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# Using the Self-Discovery Tapestry to Explore Occupational Careers

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## Abstract

Occupational careers, the multiple paths that individuals pursue throughout their lives, offer fertile ground for research in occupational science. A life-review instrument designed to record adults' occupational careers, called the Self-Discovery Tapestry, was developed by applying gerontology-based life-span theories to occupational science concepts. This article presents research into the ways mature women who had recently enrolled in higher education utilized the Tapestry to gain insights into their life-altering transitional events and adaptive coping styles. The Tapestry encompasses interpersonal relationships, occupation, personal and family health and finance, and self-evaluation against which individuals record their life histories and occupational careers. A case study is presented to illustrate how using the Tapestry assists individuals and professionals apply the concepts of occupational career development over the life span. Possible uses of the Tapestry in the practice of occupational science and in research are presented.

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## Keywords

Occupational adaptation  
Life-review  
Occupation  
Transitions  
Life-span theories

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Occupational scientists generally strive to view individuals and groups holistically over the life-span. One means of doing so is by studying the occupational career patterns of individuals, reviewing how transitional events led to altered or new occupations. The Self-Discovery Tapestry is a newly created life-review instrument that applies life-span theories to occupations. This article will present and discuss the concepts surrounding the development of the Tapestry in terms of occupational careers. A case study, using the Tapestry, will demonstrate how applying the concept of occupational careers can facilitate the exploration of transitions and encourage self discovery. The concept of occupational careers and the Tapestry are seen to be valuable tools for occupational science research.

The Tapestry formed the basis for my doctoral dissertation research. During preliminary research to establish the Tapestry as a useful instrument, it was utilized with approximately 100 currently enrolled mature male and female students of higher education. They recorded their occupational histories on the form and discussed how they had progressed from one occupation to another, usually due to a transitional event such as a marriage or divorce. Many of the interviews centered on how each individual viewed the ways his or her current occupation as a student impacted upon other occupations: parent of school age children, employee, marital partner, artist, and so on. Participants in the preliminary studies discussed their reactions to completing the Tapestry: all "discovered" aspects of their lives they had forgotten or thought unimportant. For example, upon looking at her Tapestry one woman enthusiastically said, "I *did* do more than make dinner all these years."

It was hypothesized that completed Tapestry forms, in combination with transcribed interviews, would reveal critical events that initiated transitional behaviors. In the study discussed here, the adaptive behavior following transitions was enrollment in college or university that would allow the person to pursue an occupational career.

The criteria for inclusion in the study were that participants be Caucasian, age 40 or older, and recently enrolled in a college or university with the goal of changing occupation. Ten women students were chosen as research participants. Each agreed to complete the Tapestry and participate in an audiotaped individual interview. Each woman completed coloring the Tapestry either by herself, in a group, or with me. Audio taped interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed using the methods described by Strauss and Corbin (1990). Analyses of the participants' responses were presented, as were descriptions of their occupational adaptations, based upon their responses on the Tapestry and

analysis of coded interview data (Meltzer, 1997).

Although several research questions were used in the research study, only one will be discussed here. This question focused upon the manner in which the Tapestry assisted the women in their evaluation (discovery) of their occupational career transitions. Could the participants “see” and understand their life changes by looking at and discussing their Tapestry forms? Would the Tapestry provide the means for study participants to see how continuous elements in their lives had been interrupted by critical events? Were the theories valid when applied to occupational science principles?

The Tapestry, while presenting occupational careers among other elements, is a process-oriented instrument. Individuals who complete their Tapestry forms are able to review their adaptive strategies; recall emotions surrounding transitional events that disrupted continuous elements, such as their marriage, or unplanned sad events, such as an automobile accident; and notice how they “moved on” to new challenges. By analyzing their completed Tapestry forms, participants gain understanding of the context as well as meaning of past events while indicating their future goals.

Two of the most important research results were that each woman in the study enrolled in college as the result of a recent important event in her life and that each woman’s chosen occupation, to be achieved following granting of a degree, expanded her occupational career trajectory. Several of the study participants were able to perceive (discover) their occupational career paths independently.

All but two of the women perceived their decisions to enter college as a positive and necessary addition to their occupational careers. These two women’s occupational motivations were not aligned with the others: they presented “inauthentic” aspects to their decisions to become students. One woman, formerly a graphic artist, agitated and depressed, confessed she had enrolled in the physician assistants’ program because she wanted respect. Another, divorced, sad and lonely, enrolled in a social work program in order to have some human contact.

