



Meaning in the Lives of Young Adults Labeled Retarded in a Group-Home: A Participant Observation Study

by Lous Heshusius. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Indiana University, 1978

Reviewed by
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They never have time for you . . . to sit down and try to understand you, you know. (Lisa, in a group-home. Heshusius, p. 59)

There have often been unstated assumptions in the practice and research of special education for the “retarded.” Lous Heshusius says succinctly, persons labeled retarded have been regarded as incapable of thinking and feeling at all, or, at least, not capable of thinking and feeling as “we do” (p. 35). It is quite understandable that, under the influence of such views, there can be no sincere inquiry into the quality of life and into the meaning-structure of persons labeled retarded. They are tested and measured according to various scales rather than invited to talk about their lives. This may have been one of the main reasons why we have so many “endless correlates with IQ” and repeated searches for what is not there. If we free ourselves from such stereotypic views and conventional positivist/technical orientations, questions will emerge such as those asked by Heshusius:

What particular aspects of life do concern them, what occupies their thinking, what do they talk about, dream about, laugh, cry and worry about, try to manipulate, or try to escape, what elicits their reaction, anger or pleasure, what do they do, what do they like and dislike to do, what do they think about their lives? (p. 1)

Whether the questioner is or is not a “specialist” in the area, these questions are natural questions which would be asked by people who care about other people as individuals. However, as such, the questions are not easy (to try) to answer. They all point to inquiries into what are referred to under headings such as lived experience, lived meaning, meaning-structures, or the lifeworld(s) of the persons under study. Let us now follow how one author grapples with this intricate task.

Heshusius seems to focus on the personal reality which “differs from person to person, from staff to resident, from administrator to ward attendant” (p. 34). Drawing upon Schutz, she calls this reality (or Realities)—ways of making sense out of one’s world—“constructs of the first order,” in contrast with the “second-order constructs” im-

posed by detached observers and interpreters. The author tries to recover the "first-order constructs" of the life in a group-home, which are different from academic explanations and downright prejudices. The purpose of the study is set, according to "the grounded theory" approach, "to generate theoretical propositions, from systematically obtained observational data, with regard to meaning structures" (p. 1). These meaning structures are equated with the "constructs of the first order."

Over a period of eight months, the author visited a group-home (and its attached workshop) belonging to a university training center in the midwestern United States. Making more than 80 visits adding up to over 200 hours, Heshusius observed and interviewed eight adults (ages 17-38). She took care to be "authority-free and non-evaluative," so that she actually acquired the status of a "friendly visitor" among them (p. 63). Her fieldnotes were written in private places (toilet, staff room, her car, etc.) and were typed in full immediately upon coming home each day. Her research schedule had three distinctive phases.

In the first phase (four months), she tried to be a listener. Her questions and answers were mainly "natural" responses to what the subjects told her; "letting the subjects and their lives speak to me without my intrusion or direction" (p. 55).

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The second phase (one month) included both theorizing and field work. In beginning to theorize, the author extracted "meaning-indicators" out of the typed fieldnotes taken in the first phase. "A meaning-indicator is an act or a verbal statement that expresses an opinion or an emotion about facts of past, present, or projected events" (p. 70). These "meaning-indicators" were separately recorded on about 400 cards. In the course of comparing these cards and sorting them out into same or similar topics, 16 basic groups emerged whose respective common elements were given propositional definitions and became what Heshusius calls "categories":

marriage, boy/girl relationship, physical contact, having and rearing children, intercourse and nudity, gender roles, intrapersonal understanding, significant others, interpersonal understanding, meeting authority with unpleasant demand, independence, religion, recreation, money, and work.

The different varieties within each category were referred to as its "properties." In addition to the above theorizing activity, the second phase of research also included observation/interviews which produced 120 meaning-indicators. This concurrent field work brought three modifications to Heshusius' definitions of the categories and properties. The second phase also included careful procedures to measure validity and reliability.

In the third phase, the author was in the field inquiring with more pointed questions. Here, her notion of theoretical sampling in the sense used here played an important role. Where traditional statistical sampling tries to obtain evidence on distributions in order to measure the magnitude of a relation and to pile up evidence for proof, theoretical sampling attempts “to apply theoretical control over data, to set forth relationships among categories and properties, and to discover unanticipated contingencies” (p. 97). As such, it helps to decide what questions to ask next so as to better understand the overall relationships among the categories and properties. The relationships among these form distinct patterns in the data, such as pride in and desire for independence, marriage and children, and marriage and boy/girl relationships.

