The Other Side of the Coin: Growing Up With a Learning Disability

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This study is a narrative analysis of the life history of Dale, a 25-year-old man with a learning disability who received sensory integrative treatment in early childhood. The analysis revealed that Dale's self likely developed through occupational engagement with three interconnected themes: "my mother said" and "parental tricks"; "adrenaline surges" and "hell-raising"; and work, "deal making," and self-construction. These themes depict Dale's self-construction, character development, occupation selection, and adaptation. In addition, these themes revealed how his parents used principles based on his sensory needs and learning problems to organize his childhood occupations and assist with his adaptation. The concept of occupational metamorphosis is also proposed to describe a person's search for and selection of occupations that satisfy biological and sensory needs. This study supports the idea that the complex nature of adaptation can be revealed through an occupational history, and that adaptation is multifaceted and not absolute.

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Human beings strive for adaptation through the use of their minds and bodies in daily occupation (Reilly, 1962). Adaptation is viewed as an occupational engagement that leads to a harmonious synergy between the person and the context, namely environment, culture, and time (Bruner, 1990; Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnick, 1986; Yerxa et al., 1989). The purpose of adaptation is to function effectively socially and to lead a high quality of life (Lazarus, 1974, 1991). Adaptation is constrained by self, space (e.g., family, culture, earth, nature), and time. A retrospective view of adaptiveness of different points in a person's life changes on the basis of cumulative and irreversible effects of life events (Zola, 1982).

Kahana, Fairchild, and Kahana (1982) summarized personality as one important factor in adaptation. Bateson (1991) stated that when a person actively looks for potential benefits in every problem encountered, he or she is using adaptive strategies. Erikson et al. (1986) believed that in adaptation, the person first actively accepts personally constraining life circumstances, such as aging, health, and ability, then acknowledges that some situations are beyond his or her control. Therefore, to be adaptive, the person must accept the personal assets and liabilities he or she uses in challenging encounters. In "every instance of adaptive commerce between a person and the environment" (Lazarus, 1974, p. 321), the person appraises the outcomes' affect on well-being. Lazarus suggested that thinking is a critical component of adaptation. However, in daily life, people do not usually think about adaptation; rather, they think about what they need to do in the time available to them. Adults organize their occupations in their mind or in daily planners or appointment books. Children tend to participate in activities planned by their families or others and when given choices, seek occupations they find pleasurable. It is a common belief that play should be a major theme in childhood occupations (Reilly, 1974). Therefore, a person's occupational history, the accumulation of occupational experiences, are reflections of his or her adaptation processes (Frank, in press).

Situated in "the lexicon of the culture" (Yerxa et al., 1989, p. 5), occupation is a person's actual practice that reflects his or her own beingness within the environmental context. The framework of a life is planned, drafted, and endlessly refined through active participation in daily occupation. Human occupation does not just happen; it is biologically programmed, thought through, constructed, and revised (Yerxa et al., 1989). It shapes the blueprint of a life, conveying the values of family and culture, such as work, home, love, and commitment.
These values unfold and are shared through the examples set by parents, teachers, and friends (Bateson, 1989). The shared practice is how culture is transmitted (Bruner, 1990).

This article describes a narrative analysis, with a modified life history approach (Frank, 1984; Mandelbaum, 1973), of a young man with a learning disability. The study focused on his occupational history, demonstrating his occupational experience in adapting to his disability. The impetus for this study was to explore the long-term outcomes for an adult with a learning disability who had received sensory integrative treatment in childhood.

Method
A narrative approach was used to examine the process of adaptation and at the same time, probe the interpretation of occupational history and concurrent occupational experiences from a personal and cultural viewpoint.

Informant
The informant was Dale, a 25-year-old man with a learning disability whom I had first met in 1993 at the Ayres Clinic in Torrance, California. He consented to be an informant in this study because he wanted to help other persons with learning disabilities.

Procedure
Dale participated in six interviews, with each ranging from 3 to 5 hr, and in four phone interviews between February and April 1993. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. A follow-up interview in December 1993 was the basis for the analysis of occupational metamorphosis. Dale was vigilant, conscientious, and eager to assist in the research process. He wrote down the questions so that he could research information from sources such as his mother or the university where he graduated. Dale sometimes became emotional and tearful during the interviews, seemingly reliving certain feelings as he described his past while struggling to relate a coherent explanation for them.

