

Part II

Meaning, Identity and Spirituality: Analysing the constructs for educational purposes

This part introduces the constructs meaning, identity and spirituality, which are prominent in young people's personal development as well as having credentials in psychological and educational theory. While they have significant potential for use by the various professionals concerned with the welfare of youth, these constructs are difficult to define because of their complex place in human development. Nevertheless, ongoing attempts to clarify their meaning can enhance the interpretive background that educators and other professionals bring to their work with youth. After providing a basic typology for each of the constructs, this part concludes with some generalisations about what it entails to educate young people in meaning, identity and spirituality.

Chapter 2

The nature, psychological function and construction of meaning

We live not by things,
But by the meaning of things.
It is needful to transmit the passwords from generation to
generation.

Antoine de Saint-Exupery¹

He who has a *why* to live for can bear with almost any *how*.

Friedrich Nietzsche²

Much has been written about young people's need for 'meaning' and 'identity'. While they have a key role in personal development, what is understood by these terms, especially in the educational domain, is often not well articulated. This and the following two chapters will explore questions about what constitutes meaning, what are its psychological and social functions, and about how it is constructed and communicated. These chapters work towards a typology of meaning. While they will not attempt to survey all the relevant literature, they will examine a number of basic understandings of the construct, and they also provide starting points for further research on young people's search for meaning.

Because the approach taken is analytical, many of the concepts are abstract. Ideally, practical examples would help both understanding the concepts and their educational implications. But limitations of space have kept this to a minimum, so readers will need to draw from their own experience to contextualise the material.

This is not the most easily read part of the book but it lays the conceptual groundwork for much of what follows. Chapter 2 begins with an introduction that

looks briefly at what has been called the ‘search for meaning’ in some contemporary writings as well as the way in which meaning has been understood in anthropology, psychology and religion. It argues that the search for meaning is a defining human characteristic, and that links between meaning and reason justify a role for education in the communication and evaluation of meaning. Questions about meaning that the young have to negotiate are then listed; this signals an agenda for educators and other professionals serving the welfare of youth: they need a basic understanding of the psychological dynamics of meaning. The analysis explores both personal and cultural meanings, and their relationships.

2.1 The search for meaning

In their book *SQ: Spiritual intelligence, The ultimate intelligence* (2000), Zohar and Marshall stated that ‘humanity’s need for meaning [is] an issue very much at the forefront of people’s minds as the new century begins’. They used the word ‘meaning’ along with ‘longing’, ‘capacity for vision and value’, ‘dreaming’, ‘striving’, ‘things we believe in’, ‘shape to our lives’. This example, along with others from the literature, suggest that there is a ‘crisis of meaning’ in contemporary Western societies that affects youth in particular. Australian author Tacey described the search for meaning as an urgent human need growing out of the pressures and uncertainty of contemporary life:

There is a real crisis of meaning in the community, and the problems associated with constant social change – the erosion of the old public morality, the breakdown of family structures, high levels of unemployment and instability in the workplace, and the public emergencies created by drugs, alcohol, crime and increasing suicide – have shaken this country out of its former innocence and urged us to take stock of ‘what really matters’ ...

We can no longer afford to remain silent about matters of meaning ... People who idealise the relaxed social conditions of the past are refusing to engage the urgent crises of our time, and failing to see these crises as a cry for clarification and affirmation of human and social meaning ... Speaking about our innate hunger for spiritual meaning, David Millikan has said that ‘there is a distinctive quality or capacity in us all which creates a restlessness with the limitations of our present life’. This spiritual restlessness is dramatically accelerated when society goes through a period of critical instability and uncertainty. Often, what inspires spiritual search is a profound disillusionment with the present social system, especially in the fields of politics, social leadership, industry, health, law and education. The search for new values and visions is frequently sparked by frustration, disappointment or anger at the current state of secular society ... It represents a protest against the conditions of our all-too-human world, as well as a search for abiding spiritual values that can provide a new stability and unity to society.³

You could ask if this is a relatively new phenomenon – part of the so-called postmodern condition. Or whether it is an age-old problem that humanity has always had to face – trying to make sense of life. It is both. In the 1960s, the psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, in his book *Man’s search for meaning*, talked about a contemporary crisis in meaning, especially for youth. But there are indications that there is a new

urgency to questions about meaning in life, on the part of both individuals and communities. In the past, such questions, particularly about ultimate beliefs and values, were phrased more in religious language. Now, with a high degree of secularisation in Western societies, another language is being used more frequently to frame questions about human purpose and value.⁴

In the past, more of the meaning to life was implied or culturally embedded in institutions and religious traditions. Human purpose may have been taken for granted by individuals and perhaps there was less ‘searching’ for meaning. Nowadays, in Western societies in particular, little is taken for granted; practically everything is questioned, and individuals have to do more of the construction of meaning by themselves. People in great poverty or in oppressive political situations may not have the luxury of spending time philosophising about the meaning of life; most of their energy is spent just surviving. However, it may well be their core meaning, socially reinforced by group identity, that sustains them.

While acknowledging that religion has long been important for human meaning, Zohar and Marshall claimed that it has been superseded as a principal source of meaning. They saw the meanings supported by religion as ‘unravelling’ in the wake of scientific rationalism. They considered that their view of spiritual intelligence was based on evidence from psychology, neurology, anthropology and cognitive science – as if religion and philosophy had little to say that would be relevant to the contemporary human condition. They acknowledged a role for religion in the communication of meaning. But their view seemed too narrowly associated with a particular style of Eastern spirituality; the relevance of their book thus depended on the extent to which readers could identify comfortably with that spirituality.

The construct meaning is a useful one because it can accommodate both religious and non-religious views of life. It is important to probe the spiritual dimensions of human experience in non-religious language, especially for educational purposes; but at the same time, to neglect what religions and philosophy have to say about meaning is to ignore some of the principal cultural inputs to human meaning throughout history.

As noted in the previous chapter, fostering young people’s search for meaning and purpose in life is often listed as a contemporary aim for school education. But if such an aim is to be followed through into relevant practice, it needs more clarification about what constitutes meaning, how it functions psychologically, how it develops and matures, and how it can be communicated in ways that respect the developing autonomy of young people. Also needed are skills and criteria for identifying and evaluating meaning. Young people need to learn how to judge whether particular meanings are healthy or harmful. Then there are questions about how personal meaning relates to cultural meanings, and about the roles of institutions in the communication of meaning.

2.2 The search for meaning as a defining human characteristic: Perspectives from anthropology, religion and psychology

In Lake Mungo in New South Wales is the earliest known archaeological site for the ritual burial of the dead (more than 40#000 years old). This is regarded as evidence of early human belief in an afterlife, suggesting that in these communities a spiritual element figured prominently in the way people made sense of life. In turn, this has been interpreted as an indication of the functional origins of religion.

More recently, the Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh* (over 2500 years old), translated from writing on a stone tablet, told the story of an individual's search for a meaning to life. Gilgamesh yearned for immortality; he did not want death to be the end of his self-consciousness. While Gilgamesh failed to find satisfying solutions for the dilemmas of life and death, the moral of the story was that humans are by nature mortal and must learn to accept their mortality and adjust their view of life accordingly. Finding contentment in what he could contribute to the community was the meaning that Gilgamesh ultimately accepted for his own life.

The human search for meaning is as old as humanity itself. For all other animals, there is no evidence of this level of self-awareness. Theodosius Dobzhansky, one of the principal architects of the neo-Darwinian theory of evolution, considered that knowledge that we are mortal is one of the defining characteristics of the human species. He explained this in his book *The biology of ultimate concern* (1966). Only humans can ask questions about the meaning and purpose of their lives. For many, this revolves around belief in God and an afterlife, and the practice of religion; for others, meaning is constructed in spiritual but not necessarily religious terms (for example values and commitments); for some, the meaning they decide on is that 'there is no meaning'.

So people stand today in a long line of human searchers for meaning. Meaning is not inbuilt as, by analogy, it appears to be in other animals. Instinctive, genetically determined behaviour is prominent in other animals. In humans, this has been largely replaced by a genetic ability to learn and to construct an interpretation of life. The quest for meaning is an individual task; it does not come ready made. But the answers people develop are derived in some way from their community experience. Children naturally absorb and take for granted the meaning system of their immediate family – at least until they are able to think more for themselves as well as take on meaning from other agencies and culture. Individuals are born human, but they become persons through interaction with a community. Individuals in the human species depend genetically on a non-genetic, cultural inheritance to become as fully human as they can be. In this very basic sense, education (as natural learning) is a fundamental formative process for the human being. This same basic principle justifies links between formal education and people's construction of meaning and purpose in life.

2.3 The role of religion

Providing meaning and purpose in life is a central role of religion. For many people, it is their principal source of meaning. Religion provides an overarching spiritual framework for life and it gives direction to morality as well as to prayer and other religious practices; it gives a sense of ultimate meaning not only to personal life but to the universe, seeing it as the complex creation of God. The meaning in religious beliefs can be strongly coloured by cultural contexts. Religion and culture can become so intertwined that it is difficult to see what is authentically religious (in terms of the traditional core teachings of the religion) and what is cultural accretion.

Typically, religions see the capacity of humans to construct meaning and purpose as innate and central to the human condition, even if the meaning they ultimately live out of is not drawn from a community of faith. Theistic religions also see direct, personal communication with God as a natural capacity, and that union with God is a fundamental goal of life.

2.4 The role of psychology and psychiatry

Psychology and psychiatry (and the social sciences in general) also have much to say about the search for meaning.

Viktor Frankl reflected on his experience in Auschwitz during the later part of World War II. He concluded that one of the factors that kept a number of the slave labourers alive was their conscious hold on some understanding or convictions that gave dignity and a sense of value to their lives in conditions that were inhuman.

Sensitive people who were used to a rich intellectual life may have suffered much pain (they were often of a delicate constitution), but the damage to their inner selves was less. They were able to retreat from their terrible surroundings to a life of inner riches and spiritual freedom. Only in this way can one explain the apparent paradox that some prisoners of a less hardy makeup often seemed to survive camp life better than did those of a robust nature.⁵

In his psychiatric theory of Logotherapy, Frankl argued that conscious cultivation of a sense of meaning was a key to mental health and an aid in addressing some psychological problems. He believed that a ‘will to meaning’ was a fundamental drive that energised human beings.

The term ‘meaning in life’ was also prominent in the psychology of Carl Jung. He proposed that a sense of having some valuable, purposeful place in life was important for mental health.

There is a strong reason why we should cultivate thoughts that can never be proved. It is that they are known to be useful. Man positively needs general ideas and convictions that will give a meaning to his life and enable him to find a place for himself in the universe. He can stand the most incredible hardships when he is convinced that they make sense; he is crushed when, on top of all his misfortunes, he has to admit that he is taking part in a ‘tale told by an idiot.’⁶

Jung was also interested in the meaning that was embedded in the unconscious; and in the collective unconscious, mediated by symbols and dreams.

