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## But That's Not What I Meant: Meaning-Making in Foster Care

Thom Garfat  
*TransformAction Consultation and Training*

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## **'But That's Not What I Meant' Meaning-making in Foster Care**

**Thom Garfat, PhD**  
**TransformAction Consultation and Training**

### **Introduction**

In the last issue of this journal (Vol 2:3), while introducing myself, I talked a little about the concept of meaning-making and its place in helping troubled children and youth. Given that this issue is dedicated to foster care, I thought it might be appropriate to discuss the place of meaning-making in the process of caring for troubled children specifically in a fostering arrangement. To begin it would seem important to discuss what is meant by meaning-making, how it is influenced and the relevance or importance of it as a process in helping.

It seems to me that one of the most important issues we face in the world of helping troubled young people is the specific role of the 'self' in the helping relationship (see for example, Fewster, 1987, 1990; Garfat 1998). Meaning-making, the way that we as individuals make sense of that which we experience, seems to be the place where self and experience interact most directly in impacting on 'other' (See, for example, Bruner, 1990). For example, the way that we make meaning very much influences, and perhaps even determines, how we respond to them. Thus, it is the place where the 'issues of self' play themselves out most directly in the helping relationship.

I guess we have to begin with the question of 'what is reality?'. Is there really such a thing? Is my reality the same as yours? Is there a real world *out there* that we can all agree on? Is there an objective reality that we can point at and say "There it is?! That's what's real!" Paul Watzlawick (1990), a noted therapist from the United States, once said in answer to this question that "as far as I know, the belief in 'real' reality has survived only in psychiatry" (1990, p.134).

As Watzlawick indicated, there seems to be a substantial belief that reality and meaning are created by the individual experiencing them: that there is no 'real' reality. In essence, we all make up whatever reality we experience. However, it also seems to be true that many helpers, be they in foster care, social care, social work, or some other helping profession, act as if meaning is absolute: as if the meaning of something, as they perceive it to be, is the 'real meaning'. They think that how they see things, is the way

things really are. They frequently fail to recognize that the meaning that they have adopted was accepted or created by themselves in the course of their experiences. As Watzlawick (1990) has stated, if these people do believe that reality is constructed, they "assume that all other reality constructions are false" (p.137) and they behave in a manner that opposes or attacks those other constructions.

Inherent in the foregoing paragraph is the idea - the belief if you will - that there is no such thing as an objective reality: that the meaning of things is made up by the individual; that each of us creates that which we see; that we all make our own meaning. If this is so, and it does seem to be generally accepted that it is, then the question comes up of how one makes meaning. How does one create that which they perceive? How come your reality is different than mine?

As one would expect, in the absence of an absolute truth, there are a variety of approaches to understanding how one makes meaning of a particular person, thing or event which are reflected in the writings and practice of philosophy, psychology and the helping professions. Ultimately, however, one makes a decision and takes a position (Ricks, 1993) about what one believes about meaning and reality and through this lens-of-belief, one acts in a particular fashion, all too frequently closing one's mind to alternative ways of seeing things (Watzlawick, 1990). In other words, we decide what we want to see and then we see it - and nothing else. This helps to explain some of those arguments that we have with youth in foster care about what they did - they see it one way and we see it another. Each of us decides how to see it, and we stick to our way of seeing things.

My own belief is that meaning does not exist independent of it being 'given' by the individual. It is also my belief that the individual, through an experience or an act of will can reconstruct meaning. After all, if we decided that something means one thing, we can also decide that it means something else. There is great freedom in this idea. It means, for example, that we all have the freedom to change our minds, no matter what we thought initially. It also means that it is possible that you can influence how another person sees things; that there is a chance that she can come to see things the way that you do; that values and beliefs can be taught by, for example, a foster parent to a young person.

