

# ARTICLES

## The Meaning of Work and Love: Career Issues and Interventions

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Examining concepts about work and love can help people increase their career success and life satisfaction. Career counselors may initiate this examination by eliciting clients' concepts about work and love. After hearing a client's ideas about work and love, counselors can compare this personal meaning to the social meaning of work and love. When this comparison reveals dysfunctional beliefs about work and love, counselors can link these beliefs to their client's career concerns. Such a linkage typically provokes a cognitive dissonance that motivates clients to modify their beliefs. Counselors can facilitate meaning modification by using client-centered and social influence techniques.

Mental health requires both love and work (Erikson, 1963, p. 265). Work brings people success and love allows them to enjoy their success (LaBier, 1986; Rohrlich, 1980). Many problems presented by career clients derive from disequilibrium between work and love within their life roles. Instructional counseling can help clients to resolve these problems by modifying the mistaken ideas about work and love that cause the imbalance and distress. In my experience, didactic counseling about the meaning of work and love seems more effective when it deals with the personal experience of work and love rather than societal roles. Just as we distinguish between sex and sex-roles, we can distinguish work from occupational roles and love

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from family roles. For example, work as a societal role has been defined as the "means by which we provide the goods and services needed and desired by ourselves and our society" (O'Toole, 1973, pp. 3-4). An individual's work experiences include work involved in all life roles, not just the work involved in an occupational role. Although researchers have extensively studied occupational roles and life role topics such as life structure, role salience, and role conflict (cf. Goldsmith, 1990; Super, 1980; Tittle, 1988), they have infrequently studied the personal experience of work (O'Toole, 1973, p. 4).

The current article attends only to the personal experience of work and love. It describes instructional counseling techniques that can help clients consider the personal meaning of work and love. Before describing counseling methods that prompt clients to examine what work and love mean to them, I will present the rationale for the methods. The rationale will be followed by a description of assessment techniques that counselors may use to elicit clients' concepts about work and love. The subsequent section will discuss a method for teaching clients the social meaning of work and love. The article concludes with a description of counseling methods for modifying beliefs and case examples of clients who have resolved career problems by changing their beliefs about work and love.

## **RATIONALE**

Animals are born with a full complement of instincts that animate their lives. In contrast, human beings are born with some innate drives but not enough to design their lives (Mumford, 1951). Human beings creatively complete their life design using resources and tasks furnished by society (Shulman, 1973). Although we share with other creatures the drives to survive and to reproduce, human beings invest these physiological drives with psychological meanings. Animal aggression propels labor, that is, physical exertion to meet survival needs. Human beings add to labor a psychological component, which we call work. Although animals consciously labor, they do not self-consciously work. Animal sexuality is directly tied to reproduction. Human beings add to sex a psychological component, which we call love. Human love can be independent of reproduction because it depends upon cultural meaning, not sex (Fine, 1985; Simons, 1985).

Because work and love are neither part of nature nor physiological drives, human beings are not born knowing what work and love mean. Thus, societies must cultivate the social meaning of work and love in new members of the community in order to renew their culture (Savickas, 1990). A significant number of children must partake of a community's shared social facts about work and love to

renew that society and maintain its stability (Erikson, 1977, p. 173). As a social institution, schools share the responsibility for "developing attitudes in harmony with the demands of social and economic life" (Lincoln, 1937, p. 6). Earlier in this century, character education programs taught students to make "wholesome social adjustments . . . which are beneficial both to one's self and to others" (Germane & Germane, 1929, p. x). Today, schools and communities use career education programs to enculturate students with work values (Hoyt, Evans, Mackin, & Mangum, 1974, p. 15).

To function adequately in a culture, newcomers such as children and immigrants must (a) learn how their culture defines work and love, (b) integrate the psychological experience of work and love with the biological experience of aggressive and sexual drives, and (c) balance work and love in the sociological experience of life roles. Unfortunately, some people do not learn their community's interpretations of work and love because their families, role models, and educators do not teach them common sense. Instead of learning functional ideas that facilitate adaptation to community life, these people adopt dysfunctional beliefs that thwart their adaptation or limit life quality. For example, some people believe that love means providing "presents" not sharing "presence." This dysfunctional belief about love often produces occupational and marital strain and may contribute to the problems that people bring to counseling.

