

## **Unraveling the wonder of the ordinary**

A narrative analysis of meaning construction in memories of familiar routines

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### **Abstract**

Familiar routines may be a source of meaning, but just as well become habitual and lose meaning. To understand this paradox, a narrative approach was used to explore how meaning is constructed in memories of familiar routines. Two types were distinguished: routines of transition and routines of harmony. Results show how meaning construction may relate to the contrast between instrumental acts in the memories and their higher purpose. In routines of transition, meaning may emerge through a temporal transformation, while routines of harmony may become meaningful through the awareness of contrasting evaluations within the routine or a contrasting wider context.

*Keywords:* routine, ritual, meaningful moments, meaning construction, narrative analysis

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### **Introduction**

In this article, we investigate how meaning is constructed in memories of familiar routines. Our search for the meaning potential of familiar routines stems from the recognition that meaning in life is a basic human need and crucial to wellbeing (e.g. Frankl, 1969; Mascaro & Rosen, 2005; Reker, Peacock & Wong, 1987; Ryff & Singer, 1998), yet is increasingly under pressure. It is suggested that, in a world of acceleration, reason and rationality, one may easily become alienated or indifferent and lose a sense of wonder, enchantment and meaning in ordinary life (Heschel, 1976; Jenkins, 2000; Rosa, 2013). Familiar routines have the potential to counter this alienation, giving ordinary life a sense of purpose and coherence; as such being “a mechanism by which we can fulfill one of our deepest, most fundamental motivations - to feel as if our lives matter” (Machell, Kashdan, Short & Nezlek, 2015, p 295). However, familiar routines are paradoxical, as their recurring nature may just as well cause us to take them for granted, thereby contributing to feelings of indifference.

In the meaning literature, familiar routines have only scarcely received acknowledgement for their potential to give meaning to ordinary life. Studies on meaningful moments focus mainly on unique, out of the ordinary moments such as life events, epiphanies and peak experiences: the birth of a child, an ecstatic feeling aroused by music, a sudden life changing insight in a period of turmoil (e.g. Hoffman, Kaneshiro & Compton, 2012; McDonald, 2008). On the other hand, studies on routines tend to focus on the meaning and practice of routines in special contexts: in times of illness, aging and bereavement, or as part of religious, spiritual or therapeutic practices (e.g. la Cour, Johannessen & Josephsson, 2009;

Meira, Salgado, Sousa, Ribeiro & Gonçalves, 2017; Pargament, 2011; Schnell, 2003).

However, these studies do not explain why familiar routines that occur in ordinary life, outside these pivotal moments and contexts, could be meaningful.

It is this meaning potential of familiar routines, in the setting of ordinary life, that we focus on in this study. Though this potential is acknowledged in a recent study (van de Goor, Sools, Westerhof & Bohlmeijer, 2017), it tends to be ignored and deserves more recognition (Heintzelman & King 2014 a, 2014 b). Specifically, we address the paradox that familiar routines entail: for how do these moments, that just as well may be taken for granted and contribute to feelings of indifference and disenchantment, become meaningful? In this study, we therefore focus on the way meaning is constructed within memories of familiar routines. We aim to gain knowledge about this meaning construction as a basis to develop interventions that counter disenchantment and aid the process of finding meaning in ordinary life.

In this introduction, we first describe the familiar routines that are the focus of this study. After this, we elaborate on both sides of the meaning paradox of familiar routines: on their potential to elicit meaning as well as to become meaningless. Finally, we introduce the narrative approach we adopted to investigate this paradox, focusing on the way meaning is constructed in the memories of familiar routines.

### **Familiar routines: a description**

The meaning potential of daily activities having been recognized in various studies, (e.g. Machell et al., 2015; Steger, Kashdan & Oishi, 2008; White & Dolan, 2009), here we specifically focus on familiar routines: on moments that are *familiar* because they are known and ordinary (i.e. “to be expected in the normal order of events” (Merriam Webster, 2017)), and *routine* because of their repetitive nature, recurring more or less frequently over time.

Drawing on narrative psychology, familiar routines can be classified as *generic* moments, which are distinguished from *specific* moments that are single-event and unique in their occurrence (Singer & Blagov, 2000). Generic moments “are composed of equivalent events that repeatedly occur over time intervals that are not themselves part of the memory. The events blend or fuse together, and they contain the same characters, settings, happenings, and emotions” (p.12). Finally, concerning the scope of our study, we specifically focus on familiar routines in a regular, “life as usual” setting, that is not directly negative, threatening or precarious. In summary then, the familiar routines that are the object of this study are known and ordinary, to be expected in the normal order of events; they have a repetitive nature, occurring over time intervals that are not themselves part of the memory; and they take place in a setting that is not directly precarious.

