Exploring Narrative Meaning Making through Everyday Activities – A Case of Collective Mental Health Recovery?

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Abstract

Objective: Engagement in everyday activities is important to mental health recovery, as we create meaning through what we do. The aim of this case study was to gain a deeper understanding of how individuals with mental health problems create meaning through doing everyday activities with others. In this article, we present our analysis of the events that unfolded when the participant George, the first author, and several others were involved in baking gingerbread together at a community mental health centre.

Methods: Through a narrative, ethnographic, case study design, we sought to create processual, contextual and in-depth knowledge responding to our aim. We created data through participant observations while doing everyday activities at a community mental health centre, and analyzed them through a narrative approach focused on action.

Results: Through alternately trying out ideas and possibilities to drive the activity forward, as well as communicating shared interest and mutual understanding throughout the activity, the persons involved created meaning collectively.

Conclusion: Our findings show how doing activities with others involves possibilities for engaging in processes of collective meaning making. We understand such meaning making processes as events of recovery, and suggest that we may understand and support recovery as collective processes.
Introduction

Mental health recovery is understood as multiple processes of regaining connectedness, hope, and optimism about the future, identity, meaning in life, and empowerment\textsuperscript{1,2}. Duff\textsuperscript{3} has shown how several seemingly remote everyday events of recovery that cohere together accumulate, and together establish ‘assemblages of recovery’. Recovery-oriented services are described as person-centred and collaborative, negotiating support adjusted to individuals’ interests, goals, and everyday life context\textsuperscript{4,5}. However, the recovery approach has been critiqued for this individualistic focus, leaving social or relational recovery processes in the background\textsuperscript{6,7}. Duff\textsuperscript{3} and Doroud et al.\textsuperscript{8} also critiques the lack of in-depth, contextual and processual knowledge about recovery. Duff\textsuperscript{3} advocates a shift of focus from recovery goals or milestones, to the mundane, everyday activities, encounters and atmospheres that together enable such outcomes.

Research has shown how mental health recovery progresses through individuals’ engagement in activities\textsuperscript{8-10}, as activities are a source of meaning\textsuperscript{11}. However, mental health problems may cause disruptions to individuals’ everyday lives, affecting their possibilities of doing everyday activities\textsuperscript{12-14}, and their social relations\textsuperscript{15}. Further, individuals may struggle with connecting hope and meaning to engagement in activities\textsuperscript{16} or suffer from low self-esteem\textsuperscript{17,18}, which can decrease their motivation and ability to engage in activities\textsuperscript{19}. Although research points out an important, but challenging, interrelationship between everyday activities, meaning and mental health recovery, there is a lack of processual and in-depth knowledge about how this interrelationship works. Narrative theory may help develop such knowledge, suggesting that we assemble meaning through pulling together activities and events into coherent narratives. In narrative theory, meaning is about coherence, understanding past, present and future activities and events as understandable in relation to each other\textsuperscript{20,21}. Roe and Davidson\textsuperscript{22} and Deegan\textsuperscript{23} connect their understanding of recovery to narrative meaning making, underlining how disruptions caused by mental illness require individuals to engage in processes of re-creating meaning through narrative functions like imagining, negotiating, and trying out new possibilities of creating coherence. Previously published narrative studies provide important knowledge about how individuals with mental health problems create meaning through everyday activities\textsuperscript{24-27}, underlining how doing everyday activities together with others involves opportunities of negotiating shared meaning\textsuperscript{25,26}, which may contribute to strengthened agency\textsuperscript{27}.

Recognizing processes of narrative meaning making, as well as everyday activities and encounters, as crucial in mental health recovery\textsuperscript{22,23}, the aim of this case study was to gain a deeper understanding of how individuals with mental health problems create meaning through doing everyday activities together with others.

Research Design and Methods

This study makes use of a narrative-in-action approach, building on narrative theory\textsuperscript{21,28,29} and the work of Alsaker, Josephsson, and their colleagues\textsuperscript{20,24,30,31}. This is
a qualitative, ethnographic approach, involving participant observations. A case study design\textsuperscript{32} was chosen, yielding a detailed and in-depth exploration of the meetings with a single participant, George.

