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# The meaning of work for two high school seniors

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Received 29 April 2005

Accepted 7 May 2005

**Abstract.** The workplace is increasingly serving as an important context for the development of work behaviors, interpersonal skills, and values for high school students. A lack of qualitative studies regarding the meaning of the subjective aspects of work for teens is evident. The purpose of this research study was to understand the meaning of work for two high school seniors through qualitative inquiry. The researchers interviewed two participants in a conference room to maintain privacy. Interviews were audio taped, transcribed verbatim, and returned to the interviewees for member check. The researchers analyzed transcriptions, coded for identification of themes, and shared them with the participants to ensure accuracy. The meaning of work for both participants included themes of gaining financial freedom, learning job-specific skills, learning the general work skill of time management, sacrificing and rearranging leisure time spent with friends and family, and helping to define choices related to future work and co-workers. The meaning of work for the participant who owned his own business included additional themes of improving interpersonal communication, marketing, budgeting, taking initiative and responsibility, prioritizing, organizing, and decision-making, all required to develop and expand a successful business.

## 1. Introduction

The workplace is increasingly serving as an important context for the development of work behaviors, interpersonal skills, and values for high school students [11,16,18]. According to Entwisle et al. [7], 90% of youth work for pay during their high school years. As a result of working, many youth are developing higher levels of work skill in comparison to their peers of prior generations, and are making valuable contributions to their communities [15]. In this research study, work was defined as any paid activity that "... contributes to the goods and services of society..." [1, p. 626].

Researchers have studied the quantitative aspects of work for teens that include: (a) the influence of parents' reports of economic stress in teens' adoptions of the

worker role [13], (b) the effects of parental employment on adolescents' views of future employment goals [21], (c) the importance of intrinsic and extrinsic rewards of work [16], and (d) the relationship of academic success to stability in work [25]. A lack of qualitative studies regarding the subjective aspects of work for teens is evident. For example, Entwisle et al. [7] noted that little is known regarding social variation in work during the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Johnson [12] recommended that future studies should describe the influences of postsecondary education on work values. Further, researchers should explore in greater depth, the influence of family relationships on the work performance of adolescents [20].

Developing and maintaining work skills and behaviors is an important part of the developmental process for adolescents. Moreover, the role of worker constitutes a major area of occupational performance for adults. "Occupational therapists... provide consultative, preventive, evaluative, restorative, and compensatory services that are designed to improve... productive activity, including work, for persons of all age

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groups" [1, p. 626]. By understanding more clearly the meaning of work for teens, occupational therapy clinicians and researchers can assist these workers in overcoming challenges associated with disruption of work performance. The purpose of this research study was to understand the meaning of work for high school seniors.

## 2. Review of the literature

### 2.1. *Influence of parents and family*

Researchers have shown that parental employment affects adolescents' views of future employment goals. Students whose parents were employed in professional and skilled occupations were more likely to pursue artistic, social, and conventional employment [21]. In addition, researchers reported that a family's ideas about achievement influenced a teenager's involvement in work and motivation to do quality work [18]. Those adolescents who viewed their parents' work as personal, manageable, and satisfying had a more positive attitude towards working [8].

Loughlin and Barling [18] found that a teenager's comfort level in the work role was related to internal motivation and perception of job quality. The quality of employment was important to teens in formulating a strong work ethic for the future [18]. Students' ideas about career decisions reflected their concerns for autonomy in decision-making [3]. Adolescents of highly educated parents were more likely to learn about and practice skills relevant to their future occupations [5].

### 2.2. *Influence of economic stress*

According to Jones et al. [13] parents who experienced economic stress were pessimistic about their children's lives and the future work ability of their children. Parents were less confident about preparing their children for work roles and were less likely to encourage college attendance. Adolescents of parents who reported economic stress developed negative views toward work.

### 2.3. *Work rewards*

Researchers have determined that the rewards of work influence job values for all ages. Students, ages 12–15 years, who demonstrated high self-efficacy and success in academics were less likely to become unem-

ployed and more likely to be satisfied with their employed work [22]. In addition, better grades and participation in an academic curriculum predicted more stable occupations in the years following high school [25]. Researchers have also found that adolescents held high aspirations for educational and occupational attainments, including a strong interest in the rewards of work [5,26]. Personal dispositions such as self-efficacy, openness to new experiences, and low irritability, were correlated with exploration of occupations [14].

