner explores strategies for evaluating knowledge claims. She calls upon four avenues: innate and universal human reasonableness, universal trial-and-error learning, tacit knowledge, and epistemological pluralism.

The implication of human reasonableness for the validity issue is that there is no reasonableness without (1) a particular cultural form that structures the use of cognitive abilities and

(2) a language. Consequently, reasonableness is always constrained by a particular context. The researcher must be acutely aware of the context of the research, of how language functions within the domain studied, and of whatever potential systemic distortions of communication there may be in the field where the research is undertaken.

Trial-and-error learning acts as a check on these distortions. Truth is whatever helps us take effective action towards desired results. Research must necessarily be public research, and the researcher must be aware and must demonstrate her awareness that her position within the context is only one small but interconnected part of the larger social matrix. Consequently, such research cannot be value-free and is judged by its usefulness for human action.

Human science research operates in the domain of tacit knowledge, a communal existence that is as taken for granted as the air we breathe and which we as researchers must make explicit. To do so, to invoke tacit knowledge as a means for evaluating knowledge claims, depends upon the researcher's ability to describe what is already "known" and make us conscious of it.

Epistemological pluralism refers to truth as a communal phenomenon. There can be no one single method for determining truth or even establishing a valid claim to knowledge. There may

be many questions. The method follows the research question. Each question and methodological approach has its own constraints and limitations, which must be made explicit.

Finally, Salner stresses the importance of argumentation if tacit knowledge is to make the transition to a formal knowledge claim. The negotiation of truth between the researcher and her participants and the researcher and the broader community is a fundamental aspect of methodology. To the extent that she can be explicit about the inevitable cultural and social embeddedness of her research and its inevitable limitations, the more likely is the research outcome to survive its claims to truth.

While this debate continues, the problem remains of establishing the validity of investigations employing qualitative methodology. Kvale (1986) describes a procedure which he calls "communicative validation." It requires that the researcher "put her cards on the table" for the reader via explicitness, the quality of the documentation, coherence of the findings, and clarity of organization. Thus the researcher is responsible for conveying her findings to meet these standards of communicativeness.

## Research Design

### Sample Selection

A sample of twelve women was obtained via the network approach. I approached numerous colleagues and acquaintances, informed them of my research interest, and asked them to suggest the names of women age forty and over who appeared to be actively engaged in work they love. The nominated women were contacted by a letter (see Appendix) explaining the research, selection criteria, and approximate time that would be required of them. I asked them to contact me if they fit the criteria and were willing to participate in this study. I selected the sample from those who responded on the basis of work diversity. The sample consists of twelve women who shall be designated by their occupational titles: Fashion Designer, Building Contractor, Library Director, Land Use Consultant, Teacher, University Administrator, Bank Manager, Maternal & Child Educator, Child Welfare Director, Graphic Artist/Typesetter, City Clerk, and Artist.

### Criteria for the Sample

1. Participant claims she loves her work and finds it adds a sense of fulfillment and purpose to her life.
2. Participant would continue to pursue this work even should all her economic needs be met.

3. Participant has worked within her field of endeavor for at least the past three years on more than a half-time basis, and has received or expects to receive remuneration for her work.
4. Participant is age forty or older.
5. Participant has no children under age twelve in the home.

#### Criteria Rationale

Items 1,2, and 3 fall within the definitions of work and commitment as I have defined them for this research.

Item 4 is based upon literature that reveals that it is in mid-life that women are freed sufficiently from domestic responsibilities to be able to engage in sustained, serious, and committed work. I selected age forty as an indicator of mid-life status.

Item 5 is based upon research which reveals that the conflicting demands of work and young children make work commitment particularly problematic for women. I decided that by age twelve children are usually left safely unsupervised for longer periods of time as they are in school for longer hours and are usually able to transport themselves on bicycles or buses.

### Data Collection

Two semi-structured interviews of one-and-one-half hours each were conducted with each participant in her workplace. Data collected were of two orders:

1. interview content, which was tape-recorded and transcribed;
2. my observations about each participant, inferential thinking, hunches, and speculations in the form of notes.

### Rationale for the Two-Interview Structure

1. Two interviews gave room for the emergence of ambivalence, ideas the participant may have felt she omitted, and further development of thinking generated in the first interview.
2. Two interviews were necessary for my data collection strategy, a process called collective discovery and verification (Kvale, 1986).

### Data Collection Strategy

Phase I began with an open-ended question (see Appendix) regarding the participant's work and its meaningfulness for her. I followed up all leads and probed with other broad questions directed towards the issue of fulfillment and purpose until I

considered the category of meaningfulness to be "saturated" (Glaser, 1978).

All the participants were interviewed once and the tapes transcribed and analyzed for themes prior to the second round of interviews.

Phase II consisted of two parts:

1. I summarized for each participant the themes that constituted my understanding of what made her work meaningful. The participant was invited to revise, confirm, and expand upon these themes.
2. Information about the themes of the other participants was shared on the basis of the questions each participant was invited to ask.

Data Analysis

I brought a holistic framework to this research, and in turn, this framework was reinforced by the data. By holistic, I mean that there is no work without a worker, and that neither work nor worker can be studied in isolation. We relate to our work as we relate to other aspects of environment, and it is in this interaction between the woman and her work that meaning can be studied.

Following the first interview with each participant, I studied the transcript by posing a question to the data: What is this particular woman saying about what makes her work meaningful for her? I listed themes as they emerged from the data and made note of illustrative quotes for each theme heading. The first interview for each participant was analyzed in this manner before the second round of interviews was begun. Prior to the round of second interviews, I reviewed the themes of meaning that had emerged in all of the first interviews.

The second interview consisted of two parts:

1. I summarized the themes that constituted my understanding of how work was meaningful for her, inviting her to confirm, revise, and expand upon my understanding until we reached an agreement;
2. I invited her to ask whatever questions she might have about the responses of the other participants, and shared my findings with her on the basis of her questions. This dialogue opened new themes and clarified existing themes as each woman compared and contrasted her experience with that of the others.

Tapes of the second interviews were transcribed and reviewed for additional data to support, clarify, and revise the themes already noted for each participant and to add any new ones which

had emerged. Illustrative quotes were selected to document these themes.

Following the second round of interviews, I made a grid listing all the participants and all of the themes that had emerged, noting for how many participants any particular theme had emerged. Larger themes of meaning emerged which incorporated the essential meanings of themes previously noted. For example, "growth" emerged as the larger order theme which incorporated "stimulation", "variety", "intolerance for boredom" and "feeling stuck."

The findings consist of those themes that emerged most consistently across the interviews and withstood the verification process in the second interview, and the larger order themes that incorporated the essential meanings of sub-themes.

### CHAPTER III

#### WHO ARE THESE WOMEN?

I did not systematically request demographic information beyond the sample criteria from the women I selected for my study, as such information was not relevant to my research question. However, in the course of the interviews, information emerged which may give the reader a sense of who these women are.

All twelve participants have lived in their rather small non-industrialized community for at least five years. Two were born, raised, and established their own families there. Five are married, and of these five, three are in their first marriages, and two are in long-term second marriages. Two women are in relationships that have endured many years and are marriage equivalents. Five are currently single. One of these five is widowed, and the other four are divorced. Their ages range from forty to fifty-four. The distribution of marital status in this group of women is within the norm for their age group in the community, although they were not selected on that basis. Eleven of the participants are heterosexual, and one is lesbian. Eleven of the participants are Caucasian, and one is Black. They come from predominantly middle- and working-class backgrounds. Their

educational experience ranges from the twelfth grade through postgraduate professional training.

I heard no consistent pattern of how they got to where they are today. Two, the Artist and the Teacher, knew what they wanted to do as far back as they can remember. They and two others struck me as having the strongest sense of vocation, or "calling," of all the participants. The Graphic Artist/Typesetter showed me newspapers she had made in elementary school. She sometimes wonders if there is not some connection to Guttenberg in her background. The Maternal & Child Educator showed me a note she'd written as a very little girl, telling of her wish to become a nurse.

The Child Welfare Director traces her organizational passion back to early childhood when she loved to organize "schools" for the neighborhood kids. The Fashion Designer sewed well even as a young girl. The others found their way to their work by trial and error, through jobs that became too frustrating, too limiting, jobs they no longer believed in--a kind of wriggling into place that was smoother for some than for others. Two participants were abandoned by their husbands when they had small children. Four were single mothers for long stretches of time. One has just emerged from her years of struggle.

None spoke of aspirations in male-dominated fields, but one spoke of parental encouragement to become an architect, which she ruled out for herself. Now she wishes she had listened to her parents. I got the sense that these women chose work that came naturally to them, work in keeping with their gifts and early vision, and that they had little interest in energy-draining struggles against sex-role barriers. The three participants in more traditionally male fields--the Building Contractor, Bank Manager, and Land Use Consultant--moved into their work through traditionally female routes. The Building Contractor started as an artist, then an interior decorator. Her interest in building and construction emerged as a side issue during the years she worked on her own house while raising her children alone. The Bank Manager spent twenty seven years in non-management banking before she became manager. The Land Use Consultant was a flight attendant for several years. She became active in local politics, was hired as an aide for a local congressman, and then established her own consulting business. She and one other participant were on welfare during the years they were in college while raising their children.