Goffman, (1974) said that we all interpret things through our own particular 'frame' which is, in essence, our own chosen way to see things. The way in which I have chosen to experience things predisposes me to interpret them in a certain manner (Schon, 1983). I believe that I create meaning through how I interpret the persons, things or events that I

encounter in the specific context within which I encounter them. I believe, as philosophers like Bruner, (1990) and Polanyi (1962) said, that "only a speaker or listener can mean something *by* a word, and a word, *in itself* can mean nothing" (p. 252; italics in original). As Yalom (1989) the great therapist, said "each of us is the author of his or her own life design and we create our own problems through how we structure our experience of the world around us" (p.8). In essence, then, what you see, is what you choose to see. You see things a certain way because that is how you have learned to see them. Just because a young person does not clean her room does not mean she is a slob. That's just how you have come to interpret it. Having accepted that meaning is 'made', the question, especially in relationship to helping others, becomes one of 'how' meaning is made by the individual.

### **Psychological Reality**

However, we must be concerned with what is "psychologically real" in our work with young people. Even though it may appear that some things do not exist in the world independent of a young person's construction of them, they must be an area of concern for us if they are, for that young person, psychologically real. If you believe something is real, then it may as well be so. We must be concerned with not only how the young person frames (makes meaning of) their experience but also how the foster parent frames problems (Schon, 1983), for any intervention must be constructed of the interaction between these two realities - that of the young person and that of the helper. As Durrant (1993) has said, ". . . we have a choice about how we wish to view the people with whom we work" and ". . . the way we [choose to] view them will have an impact on the way they are" (p.186). Both the foster parent and the youth bring to any interaction their own way of making sense of that moment (Garfat, 1994). When we are deciding what to do with a young person (e.g., how to intervene) we need to consider both how we see the situation, and how it is seen by the young person. For the truth, the reality if you want, lays between these two perceptions.

The process of effective intervention involves the creation of a shared meaning through the interaction of different reality constructions, and we as helpers are at least partially responsible for the co-created reality within which that intervention occurs and is interpreted by the young person (Peterson, 1988). Perhaps the most useful tool for understanding this process of meaning-making is the notion of "interpretive systems" (Bruner, 1990).

### **Interpretive Systems**

Bruner (1990) has argued for what he has called "folk psychology"; the "system by which people organize their experience in, knowledge about, and transactions with the social world" (p. 35). He argues that in every culture there exists such a folk psychology and that it is this system which forms the particular frame for people to understand and guide their behaviour and within which meaning is given to actions. Within a particular folk psychology system, for example, actions come to be symbols that represent certain meanings and in essence form an "interpretive system" (p.34). In order to understand the meaning of a particular action, one must understand the interpretive system, therefore, which frames it. In simple terms, while in one culture the gesture of offering help may be interpreted as a gesture of caring, in another it may be interpreted as a sign that the person needing help is seen as weak. There is then, a cultural meaning to actions and words, and we need to understand the cultural meaning that the young person brings to any interaction.

While the culture forms the framework for interpretation, the individual brings to the meaning-making process their own particular idiosyncratic orientation (Pharis, 1993). While two people raised in the same culture will have a tendency to give the same meaning to an action, the individual influence will determine the final meaning. Thus, again, while within a particular culture the gesture of offering help, in general, may be seen as a statement that the individual needing help is seen as weak, a person's individual experience may lead her to interpret this gesture differently. If, for example, a young person who received help was at the same time appreciated for her strengths and abilities, she may have learned to see helping as a form of support. We need, therefore, not only to know the individual's culture, but the individual.

### **Family Frameworks**

One could argue equally for the existence of a family folk psychology - an interpretive system of values and beliefs which operate in a family and serve as the frame for meaning making in that particular family which may be different, in ways dramatic or subtle, from the frame which operates in other families. This 'family frame' may help us to understand why it appears that young people tend to recreate in the group care situation or the foster care situation the problems and dynamics which are present in their life outside of care (Yalom, 1990). If, for example, certain gestures or actions in the young person's family were associated with caring, the young person may try to evoke these actions from the foster parent, in order to be convinced that the foster parent actually does care.

