
Occupational Profile

From Art to Science: A Personal Odyssey with the Self-Discovery Tapestry

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Key Words

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The Self-Discovery Tapestry, a one-page life-review matrix, is an exercise in ‘applied creativity.’ The instrument, developed in conjunction with my graduate studies in gerontology and occupational science at the University of Southern California, encourages individuals to illustrate their lives as well as interpret their life’s events. They are invited to use colored pens that help them see how changes in their lives have made their Tapestry forms ‘colorful.’ Strategies for adaptation are suggested. The development of the Tapestry came about through my lifelong interest in textiles and as part of my search for myself through graduate studies. Exciting elements emerged as people using the Tapestry discovered their own creative applications.

Personal Odyssey

My love of textiles began when I started working in my parents’ fabric store at age 11. I loved ‘petting’ the fabrics, seeing the wonderful colors, and helping people with their sewing projects. Naturally, I learned to sew. My professional life began as a speech therapist at UCLA working with children with severe disabilities. Hobbies included ceramics along with sewing and weaving. Our family’s move from Los Angeles to Washington, DC allowed me to volunteer at the Smithsonian Institution and later, become a member of the staff. I then worked for the National Gallery of Art in the Education Department. My eleventh and final year in Washington DC was divided between working at the Gallery and attending classes at Virginia Tech University in order to complete a master’s degree in adult learning. This was a joyous year, when I learned there were robust theories for the ideas I had for engaging adult learners.

Following my husband’s transfer back to Los Angeles, I enrolled in the University of Southern California’s doctoral program in adult education. That goal was interrupted, although I discovered I liked thinking in matrices. Instead I entered the master’s degree program in gerontology, where the knowledge enriched the work I was doing with older women. Upon completing the degree, I worked as education coordinator for three years for the non-profit Caregiver Resource Center. There was no time to work with textiles. In

1993, I was invited to participate in the recently formed doctoral degree program in Occupational Science within the Department of Occupational Therapy. My dissertation chairperson, Ruth Zemke, encouraged me to refine the matrix I had developed as part of my studies in gerontology. This became the Self-Discovery Tapestry.

Occupational Science and Gerontology

“Both gerontology and the new field of occupational science study older adults. Occupational science focuses on the ways in which people engage in activities and pursuits throughout their life spans” (Meltzer, 1996, p. 179). In the meaning that occupational therapists and occupational scientists promote, ‘occupation’ refers to the activities that people do “that will enhance their ability to live meaningful lives or by modifying the environment to better support participation” (WFOT, cited in Wilcock, 2006, p. 8). Both disciplines incorporate other fields, among them, anthropology, psychology, sociology, biology, philosophy and economics.

Each discipline identifies the strategies by which people search for their own authentic beings. Atchley (1999), in his continuity theory relating to older adults, posited that individuals embrace various roles throughout their lives while maintaining their essential selves. Elizabeth Yerxa (1967), one of the founders of occupational science, advised that occupational changes can aid individuals in reaching for their authentic selves, that time when there is a ‘fit’ between what one is doing and one’s goals. Self-actualization is Maslow’s term for the achievement of this development (1968, p. 191). These and other authors describe people’s efforts to search for and master their environments in meaningful ways; change and adaptation are necessary components for this growth.

During my doctoral studies, I was encouraged to limit my research to mature women students recently enrolled in a college or university and willing to complete the Tapestry and an in-depth interview. Nearly 100 women were interviewed: 10 were studied intensively. My daughter, Jessie, tells me I made four quilts during the year I conducted interviews and wrote the dissertation: I have little memory of doing so having been thoroughly engaged in the academic process. I think, in retrospect, I made quilts because I had to do something creative while being bound within the straightjacket of Chapter 1, Chapter 2, etc.!

The Self-Discovery Tapestry is a “unique instrument designed to provide an opportunity for people to acknowledge and review their life nonverbally, using colored pens and paper. It can help people understand the many patterns in their lives and how they cope with life’s changes” (Wicks, 2007, p. 8).

Matrix design

Patterns of interpersonal relations, employment and education, external influences, and personality influences are indicated as topics to be ‘colored.’ The matrix allows up to 90 years to be recorded. When individuals experience changes within one of the 24 topics, they are instructed to change colors: changed jobs? Change colors. By indicating important transitional events on the Self-Discovery Tapestry and drawing a vertical line at the age the events occurred, the individual can recall those personal events and accompanying emotions. He or she can recall the pattern of reaction and adaptation to a transitional event: functional or dysfunctional. For example, a move across the country affects nearly all aspects of previous, well-established lives and may evoke varying emotional effects.