### **The meaning paradox of familiar routines**

In this paragraph, we address both sides of the meaning paradox of familiar routines: how they may be experienced to be meaningful and how they may lose meaning. Firstly, we integrate literature from the fields of psychology, religion and spirituality in two distinct viewpoints on familiar routines as a source of meaning. After this, we switch to the other side of the paradox, giving a short overview of the way familiar routines may just as well become mechanical and meaningless.

After Frankl’s call for the recognition of meaning as our basic striving (Frankl, 1969), many studies on meaning have followed, leading to a variety of models and definitions. Two aspects of meaning life seem particularly relevant in relation to familiar routines, i.e. the experience of *purpose* and *coherence* (King, Hicks, Krull & Del Gaiso, 2006; Martela & Steger, 2016; Reker & Wong, 1988; Ryff & Singer, 1998; Steger, 2012). Where purpose

refers to reason(s) to live and to long-term aspirations in life that motivate action, coherence refers to the comprehensibility of life, to an implicit order that transcends chaos.

Reflecting on the meaning of routines in relation to *purpose*, it is relevant to distinguish the ritual and instrumental function of routines. Where instrumental routines are utilitarian by nature, ritual routines are aimed at a higher purpose, e.g. the expression or experience of (group) identity, culture, religion, spirituality or values (Heinze, 2000; Hobsbawm, & Ranger, 2012; Spagnola & Fiese, 2007). In their study on family routines, Spagnola and Fiese (2007) clarify this difference by the effect of their disruption: while disrupted instrumental family routines may cause a hassle, disrupted rituals threaten family cohesion. They note how the instrumental and symbolical, ritual function may be found together in one routine. Ganzevoort and Roeland (2014) exemplify this by showing how the routine of gardening, apart from its instrumental function, may become a devotional activity, setting the stage “to receive life as a gift” (p. 92).

Next, we shift our attention from routine as a purposeful practice to routine as an experience of *coherence*. Meaning may simply be experienced when life and the world makes sense (Heintzelman & King, 2014 a, 2014 b). Coherence refers to this sense of order, of an underlying pattern beyond the factual and visible. It is a sense of rightness (King, 2012), an experience of confidence when what happens is predictable and explicable (Antonovsky 1987). Coherence may be considered cognitively as well as spiritually: as the self-transcendent awareness of the way we are part of patterns and cycles at a higher, holistic level (e.g. Frankl, 1966; Maslow, 1971; Reed, 2008; van de Goor et al., 2017).

The routines we create often follow natural cycles of life, relating to rhythms of the day, season, year or human life phases. As they pattern our life by means of expected repetitions, they provide ways to comprehend and connect to life and existence (Romanoff, 1998). Within therapy, coherence is an orienting principle, aimed at providing structure and

order in the context of chaos, trauma or loss (e.g. Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006; Neimeyer, Herrero, & Botella, 2006). Familiar routines may help to accept and appreciate the cycles of life, stimulate agency, give hope and facilitate healing (Ganzevoort & Roeland, 2014; Imber-Black, 1991; la Cour et al., 2009; Mattingly, 1998). They connect us to traditions as well as to the transcendent meaning of our existence, to “something beyond the self” (Address, 2005 p. 224).

In sum, a routine may be a rich source of meaning, an experience of purpose or coherence. On the other hand, a familiar routine may just as well become mechanical and mindless. Because of its ordinariness, its repetitive nature, a familiar routine may become a *habit*, i.e. an automatic response to a specific contextual cue (e.g. Verplanken & Orbell, 2003; Wood, Quinn, & Kashy, 2002). Though habits are intentional and purposeful in their origins, they lose this intentionality in their execution, and are performed with less awareness or consciousness, and less thought and emotions (Bargh, 1994; Verplanken & Orbell, 2003; Wood et al., 2002). This is more likely to happen to routines that recur frequently, e.g. on a daily basis; though we may just as well become indifferent to less frequently recurring routines, such as a yearly family dinner. Heschel warns for this anesthetizing effect of our over-familiarization with life and reality, pointing out how routine may become spiritual poison, as “life is routine, and routine is resistance to wonder” (Heschel, 1976, p. 49).

So what prevents us from becoming indifferent to familiar routines, but instead causes us to value them as meaningful moments? Within the body of literature, several studies mention meaning construction to be mindset, a deliberate focus and awareness, a passion of inquiry directed to the familiar, the taken-for-granted, in such a way that the extraordinary becomes visible within the ordinary (Bennett, 2001; Vasalou, 2015). This meaning-constructing mindset is also referred to as the mindset of wonder (van de Goor et al., 2017; Vasalou, 2015) or awe-based consciousness (Schneider, 2004). Machell et al. (2015) suggest

that this mindset may be stronger in the context of depression or negative events in life, as people in these circumstances might be more sensitive to daily events that boost meaning. The study of la Cour et al. (2009) supports this idea, showing how the awareness of the end of life may lead to the construction of new meanings in familiar, instrumental routines like cooking. On the other hand, Emmons (2000) refers to this mindset as an intelligence, a character trait, an ability “to invest everyday activities, events, and relationships with a sense of the sacred” (p. 30). While these studies show how the meaning construction mindset may be related to specific contexts or personal qualities, we assume it to be natural to all human beings, as part of ordinary life. But how then does this mindset work - how does the enchantment set in? Therefore, we shift our attention to how meaning is constructed in memories of familiar routines. In the next paragraphs, we introduce the narrative approach we have taken to answer this question.