Although the research study was limited to women, later use of the Tapestry indicates that the Self-Discovery Tapestry is appropriate for both men and women. Since 1997, more than 400 women and men from diverse backgrounds have completed the Tapestry. With very few exceptions, their responses have been positive, life affirming, insightful, and responsive to the power of being able to see changes and patterns in their lives as they move on to new occupations and pursue their occupational careers.

### The Concept of Occupational Career

Occupational career is the term coined by Black (1976) within the framework of occupational behavior. It is used to describe the life course trajectories enacted by individuals as they fashion their working careers. Some roles and

occupations are abandoned as new ones are acquired. Occupational career may be defined as “a series of roles bridged by the decision-making inherent in the occupational choice process during a lifetime” (Black, 1976, p. 227). A woman who changes roles, for example, by attending college as a student in order to enter employment subsequent to being a homemaker, amends and adapts the trajectory of her occupational career. She may temporarily or partially abandon the occupation of homemaker and add the occupation of student to her repertoire.

An individual’s occupational career is the result of personal decisions to engage in roles but is continually influenced by personality, societal circumstances, gender, social class, sense of identity, and other variables (Black, 1976). Individuals continuously adapt their occupations. Theorists of occupation describe this concept of occupational adaptation as a process of response to occupational challenge which results in occupational change (Schkade & Schultz, 1992). The goal is toward achieving the greatest degree of personal mastery and authenticity possible. Yerxa proposed the concept of personal authenticity stating that it may be achieved when the individual makes “the kinds of choices by which he can discover, for himself, the meaning of his own existence and realize his potentials in accordance with that meaning” (Yerxa, 1967, p. 7). These choices include occupational choices that lead to a series of occupations or an occupational career.

It is helpful to think of the occupational career and its development over the life span as being on a trajectory. As the individual matures over time, adaptations are constructed in order to continue development toward that authentic ideal self (Osherson, 1980; Yerxa, 1967). Adaptive coping styles, once developed, serve the individual through similar circumstances throughout life.

Occupational adaptations are those changes that are enacted as time and circumstances alter. Occupational adaptation is evidenced when individuals change careers. Bateson (1989) uses the analogy of a developmental spiral as a symbol to illustrate the inter-relatedness of process, growth and maturation in adaptive styles throughout a lifetime of occupations. Christiansen (1999, p. 547) asserts that “occupations are key not just to being a person, but to being a particular person.” He continues, “When we build our identities through occupations, we provide ourselves with the contexts necessary for creating meaningful lives.” Each individual derives personal meaning while occupying many roles or engaging in a variety of occupations. In summary:

*As individuals spiral through their occupational careers, they may experience similar occupations to which they have adapted and applied newly acquired skills and knowledge. For example, a woman whose occupation has been nurturing her family may, after completing her mid-life college education, continue her nurturing preferences by becoming a teacher of young children or nursing the frail elderly (Meltzer, 1997).*

An individual's occupational career frequently appears to form a trajectory as the person enters the workforce and seeks employment that gradually reflects and enhances his or her authentic self within the parameters offered by the culture. Researchers and theorists from many fields, including occupational science and occupational therapy, exhibit interest in the trajectories of occupational careers. These include anthropologist Bateson (1989, 1996); sociologist Glassner (1994); Kielhofner and Burke in occupational therapy (1985); psychologists Levinson and his associates (1978); Russel in occupational science (1999, 2001); and Super, a theorist and practitioner in career counselling (1984).

Life-span theories developed within the discipline of gerontology contain elements that present ideas on occupational trajectories. Although not stated in those exact terms, the similarity of concepts is evident and applicable to issues in occupational science. Adaptations in the emphasis of life-span theories resulting from the study of mature and older adults strongly impacted the development of the Self-Discovery Tapestry as an instrument suitable for occupational scientists to study adults' occupational careers.

## Life-span Theories

Life-span theories hypothesize that there are elements universally shared by individuals over the human life-span. Two of these theories were utilized and adapted in order to provide the basis for the development and design of the Tapestry. The first, Continuity Theory (Atchley, 1989, 1999), proposes that people aim to sustain important, *continuous* supportive elements in their lives. For example, individuals strive to remain in the work force in order to earn a pay check so they can support themselves and their family, be productive to society, and maintain their social standings and lifestyles. A second life-span theory, dealing with critical events (Bridges, 1980; Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1978; Osherson, 1980) presents ideas on the manner in which *non-continuous* events alter the course of adults' lives. For instance, a move from a small town to a large city may result in the termination of daily contact with family and friends, demand new employment, and cause upheaval in an individual's leisure occupations. Each of these theories are outlined below and related to the design of the Tapestry.