Analysis
Each paragraph of the transcribed interview that could include meanings, plots, or occupations was coded with key words. Life events were sorted sequentially, and then all key words were inspected to determine similarities among them. Three themes of this life history emerged: "my mother said" and "parental tricks"; "adrenaline surges" and "hell-raising"; and work, "deal making," and self-construction. A second analysis regarding occupational metamorphosis was completed after the follow-up interview because it was related to Dale's selection of occupations.

Results
This section presents Dale's chronological life history in which his occupational history is embedded, the three themes of his life story, and his occupational metamorphosis. The themes and occupational metamorphosis demonstrate the strategies Dale used to adapt to his disability.

Dale's Life History
Dale was born and grew up in Ohio. His father was a librarian and his mother a physical therapist. When Dale was about 2 years old, his mother believed that his motor skills were developing slower than what she had expected. He was also slower in talking and acquiring eye-hand coordination skills than his brother who was a year older. Dale had a bad temper and was hyperactive. His mother described him as being loud, apt to take things apart, and difficult to manage at home.

Elementary school. At age 5, Dale scored 147 on the Stanford-Binet (Terman, 1960), with the vocabulary of an average 9-year-old, but the test revealed that he had many difficulties in tasks requiring quantitative skills. The school administrators initially wanted to place him in a regular education class and, if he did not perform well, planned to place him in a special education class. Fearing that failure would affect his self-esteem, his parents insisted on a special education class for first grade. Dale ended up in a special education class but went to regular reading and English classes. In second grade, Dale's parents enrolled him in regular education classes, which he attended thereafter.

During his early years in the elementary school, Dale's physician prescribed medicine to promote his classroom learning. Dale's mother concealed his learning disability, thinking he would be treated differently by the teachers. According to Dale, his mother "had her ways of helping [him] at home, and [the learning disability] was not that big a deal." Dale's father taught him spelling strategies when driving him to school every day, and his mother worked long evenings on homework with him. He got Bs and Cs on his schoolwork.

When Dale was in 3rd grade, his mother pursued sensory integration treatment for him, and he recalled the treatment as being "pretty fun." He needed, and continues to need, large amounts of vestibular input to satisfy his craving for linear or accelerated movements. Dale's
mother had attended many workshops on learning disability, behavioral modification, sensory integration, and parenting while he was in the elementary school. She bought a “kit” (a sensory integrative type of program) to assist Dale with treatment at home. Dale remembered doing “floor type” of physical activities with his whole family every evening.

Dale’s parents assisted him in engaging in various types of extracurricular activities, such as baseball, skateboarding, and biking. In his last 3 years of elementary school, Dale was eager to be a professional baseball player who earned a lot of money, and he fantasized frequently about being a millionaire. His mother encouraged him and his brother to participate in household work and assisted them in getting involved in work outside their home during summer and winter breaks. Such jobs included raking leaves, shoveling snow, and planting and selling tomatoes. When he was 7 years old, Dale earned his own money to buy things that he liked. Since then, Dale became attached to work and was highly motivated to engage in whatever work became available to him.

Emotionally, Dale remembers feeling upset and frequently breaking things at home. These feelings and behaviors were partly because he could not control his sudden outbursts of temper, an impulsive energy, and partly because he felt out of control in children’s games.

High school. During his high school years, Dale felt frustrated with and resented being in school because he was not there by choice. At home, he could make his case or argue his point with his parents, although not always having his way. He believed that he could not do the same at school and that all his schoolmates were “frivolous.” Dale had a distant and “antagonistic” relationship with his brother, only sharing a love for rock and roll music. His parents occasionally drove him, his brother, and friends to rock concerts, but he paid for the tickets himself.

At the age of 13, Dale gave up the fantasy of becoming a professional baseball player. He started working frequently to make money, and he was proud that he used his own money to buy a large powerful stereo and a 10-speed bicycle. Though he never became involved with drugs, Dale also attempted to grow and sell marijuana.

At age 14, Dale committed numerous criminal offenses, specifically vandalism, with his brother and his friends. The vandalism continued into his senior year, when he was caught by school officials and suspended for 5 days. He also had a few encounters with the police because of vandalism.

