

More than Meets the Mouth: An Exploration of Mealtime Meanings
for Toddlers in a Childcare Setting

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ABSTRACT

KRISTIN WALLACE: More than Meets the Mouth: An Exploration of Mealtime Meanings for Toddlers in a Childcare Setting
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Engagement in occupation and the experienced meaning of that occupation are interdependent and mutually transforming (Hasselkus, 2002). Therefore, changes in meaning are central to the development of occupation. However, few studies explore the occupational meanings experienced by young children. This observational study, set in a childcare center, explores the meaning of mealtime occupations of toddlers (age 13 to 24 months). A phenomenological method was used to identify and describe the various meanings of mealtime as experienced by toddlers. Five occupational meanings emerged from the data: satiating hunger, enjoying, adults as guides, being similar, and violation of expectations. Each of these meanings is discussed in terms of its impact on occupation both generally and in regards to learning to use the spoon. Finally, these meanings are discussed in terms of the Processes Transforming Occupation (PTO) model; considering the model's relevance to independent observations of occupational meaning.

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CHAPTER I: Introduction

Development is often conceptualized as biological and cognitive changes that affect how a child engages with the world. There currently exist a number of views about childhood development; however, these models tend to focus on when new abilities emerge, they do not address how children learn to participate in everyday activities also known as occupations. Although occupations such as self feeding employ discrete acts of manipulation of the spoon, cup, and food as well as oral motor action, development of occupation is more than the sum of an individual's skills. Rather, these capacities and other skills emerge through meaningful use; they emerge through occupation.

Occupations are sets of actions related to each other by physical movements, space, materials or function that are personally significant to the individual performing them (Spitzer, 2003). Occupational engagement is relevant to the study of the development of occupation as it reflects a child's experience that something about the activity, even if the activity is not chosen by the child, is significant and worth doing again. For this reason, I decided to adopt Spitzer's (2003) definition of meaning as "the subjective significance of an activity that may be sensory/felt, emotional, personally symbolic, or socially symbolic. The meaning may be experienced as positive, negative, or mixed" (p. 73). Meaning and occupational behavior are mutually interdependent and mutually transforming (Hasselkus, 2002).

Therefore, a discussion of the development of occupation necessarily includes a discussion of meaning.

The form of an individual's participation in mealtime undergoes an amazing transformation from infancy to preschool. Given the universality of the occupation of mealtime, the transformation that occurs, and the personal, social, and cultural meanings of mealtime, this occupation lends itself to an investigation of how meaning alters behavior and activity. Although mealtime is a rich cultural and social experience, too often the focus of researchers is on the individual's capacities. The contributions of others, the social context of the meal, the available food and objects, and individual factors are interconnected and transform the behavior (or the "form" of the occupation) and experience of each meal.

The purpose of this study is to describe children's experiences of meaning in a given mealtime: specifically, how these meanings inform and transform how children "do" meals. Finally, this study seeks to examine the fit of the Processes Transforming Occupation model, or PTO model (Humphry, 2005), with the development of mealtime participation. This research challenges the model, created in an inductive process, by considering its relevance to children's transformative experiences of occupational meaning. In this chapter, I define and discuss key concepts that appear throughout the paper. Chapter II contains a summary of literature relevant to my stated purpose. In chapter III, I detail the study's methodology. Chapter IV includes the results derived from data analysis; these results are interpreted based on their contribution to occupational performance and

related to the development of a specific occupation. The discussion of my results in reference to the PTO model appears in chapter V.

Children's Experiences of Meaning

As an occupational therapy student, I became quite familiar with the interconnection of occupation and meaning. "Meaningful occupation" and making treatment meaningful for a client were things that I thought about everyday. However, when I began to think about meaning, I realized that, for me, the meaning of meaning had gotten lost. I turned to the literature to explore occupational meaning (Hasselkus, 2002), especially in relation to infants and young children (Spitzer, 2003).

Investigations of occupational meaning, or the significance of an occupation, tend towards explorations of the concept itself (Hasselkus, 2002) or investigation of the meanings of various occupations (Bundgaard, 2005; Hannam, 1997; Spitzer, 2003; Wright-St Clair, Bunrayong, Vittayakorn, Rattakorn, & Hocking, 2004). Meaning can be personal as well as social, influence and influenced by place, relate to personal and cultural identity, enhance well being, and connect an individual to others (Hasselkus, 2002). Creation of meaning occurs through the senses, objects, temporal relationships, and social contexts (Hannam, 1997). Occupation is inseparable from the individual and the context, and it is through this relationship that meaning, purpose, and a sense of self and well being emerge (Christiansen, 1999; Wilcock, 1998). However, occupational scientists have not thoroughly explored the relationship of meaning and the transformation of occupation, especially in relation to children.

Development of Occupation

Currently, most theories of development seek to explain how infants “mature and gain skills to become fully functioning adults” (Law, Missiuna, Pollack, & Stewart, 2005, p.54). The emphasis on maturation and skills results in a focus on components of activity and factors that rest within the children. Occupational engagement is more than the sum of discrete components. Therefore, these theories do not explain how children learn to participate in everyday activities. Further, the implication that a child’s sole purpose is making small steps toward adulthood infers that a child and a child’s occupations are incomplete and imperfect

The PTO model (Humphry, 2005) seeks to explain the processes that transform the child’s engagement. It asserts that children are occupational at birth and that childhood occupations have a form and meaning of their own; they are not simpler versions of adult occupations. The PTO model organizes the multiple and dynamic forces from which occupations emerge into three clusters: sociocultural cluster, intrapersonal cluster, and the interpersonal cluster. An in depth discussion of these clusters appears in Chapter II.

Current Knowledge about Young Children’s Eating Habits

In order to gain an understanding of the knowledge about the development of the occupations of mealtime I first went to a pediatric occupational therapy text to find key references (Case-Smith & Humphry, 2005). As this study concerns the development of the occupation of mealtime in typically developing children, I focused on the references that were not specific to children with disabilities. Once I found a number of articles, I consulted their citations to find additional references, especially

sources cited in multiple articles. I searched the Social Science Citation index to find current articles that cited these key articles. Finally, I searched PsycInfo and CINAHL on the terms toddlers, young children and feeding, eating, or mealtime.

The results of this search provided the current conceptualization of eating in developmental literature. Parental report provides the basis for the bulk of the information about eating. Thus, the caregiver's perception and experience of mealtime is well-represented (Sanders, Patel, Le Grice & Shepherd, 1993; Hagekull & Dahl, 1987; Leung & Robson, 1994), especially in relation to picky eating. The child's experience, however, is absent. An investigation of the meanings that support participation in mealtime is not only useful in the study of occupation but may help to uncover some of the unknown variables that contribute to variability of performance across individuals.

This study adds to the current body of occupational science by exploring the occupation of mealtime for young children: describing the experiences of meaning that are essential aspects of mealtime, and analyzing how these aspects support, enhance, and transform occupational engagement.

CHAPTER II: Review of the Literature

This chapter presents literature related to the core concepts in the three clusters of the Processes Transforming Occupation (PTO) model that are central to my investigation of mealtime. These concepts are discussed in terms of their contribution to toddlers' experiences of meaning, and are organized into the clusters of the PTO model for clarity (definitions of these concepts appear in Appendix 1). In addition, I summarize literature related to the feeding habits of young children as well as literature related to occupational meaning.

Sociocultural Cluster

The sociological cluster consists of the values and traditions in a community that create a sociocultural niche (Humphry, 2005). This sociocultural niche outlines the occupations considered important and provides resources to promote these occupations. Caregivers, including parents and others, act as “proximal agents” of the community to create and support the activities. Caregivers structure activities according to cultural norms and their anticipation and interpretation of the children's needs (Humphry, 1997; Larson, 2000; Valsiner, 1997). In the context of mealtime, proximal agents encourage culturally appropriate behaviors, they create rituals around mealtimes consistent with their understanding of community values and traditions, and they provide food considered culturally and developmentally appropriate and nutritious for the child. The sociocultural cluster helps to shape the

structure of mealtime (what objects are present and the behaviors that are supported or discouraged), influencing the child's experience of cultural meanings of mealtime.