The value of the dissertation can be appreciated from several points. First, the fullness of the description stands out in the examples given abundantly throughout the text. Fullness does not mean the number of examples but refers to the descriptive quality that captures each episode. Second, the “subjective view” (what they would say about their own meaning-structures if they could) is not only an intuitive invention of a sympathetic interpreter, but verifiable account supported by the data. Third, though the overall tone of the dissertation is neutral and analytic, it raises important questions about current practices and prevalent ideas of special education.

The dissertation raises questions about the current dominant orientation of emphasizing learning skills related to the future employment of these people. This research shows that the subjects put priorities on other things, such as:

making one’s own decisions, including how and where to live, and the freedom to marry and be sexually involved, rather than with making an income above the poverty standards. . . . This is not to say that these persons would not want to have more money, a house, a car, etc., but that they set other priorities. It may well be our own meaning-structures that prevent us from understanding theirs. Their priorities are typically of no concern to us in our own lives. We don’t have to struggle and fight for them. (p. 259)

While we may tend to say that these people are much like adolescents, and therefore put them under 24-hour supervision, it may be more accurate to state, as Heshusius does, that we “make them behave like adolescents” (p. 265) by constructing the settings in which we place them.

This dissertation has led me to further questions. First, how should we interpret the knowledge gained here? For instance, the research reminds us of the importance of “owning things” according to their meaning-structures specifically under the “category of independence.” When the author showed her preliminary findings to the four

houseparents in the course of research, one of them said, "That is good to know—I was just about to clean up the cottage and get them to get rid of their junk" (p. 124). In a sense we may already know, even without reading the dissertation, how cruel it would be to throw anyone's "junk" away. And we may be throwing their "junk" away, or doing thousands of similar things, even as we read examples of it! There is a gap between a body of knowledge presented in a structured way and what we do. Is it not an open task for us, for the author and the reader as well, to interpret the body of explicit and implicit knowledge obtained in research such as this? In order to make explicit what is still buried, several questions from "orthodox" phenomenological viewpoints may be helpful. Such questions include: How is the present related to the future in their meaning-structures? Is the present a necessary moment in the subject's life-plan, or is it regarded as an entity which he/she wants to somehow get away from? What sort of "bridging" is there between the present and the future? Is the space experience as a closure which walls out the outside, wider space? How is the space of the group-home experienced? Does it serve as a source of their comfort, encouragement? How is it related to the wider society in their meaning-structures?

The second point concerns the meaning(s) of the words such as "meaning-structures." Deliberately or not, in the dissertation the author avoided questions such as: "What constitutes meaning?" "What is (are) the agent(s) of meaning-giving?" and "How are their meaning-structures changed?" Subsequently, the range of what is counted as meaning is vague. The word "meaning" in the dissertation seems to me to stand for all the various aspects of their experience: what they want to do, what they think as important, often talk about, etc., rather than the ways they make sense out of these various aspects. Further, there is no clear distinction between the personal reality which is supposedly unique to each individual, and the common reality which is more or less "shared" by the subjects in the group-home. In addition, the meaning-structures are presented as an almost static picture that "represents" the world of the group-home, out there. These related questions have not become explicit within the scope of the dissertation. Too much theorizing from the start might have spoiled the effort to somehow capture the actual atmosphere and the situational landscape. Yet, if we sincerely wish to pursue the question of what is often referred to by such words as lived experience, meaning structure, lived meaning, and lifeworld(s), certain theoretical reflections seem indispensable. Such reflections would question:

1. Does meaning refer to a reflective, interpretative activity and its product (e.g., the ways of "making sense," and "worldviews")? Or does it refer to the "prereflective," sometimes bodily, orientations which are not consciously thought through but lived through? Or does it also refer to the "hidden logic" in the

prereflective experience (e.g., Schutz's "interpretative and expressive schemes")? Or does lived meaning concern all of the above (and other) layers of experience, but especially a sort of "unifying principle?"

2. How has the lived meaning formed and transformed? Is it personal or is it "shared" with other people? If so, the transformation of the personal layer can be better captured by a biographical/life-historical approach, whereas the shared layer can be better traced by a socio-historical approach to the group under study. But then, how can lived meaning be shared, and how can it be personalized, in the first place?
3. Is lived meaning something that I, you, or people can internally "have," in the sense of possession and storage? Or is it what belongs to the realm of "between," between the things and us, between other people and self?

The dissertation succeeds in providing an excellent picture of the meaning-structure (what they do, say, want, and feel; and what they don't) in a rather structural presentation inspired by the grounded theory approach. It is also methodologically insightful. Similar research can be attempted in different settings according to the method elaborated by Heshusius. However, if we wish to understand in a deeper way the group-home situation, a hermeneutic mode of questioning seems to be called for. If we wish to further understand the problem of experience, meaning, and the world, then more theoretical reflection seems essential.