### Continuity Theory

Atchley (1989) states that adults "attempt to preserve and maintain existing internal and external structures" (p. 184). Internal continuity refers to the continuous values and traits that identify the self: for example, lifestyle and personal goals. Persistence of identity and essential authentic strands of personality exists despite changes in occupation but may require some adaptation. Continuous development is an essential part of the theoretical structure, as individuals seek to maintain their roles within their cultural milieu. Roles are added and discarded over time due to changing circumstances. For example, mothers may seek paid work outside the home when daytime mothering duties diminish as children enter school. The theory "assumes evolution, not homeostasis, and

this assumption allows change to be integrated into one's prior history without necessarily causing upheaval or disequilibrium" (Atchley, 1989, p. 183).

External continuity refers to those long-term sustaining elements in the environment that allow the individual to maintain his/her internal continuity: financial resources, social support from family members and friends, and a firmly perceived place in the community. Individuals may perceive differences in environmental opportunities due to age, cohort, ethnicity, and gender differences but patterns of responses and behaviors are created by each individual.

How does external continuity relate to occupation? One example may illustrate the concept. In a lifestyle redesign study conducted with community-dwelling, well elderly in Los Angeles, California (Mandel, Jackson, Zemke, Nelson, & Clark, 1999), older adults, guided by occupational science principles, found new occupations, such as going on group excursions around town. Participants also rediscovered and adapted earlier occupations such as joining groups for card playing or adapting exercise to activities suitable for their current ages and physical conditions, such as walking or stretching. The Tapestry, when utilized by individuals such as these can help identify healthy adaptations and stimulate recall of previously enjoyed occupations such as doing crafts or volunteering.

The assumption is that continuity in both internal and external elements allows individuals to plan for the future while allowing for changes. Such changes may have improvisational qualities as well as adaptive aspects based upon existing or past roles (Bateson, 1989; Covey, 1981). Continuity theory is consistent with the concept of occupational career development. The theory was adapted, interpreted, and applied to significant elements of the Tapestry. For example, when individuals color the lines that indicate their ages when they lived with their mothers or fathers or attended schools, most will be indicating some of the continuous occupational elements of their lives.

### Critical Events Theory

Critical events theory, also known as "life events" theory (Bridges, 1980; Levinson et al, 1978, Osherson, 1980) theorizes about the identifiable changes that occur in the individual's usual patterns of behavior. Occupational career trajectories are not usually without interruption. They may be discontinuous owing to a variety of causes. Critical events may occur when an individual experiences a personal crisis that precipitates a change. Golan (1981) defines a critical event as "a period of moving from one state of certainty to another, with an interval of uncertainty and change in-between" (p. 12).

*Changes can cause stress as well as challenges for occupational adaptation. The perception of the level of stress may be dependent, in part, on whether the event is voluntary or involuntary or is perceived as positive or negative. The degree of stress is an individual assessment and may be*

*mitigated by its meaning for the individual and his/her social resources (Meltzer, 1997).*

Critical events that initiate transitions may forge the formation of new patterns in which individuals either voluntarily or involuntarily amend their life courses (Apter, 1995; Levinson et al, 1978; Osherson, 1980).

The important issue here is how the individual perceives the event: one person may view the birth of a child as a normative event while another may feel the child's presence has significantly altered her occupational career goals and indicate the birth as a critical event on her Tapestry. Each critical event requires the expenditure of energy leading to adaptive behaviors as the individual seeks to re-establish or maintain continuity and equilibrium while amending the career trajectory—adding or discarding occupations. The occurrence of critical events such as a job change or onset of a disability consistently disrupts some, if not all, of the continuous elements of an individual's ability to maintain equilibrium.

Occupational scientists study individuals' occupational choices. Critical events, perceived as crises, force the individual to swerve, regroup, adapt or amend these previously selected choices. Knowledge of the continuous elements in peoples' lives aids in understanding how critical events interrupt those continuities. The Tapestry may be utilized as a record of past occupations, those that existed prior to critical events. Upon review, the individual may discern future directions for occupational choices, perhaps with guidance from an occupational scientist. People usually utilize effective adaptive behaviors following a crisis. Behavior during earlier crises is recalled, and, if necessary, adapted and "tried on" for appropriate response.