*A young woman came from a family where the parents, whenever they were angry with one of the children, raised their voices loud, yelling at the*

*youth. Afterwards, the parents and youth would come closer together and the youth were constantly told that 'daddy yells at you because he loves you and worries about you'. When she moved in to a foster home where the caregivers did not raise their voice or yell, she was convinced that this meant they did not care for her. As a result, and because she wanted to know that they cared about her, she kept doing things to make them more angry hoping that eventually they would yell at her.*

This thinking could also help us to understand why it is that a behaviour which a foster parent finds unacceptable may not be seen as a problem by someone else, especially the family of the young person. Given that a family is, for most family members, a validating context and that behaviours within a family serve an individual function (Garfat, 1991, 1998), the actions of a family member which we, as professionals, find unacceptable, may be valued by the family within a different "meaning frame", and thus be acceptable to them. For example, while the foster parent may interpret the use of a swear word to be rude, the young person's family may simply see it as a symbol of normalcy or even of belonging. Thus we see the same action interpreted differently because of the family culture from within which it is being interpreted.

*A young boy was admitted in to care because of difficulties he was having at school. He was, among other things, always swearing - using inappropriate language even when he was not angry. He would, for example, look directly at a teacher and say, "I have to go to the fucking bathroom." This behavior was seen as unacceptable and a sign that he was socially incompetent and provocative. Part of the initial treatment plan included the elimination of such expressions from his repertoire. As part of the helping process a worker went to the family home one evening. She arrived as the family was sitting at the table for dinner and so she joined them. After a few minutes of small talk, the father looked her straight in the eye and said "Pass the fucking salt, will you." A few minutes later, the other son said that he thought the meal was "fucking good". The worker quickly realized that, in this family, the use of such language was the norm. If anything, it seemed to signal belonging.*

### **Program Interpretations**

Any foster care program also has a culture of its own (Fulcher, 1991) - and this culture will include an interpretive frame within which actions are given meaning by the foster parents. This system, which has evolved as the result of a process of negotiating common meaning between foster parents and the organization within which the program

exists has the effect of shaping how actions and behaviors are understood (Brendtro & Ness, 1983). This helps to explain why, for example, an unacceptable action in one programme may be quite acceptable in another. Because the programme meaning frames are different, the behaviour is interpreted differently. Sometimes then, a youth will do poorly in one programme and well in another, simply because the young person's behaviour is interpreted differently by the different foster parents.

*Billy was placed in a foster home which had strict rules about what time young people should come in. Billy was expected to be in by 9:00 every evening and he was constantly late. He would arrive at 9:10 or 9:20, always with some good reason for his lateness. The foster parents interpreted this to mean that he didn't care about their rules, and that he was using this as a way to say that they couldn't control him. In other words, it was interpreted as resistance and disrespect. Eventually, Billy moved to another program where he continued with the same behaviour. While visiting, the social worker asked the new foster parents how they were making out with Billy always being late. Their response was that he was trying to do well. As proof, they cited how, while he was usually late, he was close to being on time, usually being home within 15 or 20 minutes of his curfew. They had let him know that they appreciated his efforts. So, in one family he was disrespectful and in the other he was trying to succeed. His behavior hadn't changed. But the meaning of the behavior had.*

Thus we see that in foster care programmes, for example, we have the interaction of a variety of interpretive systems: that of the predominate culture within which placement takes place, that of the child's culture and family, and that of the foster parent(s). I understand this is a current debate in Ireland with regard to Traveller populations of youth. Drawing on the previous discussion, the following sections of this paper highlights various areas in which the concept of meaning-making may be of relevance to foster care. The examples chosen come from my own personal experience and have been selected because they represent areas that are of contemporary interest as represented by their presence in current literature.

### **The Meaning of Placement**

By the time that a young person encounters the care-system, she has already constructed a way of understanding this experience, and its meaning, in her life. In other words, before the young person even comes to the foster home, she has a way of understanding the experience and what to expect from it. As Durrant (1993) indicated, we each go

through a process of giving to an experience a definition that creates for us, our individual way of knowing it. Making or giving meaning to an experience helps each of us to establish order in our experiencing (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), for *meaning is the idiosyncratic significance that each of us gives to the connections between the experiences of our lives* (Pharis, 1993). A person moving into foster care, therefore, encounters the foster parent from within the interpretative frame that they are using to organize and give meaning to the experience. Based on her previous experiences, the young person brings with her an interpretive frame about foster care - a preconceived way, if you wish, of understanding it. Meeting the foster parent, therefore, is an experience which the young person has already given a meaning to - there is nothing one can do to alter this. The meaning of the encounter is already determined for the young person, just as it is for the foster parent. So we see that while for the system the foster parents may be kind and caring people, for the child, during the first encounter, the foster parents may be seen as wardens or jailers.