### **A narrative approach to meaning construction in ordinary life**

To study the meaning construction in familiar routines, we take a narrative approach, focusing on memories that people tell of familiar routines. It has been proposed that narrative is the mode par excellence by which humans construct meaning (e.g. Bamberg & Cooper, 2012; Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001; Bruner, 1991). Narrative psychology accepts that we live in a storied world and that we make sense of events and give meaning to life through the stories we exchange (Gergen, 1994; Murray & Sools, 2014). However, within the larger field of narrative inquiry, there are different approaches and conceptualizations of narrative. Over the last decades, the usefulness of narratological and structuralist approaches to narrative for understanding storytelling in everyday life has been critically reviewed. For the purpose of understanding the way meaning is constructed in memories of familiar routines, we find the dimensional approach to living narrative, e.g. the so-called big and small story approach,

particularly relevant (Bamberg, 2006; Georgakopoulou, 2006; Ochs & Capps, 2001; Sools, 2012). This dimensional approach can be taken to depict text sorts, to sites of locating narrative, and may be applied as analytical lens for investigating stories. As text sort, small stories are literally short in contrast to whole life stories. As sites of engagement, *small stories* draw attention to under-represented narrative activities such as tellings of ongoing events, future or hypothetical events, seemingly uninteresting small incidents and taken-for-granted truths (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008). This small story approach is aimed at understanding those other stories “that are still in the fringes of narrative research” (Georgakopoulou 2007, p. 36), changing the focus from narrative as product to narration as a process (Sools, 2013). Importantly, a small story approach stretches the definition of narrative, and diverges from the dominant focus on sequence and emplotment as key features of narrative. The dimensions of this approach, on which stories may vary from big to small (Ochs and Capps, 2001; Sools, 2012) are:

- tellership: personal experience of one narrator versus shared experience by multiple narrators
- tellability: the degree to which a story or incident is worth telling as judged by the narrator
- linearity/temporality: the time focus and manner of ordering in the story, varying from a past oriented, closed, causal path to other ways of ordering, including thematic and spatial orderings, and a focus on hypothetical, future or ongoing events
- embeddedness: the extent to which the narrative stands on its own or is part of local discourse contexts
- moral stance: the way the moral meaning of events is pieced together, varying from constant to uncertain, fluid and dynamic

Regarding these dimensions, memories of familiar routines typically have both big as well as small characteristics. They may be small in the sense of being brief accounts of short incidents, rather than lengthy elaborations. They are typically big stories in the sense that they are retrospective accounts of past experiences. In the way these memories are ordered, they may take the shape of a linear account of how events evolve over time from beginning to middle to end (big story), or may be ordered differently (small).

In relation to the meaning paradox of familiar routines, particularly the dimension of *tellability* is of interest. Events become tellable when they are significant, surprising or unusual, and worth reporting – which is typical for big stories. Low tellability concerns events that are expected or taken for granted, they are “no big deal” (Ochs and Capps, 2001). In the above mentioned literature on familiar routines, we find support for both high as well as low tellability. Familiar routines may be highly tellable because they are created to be valuable intentional actions or are experiences of coherence. On the low end of tellability, they are ordinary, not unique or surprising; as familiar routines may be instrumental, become habitual and thereby not worthy of telling. Thus, the dimension of tellability seems particularly apt to address the meaning construction paradox of familiar routines. In this study, we therefore use tellability as a lens to discover how memories of familiar routines are constructed to be meaningful.

### **Method**

We used a qualitative, exploratory method to elicit memories of meaningful familiar routines, and performed a narrative analysis to investigate how these memories become tellable.

### **The Wonderful Life Question**

The memories of meaningful familiar routines in this study have been collected by means of the Wonderful Life Question:

*What if there is an afterlife. There, all your memories will be erased, except for one. Which memory do you choose to take with you to eternity?*

This question, derived from Hirokazu Koreeda's movie "After Life", has proven to be a powerful way to elicit meaningful moments that stick out in the evaluation of a whole life, without directing to specific types of experiences (van de Goor et al., 2017). It elicits a great variety of memories of meaningful moments, both intentional and unintentional, special and ordinary, and in positive as well as negative settings. Memories describe major life events like marriage, death, depression, severe illness, and childbirth, as well as encounters in nature, trips and travels and more common, everyday-like moments like meetings with family or friends. Familiar routines have been distinguished as a specific category of meaningful moments elicited by this question (van de Goor et al., 2017). These memories, that fit the description of familiar routines as given in the introduction, differ from other categories as they do not form a contrast with the known and familiar (as is the case in the memories of unexpected, unusual and unique moments), nor do they stick out in a negative, precarious setting.

