



Journal of Occupational Science

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rocc20>

More than a cup of tea: Meaning construction in an everyday occupation

Deborah Hannam^a

^a Senior Occupational Therapist for Portsmouth NHS Healthcare Trust , Community mental health , 10 Cheviot Green, Warsash , Hampshire , SO319BT , United Kingdom
Phone: 441489579043 Fax: 441489579043 E-mail:

To cite this article: Deborah Hannam (1997) More than a cup of tea: Meaning construction in an everyday occupation, Journal of Occupational Science, 4:2, 69-73, DOI: [10.1080/14427591.1997.9686423](https://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.1997.9686423)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14427591.1997.9686423>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

More Than a Cup of Tea: Meaning Construction in an Everyday Occupation

Deborah Hannam

Abstract

The objective world is given meaning through activity and language. The process of creating meaning takes place throughout life and is shaped by our social and cultural environment. Yet little is known about the role of everyday activity in the construction and maintenance of meaning. The paper describes a small scale, qualitative study designed to increase knowledge about meaning construction in one such occupation: tea-drinking. There were two aims: firstly to identify the elements of making and drinking tea which elicited meaning and secondly, to discover whether elicited meaning was shared or unique to each individual. Drinking tea during semi-structured interviews with five women provided a 'here and now' focus which linked language and activity. Six shared categories of meaning emerged. These were meaning through reasons for tea-drinking, the senses, objects used, the social context, and changes in lifestyle. Further study of other everyday activities, and amongst other social and cultural groups is recommended.

Keywords

Tea Making and Drinking
Everyday Activity
Meaning
Culture

Deborah Hannam is currently working as a Senior Occupational Therapist for Portsmouth NHS Healthcare Trust in community mental health. This article is based on work she completed for the MSc in Advanced Occupational Therapy at St Loyes's School of Occupational Therapy, Exeter in 1994.

Deborah Hannam
Senior Occupational Therapist
10 Cheviot Green
Warsash, Hampshire
SO31 9BT
United Kingdom

Tele/Fax: 44 1489 579043
E-mail: exxdhh@bath.ac.uk

Tea drinking is an everyday activity in the United Kingdom as elsewhere in the world. The ritual of tea-making and drinking takes different forms. It is multi-dimensional and contains many constituent elements. Each element has the potential to create and maintain meaning. At special occasions and important family gatherings the most valued porcelain china tea service may be brought out. However it has become more commonplace to put a tea bag in a mug, pour on the boiling water, and drink it between tasks in a busy day. The importance of this occupation may appear to have diminished as it has been reduced to a routine activity. Outward appearances may, however, hide layers of more intricate personal meanings gathered and absorbed over time. This paper describes a small scale qualitative investigation to gain a fuller understanding of this familiar occupation and to "...comprehend the experience of engagement in it"¹. The cultural world is described as a 'tool-kit' for action, which gives meaning to action situating underlying intentional states in an interpretative system². Occupational science supports the study of individuals in interaction with their environments rather than as decontextualised beings.

Vygotsky highlighted the importance of the interaction between the individual and the objective world³. Activity and language play a dynamic role as mediators or tools in this process. Awareness that everything we do contains elements of our shared social reality is evident in the language we use. It is also a dynamic element in the how, where, and when of all our occupations. There is no fixed biological way of being human. Our nature is formed by our socio-cultural setting. The human infant absorbs a world which is mediated through the significant other, so that the developing self should be seen in its social context⁴. The possibility of multiple meanings was explored while making and drinking tea.

Understanding Meaning

The research aim was to identify aspects of tea-making which create and maintain meaning. The concept of meaning is somewhat ephemeral and problematic. Definition is shaped by the discipline of the individual doing the defining. It depends upon on their knowledge base and techniques⁵. The sociologist, philosopher, craftsperson, and computer programmer will understand the concept in a way which reflects their particular orientation to the world. The meaning ascribed to making a cup of tea is influenced by my occupational therapy orientation within which assessing an individual's ability to make a cup of

tea is a common tool for evaluating readiness for safe discharge or capability for independent living.