### 2.4. *Gender differences*

Males demonstrated a steady decline in their ratings of the importance of extrinsic rewards of work when compared to females [16]. For example, money, prestige, and an opportunity for advancement were rated higher during the senior year of high school by males than during the third decade of life by the same males. In contrast, females rated intrinsic, altruistic, and social aspects of jobs as most important during their senior year as well as in the third decade of life.

### 2.5. *Effect of volunteerism on future job employment*

Researchers have shown that school-related personal attributes and mental health were more likely to influence the selection of volunteer activities. For example, highly motivated and academically successful students were more likely to participate in volunteer activities to improve their opportunities for college admission or to obtain employment [11]. At the same time, volunteering enhanced intrinsic work values, decreased the anticipation of a career, and potentially exposed adolescents to an altruistic aspect of work.

## 3. Methods

### 3.1. *Design*

The researchers used a single case qualitative design to examine the meaning of work for high school seniors. A case study is the mode of choice for naturalistic inquiries [17]. The purpose of a case study design is "to present as complete a picture as possible about the characteristics of, and exposures faced by, that individual, often resulting in the presentation of a hypothesis about the causal factors that might account for the observed outcome" [23, p. 319].

### 3.2. Participants

The researchers emailed University of Indianapolis faculty and staff to obtain two participants. High school seniors during the 2004–2005 academic year were selected based on meeting inclusion criteria of: (a) performed work defined as “any paid activity that contributes to the goods and services of society” [1, p. 626], (b) worked a maximum of 19 hours per week [18], (c) signed a consent form approved by the Institutional Review Board. Participants were assigned a pseudonym for all written documents to insure confidentiality.

### 3.3. Data gathering

For the purposes of this qualitative research project, the investigators served as the instruments for data collection [4,10,24,27]. In qualitative inquiry, the interview is a commonly used technique for data gathering, providing the researchers with the opportunity to clarify questions, observe nonverbal behaviors, and interact directly with the participant [2]. Data analysis is an early and ongoing strategy, allowing the research design to emerge over time. The continuous data gathering and analysis directs future efforts in data collection [19].

The researchers collected data during five one-hour interviews and used follow-up interviews to confirm and expand themes previously identified. Interview questions were grand tour, structural, and contrast in design [28]. Interviews were audiotaped, transcribed verbatim, and returned to the interviewees for member check. The interviewers recorded their reactions and observations of the interviews in reflective notes. Analyses of transcripts were returned and discussed with the participants. The same two researchers conducted each interview, allowing them to establish rapport with the participants and to maintain consistency in those questions structured prior to the interview. Follow-up questions during each interview varied between the participants as they reflected unique responses to the questions.

### 3.4. Data analysis

The researchers used grounded theory methodology to analyze the data. The strategies of grounded theory may be summarized as: (a) simultaneous collection and analysis of data, (b) a structured data coding process, (c) constant comparative methods for analysis, (d) memo writing for the construction of conceptual analysis, (e) sampling to refine the researchers’ emerg-

ing theoretical ideas, and (f) integration of theoretical framework [9]. With the use of grounded theory, the researchers are able to develop a substantive theory to explain the significance of current research [29].

After the initial analysis of each interview, the researchers generated reflective notes in order to categorize the data into emerging themes. The purpose of these themes was to generate additional interview questions to be asked in future interviews [28]. The researchers also described the themes in order to bring meaning to the data.

### 3.5. Rigor

Triangulation refers to the process whereby concepts are confirmed using more than one source for data gathering [23]. Within this study, researchers used follow-up interviews with the participants to clarify and confirm initial categorization of themes. An expert advisor who was experienced in designing and conducting qualitative research provided regular consultation during data collection and analysis [6]. An expert panel of faculty with clinical and teaching experience in the areas of work and adolescent development critiqued and provided feedback regarding the researchers’ analyses of the data. The researchers used this feedback to refine the analyses given to the participants for member check.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Deron

Deron was an 18-year-old male, who attended a public high school and was employed in a family-owned catering business that was managed by his mother. Deron was previously employed at a pizza delivery restaurant for one year and a family-owned auto mechanic shop for one summer. He described the duties of his catering job as clearing plates, taking up food, placing leftover food in containers, cleaning dishes, and setting up tables and chairs. Work hours varied depending on the demand of the event.