In this paper, I will use Valsiner's (1997) idea of the zones of free movement and promoted action and relate them to the mediation of everyday activities by caregivers. Caregivers' structuring of activities allows a range of possible behaviors. Within this range, caregivers encourage certain behaviors (oriented to support and develop new skills) and restrict other behaviors (behaviors not considered culturally appropriate by the caregiver). As children participate in caregiver structured activities, occupational meaning is influenced through the encouragement or restriction of aspects of their participation.

The cultural influence on occupation includes the objects available to support occupation. Mouritsen (2002) presented the idea of culture for children; objects produced for children to educate, entertain, or support participation in valued activities. The availability of adapted objects such as smaller utensils and cups with lids reflect the cultural investment in mealtime activities for children. By providing these objects for children, caregivers promote activities that reflect the practices of the culture.

By influencing the occupational opportunities in a given context, caregivers' structuring influences the experiences of occupational meaning. Culture is not static, further, it is "enacted through, and emergent in, occupations" (Dickie, 2004, p. 171). In this way, culture does not dictate the structuring of activities; it is echoed through these activities. Through engagement in occupation within the sociocultural niche, children are engaging in culturally meaningful occupations. These cultural

meanings of occupations have the potential to influence the experienced meanings of mealtime activities.

Intrapersonal Cluster

The intrapersonal cluster concerns the changing capacities of the individual. It is the assumption of the PTO model that the employment of the capacities in occupation results in self-organization therefore changing the form of the occupation. Bodily structures and functions may be necessary for the performance of an occupation but they are not sufficient to explain the transformation of an individual's engagement in the occupation. That is, children may have the oral-motor and fine motor capacities necessary for the act of self-feeding, but engagement in the occupation is a product of intentional use of these capacities to do the activity.

Intentionality is the individual's capacity to "direct their behavior toward the world" (Zeedyk, 1996, p. 416). Although developmental theorists have debated the concept of intentionality, especially, when and how intentional actions begin, directedness of behavior is easily observable in living organisms and both Reddy (2001) and Zeedyk (1996) provided evidence supporting intentional acts in early infancy. Cognitive prerequisites for intentionality are not necessary when using a transactional definition of intentionality (Garrison, 2001). Intentionality is "functional coordination" (p. 295), of objects and beings, there is no internal and external. Similarly, ecological psychologists view perception and action as a function of the organism-environment system (Wagman & Miller, 2003). As perceptual systems change, affordances for action change (Gibson, 1988; Gibson, 2000). Intentional actions are the basis for occupation (Kielhofner, 1995), and therefore the experience

of occupational meaning. Intentional use of capacities within a given context brings about self-organization, or a process of arranging abilities to achieve an outcome. As aspects of the meaning, context, or purpose of the occupation change, capacities reorganize, transforming occupation (Humphry, 2002).

Interpersonal Cluster

The forces for change presented in the interpersonal cluster relate to the child's involvement with other individuals: peers or adults. When individuals share occupation, shared meaning emerges. This shared meaning and the dynamic relationship between participants affects the performance of the occupation.

Building on Wilcock's (1998) assertion that humans are occupational beings, Lawlor (2003) suggests that children are "socially occupied beings" proposing that the focus needs to shift from just doing to doing with. Doing with others impacts the observable actions, or occupational form, and meaning of the activity for all involved in doing it. Lawlor states, "The actions, and these deeply connected sets of actors are transactional, mutually influencing and shaping each other" (p. 432). Lawlor's discussion of children as socially occupied beings focused on the shared occupation between children and adults; however, occupation and meaning are co-created between peers as well. Lokken (2000) discusses the shared meaning present in routines and play in a childcare situation. The social style of 1 and 2 year olds is spontaneous, they use the means at hand (body, space, objects in environment) to create meaning with each other. For example, one study describes 6 to 9 month old infant triads using gazes, gestures, toe holding, and other coordinated actions to further the "conversation" (Selby & Bradley, 2003). Mouritsen (2002) describes the

culture created by children, saying, “it includes sporadic, aesthetically organized forms of expression associated with the moment” (p. 17). Creation of meaning and expression in the moment highlight the importance of peers, but also infers perception of their intentionality as well, reducing the burden of social cognition (Reddy, 2001). This shared perception of the situation is intersubjectivity.

Achieving intersubjectivity in occupation indicates a shared meaning of a situation; created with another person or a group of people (Wertsch, 1999). Co-regulation is “a social process by which individuals dynamically alter their actions with respect to the ongoing and anticipated actions of their partners” (Fogel, 1993, p. 12). In the course of co-regulation, a social frame is constructed. These frames consist of repeatable patterns and rules that guide the actions of involved individuals. Through the process of co-regulation and framing, individuals experience intersubjectivity (Fogel, 1993; Wertsch, 1999) and a sense of their partner’s experienced meaning. Discussions of intersubjectivity often name language and communication as prerequisites (Wertsch, 1999); however, co-regulation and framing are observable through behaviors such as facial expression, eye gaze, and gestures. These communicative behaviors are independent of language and provide opportunities for observation of intersubjectivity among individuals prior to the acquisition of language.

Joint attention is related to intersubjectivity and the co-regulation and framing (and therefore meaning) of a situation. This “mutual mental focus” (Paparella & Kasari, 2004) is similar to the concept of framing (Fogel, 1993). Often joint attention is discussed in terms of intentional communication, and often tied to the

development of language (Camaioni, 1993; Paparella & Kasari, 2004; Reddy, 2001). However, the two dimensions of joint attention (the function of the communication and the means of communication) are observable in events not dependent on expressive language (Paparella & Kasari, 2004). Previous discussions of joint attention focused on adult-child interaction (Camaioni, 1993; Paparella & Kasari, 2004) without consideration of peer joint attention. However, peer joint attention is observable through coordinated action and young children's interactions with peers surrounding objects (Eckerman, 1993; Lokken, 2000; Selby & Bradley, 2003).

Partners in an occupation share meaning by virtue of co-regulation, framing, and intersubjectivity. According to the PTO model of development, the mutual meaning of an occupation can change the form of the occupation. The achievement of intersubjectivity allows for shared meaning: the very act of doing with another changes occupational meaning. Mealtime is a ritual that is rife with cultural and personal meanings; the act of sharing a meal, the food that is served, and the objects that are used transmit cultural values as well as contributing to and transforming personal meaning. Adults contribute to the structure of mealtime and mealtimes include shared meaning between adults and children. However, in a situation such as mealtime in a childcare center the context affords opportunities for peer-peer social meanings and the creation and expression of culture between peers.

Explorations of Children's Occupational Meaning

Hasselkus (2002) put forth an in depth discussion of meaning in everyday occupations. She explored conceptualizations of meaning and dimensions that

contributed to occupational meaning. Hasselkus acknowledged, “the sources of meaning in our lives may be thought of as a continuum or as a developmental trajectory that unfolds throughout life” (p. 3). Meaning is a connection to identity, to place, and to others.

Often interview data serve as the base of occupational science’s knowledge of meanings in specific occupations (Bundgaard, 2005; Hannam, 1997; Wright-St Clair et al., 2004). This method is not feasible with infants and young children, as it relies on speech processes. In her work with children with autism, Spitzer (2003) overcame this difficulty by conceptualizing meaning as “felt senses rather than cognitive processes...an experience of actively doing rather than a conscious articulated thought of ‘I am ____’ or ‘I think _____’” (p. 71).

Engagement in occupation emerges between individuals and environments that support the occupation. Given the reciprocal relationship between occupational engagement and occupational meaning (Hasselkus, 2002) it follows that intentional engagement in a supportive environment gives rise to occupational meaning as well. If engagement stops or changes, occupational meaning changes as well. Changes in occupational meaning may interrupt or change occupational engagement. This interdependent relationship allows shifts in meaning to be observable through the pausing, stopping, shifting, or resuming of occupational participation. Further, observations of a child changing behavior or engaging in new behavior indicates changes in occupational meaning.

Hasselkus (2002) discussed the concept of meaninglessness, or when “the possibilities of a situation are not as expected” (p.5). Experiences of

meaninglessness disrupt occupation for an individual; however, they also indicate a perception of the flow of occupation. Observed experiences of meaningless allow for an interpretation regarding the expected occupational opportunities and meanings of a situation.