### **Data collection procedure**

The Wonderful Life Question has been asked to people in workshops aimed at personal development. These workshops were held with a diversity of groups, varying from professionals in leadership training, students, homeless people, women living in a women's shelter, and festival attendants. In the workshops, participants were asked the Wonderful Life question, after which they were given some time alone to choose a memory. These were then told and shared in the group and recorded with a data recorder. People were asked to tell their

memory like a film fragment of their life, giving as much detail as possible, but without explaining their choice or describing the wider context in which the film fragment took place. During the sharing of the memories, other participants were asked to listen to the story without intervening; only the workshop facilitator sometimes asked general questions to help the narrator make a clear picture and to “zoom in” on the essential part within a longer film fragment. Thus, a “poetical space” was created for participants to resonate on the memory and personally construct meaning from it. In this way, a total of 116 memories of meaningful moments have been collected in 16 different workshops; all have been transcribed, and consent was given for use in this study. From the total dataset we selected 13 memories in the category familiar routines, adhering to the criteria of familiar routines as described in the introduction.

### **Narrative analysis**

To analyze how the collected memories of meaningful routines become tellable, we use the heuristic devices of *evaluations* and *breach*. Evaluations focus on what is mentioned in the narrative about the way the event is subjectively experienced by the narrator, relating to personal beliefs, desires, values and emotions (Bruner, 1991; Fludernik, 2003; Labov, 1972). Both the *nature* (i.e. the tone and character) of the evaluations and their *manner of appearance* in a narrative give clues about the way an event is experienced to be significant, unusual or surprising. Evaluations may be specifically and clearly stated, or they may be implied. Of interest to our study is also the distinction made between embedded and external evaluations (Labov, 1972). Where embedded evaluations are descriptions of feelings and values of the narrator within the narrative, during the event, external or extra-narrative evaluations are reflections from the narrator taking position outside of the event, commenting on the narrated situation.

Breach as a device focuses on the structural components of the narrative. It refers to a disturbance or fracture with the expected, the canonical or the taken-for-granted, that makes it worth telling (Bruner, 1986; Bruner, 1991; Murray & Sools, 2014). The breach arises out of the imbalance between two structural components or storyline elements that make up the narrative: the setting /scene (where?), agent/character (who?), acts/events (what happens?), means (with what help or hindrance?) and (5) purpose/goal (what for?). It is this imbalance that motivates the story and makes understandable how the storyline elements are connected into a meaningful whole (Burke, 1969; Murray & Sools, 2014).

Concerning evaluations, we analyzed the nature of the evaluations that appear in the memories and how they appear in the course of the moment. Therefore, we firstly coded all explicit and implicit emotions, feelings, values, desires and beliefs within the narrated moment, after which we clustered them into groups of evaluations that are similar in nature. Also, we coded the way these evaluations manifest themselves in the course of the moment, discerning embedded evaluations from external evaluations. To discover the breach within the memories of familiar routines, we performed a storyline analysis as developed by Murray and Sools (2014), focusing on the storyline elements mentioned above: setting /scene, agent/character, acts/events, means, and purpose/goal. First, each storyline element was identified and characterized, and missing elements were detected. Next, we determined whether a breach could be found between two story elements, and if yes, we summarized the breach in one sentence.

In both the analysis on evaluations and breach, we critically regarded the influence of the researcher in her role as workshop facilitator, i.e. the dimension of *tellership* of the small story approach. Tellership concerns the involvement of conversational partners in the process of narration. Where the big story approach focuses only on the main narrator, an in-depth yet decontextualized analysis of personal experiences, the small story approach shifts attention to

co-construction by multiple narrators. In the analysis of our data, it is important to recognize that the researcher has sometimes effected the narration by intervening in the narration and asking the narrator to bring focus in the chosen memory. Therefore, the small side of this dimension is of relevance in our analysis, and interventions by the researcher have been separately analyzed.

The analysis was performed by the first author of this article and then discussed with the second and third author to establish intersubjective agreement.

## **Results**

To give an impression of our data, we first present a general overview of the characteristics of the thirteen memories of meaningful familiar routines in our study. Next we present our findings concerning the evaluations and breach, that have culminated in two types of memories of familiar routines.