In Abraham Maslow’s psychology, two concepts were pertinent to meaning: a ‘hierarchy of needs’ and ‘self-actualisation’.⁷ While basic physical needs had priority, the full development of the person required, according to Maslow’s scheme, meaning and purpose, together with fulfilling life goals and satisfying relationships.

The movement known as humanistic psychology, typified by authors like Maslow, Rogers, Fromm, Erikson, Allport, May and others, did not overtly highlight the construct meaning, but had much to say about the meanings that were considered to be important in becoming a fulfilled person.

2.5 Reason and meaning, and a basic link with education

The discussion so far suggests that meaning in life would have values and beliefs, as well as cognitive, emotional and unconscious elements in a complex mixture. What is of interest in the work of Frankl, Jung and a variety of psychological or psychiatric theories (for example cognitive therapy) is that constructive links are proposed between *reason* and *meaning in life*. Through information, reflection on reasons, interpretation and evaluation, individuals can adjust their understanding of their own lives in ways that help change damaging behaviour and promote more constructive

living. Input to understanding can change people personally (even if it takes time), and it shows how education for understanding can, in turn, occasion personal change.

Reason and religious beliefs: There are important links between religious beliefs and reason. For our purposes here, only a few points will be made on a topic that is extensive.

The idea of ‘faith seeking understanding’ has been prominent in Christianity since the time of St Anselm. Also, a close association between philosophy and Christian theology has a long tradition, and there are parallels in other world religions, even if the word ‘theology’ is not used. Central to this thinking is the presumption that there is (or ought to be) a natural harmony and complementarity between reason and religious belief. In turn, it would claim that where there is a clash between the two, it is an ‘apparent’ clash, with one or the other (reason or faith), or both, being faulty. Some critics of religion tend to overplay a contrast between religious faith and reason, seeing the former as ‘a-rational’ or even ‘non-rational’.

Religion and the social sciences: Similarly, we presume that there is (or should be) a natural complementarity between religion and the social sciences. It is pertinent to a later discussion of what is called ‘psychological spirituality’, where a religious perspective is blended with psychological insights, and where religious spirituality is articulated in psychological terms – religion interpreted from the viewpoint of its enhancement of people’s lives.

Another aspect of the relationship between religious beliefs and reason is the ‘rational evaluation’ of religion – a contentious question for some, but important for the educational study of religion. In education, religious beliefs and practice need to be held open to rational evaluation. This does not mean creating conflict between faith and reason, but rather being able to show how religious beliefs can enhance people’s lives; it also calls into question religious behaviour that is harmful, judged in the light of community values. Such evaluation can help identify where religious beliefs are used as a justification for prejudice and selfish or violent behaviour; it acknowledges that not all religiously motivated behaviour is morally acceptable and it warns against religious fanaticism. Evaluation is part of a ‘critical’ study of religion that has a valuable place in both public and religious schools. In practice, it encourages the same level of critical thinking about religion as is proposed in the study of other subject matter.

These comments highlight links between reason and meaning and are the basis for relationships between education and meaning. While it is not therapy, education engages young people in the same sorts of rational processes as those noted above. This provides grounds for hope that education can make a useful contribution to young people’s search for meaning.

2.6 Young people and meaning

Young people are concerned about many things – from the pimples on their face, to what clothes to buy, relationships, unemployment, ecological problems, threats of terrorism, violence and world peace. The profile of their concerns varies according to age, time, location and mood. As noted in the previous chapter, many young people have an enduring anxiety, even if this is at a low level, about meaning and identity. Discussions of youth suicide propose that a lack of meaning is a contributing factor. Youth studies refer to young people’s need for both meaning and identity. However,

there is little research that explores in detail what young people understand by ‘meaning’ and ‘identity’, beyond acknowledging that they are important for personal development. It is presumed that if youth are somewhat secure in their sense of purpose, and sure of who they are, they will be better able to cope with and respond creatively to the psychological pressures of life in contemporary Western societies.

2.7 What is ‘meaning’?

Meaning is an explanatory construct. It is used to understand and interpret people’s thinking and behaviour.

The noun ‘meaning’, like ‘identity’, when applied to the development of the human person, is such a basic word that it is hard to define without using the same word again. But if it is to be useful in education and the helping professions, it needs clarification. Rather than beginning with a generic definition, it will be more helpful to look at a series of questions about the nature and function of meaning:

- What constitutes ‘meaning’ in life? What counts for meaning for different people?
- How is meaning constructed by individuals?
- How is meaning generated in communities? How is it communicated?
- How do you ‘search’ for meaning and how do you know when you have found it?
- If you have to search for meaning, does this imply that meaning is not readily available or is difficult to find; or that the meaning readily at hand is inadequate or unsatisfying?
- Do you only search for meaning when something goes wrong? Or when the implied meaning with which you were comfortable is called into question?
- Is the search for meaning a result of a significant or traumatic experience, calling for more thought about the fundamental values implied in the way one lives?
- Is a search for meaning a symptom of a more fundamental problem: dissatisfaction with life or unhappiness that prompts individuals to think about what is wrong with their lives and what needs to be done to improve it?
- Is the search for meaning a cognitive searching or an experiential testing of different values that are available for adoption?
- Does meaning need to include values for day-to-day living? Or is it just concerned with ultimate beliefs and values like God, death and afterlife?
- How well does one’s religion provide satisfactory meaning?
- How much time does a healthy person need to spend on the search for meaning?
- Can the search for meaning be a health hazard? Can you spend too much time and energy searching instead of getting on with life?
- How do you judge when meaning is good or harmful for the individual? What are the criteria for good and healthy meaning?
- Can meaning be manufactured and sold?
- Western culture is saturated with different meanings for life; does the search for meaning involve evaluating and choosing what is valuable from the available meanings?

- Given that the search for meaning has a significant cognitive component (also emotional, attitudinal and volitional dimensions), do the processes of interpretation, critical thinking and evaluation become important for education in meaning?

This is a daunting list! It raises a substantial agenda, making it unrealistic to think that there are simple answers.⁸ But it is in exploring these questions that there is significant educative potential, for the professional as well as for young people. It is through such inquiry that people can find some of the partial answers that help them make sense of life.

2.8 Towards a typology of meaning

Each of the following subsections is a vignette about meaning that also signposts issues. There is a risk that such an introductory treatment may seem piecemeal – like a checklist of general comments that might appear as conventional wisdom in a self-help book – and it may raise more questions than it resolves. This is a natural limitation of such a typology, but nevertheless one that develops a perspective on meaning and provides a starting point for more detailed investigation. And, as noted earlier, it builds up the interpretive background that professionals can bring to their interactions with youth.

2.9 Personal meaning: The nature and psychological function of meaning in the individual

It is possible analytically to differentiate a number of components and functions for meaning. This helps with our understanding and effective use of the construct. However, it is important to remember that personal meaning is usually a complex entity that defies simple dissection into parts.

For some scholars, a study of meaning starts and ends with metaphysics, together with appropriate ventures into epistemology. This focus is essential to an exploration of meaning. In keeping with our limited purposes, we have chosen not to visit metaphysics formally. Nevertheless, the following (and foregoing) discussion includes questions for metaphysics and epistemology. Our reluctance to address debates about the nature of knowledge and beliefs should not be taken to mean that we think them unimportant or unrelated to the discussion. Similarly, we will not venture into semantics and linguistics, and only brief attention will be given to hermeneutics as such, while hermeneutic or interpretive questions are central to the three chapters on meaning. We are more concerned with the psychological-social and operational aspects of meaning than the philosophical and linguistic. Our focus is on structure and function.

The typology of meaning is organised under the following headings:

2.9 Personal meaning: The nature and psychological function of meaning in the individual

Structure and function

- 2.9.1 Meaning as personal explanatory theory or interpretation
- 2.9.2 Meaning as personal motivation
- 2.9.3 Meaning as the justification of thinking and behaviour
- 2.9.4 Articulated personal meaning and expressions of meaning
- 2.9.5 Implied personal meaning
- 2.9.6 Emotional meaning

2.9.7	Imagination and intuition: Their contribution to meaning
<i>Components</i>	
2.9.8	Structural components of meaning
2.9.9	Meaning as a set of values
2.9.10	Meaning as beliefs
2.9.11	Religious beliefs
2.9.12	Ultimate meaning
2.9.13	Meaning through religion
2.9.14	Meaning through prayer
2.9.15	Meaning as life goals
2.9.16	Meaning as a set of ideals and hopes
2.9.17	Narrative structure to meaning; personal meaning as a 'master story' and as personal myths
2.9.18	Meaning as the point of intersection between understanding and emotion
<i>Other functions</i>	
2.9.19	Meaning as a coping mechanism
2.9.20	The contribution of meaning to wellbeing and resilience
2.9.21	Meaning as 'psychic moorings'
2.9.22	Meaning as the 'fall back position' – inner resources
2.9.23	Meaning as interpretation of the world outside
<i>Other types and expressions of meaning</i>	
2.9.24	Meaning through humour
2.9.25	Cool meaning
2.9.26	Meaning articulated in belief/values statements
2.9.27	Meaning and creative expression
2.10 Cultural meanings: Social and cultural meanings as reference points for personal meaning	
<i>Cultural meaning</i>	
2.10.1	Meaning embedded in culture
2.10.2	Communities of meaning
2.10.3	Normative cultural meanings
2.10.4	Popular cultural meaning
2.10.5	Implied cultural meaning
2.10.6	Myth-making as meaning
2.10.7	Meaning referenced to place and location
<i>Contextual influences</i>	
2.10.8	Political meaning, ideology and hegemony
2.10.9	Meaning and cultural postmodernity
2.10.10	Crisis of meaning: Diseases of meaning, spiritual pathology and junk meaning
2.10.11	Cultural change and changes in cultural meanings
<i>Meaning and community</i>	
2.10.12	Cultural inheritance as ready made meaning
2.10.13	Community and education in meaning
2.10.14	The academic study of meaning Philosophy, theology, religion studies Critical social theory Hermeneutics
[Box not styled]	

Structure and function

2.9.1 Meaning as personal explanatory theory or interpretation

Meaning can be thought of as a satisfying theory or interpretation of life; similarly, people ascribe meaning to particular events and activities. It is an understanding that gives a plausible explanation or a useful working hypothesis. Meaning is the theory that makes sense of one's experience. *Semantics* (study of the meanings of words) and *hermeneutics* (study of interpretation) are important in any investigation of meaning. While any detailed excursion into these fields is beyond our scope here, comments about these areas of study will be made towards the end of the chapter.

Meaning also helps explain behaviour; it shows the implied thinking beneath behaviour that makes it understandable; it describes the underlying pattern of motivation. Individuals may not always be fully aware of their own motives, or of other influences on their behaviour. In these circumstances, they probably would not have good or convincing reasons for what they do. Hence the meaning of their own behaviour might not be clear to them, even though astute observers may have a better idea of what was going on.

The explanation may not be perfect, but it can give a reasonably satisfying, even if partial, answer to questions people face, and it can help them work out their response.

