

Astrid and the Japanese Cherry tree: A reflection on transformation and occupation

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Abstract

Most practices using occupation as a therapeutic tool are situated within biomedical contexts. This paper argues that transformation becomes invisible in these practices, because of biomedical framing. Drawing from almost a decade of experience in and research of occupational therapy interventions for persons with dementia, and using theoretical arguments from, amongst others, the philosopher Paul Ricoeur, on the relations between narrative, action and sociality, the traditional tools and instruments used in rehabilitation practices will be questioned.

These practices have failed to capture actual changes and transformations that individuals as well as groups experience from interventions. This is partly because they are failing to capture processes and dynamics as well as failing to move beyond individual functioning to what happens *between* individuals.

Based on Ricoeur's reasoning this paper will present alternative outlines for how engagement in occupation can be transformative and further discuss the role of what happens between individuals for such transformations.

Key words: Occupation, Transformation, Dementia, Therapist-client relationship

要旨:治療手段として作業を用いているほとんどの実践は、生物医学的文脈の中に位置づけられている。この論文では、生物医学的枠組みで考えることにより、個人の変化が実践の中でいかに見えなくなってしまうかについて述べる。

十年近くの認知症の方への作業療法の実践と研究、そしてナラティブと行動と社会性との間の関係について哲学者 Paul Ricoeur の理論を使うことから、従来リハビリテーションの実践において用いられてきた手段や道具を再検討する。これらは、介入によって個人や集団が実際に経験する変化を捉えるのに失敗してきた。一つの原因は、変化の過程とダイナミクスを捉えるのに失敗してきただけでなく、個人の機能を超えて他者との間で起きていることを捉えきれていないのである。

この論文では、Ricoeur の理論に基づき、作業に従事することがいかに変化を起こすか、そしてそのような変化が、人間関係に生じさせる役割について考察する。

The story about Astrid

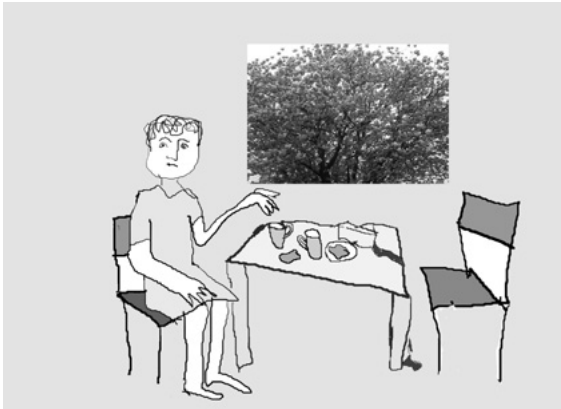
It was at springtime. Outside the hospital building stood a Japanese cherry tree. The branches were filled with flowers. It was beautiful. People started to arrive in taxis or mini buses. An old lady seemed to struggle a bit to make it out of one of the taxis. Her name was Astrid, she was an impressive woman in her sixties, a former actress and interpreter, used to be in the center. However now she gave a more vague impression. The place was a day-care center for persons with dementia just outside Stockholm, Sweden, and Astrid was diagnosed with severe Alzheimer's disease. She had lost most of her ability to speak, and she had great difficulties in performing daily

occupations.

The other persons visiting the day-care center had a hard time connecting to Astrid. She mostly sat by herself in one of the sofas of the center.

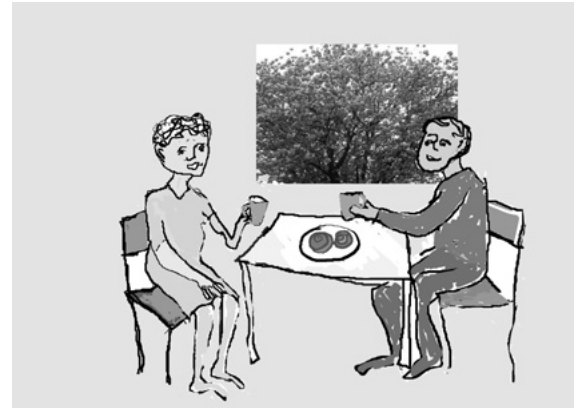
I was there as an occupational therapist to enable Astrid and others in similar situations to participate in daily life and engage in occupations. At the day care a lot of things centered on the daily meals and the occupations related to these. But Astrid could no longer participate in the meals as before. The cognitive problems caused by the disease made her lost and left outside. In fact she needed help with most everything. Eating her daily meals was no exemption, her cognitive skills did not

support her enough and as a result she became lost and remained hungry.