Although senses of meaning through occupation are experienced from birth, adults often have difficulty interpreting them. As deictic gestures emerge, typically from 6 to 18 months (Crais, Douglas, & Campbell, 2004), directedness of action and expressions of meaning become observable. By interpreting formal gestures as well as behaviors already described as suggesting meaning in the context of meals, descriptions of young children's occupational meaning are possible.

Current Views on Feeding

From 12 to 24 months toddlers experience a period of rapid change in eating and feeding performance, making it an ideal time to observe development of this occupation. Case-Smith and Humphry (2005) outlined the expected changes in mealtime behaviors for typically developing children. At 9 months, children may hold a spoon and bang it or suck on it, but caregivers continue to do most of the feeding. From 9 to 13 months finger feeding gradually replaces caregiver feeding. Twelve-month-old children have a desire for increased independence that underlies finger feeding and a possible refusal to be fed. At 12 months, children also begin to try the spoon: dipping it into food and attempting to bring it to the mouth, but tipping the spoon and spilling the food before it gets there. At 15 to 18 months, children are expected to bring the food to their mouths more successfully.

With few exceptions (see Crist & Napier-Phillips, 2001; Young & Drewett, 2000) typical feeding patterns have not been studied. When they are investigated the acts have been conceptualized in terms of gross and fine motor milestones (Carruth & Skinner, 2002; Carruth, Ziegler, Gordon, & Hendricks, 2004) often in laboratory conditions without regard to the social aspects of the mealtime ritual.

Literature on feeding has focused mainly on disorder, conceptualized as factors that rest within the children. Investigations of parental reports of picky eating are common as well. Parents are often concerned that their child is not getting the nutrition he or she needs (Leung & Robson, 1994). Studies have not found problem feeding such as food refusal to look significantly different from feeding patterns of typical children, finding instead that the frequency of the behaviors differed (Crist & Napier-Phillips, 2001).

The presence of others affects mealtime behavior in children. Parental behavior as well as peer and teacher modeling can increase food acceptance, and the amount of unfamiliar food eaten by young children (Hendy, 2002; Hendy & Raudenbush, 2000; Young & Drewett, 2000). This supports the importance of others in the development of mealtime activity. However, the presence of others does not always support participation: one study found interactions between parents and children with feeding disorders to be significantly different from interactions with children without feeding difficulties (Sanders et al., 1993). The varying effects of others on participation suggest different experiences of meaning during shared occupation.

Few studies examine the role of occupational meaning in relation to feeding behavior. However, one study (Bober, Humphry, Carswell, & Core, 2001) explored persistence of utensil use by toddlers. This study found that the predisposition to master challenges accounted for only limited variance in persistence. They posited that occupational meaning may contribute to persistence. Given that food preference does not account for all of the variability in the amount of food ingested (Young & Drewett, 2000), other layers of meaning appear to be at work here. This study seeks to uncover those unknown aspects of meaning that support participation in various aspects of mealtime, including persistence.

Overview of Phenomenology

This study sought to examine the occupations of mealtime in a childcare setting, specifically the experiences of meaning associated with mealtime. With the focus on the lived experience of mealtime for the toddler, I used a phenomenological approach to identify and describe the experiences of meaning: interpreting how these meanings transform and are transformed by the occupations associated with mealtime. Detailed minute-to-minute observations allowed rich descriptions of toddlers' experiences of meaning interpreted from their actions.

The philosophy of phenomenology concerns itself with activities and objects present in everyday life and "what can be ascertained from how things appear to us in experience" (Davidson, 2003, p.4). Rather than accepting assumptions about how things are, the phenomenological method strives to describe how things appear because it is through these appearances that the essential features can be uncovered. Husserl offered phenomenology as a science for philosophy as well as

other disciplines, especially psychology (Giorgi, 1997). Husserl presented phenomenological reduction as the methodology for phenomenology: using experience itself to “generate knowledge about the nature, structures, and laws of experience” (Davidson, 2003, p. 24). Phenomenological reduction describes the reflective stance towards life that allows a fresh look at common occurrences, a look not laden with bias or preconceived notions. When using a reflective stance one does not assume the existence of things, but examines the characteristics that contribute to the appearance of existence (Giorgi, 1997). The phenomenological method has been applied to the study of psychology for over a decade (Giorgi, 1997), and has recently appeared in the occupational science literature (Barber, 2004; Grey, 1997) as a way to examine the concept of occupation.

CHAPTER III: Methods

The model of development (PTO) used to frame the research on occupations of mealtime focuses on the processes of transformation rather than the endpoints or milestones transformation produces. The focus on microdevelopment, or the processes of change in abilities, knowledge, and understanding during short time spans (Granott & Parziale, 2002), of occupational form and meaning allows for an understanding of *how* occupations change, not just *what* changes. Studies of microdevelopment necessitate data collection during periods of rapid change. For this reason, I chose to observe in a toddler classroom as the mealtime behavior of children between one and two undergoes a vast transformation in that year. Further, this allowed me to make simultaneous observations of multiple children at the same time as well as interactions between children.

Mealtime shared between peers provided an opportunity to examine the interpersonal forces that transform occupational form and meaning for these children. When looking at microdevelopment through the lens of the PTO model it is essential that observations occur within the natural context allowing the examination of the dynamic relationship of these forces.

Participants

I used a convenience sample for this study; children were selected by being in the toddler classroom in this particular childcare facility. Regulations limited this classroom to six children: 13 to 24 months old. I chose to observe all of the children

in the classroom as the presence of each child affected the construction of meaning and the flow of mealtime.

Table 1 presents the age of each child and their enrollment status (and pseudonym) at the start of data collection. I observed eight children over the course of data collection. One child, Jack, transitioned to an older classroom three weeks into data collection, his space was split between two children (one child came in the beginning of the week the other at the end). I included both of these children in my observations.

Table 1:
Age and Sex of Child Participants

Name	Sex	Age	Enrollment Status
Jack	Male	23 months	Full time- exited in March
Madison	Female	21 months	Full time
Melanie	Female	21 months	Full time
Caleb	Male	20 months	Full time
Sandra	Female	17 months	Full time
Gary	Male	14 months	Part time
June	Female	14 months	Part time
Abigail	Female	14 months	Full time

I included the two classroom teachers in my observations as research participants.

The main teacher in the classroom, Amy, has been teaching for 12 years and has been at this particular center for two years. She has worked with various age groups

from infants to school age. The assistant, Christie, floated between classrooms helping when a teacher needed assistance. Christie had worked at the center for one year at the start of data collection. Eight years ago, she spent two years teaching infants and toddlers. Throughout my data collection, Amy and Christie engaged socially with the children, addressed their needs, and monitored and shaped their mealtime behavior. Although I did not interview them, they became sources of information about the children both indirectly (comments to each other) or directly (comments to me).

Procedures

This study was part of a larger program of studies on the development of occupation given approval by the University of North Carolina Institutional Review Board. I contacted a local childcare center and received permission from the director, and informed consent from the teachers and parents to observe mealtimes in the toddler classroom. Observations of breakfast and lunch occurred approximately three times per week for twelve weeks. During meals, I sat on the floor within three or four feet of the table where the toddlers ate. All children sat at the table; this childcare facility did not use high chairs for this age group. Due to limited space, I was unable to change my position in the classroom. However, participants did not have assigned seats, and children rotated through the easily viewable seats. I recorded notes using a laptop. I began my notes when the children came in from recess and began the pre-meal routine of washing hands and putting on bibs and ended when the last child got up from the table. Following

observations, I read my notes, completing fragmented thoughts and adding comments and ideas in parenthesis.

I desired rich contextual notes that required my presence and full attention. Taking notes requires the researcher to attend to what is going on (Graue & Walsh, 1998). Observations of the entire classroom allowed me to capture the subtleties of the situation such as temperature, smells, and quiet sounds that may affect children's experience of what is going on.