## **ELICITING PERSONAL MEANING**

To determine if dysfunctional beliefs about work and love cause or exacerbate a client's presenting problem, counselors must identify that client's beliefs. Counselors may elicit this meaning in a variety of ways. The most direct way to elicit meaning is simply to ask people to define work and love. Unfortunately, this approach rarely produces much information because most people have not reflected on their beliefs. Thus, I use several indirect ways to elicit their beliefs.

With individuals and small groups, I ask "If you know that a person is a hard worker, then what else would you know about that person?" and "If you know that a person is very loving, then what else would you know about that person?" Responses to this "construct implication question" (Fransella & Bannister, 1977) usually articulate the network of meaning that people have constructed to understand work and love. If the client or group requires or prefers a more concrete question, then I use one of two structured exercises developed by Kurtz (1974, p. 449). In the first exercise, people describe what as children they learned from their parents about (a) doing work, (b) getting an education, (c) achieving success, (d) developing talents, (e) being an

achiever, (f) being a man or a woman, and (g) earning money. In the second exercise, clients write 10 personal commandments that state their parents' favorite sayings, rules, or advice about life.

The foregoing methods work well with individuals and small groups. I prefer another method with career education classes and graduate courses in career counseling. I present two incomplete sentence stems and ask students to complete them orally while I write their responses on a chalkboard. I ask people to complete the stem, "When I work, I . . ." I tell them that it need not be paid work, it could be washing dishes or cutting grass. I also ask them not to complete the sentence with words like happy, content, or dissatisfied because these words denote evaluations of work, not the experience of work. Moreover, evaluative words apply equally well to love and work and thus do not distinguish between the two. After people have completed the first stem, I present the second stem, "When I love, I . . ." I ask people to think of a person, place, or pet whom they love and then describe their psychological experience while they are with that person or pet or in that place. After the chalkboard is full of responses, I briefly review the responses and show how the class has dichotomized work and love. Then I present the social meaning of work and love by elaborating the words on the board and adding missing words. The following section describes the highlights of the presentation.

## **TEACHING SOCIAL MEANING**

In our society, dichotomies are the basic unit of meaning (Kelly, 1955). We recognize good as the opposite of evil; black as the opposite of white; and heaven as the opposite of hell. Unfortunately, we sometimes even think of male as the opposite of female, such as when we refer to the opposite sex rather than the other sex. Because people tend to think first in dichotomies (later we multiply dichotomies or convert them to a continuum), I choose to explain, at least initially, work and love by contrasting them as psychological experiences. For example, counselors can teach clients the social meaning of work and love by using Sternberg's (1991) contrasts between work and love or Miller and Form's (1951, p. 622) contrasts between values at home and at work (for a lesson plan see Savickas & Crites, 1981, pp. 18–21). In teaching clients or students about the social meaning of work and love in our culture, I explain three basic dichotomies: future versus present, active versus receptive, and I versus we.

### **Future Versus Present**

People know that they are working when they forgo present pleasures for future rewards. A future orientation gives form to work.

Work involves the constructive use of energy to create or enhance the future. As Cabot (1914) noted, "Work is doing what you do not *now* enjoy for the sake of a future which you clearly see and desire." In contrast, love is timeless. Whereas work aims toward a goal, love exists for the sake of love itself. Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote in her *Sonnets From the Portuguese*: "If thou must love me, let it be for nought; Except for love's sake only." Because work moves toward a goal, it should be efficient, planned, and scheduled. After all, work is busyness or business. Love, spontaneous and patient, loses track of time.

After discussing the future versus present dichotomy, I explain that the personal meaning attributed to an activity shapes an experience. For example, human intercourse, although typically associated with love, can be considered work if it is scheduled or impatient. Work has a goal and is in a hurry. Sometimes couples who "work" to conceive a child with the aid of a schedule determined by a calendar and thermometer forget the importance of relaxing, enjoying, and playing. We have all heard anecdotes about such couples miraculously conceiving a child after they had given up the goal of conception and adopted a child.

### **Active Versus Receptive**

Love means to embed oneself, to form connections and share. Work means to assert oneself, to master the environment and make it one's own. Work imposes one's will on the world and turns aggression to useful tasks (Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1951). For example, in reading this article you may struggle with the ideas, attack the mistakes, swallow and digest the material. In writing the article, I tried to persuade, impose my view, integrate ideas, and convince the editor to publish it. Work involves constructive expression of aggression because it aims to improve the future. Destructive aggression, or hostility, does not aim to improve the future (Rohrlich, 1980).