**Theoretical Resources**

Narrative theory has guided both our choice of methods, analysis, and interpretations in this study, and in particular the work of Ricoeur\textsuperscript{28,29} and Mattingly\textsuperscript{21} who connect narrative meaning with activity.

In a narrative, several activities or events are pulled together into a coherent story that conveys the purpose, plot, or meaning of human activity\textsuperscript{33}. According to narrative theory, individuals create meaning through connecting past, present, and future activities and events into coherent narratives\textsuperscript{21,28,34}. Further, Mattingly\textsuperscript{21} defends a ‘theory of emergent meaning’ that acknowledges the role of activities in shaping meaning. In other words, narratives may be both told and enacted, and human activities may be viewed as parts of narratives in the making, in which meaning is both constructed and embedded. In this understanding, our current images about ‘what narratives we are in’ also guide and motivate our future activities, and thus involve possibilities for transformation and recovery\textsuperscript{21}.

Based on Aristotle’s writings on fiction, Ricoeur\textsuperscript{28}, further interpreted by Alsaker\textsuperscript{35}, describe how narrative meaning making unfolds through the process of mimesis. They present mimesis as a process with three folds: First actions and events take place (mimesis 1). Next, the person tries out, through thought and activity, his/her images and possible understandings of these events based on social/cultural/historical resources, as well as hopes for the future (mimesis 2). Finally, a current understanding is created, allowing the events to be communicated, through sharing, negotiation and confirmation, as a coherent story with a clear meaning/plot (mimesis 3). Alsaker underlines how meaning making through the process of mimesis is a continuous and flowing undertaking, moving back and forth between the three different folds\textsuperscript{35}. In line with this, the narratives and processes of meaning making in focus of this study are not verbally told stories, but rather ongoing, enacted stories of meaning making.

**Participant Recruitment and Ethical Considerations**

The data used in the present study are drawn from a related study with four participants. For this case study, we chose to further explore the data-material created with George because it yielded valuable findings related to our aim.

To recruit participants for the study, the first author made contact with the leader of three community mental health centres in an urban municipality in Norway. These centres are run by the municipality and serve as local meeting places for individuals with mental health problems. Here, people can come and go as they please, read the newspaper, drink coffee, and converse with others. Both staff and service users
organize activities at the centres, such as meals, art-groups, and physical activity. The leader invited the first author to their house meetings to inform staff and service users about the study. After the meetings, the first author left written information about the study and contact information at the centres. Individuals interested in participating were encouraged to make contact with the first author, either directly or through the staff at the centre. Criteria for inclusion were that the participants experienced mental health problems, and that they were currently living at home in their community, not in a hospital. George made contact with the first author, willing to participate in the study. Before starting data generation, the first author repeated some information about the study and what it would mean to participate, and George signed a written consent form.

The regional committee for medical and health research ethics issued ethical approval for the study (approval number: 2013/2410/REK midt). The authors also sent the project plan to the director of health in the municipality of study for approval and support. We have changed the participant’s name and some details to ensure anonymity.

Generating data through participant observations over time and in different situations requires sensitivity and reflexivity regarding how to create an open and trusting relationship, but at the same time keeping some professional boundaries, and planning for how to end the relationship. Throughout the meetings, the first author adjusted her actions, being sensitive to the current situation. To prepare George for the researcher’s withdrawal, the first author repeated and confirmed the nature and temporality of the relationship throughout the meetings. In the last meeting of data generation, the first author presented George with the opportunity to ask any questions he might have. The first author also assured that he would receive updates on the status of the project. Additionally, the first author asked George to meet again to discuss the preliminary analysis and interpretations, something he agreed to.

Data Generation

The findings in this case study are based on our analysis of events that took place during the first author’s meetings with George. Participant observations followed recommended guidelines provided in the literature on ethnography originating mainly from sociology. The first author met with George 8 times, over a period of 6 months. Each meeting lasted from 2-4 hours, while doing everyday activities suggested by George. In general, the participant observations entailed doing activities, spending time together and partaking in informal conversations with George and others present, as well as observing, listening, and asking questions relevant for the study aim. Several of the meetings with George took place at a community mental health centre, joining the art group, baking, or having coffee together in the salon.