I attempted to be as inconspicuous as possible when I was in the classroom observing. I would not initiate interactions with the children however if they initiated interactions with me I would reciprocate. The attention paid to me peaked in the beginning of my observations, eventually, the children greeted me and said goodbye, but I felt that I was neither a distraction nor a consideration during mealtime occupations. Although my presence seemed to fade to the background, the laptop interested the children when they came into the classroom or finished eating and got up from the table. I allowed the children to look at the computer but if they attempted to touch the computer, I asked them not to. If they persisted, I closed the computer. My observation notes include instances where I felt my presence changed the flow of mealtime or became a focus or distraction.

Considerations

In this type of study, the observer becomes part of the observed. To enhance the story qualitative research "tells" it is imperative to address our subjectivity. Primeau (2003) discussed the practice of reflexivity to examine how our selves, ideas, and interests affect our interpretation of events as well as how our presence

and actions change the situation. The phenomenological method calls for reflection on and identification of assumptions that will guide analysis (Giorgi, 1997). Before beginning observations, I recorded my assumptions (about occupational development, the occupations of mealtime, and the experience and expression of meaning) in a file that I returned to and added to throughout data collection and analysis. Beyond my assumptions, these memos included anecdotes from my past, reflections on articles I was reading, and day-to-day experiences that were pertinent to the study.

This reflection on my assumptions influenced what I observed. Through my experiences with mealtime and my knowledge of the occupations of mealtime, I defined the parameters of what I would observe. For the purposes of this study mealtime included the routines related to preparing for the meal (specifically, washing hands, putting on bibs, and taking a place at the table), eating (both finger feeding and eating using a utensil), social interaction (initiating and responding to social gestures, smiling, and gazing), non-feeding actions on food and mealtime objects, and participation in end of meal routines (termination of the meal, taking the cup to the sink, washing hands, and going to their mat for naptime).

Classroom Context

A church housed the childcare center and provided the private program as part of its outreach ministry. However, it was a non-denominational program with no religious rituals or practices embedded in the school day.

The center served 41 children staffed with 8 teachers and a number of volunteers. A number of the children qualified for subsidized childcare tuition. The

center strived for racial, religious, and socioeconomic diversity. The program's stated mission was to provide quality childcare and age appropriate education.

Data Analysis

Data analysis proceeded using a phenomenological method for scientific analysis of data put forth by Giorgi (1997). I chose Giorgi's method because of his statement that interview data was not the only type of data that could be used in this type of analysis. I felt this method was well suited to my observational data. This method includes five concrete steps: collection of data (described under procedures), reading of data, breaking the data into parts, a discipline specific organization and expression of data, and a synthesis of data for presentation to the scholarly community.

Reading of data.

Giorgi (1997) asserts that the reading of data should be made explicit even if it seems obvious. The goal of this reading is to get a "global sense" (p. 2) of the data, not trying to elicit themes. I read the data multiple times in order to gain this sense, resisting the inclination to categorize and organize the data.

Breaking data into parts.

Bracketing is part of the phenomenological reduction; it temporarily puts aside knowledge and past experience with the object in question (Giorgi, 1997). After familiarizing myself with the data, I reviewed my reflections on my own history: my personal experiences with mealtime as an adult and my memories of childhood mealtimes, my experiences with children and food, and my assumptions about meanings associated with mealtime. The goal was not eliminating bias, rather, it

was increasing awareness of my history and how my history affects my analysis. The recognition of these events in my history informs my analysis, the reflection can be “a rich source of information and understanding” (Dickie, 1997, p. 103). The assumptions I identified included views on occupation and development that were shaped by the curriculum of my occupational therapy program. These views were reflected in my chosen definitions of occupation and occupational meaning (presented in Appendix 1), as well as the model of development I chose to examine. At the time of data collection, I had limited clinical experience with children, so my assumptions came from academic readings, my childhood experiences, and my experiences with children in my family. I grew up in a house where playing with food was not acceptable behavior and my parents valued finishing everything on the plate. During data analysis, I was a caregiver for two nieces and a nephew who were labeled “picky” eaters. Through that experience, it became clear to me that the values I grew up with affected my actions and feelings during meals with these children. I needed to put aside these “caregiver” meanings in order to explore the experienced meaning of toddlers. My awareness of these values allowed me to identify instances where they might have affected my analysis of data.

With these assumptions and experiences bracketed I began to go through my data; breaking it down into meaning units (Giorgi, 1997). I began with a single day of data, breaking it down into paragraphs, and then numbering meaning units usually consisting of two to three sentences.

A meaning unit consisted of a situation where a participant communicated an experience of meaning. Meaning was inferred through toddlers’ affective

expressions and communicative acts such as pointing, facial expression, verbalizations, imitation, stopping of movement, and looking. Further, I inferred a stop in the flow of activity or an expression of surprise or frustration as an indication of a change in significance or an experience of momentary meaninglessness (Hasselkus, 2002). This type of action (or lack of action) provides evidence for an underlying expectation of the opportunities for action or meaning in an activity.

Organization and expression.

In the phenomenological method an examination and redescription follows the establishing of meaning units (Giorgi, 1997). Following each paragraph, I included description and analysis of specified meanings. I kept these meaning units and paragraphs in the context of the observed day as I felt that meaning is inseparable from context and thus informed the analysis. An occupational science perspective, focused on aspects of meaning of the activity that support participation in mealtime, provided the basis for the redescription and analysis of the meaning of the occupation at a given point in time and over a period of time. Periodically, I shared data, description, and analysis with Dr. Ruth Humphry and Megan Belasco to confirm the validity of my analysis.

Synthesis of data.

As I discovered reoccurring characteristics of experiences of meaning, I began to take these emerging meanings and their variations and attempt to synthesize them into a structure (Giorgi, 1997), referring back to the original data as necessary. Each structure represents a meaning or experience that emerged as an essence of the occupations of mealtime for toddlers. Following the description of a

structure, I attempted to interpret the effect of the meaning on occupational participation and synthesize the discovered aspects of the structure with literature pertaining to development of mealtime skills, experiences of meaning, and interpersonal aspects of occupation. The purpose of this synthesis was twofold: to support the validity of my analysis (Wolcott, 1994) and to use my analysis to consider the contribution of experience of meaning to previous work relating to toddlers and mealtime.

CHAPTER IV: Results

Through the data analysis process the appearance of the phenomenon “mealtime,” as experienced by toddlers, emerged. This appearance is comprised of the five essences (in this case, the meanings) of mealtime (presented in table 2).

Table 2:

Five Meanings of Mealtime for Toddlers

Identified Meaning	Definition
Satiation of hunger	The sensation of a reduction of physiological needs through eating and drinking.
Enjoyment	Pleasure experienced through the sensory aspects of food: specifically through taste and the physical properties of food.
Adults as guides	A significance in the relationship with adults. A sense that adults know how things should be done. Toddlers seek confirmation of “grown up” forms of participation and expression.
Being similar	Toddler’s awareness of and connection to peers. An experience of cohesiveness between peers through shared and co created mealtime activity.
Violation of expectations	A significance in the expected outcome of an activity. When aspects of the activity challenge this expected outcome, toddlers experience discomfort and work to match their perception of “successful” performance.

There are three main sections in this chapter. In the first section, I describe the identified significance experienced by toddlers and offer an interpretation of how that meaning supports occupational engagement. Next, I provide evidence that the meanings could emerge from a single developmental process, learning to use a spoon. Finally, following these results I provide evidence that support multiple layers

of meaning shaping actions and the temporal nature of meaning changing the form of engagement in mealtime. Throughout these sections, “toddler” and “child” refer to participants in this study. To avoid repetitiveness I use meaning, experience, and significance interchangeably as well.

Satiation of Hunger

Generally, people eat to satisfy hunger. Not surprisingly, this characteristic is present in the mealtime experience of toddlers. Satiation of hunger is the reduction of physiological needs through eating and drinking. This meaning is consistent with Spitzer’s (2002) conceptualization of meaning as it is an experience with sensory significance.

The experience of meals as a way to satiate hunger is apparent when this opportunity is not present. In the evidence below the lunch cart was late. The teacher attempted to engage the children in singing songs with the goal of keeping them entertained until the food arrived. Singing songs before lunch was an activity that the children often enjoyed, however, on this day a particularly strong experience of hunger affected participation in the songs.