### **General overview**

The familiar routines in our study are from nine female and four male adults, varying in age from mid twenty to fifty. They all describe moments of family life, in which close family members are the main people: parents and grandparents, partners and children. The narrator is never alone. Ten memories are set in or around the own home or the home of a close family member, describing routines like family visits, Sunday morning hugs and frolics, coming home, and caring for children. Three memories are in a setting that is leisure-related, describing a holiday or summer routine: a walk in the woods, boating and sailing. Six memories are childhood memories, the other seven describe routines in the narrator's adult life. The descriptions tend to be short, varying from just several sentences to a couple of paragraphs. All of the memories contain positive feelings and values like safety, calmness,

feeling connected, freedom, love, warmth, energy, flow, aloneness, completeness, and goodness.

Finally, we look at the attributes related to purpose and coherence: ritual vs instrumental in relation to purpose, and patternedness in relation to coherence. While all memories have been found to have ritual characteristics (e.g. celebrating), ten also have an instrumental function (e.g. preparing food). The patternedness of the memories relates to both cultural and natural cycles. Their recurrence varies from frequent, (the routines being part of daily life), to infrequent: (recurring on a yearly basis, e.g. relating to summer or Christmas holidays, or seasons).

### **Two types of memories of familiar routines**

On the basis of the analysis of evaluations and breach, two types of familiar routines could be distinguished in the memories: routines of transition and routines of harmony. Where routines of transition describe a buildup of events, a transformation over time from one state of being to another, routines of harmony describe a stable situation with solely positive evaluations. In table 1 an overview of the frequency and characteristics of these two main memory types is presented, followed by an in-depth description of how these types differ with regard to the use of evaluations, the way the breach is narrated, and the way these are co-constructed between narrator and researcher. These variations within and between the two types are illustrated by means of six memories. In order to facilitate referral to these memories, each of these has been given a number and a name by the researchers.

[ Table 1 Two types of memories of familiar routines ]

#### ***Routines of transition***

Memories of this type describe the transformation from one state of being to another, often more favorable state. These memories contain multiple actions or events in a clear sequence, resulting in a change or transformation. Looking at the nature of the evaluations and their manifestation in the course of the moment, we see how they appear as a polarity, i.e. two evaluations or poles that are complementary or opposite to each other. Examples of polarities that we have found are seriousness and playfulness, togetherness and autonomy, and reality and possibility. In memories of routines of transition, these poles appear sequentially, one evaluation transforming into another. In the memory below, 1 Coming home, we see how work/aloneness is transformed into togetherness/love.

1 Coming home (male respondent, middle aged)

The image or the film fragment I see...It is a gentle day, a weekday. I am riding my bike home from the station... after work. My girlfriend has a cottage-like, little white house. I arrive home, put the bike in the shed, open the door, and... I'm just received with so much warmth... And yes, that is what I want to take. A, yes, just a harmonious and respectful relationship.

*Facilitator: So you enter the house, can you describe that?*

Yes, that's hugging, and just, a lot, talking though the things of the day. And then together, being together. And that.... Yes it just feels so full of love...

*Facilitator: and what if we have to shorten the film?*

The part where I come home. The memory I want to take is that lovingness.

*Facilitator: how do we see that in your film?*

The moment I enter the house.

Identifying a breach always involves some degree of interpretation, but the relative brevity and sparsity of the memories made breach identification in this study particularly challenging. Sometimes storyline elements were found missing or be described only very briefly. However, despite these difficulties, we were able to identify a breach in all memories describing routines of transition, and more importantly the breach was consistently found between the acts and purpose.

In memory 1 (Coming home) for example, we have defined the breach as “finding love (purpose) by entering the house (act)”. This breach was detected in the following way, taking into account the co-construction of the narrated memory by researcher and narrator. In this memory, “receiving the warmth” of “a harmonious and respectful relationship” is initially constructed as desired result or purpose, but it is not entirely clear what it contrasts with. Is it the situated possibility of *receiving* warmth, the lack of access to this specific relationship, or the unavailability of other potentially warm relationships? In the first part of the excerpt, the narrator sets up a series of seemingly mundane acts (riding his bike home, arriving home, putting the bike in the shed, opening the door), which at the same time suggest anticipation. Here, the seemingly ordinariness and instrumentality of the acts are in contrast with the meaning and value found in the result of this action: in the warm welcome, the love and harmony (purpose). The researcher then zooms in by asking to specify the moment of entering the house, which is alluded to before but not explicitly mentioned. This facilitator intervention is successful in eliciting a more detailed account of the desired result, which gives further clues about what is so meaningful about that moment: “Yes, that’s hugging, and just, a lot, talking though the things of the day. And then together, being together. And that.... Yes it just feels so full of love...”. We learn in more detail about what constitutes “warmth” for him, e.g. “hugging”, “talking through the things of the day”, togetherness and a feeling “full of love”. Next, the researcher requests to “zoom in” by asking to shorten the film. The

narrator then chooses “The part where I come home”, thereby specifying the essential part of the memory: “that lovingness”. In response, the facilitator asks “how do we see that in your film?”. In the narrator’s reiteration of “The moment I enter the house” as the final act, we find extra support for the defined breach between act and purpose; the act transforming the situation to the desired state.