This study was designed to elicit meanings of tea making for the five women who agreed to participate. Meaning was defined as everything communicated during an observation and semi-structured interview about tea-making. There were two aims: firstly to identify the elements which elicited meaning and then to discover whether these meanings were shared or unique to each person. The intention was to encourage sharing of thoughts and feelings about tea drinking in a relaxed, open manner. Participants were asked to prepare and drink tea with me. This brought together the elements of language and activity in a naturalistic, spontaneous way.

A Small, Select Sample

The group of five women formed a small but unrepresentative sample. They fitted the purpose of this preliminary study which was to obtain a baseline of meaning-making phenomena within an everyday activity. They volunteered following a brief presentation about the research to a group attending a church coffee morning in a rural community in Derbyshire, England. The women have similar backgrounds and their ages span 25 years. They were white, middle class, and Catholic, an identity shared with the author. During the interviews it emerged that four have Irish familial connections of varying degrees. Brief, biographical details are given in table 1 to indicate points of similarity and difference between the informants.

Collecting Personal Meanings about Tea-Making

Data was collected during encounters in the homes of the informants between June and October 1994. The semi-structured interviews were preceded by an observation of them making tea. The purpose and method were outlined when the appointments were made. This was important. Initial comments included "I don't think I'll be much use to you" and "You should ask someone more interesting than me". The period between appointment and first contact was preparation time. It gave the five informants an opportunity to consider the topic. Memories and meanings were reactivated.

Observation was used to investigate and compare the doing process. Variables include the materials used, the sequence of

components of the task, and the physical handling of objects. However, there was little difference. The similarity suggests a strong cultural influence which may not be shared by other sections of the population. I was interested in understanding their subjective meanings rather than the objective experience. This was to ascertain whether culture provided as strong an influence on the inner, personal experience of meaning-making as it did on action.

The interview structure was derived from the author's experience of drinking tea. This acted as a mental guide to ensure comprehensive coverage of tea making and drinking. If minimal interest was shown in a topic it was presumed to have little potency as a meaningful phenomena and was not pursued. Topics included the objects and ingredients used, reasons for drinking tea, when and where it is drunk, and the role of memories associated with or evoked by this familiar activity. The interviews took place immediately after the observation of tea-making. Drinking the tea during the interview which lasted approximately 90 minutes, provided a 'here and now' focus which linked language and activity. All were tape recorded. The structure varied depending upon the spontaneity, flow of conversation, and themes highlighted by each participant. For example, informant 1 was able to express herself fluently and freely. It was as if her life experiences were activated by focusing on tea-making. Informant 5 was more diffident as it became apparent that she carried unresolved memories of family life inhibiting themes connected with the past. More prompting was required to ensure all aspects were considered. There were differences in the 'feel' of each interview and in the emphasis despite the shared meaning attributed to many elements. Such differences were apparent in the configuration of categories rather than in the uniqueness of the category itself.

The encounters produced rich and deep data typical of qualitative research. The interviews were transcribed, then subjected to a rigorous iterative process of data analysis to identify the shared and unique meanings of tea-making. The initial framework of variables provided a series of broad categories. These were sub-divided into specific objects and situations. Meaning was apparent in the reasons given for drinking tea. It was influenced by context. Categories were combined to mirror the complexity of whole situations. For example, the category 'tea in bed' encompassed time of day, relationships, memories, objects, and location. Routines,

Table 1: Brief Biographical Details of the Five Participants

| Number | AgeIn years | MaritalStatus | Employment | Children | Grandchildren |
|--------|-------------|---------------|--------------------|-----------------|---------------|
| 1 | 54 | Married | Retired teacher | 2 daughters | 3 |
| 2 | 49 | Married | Nurse trainer | 3 sons | None |
| 3 | 68 | Widowed | Retired teacher | 2 sons | 2 |
| 4 | 74 | Widowed | Retired journalist | 2 daughters | 7 |
| 5 | 48 | Married | Runs guesthouse | 1 son1 daughter | None |

lifestyle, and changes over time was another multi-faceted, dynamic category which was connected to memories and tradition. It reflected changing circumstances in the present as well as the objects used. The analysis produced six categories of meaning.