2.9.2 Meaning as personal motivation

As noted above, personal explanatory theories are closely associated with motivation. From this perspective, meaning is the articulation of motives, spelling out the individual's interests, needs and goals. Motivation may also acknowledge external influences on behaviour.

2.9.3 Meaning as the justification of thinking and behaviour

Another function of meaning as an explanatory theory is evident in the way it serves as a *justification*. People usually have some reason for what they do. Even if vague, it rationalises their action; it can be a defence or excuse. Such usage is common in ordinary conversation where people explain why they do particular things.

Even when they behave inappropriately, people still have some justification in mind; this makes it easier for them when their action conflicts with professed values. Later, they may feel uncomfortable when the real meaning of their behaviour becomes more self-evident.

The justification of behaviour given to others is not always its 'true' meaning. People are often reluctant to reveal their true motive. It may be as simple as being polite by not voicing displeasure. Or it may be more complicated where there is deception, or, where people are only partly aware of their real motives, there is self-deception.

Some distinctions help illustrate this complexity. Justificatory meaning can take three forms: articulated personal meaning; unarticulated personal meaning; and implied personal meaning. There may be differences between the meaning individuals articulate for themselves and what they profess publicly. For some there is no difference; for others the discrepancy is considerable.

There will naturally be variations in people's level of awareness of their own motives, and also in their consciousness of cultural influences. A mature person could be expected to have good self-knowledge and a discerning awareness of the cultural influences that affect them. On the other hand, people can try to avoid the discomfort

of thinking about what actually motivates them; they may be embarrassed to think that others can see their real intentions. But with hindsight and growing maturity, they may develop a more realistic picture of their own motivation, and this may lead to personal change.

This aspect of meaning parallels a later interpretation of the psychological function of identity (Chapter 6). The content of meaning is an expression of the individual's identity. Here, meaning and identity are the same psychological reality looked at from different perspectives. From the viewpoint of meaning, it is the explanation of the individual's intentionality. From the viewpoint of identity, it is the individual's distinctive self-understanding and self-expression.

2.9.4 Articulated personal meaning and expressions of meaning

Following reflection and interpretation of experience, people can articulate the beliefs and values that give direction to their lives. The process is usually affected by interaction with others.

Articulated personal meaning can be expressed in various ways, some simple and some complex. It can be phrased in their own words and/or in various formulae. Expressions of meaning may be value statements, wise sayings, quotations or religious teachings; they may be in narrative form. They can also be expressed through identification with particular role models and/or communities that embody the meanings to which individuals commit. Articulated personal meaning is usually dependent, to varying degrees, on the culture in which people live.

A significant part of people's articulated meaning and implied meaning (see below) may be directly imported from the culture – where cultural meanings become 'operative' in the individual. Hence there may be varied levels of congruence between personal and cultural meanings. It is unlikely that they generate their own personal meaning in isolation from the outside world. What constitutes a healthy interaction with cultural meanings is a matter for debate that is relevant for education.

People vary in the extent to which they try to articulate meaning; and there is also variation in the accuracy of their articulation. In articulated meaning, some give an authentic account of themselves. Others do not have good self-knowledge; they may give little or no conscious attention to clarifying their own meaning, and may live without much reference to it.

Where individualism is prominent in the culture, there is general acceptance that people have freedom and responsibility for determining their own meaning. This raises questions about the role of parents and community in the communication of meaning.

2.9.5 Implied personal meaning

As already noted briefly above, from the point of view of an observer, it is helpful to make a distinction about *implied* personal meaning. An individual's behaviour is open to interpretation by others. What they do and how they spend their time signal an implied meaning, whether or not it is ever articulated; their behaviour defines personal meaning, *de facto*. In this sense, there is always an implied meaning to people's behaviour. Accordingly, observers attribute intentionality to others, rightly or wrongly; it is a natural part of personal interaction.

To realise that the meanings in our behaviour are to some extent accessible to others can affect what we plan to do. It can make some more devious. Some may not know, or may not want to know, the implied meaning in their behaviour that is reflected back to them by others.

The capacity to interpret meaning in the behaviour of others is a basic human learning process. It shows how values can be learned, particularly by the young; they can learn across a wide values spectrum – for example, from altruism to racism. The process is a central part of socialisation into belief systems. Natural personal learning is open to enhancement through education, particularly where meaning is identified and evaluated.

The notion of implied meaning has other ramifications. The degree of congruence between professed and implied meaning has much to do with honesty and integrity. For example, someone could hardly claim that spouse and family had priority when practically all of his or her time and energy was devoted to work and progress up the career ladder, with its incentives of power, status and money. Here, the implied meaning contradicts the professed meaning. This example could also be interpreted from the perspective of identity: a conflict between professed identity and implied identity.

The cognitive dissonance between the individual's and the observer's interpretation of meaning can be a catalyst for personal change. If people judge that the meaning in their behaviour is inappropriate in the eyes of respected others, they may want to change that behaviour. Such change can be positive or negative. Young people especially are susceptible to influences from the perceived social reality sustained by role models and peer groups; who their heroes or heroines are can have a big effect on who they become.

The notion of 'knowing yourself' well presumes that congruence between inner meaning and behaviour is a desirable virtue, central to spiritual health; behaviour fits with the self-explanation. Self-knowledge is the content of the meaning that expresses the 'true' self. This is fine as long as the self-knowledge is judged to be good. But where self-knowledge is judged to be poor, there may well be congruent poor behaviour, though such congruence would hardly be regarded as spiritually healthy. It suggests that there is a need for some objective criteria for self-appraisal, and for the appraisal of personal meaning. (See 4.5 on healthy meaning. It is also related to the consideration of self-esteem in 6.4.) In other words, acting with the justification of being your 'true self' does not necessarily make what you do morally good; it is not a licence to cut across the good of others. These issues highlight the importance of the evaluation of personal meaning.

Another point can be made about implied meaning. It overlaps with the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's construct of 'life structure'. He proposed that the most telling description of people's values was embedded in the way they acted and how they spent their time. His views are considered further in the later discussion of identity.⁹

Following up the earlier comment about the potential enhancement of meaning through education, it is useful to note that study of articulated and implied meanings (hopefully, with follow-up reflection) is the substantive content that education has to work with if it is to educate the young with respect to meaning. It marks out the limited, rational 'window of opportunity' that education has for promoting personal change in young people; it shows the relevance of studying 'reasons for living'. Such study may lead to the acquisition of new meanings; it is an appropriate psychological

channel through which classroom learning can occasion change in beliefs and values. But there is a need to acknowledge that the ‘learning’ of meaning is more complex than learning knowledge and skills, even though it includes both of these.

2.9.6 Emotional meaning

While the rational component of personal meaning has been stressed, together with its implications for school education, it would be a mistake not to attend to the emotional component. How people feel about a situation can be more fundamental than what they think about it. How comfortable they feel about something may sway their thinking and beliefs, and what they believe in can affect their feelings about a situation; the influences work both ways.

There is an emotional meaning woven through people’s interpretation of life and events, just as they have feelings associated with particular places and people. Personal meaning is usually not just a rational understanding, belief or value position. The emotional dimension has implications for what constitutes maturity in meaning.

2.9.7 Imagination and intuition: Their contribution to meaning

Imagination is the capacity to see things differently – new possibilities in contrast with what exists now. It enables individuals to go beyond the constrictions of the present to create new ideas and to appraise their potential. They can try themselves out imaginatively in new situations; they can explore what they might become. Through imagination, new meanings can be developed.

But imagination comes into play not only when people think of the distant future or of fantasy-like potential change. It is much more than the capacity for daydreaming. It operates constantly in relation to more immediate activity, every time people do any planning. It helps them anticipate what might happen as a consequence of particular decisions. It is an essential part of the decision-making process, and therefore a key component of meaning – its exploratory dimension, testing the waters of new meanings. It can help people extend their meanings beyond present horizons; whenever meaning is concerned with the future, imagination is involved.

Imaginative rehearsal of future possibilities is a ‘pathfinder’ for personal change (see Chapter 13); on the other hand, if imaginations are not encouraged, they can stifle choice and action. In both cases, imagination is a potent mechanism of human learning.

Imagination does not develop in the individual in an exclusively endogenous way. While the capacity for imagination is genetic, it can be stimulated and enhanced, especially by images – it needs raw material. It can be cultivated and refined (one of the aims of education).

In the image-dominated mass media and entertainment industry, it is said that ‘little is left to the imagination’. Here, so much imagining is done for us. To the extent that this dynamic affects the imagination, life expectations can be influenced by those who orchestrate media images. Hence, while significant for creativity, and while it can pave the way for personal change, the imagination is a psychic area vulnerable to subtle manipulation. Marketing and consumerism can affect (infect?) the imaginations of the young to secure their purchasing power.

Intuition is knowing something by feeling or ‘instinct’. It is not a genetic instinct, as in other animals, but a conclusion reached about a certain meaning that is not yet fully understood or explained satisfactorily, or not yet justified by evidence or argument. Intuition may draw on the imagination. Sometimes the phrase ‘gut feeling’ is used to stand for intuition, but it is certainly the brain and not the alimentary canal where it is located physiologically.

Intuition is also about the synthesis of ideas, about discovering meaningful patterns in data. Intuition is about anticipation; it is like a hunch – it is not irrational and may be based on thorough examination of data relevant to the decision, but to some extent it is like a ‘leap of faith’; one is not sure in advance that an intuition will be correct in its interpretation, and most people learn that sometimes their intuitions are right and sometimes they prove to be wrong.

Being intuitive is a part of being creative and imaginative. Action cannot always wait for the perfect solution to be worked out successfully in advance, with no margins for error. Sometimes people have to act on their intuition as to what is the best course of action to take; they then have to wait until the eventual outcomes emerge before judging how good their intuitive meaning really was. In this way, intuitive meaning can be evaluated, and to some extent, the intuitive capacity can be enhanced.

Components to meaning

2.9.8 Structural components of meaning

The composition of meaning includes knowledge, understandings, interpretations, beliefs, attitudes, emotions and values – all interacting with personality dispositions, interests, needs and biases. This sounds like a composite from the full range of (discrete?) psychological building blocks that go to make up the human person. While distinguishing these aspects is possible analytically, if the separateness is overemphasised the unity and coherence of the human person can be compromised. Another problem here is the natural difficulty in defining fundamental categories like values and beliefs because their meaning is so basic. We will not address epistemological questions.

2.9.9 Meaning as a set of values

Personal meaning can be a set of values (beliefs and principles) to which the individual is committed as the purpose in their living. These values are the criteria for deciding what the individual thinks is good or bad. They provide a moral framework and guidelines for thinking and behaviour. These are the core values that motivate the individual.

2.9.10 Meaning as beliefs

Beliefs are principles and ideas about reality and purpose in life to which people give their allegiance, regarding them as ‘the truth’, while of their nature they are not open to empirical verification. Beliefs take people beyond what can be justified by reason. But beliefs are not necessarily irrational. As noted above, they should be open to some level of rational evaluation – for example, whether or not personal beliefs are

consistent with a set of community values, whether or not they compromise the rights and freedoms of others, whether or not they conflict with the law of the land.