Although content-wise a completely different memory, the breach in the following memory, 2 Raising the sail, is technically similar: a breach between act and purpose. We identified a breach between the utilitarian act of hoisting the sail, and the higher purpose experienced as a result of this: experiencing freedom and autonomy. In this memory, there is no co-construction between narrator and researcher that helps to define the breach, but we see how the narrator herself “zooms in” and highlights the essence of the moment by saying “raising the sail, yes, that moment”. Similar to memory 1, Coming home, we see how it is at this specific moment within the memory that a simple act transforms the situation and leads to the higher purpose.

#### 2 Raising the sail (female respondent, middle aged)

My moment, well, imagine, I... I have a boat. And I am on this boat, it’s a sailboat, about 11 meters long. My family is on board, two daughters, my husband. And...we are going on holiday, and then we... usually, when the weather is good, we set onto the ocean, so it is clear blue weather, a nice breeze, we navigate into the sluice here in IJmuiden, and after that the sluice opens, the sail is raised. You hear the seagulls, and the sun. And the... the moment the motor is turned off, that is the moment I would like to take. You know, just the sail, and me at the rudder, and the rest, well, yes they’re on board, but that’s of secondary importance. Raising the sail, yes, that moment.

Finally, as the examples above illustrate, we have found the breach in memories of routines of transition to emerge in a temporal way: the higher purpose emerges as a result of the instrumental act, after the instrumental act has finished. It is a breach that sequentially unfolds; the instrumental act enabling the transformation from one evaluation or pole into another.

### *Routines of harmony*

Memories of this type describe a moment of harmony or wholeness: a stable situation that contains solely positive evaluations. Typical for these memories is that there is only one single act/event, or multiple events that do not build up to a certain point. In the memory below, <sup>3</sup> In the meadows, this is the act of playing in the fields. Concerning the nature of the evaluations in routines of harmony, we found that the evaluations within one memory often express a polarity, as in routines of transition. In memory, <sup>3</sup> In the meadows, we see a polarity between connectedness (safety, calmness, connection to each other and the land) and autonomy (playfulness, freedom from the rest of the world):

<sup>3</sup> In the meadows (female respondent, mid twenties)

I choose the moment that I step out of the car with my two sisters and my father, at one of our meadows, cornfields, at the end of a beautiful summer day. We are in the twilight, it is still comfortably warm, the atmosphere is calm and safe. This was a custom that occurred several times a week in the summer months: my father often took us to see how the grasslands and corn were doing at the end of the day. There, we played calmly in the nature, in our dresses and boots. Around us the sounds of grazing cows, a summer breeze, humming insects, the car radio in the background. The

feeling of connection to each other, to the soil that my parents worked, and freedom from the rest of the world. I think I was around eight years old.

Regarding the manifestation of the evaluations in the course of the moment, we found the evaluations or poles to emerge *simultaneously* in the memories of this type. As there is no temporal buildup of events in the memory, there is also no temporal buildup in the evaluations. In memory 3 In the meadows, we see how autonomy is experienced at the same time as the connectedness to each other and the land. However, it was not possible to find a polarity in every memory, as the descriptions were generally very short. In these cases the evaluations seem to come together in one positive evaluation, e.g. happiness, as we see in memory 4 Frolicking:

4 Frolicking (female respondent, mid forties)

I have a very short memory. I am in bed with my family, with my husband and children. And they are frolicking delightfully. And...the, the love and happiness is overwhelming. And I am just enjoying that very much. Yes. That is a memory I want to take.

The results described above concern the *embedded* evaluations within the memories: the evaluations in which the narrator takes position within the event. These were all found to be merely positive evaluations. However, in several memories that also contain *external* evaluations, a contrast emerges between the embedded and external evaluations, i.e. evaluations in which the narrator takes position *outside* of the event, reflecting on the moment. While the embedded evaluations are all positive, the external evaluations have a different tone. This becomes clear in memory 5 Together on the boat, in which the external

evaluations are underscored. While the embedded evaluations are all positive, an experience of togetherness, they form a contrast with the external evaluations that emphasize how this togetherness is not to be taken for granted, and is absent in the here and now, in which the narrator is alone.

5 Together on the boat (female respondent, middle aged)

I just had a very happy childhood. And I was lucky to have that, because many children do not have happy childhood memories.

*Facilitator: can we cut out one fragment of that childhood movie?*

Well yes, that I am an only child, and I have.. yes, a father and a mother. I lost them both at a very young age... And the part before that I want to keep with me very much. I don't know how clear I have to be about that, but yes, I just think that is very precious, that I just, experienced that so preciously.

