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Mapping Meaning at the Crossroads of Crisis: Narratives of Renewal in the Midst of the Opioid Epidemic

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This study explores the role of meaning in a crisis situation by using Viktor Frankl's tripod of meaning and Matthew Seeger and Timothy Sellnow's narratives of renewal. Drawing from focus groups conducted in a large mid-Atlantic city where community members are embedded in the middle of the opioid crisis, the findings suggest that resiliency in the face of crisis can be encouraged to take root through a mapping of meaning that highlights gratitude and responsibility.

KEYWORDS: renewal narratives; tripod of meaning; opioid epidemic

Applied communication stands at the crossroads of change, uncertainty, and crisis, rolls up its sleeves, and gets to work. Doing applied communication work in this historical moment is like being a map surveyor on an unfamiliar continent. The work is both for those removed from the immediate situation and those in the present and needing to find their way forward. This approach to scholarship reminds me of the Spiritan Congregation members at Duquesne University, the institution where I am currently rooted. The Spiritans carry with them a deep commitment to listening to the Spirit and walking alongside those at the margins of society. This dual commitment to reflection and meaningful action permeates the environment at Duquesne and lends itself to scholarship rooted in praxis, theory-informed action.

Within applied communication, the field of crisis communication has been evolving over the past three decades (Coombs & Holladay, 2011). In part, this is due to the nature of the field itself. With the rise in the number and severity of crises, there has also been increased attention and resources devoted to questions revolving around dealing with crises effectively (Demyanyk et al., 2019; Hsu, 2012). One element of crisis communication is the way that the crisis itself is framed. The framing of a crisis is not

merely publicity or image management for the organizations involved in the crisis. The framing of a crisis can materially impact and shape reality as it unfolds in the face of a crisis (Seeger & Sellnow, 2016).

At the center of this discussion around narrative and its impact on crisis is the work of scholars Matthew Seeger and Timothy L. Sellnow. In their book, *Narratives of Crisis: Telling Stories of Ruin and Renewal*, Seeger and Sellnow explicate several different iterations of crisis narrative. One narrative possibility that shows particular promise for use in the midst of crisis is the "renewal narrative" (Seeger & Sellnow, 2016, p. 81). Renewal narratives are characterized by four commonly shared attributes (Seeger and Sellnow, 2010, p. 90): (1. Renewal narratives "tend to be more provisional and natural than staged and strategic" (Seeger and Sellnow, 2010, p. 90), (2. Renewal narratives are typically focused on what it will take to move forward rather than looking backward to assign blame, (3. Renewal narratives highlight the opportunities that may arise for an organization to recreate itself out of a crisis, (4. And finally, renewal narratives are often initiated by leaders or those in authority. Renewal narratives have the power to reframe crisis in a way that is hope-filled and forward moving. From an applied communication standpoint, one of the challenges of renewal narratives is that they are difficult to predict and even harder to intentionally direct.

Using interviews from community members embedded in a mid-Atlantic city's opioid crisis, this study unpacks Viktor Frankl's "tripod of meaning" as a frame for better understanding the power of renewal narratives to reframe crisis (Frankl, 1967, p. 15). Frankl asserts that life can be made meaningful in a threefold way: (1. Through what we give to life, (2. By what we take from the world, (3. And through the stand, we take toward a fate we can no longer change. Frankl's tripod of meaning draws on an understanding of human psychology known as "logotherapy," or the will to meaning (Frankl, 2006). Frankl's logotherapy is an integral part of the "Third Viennese School of Psychotherapy," in conjunction with Freud's psychoanalysis and Adler's individual psychology (Pytell, 2001). In better understanding the human will to meaning we can begin to better grapple with how narratives of renewal bring meaning to

the surface. Because "crisis creates a meaning vacuum," renewal narratives, by giving meaning in the midst of crisis, are functionally stories that can facilitate a posture of resilience in the face of the inevitable (Seeger and Sellnow, 2010, p. 90).

Consequently, this study asks two questions:

RQ1: How can Frankl's tripod of meaning help to map meaning in a community?