2.9.11 Religious beliefs

Religious beliefs are especially concerned with a transcendent dimension to life; they are about God, about divine revelation. They are referenced to a community of believers, the formal religion. They can make up the core of meaning for individuals. Religious beliefs can motivate a spiritual life including prayer and worship, and can sustain a moral life. Also, religious beliefs provide answers to ultimate questions about transcendence, the existence of God, joy and suffering, life, death, the afterlife, rewards for the just, punishment for wrongdoers, and creation.

Religious beliefs become enshrined in traditional doctrines; they are sustained by stories, writings, religious rituals and symbols.

2.9.12 Ultimate meaning

Ultimate meaning is summed up in a painting by Paul Gauguin entitled *D'où venons-nous? Que sommes-nous? Où allons-nous?* 1897 (Where have we come from? What are we? Where are we going?) (2.2).

The phrase 'ultimate meaning' is used to refer to the answers individuals have for ultimate questions, like those listed in Gauguin's title. While for many, ultimate meaning is a religious interpretation, for others this is not the case. For some, their ultimate meaning is that there is no such overall meaning and purpose to life, and it has to be constructed on an existential and pragmatic basis.

Religious beliefs, and some non-religious worldviews, seek to locate individuals' ultimate meaning and purpose beyond their own limited situations. Such beliefs link individuals with larger divine and/or cosmic realities and purposes; they propose that an individual's personal meaning needs to be meshed with community and transcendent meanings, giving a wider perspective than meaning that revolves exclusively around the individual. Such meaning counterbalances the uniqueness and sanctity of the individual with the importance of community and custodial responsibility for the environment (both physical and social). For religious people, this meaning underlines the importance of relating to God.

2.9.13 Meaning through religion

Because religion can give people a sense that what they do in life has meaning on a larger cosmic scale, it helps to give them a sense that as individuals they have ultimate significance; their beliefs assure them that their consciousness will endure in an afterlife with God. They feel they are contributing to God's plan for the world. Hence religion can sustain in people a profound sense of self-worth – because they are created and loved by God.

Religious beliefs not only give people an overall perspective on life, but help them cope with difficulties and adversity by giving them something transcendent to believe in, as well as practical advice for day-to-day living. For the believer, the present problems are not the complete picture. Even adversity and suffering can be accommodated beneficially in the long run; patience in suffering can be regarded as a religious virtue. Religious beliefs have given people the courage to help them survive in relatively inhuman situations. On the other hand, Marx's interpretation of this role

for religious meaning considered that it functioned like an ‘opiate’ of the people – lulling them into accepting inequitable social situations that were caused principally by prevailing economic interests. There is a fine line between religious meaning that enhances life and that which is manipulative, and this has educational implications.

Theology both provides and informs the content of religious meaning. Orthodox religious beliefs usually define what believers in a particular tradition will adhere to, though there will be variation from individual to individual, and variations within local groups. There are also changes in the interpretation of religious beliefs in any tradition over time. Nevertheless, because religions claim to have ultimate truth, there is a natural tendency for religious beliefs to remain fairly constant over long periods of time. The ultimacy of religious beliefs results in a natural resistance to theological change and to change in religious practice, even though different circumstances and individuals will catalyse new developments; if beliefs are ‘the truth’ and ‘infallible’, then these qualities may appear to be compromised if change occurs too quickly. Usually in any one tradition there is a range or spectrum of beliefs with different emphases and interests, giving rise to various belief positions described as conservative, traditional, liberal, radical – even heretical. The differences meet the varying needs of people; they draw on the religious heritage differentially. These differences inevitably cause conflict between groups.

There are always debates about how a religion might adjust to meet new cultural situations. Some members see a need for radical change; others think that current problems could be solved if the religion went back to more traditional teachings and practice. As will be considered in later chapters, these differences in religious meanings create problems for school religious education, because they give rise to different estimates of what should be taught (and how it should be taught) to meet the needs of contemporary youth. This includes questions about what is suitable for young people who are already religious and participate actively in a local community of faith, by contrast with those who are uninterested in organised religion and come from families with no formal practice of religion. The constructs meaning, identity and spirituality are useful for addressing these issues educationally.

The exclusiveness of many religions’ claims to the truth is an inevitable source of conflict between religions. Questions of tolerance, while not diminishing unique claims to truth, pose problems for interfaith (and ecumenical) dialogue. These issues are also important for education, especially where students study different religions.

Theology will propose the content for religious meaning, but in practice, people’s personal faith and adherence to a religion cannot always be accounted for adequately by their grasp of theology; a number of believers may well not understand the finer theological points in their religion. What is also important can be described as their ‘emotional religious meaning’. Theology can articulate what people think they need to believe to be members of a faith community, but also relevant to their religious identification is what makes them *feel* a part of that community. The emotional ties, social links, expressions of community and the rituals of belonging are often central to people’s adherence to religion and to their involvement in a local community of faith. Some research has suggested that, of the factors that seem to prompt changing from one religious group to another, it is the emotional and the social that are probably most influential.¹⁰ The sense of welcome, a feeling of belonging and ‘at-homeness’, where people feel comfortable and their personal and social needs are met, appear to be more significant in people’s joining a religious group than their judgment about

theological questions – whether this group has a better theology than another. In some cases, this emotional meaning may also explain why people remain within a particular local faith community – they feel comfortable there. Nevertheless, the level of satisfaction with a group’s theology is still likely to be important as regards changing from, or remaining within, a religion. Some who have joined a religious group because of its emotional appeal have eventually left because of their judgment of its theological deficiency.

2.9.14 Meaning through prayer

Prayer, in both communal and individual forms, can be very important for people in their construction and maintenance of meaning. It is the process in which people reflect on ultimate purposes from a religious perspective. For some, the reflection and meditation may not be religious. For some, prayer is considered to be a direct experience of God where they get answers to questions and directions for living. Prayer can also have an important role in coping with difficulties.

No matter what they may say in the presence of others, when people engage with their god in private prayer, this could be interpreted as expressing their ultimate truth and honesty – because for the believer, as stated by Zohar and Marshall, ‘God represents the ultimate framework of meaning and value, the ultimate context-giver. God can give ... the “big picture”’. These authors also saw in prayer a psychological function:

it recontextualises and places things in the largest frame of meaning available to us at any given stage of our spiritual growth. When we ‘talk’ or pray to God, we are doing the best we can to reach that innate wisdom within the heart of our own deepest being, which puts us in touch with the whole of reality. When he answers, it is from our own deepest selves that we are hearing. But for that reason ‘God’s word’, or the healing power of our own SQ [or spirituality], can never be final.¹¹

2.9.15 Meaning as life goals

Meaning can embody the life goals towards which the individual is working. Proposing and achieving short-term goals can be a starting point for developing more long-term life goals. Initial success with more immediate and limited goals can be important for children and young people in developing meaning for life.

The earlier comment about implied meaning (2.9.5) applies to life goals. The amount of time and energy people put into particular projects, and even the time spent thinking about them, will show implied life goals or purpose in life.

2.9.16 Meaning as a set of ideals and hopes

Another similar view of meaning sees it as a set of ideals and hopes. Often when people converse, they talk about what they think is going wrong with situations or organisations, and what they think needs to be done to set things right. It is like a social diagnosis, interpreting situations in the light of their ideals and hopes.

2.9.17 Narrative structure to meaning; personal meaning as a ‘master story’, and as personal myths

In addition to its place in literature, the theme story is used constructively in a number of domains like psychology, psychiatry and theology (see Chapter 15). The interpretation of personal meaning as ‘master story’ suggests that a narrative structure can be used for articulating personal meaning. Personal meaning is like a master theory, or master story, that explains and gives insight to an individual’s behaviour and motivation. Life is interpreted as a journey and the master story tells where people have been psychologically, where they think they are now and where they think they may be headed in the future. It gives perspective to their lives by looking at the geography of their experience in a story form that illustrates the drama, the highlights, the low points and the historical developments.

The narrative focus of this interpretation of personal meaning is important from the point of view of the ways in which story carries cultural meanings. The story of an individual’s life can be meshed with, and influenced by, the many value-laden stories in culture. These could be: stories children are told by parents; stories associated with particular community and ethnic groups (including sporting clubs); religious stories, especially in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures (with parallels in other religions); as well as stories that abound in literature. Nowadays, most of the stories in most households are told by television and film.

The meaning in an individual’s master story may unfold in episodic form. A new experience or situation may not be understood initially. Eventually, the individual comes to terms with the new episode and the understanding is assimilated into the master story. It may be interpreted without any major change to the individual’s story; or, if the event is significant, it may result in a new theme or a different orientation. When looking back over their lives, individuals may see key ‘marker events’ as turning points in their life story.

As people have new experience, they need to modify their narrative theory to incorporate it. They may talk about an experience either with themselves or others until they come up with an interpretation that they think is the most accurate or with which they feel most comfortable. But what is true and what is comfortable do not always coincide. Some people cannot always cope with the truth of certain situations or with aspects of self.

A strength of the story interpretation of meaning is its emphasis on continuous development. People’s meaning has coherence and continuity, but it is not static. It gives them perspective on the geography and history of their lives. It helps them see new decisions from a vantage point; decisions can then be made on more than a pragmatic basis. The story motif is equally useful in interpreting identity (Chapter 6).

A recent research study on Australian youth considered that:

Young people make their lives by using various resources, especially those drawn from trusted relationships, to create storylines about who they are and where their lives are leading. The results of their narratives, or ‘storying’ are visible over time: different understandings shape the way individuals engage in the world, the way they engage shapes experience, and experience, in turn, shapes understandings.

... Research has explored how personal stories or narratives can be useful for negotiating complex social spaces. For example, for 40 years, social theorists have explored how individuals make meaning and construct identities in story (e.g. Strauss 1977). Moral

philosophers have suggested that individuals' stories are narratives of progress, charting the journey towards and away from 'the good' or valued goal-states (e.g. Taylor 1989).¹²

Myth or meaning-embedded story will be considered later in this chapter in section 2.10.6 on cultural meaning – *myth-making as meaning*. But it is pertinent here to consider the idea of personal myths, understood in much the same way as master story. People understand themselves through their own mythology. As one education writer expressed it, 'literally every human being on earth, weaves a tapestry of beliefs and myths with which to make sense of reality. In short, every young learner has to build his or her own explanatory system for the universe.'¹³

In addition, people use personal myths to express some of the principal motifs that they would like to see as distinctive of their way of life; to some extent, they may consciously act in ways that seek to identify themselves with these myths.

2.9.18 Meaning as the point of intersection between understanding and emotion

Meaning is multidimensional both in the way it resides in the individual and how it functions. It is structured within a complex of the individual's cognitive, volitional, emotional and subconscious components. But, as noted earlier, what is particularly important both for meaning itself, and for education, is the role of reason.

