ENO THE 2011
Keynote 2
1100-1200
5 November 2011
Aula 3
The Role of Occupation in the Construction of Meaning

Charles Christiansen
The American Occupational Therapy Foundation
MEANING IN LIFE
DEFINING MEANING
UNDERSTANDING LIVES AS STORIES
NEEDS FOR MEANING & COHERENCE
THEORY & RESEARCH
THREATS TO MEANING
MEANING, STRESS & HEALTH
OT’s AS MEANING GIVERS
So much depends upon
a red wheelbarrow
glazed with rain water
beside the white chickens.

William Carlos Williams: The Red Wheelbarrow 1923
William Carlos Williams (and son Eric) (c. 1919)
William Carlos Williams: The Red Wheelbarrow 1923
People understand their experiences as part of an unfolding life story.
Making sense of relationships between places, objects, events, & people.
"making-sense of experience is the very essence of gaining meaning in life."
The process of making sense of the world and one’s place in it.
Sense-making involves:

"...a mental representation of possible relationships among things, events, and relationships. Thus meaning connects things."

Baumeister, 1991, p. 15
Chunks of meaning are assembled to form an integrated whole.
Each person creates an integrated life story.
Functions of Meaning

Imposes order and enables conservation of thought through routine.

Facilitates adaptation through regulation of internal states (emotion regulation)
Four needs for sense-making from events.

Baumeister, 1991
1. Events must have a purpose. These are pursued as goals or fulfillments.
2. Events must conform to one's system of **value** and **justification**.
3. **Efficacy.** Events must demonstrate that one can make a difference.
4. Events must provide one a sense of **self-worth**.
EVENT

Immediate Meaning

Integrated Meaning
Not all life experiences result in meaning.
When experiences are inconsistent with needs, meaning voids result.
Research on Meaning
What role does meaning serve in human adaptation?
Meaning serves human adaptation by:

Organizing the perception of sensory information, which conserves energy

Regulating emotion, which provides social and biological benefits
The role of narrative in the creation of meaning
Narrative Understanding

- Perspective or voice
- Sequence of events
- Typicality
- Actions taken toward goals by agents
PROCESS OF ADAPTATION

Novel Event  
Appraisal  
Implication for meaning

NARRATIVE INTEGRATION
Life Stories (McAdams):

- Integrate experience
- Have features of agency or communion
- Have themes of redemption or contamination
Salutogenesis

Aaron Antonovsky
Aaron Antonovsky

Comprehensible
Manageable
Meaningful
Aaron Antonovsky

Comprehensible
Manageable
Purposeful

Sense of Coherence
Threats to Meaning...

are experiences that fail to satisfy needs for meaning.
Life situations that often threaten meaning:

- Death of Spouse/Divorce
- Unemployment
- Normal aging
Connecting meaning to health and illness.
Allostasis/HPA axis

- Hypothalamus
- Pituitary Gland
  - ACTH
- Adrenal Gland
  - Cortisol
  - Epinephrine/Nor epinephrine
Implications for Intervention: Activities as antidotes to meaning loss.
Implications

Occupational therapy, planned in context, can enable the creation of:

- Purpose
- Efficacy
- Self-worth
- Identity construction
- Value & justification
### Meaning Creation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meaning Void</th>
<th>Activity Antidote</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PURPOSE</strong></td>
<td>Any goal directed activity of interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>VALUE/JUSTIFICATION</strong></td>
<td>Doing what is seen as good, right, and just</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>EFFICACY</strong></td>
<td>Learning and skill acquisition</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>SELF-WORTH</strong></td>
<td>Participation, social acceptance</td>
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</tbody>
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Voluntary Work

Has the capacity to address all forms of meaning loss

• by creating a sense of purpose
• By fulfilling one’s sense of value and justification by doing something that benefits others
• by offering an opportunity to learn new skills, and gain a sense of efficacy
• by presenting situations for social acceptance and self worth.
Occupational therapists, as technologists and custodians of meaning enable activity, participation and the creation of meaning.

Tristram Englehardt, Jr (1977)
DEFINING MEANING
NARRATIVE UNDERSTANDING
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In summary…
“It is difficult to get the news from poems. But men die miserably every day for lack of what is found there.”

William Carlos Williams, 1962
This presentation was made possible through the generosity of The American Occupational Therapy Foundation and its supporters.
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>NEED</th>
<th>DEFICIT EVENT</th>
<th>RX</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PURPOSE</td>
<td>JOB LOSS</td>
<td>NEW SKILLS</td>
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<td>LOSS OF SPOUSE</td>
<td>NEW RELATIONSHIP</td>
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<td>SENSE OF</td>
<td>CRIME</td>
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<td>NATURAL DISASTER</td>
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<td>EFFICACY</td>
<td>AGE RELATED LOSS</td>
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<td>WITHIN SCOPE OF</td>
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<td>NEW RELATIONSHIP</td>
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<td></td>
<td>LAYOFF</td>
<td>NEW ROLE &amp;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>PURPOSE</td>
</tr>
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Anomie

Sense of value and justification lost on a social or societal level

Emile Durkheim