At age 17, Dale dated a girl. He was encouraged by both his and her parents, but he did not find the relationship meaningful. He continued to believe that his social skills were underdeveloped and that he did not fit into his peer group. Ultimately, he stopped seeking what he called “peer acceptance.”

College. Dale did not go to parties much or date girls; he studied laboriously and felt in control. He came to realize the impact of his learning disability on his schooling when he saw that his peers did not need to study as hard as he did to get good grades. His learning disability was recognized and compensated for; for example, he was allowed twice the usual time to take tests. Because of difficulties with a required math class, Dale was not accepted into the business school, his preferred major. He then chose psychology as a major only because he found that he could still take a number of marketing classes to satisfy his interest. Throughout the rest of his college years, Dale worried about how he would explain to his prospective job interviewers why he was a psychology major and wanted to be a businessman, but he was able to convince them that his choice of psychology was an asset rather than a liability. At age 22, after 4 1/2 years of college, Dale graduated with a grade point average of 3.59. He had several job offers and accepted a job as a sales representative.

At the time of the study interviews, Dale was living on his own at the time of the interviews. He independently organized his business sales appointments and made his quota of sales every month. His interests included singing, composing rock songs, taking lessons in rock singing, learning to sail, and riding his bicycle. He planned to complete course work toward becoming a massage therapist. Dale thought that his parents were very proud of how he was doing. He believed that he had surpassed his peers in work because he knew how to make and save money. He thought that he had improved in his social skills, but he was still insecure about them. He also worked at being in touch with his emotions. Dale had a sense of satisfaction when he received his paycheck every month, but he did not feel good about his work.

Theme I: “My Mother Said” and “Parental Tricks”

Dale’s mother is a prominent figure throughout his narrative. She orchestrated childhood occupations beneficial to his unique developmental needs; chose and structured occupations to increase his success and imbue family values; and designed tricks that helped Dale to become self-controlled and motivated to engage in productive occupations. Through contacting health professionals and seeking information about Dale’s learning disability, his mother began to make sense of what she saw in his uncontrollable behaviors, bad temper, uncoordinated movement, hyperactivity, and frustration in peer group interaction. At the sensory integration clinic, she learned
many different ways to assist him. According to Dale, she used physical activities, such as "holding [his] arms and feet up and straight when [he] lay on [his] stomach." Knowing that running and riding a bicycle would usually calm him, she showed him how to run off his energy or hyperactivity when he was frustrated with himself or events. She steered him away from football and baseball because he was not coordinated enough to do well in these sports. She instead encouraged running as a sport because he had a better chance of excelling.

Dale's mother also taught him the values of the productive and healthy occupations that had shaped her own life. His refrain of "my mother said" indicated that he had adopted her values. For example, he adopted her formula for success, "My mother said... IF you want to be successful...you need to do well in school and make money and go to college," and her work ethic:

My mother said..."Time and health are the only things you really have on your side...IF you've got some free time, you need to better yourself, you need to work...You can't play until the work is done. You need to go learn something, you need to make yourself valuable, but, but don't go have fun...." It would give me all the stress about wasting time and sleeping and wasting my days...and leisure, just taking it easy is a waste of time in her mind because you couldn't measure any productivity.

She stretched Dale's tolerance for tedious work and showed him what it meant to work hard and persistently with practical experience:

My mother...pushed me beyond pain, I mean, it was terrible. We sat there and did math problem, after math problem, after math problem, and after I thought I could not comprehend another math problem, we had 20 more...that woman is like a drill sergeant....She didn't take no from anybody for anything...especially...her kids.

Dale's parents directed him in activities aimed at making him feel good about himself. He acknowledged that had his mother not stood behind him, he would not have acquired the habit and style that made him able to tackle life's challenges persistently and diligently. He claimed that his mother was successful in instilling work habits in her children through what he called "parental tricks." For example, she created in him the desire to work and support his working motivation, which reinforced his work ethic. The working experience provided Dale with far more social values than she had ever anticipated:

[When I was 7], she bought [my brother and me] used bicycles...[which] created a desire in us to have new bicycles...the best ones in the store....But she wasn't going to give us anything for free because...[we] wouldn't learn...how to work, and that was a terrible thing in her mind...so...she created this want, for a better bicycle and then...she dreamed up a way for her kids to do it...She didn't have to push me outdoors to go, I wanted to shovel snow, I wanted a new bike...She [essentially said], "Wouldn't you like to have this? Go work!"...So we did...and...saved [our] quarters... and at the end of the week, we [would] take it to the bank....Every other kid would buy a [candy] bar, a baseball card, and a [soda], and have nothing.