An example of applying the principles of occupational science to a critical event may be when Joe, a 63 year old white male, is made redundant in his long-held job as an administrator for an engineering firm. He is desolate and feels robbed of his identity and occupational (work) community. After completing the Tapestry form he sees and is reminded that he had been fired from a similar firm when he was 40. Then he updated his résumé, talked to friends about possible positions in their firms, and went on at least six job interviews. When he was reminded of his earlier effective adaptive behavior, he felt more hopeful and began to assess his recently acquired experiences preparatory to writing a new résumé. Joe might also have decided to pursue a new career based on his recent interest in motorcycle racing.

When an individual perceives a critical event as a personal crisis leading to occupational change and subsequent adaptation, he can better understand its meaning. The process of understanding may be immediate or gradual. A perceived critical event may elicit periods of introspective processing including self-assessment and integration of new occupational goals. This process is referred to as "turmoil and confusion" (Glassner, 1994). It has several stages during which the individual acquires and practices adaptive behaviors.

The emotions of turmoil and confusion may arise both prior to or following critical events. The process is generally understood as having three stages (Glassner, 1994). The first stage in this adaptive process is realizing and admitting that the prior occupation has ended: the job, schooling, or child raising is over. Following this realization, the individual enters the second stage and endures periods that may include dependency and grieving for the lost occupation and, gradually, hopefully, realizes that other alternatives exist, that he or she is free to make new choices, and that it is time to evaluate those alternatives. It is a time when individuals "test" their knowledge of themselves against their idea of how they might adapt their prior abilities or situations into new occupations. During my doctoral research, one research participant, following her husband's request for a divorce, decided to seek a new work career. She investigated the requirements for becoming a property manager but thought, "You'd have to be very demanding and bossy. I could never do that." She looked into the requirements for several other occupations. Her sister, a graduate of a Certified Occupational Therapy Assistant (COTA) program proposed she consider enrolling in the same course of study. She investigated the requirements and said it "felt right." At the time of our interview she had successfully completed her first academic year.

The third stage of processing turmoil and confusion is entered into when the individual makes a decision to move forward, for example, enrolling in college. Not all decisions are the right ones or unidirectional, by any means, but indications are that some "moving on" has occurred surrounding the transitional event when a decision has been made.

Emotions that include turmoil and confusion generally surround transitional events, but most of the time most people successfully handle life's transitions: changes are perceived as part of the normal flow of life. Most adults have developed coping styles that permit them to adapt to transitional events. The image of a spiral recalls "the shaping and reshaping of identity, as gradually we have more to work with and we become skilled in reconstruction" (Bateson, 1989, p. 214). The "shaping and reshaping" indicate the adaptive skills we have acquired throughout our lifetimes. Strategies for adaptation may occur during the stages of "turmoil and confusion" when self-analysis occurs. For example, in the course of normal aging physical impairments may lead to being unable to drive a car. Adaptive behaviors might include acquiring a bus schedule, using taxis or neighborhood transportation systems, or asking for assistance from friends and family members. Adaptation is also part of the strategy that builds the occupational career: individuals continually adapt each occupation and the *series* of occupations that lead to fulfilling careers and authentic personal expression throughout their adult lives.

Transitions, both voluntary and involuntary, provide catalysts for change. From time to time, though, and depending on the level of stress incurred, professional intervention may aid the process of "moving on." The Tapestry can be a useful tool when professionals work with individuals who are

anticipating or have already experienced a transitional event. Their completed Tapestry forms show where they have been, how they have historically made successful changes, and the direction their goals are taking them.

## Development and Testing of the Self-Discovery Tapestry

Having worked with textiles for many years I was inspired to represent my own life as a weaving after reading Bateson's *Composing a Life* (1989). This book presents a discussion of how several prominent women improvised their lives through continuous development, in essence, a history of their occupational career building. Bateson frequently used terms for life changes that evoked images of textiles, weaving, patchwork, threads, and so on. The idea of a weaving was adapted as a printed paper instrument. Following extensive testing the instrument was published as a kit for researchers or therapists.