Now, this particular morning I was going to work together with Astrid. I had made some planning. I used the theory that I had available at that time, Kielhofner's Model of Human Occupation¹⁾, and from that theory I had learned that occupations could not only be seen as stemming from the capacity of the individual. Rather I had learned that the task and the environment, including other people, also mattered for engagement in occupation. Based on such reasoning my idea was to move away from focusing on Astrid's dysfunctions and instead focus on establishing possibilities for Astrid to engage in occupation. I had identified and analyzed occupations where Astrid had problems. Normally Astrid needed help to prepare meals and also to eat, because she could no longer recognize objects and further she was unable to remember the complex line of actions needed for everyday engagement in occupations.

This morning I arranged the breakfast so that it no longer required that Astrid independently recognized the objects needed for eating the breakfast. Further I structured the order of the breakfast so that Astrid did not need to remember the chains of actions that comprised the occupation of eating breakfast. What followed made me surprised. When she was guided and when the occupation was adjusted to her way of functioning, her problems were no longer visible. Now she could eat. And obviously this eased her. Before she did not say very much. Now when we were having breakfast together in a way that was adjusted to her functioning Astrid smiled and nodded to me. After a while she turned around and looked out through the window. The Japanese Cherry Tree moved a little in the wind. She said "Look, Beautiful".



My Argument

I will state my basic argument clearly; it is this: there is a relation between engagement in occupation, social relations and transformation. I argue that within our discipline of Occupational Science as well as within our clinical practices of Occupational Therapy we build firmly on this assumption. However I will also argue that we have limited theoretical grounding for this argument.

We have some models and frames of references and these different conceptualizations give us language and landscapes for WHAT human occupation is. These resources are like maps outlining the territory, identifying the different components, parts and features. And from these maps we know that occupation can be identified as, and here I quote the definition from the Canadian Occupational Therapy Association²⁾ "Groups of activities and tasks of everyday life, named, organized, and given value and meaning by individuals and a culture." We know that other human beings, as well as the social forms, patterns and processes we are a part of, influence human occupation. And we know that engagement in occupation is transformative. We know that things can change and be different because of engagement in occupations. So to put it simple: We know WHAT occupation is, but HOW does it work? How is occupation transformative? And what role do other people have for this functioning? This will be our focus of this paper. To reflect on HOW occupation is transformative and how social relations, and specifically other human beings, tap into these dynamics. In entering a dialogue reflecting on how occupation is transformative there are some theoretical resources that are helpful:

- First, Dewey's idea of transactionism as perceived by the Occupational Scientists Dickie, Cutchin and Humphry³⁾.
- Second, Bruner's⁴⁾ writings on meaning.

-Third, Ricoeur's⁵⁾ theory on narrative and action.

And Finally Astrid and the story about her breakfast will serve as our empirical grounding when we enter into dialogue with theory.

But, before opening our dialogue with theory, let's return to the story about Astrid.

Return to Astrid

Astrid had Alzheimer's disease (See Josephsson et al 1993⁶⁾ for further information about Astrid and the research we did involving her). When she was tested on the widely used Mini Mental State Examination test she scored 4 on a scale of 30 indicating a severe dementia. Today we know that it is hard to engage in occupations for people who have dementia at such stage of development. And true, Astrid did not do much independently. But as told in the introduction of this paper, when the environment, the place, was altered and when Astrid was in tune with another person eating together with her the situation changed.

How can we understand this transformation? If we place occupation within the individual as an individual function - as we might traditionally do, then Astrid's transformation might not be so visible. The change was not because of improved independent functioning and did not lead to independent functioning.

Interestingly, almost all measures or assessments we have on occupational functioning measure in terms of independence. At the day-care center where Astrid was a client we used the Assessment of Motor and Process Skills⁷⁾ to measure the client's occupational performance; however on that measure Astrid's transformation was barely visible. Astrid was not independent. But the story informs us that Astrid's occupational performance was transformed and that this transformation had something to do with Astrid and me being engaged in the occupation together.

Dialogue with theory

Now let us get in dialogue with our theoretical resources to see if we can get further in our reasoning. Our first resource is Dewey's and Bentely's Idea of Transactions as the Occupational Scientists Dickie, Cutchin and Humphry³⁾ have presented it. These authors wanted to address a problem they have identified in the argumentations from our discipline Occupational Science; namely the argument that occupation is residing within the individual. In fact they question the idea of a

dualism between the person and the environment. This is something that Dewey together with his colleague Bentely was reflecting on already 50 years ago when formulating the idea of transactionism. They identified three levels in which we can place human action: 1) self action, 2) interaction and 3) transaction.

Self action was described as "where things were viewed as acting under their own powers." In other words, a view that sees occupation as a result of the capacities and resources residing within the individual.

Interaction was identified as "where thing is balanced against thing in casual interconnection." In other words, a view of occupation as a dynamic interplay between different components, aspects and features.

