

## Meaning-Making and Intervention in Child and Youth Care Practice

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Thom Garfat

TransformAction Consulting and Training

In the past few years the subject of how one makes meaning of one's experiences, or meaning-making, has been a subject of frequent focus in the Child and Youth Care literature in North America (See, for example, Garfat, 1998; Krueger, 1994, 1998; VanderVen, 1992). We do not really know, however, whether meaning is pre-existent, or whether each of us is ultimately the 'author of his or her own life design' (Yalom, 1989, p. 8), creating meaning individually as we move through life. It has generally been accepted in the helping professions, however, that meaning is created as we encounter our experiences (Peterson, 1988; White & Epton, 1990; Watzlawick, 1990) creating for each of us a unique and individualised experience of an event. We also do not know, specifically, how meaning is created by the individual. It appears, however, that culture, personal history, sequencing, and specific circumstance play an important role in determining how one uses one's personal interpretive frame to make meaning of his or her encounters (Bruner, 1990 ; Fulcher, 1991; Goffman, 1974; Guttman, 1991). Each of us, then, brings to the making of meaning our individual experiences.

When a young person and a Child and Youth Care Worker encounter one another in the process of intervention, both go through a process of making meaning of that encounter. Each creates both the specific context and the meaning they experience in that encounter (Schon, 1983). Thus the process of intervention is, to a great extent, the process of making meaning.

In a sense, Child and Youth Care, like all helping professions, involves the encounter of cultures, each with its own way of assigning meaning to particular events. The culture of the young person and family, the culture of the dominant society, the culture of the program in the organization, and the culture of the worker all impinge on the intervention process. It is only when the worker attends to how meaning is construed in all of these that she can begin to understand the young person and his or her behaviour.

This is not to suggest that attending to meaning-making is simply a process of assessment to be conducted at the beginning of our engagement with a young person, for meaning-making affects all aspects of the helping process. By attending to meaning-making throughout the process of intervention, the Child and Youth Care worker enters an 'expanded world of therapeutic opportunity' (Polster, 1987, p. 97) as she encounters the young person according to how the young person has constructed the experience. It is only then that the worker

can meet the young person in 'direct perception' (Austin & Halpin, 1987, p. 38) and co-create with the young person the opportunity to 're-establish in the child's being the possibility of relationship' (Austin & Halpin, 1987, p. 37). Perhaps in Child and Youth Care there is nothing more important than this process of meaning-making for, as Bruner has argued '... the lives and the Selves that we construct are the outcome of this process of meaning construction' (Bruner, 1990, p. 138).

### **Situating meaning-making in the process of intervention**

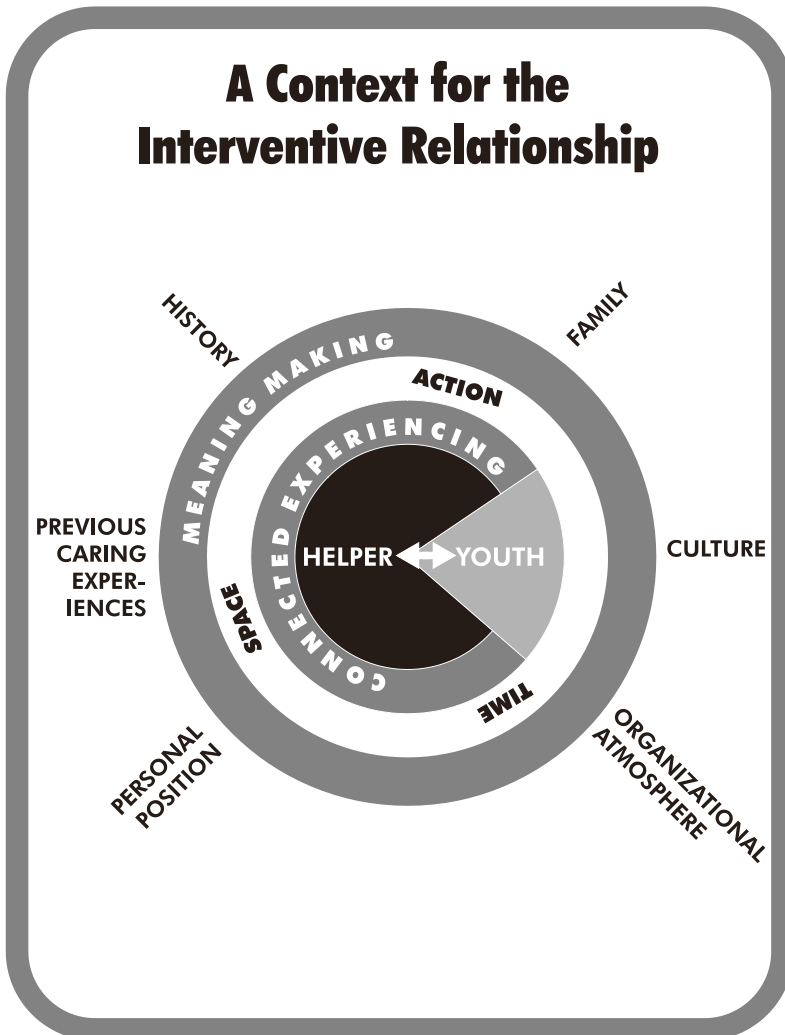
In previous research into the effective Child and Youth Care intervention (Garfat, 1998), this author identified characteristics of Child and Youth Care Workers who are able to use daily life events effectively. These characteristics are re-produced in Table 1, below:

#### **Characteristics associated with Child and Youth Care Workers who seem able to use daily life events effectively**

- **Have a way of understanding how change occurs**
- **Have a way of understanding/knowing individual youth**
- **Have a framework for organizing their interventive actions**
- **Are actively self-aware and able to distinguish self from other**
- **Are able to use aspects of self in relationship with youth**
- **Understand the concept and role of meaning-making**
- **Are able to identify and/or create and utilize opportunities**
- **Are able to connect the immediate to the overall**
- **Demonstrate a caring for and commitment to youth**
- **Possess self-confidence and responsibility**
- **Are able to use a way of connecting which fits for the youth**
- **Are able to enter into the flow of experiencing with a youth**

Central to these characteristics is the ability to understand the concept and role of meaning-making, both for the worker, and also for the young person with whom the worker is intervening. It is not enough for the worker to understand only his own process of meaning-making, for without understanding the meaning making process of the young person, the worker may fail to understand the actions of that person as he or she reacts to the worker's actions in intervention. The young person and the worker engage in a mutual process of meaning-making in the act of intervention, each responding to how they make sense of the actions of the other.

It is widely accepted that all things occur in a context. The moment of intervention, like any action, occurs in a specific context, as shown in Diagram 1 below:



In this diagram, we see that the moment of intervention, or any interaction between the young person and the helper is contextualized by connected experiencing, action, space, time and, in the outer circle, the process of meaning-making, which is in turn influenced by the elements identified on the outside. These characteristics are applicable to both the young person and the helper/worker, and meaning-making is placed on the outside to indicate how it, in essence, frames the other elements which fall inside of it.

### **A simple example of meaning-making in action**

The act of intervention is, quite simply, a human interaction. While the moment is constructed for the specific purpose of helping, and complicated by influences not necessarily present in the average human interaction, such as the intent of helping, the presence of helper and 'helpee' roles and the context of an organised process for being helpful, it remains at its core, a human interaction. Thus, it is useful, perhaps, to look to a simple inter-personal action in order to understand the importance of the dynamics of meaning-making. For the purpose of explanation, the reader is invited to imagine the simple western process of a handshake between two strangers, one male and the other female.

Let us imagine that a man, for whatever reason, wishes to introduce himself to a woman. He might catch her eye and walk towards her. As he does so, she wonders why this person is approaching her, a brief moment of anticipatory anxiety passes through her as she wonders at the purpose of his approach. As he gets near, he extends his right hand in the gesture of greeting known as the handshake. She reaches out in response and takes his hand, curling her fingers around it. He, in turn, curls his fingers around her hand and begins to lightly shake it up and down. After a few seconds, they both let go of the other's hand.

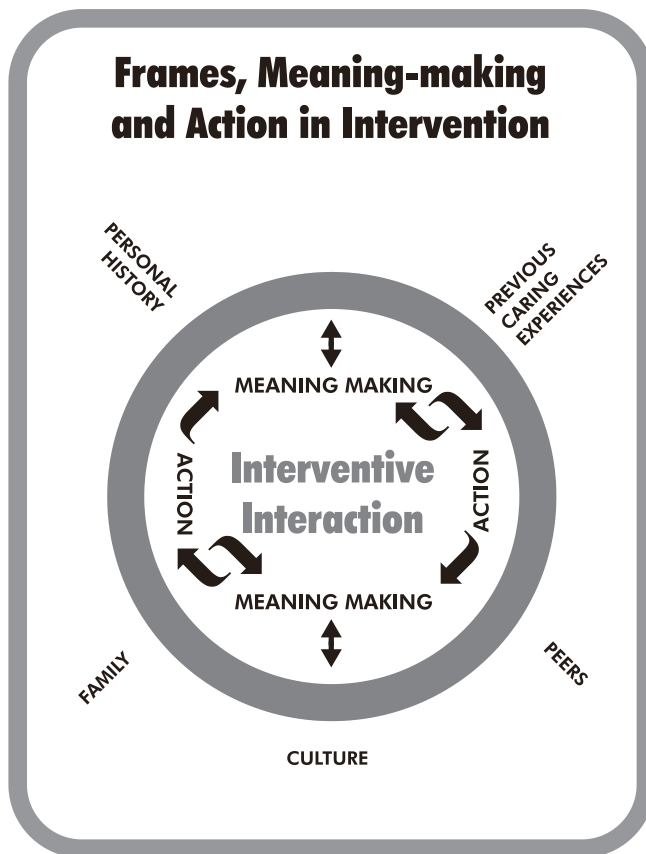
Described as above the handshake is a simple behavioural interaction. Looked at through the frame of meaning-making and action, however, it is a much more complex process.