What they all have in common, in varying degrees, are stunning coping abilities that they bring to their work which prevent them from feeling overwhelmed or helpless for any length of time and keep pressure at a tolerable level. One participant

has the unusual knack of framing high pressure decisions as "provisional," and only in retrospect sees they weren't provisional at all. Another frequently spoke of "stepping back and thinking about what's really important." Almost all have the capacity to distance themselves from the negative aspects of their work, which protects them from getting bogged down and unable to act effectively. All have a low tolerance for depression. One participant described a unique experience which occurs whenever she is overwhelmed and depressed for any length of time: "I get this image in my head of this little ladder, and then I feel myself climbing right up and out."

They all share the capacity for realistic self-assessment, a sound sense of their strengths and weaknesses. Most will experience a few hours to a day or two of self-doubt when meeting a new and challenging opportunity. Nearly always they will consult themselves and others who know them well, and then rise to the occasion. They share a similar risk-taking style of carefully considering the strengths and weaknesses in the opportunity as well as in themselves, and then they move. They don't act precipitously.

All seem to have nourishing personal lives. I heard of children and grandchildren, spouses and partners, siblings and friendships, community activities, intellectual interests, and puppies. I was particularly taken with a thoughtful, carefully

spoken, conservatively dressed fifty-two-year-old woman who, at the age of forty-seven, took up the drums out of a "passionate desire to learn a drum roll."

These women are very approachable and would not want to be idealized. They have had their share of human miseries. They have experienced deaths of parents, spouses, children, and marriages. They have experienced their own illnesses and dealt with the illnesses of family members. They sometimes feel confused, worry, doubt themselves, and have sleepless nights. In short, they are very human.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

#### Introduction

The central finding in this research about what makes work meaningful for women is that work is an extension of who the person is at this time in her life in a broad, public context. "Work" is how she moves through the world. The Fashion Designer, in describing her work, stated, "I consider my whole life what it is I like to do. . . . For me to stop working is for me to stop living. . . it means being creative and moving along." She finds that working and playing are indistinguishable for her. "I think about the words 'work' and 'leisure.' I just don't relate to 'leisure,' and yet the word 'work' is not a difficult word for me. . . . I'm in my studio because I love it. Sometimes I have to be there at that particular time, but I can't tell if it's because I want to or have to." The public and private are not separate spheres that call upon different modes of operating, but instead are instances of a larger whole wherein she is who she is.

The University Administrator said, "I know I feel a great congruity between my work and my life. I would find it very dissociative if I had to compartmentalize work and home, or

private and public. I guess it's very important to me to be me wherever I am, so I guess that means I'm going to operate the same way wherever I am."

The themes which emerged reveal how these women organize the subjective experience of their public lives. These themes are therefore aspects of what constitutes the fit between them and their work. In this chapter I will introduce the themes and then elaborate on each one. The themes which emerged are:

1. Vision: Work is an extension of vision--the fundamental beliefs, values, talents, and gifts that constitute how each participant views the world and what she has to offer.
2. Power: Only three participants directly discussed hierarchical power, but it was salient enough to warrant attention. The meanings ascribed to power shed light on the interconnected quality of their vision. Power was viewed ambivalently by one and negatively by two. Hierarchical power emerged indirectly in the interviews of three other participants. Power as autonomy, leadership, and responsible effectiveness was highly valued by all the participants.
3. "Work" and "Job": Work and job are not synonymous. Work is the larger concept and has to do with vision of the

world and one's place in it. Job refers to how the world meets one with a specific remunerated role.

4. Competence, Autonomy, and Belief: All of the participants need to be good at what they do, but competence cannot be considered apart from the autonomy necessary for that competence nor from the belief in the significance of their work that makes that competence meaningful.
5. Coherence: The preoccupation with finding, creating, and completing meaningful patterns appeared in the interviews of all the participants and could be seen on several levels: coherence between vision and work, coherence with how they live, and coherence as a part of the work itself.
6. Growth: Work as a vehicle for growth was highly valued by all the participants. None could tolerate boredom and stagnation.

### Vision

For every participant, work was an extension of her most fundamental beliefs and values, her gifts and talents, her vision of the world and what she has to offer. This vision was explicitly stated by nine of the participants. For the other three, their vision was readily discerned in the first interview and was confirmed by them in the second. The University

Administrator described herself at work as "the person who makes the administration intelligible and responsive. . . . I consciously try to humanize what can be inhuman." The Child Welfare Director stated, "I really believe we can make a difference, and it's important to me when I leave this world, when I shuffle off, to feel that I made some use out of my life." The Artist, who envisions her work as emanating from her spirit to touch the spirit in others, described how her gifts connect her with what is most essential: "It's probably the only time I'm in touch with being in that frame of loving, because it makes me more gentle, makes me forget about myself."

In all instances, the women's visions of their work include other people. Meaningful work does not exist in a vacuum, but is embedded in a larger context and a value system which has to do with touching other people, maintaining communities, and sustaining life.

For five, the building and maintenance of communities is a central component of their vision. The Library Director firmly believes that equal access to information is vital for healthy communities. One of the most meaningful periods in her career was "turning the library around in a racist, closed community on the East Coast," where the library was "elitist" and unapproachable for most the community. The Child Welfare Director is committed to the vision that communities "own" their problems: "It's

building that community consensus and coming to a sense of ownership about these children and families who are our neighbors, our friends, our relatives, our clients, our community. . . .

That's one of the things I can do and it's pretty effective."

Long before she became manager, the Bank Manager was actively involved in a large number of community organizations. Her position as bank manager is an extension of that activity. "It's a need fulfilled inside, I guess. . . it's service, taking care of people's needs, helping the community. . . I was always taught to take care of the other person three hundred percent, and that's what I do here."

Even the four participants who work most directly with concrete objects to create a product include other people in how they envision their work. For the Building Contractor, who "builds environments for people," the process of interacting with her clients to create a shared vision is as important to her as her own aesthetic vision. "What means a lot to me is to make that client's vision work for them." The Fashion Designer includes her interactions with her clients as part of the creativity of her work, as does the Graphic Artist/Typesetter, who describes her work as "facilitating communication, which carries through everything I've done. . . . Part of it is taking the client's ideas, turning them into something that's producible, and then conveying back to them what you're going to do so that they can

understand it." She describes her pleasure in creating businesses: "It's taking nothing and making something that's exciting. It's producing jobs for other people. That's something I'm always involved in. And it's giving people something they need. I like that part of it." And the Artist, who works alone, describes her art as "message art." She finds it "kind of interesting that people know you because of your work, not because of you. There's a whole bunch of people who are interested in the work I do because they're of like mind."

For the three participants involved in education, their vision has to do with facilitating the development of others. The University Administrator, who had previously taught at the university level, finds the facilitative, responsive role she now carries in relation to people much more personally compatible than was lecturing. The fourth-grade Teacher states, "Teaching is meaningful for me because I love the children, being part of their lives, watching them develop." For this participant, to facilitate the development of children is to facilitate life. She describes her love of the freshness, spontaneity, and vitality of children and how she works against apathy, boredom, and deadness. This sense of facilitating life and life processes is shared by the Maternal & Child Educator, whose work has to do with birthing, parenting, and dying. She was first exposed to birth and death in a clinic in India twenty years ago, an experience that led her to

question the heavy emphasis on the "birth experience" in this country. "There is something much more important. . . . It's the whole thing, not one isolated piece of it. I don't know why I like doing this, but in some way, this continuity matters to me."

For the five participants who work in organizations, their relationships with their employees and employee development are part of their vision. The Library Director speaks of "liberating" a staff to take action on their own behalf and on behalf of the library. She is concerned that as she moves higher in the library system, she loses contact with the line staff. The Bank Manager, who worked in non-management banking positions for twenty-seven years before becoming a manager one-and-one-half years ago, feels as responsible for the care of her staff as she does for her customers. "One of my main goals is that each of my staff members is cross-trained on every job. That's one of my personal goals, what I owe them, so that if a position comes up in another office. . . ." Her main frustration is working with employees who don't share her vision of "giving three hundred percent to the other person," yet her responsibility to her staff and the people in their lives--"the kids they feed, families they take care of"--impedes her ability to dismiss employees. Because her service vision makes customers' needs a priority, she has sleepless nights.

The City Clerk, who has been in management much longer than the Bank Manager, has more experience in dismissing staff, a process that is quite painful for her. As she has grown in her job, her vision of service to other people has expanded beyond the personal needs of the other to include her broader commitment to the community. The more personal needs rarely go unrecognized by her, but at times they must be set aside when they cannot be resolved and when they conflict with the larger vision of her work.

There is a compelling quality to this vision, this larger sense of their work, that may account for why they persevere through the inevitable frustrations and pressures they experience on the job. The Maternal & Child Educator equates her commitment to her work with the commitment in parenting--there can be those awful days, but "when you know it's your choice and you're fascinated with the process, it's well worth it." The Child Welfare Director talks about her "long-range view," and the importance of "being willing to wait out some pretty horrendous times in the sure and certain knowledge that things are going to change, and for the better."

Work is meaningful for all these participants when they use their gifts and abilities to participate in the building and maintenance of life as they envision it. Viewed from the outside, the careers of many look like trajectories. Subjectively however,

their public lives seem to be experienced as complex webs of interrelationships. They view themselves as "actors" in the world, but certainly not solitary actors. While all are task-oriented in their need to be good at what they do, the task doesn't stand alone, but instead seems to be viewed as a contribution to the ongoingness of life. How the task is accomplished is as important as its accomplishment. The Land Use Consultant, who views her work as a game, says, "I like to win, but I feel OK if I don't win, if the community wins, if they make a decision."