We must concern ourselves not only with how people, in general, might experience the process but, also, with how each individual who encounters these processes might make meaning of them. We must also be concerned with the meaning we have given to the processes in which we are involved so that we can understand how our interpretation of events and actions within these processes are framed by the overall meaning we have assigned to the event. We need to attend to how we have limited our thinking because of how we have framed our perceptions (Castanada, 1994; Goffman, 1974).

When the foster parent first encounters a young person, therefore, it may be important for them to take time to explore the meaning the youth is giving to the placement in foster care so as to understand what this experience means to them. By understanding how a person has constructed their experience, we are more able to connect with them and, perhaps, to help them find different ways to frame their experience. In some sense, then, what it means to us to be accepting a new youth into our home, is less important than what it means to the youth to be coming to live there. We must pay attention to what it means for the young person; if for example, we think it is an opportunity for the youth and the youth thinks it means she will never see her mother again, we are operating with different meanings indeed. Let the following story illustrate the point.

*A 14-year-old Jamaican girl was placed in an emergency foster home one night after being found on the streets of Montreal in a situation which lead the authorities to believe that she was at risk for prostitution or abuse. She had only been in Canada for a short time and she spoke English only poorly. The authorities, who knew from street workers that the girl had*

*been seen frequently on the streets late at night, wanted to place her in a program which would provide her with the necessary safety and learning to help her make the transition to this foreign culture. When asked to describe her experience of first encountering the program she said; "When I went into the foster home, I looked around and I thought that all my life, . . . I mean, I looked and saw and I thought that all my life up to then . . . all my dreams was over." From her family and cultural perspective being on the streets late at night was not an issue; in ours it meant a lack of parental responsibility. For the authorities, placement meant safety and learning; for her, it meant control over her life and the end of any opportunity to make a better life for herself in this new country. In our culture placement meant hope; in hers it meant the end of life with her family. For her, it was the end of her dreams.*

The philosopher Polyani (1962) identifies two kinds of meaning - those in which one thing, like a word, means another (representative) and those, like a tune, in which the thing means something only in itself (existential). When an experience is too large, overwhelming or interconnected for us to break it into its component parts we must react, and give meaning, to the whole of the experience as the young woman did in the above example. When a child first enters care, she must make meaning of the experiences she encounters. When this experience is totally new to her, she will begin by giving a meaning to the whole, or gestalt, of the experience because she will be unable, before knowing it, to break it into its various parts. How she gives such meaning may be determined by her previous cultural experiences, and the symbolic meanings attached to such an action within the interpretative frame available to her. Once a youngster has evoked her interpretive frame to give meaning to her initial experience this may give shape to everything that follows and we enter the territory of 'self-fulfilling prophesies' (Baizerman, 1994). If we can understand how a youth is making sense of an experience, then we can assist her in finding ways to "make sense of things differently" (Durrant, 1993, p. 11). If we do not pay attention to what the experience of placement means to a youth, we have no way of understanding their behaviour except within our own interpretive system. If we react to the youth thinking only of what her actions mean to us, then we miss completely the opportunity for a real connectedness.

### **The Meaning of Environment**

In the same way that a child must make sense of her initial experience of placement so, too must she make sense of the environment of care which she encounters. It is now common practice in the field of social care to say that 'space speaks' (Maier, 1987): that how, for example, the receiving and treatment environment is organized for welcoming

young people gives them a message about how they are regarded by the caregivers, how they are expected to conduct themselves and what they might expect from a program. Any consideration of how 'space speaks' however, must consider how it speaks to the individual as well as the collective. A room that says 'relax' to foster parents, for example, may well say 'do not touch' to a child who comes from a different history.