The house rules were that the parents would provide the necessities, such as clothes, food, and education, and the children would pay for the things they wanted, such as toys, bicycles, and concert tickets. Dale's parents also taught him to curb his impulsiveness in breaking household things; if he acted impulsively and broke his toys, he was losing his own money, a tangible and realistic result of his behaviors. This rule was not only adaptive for Dale (controlling his bad temper and behaviors through accountability), but also helped him gain money management skills. Parental tricks were therefore adaptive in shaping a reflective and less impulsive and violent interaction style.

To summarize, this theme demonstrates how Dale's mother instilled goals, values, and aspirations during his childhood. As a child, his occupational goals were concrete, tangibly affecting his positive view of himself and his attainment of skills that would further his success as an adult (see Theme III). At a young age, he learned to value earning and saving money, and for Dale, money was one way to measure his success. As he grew older, he also heeded his mother's lectures that stressed the selection of occupations that would enhance self-development and health improvement, choosing healthful occupations that calmed his hyperactive impulses (see Theme III and discussion of occupational metamorphosis).

**Theme II: "Adrenaline Surges" and "Hell-Raising"**

Dale frequently referred to his overwhelming impulsiveness and the thrill-seeking behaviors that dominated his childhood and youth. In late childhood, he learned to control his impulsiveness because he had to pay for his destructive behaviors with his own money. In addition, his thrill craving was channeled to bike riding and running. However, later in adolescence, he returned to engaging in socially costly and risky "hell-raising" activities.

Dale remembered often feeling bursting with impulsive energy, which he wanted to let out. For example, he put his hands through a window after oversleeping and missing a favorite cartoon show, and he usually was loud and disorganized at parties or family meetings because when he was overstimulated, he felt a need to release energy right then. When he was "high" or on the verge of allowing his energy to burst forth, his parents usually said to him that he had eaten too much chocolate, was
tired, or had a bad day and told him to take his medicine (methylphenidate). Dale disliked the idea of using medicine to suppress his bursts of energy or to sleep through them. He would rather work it out through occupations, and consequently, his energy would have a release. His thrill seeking and energy outbursts have continued into adulthood.

Bike riding and skateboarding for Dale were what he called “adrenaline surges” because he would feel a “rushing sensation” without the threat of competition. Running on the cross-country team also produced a health-enhancing channel for “bursting out,” fulfilling his need for an adrenaline surge.

Listening to rock and roll music had the same effect. He listened in a participatory style in his room with door closed and the stereo playing loudly as he jumped around and played “air drums” or “air guitar.” When he became an adult, he would work out until he reached a state of extreme physical exhaustion, go sailing, or ride a 10-speed mountain bike. During the interviews, Dale recognized his continued need for these types of activities:

...fast movement and motion....What I like most is when I can feel my...system of balance being used a lot...tested...challenged...feeling my muscles work real hard...it's a tiring thing....There's another sensation involved there that I like...all that whole of energy being put to one task...you feel kind of powerful...it takes so much energy. Not many thoughts are entering your mind...it's kind of an escape...it's also just an interesting sensation....

This description is like that of the optimal experiences stated by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) where persons feel “in control of [their] actions, masters of [their] own fate...a sense of exhilaration, a deep sense of enjoyment that is long cherished” (p. 3). For Dale, stretching his body’s capacities relieved the pressing desire to “explode” and bring a state of peacefulness. Dale’s mother recognized his needs for linear accelerated movements and encouraged movement activities that subsequently led to his discovery of these optimal centering experiences during bicycling and running.

In adolescence, his search for adrenaline rushes reached dangerous peaks when he engaged in school vandalism and bomb making. It also created friendships and a bond between he and his brother that had not previously existed: “We always enjoyed saying we are going to do some hell....It was strange. Whenever we were involved in criminal behavior, we were very good friends, actually, because it was like we needed each other.”

Dale perceived school rules as “control oriented” which made him feel like he was being punished, locked up, and controlled. He claimed that a sense of “unfairness and powerlessness” justified his vandalism and total disregard for the school. His destructive activities also extended beyond the high school setting:

I like everything in grand proportion and all this kaboom....It was a good thing...never really hurt anybody. We made these pipe bombs...and put [them] in trash cans and...in a gas tank of a car [in the junkyard]...