### Power

The word "power" did not appear as a major theme organizing the participants' subjective experience of work's meaningfulness. However, in those three instances where it did emerge, it was salient enough to warrant attention. Hierarchical power was perceived as a potential threat to their people-related vision of work. These three participants work in contexts of political power, and all three closely monitor their responses to power so as not to abuse it. Four other participants work within contexts where power plays a role--power they carry themselves in relation to employees, students, the community, and power external to them which can either facilitate or impede the scope of their work. For these women, the issue of power did not emerge directly in the

interview, so its meaning can only be inferred. For all the participants, to the extent that power implied leadership, effective responsibility, autonomy, and control over their own work conditions, it was highly valued. To the extent that it implied control over their own and other people's lives, it was seen as potentially destructive to their vision of work.

The Library Director spoke most directly about her enjoyment of power. She described her decision to become a librarian: "I knew that where I was going was management, and the bigger the library, the more power I was going to have, and certainly the personal power is a pleasurable thing." She explored what she meant by power. "One thing I learned early on. . . is that the power is really minimal and more apparent than real." She has a large staff of eighty-eight people and finds that "being responsible for the whole schmeer really isn't power at all. The power I really have is to lead. . . . I suppose it's a kind of power based on the reputation of competency and knowing what I really want and what's right that I project. . . and that's a power that I feel satisfied with because it means I can do my job better." In her second interview she returned to the same theme, and the importance of being "very conscious about not liking it too much. . . as you may end up not doing the right thing, and the leader's job is to do the right thing. . . . The further up I go,

the more I'm acting in a public way in the political process, the more I get separated from the basic principles I started with."

The Land Use Consultant works in a field where the name of the game is power. She spoke about the threat power poses to her own well-being when she described how she likes to work behind the scenes. "If I don't, two things can happen. I'm not as effective, and my ego can get involved. . . . I watch that carefully because my personal goal in life is to be happy, and if I slip into that place of needing, of grabbing for power, I lose touch with that goal. . . . I see what power does to people, and I don't want that kind of power." For her, power means circumventing the processes necessary for the community decision-making that constitutes her vision of her work.

The University Administrator articulately expressed her view of power as a threat to her interconnected vision of her work. "It's a word that's very uncomfortable to me. When people talk to me about power, usually what I think they're talking about is power over people, the ability to make changes in people's situations or circumstances." She finds that when she's perceived as powerful, she's concerned that perhaps she's distancing herself, as "power is discerned in the spaces between people." When she thinks of power, she thinks in terms of autonomy. "Power is something I exercise in my own life. . . . I can feel comfortable with the word 'authority' as a quality one has rather

than something that's external." She is also comfortable with being described as persuasive. "Persuasion implies connection, while power implies disconnection." She works in a large, hierarchical organization and has been described as "the most powerful woman on campus." She handles this discrepancy between how she's perceived and her subjective stance by acknowledging the reality of her positional power while underscoring the constraints within which she functions and while differentiating positional power from personal worth. Her relationships with others who are in positions of power are congruent with this stance--she is personally courteous but not deferential. "It helps that I am tall."

While power was not directly addressed by the other participants, three women who work in organizational settings spoke of hierarchical power-related dimensions of their work. Both the Bank Manager and City Clerk described their discomfort with their responsibility for discharging incompetent employees. Their discomfort was not limited to the negative interaction between themselves and the discharged employee but also included the impact on the employee's family and the morale of other employees. Their commitment to the organizations in which they worked, which embodied their visions, necessitated such action and made it possible. The Teacher addressed the issue of hierarchical power by describing her classroom stance of "setting limits but

not setting myself up as some all-knowing god." She considers limits and order to be essential for the children and for herself. Authority for authority's sake she views as damaging to the environment she strives to create.

If hierarchical power threatens connection, sharing power facilitates it. The three women who work in centers of power speak frequently of empowering others. The Library Director "liberates" her staff from dependency and apathy and empowers the community by bringing information to the people; the Land Use Consultant empowers the community by facilitating and protecting its decision making; and the University Administrator talks of her pleasure in empowering individuals and groups to make use of the University and find their own decisions.

#### "Work" and "Job"

Work and job are not necessarily synonymous for these women. Work is the larger concept and has to do with vision. Job refers to how the world meets her with a role and a paycheck. Perhaps this confusion between work and job may explain why most of the participants found it difficult to delineate their work. Among those seven participants whose jobs are pre-defined by the organizations within which they work, five made distinct differentiations between the "job description" and how they define what they do. The City Clerk carefully reviewed the official job

description, and then defined her work as "making meaningful progressive steps, something that works, that makes us more effective, that allows us to do whatever our jobs are." Three of the five self-employed women had the most difficulty defining what it is they do. The Land Use Consultant said, "I always struggle with definitions of my work." The Graphic Artist/Typesetter stated: "What I do is a lot of things. It's not simple what I do. . . so what I do now is I own a typesetting business, I'm a graphic designer, and I do production work which is generally how I make my money." She is also actively working on several related but unpaid projects: putting businesses together and facilitating a women's newspaper.

For some of the participants, particularly for those four in large organizations, the job has sufficient flexibility and scope and is well enough situated within the organization to fully include the work. The Child Welfare Director finds that "This is the job where I've finally been able to have enough scope and to have the resources available to me to get major things organized that I'm really interested in." She has also molded this position to fit her conviction that communities must "own" their problems, and so she directs much of her organizational energies into the community rather than primarily focusing on the internal workings of her own department.

For these four, who work in organizations in which there are equivalent positions held by other people, this personal molding could be seen most readily. The Child Welfare Director is aware that not all such directors in the state operate as she does. The University Administrator believes that a more hierarchical, linear person could fill her job description but would work very differently from the way she does. The Library Director is aware of how her political convictions color the way she administers the Library system, and the City Clerk's involvement with the statewide city clerks' organization informs her of her unique management style.

For others, particularly for those who are in less flexible organizations or whose position is less autonomous, the job is smaller than the work. Where possible, the woman tries to expand the job to contain more and more of her work. When the Maternal and Child Educator assumed her position, the program centered primarily around childbirth education. "It's never made sense to me that the focus is on birth. What you get is a gift, a challenge, a project to work through, but the real work is in parenting that child." Her response has been to include a number of parenting classes. Her vision is of life as continuity, and her gifts are facilitating birth, parenting, dying. "There's something about trying to provide some perspective on how the world can be." Her vision and gifts can only partially be

contained in her present job. Yet her vision is so compelling that she, like two other participants, "fills in" the work with non-paid activities. She is working on a master's degree in education; she has used her nursing degree to gain admittance to her friend's cancer surgery and to remain involved with her until she died; and in her personal life she maintains friendships with the adolescents who were part of her earliest play group.

The five self-employed participants are freer to structure and restructure their work around this compelling vision. However, this freedom from an externally defined and salaried container also raises certain issues that must be addressed by these self-employed women. I heard more about money from these women, who cannot count on a steady, predictable income. Money, for this group, means pinning down their security needs sufficiently so that they can have the freedom to do what they want, to do their work. For the two whose work products are sufficiently comprehensive and can command sizable fees, job and work can be relatively synonymous. The Building Contractor needs only a few projects each year to meet her security needs, and only occasionally must compromise her aesthetic vision by taking on less interesting projects to stabilize her income. Those three self-employed women whose work products are not as highly remunerated experience more conflict between job and work. The Graphic Artist/Typesetter makes the most money from the least

creative of her activities—production work—and struggles with her fear that economic stability can only come at the price of her vision.

If these women do not define what they do to include those related but not-yet-remunerated activities that are creative and stimulating, they can feel fragmented and question the legitimacy of what they do. The Fashion Designer formerly had identified herself as a dressmaker. She felt pulled apart by classes she had recently decided to offer and by the amount of time she spent with each client until she defined herself by the more inclusive concept of designer. "It's not just the clothes I make but it's because I've been able to deal with people in a very personal way. It's a whole range of skills." In order to remain financially afloat, she violates her vision by doing alterations, which stabilizes her income but is deadeningly non-creative. The most extreme divergence of job and work is illustrated by the Artist. For twenty-two years she was an adequately paid fashion illustrator and did her work, her art, around the edges of her job. Now she is fully committed to her art, for which she has, as yet, received nothing except recognition.

#### Competence, Autonomy, and Belief

Being good at their work is essential for all the participants, as work represents a public extension of who they

are. All twelve participants highly value competency but could not talk about competence as separate from belief in the significance of their work nor apart from the autonomy necessary for competency and the personal authorship fundamental to their vision.

These women demand the best from themselves. Three even describe themselves as "almost perfectionists." The Building Contractor states, "It's a field I am so competent in. I have total confidence in what I do. . . . It's the part of me I love to show the world." Competence reinforces their sense of fit, the feeling that it is truly "their" work. The Teacher described the importance of her proven competence. "I want to do a good job, and if I see things are not going well in the classroom, I will do something immediately. I always feel like I have the resources to make it OK. If I didn't, I'd have to consider doing something else because that would really be depressing. I couldn't work on a job I didn't like and felt I wasn't really contributing. . . . I know I'm a born teacher."