Many young people who come into care do so from environments in which there are limited possessions or where possessions are treated with a casual disregard. A child coming from such an environment into a foster home where the home is neat and organized, where there are many possessions and where there is an expectation that those possessions be treated with care, may well have a disorienting experience. The young person may assume that this means that the foster parents care more about things than about people, or that they are rich, or only doing this for the money. A request to keep one's feet off of the coffee table may, for example, be interpreted by the young person as a stupid and controlling rule that means that she is just a visitor and doesn't really belong there. We can only know what something means to a young person, of course, by asking – and we can only help them to understand it differently through the sharing of our own interpretation.

### **Individual Actions**

Just as the individual child will interpret the environment, so will she interpret the actions of those in that environment. Bringing to the interaction a readiness to interpret it in a certain way, the young person also interprets the individual gestures within this pre-conceived framework.

The child in the previous example had come in to the home late and the foster parents, wanting to be caring and nurturing, warmed-up some leftover dinner and served it to her. The meal included pork. The child and her mother were of a religious group that did not eat pork. For the foster parents, the gesture meant caring. For the child it meant that what she had with her mother, their shared religious beliefs, were unimportant. We see then in this example, which obviously comes from a particular cultural context, the potentially conflictual relationship between the values, beliefs and manners of a dominant culture with those of a non-dominant one. In one situation it may be the serving of pork, in another it may be inviting the child to address you by your first name, in still another it may be as simple and caring a gesture as inviting a child to sit with you while you talk. In order to avoid creating these types of cultural clashes we need to be constantly processing with young people what things mean to them and what they mean to us.

Ultimately, as Linge (1976) has stated, the meaning of actions or words "depends on the context into which they are spoken" (p. xxxii). Context, as we have seen, is construed by the individual who experiences it. Thus, the context of an intervention is different for the foster parent worker than it is for the child and "no two contexts are alike" (Ricks & Garfat, 1989, p. 68). As a child lives her experiences, certain actions come to be "representative symbols" (Polyani, 1962, p.58) which have a "denotative meaning" (p.92) in and of themselves which remain consistent across contexts until the child learns to differentiate between contexts.

When a child moves into care, or encounters a care-giver, there is a need for them to come to understand the symbols which they each use and how these work to give meaning to their immediate context for "it does make a difference whether I interpret your remarks as snide, or an affectionate tease . . ." (Polster, 1987, p. 113). Without this understanding, the foster parent is less able (or, even, unable) to understand the actions of the child in the immediate context (Austin & Halpin, 1987; Fewster, 1990). Understanding a child's reference symbols and how they operate can help us to understand what people do with their experience in order to give it meaning (White & Epsom, 1990). When we understand how people are giving meaning to their experiences through their use of interpretive frames, representative symbols and the connecting of events we are better positioned to be able to understand their actions.

### **Other Influences on the Making of Meaning**

Other factors also affect the meaning a child gives to a worker's intervention. For example, the place of an intervention in the "overall sequence of things" (Bruner, 1990, p. 138) will effect the meaning a child gives to an intervention as she connects it to previous and subsequent events according to her own method of contextualizing that which she experiences. Timing, location, tone, gender, relative power, age, roles, personal history - all of these must also be considered as they will impact on the child's interpretation of the meaning of the foster parent's intervention. Ultimately we must ask the question "what does this intervention, by this care-giver, in this circumstance, mean to this child?" It is only through answering this question that we are able to understand why the child reacts as she does to our interventions.

### **Concluding Commentary**

Foster parents need also to understand that their own actions are a result of the same process. A worker sees a child's action, for example, and gives it meaning. Based on the meaning that she has given to the child's action she then intervenes. Without understanding the meaning of the child's actions to the child, the worker is intervening into reality only as they have created it; not as it actually might be. Perhaps, in the end,

we must conclude that there is no 'real reality' - that there is only the reality that each of us creates. If we understand that young people create their own reality, then perhaps we are also willing to accept that we create ours. In the end, the child that you see on your doorstep, first coming for placement, is not the real child. She is only the child you have created through your own interpretive frame. Only time, attention, conversation and the age-old process of 'getting to know' the young person can help us avoid the potential conflict of our various ways of making meaning of that which we experience. We are all in this business because we care and want to be helpful. Attending to how we and the young person make meaning of each other and our experiences is, simply put, another aspect of caring. In many ways, attending to self, is a powerful way of attending to other.

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