Spaces are reserved for indicating career histories and hobbies, and there is a column in which to indicate future activities and attachments. The future column is analogous to the unwoven strands of a tapestry. Here individuals may indicate the activities they wish to continue or initiate. The matrix becomes a record of personal values, and when combined with the career and hobby histories becomes a valuable counseling tool. “It can help people understand the many patterns in their lives and how they cope with life’s changes” (Wicks, 2007, p. 6).

The Analogy of Weaving One’s Life

Why a tapestry? The grid of the Tapestry exactly illustrates two gerontological theories: the long horizontal lines on which the individual topics are colored are the ‘weft.’ They represent the continuity that most people attempt to maintain (Atchely, 1999) although changes necessarily occur within many elements of one’s life. For example, roles may change from that of a daughter to that of a mother or caregiver.

When one creates the weft of an actual weaving, the weaver uses a continuous thread. At right angles to the weft threads are the threads that create the warp: they ‘interrupt’ the weft, just as important transitional events interrupt many of the continuous elements of lives (Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1978).

In an actual tapestry, to further the analogy, the threads are woven in sections and may be reversed and woven on the prior weft thread (See Figure 2). This analogy allows individuals to indicate when they have experiences events similar to prior events, or to analyze their crisis-related problem solving skills.

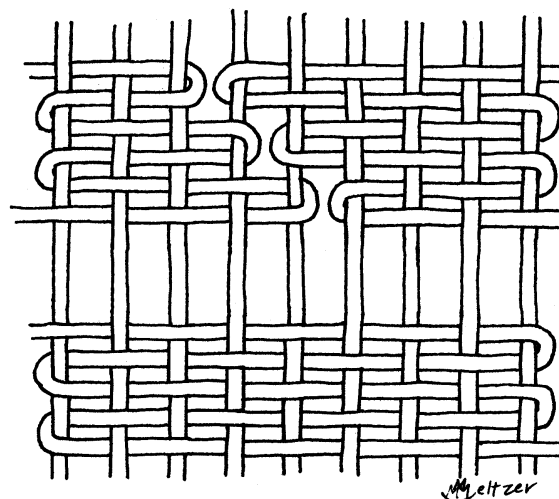
After my doctorate was completed, the Tapestry was published so that others might utilize it. A gifted graphics designer

created a boxed ‘kit’ containing materials sufficient for 15 persons. The kit included the Tapestry forms, instructive Client Guides, a Leader’s Guide containing case studies and suggestions for administering the instrument, and colored pens. Subsequently, the kit was marketed to academic departments around the United States. During the past years, thousands of students and older adults have completed their Tapestry forms and discovered elements about their lives that enrich their understanding of themselves, their relationships, and their goals. Many students use the Tapestry form as a guide while interviewing older adults.

Figure 2: Drawing of a Tapestry

A tapestry is a woven textile in which the warps of the textile conceal the wefts. Instead of one warp crossing the entire width of the fabric, however, a number of warps of different colors are used, each crossing back over any number of warps, as often as needed to create the design.

Diagram by Maxine M. Meltzer



I have personally presented the Tapestry to thousands of adults. Teaching and other academic activities and my own textile interests have continued to engage me, as does the duality of the disciplines of shared values within gerontology and occupational science. In addition, I have published several articles in gerontological and occupational science journals (Meltzer, 2001; Meltzer, Abbott, & Spradling, 2002).

Continuing Creativity

The production and distribution of the Self-Discovery Tapestry and accompanying materials serves to satisfy my need for creative productivity and professional occupation. I get great joy when people in the United States, Australia or New Zealand contact me, sharing the ways they are using the Tapestry with retirees, aging women artists, women parolees, young adolescents, returning soldiers, and Episcopalian ministers. A group of women in Kentucky completed their Tapestry forms and buried them in a time capsule beneath the

cornerstone of a new community center: it will be opened in 50 years. The goal of the Tapestry remains to encourage older adults to explore their meaningful development and visually plan for their future by using this interactive instrument.

My future research goals include tracking responses to the question, "In what ways, if any, did historical or political events impact your life?" And my own textile work continues. During the past 10 years, since completing the doctorate degree, I've made about four-dozen quilts, 13 arty jackets and eight vests. More projects await, on the sewing room table and the desk!

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