Multiple Meanings for Tea-Drinking

The six, shared meanings for tea-drinking are present in table 2. Each category will be described and illustrated by quotations which best illustrate the nuances of meaning in this everyday activity.

Table 2: Six Shared Meanings for Tea-Drinking

| |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Meaning through the reasons for drinking tea Meaning through the senses Meaning through objects used Meaning through temporality Meaning through social context Meaning through changes in lifestyle |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

Meaning Through the Reasons for Tea-Drinking

There were many reasons for drinking tea but there was little mention of satisfying thirst as a basic physiological need. For example; informant 1 stated *"I drink tea to relax...to have a little break."* And *"I used to smoke. Now I have a biscuit and a cup of tea."* It was for *"having a little chat, if my daughter is here or if anyone else pops round."* Also, *"I find it a comfort...because I'm alone...it settles me"* (informant 3), *"it boosts the energy level"* (informant 5) and *"I find it very refreshing. It is a stimulant, a comforter...it is welcoming, hospitality, a sign of friendship"* (informant 4).

Social meanings predominate. Tea was for comfort, to settle, relax, welcome, and refresh. It also provided a sense of continuity with another time and generation. For example, informant 2 stated *"I think I've gone back to being more like my mother. I went through a time when it was all fuss. It didn't matter. But now it means more to me. It is some sort of continuity. It is the connection with the past...and I like to remember that."*

Meaning through the Senses

Tea-making and drinking was a multi-sensory experience stimulating smell, taste, touch and vision. The sense of smell was mentioned by all five women. Informant 2 stated *"I always smell my tea before drinking it...I'm more interested in first of all the smell and then it would be the taste"* and *"there is a smell to a good cup of tea...with these traditional teas you do get a sort of aroma"* (Informant 3). Flavour and taste were also discussed.

Fine, delicate porcelain china crockery was appreciated through touch and visual awareness of colour by several informants. For example, *"The one I quite like is the breakfast cup – of the original green china. It is a big cup. It is just a nice colour. It balances well...it is a good honest cup and saucer"* (informant 4). There was a general dislike of heavy pottery cups and mugs. Temperature was also important. It was associated with preferences about strength and colour. The desired combination was seen as a delicate balance of hot tea and cold milk. *"We like fairly strong tea...not too much milk. I like it very hot. I have an asbestos lining to my stomach"* (informant 3).

The Role of Objects and Ingredients used in Meaning Making

China objects, including cups, mugs, and tea services were mentioned most frequently. Their importance and value was expressed through the memories they elicited and aesthetic considerations of quality, colour, and feel. In each interview there was an ease, and flow, and spontaneity of conversation when sharing memories. Memories seem to be a salient way of constructing meaning. There was remarkable similarity amongst the participants in the preferences and pleasure shown when talking about the different china cups and saucers used. Objects used in drinking tea which had been handed down as family heirlooms by mothers stimulated memories about family gatherings. Complete tea services with matching cups, saucers, sugar bowl, milk jug, and tea pot were valued. Chipped and cracked cups aroused disapproval. These objects seemed to hold shared, symbolic meanings. They were associated with preserving and passing on memory laden crockery to the next generation and an aversion to germs and dirt.

Aesthetic qualities also held shared meaning. Participants preferred thin china to thick pottery, believing tea tasted better when using delicate, porcelain china cups and saucers. Bruner refers to the role of "folk psychology" in transmitting meanings², this may explain why the flavour enhancing properties of delicate porcelain was asserted as a known fact. It may stem from a desire to demonstrate a middle class system of manners in comparison with rougher, work utensils. The shared pleasure in possessing a complete tea-service, and in delicate floral patterns may also be ascribed to these reasons.

Other objects and ingredients such as the electric kettle, placing a cup on the saucer, and washing-up were not mentioned, perhaps indicating less meaning in the symbolic sense. However, "habitualized actions...retain their meaningful character for the individual although the meanings become embedded as routines"⁴ (p. 71). Fine porcelain china was surrounded with thoughts and feelings. These shaped the meanings of tea-making for the five informants.