In contrasting active work with receptive love, I emphasize Rohrlich's (1980) distinction that work changes the world (for example, work transforms a tree into a chair) whereas love changes the lover. Love makes people more than they were because it extends them beyond their previous limits. I elaborate the meaning of active versus receptive by discussing similar dichotomies such as agency versus communion (Bakan, 1966), autonomy versus surrender (Angyal, 1941), power versus intimacy (McAdams, 1985), competition versus cooperation (Axelrod, 1984; Kohn, 1986), control versus share (Fine, 1985), and detach versus attach (Gilligan, 1982).

Anecdotes and stories serve to elaborate meaning. For example, in discussing the contrast between active versus receptive, a counselor

can discuss people who believe that the opposite of active is passive. All too often, they value work because they can be active while they devalue love because they despise being passive. In contrasting control versus share, I like to discuss the old Viennese custom of asking a prospective bride and groom to cut down a tree using a two-person saw. Obviously, the couple must move together in completing the task. However, if one or both partners want to compete or control, then the task becomes overwhelming. Couples who failed to fell the tree encountered a momentous question: If we cannot co-operate for a short time, then how can we cooperate for a lifetime? I ask class members who have been canoeing or sailing to discuss how these activities reveal tendencies to control and share.

### **I Versus We**

Work is egocentric in that "I am what I do." In contrast, love is allocentric in that "we are what we love." Work solidifies an individual's boundaries and provides self-definition; love dissolves these boundaries and embeds the individual in a social matrix (Fine, 1985; Rohrlich, 1980). The lover frees self from labels and crosses boundaries as she or he unites with people, places, and pets. The lover moves out of "I" and into "we." Work permits self-realization in the environment whereas love permits self-transcendence beyond narcissistic limits as the lover fuses self with others. Accordingly, individuals with weak identities fear love because they fear the loss of self (Erikson, 1963, p. 263; Simons, 1985, pp. 445). Therefore, they work hard to delimit self, not give it up. Love turns into work when a person uses love to gain an identity or enhance the self.

After presenting the foregoing three dichotomies, I discuss the integration of work and love in life roles. I explain that the greatest enjoyment of life comes when one incorporates work and love into each role. As Rohrlich (1980, p. 234) wrote, "for just as work and love conflict with each other, so, paradoxically do they enrich each other." Blending work and love into each family role (e.g., mother and father, wife and husband, and woman and man) enriches role enactment. Also, occupational roles provide more success and satisfaction when each day on the job intermixes work and love. For example, a good teacher balances moments of tough-minded work with moments of tender-hearted love. The counseling role also requires moment-by-moment integration of work and love. During a counseling session, the counselor may at one moment control the relationship or teach the client a new behavior yet in the next moment actively listen and share the client's world. Occupational roles devoid of moments of sharing, laughing, and communicating become



oppressive. As Black (1903, p. 97) noted, "work needs to be touched by the romance of love to relieve it from ultimate barrenness."

## MEANING MODIFICATION

After using instruction, persuasion, and storytelling to teach the social meaning of work and love, I help clients think about their lives by comparing this social meaning to the personal meaning of work and love that we identified earlier. Such comparisons often reveal sharp discrepancies. Articulating the discrepancies between personal and social meanings of work and love often disorients clients who hold dysfunctional beliefs. They find it difficult to rethink and change ideas about love and work that have structured their daily lives for years. Counseling can help these clients to reduce cognitive dissonance by reconceptualizing their ideas about work and love (Carlsen, 1988).

Counseling for meaning modification can begin by relating the discrepancies between personal and social meaning to the developmental challenges or personal problems that clients bring to counseling. Next, counselors may use nondirective counseling techniques that ease self-exploration (e.g., open questions, restatement of relevant content, reflection of feeling, silence, and clarification of meaning) to help clients consider the hypothesis that their distress stems from dysfunctional beliefs about work and love. When clients attempt to reduce cognitive dissonance by reconceptualizing their beliefs, counselors can assist them by using social influence counseling procedures along with cognitive behavior modification techniques (e.g., verbal modeling and reinforcement). As clients reconceptualize their beliefs, counselors should be alert to client attempts to foreclose the process by discrediting the counselor's message, applying counterpersuasion, devaluing the issue, and seeking support from other people who share their views (Strong, 1968). If these attempts occur, then counselors may use expertness, trustworthiness, and attractiveness to discourage clients from pursuing these unproductive paths to dissonance reduction. The following six clients with whom I have worked illustrate the outcomes of counseling for meaning modification.