While these women are highly disciplined in their work and put in long hours, there's a sense of ease to their competence, probably because they are working from areas of strength and from gifts so natural they take them for granted. For the Building Contractor, work is an area of safety and confidence in her life. "I'm on my own level. I'm unique enough that there aren't others

I'm in competition with." The Artist says, "I feel real sure of myself with my art. I probably feel surest of myself at that time." The Fashion Designer describes the security she's found in her ability: "I used to say there are two things that could never be denied about me. One was that I was tall and the other was that I sew very well. During the years I was getting no recognition, those were two things I didn't have to argue about. Those things were true and I knew they were true." The Child Welfare Director identifies the organizational talents "that I had as a little kid and that have always been important to me. . . . I think I would have done the same sorts of things in whatever field I ended up in. If I'd been a nurse, I'd have been a charge nurse reorganizing the nursery."

Being good at their work is a combination of hard work and ability. For all these participants, "success" includes accomplishing what they have set out to do as effectively as they can. Each has a "task" and each requires certain conditions for that task to be accomplished in a way that meets her standards. Autonomy is the most important condition. All twelve participants highly value autonomy in their work, both as an end in itself, and primarily because it permits them the freedom to determine both what their work is to be and its quality. There is considerable variation in how much actual control these participants have over

the variables that determine the outcome of their work, given the diversity of their "products" and the contexts in which they work.

The Artist has the most complete control over her work conditions and the materials that go into her work. This autonomy is essential for her because when she works she retreats to her studio and to a place within herself. "I like to work in my studio a lot. At that time I become like a child, and I daydream, and it doesn't matter if things are falling on the floor because nobody's there watching me." Her materials are bits and pieces she collects, objects she loves and makes her own.

The Fashion Designer, Building Contractor, and Graphic Artist/Typesetter, once they've reached a shared vision of their product with the client, also have considerable control over the quality of their materials and their work conditions. However, the client's vision can be frustrating for them, and compromises are occasionally necessary to keep afloat financially. Even in those instances, the creative interactions these participants are able to generate can offset the dissatisfactions. The Graphic Artist/Typesetter agreed to produce a game for a client. Once committed and involved, she discovered it was a highly offensive war game. Following through on her commitments is highly valued by this woman, so she completed the project, but not without informing him of what she thought. His response was to bring her

another game, this one peaceful, "for you and for people like you."

Perhaps because such control is possible, these four participants revealed the strongest need for autonomy. The Fashion Designer has only once worked for someone else. "I realized I wanted to be in control of all the elements, and I didn't like not being in control." The Building Contractor said, "You know how you feel when someone sits on you and holds you down? Well, that's how I feel when I have an employer. I need to be in control." The Graphic Artist/Typesetter said, "I can't imagine working for anybody else. . . . I can put a value on my own time, set my price. And another thing, I'm not locked into any one job. That's boring."

The Bank Manager is in a unique position in relation to control and autonomy. When she was in non-managerial banking positions, she didn't have control over her time, which she found frustrating as her drive to "do my best" entailed longer working hours than the bank allowed. However, she had hands-on control over her product--the actual banking services--which she found highly gratifying. As bank manager, she values the autonomy of managing the physical plant and of being accountable only to her own high standards. However, delegating the hands-on banking to others who don't share her vision is highly frustrating for her.

The other seven participants who work with people and in organizations may have pockets of control, as does the Teacher in her classroom. However, all of them work in contexts where the major variables that affect the quality of their work are people and organizations. Their "products" are the outcomes of processes, of a series of interactions, and they evaluate the quality of their work on the basis of both the product and the processes that went into the making of it. Most of these women revealed a seasoned acceptance of that over which they have no control, a fluidity in their ability to shift tactics and methods as they move towards what they envision. For these women, control over their own time was their one fixed requirement. The Child Welfare Director said, "You never let go of the ultimate goal, but if that strategy doesn't work, fall back, regroup, try something else." Three participants diversified their work not only for stimulation, but as a kind of buffer for their own competency needs. The Child Welfare Director "would never stake my life, my reputation, my feelings, anything, on developing one particular program or doing one thing my way. What I have is an ultimate goal. . . which entails working with several systems, and where there isn't progress in one, perhaps there will be in another." The Library Director turns to her computer to work out processing systems, writes grant proposals, or may even go out and shelve books. She is aware that keeping herself busy distracts her and helps her avoid taking precipitous action in projects involving

political processes where she has minimal control and where such action could be futile or could jeopardize the outcome.

For all of the participants whose work is an extension of their vision, competence must be accompanied by belief in the significance of what they do. These are women of talent and ability, and most of them could be competent in a number of different fields. The Library Director states, "I suppose an important criterion for why you love something is that you have to believe in it." As a younger woman she had worked in another position, and despite feedback to the contrary, felt incompetent and was unhappy. "I think it was because I was bad at it. Everyone else says I wasn't bad at it, that I was very good at it, but I didn't feel myself that I was doing it right. I just couldn't justify in my own head what I was doing. My politics had outstripped the liberal agency I worked for. What I was doing all day didn't fit with what I was doing at night, which was going out to meetings and organizing."

Values and beliefs are the salient criteria for evaluating those projects the Land Use Consultant selects. She carefully picks and chooses only those projects she can personally support, asking herself if she'd consider acting as a volunteer were she not hired as a consultant. "I'm a real believer in the community's ability to govern itself if it gets enough

information. I don't like closed systems. . . . I would be doing this work even if there were no money involved."

For these women who believe in the significance of what they do, they see the impact of their competence when they make a difference in people's lives in whatever context they work, whether with individual clients, a staff, or the community as a whole. The Fashion Designer wants "my work to make a difference to the clients that I have, their lives enriched because of what I do." The Teacher says, "I don't have to be their favorite teacher, but I need to know that something significant has happened, that I left my mark somewhere." The City Clerk feels "good about my work, personally, when my staff feels good about their work. . . ." And the Land Use Consultant likes driving around the county seeing what she's done, "the physical objects or the lack thereof. I see that my skills have some direct impact on the community." Only one participant expressly stated that her impact is not that important to her, although feedback that she's been helpful feels good. Her work is there for others to use or reject as they see fit.

It is this recognition in their own eyes of the difference they do make that reaffirms the significance of their work--that it is truly "their" work, and deepens their commitment and sustains them through the inevitable frustrations.

### Coherence

The theme of coherence, a preoccupation with the finding, creation, and completion of patterns, appeared in the interviews of all twelve participants and could be seen on several levels. First, as previously noted, work must be coherent with her vision so that the woman and her work form a coherent whole. Work also must be coherent with how they live, a component part of the meaningful whole of their lives. Finally, the work itself must have coherence.

On the most concrete level, the work of four of the participants consists of putting pieces together to make larger wholes. The Fashion Designer sews together pieces of fabric, the Graphic Artist/Typesetter puts together various forms of print to create a design, the Building Contractor works the various materials into a structure, and the Artist builds assemblages out of the bits and pieces she collects. This pulling together of parts is also highly significant for them on levels beyond the concrete. The Building Contractor talks of her joy in the "finished product" that fits within a larger context. "We pick the wallpaper before I even start construction. . . . I somehow can't just go in and put in a window...I must know that it's been done right for the room. I wouldn't take a job just for the window, but I would take the job of turning the whole space into a very livable office." The Graphic Artist/Typesetter describes the

process of "organizing things, just the whole task of fitting things together, making them work. . . what that means is that there's this balance of all these different elements."

This theme also occurred in the interviews of the eight participants whose "materials" were people, ideas, and organizations. The University Administrator describes her pleasure "any time I feel I have put together pieces in a harmonious whole." The Land Use Consultant knows she's done good work when "I've followed up on all the pieces. I like knitting all the parts together." The Teacher described her fine attunement to the classroom "as a whole" and the necessity for a teacher to see "the big picture." The Bank Manager describes her frustration when her employees don't "follow through to completion" all the details of the customers' banking needs. These descriptions were often accompanied by sweeping, circular gestures.

Meaningful work must also be coherent with how they live. Work is a more prominent part in the lives of some than of others, and its proportion shifts at various times in each woman's life. The Land Use Consultant describes the back and forth "flow" between work and family now that her domestic life is less demanding. "I love that ability to pull the pieces of my life together like that." She likes to stand by the stove cooking dinner, with a spoon in one hand and a telephone in the other, as

she talks with a client in New York. Fabric metaphors abound. The City Clerk has always known that "the skills that I continued to hone at home have helped me in my work all the way through, and everything does interweave for me. Work is one meaningful part of a meaningful life. My life is very much like a tapestry." The University Administrator describes her life as a patchwork quilt. The Land Use Consultant refers to the parts of her life as "knitting together." The Teacher is married to another teacher, and she describes the "interweaving" of their professional lives and their personal relationship. "Sometimes when I'm feeling overwhelmed I just run around the track and he runs with me. We talk about what's going on." While she states that couple time takes priority over work time, "I can't separate them out and I don't think I want to." These women do not value compartments or schisms in their lives. The Land Use Consultant describes her admiration of the finely honed skills and intensity of some of the men she works with who separate their personal lives from their work. She can't do that, can't tolerate the split in her life. "I couldn't stand going home in that body."