A *transactional* view proposes "organism-in-environment-as-a-whole." In other words, actions are identified as processes that embrace individuals as well as their places without breaking these actions up in discrete underlying components.

Note that what Dickie and her colleagues do is taking this idea of transaction and applying it to human occupation. They talk about occupational transactions. And by doing so, they respond to some of the dilemmas that I outlined earlier and that we encountered in Astrid's story.

First, they respond to the dilemma that the traditional notion of self action cannot explain why engagement in occupation is transformative. Second, they respond to the dilemma that introducing the term interaction does not really solve the problem, because interaction still is based on the idea of independent individuals in communication. Taking a transactional perspective changes the perspectives though. Such a perspective acknowledges the character of interconnectedness and involvement that the story about Astrid's transformation informs us about. ‘

So let's accept Dickie and her colleagues' argument that engagement in occupation is transactional³⁾. But still that alone does not inform us on HOW occupation is transformative and on HOW social interaction with other human beings tap into these dynamics.

So how can we get further in our search for how occupation is transformative? I found one possible thread when reading Bruner's work⁴⁾. Bruner, an American Professor in Psychology argued in his well-known book "Acts of Meaning" that we have abandoned concepts rooted in the human experience, such as meaning, in favor of technical terms such as process,

information and environment. (And maybe we can add transactions to that list of technical terms?). He argues that in doing so we miss something of the very essence of human life, which is our ability to interpret. Humans do not only read life as facts. We also interpret life in relation to what gives us meaning. And these interpretations of human life evoke moral issues, what is at stake for people, and how we can achieve the good in the situations we are facing in life. Bruner also argued that this ability to interpret leads us into symbolic terrains. The lands of “as if” where as he puts it “we are wandering in human possibilities rather than settled certainties.” Maybe we can say that whenever we engage in occupations we are also creating possible meanings. But still how do these moral and meaning related issues tap into our engagement in human occupation?

Return to Astrid’s story

Let’s again revisit our story to see if we can get some ideas on how to proceed. Dementia diseases are surrounded with a lot of fearful connotations. It is a group of progressive diseases and there is still limited treatment. The cardinal symptom is often presented as memory problems. However as occupational scientists we might foreground that dementia makes it difficult to engage in occupations and that these restrictions lead to problems in social relations. In line with such reasoning one possible meaning of the engagement in everyday life for Astrid might be that she was lost in relations to her daily occupations and in relation to the people she had around herself. So what does this tell about Astrid’s transformation? Is there a relation between being engaged in occupations and returning from being lost to being at home? And if so how can occupation enable this? Before moving forward let us see where we have come so far in our search to explore how occupation is transformative.

We have, with help of Dickie and her colleagues’ reasoning on Dewey’s concept of transactionism identified how we might need to understand occupation as residing within the person and environment as a whole. With help of Bruner’s reasoning on meaning we identified that we cannot understand transformation in occupation without relating it to what is meaningful and at stake for people. But still the question remains, how does it work? And how does human occupation play a role? Let us turn to a final theoretical resource and see if we can get some further guidance.

Ricoeur and enacting transformations

One philosopher that maybe has made the most deliberate contributions to understanding human meaning is Ricoeur. And for the exploration of occupation and meaning his writings are of particular interest since the link between meaning and human actions is central in his writing. The point of departure for Ricoeur⁵⁾ is the Greek philosopher Aristotle’s notion of ‘mimesis.’ Already 2400 years ago, Aristotle⁸⁾ used the idea of mimesis in order to describe how life related to narrative. And this is still interesting today, particularly to the argument I am formulating in this paper.

Ricoeur had ideas on how occupation, social relations and transformation are linked. He proposed that these are linked through engaging in enacted narratives⁹⁾. What is then enacted narratives? Narratives are traditionally described as verbal stories. Verbal stories containing a beginning, a middle and an end organized around an inherent plot. Can narratives also be a way to understand human occupation? Let us study Ricoeur’s argumentation further. Ricoeur starts with the concept of emplotment, that is: the active process of creating possible connections and causal relations between material and circumstances. A simple way to explain how emplotment works is the following example. If I state “the queen is dead and the prince is crying” one might read as if I was stating that the prince is crying because the queen is dead. Now that is not what I wrote. I just gave some facts. I stated that the queen was dead and that the prince was crying. The casual link between these is made by the person listening or reading and that is employment: making causal connections between events, material and circumstances.