Field notes were organized in four parts, following guidelines from literature. 1) Before each meeting, the first author wrote some notes about her preparations and pre-understandings for the meeting. Parts 2-4 were written after each meeting, and included 2) a description of the context of the meeting; when, where, what, who, 3) a description of the meeting, of what was said and done as the first author remembered it, and 4) the
first author’s current reflections and analytical ideas. These texts, in total 17900 words, formed the data material that we subsequently analyzed.

Data Analysis

We analyzed the data using a narrative, interpretive approach. Our analysis involved a hermeneutical process of studying the data-material, team-discussions of analytical ideas and possible interpretations, and searching for relevant theory and research literature to deepen our understanding further.

In accordance with the narrative-in-action approach, we focused our analysis on unfolding actions and events in the data material. We took particular interest in events involving some kind of ambiguity or suspense. Such situations require individuals to imagine possibilities and deliberate their actions, and may thus be particularly significant to uncover their meanings and intentions. The first and third author both read the field notes to get an overview of the data material. The first author continued by reading the field notes several times, searching for events raising curiosity or questions related to creating meaning. Theory about narrative meaning making and the process of mimesis guided the focus of our readings, and the identification of possible significant events related to our study aim. The first author then read the field notes again, searching for other parts of the data material that seemed interrelated to these significant events. Hence, our analysis followed the principles of a hermeneutic circle of understanding; moving between particulars and wholes, thereby expanding our understanding in concentric circles. During this process, all three authors met on several occasions to discuss preliminary findings and interpretations, as well as how to proceed with the analysis.

As a next step in our analysis, we pulled together the parts of the data-material that we viewed as relevant to our interpretations of significant events to create a coherent story which shows a possible emergent plot or meaning. This helped us both to deepen our understanding of these events and to communicate our findings. Next, the narrative was interpreted further through the joint work of all three authors, drawing both on other parts of the data material, theory, our preunderstandings as occupational scientists, as well as relevant research literature, fulfilling a double hermeneutic circle of interpretation. Through this process, we sought to provide scholarly and theoretic arguments to support our findings and interpretations.

George read the manuscript before submission, and met with the first author to discuss our findings and interpretations. George responded that he could recognize our interpretations of the analyzed events, and that our focus on the relational aspects of everyday activities and meaning making points to issues very important to him. This helped develop our understanding further, and to secure validity of our findings.
Methodological Considerations

We sought to ensure transparency and validity of our research through several procedures. We have described our process of data-creation, analysis, and interpretation thoroughly, making it as transparent as possible through displaying our theoretical, methodological, and professional resources. We discussed our findings and interpretations with George to further ensure their validity. In line with the conception of narratives as socially constructed\(^1\), the narrative presented in the findings section must be viewed as co-created between the participant and the researchers. Although findings and interpretations were discussed with George, they are mainly the authors’ and must be viewed as some of many possible interpretations, grounded in theory and professional knowledge. We uphold that our professionally and theoretically grounded interpretations may contribute to our understanding of the phenomena of study, as well as to the field of mental health.

Results

George is a man in his mid-fifties. He is divorced and father of three grown children. Previously, George worked full-time as an academic, volunteered in community work, and was active in a sports-club together with his children. Some years ago, George suffered from severe mental illness and was hospitalized for a while. After hospitalization, he moved into the city to start a new life. George states that he is not able to work anymore, and talks about himself as a retiree. George spends most of his days at the community mental health centre or at home, doing everyday activities like painting, working out, or cooking. He says that he may be ‘lazy’ sometimes, needing someone to push him to do things, and that the community mental health centre helps him stay active.

The results presented here are grounded in our analysis of the complete data material created with George. To communicate our findings, we choose to present the storied events of two meetings where George and I [the first author] were involved in baking gingerbread at the community mental health centre. For friends and families in Norway, baking gingerbread, and especially a gingerbread house, is a common activity to do before Christmas. Our analysis of these particular events focused on how George and the other individuals involved created meaning while doing this activity together. As we will show, our main finding is that through alternately trying out ideas and possibilities, as well as communicating shared interest and understanding throughout the activity, the participants engaged in a process we have called collective meaning making.

Making a Gingerbread House – Collective Meaning Making in Action

Trying out an idea.