A university professor wondered why he felt so isolated at work and why his marriage had ended in divorce. He eventually understood that his compulsion to control could be the cause. Then he struggled to change his style of work and love from "my way or the highway" to "our way is the highway."

A school principal reported being liked but not respected by her faculty. They admired her patience, kindness, empathy, and

flexibility. However, they disliked her disorganization, inefficiency, and lack of goals. In other words, they liked her as a person but not as a colleague. She wanted to improve her work habits and attitudes after learning that her job required "getting ahead" as well as "getting along." She began by participating in assertiveness training, taking a leadership course, and reading a book on time management.

A young mother who gave herself completely to the family cried because she felt drained. She later stated that she felt like a martyr because she thought love meant giving. When she believed that love meant give-and-take, she felt relieved. For her, learning that selflessness must be balanced with selfishness was a difficult but worthwhile lesson.

A middle-aged mechanic complained that he did not enjoy weekends or vacations because parties, concerts, and hobbies wasted his time. Eventually, he realized that the most precious time in life is the time that you "waste" on people and places that you love. He had to learn to forget about his goals and enjoy the present while he was playing.

A dual career couple was haunted by the problems of raising a family while climbing their career ladders. Their resolution had been to restrict their time at home to mother-father and wife-husband roles. They sacrificed their private time (personal hobbies) and their woman-man time. As a result, they felt that they worked all day on the job and all night at home. After learning how "less can be more," they gained the courage to make the painful compromises between work and love that decreased their career success yet increased their life satisfaction. For example, they passed up a weekend at the boss's lodge to spend time with their children.

A physician entered counseling to change careers. She liked the field of medicine but was disturbed by patients who wanted more from her than just biotechnical competence. Through career counseling she changed her goal from finding a field where she could work with things to developing the psychosocial sensitivity and skills that she had not learned from her alcoholic parents.

Counselors may use instructional counseling to modify meaning with groups (Friedman & Ulmer, 1986; Karasek & Theorell, 1990; Roskies, 1987). For example, instructional counseling in groups has been used with people who suffer from "hurry sickness" or exhibit "Type A behavior syndrome." They benefit from group intervention because they share in common too much work and too little love. To bind anxiety, reduce insecurity, or avoid liking and loving, they exaggerate work's importance and overdo its behaviors. Over-involvement in work leads to a work style characterized by competitiveness, time urgency, impatience, and hostility. Instructional counseling to modify Type A beliefs and behaviors teaches people to balance work with love, whether love be expressed through play, intimacy, or worship. Competition must alternate with cooperation, aggression



with altruism, efficiency with patience, control with reciprocity, and individuality with empathy. Sometimes, spouses of Type A people present the complementary imbalance, too much love and too little work. They also benefit from learning to balance work and love. For example, group counseling with displaced homemakers does not usually emphasize living in the present, cooperating, and mutuality because these are already overdone in the lives of many participants. Instead, group members learn to be comfortable competing, controlling, deciding, setting goals, planning, and asserting self.

## CONCLUSION

Work and love are life's two great passions. Although some people assume that everyone knows what work and love are, this is not true. People must learn how their culture defines work and love as well as how they can balance the two. Because these ideas are learned, they may be mistakenly learned or not learned at all. Career counselors encounter many occasions in which the most fundamental help that they can offer to their clients is encouragement to examine the meaning of work and love. In career education programs, counselors have an opportunity to orient students to the social meaning of work and love. During career counseling, counselors can make time to help clients examine their views about work and love as they relate to career choice. In work adjustment counseling, counselors may connect clients' concepts about work and love to difficulties such as keeping a job, coping with the "failure of success," adopting a work ethic, relating to co-workers, maintaining productive work habits, adapting to a job plateau, and making a mid-career change. In retirement planning workshops, counselors may help clients review work and love as they have lived them and then help participants to redefine work and love as they leave paid employment. Thus, many different types of clients can benefit from examining their concepts about work and love and then relating this meaning to the developmental challenges or personal problems that they bring to counseling.

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