Both of Deron’s parents worked and impacted his views on work. As his boss, his mother was perceived as flexible: “My mom kind of gives me some slack so not working every night, just get it done whenever.” Deron’s experience in working for an uncle was described as a way to learn to manage his money and understand that bosses differ in their approaches to supervision of employees.

Working for my mom. . . was easier but then again it was still work. But then with my uncle, that was just a whole other story. . . and I kind of had a feeling that it was going to be how it was because he was in the military, and he's not going to be easy. . . . he taught me a lot. . . like how to save money. . . . He just kept my pay so that when I wanted to go to a movie or something he would just give me money and so I wouldn't spend as much.

Deron identified the main benefit of having a job as earning an income. Deron used this income to pay for car insurance and to participate in leisure activities with his friends: "Any kid wants money and. . . so they need to work hard, so they may as well go out and make some money. . . . [With my money, I can] do to what I want. . . on the weekends. Having. . . money for spring break, stuff like that."

According to Deron, working gave him an opportunity to learn job-specific skills that varied in the amount of structure provided and the degree of problem-solving required of him:

Directions and everything because of delivering [pizza] everywhere. We had to go all the way past Greenwood and then downtown. So I've had to learn a lot, like streets and where to go. And that was probably the hardest part was knowing where. And with mom [and the catering business] it was easy because she would tell me what to do exactly. . . like, take up food, put it in the caterers, clear the plates.

In addition to job-specific skills, Deron described learning to use general skills gained from all of his work experience: "Yeah, like planning and time management so I can plan to get off work and do my hobbies." Work also provided him with an opportunity to observe others problem-solving difficult and unexpected situations. "Then there are some times that the guests are acting kind of drunk because they have all this alcohol there and sometimes you have to deal with that and at least get control of that. . . . I am under age. . . and [my mom] will ask them to leave or she will call the owner of the building. . . ."

Conversely, Deron described disadvantages of having a job including interference with completion of academic activities and interference with his social participation with family and friends. For example, he described a time when he wanted to adjust his work hours in order to be with friends:

I [wanted to] meet up with them because they were all out and having a good time, eating pizza or

something and so that [work] kind of got in the way and I was sort of mad. Yeah I called my mom that day to see if I could skip work but she wouldn't let me."

Having a job required Deron to balance his time away from work to complete schoolwork as a priority over socializing with friends. "If it comes down to it, I need to study, then that's going to be the first thing."

Being involved in work also made Deron more aware of the positive and negative attributes of workers, therefore, more aware of the types of workers he would prefer to have as peers for future work. For example, Deron described a good worker as someone who was motivated, reliable, and respectful, whereas a poor worker was someone who was disrespectful and dishonest. "[I would want them to be] respectful, um, probably ask them to get the job done and go from there. . . . I wouldn't want them to like, cheat me out or something."

Deron envisioned owning his own business eventually but described this type of work for his future. "I had a couple of ideas, I was thinking about construction but then maybe own my own restaurant because I do some cooking and I always liked cooking." In order to reach this future goal, Deron believed he had two options. One option was to obtain a college education by which he would develop the skills he needed to open his business. However, he identified the cost of college as a barrier to pursuing this direction for his long-term goal. His other option was to join the military, a strategy that would indirectly accomplish completing a college education through provision of financial resources: "If you go into the military, you get to see the world and experience life. . . . my little brother goes to college and he tells me about his class. . . . I kind of like the military idea-we'll see what happens." Although joining the military had the added benefits of providing life experiences and respect for Deron, he also recognized that he would need to sacrifice time with his family and friends in order to pursue this strategy of reaching his career goal.

Deron described the ideal work environment for his future business as one that provided novelty, diversity, physical activity, and flexibility for spending time with his family. Additionally, he preferred the type of job that would allow socialization with other workers. Deron recognized that the best way to insure his ideal work environment was to have his own business. However, this necessitated having financial resources, marketing the business, and obtaining employees.

[To have your own business, you] probably have to market stuff, get it out, and get employees, you're going to need money. Um, a place to have the restaurant. You have to think about all that stuff. Pretty much, just the money. Are you going to have the money to do it all?

#### 4.2. John

John was an 18-year-old male, who attended a public high school. He was self-employed in lawn maintenance, having worked independently for three years. John had no previous work experience. He described the duties of his work as lawn-cutting, edging, weed whacking, bagging, and cleaning debris. Work hours during the school year consisted of a minimum of 5 yards or approximately 6 hours of work per week. During the summer, work consisted of a minimum of 8–10 yards or approximately 12 hours of work per week.