Abigail is sucking her thumb, looking out the door. Everyone claps after the song, except for Gary and Abigail. Gary is watching the teacher intently, his mouth is moving. Gary starts to get upset. He begins whining. Amy says, "Let’s sing one more song."

In this example, the experienced meaning disrupted participation. The children experienced a desire to satiate hunger; however, the opportunity to meet the need was not available. Abigail was unengaged with the activity at the table; she used a self-calming strategy while looking out the door (where the food usually comes in) anticipating the arrival of food. Gary, the newest child in the classroom,

attempted to gain Amy's attention. When this did not work he expressed this need by becoming upset. Amy tried to provide another opportunity for engagement, but the group's participation decreased because this occupation did not address their experienced need.

Experiencing physiological needs and acting to meet these needs underlies many of the activities of mealtime. Although it is impossible to observe hunger in toddlers, the meaning of future satiation hunger was evident in the anticipation of food and the enthusiastic consumption of food when first presented.

The lunch cart arrives outside of the room. Each child receives a plate of food and a metal spoon. Madison picks up her spoon, uses it for the meatloaf, she takes a bite then drops the spoon and continues eating with her fingers. June is eating her bread. Melanie is using her fingers to eat mashed potatoes. Caleb is eating his bread. Jeffrey picks up his bread and takes a bite. Amy tries to involve the kids with language by saying "What is Ms. Amy pouring?" Melanie looks up and says "milk." The rest of the children do not look up, they continue to eat.

In this example, the children ate to satiate hunger. Children focused on their plates; there was no observable engagement between toddlers. The children in this classroom often sought opportunities to engage with the teacher. However, in this example, most of the toddlers ignored the social invitation from Amy, as the experience of satiating hunger was paramount.

The experience of hunger supports participation by providing a reason to engage in eating. In the first example above, the situation does not support the toddler's ability to address this need. These children experienced meaninglessness (Hasselkus, 2002) that inhibited participation in the current occupation. From hunger and the opportunity to eat, arose the meaning of meeting needs through

engagement in feeding. When given appropriate opportunities, this experience of meaning supported toddlers' engagement in feeding.

While the experience of satiating hunger supported engagement in feeding, it temporarily limited other forms of engagement during meals, as illustrated in the second example. Although the toddlers likely experienced other concurrent meanings, the experience of satiating hunger was primary resulting in focused engagement with eating. These findings allude to the layered and temporal aspects of meaning discussed in the final section of this chapter.

Enjoyment

The presence of food at meals made the experience generally pleasurable. Meals were often a time of playfulness and expressions of happiness and enjoyment were common. The sensory significance experienced through enjoyment of the taste and physical properties of food necessitates the consideration of enjoyment as a meaning that supported engagement in mealtime occupations.

In most cases, toddlers ate food without much reaction at all; however, there were occasions when food seemed particularly enjoyable. Eating was not only a way to satiate hunger for these toddlers it was sometimes enjoyable. I observed many situations where children tasted food and spit it out or made a disgusted face. Toddlers generally passed on these foods in favor of foods that clearly tasted better to them.

On one day of observations, toddlers received toast and jelly. The enthusiastic and selective consumption of jelly in the evidence below emphasizes the enjoyment of a particular food.

Sandra had not started to eat her toast before Amy dabbed a spoon full of grape jelly on it. She is now licking the jelly off her toast; she puts the bread down, sticks her finger in the jelly and licks her finger. Madison grabs a gob of jelly off her toast, and puts it in her mouth. Next, she grabs a gob off the napkin and puts that in her mouth.

Bread was usually a preferred food; however, both girls disregarded the bread. Sandra and Madison consumed an especially enjoyable food over the other available foods. Enjoyment of taste, intertwined with the activity of eating, became the primary experience of meaning.

Beyond taste, toddlers experienced joy in exploring other sensory aspects of food. To these toddlers, solid food was a relatively new material with unexplored properties. Toddlers poked, touched, splattered, and squished the food on their plate. This type of exploration often elicited joy and pleasure. In this example, Sandra discovered that spaghetti was not only tasty but provided a physical experience that is pleasurable.

Sandra has spaghetti sauce and meat on her hands. She begins rubbing her hands together. She seems to be focused on this movement, she has a slight smile and she is watching her hands. She puts both hands on her plate, begins squishing the noodles in her hands. She stops and begins sucking on her fingers.

Sandra focused completely on the sensory experience of the spaghetti. She felt the texture of the spaghetti and sauce, watched it as she rubbed it between her hands, and her smile expressed her enjoyment of the activity. After manipulating the food in different ways, she tasted it.

Sensory enjoyment of the physical aspects of food supported and transformed participation in mealtime. Experiences of pleasure, whether through taste or exploration, invited continued activity and may have extended toddlers'

participation. The influence of enjoyment of taste on feeding, as illustrated in the jelly example, is clear and literature related to interventions for feeding difficulties recognize the importance of pleasant taste to motivate engagement (Case-Smith & Humphry, 2005). However, the enjoyment of exploration as a support to participation is not recognized in the literature. Studies of feeding difficulties label the exploration and enjoyment of sensory aspects of food as playing with food (Sanders et al., 1993) and consider it disruptive mealtime behavior. For Sandra, exploration of food did not inhibit consumption it preceded consumption. In this particular childcare, the zone of free movement (Valsiner, 1997) allowed for some exploration of food by toddlers, that is, the caregivers did not strictly prohibit this behavior. However, given the labeling of this behavior as disruptive in some accounts (Sanders et al., 1993), the acceptance of this behavior is not widespread.

When adults feed infants and young children, the children are distanced from the food. Their sole means of exploration is through taste and an exploration of texture with their mouths. Proximity to food invited play and exploration; and the presence of this enjoyable occupation at mealtime may extend and enhance participation in mealtime.

Adults as Guides

Mealtime was not just a time of sensory experiences. Toddlers actively pursued experience with “grown up” routines and practices. They experienced social significance in doing with adults when they used language to gain information about occupation and objects. This experience of meaning is not consistent with Spitzer’s (2002) definition as it goes beyond a subjective significance and becomes

a shared significance in the activity. As children engage with adults, shared meaning emerges through confirmation and encouragement of mealtime behaviors.

“Melanie is eating her biscuit; she holds it up to Amy and says “biscuit.” Amy says, “Yes, Melanie that’s a biscuit.” Melanie smiles and continues to eat.” Melanie holds up the item to Amy, a showing gesture used to draw attention to the object (Crais et al., 2004); however, she also names the item. For Melanie, the meaning of the adult is one who understands and can verify language, thus, she directs her verbalizations towards the teacher.

Caregivers often became encouragers and confirmers. These toddlers had a basic range of verbalizations and behaviors that were standard for mealtime. When they ventured beyond this range, they generally did so while engaged with a caregiver. Caregivers were not seen as similar to them like their peers were, rather they were viewed as more knowledgeable others.

“Madison says ‘hot’ looking at Amy. Melanie is blowing on her chicken; she looks up at Amy. Amy praises her ‘That’s right, we blow on food when it’s hot.’” Melanie has connected an experience of hot food with the action of blowing on food. Melanie attempted to build on to Madison’s statement and then looked to Amy for confirmation that it was the correct behavior.

Through the experience of adults as guides, both examples illustrated children practicing “grown up” behaviors: and seeking guidance from adults. This experienced meaning supported the transformation of occupation in two ways. First, this type of social engagement was closer to the appearance of adult meals, where interaction with other mealtime participants is predominately verbal. Although the

goal of the expressions was not solely social, the pairing of mealtime and verbal relating mimicked the adult form of occupation. Second, when toddlers went outside of their typical patterns of expression and behavior they broadened their range of occupations.

Rogoff (2003) discussed children's active pursuit of cultural experience. They "make large contributions to their own socialization, assisted by other people's efforts to support their growing understanding" (p. 287). The examples in the current study are consistent with the concept of guided participation. Through doing with adults, children created and transformed the structure of mealtime; they gained knowledge and practiced actions and gestures that changed the toddlers' behaviors within meals over a period of time.