On the most personal level, two spoke about pulling pieces of themselves together. Perhaps the Artist most clearly described the significance of her preoccupation with wholes in her assemblages: "I use only objects I really love. . . and I reject things that aren't a part of me. . . . I'm tired of being so many

people. I want to be the same with everyone. And that's what I want in my work. I want the nude body and the other things to be a part of the same picture."

Six participants revealed a particular kind of attention to detail in finding meaningful patterns in their lives which one called "serendipity," and which may be a way in which these women are attracted to complexity. The University Administrator stated, "It's like a plate of spaghetti. You isolate some strands. When I look at a situation, I don't first of all see it as complex. What usually interests me or draws me to something is that I see that little strand out there. . . ." As they described their work over time, these women would note a series of seemingly unrelated events that, in retrospect, preceded an important change. The City Clerk mused about the period of time immediately preceding her latest job change. She noted that she had subscribed to a new magazine, and had, on impulse, purchased a briefcase. She now views these events as her "getting ready" for what was to follow, and described this pattern to illustrate another meaningful whole in her life—that over time, her readiness for change was met by the world in the form of an opportunity. Another participant described how her years in a "tagalong career" were in fact years of preparation for the work that was to come. She described a series of opportunities that appeared precisely at the time she was ready for them. As they retrospectively viewed their work, they

would find patterns of meaning and coherence that were highly satisfying for them. And the converse was equally true--they would describe their frustrations when processes wouldn't pull together, parts didn't fit, workable wholes could not be found in their lives, their work, themselves.

### Growth

For work to be meaningful and stay meaningful for all twelve of the participants, it must facilitate growth. Growth means movement in their lives. It was referred to as a need for stimulation, variety, challenge, freshness, and creativity, or it might be inferred from its distasteful converse--boredom and stagnation, stasis. It entails a stretch, a move beyond where they've been in learning new skills, building on old ones, increased self-awareness and knowledge about the world. The Graphic Artist/Typesetter states that "Growth is the most important thing to me. If I'm not learning, I just can't stay with it." The City Clerk can't stand to "stay in a rut for a long period of time." The Building Contractor finds that "anything when it gets routine--I just kind of fold. . . . I need to get things down, put away, and then go on to something else. I don't know what kind of trait that is but it's certainly given me an interesting life, not steady." The need for growth can be the cutting edge for job change. The City Clerk described her state

before her latest advancement. "I could feel those inner stirrings. I knew I needed more challenge." The Graphic Artist/Typesetter left a plum job after six months as a State Public Information Officer because, "I realized I didn't want to be that specialized, to do one thing, even if it meant giving up the chance to work in a larger agency, which is what I always thought I wanted to do." Her love for design stems from the same root. "You never do the same thing twice. . . the only repetition is building on what you've learned from the past."

These women actively seek growth in their attraction to complexity. They all resist specialization. Even those who have been in the same field all their working lives have sought variety in their fields. For example, the Teacher prefers to teach the same grade level for three years and then change to another level. Over the years she has taught every grade level. The Bank Manager has mastered all the components of banking services. All these women have a firm grasp on the fundamental skills their work entails because of their need for variety and stimulation. This mastery serves to enhance their competence. Four voluntarily took on additional responsibilities in their jobs, six actively diversify their activities, and five seek out rich feedback systems. The Land Use Consultant describes how she diversifies her projects. "That's how I keep interested. If I had to do one thing I'd get really stale. I'm a little envious of people who

have one area of expertise and get recognition in that one area. My interests are too wide ranging. I struggle constantly to prioritize so I don't take on too much." The Child Welfare Director says, "I don't think it's the work so much. I think its the way I operate. I always seem to be operating on lots of levels at the same time, biting off a whole lot." And the Building Contractor loves her work because "every day I learn something different. Like I just learned this week I can stress my ceiling with a steel beam. To me that is magic. A whole new field has opened up. . . ."

Growth is self-expanding and is sometimes called "therapy." The Maternal & Child Educator describes how her work has pushed her into places that are difficult for her. "I feel like I have a chance to learn things that if I'd just stayed in OB nursing I wouldn't learn. . . . To make this job mine has personally been an issue that's almost like my therapy in coming to terms with who I am." The Artist describes how her art "is a way of finding out about myself, because I learn from what I'm doing. . . . I can see what I've done after I've done it and I see how I keep repeating myself. . . it sort of saves my life." The Graphic Artist/Typesetter found that in putting together businesses she learned about her blind spots. "That's interesting for me, because now I can stand back and look at them. These are skills I want to develop and can develop."

Growth is essential to meaningful work because it expands and develops gifts and talents, it helps to clarify values and increase self-awareness, and it nourishes their own vitality. The University Administrator describes how work has contributed to her development. "Work allows me to have all these little sensors out there that feed me back all sorts of information, not only about myself. . . . I've really learned a lot about tolerance and appreciating and valuing the way people are different. It made me think about things I hadn't thought of before, like the importance of honesty, the importance of information as power, and how important it is for me to share information as a way of empowering people. I learned I still had a distressing need to be liked."

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

#### Introduction

Midway into the first interview with each participant, I would find myself thinking, "Of course she'd have to be doing this work. It's just another aspect of who she is everywhere else in her life." Nothing in the literature led me to expect this. When I checked this finding with each woman, the typical response was, "I hadn't thought about it, but it's true." Thinking about the implications of this datum then proved to be exciting to most of them and very exciting for me.

The discussion of the data is organized in four sections. First, how the literature presented in the literature review pertains to these findings will be discussed. Because the historical separation of love and work undergirds this literature, I will begin by discussing what my data reveal about that split for this group of women. I will then discuss the data in relation to the literature on women and work, the literature on adulthood in women and current feminist research, and finally in relation to the life-span theorists. The third section focuses on Erikson's concept of generativity, which, when amplified by concepts found in the literature on creativity, seems to best describe the

underlying meaning that work holds for the participants. In the last section I will discuss the implications for clinical theory and practice and further research that the data suggest.

### Love and Work

For these women, love and work, personal and public, are not separate categories but are component parts of their lives and are rooted in the same source. "Expressive" behavior having to do with affects, and "instrumental" behavior directed toward task accomplishment, are not separate modes but are qualities they bring to these component parts of their lives.

These women are aware that their insistence on coherence makes for lives that deviate from the cultural norm of "job" and "leisure." Some are uneasy as they compare their lives with those of others. Two volunteered they weren't "workaholics," as if that were a point that needed defending. The Fashion Designer was initially apologetic about that the fact that she often worked long into the night for the sheer pleasure of it. Her relationship with a man who disliked his work even though it was much more lucrative than hers, and who was critical of her enthusiasm and long hours, led her to question herself and then hide the centrality of work in her own life. The Land Use Consultant wondered if some day she wasn't going to have to

"settle down and get a real job," which to her meant working from 8 to 5 with a boss and a time card.

All of them feel immensely "lucky" to be able to do what they love. Several attribute their luck to "middle-class privilege." Many are grateful for the women's movement, for parents and colleagues who believed in them, for emotionally supportive spouses and partners, and for their good fortune that the world was there to meet them with opportunities.

Certainly luck, class privilege, and gender play a significant part in these women's work lives. Only one of the participants, the Artist who came from a working-class background where her mother was sole breadwinner, grew up knowing she must work to support herself. Ironically, she's the only participant who as yet has received no remuneration for her current work, and lives off the savings of her twenty years as a fashion illustrator. Certainly all the participants have experienced periods of struggle, when the paycheck was paramount. Four put in long years as single mothers with no income beyond what they could scrape together. Currently, seven are self-supporting, and the other five contribute at least half of the family income. But perhaps it was that very absence of early conditioning which presents work as inevitable and in terms of survival and external rewards that freed these women to approach work in terms of its intrinsic rewards.

The interview data indicate that they also bring an extraordinary capacity to see opportunity and move with it, a willingness to risk, and an intolerance for boredom and incompetence that precludes remaining in dead-end, alienating jobs even in times of hardship. None has been content not working for any length of time even when she was economically free to do so. As one of the participants said, "It's like trying to put an octopus in a box."

Further research which focuses on the subjective experience of work might reveal that intrinsically rewarding work is highly valued by both sexes, once basic security needs are met. And while there are probably many people who find their work intrinsically meaningful, the participants in this study may very well be unusual women in their unwillingness to be limited to domestic roles, their intolerance for boredom and incompetence, and their good fortune in having sufficient margin to take risks at a time in our social history when women receive social support for such risk taking. Maslow (1970) argues for studying the normal by looking at the supernormal. If these women are "supernormal" in transcending the dichotomy of love and work by insisting on work they love, they may reveal to us that alienating work, work that lacks intrinsic meaning, yields fragmented lives and psyches and is damaging for us all.

Robert Bellah, in Habits of the Heart, (1985) describes the moral incoherence of contemporary American culture. He attributes much of this fragmentation to the split between personal and public that is inevitable when work consists of a "job" that all too often fails to link us to the larger community. In a large-scale industrial community, it is difficult to see one's work as contributing to the larger whole and easier to view it as self-interested activity. His concept of "calling" is similar to how work has been defined in this research and provides a crucial link between the individual and public realms. "Work in the sense of calling can never be merely private" (p. 66). The findings reveal that the work visions of the participants go beyond individual self-interest and do, in fact, link their individual gifts and talents to the world through their contributions. Perhaps it is the social context of a relatively small, non-industrialized community that makes work as calling possible. However, similar sampling criteria and procedures for research questions directed toward questions of meaning might find some, if not many, people with callings in larger, more industrialized parts of our nation.