The Tapestry was created by applying and adapting gerontology life-span theories as well as research in occupational science and occupational therapy. Twenty-four topics, supported by that literature, were established within the 4 domains. (See figure 1.) I decided not to name (entitle) the domains so as to avoid directing recall into specific categories. However, the first domain elicits information about *interpersonal relationships*, which include the topics of family, work, religious, and organizational relationships. The second domain elicits recall about the individual's *occupations* such as education, work, individual learning, and interests. The third domain, *personal meaning*, names three topics: personal as well as family health problems, and financial hardship. The fourth domain, *self-evaluation*, includes the topics of turmoil and confusion as well as generally established personality states: being creative, happy, or unhappy.

Pilot testing of the instrument was conducted in classrooms, with groups of men and women who volunteered to participate outside of classes, and with individuals who were told of the study by their instructors. Topics were added based upon responses of these early participants. For example, several individuals enrolled in the Certified Occupational Therapy Assistant Program in Los Angeles indicated the loss of a pet as an important event. I discovered that a study had been conducted that concluded that pets represent important interpersonal relationships: "pets" were added as a topic within the interpersonal domain. A face to face evaluation was conducted with several nurses and social workers in the Los Angeles area. Their suggestions that older adults would find the smaller page size difficult to read contributed to the larger size of the Tapestry.

Limitations of the instrument discovered thus far are that the individuals must be able to read or understand the instructions and recall past events in English, and be willing to share aspects of his or her life. It is possible for individuals to complete and interpret their Tapestry forms without

guidance but this requires a willingness and ability to explore one's life in isolation.

Every person who completed the Tapestry was asked for his or her opinion on how or if they enjoyed completing it and if they discovered something about themselves while so doing. The responses were decidedly positive. Many people "discovered" meaningful patterns among their transitional events and recalled positive aspects of past continuous elements.

## Construction and Administration of the Tapestry

The Self-Discovery Tapestry is printed on a paper 11x17 inches. It appears as a grid or matrix with a column on the left divided into the four domains. Numbers across the top horizontal area range from 0 to 90 and represent the participant's age. Continuous topics are colored horizontally representing the years when the individual did or had something on a continuous basis, eg, lived with mother, worked for pay, engaged in creative activities, and so on. Critical events are represented by drawing a continuous line from the top of the grid to the bottom at the "age" when a critical event occurred. Future activities are colored on the column at the far right. Figure 1 presents a blank Tapestry form.

The Tapestry applies both continuity theory and critical events theory by encouraging individuals to color in the continuous elements of their lives. Changes in continuous elements are indicated by changing colors on the topic line. For example, if the individual changed jobs three times between the ages of 25 and 35 she might use the blue pen to color from age 25 to 28, change to red to indicate she changed again at 28 and worked in that job until age 31; changing to green will show she moved to a new job at age 34. Different colors on the horizontal lines may indicate movement toward the fulfillment of the individual's occupational career. Many changes on the continuous horizontal lines may also be interpreted as seeking a goal, seeking alignment toward the "authentic self." Changes may also correspond to critical events that precipitated voluntary or involuntary transitions in several aspects of the individual's life.

Future goals and values ("Future activities and attachments") are indicated with colored lines in a separate column on the far right. These represent the unwoven strands of a tapestry. For example, if one wished to continue working, the horizontal line, "Work (job/career)" would be colored.

Critical events are indicated when the individual draws vertical lines from the top to the bottom of the form at the age(s) when the event(s) occurred. Individuals can see that when a critical event occurred it affected many parts of their lives. For example, following a move to a new city a person may show changes in the previously sustained elements of her life. She is leaving friends, colleagues, church, job, hobbies, and may perceive altered states and levels of happiness or creativity. Each perceived important event, as indicated in the research literature, affects the individual, her support



systems, and cultural milieu (Apter, 1995). As though they were weaving a tapestry, individuals completing the form with colored pens “weave” the *warp strands*, continuous elements, and the *weft*, critical events, at right angles to the warp and the “*unwoven strands*” of the future. The three numbered shaded areas below the printed form are for individuals to list the critical events they indicated with vertical lines, their work histories, and sports and hobbies they currently or formerly enjoyed. When these spaces are filled in, the individual is able to view his or her occupational history, and whether and to what degree his or her occupations correspond to desired future occupations, attachments and interests.