Being Similar

A characteristic of mealtime in childcare settings that may differ from mealtimes at home is the presence of multiple peers and caregivers that are not relatives. Others are present at all times during these meals and there is shared sense of similarity created through doing activities together. Like the meaning of adults as guides, this significance is shared, and requires an adaptation of Spitzer's (2003) definition of meaning.

Toddlers listen to and watch each other closely. Peers' effort in activities invites others to want to do the same thing. When doing activities together, toddlers achieved a connectedness and a sense of similarity. Further, peers became audiences and partners for social gestures and actions. Toddlers did not want to "miss out" on something enjoyable. When they experienced a connection to their

peers and their peers requested something or refused something, they often acted similarly.

Ordinary actions, such as drinking milk, often caught on in the group. In this classroom, where verbal communication was still sparse, engaging in the same activity expressed a meaning of being similar and connected to peers.

Jack holds his cup of milk up to Amy. She says, "Would you like more milk please?" Jack nods his head and hands the cup to Amy. Abigail picks up her cup in one hand. Melanie looks at Abigail and picks up her milk to drink. Sandra notices and begins to drink her milk. When Jack gets his cup back from Amy, he begins drinking.

In this example, drinking milk becomes the focus in a shared act. The drinking in this example was not frenzied; it was not intended to rush in order to get more. There was an awareness of the others engaging in similar action. The experience of similarity both motivated and was motivated by this coordinated action.

Experiences of similarity motivated toddlers to do like their peers. The following example was on a day when the children were having toast and jelly for breakfast. Save for one child, the toddlers seemed to have a positive experience and are enjoying the jelly. For Caleb the experience of the jelly was less positive; however, throughout the meal he periodically watched other children enthusiastically consuming the jelly.

Caleb tips his toast so the jelly falls off, part of it lands in the napkin, and part of the jelly has stuck to his hand. He uses his other hand to pick up the gob of jelly off his right and he puts it in his mouth. He makes a face that looks like he does not like it, but he proceeds to pick up the gob that fell on his napkin and put it in his mouth. Caleb hurries to finish his bread and says more.

Despite an apparent distaste for the texture and taste of the jelly, Caleb hurries to ask for more. His experience of previous similarity and his desire to

continue this similarity motivated him to act. This overcoming of individual preferences in favor of doing like the rest of the participants speaks to the powerful influence of others during a meal.

The proximity to peers permitted socially interactive routines. Toddlers created social meaning and a sense of cohesiveness not only through sharing experiences, like drinking milk, but also through the creation of unique social rituals. Bibs were the focus of a unique ritual in this classroom.

Amy says, "Where does our bib go?" Caleb, Abigail, Madison and Melanie put their bibs on their heads. They look around and smile at each other. Amy says, 'Bibs don't go on our heads, they go on our...' Caleb, Madison, and Melanie look at each other then to Amy and say "Fronts!"

I witnessed this ritual throughout my observations. Through this ritual, the donning the bib took on a symbolic meaning that overshadowed its functional meaning. It became a social focus and an object with a funny use: an object used incorrectly before wearing it correctly. Highlighting the "wrong" use of the object underscored the "correct" use. This ritual was dependent on a comfort with the functional use of bibs; by intentionally using the object incorrectly, toddlers shared their perception of the functional meaning of the object.

The sense of similarity experienced through shared activity supported participation in the occupations of mealtime. In the milk-drinking example, the children achieved intersubjectivity and significance in the sharing of the activity that went beyond the physical act of drinking milk. Toddlers take cues from each other and experiences of cohesiveness extended and transformed mealtime behaviors. Hendy (2002) found that trained peer models increased acceptance of novel food in

preschool children. Similarly, Caleb experienced a desire to share in his peers' enjoyment and therefore consumed a non-preferred food. An awareness of, and interest in, peers draws toddlers into mealtime. The experience of similarity and social cohesiveness (illustrated in both the milk and the jelly examples), can increase the amount and variety of food consumed at a given meal and over time.

Creation of unique rituals grew out of and enhanced a sense of similarity. As stated before, this sense of similarity can motivate participation in occupation; however, this ritual transformed participation in another way. Much of the joy of this ritual came from the violation of the objects "rules." Violating the object's rules called attention to the object's intended purpose.

Children are social (Lawlor, 2003), and even very young infants create coordinated actions to relate socially (Selby & Bradley, 2003). Lokken (2000) discussed the use of objects in the social rituals of preschool children. The bib ritual, created through a sense of similarity among peers, supported participation by even the youngest members of the classroom. The rituals added a complexity to mealtime, reflecting the social element of mealtime that defines meals in the larger culture across the lifetime (Devault, 1991; Hannam, 1997).

Violation of Expectations

Meals occurred multiple times per day; however, instead of repetition making ordinary occurrences mundane and unnoticed, they contributed to a toddler's ideas about the outcome of an activity. When toddlers encountered difficulty achieving this outcome they experienced discomfort and worked to restore the expected outcome. The expectations of the inter-relationships of objects and the outcomes of activities,

as well as the discomfort experienced when these expectations are violated, characterize this experience of meaning; making it both personally symbolic and emotionally significant and therefore in line with Spitzer's (2003) definition of meaning. .

Although children are still learning about food, they do have expectations about what food is and what food does. In the following example, the disruption of expectation highlights what Abigail knows about food and her discomfort when it defies this expectation.

Abigail takes a bite of greens with her fingers. After putting them in her mouth, she notices that some greens have stuck to the back of her fingers. She makes a disgusted face that turns into an upset expression. Abigail pauses, wipes the greens on her bib and begins eating her pears; she no longer looks displeased.

Abigail communicated her surprise and displeasure; this says something about the expectations she associates with food. To her, food is ordinarily something that is acted upon; however, when food seems to "act" upon her, her situation definition (Wertsch, 1999) is challenged. This reaction seems to be inconsistent with the enjoyable sensory exploration of food. Children who did not seem to mind squishing food with their fingers expressed surprise or become upset when food sticks to them: there seems to be a distinct difference between acting on food and being a passive recipient of food's "actions." Abigail is participating in eating; her intention is to transport the greens to her mouth. She is not opposed to touching food as she is using her fingers to assist with feeding. However, the significance of food as inanimate is challenged when the food continues to touch her after she stopped touching the food.

In the next example, Sandra's comfort with the familiar relationship of plates, spoons, and food affects her actions. "Sandra picks up some egg that has fallen into her bib; she pauses and looks at the egg, then puts it on her plate to eat with her spoon." In this example, the most efficient means of eating would have been to pick the egg out of her bib and put it in her mouth. However, Sandra's expectation of the relationship between the plate, egg, and spoon compelled her to place the food on her plate and then eat it with her spoon.

Expectations about uses and relationships of objects support participation in more complex mealtime behaviors. Teachers structured mealtimes consistently over time; this "contemporary redundancy" (Super & Harkness, 2002, p. 271) included the continuity of objects. This continuity contributed to toddlers' situation definition (Wertsch, 1999): their expectations of inter-relationships of objects and expected outcomes of activity, in other words, what toddlers perceived as successful participation. Beyond continuity, the recalled experiences of shared participation with peers ("being similar") and adults ("adults as guides") contributed to their evolving situation definition.

Experiences that did not fit toddlers' situation definition caused discomfort and toddlers changed their actions to match their expectations and overcome or avoid discomfort. In Abigail's example, the food acted in a way that was not expected, she expressed visible discomfort before changing her actions to restore the expectations. Sandra's perception of the relationship between food plate and spoon contributed to her acting in a manner that matched her expectations.

Experienced Meanings in a Specific Occupation: Learning the Spoon

In order to further examine how the identified meanings transform the occupations of mealtime I discuss these meanings as related to learning how to use the spoon. Although the occupations of mealtime are not limited to utensil use, the scope and importance of this task, for this age group, lends itself to a focused examination.

The caregivers and administrators in this childcare facility expect children in this age group to begin using spoons. The presentations of spoons and spoon appropriate foods at every meal and the encouragement of teachers underscore this expectation.

Satiation of hunger.