One day in early December, George and I were reading newspapers together at the community mental health centre, waiting for the weekly house meeting
to begin. I showed George a newspaper article about artistic gingerbread decorations. George eagerly looked at the pictures for a while, seeming very intrigued by them. Soon after, he contacted the staff at the centre and asked them if it would be possible to bake and decorate gingerbread before Christmas. The staff sounded positive and said that this could be possible but encouraged him to bring his question to the house meeting, which was about to begin. During the meeting, both staff and other service users supported George’s idea, and therefore agreed on a date on which to bake gingerbread. The staff said that the centre would provide money for the activity, and George volunteered to go buy ready-made gingerbread dough.

When analyzing these events in light of narrative theory we recognize them as being part of a process of mimesis. We understand George reading the article as the first fold of a meaning making process, mimesis 1. Reading the article about artistic gingerbread decorations seemed to intrigue George, perhaps because of his general interest in art and baking. Reading the article also seemed to trigger George’s imagination, as he soon envisioned baking gingerbread himself, and wondered about the possibility of doing this at the community mental health centre. Perhaps positive experiences of baking together with others triggered these images of involving others at the centre in this activity? Alternatively, perhaps he seeks other’s engagement because he thinks he cannot do this activity on his own? George decided to present his idea to the staff, trying out the staff’s evaluation of his proposal. We identify this envisioning of future possibilities and trying out of his idea as events belonging to the second fold of the mimesis process. We suggest that through mimesis 2, George sought both practical and moral support from the staff through trying out their interest in the activity. Further, by being positive and supportive of his idea, the staff confirmed that they shared George’s interest and understanding of baking gingerbread as a meaningful activity to do together at the centre. We view the staff and George’s communication of shared interest and understanding as joint engagement in mimesis 3, being the beginning of a collective meaning making process evolving through this activity.

However, their shared understanding seemed temporary and fragile, as the staff required George to present his idea also at the house meeting. In our interpretation, the staff viewed the house meeting as an opportunity to try out other service users’ interests in engaging in this activity, initiating a new round of mimesis 2. Building on their own experiences and images others also voiced their interest in baking gingerbread at the meeting, thereby creating a new shared understanding of the activity, identified by us as another round of mimesis 3. They decided to go through with the idea, and made further plans. As can be seen from our analysis, we suggest that through these activities, George, the staff, and other service users were engaged in meaning making through the process of mimesis. By moving between events/actions (mimesis 1), testing out the idea (mimesis 2), and communicating shared interest and understanding (mimesis 3), they manifested baking gingerbread as an activity worthwhile doing together at the community mental health centre.
**A moment of hesitation.**

George invited me to join them while baking, and about a week later, I met up at George’s apartment as agreed upon to go bake gingerbread at the centre. However, when George opened the door, he was not yet dressed for leaving the house… Moreover, he asked me if I would rather come in and drink coffee with him in his apartment… This surprised me, and I hesitated for a short while. I then replied that I was curious about the event of baking gingerbread, and proposed that we should go to the community centre as planned. George agreed on this immediately, got dressed, and we walked to the centre together.

George spent both time and effort in initiating and planning the gingerbread baking. However, when I came to pick him up to go baking that December morning, something had changed... Why was he now hesitant to go, after all his previous efforts to arrange the baking? We suggest that George had become uncertain about the validity of the shared understanding previously created and communicated at the house meeting. Perhaps he has experienced previous situations where others have changed their mind about an activity, or where plans have not come through? In our interpretation, George initiated a new round of mimesis 2, trying out again the first author’s interest in going baking by offering an opportunity to back out of the activity. George’s hesitation and question prompted the first author to communicate and solidify a collective interest and engagement in baking gingerbread, completing a new mimesis 3. George received the reassurance he needed and quickly re-engaged in the activity as he got dressed and walked to the centre as planned.

**Unexpected hindrances causing bewilderment.**

George and I were some of the first persons to come to the centre that day, and George immediately went into the kitchen to prepare the baking. However, he could not find all the dough he had bought… He and the staff searched the kitchen but soon concluded that some of the dough he had bought was missing… Both George and the staff seemed puzzled and uncertain on what to do... They discussed who might have taken it, how much dough they would actually need, and how to deal with this unexpected hindrance. Finally, one of the staff said that she would go to the store and buy some more dough. George seemed relieved by this solution to the problem. While waiting for her to come back, George and I sat down in the salon.