A fundamental way of seeing meaning as a theory or explanation of life is to see it as the point where understanding intersects with the non-rational parts of the person's makeup (emotions, imaginations, moods, and so on). In particular, beliefs, values and commitments have a strong *volitional* component as well as rational and emotional-affective content; they have to do with the willing or decision-making of the individual made in the light of dearly held principles. Individuals are often prepared to follow through on commitments, even when this is difficult.

These analytical distinctions help interpret psychic conflict. People do not always feel like doing what they judge they must do. Learning how to work through these conflicts is part of what it means to be human.

Meaning has a moderating psychic role within the inner life of the person; its overall function of integrating non-rational components with reason and understanding is like that of an internal 'orchestra conductor'; it gets all the parts into perspective or, in narrative terms, it gets all the internal 'actors' working together to present a coherent personal story. Just how well the different aspects of psychic makeup are integrated will vary from person to person. The integration may not be perfect; even where there are conflicts between reason and non-rational dimensions – and this is a natural part of being human – there can still be an overall rational orientation to living. It is considered to be a principal quality of the mature person. Mental health is impaired when this integration is disturbed, and mental health is enhanced when it is restored. The importance of *understanding* in this view of meaning is critical for education, because understanding is the main channel through which education might enhance personal meaning.

Meaning can thus be important in regulating emotions, or in putting feelings into some perspective. This does not take the feelings away; it does not repress emotions, but it can help the individual take other things into account and action can be based not just on immediate feelings. For example, people can feel depressed, but on thinking the situation through, a particular way of interpreting the situation or

acknowledging the apparent reasons for the feelings of depression (even if these are physical) can help them understand what is happening at the emotional level; as a consequence, the emotions can be better managed. Management of emotions – not stifling them, and not exciting them inappropriately – is a major part of *coping* and *resilience*.

Other functions

2.9.19 Meaning as a coping mechanism

Making meaning is a psychological mechanism for navigating one's way through the demands of life, both physical and mental. This includes surviving the overload of demands on consciousness.¹⁴

By developing some meaning in relation to difficult or traumatic experiences, people can come to an interpretation of how they might manage or cope. It is expected that the psychological literature on coping has much to say about the role of meaning in the coping process.¹⁵ The researcher Lazarus defined coping as 'the cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage the specific external and internal demands ... that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person'.¹⁶

2.9.20 The contribution of meaning to wellbeing and resilience

Wellbeing: This personal development construct is about how 'well' and 'happy' people feel. It has become prominent in the literature of youth studies and policy development. It includes elements of many of the constructs already examined in this chapter.

What youth wellbeing means is reflected in the Australian literature in a purposefully open-ended way.¹⁷ What is emphasised in proposals to foster wellbeing therefore makes a political statement about youth policy as well as value judgments about what counts as wellbeing. For example, a recent research report on youth wellbeing noted that 'the development of social and cultural resources' should not be neglected in favour of 'economic and material resources'.¹⁸ The inner, personal dimensions to wellbeing were prioritised above the economic. Some of the writings emphasised 'spiritual health' as its key dimension.¹⁹

The notion of wellbeing seems to have arisen from the scientific study of the personal and social situation of people, and of youth in particular – hence the significance of its aptitude for quantitative research and population statistics. A variety of health and welfare indicators are used, together with measures of education, employment, disposable income and other variables. It does not necessarily minimise the importance of spiritual dimensions that are not so open to empirical research. But it does serve the political purposes within youth studies to advocate the development of government youth policies. These points are evident in the publication of the *Wellbeing Manifesto* by the Australia Institute in 2005.²⁰

Youth wellbeing does focus on young people at risk, and on social problems. But it also registers concern for the life enhancement of all youth.

Eckersley and co-researchers at the Australia 21 Research company and the Australian Youth Research Centre, in a comprehensive review of research, considered that:

Wellbeing, especially positive wellbeing, is strongly related to meaning in life ... At the most fundamental, transcendent level, there is spiritual meaning: a sense of having a place in the universe. Spirituality represents the broadest and deepest form of connectedness. It is the only form of meaning that transcends people's personal circumstances, social situation and the material world, and so has a powerful capacity to sustain [youth] through adversity.

... The search for happiness is often confused with the pursuit of pleasure, but wellbeing is about more than living 'the good life'; it is about having meaning in life, about fulfilling our potential and feeling that our lives are worthwhile.

... All in all, wellbeing comes from being connected and engaged, from being suspended in a web of relationships and interests. These give meaning to our lives.²¹

Many of the attributes of meaning as explained in this chapter are relevant to wellbeing, as well as the later discussion of identity and spirituality.

Resilience: This construct refers to the capacity to cope with difficulty and not give up. It is dependent on inner resources. Meaning is central to resilience as people rely on their interpretations of the situation to help them manage, along with qualities like courage and character that also enter into their efforts to overcome setbacks.²²

Resilience is closely related to coping (2.9.19). Other aspects of meaning are also relevant. For example, the research report quoted above noted that young people with strong personal narratives were better able to negotiate chaos, hardship and crisis – 'weaving storylines through chaos, change and complexity ... a significant task for young people'.²³

2.9.21 Meaning as 'psychic moorings'

Beliefs and values function like 'psychic moorings'. They can give a sense of 'comfortable connectedness' with life. They help people feel 'at home' in their life situation. People know where they stand in relation to their principal spiritual and moral reference points. By contrast, when there is a lack of adequate meaning, individuals can feel cut adrift from their psychic moorings. They can sense that they are drifting psychologically; they feel mentally lost, at least temporarily, because the usual signposts are missing or inadequate for making sense of their new situation. What helped previously to give life balance and direction now does not seem to work.

Sometimes the feeling of being mentally adrift can result from a lack of balance or integration in the personality. If people are stressed or over-emotional, or in manic depressive moods, their behaviour will not be regulated as it would be normally by their beliefs. Irrational behaviour, or behaviour that is contrary to the individual's personal meaning, may stem from emotion – fear, anxiety or guilt. Just how much personal change to such a condition can be facilitated by therapy remains difficult to determine; in many cases, the inclination to such psychological states is based in a genetic imbalance in brain chemistry and it can be triggered or exacerbated by stress.

2.9.22 Meaning as the 'fallback position' – inner resources

Another way of expressing what has been said above about the psychological function of meaning is to see it as what people fall back on when everything seems to be going wrong. When things are not going well, when there is stress and difficulty, people are forced back onto their inner resources to help them cope and hold together in difficult times. As noted earlier, this notion was prominent in the writing of Viktor Frankl.

When people are desperate, and if they feel there is no helpful personal or community meaning, and no supportive relationships to sustain them, they feel the lack of meaning acutely. This is particularly evident in those who contemplate suicide. If they can find no satisfying reason for going on, for fighting the problem, they can give up on meaning and then give up on life; they have no hope left. Opting out of life may feel preferable to living on in a painful and depressing situation.

2.9.23 Meaning as interpretation of the world outside

Meaning usually incorporates some particular interpretation of the world outside. How individuals make sense of their own experience necessarily involves the perspective they take on culture. This includes relationships with, and regard for, other people, as well as the valuing of community and various social structures. Their meaning therefore involves at least some *interpretation* and *evaluation of culture*. More will be said about this in the sections on cultural meaning.

Other types and expressions of meaning

2.9.24 Meaning through humour

There are many forms of humour and it has various psychological functions, even therapeutic.²⁴ It can draw attention to the amusing elements in people and events; it can conjure up unrealistic and incongruous meanings, as well as highlight the subtle and the obscure. The cartoonist has always been a critical evaluator of culture.

One of the ways of coping with problem people and traumatic events is to joke and laugh about them. Finding a humorous side to difficult experiences can be a way of coping with them. Humour creates psychological distance between the self and problems; it gives a sense of bringing the powerful, oppressors and antagonists down to ordinary size, and of treating them with disdain; humour is a way of protecting oneself, and taking the focus away from one's vulnerability.

2.9.25 Cool meaning

For a considerable number of young people what they like and how they act are determined by what they perceive to be 'cool'. Life is divided up across a spectrum, one end of which is cool while the other end is inhabited by what 'sucks'. If something has a cool meaning it is desirable; what is 'uncool' tends to be spurned. Whatever appears to wear the label of coolness can have a disproportionate influence on young people's thinking and behaviour.

The perceived criteria for coolness are therefore important for interpreting young people's meanings (see Chapter 7). Some study of how and why cool meaning is generated would not only be an interesting exercise for adults, but would be a useful project for adolescents at school.

2.9.26 Meaning articulated in belief/values statements

Expressions of meaning – articulated in statements – are precise verbal summaries of personal meaning (as noted briefly in **2.9.4**). They function like concrete points of focus for meaning, symbolic reminders of beliefs, wisdom statements, mantras for repetition, compasses for giving personal direction, and support or reinforcement for commitments. Saying the words can help in difficult times; when one is not sure of where to go in life, they can at least point in the right direction; they can help with making difficult decisions.

Belief statements can often be religious. For example, from the Christian gospels: ‘What does it profit an individual to gain the whole world, but to lose their own soul in the process’ (Mark 8:36). ‘No greater love can one have than to lay down your life for a friend’ (John 15:13). ‘I am the way, the truth and the life ... Anyone who believes in me will have life everlasting’ (John 16:6; 11:26).

Religions often provide meaning in this form. For example, Christian and Jewish Scriptures, as well as those from Islam and other religions, are regarded as theologically embedded narratives, a source of belief statements and guidelines for living.

Other spiritual, but not necessarily religious, statements are used by people for a similar function. For example: ‘All life is sacred.’ ‘We need satisfying relationships with other living things and the environment.’

Quotations from literature serve this same function:

This above all, to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night follows the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.

Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Act 1 Scene 3

A thing of beauty is a joy forever.

Keats

Film and television provide wide-ranging sources of wisdom statements. Comments like ‘Stay cool’, ‘Chill out’, ‘I’m dealing’ become parts of everyday language used to help interpret and cope with situations. Other statements seem to develop a cult-like following: ‘May the Force be with you’ (*Star Wars*). ‘With great power comes great responsibility’ (*Spiderman*). ‘Be kind to your self and each other’ (Jerry Springer). ‘You are free to choose a particular behaviour. But you are *not* free to choose the consequences of that behaviour’ (Dr Phil McGraw).

No matter what the source, meaning statements can be wise and instructive.

One can get the impression that belief and values statements are always positive. This is not the case. People have quoted scripture to justify harmful behaviour, racism and homophobia. Combatants on opposite sides in a war have prayed to the same God to justify their cause and to give them success in battle. So too, quotations from literature, film and television can be used to justify violence and negative behaviour.

2.9.27 Meaning and creative expression

The expression of meaning is multifaceted. The use of myth, symbol and ritual in the expression of meaning has already been noted. Similarly, artistic expression of various kinds will be used to make statements of meaning. Meaning can be explored and expressed in art, artefacts, sculpture and architecture, as well as in music; also in

literature, poetry, lyrics to songs, and creative writing of various sorts. This includes what the literature refers to as the mythopoetic (or mythopoeic) dimension. All of these expressions can be regarded as different forms of meaning-embedded narratives, and they have an influence on identity (see Chapter 6).