### Women and Work

The social science literature tacitly assumes the splits between love and work, female and male domains, even as it

attempts redress. It has ignored the subjective experience of work and the intrinsic rewards that work offers that very well may be essential for human well-being and development.

The view I found in the social science literature on women and work was not one of an internal process moving out into the world, but instead, came from a point of view outside the woman and described career tracks with external rewards. The themes that emerged in this research are of interior states having to do with self and other.

I've concluded that these two views can both describe the same phenomena. The question posed in this research was aimed at the interior of the public realm and threw a searchlight on the unlit area of the subjective experience of work. The configuration is very different from this point of view. I heard nothing about security and competition and very little about external rewards such as status and money. When I did, the meanings of these words were idiosyncratic and personal. It is not that these women are unconcerned about such matters. They simply do not use these concepts to talk about their own experience. For most of them, it is not their first language. Instead, they use the very personal language of their own vision and development, how over time they've become who they are, doing what they do.

The external point of view emerged only in bits and pieces in these interviews. It seemed as if each woman was much too engrossed with her own vision, her own project, to evaluate herself in external terms except when the external rewards were problematic. When she did step outside herself with these concepts, it was to look at her work as she thought others might, or to compare herself with others to illustrate a particular point. For example, one participant, who considered herself to be fully competent in her demanding job feared others might view her as insufficiently educated for such a prestigious position. Others puzzled about friends of both sexes whose work had all the external trappings of success but who were not happy. Another participant, whose work vision had emerged and was rooted in the political and intellectual context of Marxism, used the language of power. However, the meanings behind her words were as subjective and personal as were the other participants.

Although the social science literature on women and work contained nothing about women who are moving wholeheartedly into public life with intrinsically meaningful work, there are studies about well-being in working women that are relevant to the findings of this research.

Grace Baruch's (1984) study of mid-life women in Boston revealed that employed women, married and unmarried, had higher mastery scores than unemployed women. There were no differences

in happiness scores between the two groups. When employed women were asked to rank the most rewarding aspects of their work roles, "challenge" ranked high. The most distressing aspects ranked were "dull" and "dead end." Barnett and Baruch (1978) found that the mastery, control, and competence learned through work served as a sturdier buffer against depression than did the pleasures of the family. The data in my research revealed that the participants have effective and flexible coping styles which keep depression at bay and prevent the negative aspects of their work from impeding effective action. The fact that these women are recognized by their community as highly competent in their respective fields attests to their capacities to sustain effective action. These participants also appeared to have fulfilling personal lives. However, the research design precluded systematic exploration of their family lives, and the assumption underlying this research were that pleasure and mastery might be found in both domains of love and work. Therefore, we can only speculate about the sources of their "buffers against depression."

These findings also support those of Birnbaum (1975) that certain aspects of work status, such as level of occupation and commitment, appear to have a strong impact on women's well-being.

### Adulthood in Women

While the literature and research on adulthood in women says very little about the role work plays in maturation, both Bardwick (1971) and Gutman (1975) present a picture of mid-life women that is in keeping with the findings of this research. Both describe mid-life women as having integrated the more traditional, relational aspects of herself with the "egocentric" qualities necessary for initiative and sustained work. They note that when domestic responsibilities decrease in the middle years, energies are freed so that interests held dormant can flourish. While none of the participants in my research were "late bloomers," as all had worked nearly continuously throughout their adult years, those with children have been freer to move more wholeheartedly toward their work as their children grew older.

In her more recent work, "The Seasons of a Woman's Life," Bardwick (1980) describes hypothetical life stages in the adult development of women and a continuum of three orientations towards self and other: traditional, egocentric, and interdependent. The "interdependent" orientation integrates both traditional and egocentric aspects of the self and is most often developed in the complex realities of mid-life women who have both familial and non-familial responsibilities.

The findings in my research revealed that the participants had the egocentric qualities of assertion, autonomy, and decisiveness that are essential for the sustained initiative in committed work. The participants reported increased self-confidence, assertion, and decisiveness as they matured, but whether these qualities were in fact recently developed or are more enduring traits could not be confirmed by this research.

While contemporary feminist research criticizes the larger body of adult development literature as male-biased and dominated by such values as separation and autonomy, these researchers seem to tacitly assume that the world of work is a male bastion and is dominated by culturally male values. This body of research attempts to balance this heavy cultural bias by emphasizing the neglected values of the female realm, the world of personal relationships. However, the heavy attachment bias leaves little room for the inherent pleasures of autonomy and mastery that are essential components of work.

Gilligan (1982) has focused almost exclusively on women's relational self-concept and describes maturity as a refining of the care and responsibility in that relational self. There is little mention of the importance of task accomplishment and mastery. She extends her point of view to the world of work when she assumes that attachment is central to women's work lives. None of the participants in this research volunteered information

about significant attachments or personal ties at work although all were acutely aware of the interpersonal context within which they worked.

Nor did these women personalize their work in other ways. The data supports Bardwick's (1979) speculation that when women are engaged in work that is interesting, challenging, and intrinsically meaningful, there is little interest or involvement in the ups and downs of day-to-day personal relationships at work. These participants internalized blame for "failure" only when they lacked the necessary information for perspective. For example, the University Administrator recounted an incident when she was unable to bring resolution between disagreeing parties. She felt personally responsible for this lack of resolution until she learned that one of the parties "had no respect for objective reality," and that no one else had been able to work with him either.

Hancock (1981) found that the maturing process for her subjects consisted of taking an active stance in the rebuilding of their relational lives following the disruption of their assumptions that relationships of on-going care would be continuous. While many of her subjects worked, the significance of work in this rebuilding is not clear. Instead, what we hear are the schisms between these two areas of responsibility in her subjects' lives. Reconciling work and relational lives was

problematic for all but one of Hancock's subjects, a seventy-two-year-old writer.

The difference in my findings can be attributed to sample selection and research question. Hancock selected her sample on the basis of their capacities for self-reflection. Her participants ranged from age thirty to seventy-one. The sample criterion for my research was commitment to loved work, and the participants' ages clustered in the mid-life range. Hancock's research question was directed toward the developmental processes of adulthood in women, while the question of this research was specifically targeted towards work. However, I still find it puzzling that in a group of twenty self-reflective women, no mention is made about the importance of work in the maturing process of rebuilding their lives.

The findings of this research revealed that the feminine values of care, responsibility, and commitment were extended beyond the personal to include ideas, objects, and institutions as they related to people. The data suggest that work is as integral a component of the maturing process for the participants as are their relationships, and that learning in one area contributed to development in the other. For example, the City Clerk reported that as she had gained self-confidence at work, she became "more outspoken and opinionated in all of my relationships." The organizational and support skills she developed at home are

essential in her work. The University Administrator described her awareness that as she's matured in the context of her work, she is more selective in her friendships and more discriminating about the kinds of claims people can make on her. The Child Welfare Director, a very quick and active woman who has had to learn patience, was widowed twice and has suffered severe physical limitations. She has learned there is much in life that is beyond her control, and while in her work she never gives up her vision-related goals, she can sit back and wait for better times.

The participants frequently made reference to their own sense of the maturation process. The City Clerk, for example, smiled as she touched her greying hair and said, "It feels right for me now." The University Administrator was particularly articulate in describing her development in her adult years--her increased self-awareness and self-confidence. The participants repeatedly reported how their work had changed as they'd gotten a grasp on who they were and how important broad life experience was in getting that grasp. My sense was that I was hearing a cross section of a circular process with roots far back in time moving toward the future, an interaction of the woman with the world which constitutes maturation. She would discover more about herself through her work, the world would meet her in the form of an opportunity, and as she moved with the opportunity she would learn even more about herself.

Work has stretched these women, and much of this stretching they have asked for in their need for challenge and desire to grow. Work has called forth and developed aspects of themselves that probably would not have been developed in more circumscribed lives. Almost by definition work has enlarged their self-concepts and has been ego-expanding. Since their work is chosen work, they experience personal authorship and no distancing or dissociation from those traits their work has developed. They have been able to integrate what they've learned.

To a greater or lesser degree they have achieved a kind of steadiness and confidence in moving into the world, experiencing the inevitable triumphs and disappointments. In varying degrees they've learned frustration tolerance, timing, the capacity to ride out bad times, and a capacity to assess their strengths and weaknesses realistically. Some have learned to modulate their perfectionism. Others still struggle with it. They have learned where they can compromise and where they cannot. In short, they have developed traits in the public world of work and the personal world of relationships that serve them well in both worlds.

I think maturation requires a crossover between the personal and the public, as both offer different but valuable lessons. Ideally, the relational world should expand beyond the personal so that caring and responsibility extend beyond specific people to the larger issues of life. The mastery, the hard-earned lessons

of cause and effect, and the reality testing that are learned in the world of work must also be applied to personal relationships. As I listened to these women, I sensed that each had her own internal ground plan of who she was and what she had to contribute. Some had a clearer view of that ground plan than others. Life experience seemed to be a process of scraping away those notions about herself and the world that were no longer relevant and that obscured her view.