*Facilitator: You choose a whole period of your life. Can you choose a smaller fragment within that period?*

Well, that's difficult, everything was beautiful. Oh yes, that the three of us, my father, he was a carpenter, and once he made, he made a boat. A rowing boat, and well, being on the water with the three of us. [ ] That's it actually, those were very beautiful moments, being on that boat with the three of us. And well, I would really like to keep that memory. And that it was really the three of us.

*Facilitator: And what happened there?*

Yes, having fun, my father went fishing, I went swimming, I helped my father take the fish off the hooks and... throw them back into the water. And, and my mother she, yes, she was also with us, pleasantly, and she also went swimming with me,... and yes...

In this memory, the contrast between the embedded and external evaluations is clearly a result of the *co-construction* between narrator and researcher. We see how the researcher asked the narrator to “zoom in” to a specific moment in her childhood: “can we cut out one fragment of that childhood movie?” and later: “can you choose a smaller fragment within that period?”. From the answers to these questions, we learn what was so meaningful in the childhood of the narrator, i.e. being together with her parents: “being on the water with the three of us”, “those were very beautiful moments, being on that boat with the three of us”, “And that it was really the three of us.” From the question to become more specific (“And what happened there?”), we learn about the setting and acts that contribute to this togetherness: father, mother and daughter each doing their own thing, and also engaging in each other's activities: “my father went fishing, I went swimming, I helped my father take the fish off the hooks and... throw them back into the water. And, and my mother she, yes, she was also with us, pleasantly, and she also went swimming with me.” While this “zooming in” by the researcher has elicited these embedded evaluations, the narrator herself “zoomed out”, taking position outside the event and reflecting on her childhood, leading to the underscored external evaluations that emphasize the absence and unusualness of togetherness in the here and now. It is through this combination of zooming in and zooming out that a contrast emerges.

Finding a breach in memories of routines of harmony was even more challenging than in routines of transition; these moments generally being even more compact. However, in several memories of this type a breach between the same storyline elements as in routines of transition may be implied: between a simple, instrumental act and higher purpose. In the following memory, 6 Storytime, interpretation of the storyline elements in this way may lead to the breach ‘connecting the hearts (purpose) through reading a story (act)’. While the

purpose is quite clearly mentioned by the narrator (“that moment of connection, with.. with my heart and their hearts”) and highlighted through the sentence “realizing yes, this is what it is all about”, the act is only briefly named (“I am reading to them”) thereby possibly pointing to its smallness:

6 Storytime (female respondent, middle aged)

I’m sitting in my youngest son’s room, he is a year and a half old, and.. my other son is also sitting on his bed, he is three years old... It’s after dinner, they both have taken a bath, they’re wearing their pajamas, and I am reading to them. And... that moment of connection, with.. with my heart and their hearts, and realizing yes, this is what it is all about. That’s what I want to take.

Other than in memories of routines of transition, we have found the breach in memories of routines of harmony to be solely structural and not temporal. In memories of routines of harmony, the instrumental act and higher purpose that constitute the breach emerge simultaneously – when the act stops, the higher purpose stops as well. In memory 6, Storytime, the heart of the mother and the children’s hearts are connected in the *process* of reading.

### **Conclusions and discussion**

To discover how familiar routines are constructed to be meaningful, we took a narrative approach, using the heuristic devices of *evaluations* and *breach* to analyze how a set of 13 memories of familiar routines become tellable. A distinction was found between two types of memories: routines of transition and routines of harmony. In memories of routines of transition, meaning construction is evidently related to the process of change: the temporal

transformation of evaluations within the memory, and to the contrast between the small, instrumental act and the higher purpose of the routine. In these routines this breach sequentially unfolds; the co-construction between researcher and narrator helping to “zoom in” on this breach. Routines of harmony are stable, solely positive moments without a build-up in events. Our findings show how memories of these routines may be constructed to be meaningful through the simultaneous emergence of contrasting, complementary evaluations within the routine - an unusual state of balance or harmony. As shown by the contrast between embedded and external evaluations in the memories, memories of routines of harmony may also be constructed to be meaningful through the co-constructed combination of zooming in and zooming out, i.e. valuing the specific memory against a wider, contrasting context. Though less clear than in memories of routines of transition, in memories of routines of harmony a similar contrast may be implied between the small, utilitarian act and the higher purpose of the routine. In memories of routines of harmony, this breach is non-temporal, the purpose emerging during the act instead of after the act.