The man decides to approach the woman. As he does so, she reflects on his behaviour, perhaps accessing memories of other situations, both positive and negative, in which a similar incident has occurred. Based on those previous experiences she prepares herself for what she expects, hopes, or fears is most likely to occur. If her last experience of being approached by a man, for example, was one in which she was hurt, she may position herself defensively, prepared for the worst. If her last similar experience resulted in a positive outcome, she may prepare herself for a pleasant experience, welcoming the approach. Previous experiences always play a role in how we initially interpret current experiences.

As the man approaches, he stretches out his hand in a well recognised western gesture of greeting. Based on her previous experiences, and her knowledge of the culture in which the gesture is occurring, she recognises the gesture, interpreting it to mean that the man is signalling a non-threatening, contact-making attempt. In response, she reaches out her hand to grasp his. Her behaviour is based on her interpretation of the behaviour of the man, in the context in which it occurs.

As she grasps his hand, the man, based on his previous experiences, his cultural knowledge, and his previous learning, interprets her action, and grasps back. She recognises the action and based on her knowledge of the cultural sequencing of events, begins the process of pumping her hand up and down. He, based on the immediate experience, past experience, previous learning, his knowledge of the culture, and the desire to signal connection, pumps back with her.

This simple western process of the handshake of greeting embodies the essence of the cycle of action and meaning-making inherent, I would argue, in all human interactions from the simple social to the complexity of intervention. Diagram 2, below, represents this process, as it relates to the process of intervention.



In the context of a personal interpretive frame (Bruner, 1990) influenced by personal history, previous experiences, culture, family and peers, an action occurs and is interpreted. Once interpreted, an action follows based on that interpretation. The new action is interpreted by the other, and based on that interpretation another action occurs. Thus we see the process of action, interpretation, action and interpretation repeating itself in a continuous flow until the interaction is broken by one of the parties leaving the situation. This simple human process has tremendous implications for the process of intervention. Imagine, for example, the following:

- A worker goes over to greet a new arrival in a group home
- A member of staff calls out loudly to a young person across a table
- A young person calls out a member of staff's name at night after lights out
- A member of staff, seeing a young person about to do something, says 'no'
- A member of staff gives a young person a piece of advice
- A young person pulls back a hand as if to strike the member of staff

No matter what situation we might imagine, the process of meaning-making and action will occur. It occurs for both the member of staff and the young person for both are human. The process, however, does not always have the same positive outcome as suggested in the handshake example previously described, for one's previous experiences of similar situations may not have been positive. Imagine, for example, a young man in residential care.

Harry's history is typical of so many young people in our programs. He was raised for years in a violent family. His father frequently, especially after periods of drinking, would yell out to the kids to do something. If they didn't respond immediately, he would slap them around, telling them they had to learn to listen to 'dad'. One day, in the residential program, Harry is about to do something which the staff member thinks is dangerous. Concerned about Harry's safety the staff member yells across the room, 'Harry, don't do that. Come here.' Harry's immediate reaction is to interpret this yelling at him in light of his previous experience of being yelled at and then beaten. Based on this experience, Harry sees the yelling as a potential threat to his physical well-being. 'Go to hell!' he yells back. Imagine the member of staff, concerned about Harry's well being, and now confused by the response to his gesture of caring. The staff member, of course, will interpret Harry's behaviour according to his own previous experience *and* according to how he knows Harry, and Harry's process of meaning-making. We see, easily, that how the staff member now interprets Harry's response will determine where the rest of the interaction goes. And we see the importance of knowing well the process of meaning-making of the young people with whom we work.

## Conclusion

The process of meaning-making is central to the process of intervention in Child and Youth Care practice. Attending to and understanding our own process as well as that of the people with whom we work helps us to understand our responses to one another. In understanding the process, we create the opportunity for different interpretations and, therefore, different responses to one another.

One of the characteristics of effective interventions with young people is that interventive actions are intentional, created to serve a specific purpose in the interaction between helper and the young person (Garfat, 1998). Attending to the process of meaning-making, allows us to act in an intentional manner, and to interpret the actions of others in a personal, as well as professional context. To fail to attend to the meaning-making process, is to fail in our intention to be helpful.

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