RQ2: How can meaning, through narratives of renewal, contribute to a positive posture toward crisis?

Methodology

The opioid crisis has affected many communities across the United States in a variety of ways. In one mid-Atlantic city, there are four neighborhoods that have been identified as having an abnormally high number of drug overdose deaths per capita (Maier, 2018). This high rate of drug-related deaths is symptomatic of a local government, and nonprofit ecosystem strained to the maximum while trying to cope with the fallout from the opioid crisis. To better understand the unfolding crisis, city officials approached a team who conducted research in two phases. The first phase involved a SOAR analysis that identified Strengths and Opportunities that define Aspirations, which may launch groups into achieving remarkable Results. Out of the first study, a report was published in a nationally recognized, peer-reviewed journal, and city officials were given tools to understand further the wide-reaching effects of the opioid crisis in their community (Maier, 2018).

For the second phase, the research team conducted a series of focus groups rooted in Participatory Ethical Inquiry (PEI). First, a team of graduate and undergraduate students piloted a trial run of this particular methodology. After a successful trial period, the same team conducted two focus groups made up of approximately sixteen people from one of the four neighborhoods that had been previously identified. Over the course of five weeks, the team facilitated groups, sorted data, and cataloged findings. Each session was recorded for transcribing purposes. Throughout the process, the research team helped

the community members participating in the study to identify a set of core values that defined their neighborhood. The team then helped participants connect their community's values to communicative practices that could help protect and promote those values. The exercises that were chosen by the team designing the study purposefully prioritized interactive strategies that facilitated a co-constructive approach between participants (Liamputtong, 2011). For this article's purposes, I am drawing primarily from the data collected through the second phase of the project.

After each session, the audio transcriptions, the work that participants completed on their own, and other auxiliary documentation were collected and cataloged digitally. That data was reviewed for accuracy and then disposed of in an ethical manner, paying attention to privacy and legal considerations. To interact with this study's findings, I will be doing a thematic analysis of the relevant materials.

Results

The first research question considered how Frankl's tripod of meaning can help community members and organizations map meaning in the face of the opioid crisis. In a thematic review of the interview data, three overarching ways of mining meaning from life emerged: recognizing gratitude, a sense of responsibility, and an emerging commitment to a narrative of renewal. These three methods seem to correspond with Frankl's tripod theory of how humans derive meaning in life:

1. Through *what we give to life* (in terms of our creative works).
2. By *what we take* from the world (in terms of our experiencing values).
3. Through *the stand we take* toward a fate we no longer can change" (Frankl, 1967, 15).

Many community members who participated in the study were actively engaged in creatively giving to their community. In one focus group, there were three policemen, a local entrepreneur, and two retirees who were actively engaged in community service. When participants contributed to the conversation, their words or actions were often rooted in the context of the meaning they derived from what they gave to their community. For example, during an exercise, when participants shared what made

their neighborhood feel like home, many participants shared about the volunteer or service-oriented projects they were involved in. One participant said that what made the neighborhood feel like home was a combination of what was given and what was received. “To me, being home is when there’s no stress, and you’re at somebody’s house… They get along with each other and give you help… You know your neighbor’s name, not just their email address… And then you help out.” This kind of story, where giving and receiving are intertwined in relation to meaning, was common across both of the focus groups. In some ways, it is difficult to clearly articulate where giving ends and receiving begins. Another participant shared a story of home that revolved around a community event. The participant was donating time and money to make the event happen. At one point the team putting on the event realized that they had to move the stage that was going to be used for live music later in the day. The participant in our study asked some teenagers to help, they did, and their generosity deeply impacted the participant. For the participant, this is what gave meaning to experiences within the community. This suggests that “meaning does not emerge out of the abstract, but from concrete happenings before us” (Arnett & Arneson, 1999, p. 221). Because meaning comes from what we give to and receive from life, it is important to keep these coordinates in mind when situated within a crisis that threatens to suck meaning out of life like a fir sucks oxygen out of the air.