The experience of hunger led to the most efficient means, available to the child at that time, of getting food into the body. At the beginning of meals when hunger levels were presumably high, children, especially the younger children, tended to finger feed. The following example, occurring just after the meal had been served, illustrates a compromise between the desire to use the spoon and the desire to address hunger quickly.

Madison holds the spoon in her left hand, she picks up macaroni with her right hand and puts it in her mouth. Madison then switches the spoon to her right hand; she loads the spoon with macaroni and takes it to her mouth. She then takes another bite with her fingers.

In this example, Madison experienced the meaning of the spoon as a way to get food to the mouth ultimately satiating hunger. However, the alternating between fingers and spoon illustrated a compromise in the meaning of the spoon: the spoon

was one way to get the food to her mouth, but it was not the only way that effectively matched Madison's current experience of what was meaningful about the activity. Using the spoon was personally motivating; however, Madison was also interested in quickly addressing hunger.

Enjoying.

The children experienced exploration with the spoon as enjoyable. "Madison is tapping her applesauce with her spoon. She smiles, visibly enjoying the splattering of the applesauce. Madison stops her action and scoops a bite of applesauce with her spoon." In this example, the spoon and applesauce provide a source of pleasure for Madison. Development of tool use has been conceptualized as the development of skilled motor patterns or the emergence of problem solving strategies to use in a customized way (Connolly & Dalgleish, 1989; Connolly & Dalgleish, 1993). These types of discussions do not recognize the joy in discovering the affordances of the spoon. Exploration of food with the spoon builds on the actions used when exploring food with the hands. Lockman (2000) discussed the skill that young children have with exploring surfaces and objects with their hands, however, when using tools children may discover that these same hand movements have different consequences. That is, exploration typically executed with the hands provides new experiences when performed with a tool used as an extension of the hand.

Adults as guides.

Toddlers desired to do an activity "right"; they perceived adults as knowing individuals and were sensitive to their feedback. When children engaged in behavior

that brought negative attention from a caregiver, they were quick to change their behavior. In the following example, an enjoyable ritual ended with an admonishment from the teacher.

Jack and Caleb begin banging their spoons on their chairs, they smile at each other. Madison begins to bang her spoon against the chair. They begin to bang the spoons on the plate. Sandra joins in. The boys stop banging just before the teacher says, “spoons are for eating” Sandra and Madison look at her and stop banging spoons; Sandra turns her attention to her plate and eats a bite of rice with her fingers.

Sandra and Madison immediately stopped the offending behavior, and Sandra switched her action to eating with her fingers, a behavior that has shared acceptance even though it was not a direct response to Amy’s correction (using the spoon for eating). Amy’s statement redefined the situation definition for Sandra and Madison, the resulting shared sense of meaning limited actions with a spoon that were beyond the manufacturer’s intended purpose.

Being similar.

The meaning of being similar to peers organized action with the spoon. When peers were using the spoon to feed themselves toddlers participated in a similar manner. In the next example, utensil use became a shared activity, inviting participation from even the youngest participant.

Amy says, “Show Gary how you use your spoon Caleb and Madison.” Melanie sees them eating with their spoons and begins to eat with her spoon. Gary picks up his spoon but continues to eat cereal with his left hand.

Amy cued the older children to use their spoon. The teacher recognized the social nature of the children and their desire to participate with and in the same way as other children. Melanie’s awareness of others’ actions motivated her to act

similarly. Gary desired to participate in this shared activity. His current capacities did not allow for the same type of participation, but this desire to share in the activity with others motivated him to engage with the spoon when he might not have otherwise.

Violation of expectations.

Children find significance in achieving an expected outcome of an activity.

The following example illustrates a creative solution to achieve this expectation.

Melanie is holding the spoon with her left hand; she is holding a noodle in that hand as well (not on spoon). She turns her hand so she can eat the noodle, but the spoon blocks her from doing this. She stops and switches the spoon to her other hand and then eats the noodle from her right hand.

Melanie's expectation about the activity, specifically the association between the spoon and eating, was observable through her insistence on holding it even when it got in the way. Holding the spoon was significant and was a part of her perception of "successful" self-feeding. Had holding the spoon been optional in Melanie's situation definition, she would have put it down when it impeded eating rather than switching it to her other hand. Instead, Melanie adapted her behavior to match her perception, therefore avoiding the discomfort of violated expectations.

The Nature of Children's Experiences of Occupational Meaning

Through data analysis, I identified and described types of meaning that children experience when engaged in the occupation of mealtime. However, I also discovered other aspects of the nature of occupational meaning. That is, the layering of occupational meanings and the temporal organization of occupational meaning over the course of the meal.

The five identified meanings were explored and discussed separately, however, it is important to note that toddlers experience combinations of these meanings simultaneously. The conceptualization of meanings as layered allows for the simultaneous experiences of meaning with each experience having various amounts of connection with intentional behavior. That is, the outermost layer of meaning is most connected to the observed behavior at that moment. Layers of meaning that are farther below the surface, that is, meanings that are less primary, have less observable effects. These layers shift and reorganize as the toddler's situation definition changes. In the following example, June experiences multiple layers of meaning at the end of a meal.

Abigail is done; she scoots back her chair and gets up to walk over to the sink. June is watching her while eating macaroni. She tries to get up while she is still eating with her right hand. Amy asks June to stay in her seat until her turn. June sits and continues eating macaroni.

The meaning of satiation of hunger seemed to fade into the background as June experienced other significances in the situation. June's sense of similarity with Abigail organized June's action to end the meal, while her comfort with the form of the end of mealtime routine shaped her behavior. However, Amy's requests redefined June's situation definition and June experienced the meaning of eating to satisfy her hunger.

Occupational meaning is complex, at any given time toddlers were likely experiencing multiple layers of meaning. One meaning appeared to be primary however; this did not prohibit other experiences. Rather than switching from one meaning to another, children experiences were fluid. Eating with a spoon lent itself

to multiple layers of meaning; a child was satiating hunger, being like their peers, and experiencing familiarity with how a spoon was related to food.

Meaning during mealtimes tended to have a temporal organization. When meals were first presented, the toddler's dominant meaning was the satiation of hunger; this resulted in the focused consumption of food. As the meal continued, the other meanings began to appear more frequently. The following example presents data from both the beginning and the end of the meal.

Madison is using her spoon for the macaroni. She is switching between using her spoon and using her hand to take bites. Melanie starts to bang her spoon on plate. A few moments go by, Melanie looks at Madison, but Madison does not look back.

Towards the end of the meal, Madison is eating fruit. She starts to scoop some beans with her spoon, she stops and begins hitting her green beans with her spoon, laughing, She is now banging her spoon on her plate, looking around at the other children.

In the first scenario Madison focused on eating, the significance of this occupation is the satiation of hunger. Although the opportunity for shared occupation was available, her experience remained focused on eating. In the second scenario, the experience includes satiation of hunger but has expanded to include enjoyment and a desire to share occupation. Her experiences of meaning transformed her behavior over the course of the meal: at first, focused eating, later, more socially directed behavior.

CHAPTER V: Discussion

To date, most research on mealtime behaviors has focused on elements of activity and discrete skills neglecting to consider the activity as a whole. The Processes Transforming Occupation (PTO) model argues that capacities and skills emerge through meaningful use: through a child's engagement in occupation. This study was unique in its focus on toddlers' experienced meanings of mealtime. The results enhanced our understanding of how occupation develops, as changes in meaning shape behavior. Using a phenomenological method, I discovered five meanings that contributed to participation in mealtime; "satiation of hunger," "enjoyment," "adults as guides," "being similar," and "violation of expectations." The results of this study further illustrated the power of these meanings to support and transform engagement by considering how they relate to one aspect of meals: learning to use a spoon. Finally, I provided evidence illustrating the layered nature of children's occupational meaning and how the temporal organization of these meanings transformed engagement within a meal.

Beyond describing these toddlers' experiences of meaning, this study examined how the identified meanings fit within the forces of change put forth by the PTO model (Humphry, 2005). I consider the social cultural cluster, intrapersonal cluster, and interpersonal cluster individually by relating identified meanings to changes in occupation. Following this discussion, I suggest areas for further study related to my findings. Finally, I identify limitations of this study.