Meaning through Temporality

An awareness of time was a predominant theme. Childhood

memories were strong and emotive. They represented a time of togetherness lost with dispersed families. Memories of regular, formal tea parties with the extended family and friends sitting around the dinning room table in the parlour were treasured. There was regret for the loss of these customs over time. They were not valued or continued by their children as consistently as their mothers would have wanted.

There was a shared pattern of tea drinking throughout the day. It was drunk after meals – breakfast, lunch, dinner, and tea. Early morning tea in bed was a pleasure for informants 1 and 2 because it was a private time. Their husbands brought them a cup of tea, and then left them along to drink it. Both women associated tea with extra comfort, a pillow, a book plus the time to enjoy it. Informants 3 and 4 described a similar pattern but it had a different meaning. They made their own early morning tea as they lived alone. They did not return to bed to drink it. A cup of tea marked the start of a new day. *“...it makes me awake up...it is a sort of entrance to the day. If I don't have the tea I feel I am definitely missing something absolutely essential”* (informant 4). Only informant 5 expressed dislike of tea in bed. She did not have time to stop in the morning. She was busy preparing breakfast for her Bed and Breakfast guests.

Tea provided an excuse for the rest during the day. While there were differences in the organisation of tea-breaks there was consensus about the need to stop. Tea-making and drinking was an excuse for a rest. It was a way of dividing the day into manageable chunks, to separate the change activities. For example, informant 4 stated *“I'll have a cup of tea when I want to read the paper, to sit down”* and *“if I am very tired I will go to the café in the supermarket when I am shopping. I make myself sit down. I enjoy it”* (informant 5).

Meaning through Social Context

Each woman mentioned the social context in which tea was drunk. Childhood memories were strong and emotive. Informant 3 described her mother as ‘governed by tradition’ a term she frequently used about herself. Another recalled her mother's kitchen in Lancashire with its ever boiling ‘huge kettle’ always ready for tea (informant 1). Informant 2 talked about her mother's hospitality to neighbours in the street where they lived. Her grandmother rented a 12 piece tea service for weddings and funerals. In contrast, informant 5's mother worked long hours cleaning in a sausage factory. She rarely invited guests into the house. Informant 4 remembered as a child sitting at her grandmother's Sunday tea table. This was laden with piles of bread and butter and Fullers walnut cake, and surrounded by great aunts and uncles. These social gatherings were marked by customs seen as polite and necessary at the time.

Nowadays tea was usually drunk along or with a friend or family member. The emphasis was upon relaxation, the opportunity for a chat or gossip. Tea was drunk to mark social comings and

goings with varying degrees of formality depending upon the visitor. Memories of the past held the criteria for correct, proper behaviour even though these rituals were becoming anachronisms. For example; *“If tea is for several people then I always make it in the tea pot...it is more of preparation...then is part of the social thing”* (informant 2) and *“Visitors get the traditional preparation of tea...not beakers thrust under their noses”* (informant 3). Solitary tea drinking was a time for pleasure and meaning. Informant 1 stated *“I have my cup of tea on my own...it is a really nice time of the day.”* In contrast, informant 3 who lived alone experimented solitude differently. *“If I am alone I drink tea in the dining room. My friends always gravitate to the kitchen. When I am alone I take tea through to the dining room and use the television for comfort.”*

Meaning through Changes in Lifestyle

Change in lifestyle was another shared theme. Routine, everyday activities continue against a background of social and environmental change. Although shared memories of large social gatherings were vivid, tea was now usually drunk in small informal groups. Memories of family occasions were embedded in treasured china. Tea was routinely drunk from mugs rather than cups and saucers. Tea-bags replaced leaf tea. These changes – ostensibly for practical reasons and for convenience – also reflect cultural changes. The trend toward less formal social behaviour was commented upon. The sense of a wider, extended family which is contained in memories of tea drinking was being weakened by social mobility although immediate family ties, especially with adult children and grandchildren were strong. Participants apologies for using mugs and cardboard milk cartons rather than a proper, full tea service during the interview.