When noticing this unexpected lack of dough, George pondered for a while together with the staff about what to do. It was the staff who eventually initiated a solution and went to buy more dough. In our interpretation, this may be understood as another situation in which George became uncertain and hesitant. Perhaps he was again trying out if the staff were invested enough in the activity to solve the issue and bring the
activity forward. When the staff decided to go buy more dough, they confirmed to George that they were in this activity together, and that they found baking gingerbread to be an activity worth doing.

*Creating shared understandings, drawing on individuals’ creativity and strengths.*

While waiting for the staff to arrive with the dough, more service users joined in. Some of them had already agreed on baking a gingerbread house together and now engaged in a discussion on how to design it. A female service user, who is a very capable artist, suggested different designs to the others. They soon agreed on making a traditional gingerbread cottage. They asked a male service user, who is an architect, to draw the patterns for the house. He agreed to do this, and with input from the others, patterns in the correct size and design were drawn.

During these events, other service users took initiative and elaborated on George’s idea, trying out their own ideas as well. Now George was mostly quiet, listening and smiling while the others were doing the planning, thus confirming others’ ideas and initiatives during the activity. We recognize these events as a collective endeavours of mimesis 2, with several individuals alternately trying out ideas and possibilities. In this particular situation, some individuals also experienced opportunities of using their individual strengths and capacities, such as designing and drawing the patterns for the gingerbread house. Finally, through their involvement in these activities, they collectively reached agreement on how to proceed, in our interpretation again having negotiated another preliminary shared understanding, a mimesis 3, of the activity.

*Enjoying the finish line.*

The staff finally arrived with the dough, and we all moved into the kitchen to start the baking. The staff helped find the kitchen utensils needed, but then they left us to do the baking on our own. This was the first time baking gingerbread for both George and some of the other service users. They asked the more experienced persons for advice before starting baking. They had some trouble working the dough at the beginning, but after some trying and failing, George decidedly found his own way to do it. Another male service user laughed and said, "Now the baker has made up his mind." While talking, tasting, and enjoying the unique scent of gingerbread, they made many artistic looking cakes, as well as a house. George seemed dedicated while making his fancy cakes. Both staff and other service users told him how well his cakes looked. George smiled proudly and replied, "Thank you."

Throughout these last events, when finally starting the gingerbread baking, George and the others involved seemed both relaxed and joyful. Our findings show how while planning and preparing for this activity, George was uncertain, and the collective
meaning making process seemed fragile. However, in this final part of the activity, any uncertainties seemed resolved. We understand this as a final round of mimesis. They now finalized the activity, establishing a shared understanding of baking gingerbread as a coherent and meaningful experience for the group.

As noted above, the first author initially understood George's interest and enthusiasm for baking gingerbread as connected to his interests and abilities in art and baking. However, our analysis shows that doing the activity together with others was crucial in order for George to follow through with his idea. He needed confirmation and involvement from others on several occasions to keep up with the activity. We suggest that the individuals involved in this activity engaged in what we have interpreted as collective meaning making, undertaking the process of mimesis together. Through making use of their narrative abilities of trying out ideas and possibilities, communicating shared interest and understanding, as well as valuing and making use of individual resources, the participants collectively created meaning throughout the activity, a process that was crucial to George.

Discussion

Our analysis and interpretations of the events presented here show how doing everyday activities with others opens up possibilities for negotiating shared understandings and coherence through processes we have called collective meaning making. Although our focus was primarily on George as participant in the study, the participant observations yielded contextual and processual data involving several individuals. Our findings of collective meaning making add to previous research showing how doing everyday activities with others provides us with important possibilities for relational experiences and meaning making.

Through our analysis, we came to understand that George strives for collective meaning making in several situations, and that this is crucial for him to achieve in order to go through with activities. George's mental health problems and other life events have interrupted his engagement in activities and relationships that previously have provided him with possibilities of collective meaning making, such as taking care of children, working, or doing sports. Literature shows how such losses are not unique to George. Further, experiences of mental illness may have eroded George's self-esteem, affecting his ability to initiate and engage in activities on his own. All these challenges are plausible reasons why George and others experiencing mental health problems may need and seek new arenas for doing everyday activities together with others that entail possibilities for collective meaning making.