Regarding these conclusions, we now reflect on the narrative approach we have taken to analyze meaning construction in memories of familiar routines. First of all, this approach has led to a deepening insight on *purpose* in familiar routines. As shown, there is a large contrast between the ordinariness and instrumentality of the acts in the routines and the higher, ritual purpose that emerges as a result of these acts. Our study thereby confirms that the instrumental and ritual functions are often combined in one routine, empirically supporting Ganzevoort and Roeland (2014) and Spagnola and Fiese (2007), and highlights that higher purpose does not have to be sought in separate religious, cultural or spiritual rituals, but may be found through and within the instrumental routines of ordinary life. Additionally, it shows how these two functions manifest themselves differently in routines of transition and routines of harmony. The awareness of this contrast between the simple,

instrumental act and its higher purpose may be an important factor to meaning construction in familiar routines. In resemblance to sacred objects (Goldstein, 2007), the cultivation of instrumental acts of ordinary life as “gateways to meaning” is a valuable field for further study.

Second, in relation to *coherence*, the narrative approach has shed light on the paradoxical, simultaneous appearance of opposing or contradictory values within familiar routines, thereby deepening insight in the way harmony or wholeness may be experienced. Though the fact that the analysis was performed on generally short memories raises questions about the validity of this finding, polarities (referred to in Maslow’s later works as dichotomy-transcendence, (Maslow, 1971)) are an interesting topic for further study in the field of meaning research and specifically self-transcendence and coherence, showing how either-other thinking may be countered with and-and thinking.

Apart from polarities, of interest to coherence is also the process of “zooming in and out” in the narration process, brought about by the co-construction of narrator and researcher. While the researcher’s focus on zooming in helped point to the breach, the narrator’s zooming out shed light on the value of the routine against a wider context. Only against this wider time frame, that received a different evaluation than the routine itself, did a contrast emerge that accounts for the meaning found in the routine. While the body of literature is clear about the meaning of routines in a context of precarious or negative life events (e.g. Ganzevoort & Roeland, 2014; la Cour et al., 2009), our study shows that this contrast may also be found in everyday life: though there is no explicit, direct precariousness, there may be some degree of disorder or disharmony, as the external evaluations in the memories have pointed out. And while external evaluations were not available in all memories, a context of disharmony may be implied – as we may understand how in the hassle of a busy working mother’s life (memory 6 Storytime), the act of bedtime reading becomes a meaningful,

harmonious moment of connection. The process of zooming out and reframing the routine against the inherent incoherence of ordinary life may be crucial to meaning construction in routines of harmony: in the awareness of disharmony, harmony becomes special.

The process of zooming out or reframing also aligns with the idea of meaning as a process of integrating past, present and future (Baumeister, Vohs, Aaker & Garbinsky, 2013). Here, the question arises if it takes place during the routine, at the time of happening, or only in retrospective. After all, we have studied *memories* of familiar routines, which is inherently a process of looking back. Though our study thereby cannot directly answer this question of real-time or retrospectively experienced meaning, *real-time* reframing is suggested through the numerous embedded evaluations in our data. Further study is necessary to investigate if this is indeed a real-time process, and to provide empirical backing for the meaning-constructing mindset or mindset of wonder, that leads to experiencing meaning within the moment (Schneider, 2004; Vasalou, 2015).

In regard to the purpose of this study, we align with the small story approach, agreeing that there is a great challenge to create a space for telling seemingly ordinary experiences (e.g. Sools 2012). As an intervention, the Wonderful Life Question has proven to fulfill this need, highlighting not only the unique or extreme as meaningful, but also the small and ordinary. Additionally, its dual temporal focus is of interest, as it entails both an orientation to the past (a memory) as well as to the future (the afterlife). The Wonderful Life Question as an intervention thereby relates to “therapy in the poetic dimension” that does not center around recovering the past but around “the generation of a discourse of desire, that is, a discourse that creates images of a future that nurtures hope, excites and entices.” (Gergen, 2006, p.173). As a means to gather data, we were sure to collect familiar routines that are extremely meaningful: The Wonderful Life Question immediately sends us “on holiday” (Freeman, 2006) and activates a process of reflection. However, the lack of extra contextual

and evaluative information in the data have formed a restriction in the reflection on the construction of meaning. Additionally, we question if the amount of memories in our dataset was enough for a saturated analysis, leading to the possibility that there are other ways of meaning construction in familiar routines than in the two types we have found.

Finally, back to the object of our study: the meaning potential of familiar routines. Though raising new questions and leaving open ends, our study has deepened insight in meaning construction in familiar routines - repetitive experiences of paradox, wonder or awe, that open up to something valuable. An impact that possibly befalls us the first time we encounter it, but may be intentionally re-created to re-experience the wonder. These insights may contribute to the development of interventions that counter disenchantment and aid the process of finding meaning in ordinary life. For, while routine may be spiritual poison that kills wonder, the opposite is just as well true: that routine may be a spiritual potion, that brings alive wonder and unveils the meaning of ordinary life.

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