2.10 Social and cultural meanings as reference points for personal meaning

To this point the chapter has examined the nature and function of personal meaning, and the ways in which meaning takes hold and develops psychologically in people. But meaning does not develop or function in a psychic vacuum. It relates to meanings outside the individual: in other people and in the cultural environment. The following sections look at the meanings embedded in culture and at the interactions between personal and cultural meanings.

Cultural meaning

2.10.1 Meaning embedded in culture

It is natural for the young to absorb meanings from their family and community reference groups in an uncritical way; they are socialised into meaning; their personal meaning is located in, and therefore only explicable within, their community frame of reference. In most cases, children would not advert to this as a conscious learning process. Such learning prompts use of the concept *community of meaning*. The first community of meaning for children and young adults is their family. Then there are various other groups that engage the young, ranging from religion and school to peer groups and the local sports club and the like. In an age of television and information technology, young people are tuned in more widely to international sources of meaning.

2.10.2 Communities of meaning

The above listing of communities of meaning is a traditional one. But for many young people, their upbringing is anything but traditional. The groups within which they grow up are diverse and not as homogeneous as they might have been in the past; each of the groups in which they move may have different implied meanings for life. From an early age, the young are subject to competing cultural meanings, only one of which comes from their parents or guardians. Some scholars would argue that once children are old enough to watch television, it becomes their most influential socialising agency and their principal spiritual and moral reference point. The role of parents then changes to that of secondary modifiers of their children's primary television socialisation.²⁵

How dependent people are on meaning derived from culture is not easily determined; they use cultural elements differently. They may implicitly accept the meaning proposed by others or the meanings into which they are socialised; different levels of autonomy, reflection, evaluation and choice may enter into the equation. Cultural influences on different people vary in scope and strength, as well as across different periods of the life cycle; hence personal meaning is often variegated, showing its diverse cultural origins. Also, the 'size' of the individual's 'life-world' often changes. People are always judging, and then choosing or rejecting cultural

meanings. But as they become mature and better educated, they will be more selective; they engage in a more critical interpretation and evaluation of culture.

Personal meaning not only draws from culture in its construction, but is sustained and reinforced by social interaction and cultural artefacts. The way people think ‘things should be’ creates an influential social reality for the young; its power depends on the regard they have for these people – hence the influence of family, friends (‘mates’) and peer groups. The power of television over social reality is more subtle; it does not argue a case for ‘what should be’, but through its narrative structure it gives the impression that ‘this *is* reality.’ And it is hard to argue against what is perceived to be reality – ‘if you see it on TV, it must be true!’ To make sense of any television narrative (even commercials) one has to enter, at least to some extent, the presumed worldview of that narrative. And it is only if one is able to identify and articulate this presumed worldview that its reality criteria can be questioned.

Personal meaning is supported by cultural elements like symbols and rituals, as well as by religious structures like churches, synagogues, temples and mosques. In addition, meaning is also promoted and sustained by structures like malls, game arcades, night clubs, theme parks, museums, monuments, galleries, movie theatres, public beaches, architecture and posters. Film and television images, song lyrics and even messages on T-shirts can imply meaning for life. Meaning in culture is ‘atmospheric’ and young people breathe it all the time. It has to do with self-understanding and self-expression and is therefore central to their identity.

The learning of meaning from culture is also influenced by cultural change – as if culture itself were a living organism with evolving meanings. Different events and issues change the meaning landscape within a culture. For example, in the 1970s and 1980s, fear of total nuclear war worried both adults and children. This is not so prominent now, but terrorism and violence are – even though they have been present for a long time, they now feature more visibly in the media. Also more prominent is concern about the global environment and the potential for natural disasters. At any point in time, the changing topography of meanings in the local culture needs to be taken into account as it colours the meaning young people develop.

While people absorb meaning from culture, they also help maintain and change cultural meaning. It is a two-way process. Individuals and groups may introduce their own distinctive variants. This is how ideologies are born. National Socialism, Leninism and Maoism, for example, had humble beginnings on their way to becoming political ideologies that changed the course of history. Judgments of such manipulative ideologies do not necessarily imply a canonisation of capitalism or the liberal democracy; the latter too are in constant need of appraisal. The lessons of history need to be learnt in terms of critical evaluation of cultural meanings – an important role for education.

2.10.3 Normative cultural meanings

Answers to questions about meaning in life, and reasons or justifications for particular behaviour are embedded in the culture generally, and specifically in the culture of particular groups. The official or normative meaning of a group (for example a church, sporting club, business corporation and even the nation-state) is expressed in authoritative statements. Institutions are concerned with the communication of these beliefs both to serve the meaning needs of their community members and to ensure the continuation and effective functioning of their organisation. In addition to verbal

teachings, there are symbols that express the group's meaning, and its meaning is also celebrated in rituals and artefacts.

Religions are specifically concerned with meaning. Much of their teachings, sacred writings, spirituality, symbols, rituals and structures are vehicles for the carriage of meaning.

2.10.4 Popular cultural meaning

For both local groups and individuals, the various normative meanings of the institutions to which they belong are not always appropriated fully or consistently. Hence popular cultural meanings can have a 'life of their own' with considerable variation and influence, while still maintaining links with the normative meanings of institutions. For example, at a personal level, some Christians do not subscribe to all of the official teachings of their church while still maintaining identification with the institution. The cultural meanings carried in a particular local community or family are often a complex mixture that cannot easily be ascribed to any one normative source.

2.10.5 Implied cultural meaning

The use of 'implied' with respect to cultural meanings parallels its usage earlier for personal meaning. Cultural meanings are not always clearly articulated and documented; they may be implied. Naming implied cultural meanings uncovers relatively hidden values and agendas, making them more open to critical interpretation.

Increasingly, especially in contemporary television documentaries on socio-political and historical themes, we learn that there has always been much more in the way of political purposes that affected events than was made public at the time. In Western countries, both the media and formal education (along with other cultural factors) appear to have lifted the level of suspicion and critique that people bring to the interpretation of what happens in politics and business. People are more alert to the existence of hidden meanings in culture, even if they are not sure what they are. However, there remains a naivety, especially among the young, as regards the influences on lifestyle that flow from the meanings implied in film and television (see Chapter 15).

2.10.6 Meaning through myth-making

Myth, in its proper sense, is a story with a worldview-creating function – contrasting with the popular use of the word 'myth' to mean an untruth. Myths are 'truths about life' expressed in story form. A mythology is a worldview embodied in a collection of related myths. Hence, in essence, myth is about personal meaning; it is a way of articulating values and beliefs – essentially spiritual realities – in story form. Psychologists like Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell considered that myth was a human way of grasping at the trans-empirical or transcendent dimensions to human experience.²⁶ Myths help people to make sense of reality and of their place in the world, particularly with regard to ultimate questions about human existence and purpose. The meaning of myths will be missed if they are interpreted purely in factual or historical terms, for they are rich in metaphor and symbol. Myths may have historical roots, but historicity is not essential to their meaning-carrying capacity.

Later, in Chapter 3, this will be followed up when looking at fundamentalism, which generally focuses on literal and historical meanings to religious texts. Those who see more importance in symbolic and theological meanings in myths would consider that fundamentalism fails to grasp their principal human meaning.

Just as individuals use the notion of story or myth to frame their own personal meaning, communities of meaning will embody their beliefs in myths. Beare explained it as follows:

A mythology ... is a representation, through language and story, through imagery rather than through propositions, of what the cosmic order is. It is the most widely used explanatory device known to the human race. It has always been part of the schooling within traditional societies, and coming to an understanding of and respect for the prevailing system of myths is part of the initiation which gives one a rite of passage into a culture.

Mythology touches us at the outer limits of our understanding and gives us a method to cope; it means to take the ineffable and to make it intersect with what we deem to be real. As a result, our personal and collective mythologies (we all have them) govern what we think, what we are able to grasp, to act upon, and to achieve ...

Beliefs, visualization, ideas of connectedness, play-acting and personality tend then to become embedded in, and embodied within, narratives and stories. When human beings are confronted by a reality which is hard to describe, and when comprehension teeters on the edge of wonder, then they use the universal device of inventing stories to convey meanings. At the simplest level, they emerge as novels or films or TV serials or stage-plays. Some of them last and survive because they encapsulate so well what human beings know to be authentic about themselves... . Some stories acquire overlays, invent symbolism, or express profundities, or become epics in which the characters assume the status of heroes, heroines and demigods; and the events become cosmic struggles. Sometimes the stories are based upon actual events to which added significances are attached. Sometimes the stories are invented for the purpose. It really does not matter which. The meanings are what is important.²⁷

This view of meaning through myth-making relates to our discussion of religious meanings, and to later considerations of scriptural meanings, and of clashes between religious and scientific meanings. It is also helpful for evaluating the social meanings purveyed through film and television. As Beare went on to note:

Of growing concern for the community ... is the question of who is creating the myths of modern societies, how those myths are being promulgated, and what collective set of meanings is being legitimized. Clearly, film, television and video libraries are mass-producing stories and images which have the power of myth, and which deliberately create attitudes about the world and about life itself. There are millions of persons generating music and song which carry their own powerful and recurrent messages ... the consistency of violent depictions on screen and records shapes impressionable people's beliefs. The print media – especially the paperback industry – is producing more books, especially novels,

than ever before in human history. Collectively, then, there is a huge, worldwide industry in myth-making. It is generally left to schools, as a formal part of their curriculum, to teach the skills to discriminate, to critique, to appreciate, to classify and to respond ...

That modern society has failed to comprehend the fundamental nature of mythic consciousness and of story, is all too evident across the globe. *Teachers* almost by default have inherited that role of cultural priest.²⁸

Beare also drew attention to techniques for the evaluation and development of mythologies, considering that the mythopoetic dimension was an important one to develop in education, which was still dominated by learnings that were too scientific, rationalist and utilitarian.

2.10.7 Meaning referenced to place, location and lifestyle

Place and location, and especially lifestyle, can be reference points for meaning. Living in a particular home town or city can form part of the 'infrastructure' to personal meaning. For some, it may be a place where they feel comfortable; for others, there may be an uncomfortable feeling about where they live and they would change location if they could. Location can be connected with lifestyle – as we are constantly reminded by television. Some people feel that living in a particular place expresses a desirable, distinctive lifestyle. Some prefer inner-city life, others a rural setting, and others proximity to the sea; many do not have great choice as to where they live. When people change their place of living (in the extreme, in migration to another country), there are always reasons that have to do with meaning, even if these are economic or there is no alternative.

Some locations express people's idiosyncratic personal meanings. For some, the name of the suburb they choose to live in is an intended statement about their economic status; for others, their place of residence is a countercultural statement – a location that appears to exude a bohemian attitude. Particular towns and suburbs in the cities are havens for backpackers which support that particular subculture and its associated meanings. Travelling, both nationally and internationally, as well as distinctive places for recreation and holidays (skiing, the beach, golfing) can figure in personal meaning.