We'd take the fire extinguisher home from school and shoot them off in the field...it is just a charge...We loved to play with all this heavy machinery and tools and equipment in ways that you were not supposed to play with it and that was always fun. You know you can get in trouble. You might kill somebody. Who knows what is going to happen?

I interpreted Dale’s hell-raising as a planned, purposeful activity to seek an adrenaline surge, not as an impulsive act. What Dale called “a charge,” described his feeling of successfully exercising control over the things he destroyed, echoing the feeling of adrenaline surges he experienced when he felt in control of his body. Hell-raising was an occupation that captured elements of optimal experiences. In the broader social context, hell-raising would not be considered adaptive. However, once viewed from the other side of the coin, positive progress can be seen. Dale, to some extent, was engaging in social play activities with peers. According to Corsaro (1985), hell-raising represents “the themes of control and communal sharing...of peer culture” (p. 279). It seems reasonable to conclude that this type of play may have been adaptive because it promoted peer cooperation, advanced planning, and a sense of togetherness. Judgment of adaptation should be individualized and subjective, that is, what is adaptive to one person may not necessarily be adaptive to a society. Finally, as an adolescent, he sought risky “rushes,” not unlike many in his peer group, that provided him some sense of friendship and an outlet for repressed impulses. When the feelings of powerlessness and repression were removed, Dale’s hell-raising occupations disappeared:

All the interest in [hell-raising] evaporated when I graduated from high school because then the world was mine to make something out of it, and I didn’t have people telling me when I was going to do, what I was going to do, and how I was going to do it, and I was allowed to be a human being with a little bit of dignity.

Theme III: Work, “Deal Making,” and Self-Construction

Dale emphasized the part of his life that revolved around work, the evolution of his work ethic, his internship in deal making, and how these all contributed to the formation of his identity. Dale’s life was consistently and largely defined by paid work. Work provided money, a concrete and measurable product that is thought of by some as a standard of achievement:
i wanted a bike that cost $130. at $5 a pop, you [ve] got to shovel a lot of snow to make that much money. and in the meantime, you can’t buy any candy bars because they all cost a quarter... it's a whole active discipline to save it... that's something i don't even think about any more. it's very natural to me...

To Dale as a 7-year-old child with a learning disability, money was a means of acquiring a desired physical object (a bicycle) that could give him the adrenaline surges he craved. Although he believed that raking leaves and shoveling snow were not pleasant jobs, the reward for his effort was concrete, measurable, and meaningful to him because money helped him attain the things he wanted.

His repertoire of work served another benefit—a practice of delayed gratification. Consequently, he learned to impose control over his impulsiveness. He saw that long and continuous effort resulted in achievement (a large quantity of money); ultimately, he came to value persistence:

I'll never forget the day the balance was... $98... $100 to me is this impossible figure in the clouds... i was 8 years old, and i earned $100, nobody gave it to me... when i earned money, i thought i was a part of this world... i felt like i was somebody... or i was a member of [the world]... because all around me were material goods that i wanted....

Dale's most successful social strategy was seeing himself as connected to other persons through business. This strategy was adaptive in developing his sense of affiliation with a larger community. According to Moore (1992), adaptation involves connecting to the environment, affiliation, and yearning for community. Maslow (1954) believed that everybody has a need to feel connected to the surrounding social environment. Through engagement in occupations that contribute to the community, their loved ones, and society, people may experience affiliation (Bowditch & Buono, 1982). Dale's successful connection with work bolstered his sense of self-worth and counteracted the negative self-concept he had developed through difficult interactions with the physical and social world.

Dale learned the beginnings of what he called "deal making" when he was 8 years old and running a tomato business with his brother. They planted the tomato plants and sold them to a middleman. The middleman left after 3 years of business with them, leaving them with 600 tomato plants to sell. With the help of their mother, Dale and his brother learned to make deals directly with the restaurant owners to sell their produce:

She drove us and gave us the idea what to say... these adults [said] "yeah, we'll buy them from you...

Dealing directly with adults (i.e., talking seriously to them and convincing them of what he had to offer) was thrilling to Dale. His verbal skills excelled, and his peers called him "Mr. X" to indicate his adult-like manner.