John's parents were both employed and supportive of his work as evidenced by assisting in the purchase of equipment to begin his business. His parents influenced the way he viewed his work because they expected him to be responsible for the business, and to use his work to gain independence.

My parents bought the mower. . . and I am responsible for all the maintenance. So I pay for all my gas, insurance all that kind of stuff and then the blower and weed whacker I purchased myself. Throughout the wear and tear of my business, I have had to replace a blower and weed whacker once.

John identified the main benefit of having a job as being able to make the most money in the least amount of time. John was able to do this by owning his own lawn maintenance business. According to John, work provided him with an opportunity to have a "taste of the future":

Something like this gives them [high school students] a little bit of a taste of what it will be like when they go to college and also when your parents aren't there for you all the time and there is no one there to keep after you to do something. It is all up to you and. . . you are slightly more prepared than that person that didn't have a job and didn't learn those skills.

Additionally, John described his development of successful business skills of networking, organization, and productivity. In particular, he emphasized his development of interpersonal skills. "My social skills have gone up big time. Um. . . a lot of these neighbors I had

never really seen before. I didn't know them all that well. . . . But now you know I have a semi – decent relationship with them and after I mow their yard, I talk to them for five or ten minutes about stuff and so. . . I am much more outgoing because of it [my work]."

Challenges associated with having this type of business were high upfront costs for the purchase of equipment, physical demands, and interference with time spent on social and educational activities. John's involvement in work also made him more aware of the positive and negative attributes of workers. For example, John described the ideal business partner as someone who was knowledgeable, dedicated, extroverted, and disciplined, whereas a poor business partner was someone who was introverted and unmotivated.

I am debating whether or not to do this [hire someone] . . . because I will be going away to college, . . . but it would have to be someone that was friendly with the people you work for. . . . They have to be personable and. . . polite and. . . understanding. . . . They have to be hard-working and dedicated. This isn't something you can just kind of mess around with and work whenever you want. You have to be dedicated and it has to be a high priority, too.

By owning his own business, John identified and developed personal characteristics that contributed to the success of his business. He described these characteristics as planning ahead, willingness to work, financial management, motivation, initiative, and time management.

The benefits you get from having a job like that, as far as responsibilities, hard working. . . . Also, I am one of those people that when I am busy, I perform a lot better. . . Like when I have a lot of free time, I will procrastinate. I put stuff off until the last minute and grades start slipping and all kinds of stuff. If I am busy, I have to plan. . . it requires planning that is for sure. And so I work diligently. . . . I get the most out of my time which encourages time management.

John described the ideal work environment for his future career as one that provided enjoyment, flexibility, good pay, and direct contact with people. John hoped to have a job that gave him the financial security to eliminate the need for over-time work and to fund his avocational and living expenses. John recognized that the best way to insure his ideal work environment was to pursue higher education, identifying work skills as influential in succeeding academically.

Well I think those [time management, social skills, dedication] are skills that anyone needs for whatever the road ahead might lead them to. . . in college, um, organization, priorities, discipline, and all that stuff is probably going to be necessary to keep on top of your studies and. . . your academic schedule gets so much harder. And on down the road with a job and stuff, I think those are all qualities that are necessary to be successful in life. And, um, having this job I have had the opportunity to gain these skills early.

## 5. Discussion

The data demonstrated that the meaning of work for John and Deron was congruent with previous research findings. Researchers found that students whose parents were employed in professional and skilled occupations were more likely to pursue artistic, social, and conventional employment [21]. Both John and Deron had parents who were employed in professional and skilled occupations. John's parents held more conventional employment characterized by a defined chain of command and structure, whereas Deron's parents held more artistic and social employment, characterized by a lack of structure and interaction with groups of people. The type of employment each parent had influenced the decisions John and Deron made to pursue employment with similar characteristics [21]. In addition, researchers reported that a family's ideas about achievement influenced a teenager's involvement in work and motivation to do quality work [18]. John stated that his father had worked for the same company for a number of years and that he had found the appropriate balance in time spent between work and family. Likewise, John envisioned performing quality work but spending time with family and friends as important to his future career.