Similarly, places of work or study can carry subcultural meanings; in turn, those who inhabit these places contribute to the maintenance and change in cultural meaning. Schools, universities and the workplace function as 'mini-communities' of meaning.

Lifestyle is often a key element in both identity and spirituality (see Chapters 7 and 9).

Contextual influences

2.10.8 Political meaning, ideology and hegemony

This cluster of terms has to do with the influence of power in human relationships and social activity.

The *political meaning* of a situation is the composite of values, motives and decisions that actually 'drive' developments, or that influence consequent decision-

making and actions. Political meaning reflects the ‘real’ power influences at work in a situation and the ‘real’ intentions may not square with the stated ones.

At times, political meaning is the rationale of the power players who are setting out to have their will followed. Here, the political meaning is the one that counts; in this sense, the words ‘political meaning’ have a negative connotation, implying that the influential reasons behind an action are not stated and are not transparent to public scrutiny – this meaning has to be uncovered to be identified.

An individual’s political meanings are the relatively hidden purposes that direct activity towards particular goals; exposing these meanings would show up their personal plans and schemes.

In terms of governance, whether this be at institutional or state level, political meaning is implied in the policies and actions of those in positions of power. Politics could be said to include the ‘art of negotiating political meanings’, among other things.

An *ideology* is an identifiable set of political meanings and values that go with a particular viewpoint or purposeful activity. The cluster of meanings in an ideology make up the philosophy behind a movement or particular action.

Ideologies have different scopes and strengths. While the ideology of an individual informs his or her life, usually the term refers to the meanings of social groups. There is an ideology for the Rappers in the popular music world and for particular business practices; it may be as large as a whole political system like Maoism or socialism. Ideology is like a philosophy of life: it can underpin lifestyle choice and approach to work.

The words ‘ideology’ and ‘ideologue’ have a negative connotation where their values are not publicly transparent. Particular views and actions may be so taken for granted, almost as if they were natural, that it may come as a shock to discover that they are human constructions coming out of an ideology. For example, the disadvantaged position of women in society was long felt to be part of the natural order – as Earl Percy noted in England in 1873, ‘The real fact is that man in the beginning was ordained to rule over woman: and this is an eternal decree which we have no right and no power to alter.’²⁹ This view is now more readily identified as part of a patriarchal ideology. Ideologies can be more effective in commanding compliance if their influence is not so visible. They are less likely to be challenged if they appear as natural and commonsense, and not recognised as constructed by the powerful and maintained by social interaction.

An ideological statement is intended to promote the cause of a particular ideology. It is likely to be more effective if its ideological status is not identified. De Botton defined it as ‘one that is engaged in subtly pushing a partial line while pretending to be speaking neutrally’.³⁰ This view was prominent in the thought of Marx, who saw ideology as the instrument of those in power: ‘The ruling ideas of every age are always the ideas of the ruling class.’³¹

Hegemony, derived from the Greek word *hegemon* – leader, and by association, the dominant group – is the sphere of political influence flowing from a particular person, institution or movement. It is like the ‘cultural momentum’ of an ideology – the ideological dominance of one group over another. This can take the form of subtle control over people’s thinking by some ideas being more important and influential than others, often excluding or marginalising contrary views. Like ideology,

hegemony may not always be readily evident – such cultural influences need to be identified and tracked to their sources.

The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci developed a theory of cultural hegemony (in the late 1920s and early 1930s) to show how the dominant power maintained the political status quo through the influence of its ideological, cultural values.³² He proposed the need for counter-hegemonic thinking and education to critique prevailing cultural values as a prelude to social change. His thinking has been applied in contemporary cultural studies to explore the ways in which themes in popular culture can have a shaping influence on people's thinking and behaviour.

What is common to the three terms considered here is the exercise of power and its subversive influence through cultural meanings. Hence, detecting these meanings and 'auditing' the trail of power are essential elements in what can be called a *political education*. It *empowers* individuals, giving them more scope for self-determination. It may not always deliver real power to those in unjust or oppressive situations, but at least it can liberate their thinking. This can be a first step towards social change.

2.10.9 Meaning and cultural postmodernity

There are problems with the use of the word 'postmodern' when applied to culture (see Chapter 8). Sometimes the impression is given that it is used as a synonym for 'contemporary'; other usage does not clarify differences between postmodernity as the description of a particular style of culture and postmodernism as an ideology; also, its meaning can be conflated with the views of postmodern (and post-structuralist) philosophers. However, what is prominent in cultural postmodernity is the level of questioning and uncertainty about meaning and truth.

In the past, people tended to chart their meaning within a given framework (worldview or meta-narrative) that was relatively well accepted. Now, there is a recognisable tendency not only to challenge traditional cultural meanings, but to call all frameworks into question. Meaning is then perceived as relative, subjective, individualistic and linked to particular contexts (4.3.4, 8.4.2 and 8.5.6). This tends to create diffidence about finding any worthwhile meaning to life. With less cultural reinforcement, individuals can feel more alone in their construction of meaning. They can find it difficult to locate helpful meaning, while at the same time sensing that there is a virtual supermarket of meaning available if they care to shop for it.

2.10.10 Crisis of meaning: Diseases of meaning, spiritual pathology and junk meaning

Meaning has become more a matter of idiosyncratic taste and feel than of values and commitments. In addition, this trend helps promote nihilism – a feeling that no coherent personal meaning is possible, and that it is pointless trying to find it. Scholars have described this situation as a *crisis of meaning*. Jung identified some psychological disorders as primarily spiritual or existential illnesses, related to problems with meaning.³³ Frankl's social diagnosis referred to the problem as an 'existential vacuum' or lack of a satisfying interpretation of life. He felt this was linked with a 'pervasive sense of boredom in our culture, particularly among the young'.³⁴ More recently, Zohar and Marshall have used phrases like 'diseases of meaning' and 'spiritual pathology' in their interpretation of problems with meaning.³⁵ They considered that increasingly, disorders such as depression, fatigue, excessive

eating, anorexia, stress and addiction could be attributed more to ‘problems of meaning and value and to a consequent inability to integrate and balance the personality’.³⁶ While there is an abundance of cultural meanings readily available, many of them are comparatively trivial (concerned with entertainment, enjoyment, pleasure, fashion, lifestyle and money), while meaning about more substantive human issues (quality of life, meaning of work, transcendence, suffering, injustice, death, God) are not so prominent or so popular. Perhaps there is a glut of ‘junk meaning’.

This crisis of meaning affects people, and the young in particular, in different ways. Some will burrow more deeply into their traditional beliefs and will resist critical questioning and any aspects of contemporary culture identified as dangerous. Others will try to adjust their traditional meanings to help them understand their new situation. Still others, who do not find current religious meaning very helpful, will work out some pragmatic meaning ‘on the run’. Some will be affected negatively by their perception of a lack of functional meaning (this will be more noticeable in those who are depressed); this may be linked with a general feeling of dissatisfaction with life related to a variety of causes. Public acknowledgment of this problem was evident on a recent billboard advertising a youth helpline: It read ‘Life sucks now has a website!’³⁷

Still other young people may not give much attention to seeking coherent meaning and purpose in life. They keep themselves occupied with things immediate and pragmatic – for them what is important is maintaining and improving their lifestyle.

The issues considered in this and the previous section point to a stream of postmodern cultural diffidence about meaning that has behavioural consequences. The value position taken here identifies with Frankl’s interpretation that adequate meaning is essential for psychic health.

2.10.11 Cultural change and changes in cultural meanings

People’s meaning (whether or not it is articulated) is usually indexed in some way to the prevailing culture, even though difficult to map empirically. Some may go along with what they perceive as the dominant cultural meanings, while others may be antagonistic to them to varying degrees.

Change in personal meaning is often catalysed by cultural change. History and events change popular concerns, resulting in shifts in meanings. At the macro level, events like wars, natural catastrophes and changes in government become markers of change in cultural meanings. Currently the world is adjusting to global terrorism in the wake of the September 11, Bali, Spain and London attacks, as well as to the war and violence in Iraq, social unrest in many countries, and various natural disasters. High levels of poverty are still evident even in prosperous countries. Environmental degradation and global warming are also worrying concerns. These developments have multiple consequences for individuals, communities, commerce and nation-states. People wonder where these developments may lead over the next decade, and what will be the consequences for them.

Changes in cultural meanings can be relatively sudden or drawn out and almost imperceptible, like a gradual change in cultural mood or change in fashion. The metaphor of fashion is apt because change in fashion is orchestrated by commercial interests and it involves complex interaction between the ‘leaders’ of change in cultural meaning and the ‘followers’ who sustain it. Cultural meanings, like

traditional beliefs and values, change gradually as they are handed on and reinterpreted by each generation.

Meaning and community

2.10.12 Cultural inheritance as ready-made meaning

Parents, community groups, religions – even the nation-state – want to hand on their meaning to the next generation. Because the notions of freedom and individuality are prized in Westernised societies, taking personal responsibility for one's meaning is well accepted; but it should be balanced with recognition that the developing person (especially when young) needs some ready-made meaning from the community. This constitutes an initial cultural inheritance that the individual eventually embraces, modifies or rejects – a starting point in the process of developing mature personal meaning. What constitutes an appropriate community contribution and when it compromises personal freedom and autonomy are matters for ongoing debate.

2.10.13 Community and education in meaning

While the construction of meaning is a personal process, what counts as meaning should be kept open to community as well as personal evaluation, even though it is the individual who ultimately decides what is meaningful.

What is of interest to educators is the possibility that meaning can be developed and enhanced to some extent by education. This would include efforts to communicate meaning, and to help the young learn how to evaluate meaning as well as understand its nature and function (see Chapter 10). The better they are educated in meaning, the less vulnerable they will be to naive and manipulative meanings, and to the distortion of authentic interpretations. Here are some extreme examples: the misuse of Christian faith to justify the killing of Muslims by the Crusaders; terrorists citing the Qu'ran to justify suicide bombings of civilians as an act of self-martyrdom.

2.10.14 The academic study of meaning

Philosophy, especially metaphysics, is primarily concerned with the study of meaning. Also, the social sciences focus on meaning through interpretation of human behaviour. Theology and religion studies are concerned with meaning as it is embedded in religions.

Here we will limit our attention to one area: critical social theory (or critical theory for short).

The study of meaning from the perspective of critical social theory

For those unfamiliar with critical theory, the following is an introductory summary that highlights the perspectives from which it addresses questions about meaning. Some of the constructs used in critical theory have already been considered, such as ideology, hegemony, and the critical evaluation of culture.