Dale believed that he had an "economic relationship" with his mother. After a number of verbal warnings that she was not satisfied with the sweeping work he did at home, she tore up the contract she had with him. When he impulsively broke things in the house, his parents added the cost to his debt list. When he and his brother wanted to go to a rock concert, and they wanted their parents to drive them there, the boys had to "lobby [their] parents a few weeks ahead of time":

I learned bargaining through my mother, mainly... and doing deals—negotiating these sweeping contracts, or going to concerts... you couldn't just walk up to my mom and say "i want something." you have to figure out what you're going to give and what you're going to get... it's always a deal.

Deal making taught Dale responsibility and accountability. Making and saving money and talking to adults in a convincing way were skills that helped him overcome the misery of learning math and feeling bad about not being popular or in control. However, these skills also contributed to his feeling like a misfit in his childhood:

My mom taught me the way adults operated. the problem [was] that i had to spend the next 17 years living in a child's world... my childhood was misspent... if i could go work... i would have been in business and made money sooner....

Our identities come from the characters and themes of our family members (Moore, 1992) and are shaped in the midst of family interaction and activities (Bruner, 1990). Dale's work habits, qualities, and sense of self were characterized by those of his family (also in Theme I), and his self-construction (character) gradually evolved through his childhood occupations. The following illustrates the discipline Dale acquired through the hard work:

... many times when i was carrying golf bags, my shoulders were killing me, and i was very tired [and] sick of doing it... like in running... you're only half-way through the race, [and in pain], and after a point, your mind goes to a different level, and you just say "ok, we're going."... marathon [runners] will tell you, after the first 10 miles, you might as well run 50 because once you've gotten through the first wall of pain, you can just go....

Dale's sense of self seems to be anchored in themes of work and money. In 5th grade, he dreamed of being a baseball player because he knew baseball players made a lot of money. Dale never took drugs because it was too expensive, but he did attempt to plant marijuana as a cash crop. He spent his high school summer breaks...
building swimming pools to make money, and he felt superior to his peers because he earned enough money to purchase his own used truck. He said that he “misspent” his time in high school because he could not use the time spent in school to make money (i.e., to build an identity and feel good about himself) nor could he learn valuable things (e.g., about work and money making). Instead, he felt controlled and not respected while in high school:

...if...teachers could give you some respect and treat you like an adult, I would have acted like one and performed very well... [When you] give kids all sorts of freedom and a lot of accountability...they can do all kinds of things...

For Dale, not being able to work is like not having an identity. For example, while in college, he broke his shoulder and could not work for the first time. “It was miserable. No work, no money, and no identity.”

The goal of making more money firmly stuck in his mind. Dale’s purpose in college was to prepare for a career that enabled him to continue to make money, because his parents “set [him] up to believe that college is very, very hard and that it is a ticket to success...and success is measured by money making.” Nevertheless, Dale seemed to have no sense that work itself could be inspiring, stimulating, and enjoyable. He was not aware that people could take pleasure in the daily activities of work and have fun with the doing aspect of work. It seemed to him that work was a drudgery, performed only for material reward.

To summarize, this theme depicts how Dale’s occupations of money making and deal making were constructive in creating a strong sense of self. Dale related numerous instances of his development as “active discipline” where he learned to save money and to modulate his own sensory discomfort to persist to the end of a job or activity. Learning this active discipline laid the foundation for work skills that he developed and refined through making deals with his family and running his own businesses. Work led him to feel a sense of achievement, so much so that he believed that his childhood could have been better spent if he had been given more responsibilities and gone to work sooner.

Occupational Metamorphosis

One year after the initial interview, Dale became a full-time massage therapist. He described other massage therapists as always complaining that the customers were leeches because they “suck your energy.” On the contrary, he felt calm, soothed, and organized when he was doing massages. Although it was physical labor, he felt content as a massage therapist. Interestingly, this change of career seemed better suited to his sensory needs, draining off his excess energy and giving him intense proprioceptive and tactile input.