Most people require approximately thirty minutes to complete their Tapestry forms. A well-lit quiet room, free of interruptions and distractions, allows for more complete concentration. Questions about completing the form often arise when used in a group setting. Some participants ask about special needs: more siblings than the form provides spaces (“Use the extra lines at the bottom.”), where to put the record of their military service (either as “work” or at “other information” lines), and so on. Others may need to be told that, “This is *your* life, use whatever colors you like.” Some create patterns rather than lines, which is fine: individual interpretation is encouraged. A dynamic of intense concentration emerges when a group works on their Tapestry forms.

When working with one person it is helpful to sit next to, rather than across from the individual. This allows the therapist to ask questions about history and emotions surrounding past events and future goals. Conversation is encouraged and when trust has been established, generally flows freely.

When completed, the Tapestry presents a colorful matrix upon which individuals can trace their occupational histories, interests and important events and record their desired future activities and attachments, which include valued occupations. By studying their completed Tapestry forms participants may recall past transitional patterns and the adaptive or maladaptive coping strategies they utilized. Many individuals report they review their completed Tapestry forms periodically to remind themselves of successful transitions.

### A Case Study of Tapestry Use

The use of the Tapestry in discovering the occupational career of one of the women in my doctoral research is described here. The case study includes information gained from the completed Tapestry as well as during the one-on-one interviews that immediately followed. The completed Tapestry encouraged the participant to review her personal history in color and to actually *see* how continuous events persisted or were interrupted by critical events. The participant and I sat side-by-side while I asked her about the information she indicated on the Tapestry, pursued some areas in greater depth, and questioned the personal meaning of events. All names used are fictitious.

Betty is 43 years old and the single divorced mother of three children aged 15, 10, and 8. The eldest daughter, Alexandra, is severely disabled requiring full-time care since she is unable to move independently, eat or speak. Alexandra attends a school for the disabled five days a week. Her current and future care dominate Betty’s actions and plans. The younger children, Christine and Donald, are resentful of the time their mother devotes to caring for their older sister. Bill, her husband of 20 years, a successful attorney, filed for and won a divorce two years ago. Within the past few years, Betty’s father died and her husband left: Betty and the children miss both men. According to the divorce settlement her ex-husband will provide sufficient financial support only for the next five years.

Betty has not worked outside the home since before her first child was born but the need for income is apparent. Betty completed three years of college as an education major but withdrew following her marriage to her college sweetheart. She recently enrolled in a nearby state university to complete her degree in special education. The younger children complain about their mother’s absence from the home while she attends classes.

Despite an overall energetic and enthusiastic attitude during the interview Betty had some tearful moments discussing recent personal events. She reports she feels tired most of the time, unsure of herself, and “so lost.” She feels she runs from one unfinished task to another without completing any. Betty finds it particularly difficult to concentrate on her studies. Despite her many responsibilities, she feels the need for some creative expression: she enjoys creating small quilts, which she donates to the pediatric unit of the local hospital. She likes people and has a wide circle of women friends. She feels close to and receives instrumental support from her mother and sister who live nearby. She feels the need to discuss problems with the school counsellor who works with non-traditional students.

Betty enjoyed a remarkable level of continuity in her life until her divorce. She indicates on the Tapestry that she was happy, creative, and financially comfortable for most of her life. Her critical events indicate, for the most part, usual experiences: attending residential college at age 18, marriage, the children’s births, and her recent enrolment in college. Her father’s death and the divorce are the most recent critical events. With the exception those events, other transitional events were planned and voluntary. Despite her current unhappiness, Betty indicates on the “future activities and attachments” column of her Tapestry that some day she would like a new marital partner, to work in her future profession, and to be creative. She acknowledges in our discussion that she expects be responsible for Alexandra for the remainder of her life. There appear to be several occupations, such as volunteering and attending church, in which she would like to engage in the future.

The Tapestry provides visual evidence of her achievements. Betty is able to analyze her completed Tapestry. She

“discovered” how stable her life had been and, analyzing the vertical lines, saw she has successfully coped with past transitions. Interpreting the horizontal lines as *strong threads*, she discovered her strengths derived from the supportive continuous elements in her life. The Tapestry itself serves as a document to which Betty can refer when she needs a reminder of her essentially positive cheerful spirit. Through her work with her eldest child and raising her son and younger daughter, Betty understands the adaptations that have taken place in her occupational career: she has emerged from “mom” to special education teacher, building independence and determination along the way. Caring for her daughter with the severe disability has shaped her occupational goals while helping her realize the authenticity of her choices. Her occupational career is moving toward a new level of personal fulfilment.