Critical theory is used as a collective term to cover a number of theoretical developments in philosophy, sociology, the humanities and social sciences that occurred mainly in the last half of the 20th century. It has been influenced by philosophies such as structuralism and Marxism; more recently it has taken some account of post-structuralism and postmodernism, while it is distinct from these

philosophies because of its political focus and concern for social change. The word ‘critical’ is consistent with the special attention it gives to the interpretation and critique of society, particularly the critique of domination – in the pursuit of the emancipation of marginalised groups.³⁸ Giroux considered that one of the central aspects of critical theory was a ‘commitment to penetrate a world of objective appearances to expose the underlying social relationships they often conceal. In other words, penetrating such appearances meant exposing, through critical analysis, social relationships that took on the status of things or objects’.³⁹ For example, a projection of the ‘good life’ could be little more than subtly promoting a ‘satisfying consumerism’, thus reducing it to the exercise of purchasing power.

The philosophical-sociological branch of critical theory made use of the notion of cultural meaning for interpreting social interaction and the dynamics of societies, as well as for analysing social, political and cultural change.

The term ‘critical theory’ was first used to describe the work of scholars from the Institute for Social Research at the University of Frankfurt, which dated back to the 1930s (for example Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse and Fromm and, more recently, Habermas). For some, the Frankfurt School *is* critical theory. But the term has come to include other social theory with different historical and philosophical roots, for example the psychoanalytic theory of Lacan, hermeneutics and feminist theory.

The encyclopaedia quotation below summarises the approach of the Frankfurt School:

Responding to the intensification of un-freedom and irrationality in industrial, scientific, advanced capitalist society, critical theory is a comprehensive, ideology-critical, historically self-reflective, body of theory aiming simultaneously to explain and combat the domination and alienation and help bring about a rational, humane, democratic, and socialist society. The critical theorists developed an integrated theory of the economic, political, cultural, and psychological domination structures of advanced industrial civilisation and of the dialectic through which the emancipatory potential of modern society is suppressed and its rationality turns into a positivistic rationality of domination.⁴⁰

Habermas’ distinctive contribution was in his communication theory.⁴¹ It raised epistemological questions about ‘rationality’, proposing that ‘critical knowledge’ avoided the problems both in positivism and in excessive individualism; it stressed communicative competence, social interaction, self-reflection and emancipation. Habermas understood critical (communicative) rationality within the process of interpersonal linguistic communication and he linked it with the potential for personal and social change. He brought greater coherence to critical theory through his extensive work in theoretical synthesis – towards the purposes of a democratic socialism, aiming at a just and egalitarian society.

Critical theory questioned the positivistic view of knowledge as scientific because this tended to make knowledge into descriptions and generalisations that excluded a critical interpretation. Critical interpretation was at the heart of ‘personal knowing’; it was needed for discerning ‘relevance’, that is, for distinguishing the unimportant and inconsequential from the essential.⁴² In turn, this view of knowledge promoted a critical interpretation of culture: it was not abstract, autonomous and taken for granted, but socially constructed and influenced by historical, economic, contextual

and societal forces. Hence culture was not something that had to be accepted as inescapable reality, but social processes that could be identified and evaluated – and thus something that people could consciously change by committed social action. A critical interpretation of culture within its formative context was needed to uncover the ‘meaning’ of culture.

As noted earlier, critical theory has taken aspects of postmodernism and post-structuralism into account. However, its difference from these philosophies is noteworthy. McLaren, a prominent writer in ‘critical pedagogy’, was forceful in pointing this out:

many postmodern theorists and their post-structuralist companions operate from a theoretical terrain built upon a number of questionable assumptions – that is, they:

- view symbolic exchange as taking place outside the domain of value;
- privilege structures of deference over structures of exploitation, and relations of exchange over relations of production;
- emphasise local narratives over grand narratives;
- encourage the coming to voice of the symbolically dispossessed over the transformation of existing social relations;
- reduce models of reality to historical fictions;
- abandon the assessment of the truth value of competing narratives;
- replace the idea that power is class-specific and historically bound with the idea that power is everywhere and nowhere.

[By doing this] they end up advancing a philosophical commission that propagates hegemonic class rule and re-establishing the rule of the capitalist class. What this has done is precisely to continue the work of reproducing class antagonisms and creating a new balance of hegemonic relations favouring dominant class interests. According to Glen Rikowski, ‘the insertion of postmodernism within educational discourses lets in some of the most unwelcome of guests – nihilism, relativism, educational marketisation.’⁴³

More will be said about critical theory in Chapter 6 with reference to identity, and later in Chapter 12 in relation to critical pedagogy.

The study of meaning in hermeneutics

Semantics is concerned with the study of meaning in linguistics and is beyond our scope here. The following summarises developments in hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is a branch of philosophy that studies interpretation and understanding. Originally it involved the interpretation of texts and had its origins in biblical exegesis, but it has been extended beyond written documents to cover other aspects of communication and culture, giving rise to a number of different but related hermeneutic streams. Hermeneutics is concerned with seeking meaning, truth and consensus through dialogue, although some versions question whether this can ever be attained.

In the 19th century, Dilthey emphasised systematic and scientific interpretations, acknowledging the influence of sociohistorical context on both author and the meaning of texts. In the 20th century, the scope of hermeneutics spread beyond texts, and in addition, Heidegger initiated a philosophical hermeneutics that included existential understanding – taking in the idea of being in the world and not just about knowing and interpreting the world. The idea of linear progress from knowledge to understanding to interpretation was regarded as simplistic, and the very act of understanding implied an active interpretation. Heidegger, followed by Gadamer, proposed that there was another element in the understanding and interpretation process and that was self-understanding – in other words, sensing what the meaning had for the individual in his or her particular life situation.⁴⁴

Habermas considered mainstream hermeneutics too insulated from political realities, and his approach was strongly influenced by critical theory.⁴⁵ Ricoeur is associated with hermeneutics, particularly through his work in trying to relate hermeneutics (interpretation) to phenomenology (description of society). His writing of *Time and narrative*⁴⁶ included special attention to the idea of a narrative interpretation of identity (6.3.2).

Hermeneutics is concerned not only with the meanings in texts and culture intended by their authors, but with their interactions with social and political contexts; texts and culture can have something like their own ‘different voices’ when considered from other perspectives, or when applied to new circumstances. As Gadamer claimed: ‘Not just occasionally but always, the meaning of a text goes beyond its author. That is why understanding is not merely a reproduction but always a productive activity as well.’⁴⁷

Ricoeur differentiated between a ‘hermeneutics of trust’ and a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’.⁴⁸ The former involved a basic trust in texts and language and that interpretation can recover and restore original meanings. Contrasting with this, the hermeneutics of suspicion questioned much of cultural consciousness as false (drawing on Nietzsche, Marx and Freud), implying that the task of hermeneutics is to unmask false consciousness and expose ideologies in culture, organisations and people. The principle of deconstruction is prominent here, and in the extreme it distrusts both consciousness and language.⁴⁹

In his consideration of the implications in hermeneutics for education, Gallagher grouped it into four main streams (each with its particular relevance for education).⁵⁰ Table 2.1 summarises his analysis, together with notes on pertinent educational issues.

Table 2.1 A classification of different streams within hermeneutics according to Gallagher

Approach to hermeneutics	Focus of the approach	Key contributors	Some issues for education
Conservative hermeneutics	Interpretation to reproduce the meaning and intentions of authors and to overcome the limitations set by the historical context of the interpreter. It seeks objective truth.	Based on 19th-century work by Dilthey and Schleiermacher.	The ‘reproduction’ of cultural meanings. Interpreting normative meanings in authoritative texts, e.g. scripture, official curriculum documents. A hermeneutics of ‘trust’ that meaning can be recovered.

<p>Moderate hermeneutics</p>	<p>Fully objective interpretations are not possible due to the influences of socio-historical and personal contexts. Interpretation is an active dialogical process, ‘fusion of horizons’ and creative communication between text and interpreter. Truth can be interpreted, but it is not absolute.</p>	<p>Exemplified in the work of Gadamer and Ricoeur.</p>	<p>Readers and interpreters participate in the construction of meaning from texts and culture. Intersubjectivity is a more realistic aim than achieving absolute truth and objectivity. Active role of learners in the construction of meaning, imaginations and aesthetic experience.</p>
<p>Radical hermeneutics</p>	<p>Presumes that original meaning in texts is unattainable; even the texts can raise questions about their meaning – there being no truth beyond language itself. Emphasises deconstruction and questions the authenticity in all interpretations. Is sceptical and nihilistic about truth claims.</p>	<p>Influenced by Nietzsche and Heidegger, and used by postmodern deconstructionists and post-structuralists like Derrida and Foucault.</p>	<p>A radical view questioning whether there can be any authenticity as regards meaning, identity, authorship, objectivity. A type of agnosticism of meaning – all meaning is interpreted as relative, contingent and contextual. Takes hermeneutics of ‘suspicion’ to a high level of distrust of institutional meanings. Creates problems regarding the nature and educative role of traditional cultural meanings. Tends to make the construction of meaning a privatised, personal task that is relative and contextual.</p>
<p>Critical hermeneutics</p>	<p>Hermeneutics influenced by the social and political agenda of critical theory – concerned with challenging the interpretation method and its results that are marginalizing, and with promoting emancipation. What passes for truth is usually distorted by ideology; it needs ‘purification’ to arrive at an undistorted consensus.</p>	<p>Typified by the work of Habermas.</p>	<p>The need for the interpretation of ideological and hegemonic influences on thinking and behaviour. A hermeneutics of ‘suspicion’, not presuming good-willed, ideology-free institutional or cultural meanings. Tries to develop ‘distortion free’ communication. Promotes the critical interpretation of culture with an emancipatory and social justice orientation.</p>

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As illustrated throughout this chapter, the hermeneutic dimension is fundamental to the notion of meaning.

In one sense, the sharing of interpretations is essential to teaching and learning. The potential significance of meaning and hermeneutics for education was summarised by Gallagher as follows:

Reproduction, authority, and conversation; objectivity, distortion and transformation; these are issues that both hermeneutics and education must deal with. If education involves understanding and interpretation; if formal educational practice is guided by the use of texts and commentary, reading and writing; if linguistic understanding and communication are essential to educational institutions; if educational experience is a temporal process involving fixed expressions of life and the transmission or critique of traditions; if in effect, education is a human enterprise, then hermeneutics, which claims all of these as its subject matter, holds out the promise of providing a deeper understanding of the educational process.⁵¹

Notes

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- 1 A de Saint Exupery, 'From generation to generation', <http://www.uua.org/news/91101/pbeedle.html> Accessed 18/04/05.
 - 2 F Nietzsche, quoted by R Eckersley 2006, What is wellbeing and what promotes it? Paper published on the Wellbeing Manifesto Website of the Australia Insitute, <http://www.wellbeingmanifesto.net/wellbeing.htm> Accessed 26/06/06, p. 7.
 - 3 D Tacey 2000, *Reenchantment: the new Australian spirituality*, p. 6.
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 - 6 CG Jung 1964, *Man and his symbols*, p. 76.
 - 7 AH Maslow 1968, *Toward a psychology of being*; AH Maslow 1970, *Motivation and personality*.
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- 34 *Man's search for meaning*, p. 28.
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51 *ibid.*, p. 24.