Ricoeur used the Aristotle’s concept of mimesis to present the complexity of narrative emplotment and suggested that narrative emplotment has three folds or three dimensions. In mimesis 1 we have the material we use to make meaning of life. The culture, the language and the actions that are taken place around us. So, enacted narratives connect us with culture. In mimesis 2 we have the actual emplotment: the creation of causal links and threads between circumstances, matters, events and materials. So, enacted narratives connect us with possible meanings. In mimesis 3 we communicate these emplotments to the culture we are part of and to other possible emplotments. So enacted narratives create multiplicity and again connect us with others and culture. As shown above these three folds of emplotment are all about connecting; connecting to culture, to matters and circumstances. Also all three folds identify

emplacements as social.

Now let's go back to our question about what enacted narrative is. Ricoeur proposed that emplotment is not only done verbally, he argued that we actually enact emplotments when we engage in ordinary occupations. So when we perform everyday occupations we enact plots, often mundane and ordinary, but still we enact plots. And we enact these plots within the social settings and the physical spaces that we are placed in.

So I propose, inspired by Dickie and her colleagues' reading of Dewey, inspired by Bruner's arguments on meaning, and inspired on Ricoeur's argumentation on narrative and action, that when humans engage in occupation this engagement, in a very physical sense, creates links with resources such as other people and material around us. I propose that this true even if we have limited resources by our self, such as Astrid. In fact this functioning of occupation is very important for persons with limited resources. So with help of engagement in occupations we get access to resources beyond our own capacities. Further I proposed, inspired by Bruner and Ricoeur, that engaging in occupation creates possible ways to establish alternative meanings, which brings people to what is at stake. By acting, the doings creates possible "as ifs", that can serve as alternative interpretative possibilities. And I have proposed that other humans through the social connections tap into the occupation and their participation adds to this transformative functioning. Dicke and colleagues proposed that Occupation needs to be seen as transactional. I suggest that it is the actual engagement in occupation that places us within a transactional state. The engagement in occupation places us into dynamics of you and me intersecting and transforming. Yes, I propose that engagement in occupation places us within a transactional world: A world connecting us with others and with the kingdom of "as if."

Now for the last time today let us revisit the story about Astrid. When eating together with another person that adjusted the situation to Astrid's way of functioning, Astrid was no longer disconnected. Still if we look on her as a separate person, then she still had dementia impairing her cognition, she still could not independently engage in occupations as before. However, when she was engaged in eating breakfast together with another person, within an environment that was transactional and in pace with her way of functioning the situation transformed. She did not become more independent, so if we use traditional ways of measuring in terms of

independence then the transformation will not be visible.

I have suggested that this can be explained using theoretical resources from Dewey as interpreted by Dickie and her colleagues. This places human occupation as neither within the individual or between individuals. Rather they propose that we should not divide individual from environment. Then our gaze will shift from WHAT the occupation is to HOW occupation works.

I have suggested that Bruner's reasoning supports us in seeing how occupation taps into what is at stake for people. That occupation needs to be connected to issues on human meaning.

I have suggested that Ricoeur's reasoning on narrative-in-action helps us to explore how the actual engagement in occupation in a very physical way can serve as creating and transforming meaning and how the actual engagement in occupation is transformative.

Some concerns and possibilities

Before ending let me raise some concerns. The argumentations touched upon in this paper propose that engagement in occupations puts people in touch with resources in the environment and within the culture. But this must also mean that people can, through occupation, be put in touch with structures and patterns that are not good for them? In that sense can engagement in occupation also be harmful? We need to develop more theory on how that works.

Further the argumentations suggest that there is a link between engagement in occupation with our bodies, and the meaning and the moral dimensions of life. Within our practices, such as occupational therapy, we know this. But still it is common that we in different practices make divisions between biomedical and humanistic knowledge about human occupations. Interestingly this divide has been challenged lately, not only by the theory we have been touching up today, but also from cognitive scientists such Gallese and Lakoff⁽¹⁰⁾ proposing that there is a neurological basis for what he calls intersubjectivity, which is what we may call meaning or social meaning. However this kind of reasoning needs further grounding and research.

Further the arguments within this paper here point at a need for alternative measures capturing other changes rather than only these than can be identified independent changes. Or to put it as baldly as possible: I have argued that occupation is

transactional and therefore goes beyond individuals and circumstances, as Dewey and colleagues have stated. Further I have argued that engagement in occupation rearranges and transforms the lived plots and then transforms the functioning as well as the meaning of the everyday, as Ricoeur stated. Also I have argued that occupations tap into what is at stake for people, the meaning and the moral dimension of life, as Bruner argued. And drawing on all these theoretical resources as well as on the story about Astrid I have argued that engagement in occupation transforms individuals' everyday life by rearranging material and circumstances. Engagement in occupations moves us into the land of "as if", where things can be different, as in the story of Astrid.

These were my dialogues with the story of Astrid and theory. I hope these dialogues succeed in inviting to engagement with me in discussions, critique, and communications on how occupation is transformative.

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