## Discussion

It seems evident that the development of an occupational career—choices related to personal traits along with societal and environmental possibilities—are closely aligned to the research concerns of occupational science. While acknowledging that occupations are the meaningful everyday things that people do, occupational science defines and emphasizes that occupations are formed within cultural contexts and that identity is forged, in part, through occupational choices: the holistic goals of occupational science are illustrated within these principles (Clark et al, 1991).

Although impairment and disability may increase the degree of challenge, all human beings have adaptive potential. The life span is a continuous adaptive developmental process with adaptive resources being built up through development and learning (Jönsson, Möller, & Grimby, 1999). However, “according to White (1974), adaptation is neither a total triumph over the environment nor a total surrender to it, but rather a striving toward an acceptable compromise” (Jönsson, Möller, & Grimby, 1999, p. 354). The disclosure of an individual’s occupational career (the trajectory of that search toward personal authenticity), prior to and following transitional events, offers rich areas to explore as those individuals seek meaningful adaptive strategies. Ultimately, redefined and realized occupational goals become possible achievements. The Self-Discovery Tapestry provides the visual means for people to actually “see” their life events and recall the adaptive strategies they utilized.

The Tapestry can be utilized by researchers or therapists interested in the life courses of research participants or clients. Investigation of occupational careers can yield rich untapped data. The concept of an occupational career also has implications for occupational scientists and researchers in related fields seeking new research directions. The Tapestry is useful for students, mental health workers, therapists, and the aging, among others, interested in investigating the benefits to be derived from a life-review exercise. Utilizing the Tapestry as a stand-alone instrument,

or in conjunction with interviews, other assessment instruments, or good therapeutic strategies, most people are able to realize a sense of accomplishment, recall past successes, and assess critical transitional events. They build effective coping strategies, construct a vision of the future, and form a picture of their occupational selves throughout their lives.

The instrument encourages individuals, clients, and therapists to recognize circumstances surrounding transitional events when turmoil and confusion cause a derailment to the occupational career. The individual may need time, guidance and compassion in order to move to the emotional state when resolution for action becomes feasible. Occupational science principles guide the holistic interpretations of personal histories as well as studies of occupational careers (Clark et al, 1991; Russel, 1999, 2001).

In this article, I have presented an overview of some research literature that supports life-span theories and occupational science concepts. The theories of the two fields of gerontology (that gave rise to life-span-theories) and occupational science have meshed in the research that led to the creation and refinement of the Tapestry. These theories were affirmed as the Tapestry was completed by more than 100 individuals during the author’s doctoral research.

Occupational scientists who use the Tapestry as a research tool will be able to expand existing knowledge of occupational careers and life-span transitions. Some possible research questions may be: How do people who have experienced critical events, such as a stroke or losing their jobs, cope? What strategies help a person rebuild a sense of identity? How are these strategies adapted over the life course? In what ways can the Tapestry be used to help individuals understand their occupational careers? Why do some people living through similar life episodes indicate a multitude of critical events while others do not? What qualities are shared by people who successfully adapt to new situations? Can others adopt them? How do non-paid productive occupations contribute to personal happiness and sense of achievement? How, if ever, do people become aware of their development toward personal authenticity? Are there people who never come to know themselves? How might people be counselled so that their development is directed toward greater personal satisfaction? Can people be counselled in this area? The Tapestry opens the door, so to speak, for people to actually look at the continuous elements in their lives, critical events, discuss the adaptive coping strategies they typically employ, and discover that they have a career of occupations.

Practitioners may usefully assess the occupational careers of their clients using the Tapestry. The goals are to guide clients as they build greater understanding by using the concept of life-review. Such understanding is continually demonstrated as individuals adapt, develop, and expand their occupational careers. The Self-Discovery Tapestry enriches the principles of occupational science and the concepts of the occupational career.

**Endnote**

The Self-Discovery Tapestry is printed as a kit with sufficient materials for fifteen people. Each kit contains Client's Guides, which provide an overview, instructions, and introspective questions. The Leader's Guide is a useful manual for therapists, instructors, group leaders and researchers. Colored pens are included. Contact the author at [www.lifecoursepublishing.com](http://www.lifecoursepublishing.com) or [Tapestrykit@aol.com](mailto:Tapestrykit@aol.com).

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