Sociocultural Cluster

My findings regarding the meanings experienced by toddlers in this childcare center appear congruent with the attempts by the caregiver to structure and support mealtime behaviors. These toddlers found meaning in eating. The investment of communities and the practices of caregivers influenced the toddlers' experience of meaning and the transformation of mealtime occupations. This influence is executed through both the structuring of mealtime and through the presence of culture for children (Mouritsen, 2002). The caregivers in this childcare center provided culturally prescribed physical materials (child size spoons, plates, bibs, and cups) that provided opportunities to satiate hunger. The children's desire to satiate hunger made the objects made by their community relevant. That is, the experience of satiation of hunger was necessary for these sociocultural forces to shape behavior.

This study also found that these toddlers experienced adults as guides; they perceived that adults have language and instrumental knowledge about the activity and the children often sought this knowledge. The sociocultural cluster of the PTO model acknowledges the caregiver's role in providing opportunities and shaping behavior, however, this study elaborates on this idea by providing evidence that these roles are executed through shared occupations and experiences of shared meaning.

Caregiving practices shaped the expectations that influenced the experienced meaning of "violation of expectations." The experience of adults as guides, the consistent presentation of objects at meals, and the range of accepted and restricted

behaviors contributed to the toddlers' evolving situation definitions. These situation definitions included the toddlers' perceptions of successful participation and reflected cultural practices that went beyond the functions and affordances of objects.

Intrapersonal Cluster

The idea that changing experiences of meaning bring the child to reorganize his or her capacities to do, or experience, what is now significant about the activity is the focus of the intrapersonal cluster of the PTO model.

Toddlers in this childcare facility tried to match their perceptions of successful participation. As attempts were blocked or frustrated, these toddlers appeared to work harder to achieve this expected outcome. Thus, the actions directed to achieve the outcome and overcome discomfort brought about a reorganization of capacities. As situation definitions evolved so did expected outcomes, resulting in the intentional use of capacities in different ways to meet their goals.

The final section of the results chapter described how layers of meaning and the temporal organization of meaning throughout mealtime consistently transformed the form of the occupation. Using the example of satiation of hunger, this process is apparent. At the beginning of meals when hunger levels were presumably at their highest, these toddlers engaged in the most efficient means of satiating their hunger. As hunger decreased, other layers of meaning became primary (enjoyable exploration, shared meaning through adult guidance, or experiences of similarity and shared meaning with peers, and violation of expectations). Toddlers' capacities reorganized under these different experiences of meaning: rather than an intense desire to efficiently satiate hunger, their experience of meaning often turned to their

expectations of the spoon and its relationship to eating, which contributed to an intentional action on the spoon and a transformation of the occupation.

Interpersonal Cluster

Humphry and Wakeford (2006) discuss the negotiation of shared meaning through occupation. In shared occupation, these toddlers expressed their experiences of the situation through actions and facial expressions. Through the expression of their situation definitions and their perception of peers' definitions, toddlers coordinated their actions: achieving sense of shared meaning that was different from the original meaning of the activity. This study offers evidence that shared meaning contributed to participation in activities that are part of mealtime. Furthermore, the study identified the meaning, "being similar" which addresses the sense of cohesiveness and how the significance of similarity moved these children to engage in activities with their peers. Shared meaning was not solely an outcome of shared occupation; it was often the purpose of shared occupation. Although Lawlor's (2000) idea of children as socially occupied beings was based on child-adult interaction, this study illustrates social occupation occurred between these toddlers as well.

The identification of shared meaning in these toddlers' experiences of mealtime is congruent with the forces for change presented in the interpersonal cluster of the PTO model; however, this aspect of meaning required an adaptation to Spitzer's (2003) definition of occupational meaning, based on her study of children with autism. Her definition's emphasis on the individual's experience is consistent with the characteristics of the population she studied. This study of typically

developing children necessitated a consideration of the aspect of meaning that is significant by virtue of being larger than the individual's experience. When engaged in coordinated action the toddlers' experience was not limited to "me," it was an experience of "us;" supporting the idea that the focus of occupation on the individual experience is problematic as occupation typically extends beyond the individual (Dickie, Cutchin, & Humphry, 2006).

Implications for Future Research

The PTO model provides a framework for organizing and explaining transforming processes influencing occupational form and meaning. Although the three clusters of propositions are discussed separately for clarity, the results of this study suggest that future research on occupational meaning must consider them together. At any given moment, experienced meaning of occupation transcended the clusters. The complexity and layering of occupational meaning can be lost when a researcher attempts to delineate what "parts" are sociocultural, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. Although on a theoretical level the separation of these clusters is necessary to explicate the processes that transform occupational engagement, this type of separation would limit observational investigations.

As previously discussed, the meaning of enjoyment from the physical properties of food found here has been conceptualized by other authors as "playing with food;" a disruptive behavior. The fact that this meaning arose here and may not be universal suggests this action may be outside of the zones of free movement created by some caregivers. A future study might examine how adaptations of the sociocultural niche may extend or limit participation in occupation.

This study provides a starting point for understanding the experiences of occupational meaning for very young children. Descriptions of identified meanings (satiating hunger, enjoyment, adults as guides, being similar, and avoiding discomfort) are specific to the context of mealtime occupations in this particular childcare center. Subsequent studies of other childhood occupations and contexts (for example, home versus daycare) would be useful in expanding these identified meanings and discovering other experienced meanings that motivate and support occupational participation.

This study examined the experienced meanings of one small group of toddlers therefore; they cannot be generalized to all toddlers. More studies of this phenomenon would increase generalizability.

Limitations of the Study

As an exploratory study of children's occupational meaning, this study examined and described broad experiences of occupational meaning that contributed to occupation. Occupational meaning is complex and layered; however, toddlers were expressing their primary experience of meaning at that moment in time. The experience of concurrent meanings is almost impossible to observe when relying on overt expressions of meaning. In addition, It is likely that toddlers do not express all meanings overtly; given the distance and the relative inexperience of the researcher, more subtle expressions of meaning may have been overlooked.

My descriptions of experiences of meaning illustrated how meaning transformed engagement in the moment; however, I did not address the change in behavior over time. Observational data focused on expressions of meaning and did

not include enough detailed information to make valid interpretations about changes in performance over time. Although observations of the entire class provided a contextuality that allowed me to examine the complexity of occupational meaning it limited my ability to see specific changes over time. Detailed case studies focusing on one or two children would be more suited for this purpose.

Conclusion

Beyond providing a starting point for understanding the experiences of occupational meaning for very young children, results of this study illustrate the complexity of occupational meaning and the influence of these meanings on participation. The findings highlight the joy of exploration but also suggest an appreciation of the ordinary and expected aspects of occupation. These toddlers experience significance in being similar that supported participation in shared activities, going beyond mere imitation. With further study, these results may have implications for the practice of occupational therapy.

This study successfully used a phenomenological approach to understand the essences of these children's experiences of meaning during mealtime. By moving the focus of children's mealtime beyond disorder or discrete skills, this study celebrates the complexity of childhood occupations; suggesting that the mealtime experience for toddlers is, indeed, more than meets the mouth.

Appendix:

Definition of Key Concepts

Concept	Definition
Occupation	A set of actions related to each other by physical movements, space, materials or function that are personally significant to the individual performing them (Spitzer, 2003).
Occupational Meaning	“The subjective significance of an activity that may be sensory/felt, emotional, personally symbolic, or socially symbolic. The meaning may be experienced as positive, negative, or mixed” (Spitzer, 2003, p. 73)
Intentionality	The experience of, and direction of behavior toward, the environment (Zeedyk, 1996). Intentionality emerges from the person-environment unit.
Co-regulation	“A social process by which individuals dynamically alter their actions with respect to the ongoing and anticipated actions of their partners” (Fogel, 1993, p. 12).
Framing	Repeatable patterns and rules that guide actions involved individuals involved in an activity (Fogel, 1993)
Intersubjective perception of meaning	A shared sense of meaning between partners in an occupation, that is different than the individual meaning a participant brings to the occupation (Humphry & Wakeford, 2006). This meaning is achieved through co-regulation, framing, and a coordination of actions in occupation.

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