Life experience also consisted of opportunities to build on that ground plan. Some of these women were busier scraping and building, while others moved reflectively back and forth from ground plan to project. In each one of them I sensed that where she is now with her project is a much closer approximation of that ground plan than where she was ten years ago, and not as close as where she will be ten years from now. Growth seems to be the process of discovering and building. Being stuck seems to mean the process is derailed, the project halted. Maturation is a process that consists of vision and action and requires ongoing interaction between the self and the world.

#### Life Span Models of Maturity

The concepts of maturity found in the life-span growth models of Jung, Maslow, Loevinger, Hill, and Erikson were relevant for understanding the data of this research. These concepts of

maturity have in common the values of ego expansion and flexibility, integration, interconnection, and a coherent engagement with the world. They describe a process of becoming more singular while also becoming a more effective participant in the whole of humanity.

These models of maturity have been criticized as male-biased because they imply an engagement with the world not readily available to most women. Historically, however, meaningful engagement with the world via chosen work has been a luxury for both sexes. Creative work has emerged primarily from the privileged classes, from rare and highly talented individuals who found sponsors from amongst the privileged, or at great personal and financial cost. Few men or women have earned livelihoods doing work they love. The cultural pressure on men to support not only themselves but their families all too frequently leads to alienating work lives that can be as limiting to their development as the absence of work can be in the lives of women. These are ideal, not normative, models which, nevertheless, may inform us about the optimal conditions for human development.

The themes that emerged from the data are consonant with the values that these concepts of maturity have in common. They are themes that link inner states with the outer world. Work emanates from a compelling vision that constitutes how each woman views her beliefs, values, talents, and gifts in relation to the world. The

active engagement with the world that committed work demands is by nature ego-expanding. The growth described by these women is an ongoing circular process of increased self-awareness and further expansion and refinement of her work as she becomes more self-aware. Growth leads toward the world of other people, ideas, and institutions rather than towards excessive self-involvement. Personal development and engagement with the world are not in opposition but instead are of one piece.

Jung's (1970) developmental model differentiates the first and second halves of life on the basis of tasks and preoccupations. The first half of life requires establishing oneself in the adult world, and is characterized by preoccupations of security and earning a livelihood, those extrinsic rewards that are assumed in the literature of work. Most of the social science research on women and work was conducted on female college students, and perhaps these first-half-of-life goals were not only assumed to be important to both sexes but also as life-long preoccupations. Jung tells us that it is in the second half of life when concerns about becoming more truly one's self and more truly a part of humanity, about meaning, purpose, integration, and interconnection are dominant. The themes that emerged in this research parallel these second-half-of-life preoccupations. Perhaps this particular age group of women find their work meaningful because work provides both an arena and the materials

for the discovery of who they are and what they can contribute. Work provides an opportunity to create patterns that are meaningful in their own right as well as extensions of that drive towards integration and interconnection.

### Generativity and Creativity

Erikson's (1950) developmental concept of generativity is most useful for understanding the data of this research, particularly when his thinking is expanded and amplified by concepts found in the literature on creativity.

Generativity is the task of adulthood in Erikson's schema of life-span psychosocial development, a stage-related theory of tasks with attendant "virtues," or qualities, that are acquired in the resolution of the tasks. Care is the attendant virtue of generativity. Erikson repeatedly stressed that the meaning of generativity must not be limited to the literal act of procreation but must also include productivity and creativity. Generativity has to do with the ongoing life of the generations and care for those people, institutions, ideas, and products which perpetuate life. As such, it includes dimensions of both love and work, home and marketplace. Embedded in the concept are the values of mutuality, responsibility, and commitment that research has revealed are central to women's lives.

Generativity is a potential, or a capacity, and does not just automatically evolve. It must be both environmentally activated and individually chosen and confirmed. Although Erikson's examples of female generativity are limited to literal childbearing and rearing, he also speculated about what qualities female generativity might bring to the larger world.

Generativity is applicable to these data for a number of reasons. None of these participants was willing to limit her productivity or creativity to domestic roles. Certainly lives committed solely to domestic generativity have their own richness, but by definition certain other aspects of the personality are not developed. All of these participants require a larger arena, where care, responsibility, and commitment can expand beyond personal care for the immediate family to the broader issues of life. While generativity may or may not have been activated in the bearing and rearing of children in those participants who have children, it has been strongly activated, chosen, and confirmed in their public lives. The "ego" that has been expanded may be different from the more contained and autonomous male ego presented in Erikson's examples of generativity. Typically when we think of narrowed lives, we think of the lives of men which have been dominated by excessive commitment to work. But the female ego can be just as dangerously narrowed in its tendency to overly personalize and to limit caring to self and progeny.

One-sidedness threatens the development of both men and women.

The opposite of generativity is stagnation and excessive self-absorption. They are hazards for both genders.

The themes yielded by this research describe an initial picture of what generativity in working women of this particular age-group at this time in our social history might look like. Generative work emanates from a vision of mutuality, of self in relation to the world of other people. For these participants, work was meaningful when they used their gifts and abilities to participate in the building and maintenance of the world as they envision it. Generative work is an extension of inner processes, is uniquely shaped around the contours of the woman, and connects her life with others.

Generativity can be facilitated or frustrated to the extent that "work" and "job" are consonant, or at least not contradictory. Generative women may fill in the work vision with unpaid activities, particularly when the job is more limited than work. Generative work is not a pre-packaged compartment that leaves essential components of one's being hanging out and dangling in isolation.

Generative women are wary of hierarchical power when it implies control over the lives of others or threatens their own autonomy. When in positions of hierarchical power, generative

women monitor their own use of it and work to empower others. Power is highly valued when it implies autonomy, leadership, and effective responsibility that makes a difference.

Generative women are task-oriented. Competence is highly valued and requires the integration of such egocentric qualities as autonomy, assertion, and decisiveness that are necessary for sustained initiative. However, the nature of the task and how it is accomplished must be consonant with vision. The task doesn't stand alone, but instead seems to be viewed as a contribution to the ongoingness of life. The task is accomplished by a combination of hard work, ease, and delight.

Concepts from the literature on creativity help round out this picture of generativity, particularly in relation to the themes of coherence and growth. This literature vividly describes the process and movement that the data suggest is central to generativity in women. C.R. Hulbeck (1945) defines human nature as essentially a teleological striving for completeness, and believes that one of the major problems of our time is a kind of senseless boredom resulting from an inability to put form into one's life. Like Erikson, he describes an active process of choosing with an endpoint outside the self. Its opposite is disintegration and feelings of helplessness. To give one's life form, or coherence, implies a vision of what one loves and an

ongoing process of effective action that selects and excludes, evaluates and initiates.

The participants in this research are all deeply engrossed in finding, creating, and sustaining meaningful patterns, or form, in their lives. For some, work provides the major form-building arena. For others it is a smaller component of a meaningful whole. Growth, from this point of view, is a synonym for the creative process of forming their lives. Their distaste for feeling "stuck" is their resistance to stagnation, excessive self-absorption, disintegration, and helplessness.

To a greater or lesser degree, all the participants revealed the following capacities, which are characteristic of the creative process that I summarized from the writings of: Anderson (1959), Barron (1969), Fromm (1959), Ghiselin (1969), Hulbeck (1945), Maslow (1959), May (1959), and Rogers (1959).

1. The ability to abandon or omit that which is extraneous.
2. The capacity to "commit," fidelity to their vision and integrity.
3. The drive for wholeness, for bringing previously disparate forces into a new and overriding order; the attraction to complexity and the need for meaning-making; tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty based on

something like faith that a new, more encompassing integration will evolve.

4. The capacity for discipline, hard work, concentration, absorption.
5. A sense of timing--the ability to stay with, yet not persevere nor force premature closure.
6. The willingness to take risks, to forgo the known in the service of more comprehensive formulations.
7. Curiosity--alertness to external and internal stimuli and awareness of the unusual and the overlooked.
8. Tolerance of the irrational and superrational and permeable ego boundaries that can regroup.
9. Aliveness, vitality, energy, spontaneity.
10. The willingness to treat hunches, intuition, the improbable and impractical, with respect.
11. The willingness to admit mistakes and use them as opportunities for learning.

Implications for Clinical Theory and Practice

The data suggest that if Freud were living today, he would extend his definition of healthy adulthood as having the capacities to both love and work to include women. His personality theory, however, was developed primarily through retrospective work with adults suffering incapacities in love and work in a particular cultural context. It is the focus on pathology in the psychoanalytic tradition and its historical rather than teleological orientation that have made it less useful for understanding these data.

While Erikson remains loyal to psychoanalytic underpinnings and makes no reference to object-relations theory, he places the person within a social context and constantly emphasizes the interaction between self and other and self and society. He includes the lives of "healthy" people as he extends his developmental theory through adulthood and old age. He shifts our attention to the present and the future, to where we are going as well as where we have been. This teleological emphasis is even sharper in the literature on creativity and the creative process. Consequently, I found both these bodies of literature much more relevant in understanding these well-functioning women.

My research reinforced my belief that a developmental model is as essential for understanding adults as it is for children,

and alerted me to the importance of maintaining a teleological point of view. It is vital that we first ask of ourselves to what ends we are working, what are our notions of health and maturity? These data suggest that health is not the absence of pain or conflict, but the capacities to love and to work. As therapists, we must be as alert to the presence or absence of effective and flexible coping abilities in our clients as we are to the human miseries they bring us. And we must be alert to the role the presence or absence of work plays in the lives of the men and women we see. Meaningless, tedious, and alienating work diminishes lives regardless of its external rewards. We must attend to the experiential richness and deprivation in work as well as in relationships.