As we have shown, collective meaning making entails communication of shared interest and understanding, as well as using one's imagination, influence and personal resources throughout an activity. Building on the narrative understanding of mental health recovery presented in our introduction, we recognize the process of meaning making explored in this study as an 'event of recovery', with a potential of establishing both connectedness, empowerment, and hope and optimism about the future for the
participants. What our findings underline is how such events of recovery may be collective, rather than individual. This collective view of recovery is also supported by Price-Robertson, Obradovic, and Morgan and Duff, who propose that some recovery processes, such as creating hope and belief, are both relational and atmospheric. In light of these findings, an important question for discussion and further investigation will be: How may such processes of collective meaning making and recovery be supported?

As we outlined in our introduction, literature mainly describes mental health recovery as an individual process, although social processes are found to be important. Further, recovery-oriented services are also mainly person centred, focusing on individuals’ recovery in their context. In person-centred recovery planning, individuals are first asked about their interests and goals, then possibilities and ideas of meaningful activities are brought forward, and later completed individually or together with others.

As opposed to an individual and linear process of creating meaning, our findings show how meaning making processes are evolving, linking together the actions of several individuals, events, and contexts, and require ongoing negotiation and communication of shared meaning and understandings. Further, our analysis shows how the participants’ interest and engagement in baking gingerbread was created and enhanced throughout the activity, and how participants were able to insert their influence during the process through trying out their own ideas and wishes for how to further proceed with the activity together. This implies that creating interest and meaning was an emergent, spontaneous, ongoing, and collective process. We therefore suggest that individual and linear processes and recovery planning should be assisted by efforts to facilitate what we understand as collective recovery.

We have shown how collective meaning making is an evolving process of individuals taking turns in trying out ideas and possibilities, craving an atmosphere where individuals can meet and feel comfortable, and that allow for spontaneity, improvising, risk-taking, exploration, and diverse activities. Duff discusses how atmospheres may be staged to promote recovery, and based on our findings we support his suggestion of how open, accessible, and tolerant atmospheres may accommodate for such processes. Our findings suggest that the community mental health centres may provide such atmospheres, as they arrange for individuals with similar experiences and needs for recovery to meet and do activities together, offering both material and relational support. The community mental health centres have also been documented as inclusive and supportive atmospheres facilitating participation and recovery by Elstad and Eide.

An important premise for the process of collective meaning making presented here was doing an activity or project together. It was doing something together that opened up for possibilities of meaning making. Although the community mental health centres offer possibilities for collective activities or projects, our findings may call for an enhanced effort to arrange for such possibilities. Perhaps ideas may be drawn from the clubhouse model, where all members are viewed, treated, and fostered as contributors to the clubhouse community through reciprocal relationships and collective undertakings. However, our findings underline the importance of keeping the activities and atmospheres open for spontaneity and exploration.
**Study Limitations and Future Research**

This is a case study, exploring a single process of meaning making. We view the interpretations presented here as only some of many possible interpretations. We propose that more research is needed to nuance and deepen our understanding of recovery as a collective process.

Our findings underline how doing everyday activities with others facilitates collective assemblages of recovery, and we suggest creating safe and flexible atmospheres that accommodate such activities. Although the community mental health centres offer accommodating atmospheres for recovery, recovery literature also highlights the importance of inclusion in ‘mainstream’ social arenas. An important question for further research and discussion is how to support collective recovery in such arenas and activities as well.

**Conclusion**

The aim of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of how individuals with mental health problems create meaning through doing everyday activities together with others. Through a narrative-in-action approach, this case study has yielded processual, contextual and in-depth knowledge about how a group of individuals create meaning collectively through activity. We understand such processes of collective meaning making as everyday events of recovery, hence our findings shed light on the interrelationship between doing everyday activities with others, meaning making, and mental health recovery. Further, narrative theory suggests that experiences of activity and collective meaning making may be a source of images, hopes and possibilities for future events, thus inspiring and stimulating later activities and contributing to create assemblages of several coherent events of recovery such as Duff describes. In line with Duff, we therefore uphold that analyzing and understanding mundane everyday activities and events of meaning making such as the one we have presented here is an important contribution to understanding and supporting mental health recovery.

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