Personal change provided a backdrop against which tea drinking was enacted. These included major life events such as marriage, illness, or bereavement and less dramatic changes associated with new friendships and financial security. Although tea-drinking did not create these change it was a tool, easing transitions and maintaining important personal elements of culture through crisis and conflict. Informant 2 described nursing her dying mother at home. She was careful to do everything as her mother would have done it. The meanings evolved over time gave form to the present activity and simultaneously contributed to a dynamic situation in the present. *“When people came in for a drink of tea everything used was the best. The way she would have done it.”* She continues to use her mother's favourite cup.

Another informant (1) was concerned that her married daughter was oblivious to chipped cups and creased tablecloths. She disguised her feelings of disgust to avoid upsetting her daughter as she wished to maintain a good relationship. She recognised her daughter's different valued. This example typifies a clash of cultures, a point of change between one generation and the next. Informant 1 was aware of her own mother speaking

through memory. Cracked mugs symbolise germs and carelessness. Sharing tea was a means of strengthening the bond with her daughter at a difficult time. She compromised, saying nothing but bought her daughter six new pottery mugs as a present. Potential conflict is thus negotiated through the participation in an everyday act of shared meanings organised to fit the situation.

Conclusion

There is much more to drinking tea than quenching thirst. This apparently simple, routine occupation contains multiple meanings. Some are shared like the pleasure derived from using family heirlooms such as treasured china cups and saucers; the value of an early morning cup of tea in bed as a quiet, personal time and tea as an excuse for breaks, rest, and change during the day. This shared culture provides a basic tool kit for behaviour. Individuals interpret this and use the tool in their personal configuration of meaning. Each participant highlighted particular themes which gave a personal shape to their cultural world.

These meanings, formed within a specific culture, are the tools and signs which mediate human activity described by Vygotsky³. The importance of context emphasises the experiential doing of an activity, integrating time, place, purpose, and objects used. Vygotsky's concept of meaningful activity is one in which activity moves us forward in history within a shared social experience.

The flow of conversation during the interviews was stimulated by memories associated with drinking tea. Tea seemed to convey strong, emotive memories which located each participant in their own personal history. Some objects, especially china crockery and the patterns of chunking time during the day provided powerful connections to past events. Tea-making and drinking was a meaningful bridge between past experience and the current context. This situation would then become part of the memories contributing to the next cup of tea.

Although this is a small scale study using an unrepresentative sample and a single occupation, such limitations do not preclude the proposal that everyday occupation plays a dynamic part in holding the individual in a meaningful social world. While insights are restricted to this social group the six meanings

provide a starting point to explore the patterns of meaning amongst other people and activities. Although mundane tea-making and drinking is rich in symbols and ritual. Many of the elements of meaning were shared but in a way which was unique to the individual.

The importance of the meanings embedded within everyday occupations raises questions about those who do not have access to familiar routines, for example, elderly people in residential care, people with disabilities, and young people whose social reality has become chaotic and fragmented. There is scope for further study to discover whether it is possible to produce similar layers of meaning within all everyday occupations. Social reality may be reflected in the familiar tasks of getting dressed in the morning, having a bath, or in walking the dog. The experience of chronic illness may be so preoccupying that it dominates the usual ways of constructing a meaningful world.

This preliminary study suggests that everyday occupations are important for their practical role and because they contain accumulated meanings. These hold the individual in social reality. Making a cup of tea revealed a world of socially shared meanings. This has implications for the development of a more culturally sensitive awareness of the influences which shape the way we see and interpret the world.

References

1. Yexa EJ, Clark F, Frank G, Jackson J, Parham D, Pierce D, Stein C, Zemke R. An Introduction to occupational science, a foundation for occupational therapy in the 21st century. *Occupational Therapy in Health Care* 1989; 6(4): 1-17
2. Bruner J. *Acts of meaning*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990.
3. Vygotsky, 1962, cited by Burkitt I. *Theories of the social formation of personality*. London: sage, 1991
4. Berger P, Luckman T. *The social construction of reality*. London: Penguin, 1966.
5. Osgood C. *The measurement of meaning*. Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1957.