According to research findings, the quality of employment was important to teens in formulating a strong work ethic for the future [18]. John described the benefits of providing quality work to his customers by their loyalty to his services and by their referrals for additional work. By providing quality work, John developed and expanded a successful business. Moreover, his development of professional skills related to owning his own business were viewed as ways to achieve success in future employment.

Schneider & Stevenson [26] and Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider [5] found that adolescents who received a positive reward from work were more likely to pursue

higher education and professional employment. Both John and Deron found financial gains as a positive reward from their work experience. Both individuals described goals of completing higher education in order to increase these financial gains with professional employment.

Adolescents who had better grades and who participated in an academic curriculum were employed in more stable occupations [25]. John opted to enroll in advanced placement classes in which he achieved high academic standing. John hoped to pursue a career in the medical field. In contrast, Deron was enrolled in standard academic classes and was undecided about his future employment.

Unlike previous research findings, this study revealed subjective aspects of work that both participants described as influential on their personal development and decision-making. The meaning of work for both participants included themes of gaining financial freedom, learning job-specific skills, learning the general work skill of time management, sacrificing and rearranging leisure time spent with friends and family, and helping to define choices related to future work and co-workers. The meaning of work for the participant who owned his own business included additional themes of improving interpersonal communication, marketing, budgeting, taking initiative and responsibility, prioritizing, and organizing, all skills required to develop and expand a successful business. These additional skills were directly related to John's ownership of the business. Because Deron was not the owner of the business in which he worked, he was not directly responsible for the survival of the business. This finding suggests that the level of responsibility a teen assumes and the amount of structure within a job influences the type and complexity of the skills learned. Therefore, even though both participants gained job-specific skills, greater responsibility for the success of the job translated into additional skills learned that could be applied generally to all work settings, not just the job in which the skills were learned. Moreover, John recognized that his job required and fostered skills that would benefit him in non-work settings.

The identification of multiple themes expands previous descriptions of the rewards of work for teens. For example, researchers have indicated that males in their senior year of high school valued the extrinsic rewards from work initially, in contrast to females who valued the intrinsic rewards [16]. Likewise, in this study John and Deron valued money as the extrinsic reward of work, which gave them greater independence in mak-

ing decisions related to their use of leisure time and money to make purchases. In turn, financial freedom required discipline and self-responsibility for management of income. In contrast to previous research reports, John described additional intrinsic rewards of work related to personal and professional development, and job satisfaction. Intrinsic rewards of work have been reported primarily by females and by those who perform volunteer work [11].

In this study, no themes emerged that demonstrated a relationship between economic stress and the meaning of work for high school seniors. Researchers have described teens as developing negative views towards future work ability when they experience economic stress. Although exploring socioeconomic impacts experienced by the research participants was not a focus of this study, John and Deron admitted that their parents expected them to earn money for leisure activities and transportation. Neither of the teen workers described stress related to finances nor did they demonstrate negative attitudes towards future work related to finances.

## 6. Limitations and recommendations

The data gathered from qualitative research provides rich description of the perspectives of individual experiences. Likewise the findings of this study add valuable information to our understanding of the unique work experiences for two high school seniors, information not previously reported. Because of the qualitative design, the findings of this study cannot be generalized.

The findings support the need for future research to describe the meaning of work for high school seniors. Researchers would add valuable evidence to the literature in their use of participants who represented diversity in gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. In this study both participants were white males who lived in suburban areas. By expanding the meaning of work for this population, researchers would also assist those in education, social services, and vocational training, in providing appropriate and meaningful services to teens.

The American Occupational Therapy Association defines an occupational therapist's role within the occupation of work as providing "... services designed to improve... productive activity, including work for persons of all ages" [1, p. 626]. However, most literature describing occupational therapists' role in work has involved adult workers who have experienced disruption in work secondary to injury, illness, or disease. Recent literature has expanded to include con-

cepts of health and wellness for adult workers. Little has been written regarding occupational therapy intervention with teens in regards to work. By understanding more clearly the meaning of work for this population, occupational therapists will be better prepared to evaluate and intervene with prevention and remediation strategies for teens who are making the transition from adolescent to adult work. Occupational therapists can also be better equipped to provide valuable consultancy related to work performance issues for employers of teen workers.

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank our two participants for volunteering their time to participate in our research study. We would also like to thank Lucinda Dale for her input and guidance in this project.

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