The third and final leg of Frankl’s tripod of meaning is the stand one takes toward that which one can no longer control. As a reminder, our participants were from one of the most problematic neighborhoods in a large mid-Atlantic city. In many ways, their situation was and still is defined by a state of crisis, particularly in regards to the opioid epidemic. This is where the research found an interesting intersection between renewal narratives and meaning. As the study focused on mapping meaning by highlighting giving and receiving experiences, the focus groups themselves began to organically tell their own story of renewal. This corresponds with Seeger and Sellnow’s understanding of renewal narratives as being unplanned and unscripted. That does not mean that renewal narratives cannot be guided. At one

point in the focus groups, participants were asked to do a simple exercise where they identified problems, opportunities for growth, and good things in their community as thorns, buds, and roses. This exercise generated significant discussion around the future of the community. Rather than becoming caught in a negative cycle, participants were able to talk about the future by highlighting opportunities for their neighborhood to recreate itself.

Discussion

This study examined, through the lens of Frankl's tripod and Seeger and Sellnow's renewal narratives, how individuals uncover meaning in the face of crisis. Through the use of Participatory Ethical Inquiry (PEI), the research team found that participants uncovered meaning in three primary ways: through what they gave to their community, through what they received from their community in terms of values, and through the stand they took in the midst of crisis. These findings support Frankl's conceptualization of how people interact with meaning (Frankl, 2014). This is important because crisis, at its core, is a cancer that attacks meaning (Seeger & Sellnow). Although the physical, psychological, and emotional trauma of crisis is real and must be addressed, it is meaning or a lack of it that is the primary indicator of whether or not a community is capable of resiliency in the face of crisis (Teo et al., 2017; Weber, et al., 2019; Helsloot & Groenendaal, 2017). "The task of the person is to uncover the meaning present in ordinary and extraordinary events of life" (Arnett & Arneson, 1999, p. 222; Parks, 2018). Based on this study's findings, Frankl's tripod of meaning can assist leaders and researchers in mapping where community members are already finding meaning.

Due to the participatory nature of PEI, meaning may also be uncovered in the research process itself. For example, as participants reflected on their experiences regarding what they had given to and received from their community a sense of gratitude and an increased measure of responsibility came to animate the focus groups. By inspiring reflection that led to gratitude and a sense of responsibility early in the research process, the later stages of the study that dealt with the community's posture toward crisis

were characterized by an emerging narrative of renewal. This suggests that an awareness of meaning in the first two stages of the tripod may contribute to an increased ability to find meaning and tap into narratives of renewal when facing the inevitable.

Limitations

The limitations of this study provide multiple opportunities for further research. One such opportunity has to do with the scale of the research. This study was based in one neighborhood of a large mid-Atlantic city. There could be value in expanding the research to other cities and cultural contexts. Another avenue for additional inquiry would be to explore the push and pull of renewal narratives and the tripod of meaning within other crises. The opioid crisis, although urgent, is hardly the only crisis in our society today. New questions and observations may emerge if the study was rooted in the particulars of a crisis like climate change, immigration, or a failure of corporate responsibility.

Additionally, the format of the study itself can be improved upon to increase participant retention and maximize the quality of data points that are collected. In some ways this format for mapping meaning is a way of preparing the existential ground for the planting of renewal narratives. In the future, and as we grapple with the crises around Covid-19, this methodology could be used as a form of theory informed practice for organizations looking for a way forward in the midst of crisis.

Conclusion

An essential part of Duquesne University's Spiritan ethos is the call to walk with those who have been relegated to the margins of society. Moments of crisis have a way of bringing those who are in the midst of it to the end of their mental, spiritual, and physical reserves. When a crisis stretches on without a clear end in sight, like the opioid epidemic, it can be tempting to shift one's focus of attention to new problems that arise. Research methods such as Participatory Ethical Inquiry (PEI) provide a unique opportunity to come alongside individuals, and whole communities, who find themselves stuck and forgotten. Through guided reflection, participants in PEI can be given tools to cultivate a sense of

responsibility, gratitude, and meaning. Although PEI is no guarantee of change, walking with those in the margins opens us to the possibility of seeing miracles emerge. The journey reminds us that even at the crossroads of crisis it is possible to find meaning.

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