**Vocational Meaning Survey: A Theory-Based Approach**

Gary W. Peterson, Ph.D., Debra Osborn, Ph.D., Caitlyn Brown, Doctoral Student, Florida State University

Annual National Career Development Association Conference, Phoenix, AZ, Program 4-10, June 22, 2018

**Purpose**

The **Vocational Meaning Survey** (**VMS**) is a 28-item instrument that measures the extent to which individuals seek importance in their work according to four dimensions, *Surviva*l, *Ego Centrism*, *Group Welfare*, and *Universalism*. The companion instrument, the **Vocational Fulfillment Survey** (**VFS**), contains the same 28 items but measures the extent to which individuals find their present employment fulfilling according to the same dimensions. Profiles of the VMS and VFS identify consistencies and discrepancies between meanings in work and fulfillment of them.

**Need for the VMS and VFS**

Sometimes, individuals may express general or specific negative thoughts about tasks, duties, peers, and supervisors, as well as experiencing feelings of emptiness, boredom, uncertainty, ennui, and dissatisfaction about their work. Or they may feel as if “something is missing in my work and even life.” The VMS with the VFS were designed to assist individuals in exploring reasons for their discontent.

**Theory Base**

The proposed Model of Vocational Meaning (Peterson, MacFarlane, & Osborn, 2017) in work can be traced to the works of Maslow (1954) who developed a hierarchical theory of human needs. In our model of vocational meanings, there are four hierarchical levels of meaning in the form of psychological constructs portrayed in the form of a triangle with *Survival* at the base, followed by *Ego Centrism*, then *Group Welfare*, and *Universalism* at the apex (See attachment). The proposed model of meanings is enhanced by the work of Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzensniewski (2010).

**Measures of the Four Dimensions of the VMS and VFS**

Basic Needs. This scale measures the construct of *Surviva*l and consists of 6 items. At the lowest level of the Model of Vocational Meaning in work, the level relates to deriving meaning through providing for essential needs such as food, shelter, clothing, transportation, health care, and other basic necessities of day to day living.

Self-Enhancement. This scale measures the construct of *Ego Centrism* and contains 6 items. This second level of the Model alludes to finding meaning in ego gratification (Freud, 1923, Erikson, 1968) by addressing the fundamental question, “What’s in it for me?” Here, individuals derive meaning from such hygiene satisfiers (Herzberg, 1966) as salary relative to peers, recognition from supervisors, promotions, earned privileges or perks, and social status among peers.

Team Enhancement. This scale measures the trait of *Group Welfare* and is comprised of 8 items. Here, at the third level, meaning is derived from the extent to which individuals derive pleasure from contributing to their work group or team in the attainment of group accomplishments and successes.

Transcendence. This scale measures the trait of *Universalism* and consists of 8 items. At the apex of the model, this construct speaks to the importance of making the world a better place through working for the organization as well as advancing the profession or the human condition itself. Further, the extent to which individuals perceive a divine purpose (Warren, 2002) in their work is also an important element in universalism.

**Administering, Scoring, and Profiling the VMS and VFS**

Attached are the VMS and VFS on a single sheet with responses to the VMS on the left and VFS on the right. The scoring key which allows for the derivation of scale scores for both surveys, and the profile sheet which enables the graphing of the respective VMS and VFS scale scores superimposed one another may be obtained from the authors upon request.

**Interpretation**

1. Individual scale scores and relative importance among them
2. Profile elevation as an indicator of importance of work in life.
3. Magnitude of differences between VMS and VFS on same dimensions
4. Individual items

**Validity and Reliability**

A field test of the VMS and VFS resulted in alpha reliability coefficients spanning .92 - .76 for the VMS and .93 - .82 for the VFS. Intercorrelations among the VMS scales spanned .287 - .659, M = .423, and among the VFS, .125 - .677, M = .376. Correlations between the Work as Meaning Inventory (WAMI; Steger, Dik, & Duffy, 2012) and the VMS were .038 Basic Needs, .416 Self-Enhancement, .480 Team Enhancement, and .317 Transcendence.

**Bibliography**

Erikson, J. (1968). *Life cycle completed*. N.Y.: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

Freud, S. (1923). *Beyond the pleasure principle*. In J. Strachey (1960). The standard edition of the complete works of Sigmund Freud. N. Y.: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

Herzberg, F. (1966). *Work and the nature of man*. Cleveland, OH: Word Publishing

Maslow, A. (1954). *Motivation and personality*. N. Y.: Harper & Row.

Peterson, G. W., MacFarlane, J., & Osborn, D. (2017, Summer). The Vocational Meaning Survey (VMS): An exploration of importance in current work*. Career Planning and Adult Development Journal, 33*, 49 – 59.

Rosso, B. D., Dekas, K. H., & Wrzesniewski, A. (2010). On the meaning of work: A theoretical integration and review. *Research in Organizational Behavior, 30*, 91 – 127.

Stegar, M. F., Dik, B. J., & Duffy, R. D. (2012). Measuring meaningful work: The Work as Meaning Inventory (WAMI). *Journal of Career Assessment, 20*, 332 – 337.

Warren, R. (2002). *The purpose-driven life*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zonervan

**Correspondence**

Gary W. Peterson, [gpeterson@fsu.edu](mailto:gpeterson@fsu.edu); and [dosborn@fsu.edu](mailto:dosborn@fsu.edu)