We also must ask ourselves where our clients seem to be headed, what is it that is missing, and what do they want to happen? As therapists we need to be alert to the presence or absence of vision in people who complain of depression and isolation and to listen for and help develop capacities for putting form into lives, in taking effective action on behalf of who and what one loves. The data suggest that the vision from which loved work emanates is a connecting vision. Even those isolated clients who are house-bound or job-locked might benefit if some small aspect of a vision could be identified and then actualized. Hulbeck (1945) reminds us of the self-confidence that

comes from bringing some form into one's life and of the meaninglessness of "social contacts" in a formless life.

We must remain loyal to our social work tradition, which views the person in context, and we must broaden our understanding of context to include a developmental backdrop for evaluating our clients that includes the future as well as the past.

Generativity provides an invaluable backdrop for evaluating our mid-life clients. Neugarten (1979) informs us that not only are there increasing numbers of people in their middle years, but also that the characteristic preoccupations of this population have to do with stock-taking and issues of meaning. People need to identify and act on what they love as well as who they love, particularly in mid-life and particularly at this very fluid time in our social history. Continuity between generations and within lives can no longer be assumed. Generativity must be actively chosen and maintained if depression, fragmentation, and excessive self-absorption are to be kept at bay. Caring that is narrowed to progeny and immediate family provides fragile ballast for mid-life women. In our practices we see many divorced mid-life women who not only are unprepared for economic self-support, but also have insufficient life experience to know what they love outside the domain of the family. Hancock's (1981) research revealed that such marker events as menopause and "the empty nest" were crises of purpose for her subjects, married and divorced, given the heavy emphasis on reproductive roles as meaning-makers in this

generation of mid-life women's lives. For many women there is a prolonged period between child rearing and old age, years that will need purpose and fulfillment.

The findings of this research support my belief that life experience is the best teacher and that the role of therapy is to facilitate learning from life experience so that derailed development can get back on track. Therapy and "growth" are not ends in themselves. As therapists it is essential that we do not fall prey to an overly privatized view of our clients as selves apart from a surrounding social matrix. Therapy, too, must be generative and maintain a stance of embeddedness and mutuality with the larger culture.

#### Implications for Further Research

Almost every participant asked me the same question: "Do you think men would say the same things about their work that we are saying?" Each had her own particular ideas about how that question might be answered, and most of them had some fascinating observations about gender differences as they operate at work. Some wondered if an equivalent group of men, men who loved their work, could even be found. In deference to their curiosity as well as my own, research on men who love their work and what makes it meaningful for them is called for.

People who heard about my research frequently asked, "But are these women successful?" Some simply assumed that "loved work" and "success" are the same thing when they told me about lawsuits, affirmative action policies, and legislation as they affected women in highly paid non-traditional occupations that they thought would be pertinent to this research. Clearly, collective thinking about intrinsic and extrinsic rewards is confused; on one hand questioning if meaningful work could command extrinsic rewards and on the other, assuming that extrinsically rewarding work must be "loved." My answer to the question about the "success" of these participants is a definite "Yes." All the participants are respected in this community as highly competent women. My response to the second issue is to suggest a similar study but with sampling criteria of "success," in terms of income and social recognition. I am curious where the findings would be similar and where they would differ.

Another not-so-frequently asked question that came my way was, "But what about their personal lives--are they happy?" This question reveals another conventional notion--that commitment to work is compensatory for women. My response to that question was that I found them to be vital and engaging women, and that they certainly seemed happy to me, but that this study was targeted at their work rather than personal lives. To lay this piece of conventional wisdom to rest, I suggest a study comparing happiness

in women committed to loved work with a population of non-working women or women with "jobs," matched in terms of age, marital status, and children. I speculate that the happiness scores of the former will be as high or higher, which would support my belief that intrinsically rewarding work is important for women's well-being.

This study calls for additional research systematically testing generativity on both mid-life men and women. Certainly generative qualities are sorely needed in our families, institutions, and communities, and we would be well advised to look for them, discover the conditions which activate and cultivate them, and then nourish them wherever we can. It would be particularly interesting to explore the issue of social context by discovering where generativity is found in larger, more industrialized and perhaps less humane communities than that of my participants.

## CHAPTER VI

## CONCLUSION

This research has addressed the question of what makes work meaningful for women by asking twelve chronologically mature middle-class women who are committed to work they love to describe what makes their work meaningful for them. The findings reveal that work is meaningful when it is coherent with their vision and a congruent part of the meaningful whole of their lives, when they feel competent in their work and believe in its significance, and when their work furthers their development. Work and job are not synonymous. Work is an extension of vision, while job is a particular role that society provides and remunerates. Work and job come together more easily for some of the participants than for others, and in varying degrees for the same woman over time.

The concepts of maturity found in the life-span models of Jung, Loevinger, Hill, Maslow, and Erikson were most relevant to these findings. These concepts of maturity describe the simultaneous processes of integration and interconnection, the becoming more of one piece while at the same time becoming more a part of the larger whole of humanity. Erikson's developmental concept of generativity, when amplified by literature on creativity, was especially relevant. The concepts of maturity found in this body of literature are ideal, not normative, and

have not been systematically tested. The findings of this research lend support to their applicability for this particular group of mid-life women and point to further research on both sexes.

The reader may ask the same question I initially asked myself: Why study well-functioning, middle-class women when there are so many problems in my practice, and in the world, that must be addressed? My initial justification was purely personal. I was drawn to them, and I enjoyed them. The experience of immersing myself in the work lives of these women strongly effected me and my practice in ways I hadn't predicted. The vitality of these women, their absorption in work they love, their startlingly effective coping abilities, and their humanity reinforced those same qualities in me. I found myself listening to my clients in fresh ways, my attention shifting to coping styles, to what they most truly cared about, to what were the sources of meaning and purpose in their lives.

The participants in this study reinforced my vision. The incoherence and fragmentation, the alienated and overly privatized lives that Bellah (1985) so clearly describes, are all around us and in us. These ordinary-looking, middle-class women who participated in this research constitute a quiet counterforce as they go their individual ways, acting on what they love, putting form in their lives, and contributing to the lives of others

around them. I think we all need a vision of what is possible, of how we can create meaningful lives with the materials we have at hand. And we need support for our vision wherever we can find it.

John Cage, who certainly is not an ordinary man, was interviewed for a series on creative artists over seventy entitled "I'm too busy to talk now" (Connie Goldman Productions, 1983). He was asked for his suggestions on how to age with vitality and engagement. His advice: Avoid getting a job if at all possible and instead, be self-employed. If getting a job is necessary for survival, practice self-employment by taking twenty minutes out of each day to write a poem. Then share that poem with another person.

In his inimitable way, Cage was advocating an approach to living which is central to the lives of these women: Do what you care most deeply about, and when life circumstances make that impossible, carve out some small corner of freedom and do it anyway. Alice Walker (1981) gives us another example of that approach. She describes how her mother--a poor, black woman in the rural South--created a magnificent flower garden with what moments of time she could glean from her day, and how friends and strangers would come to see this garden and gather seeds for their own gardens. I think there are many extraordinary "ordinary" people who can inspire and sustain our vision if we just stop long enough to scratch the surface and look. We can't all write poems

(even though Cage says we can if we can read and write), nor even create beautiful gardens. But each of us has the capacity to care about something and to take action on that caring. We all have some small, particular piece of ourselves that we can contribute. Our lives can be our art.

One of the participants, the Artist, put my thinking into words: "I do believe that we really are art. That, not what we do, is art. I think what is really trying to happen is that we are emerging and becoming free, changing ourselves through changing the things around us."

**APPENDIX**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

Your name was suggested to me as a possible participant in a study I am conducting on what makes work meaningful for women.

Although we all know that more and more of us are working and that we work for a variety of reasons, there is no research on what makes work meaningful for women. I hope to begin to fill this gap in our understanding of women and work by talking with women in diverse fields who find their work adds purpose and fulfillment to their lives.

I am looking for women who love their work. Participants must have been committed to their field of endeavor on a non-volunteer and more than half-time basis for at least the last three years. I am interested in participants who would continue this work even should all their economic needs be met. They must be at least forty years old and have no children under the age of twelve in the home.

This study would require a time commitment of about three hours. There will be two interviews, each taking approximately one and one half hours, in which we will talk about you and your work. These interviews will be tape recorded, but no identifying information will be used. Our discussions will be confidential.

If you are interested in exploring with me what makes your work meaningful for you, and if you fit the description of participants I am looking for, would you please call me at 423-0576. If you get my answering machine, please leave your name and phone number, and I will return your call. I would appreciate any suggestions you might have about other women who might be appropriate for this study.

Sincerely,

Margy Cottle,  
Licensed Clinical  
Social Worker

## INTERVIEW GUIDE

**Each initial interview was opened with the following request:**

"Tell me about your work and how it is meaningful for you."

**At some point in the first interview I asked the following back-up questions, both aimed at work's meaningfulness:**

"Could you describe a particular time in your work, or piece of work, that was especially meaningful for you?"

"What do you imagine your life would be like if you weren't doing this work?"

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