From my own observation, occupational metamorphosis occurs when a person chooses an occupation that matches his or her personal needs, including sensory cravings. Dale sought and eventually found, beyond his leisure occupations, a career that was beneficial in helping him manage both his high energy level and sensory diet (Wilbarger, 1995). A person’s optimal level of arousal and performance is moderated by proper sensory input; for example, working out is a meaningful sensory diet (Wilbarger, 1995). For Dale, the work of massage therapy can be viewed as a powerful, heavy work out that is an extension of his childhood occupations. This occupational engagement not only satisfies Dale’s sensory diet, but also provides him a chance to be helpful to clients, building his social relationship skills. It is important to Dale that what he does makes a difference to others. Through massage therapy, he can make others feel better, whereas as a sales representative, he did not believe that he had contributed anything to others. Therefore, Dale’s occupational metamorphosis was adaptive.

Discussion

Three major points regarding occupation and adaptation emerged from Dale’s narrative: (a) choices of occupations and the biological drives that support them are connected; (b) character develops through the parental structuring of occupation and one’s selection of occupation; and (c) seeing the other side of the coin or taking an alternative position when facing life events and occupational choices is adaptive.

Regarding the first point, Dale centered his choices of occupations on his sensory needs, such as organized childhood occupations that provided needed sensory experiences; self-initiated adrenaline surges as a teenager; and work as a massage therapist in adulthood, with leisure time spent biking and running. In childhood, Dale’s activities, including high drill strategies to manage his learning and self-control problems, assisted in regulating his impulsive outbursts to master the biological limitations of his learning disability. These sensory-based occupations and high drill strategies enabled him to adapt to the social contexts of school, college, and community life. The sensory-based occupations treated Dale’s sensory integrative problems and organized his overaroused behaviors. Dale used sensory-based occupations to engage in optimal experiences that satisfied his sensory craving. He also selected a career partially on the basis of these biological forces.
Regarding the second point, Dale’s self and character were constructed through occupational engagement. His family blueprint of values that centered on work were transmitted to him through example, practice, and the provision of opportunities to work. Dale’s engagement in various money-making occupational experiences in childhood cultivated his sense of self; work identity and work ethics; ability to delay gratification; and self-control, persistence, and goal orientation. The sense of achievement gained through occupational experiences counteracted the insecurities resulting from his learning disability and hyperactivity.

The third point is illustrated in Dale’s recognition that not being able to participate in some occupations because of his learning disability or life events led to other occupational choices with positive outcomes. For example, although he did not enjoy being drilled on math problems, these homework sessions built sound work habits and persistence, and although his lack of coordination precluded engagements in team sports, other physical activities provided the adrenaline rushes he needed.

Dale’s interpretation during the interviews of some seemingly negative life events suggests the importance of taking another perspective on the concept of adaptation itself, recognizing that it is multifaceted and not absolute. Dale’s adaptation involved interpreting incidents and events normally viewed as negative as having a positive side, which is similar to Bateson’s (1991) idea of adaptation.

Implications for Practice

The ultimate goal of occupational therapy is to promote the client’s adaptation (King, 1978; Schkade & Schultz, 1992). Knowing that occupational choice can have biological bases (e.g., the need to have sensory processing in linear acceleration), occupational therapists can discuss with clients the selection of occupations that modulate or meet their expressed biological needs. Therapists can assist clients in choosing occupations that meet a particular sensory diet, through the organization of daily routines in synch with the person’s biological clock, or through occupations that elicit optimal experiences.

By fostering flexible views of occupation selection and life events despite the physical limitations of the client’s disability, occupational therapists can assist clients in examining the experience with a positive stance. Such a shift in points of view can direct attention to the self and facilitate adaptive responses (Salovey & Rodin, 1985).

It may be beneficial to add work to the repertoire of childhood occupations, although traditionally, play is viewed as the primary childhood occupation (Reilly, 1974). The value of work in fostering qualities such as delaying gratification, persistence, positive identity, and sound work habits should not be overlooked. Occupational therapists can help identify proper household and nonhousehold work for pediatric clients while knowing the skills of the clients and viewing their family as their immediate cultural context.

Use of enjoyable occupations builds skills and develops strength. In Dale’s case, a loss of social connectedness and affiliation with the community because of his learning disability continued into his adulthood (Osman, 1982). Fortunately, his repertoire of enjoyable occupations can be used to bridge the gap of his social skills. For Dale, perhaps suggesting that he bike with a bike club could assist him in participating in an occupation that both builds on his biologically driven choices and assists him in building social connections. On the basis of this notion, occupational therapists can act as long-term consultants for persons with sensory processing problems and learning disabilities.

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