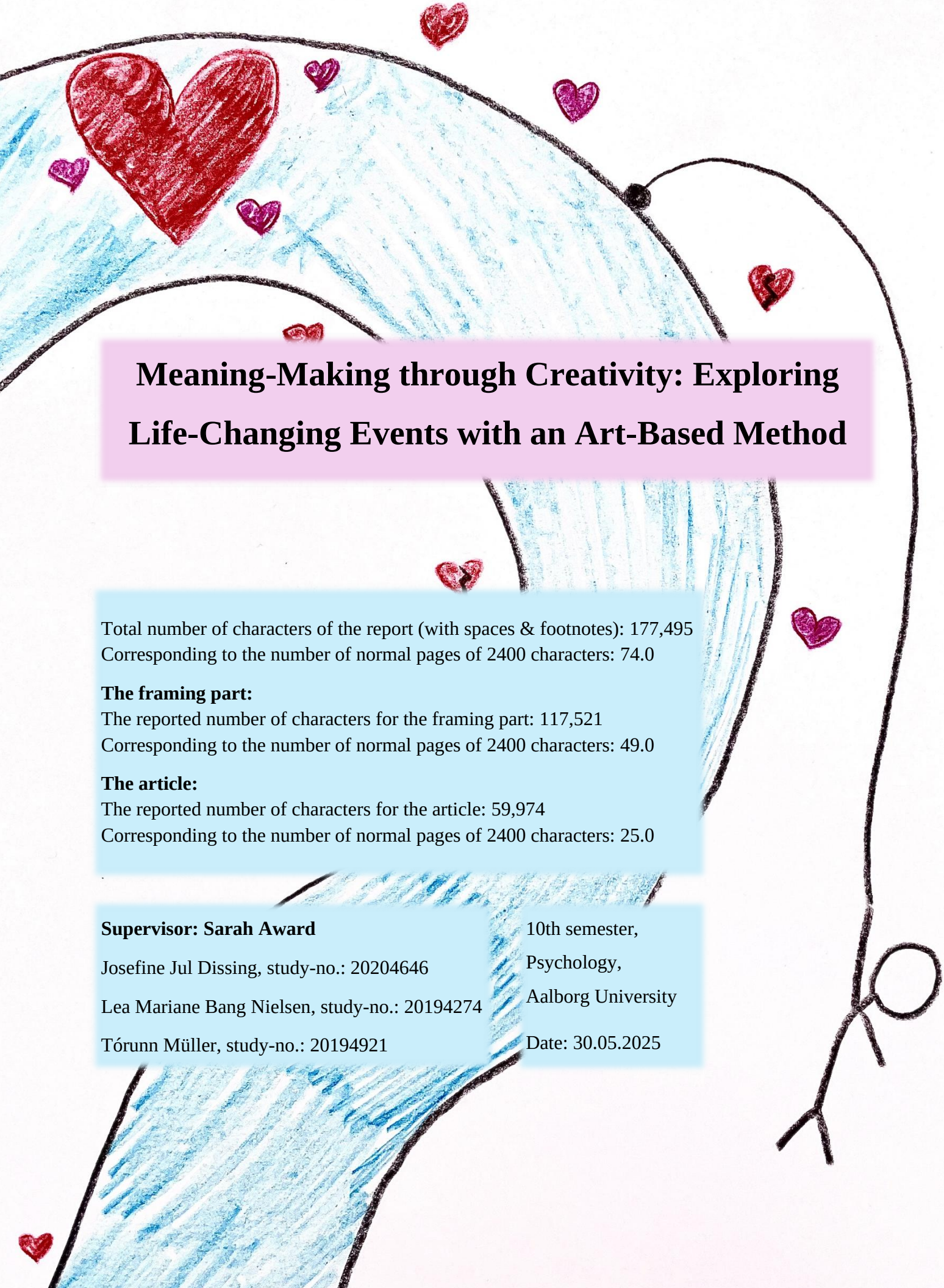

Meaning-Making through Creativity: Exploring Life-Changing Events with an Art-Based Method

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Resume

Dette speciale undersøger den kunstbaserede metode 'the River of Life' (ROL), og formålet med studiet er at undersøge, hvordan en kunstbaseret metode kan facilitere de meningsskabende processer, der foregår i relation til livsomvæltende begivenheder. Studiet er baseret på antagelsen om, at livet kan ses som en (livs)flod, hvor visse begivenheder kan trigge en overgangsproces, hvori meningsdannelse er afgørende for at der igen er en følelse af balance i livet. Foruden kortlægning og evaluering af ROL som faciliterende metode, er der også fokus på, hvilke koncepter, der synes relevante for meningsskabende processer. Ydermere forelægges mulighederne for at udvikle fundene i forskningsøjemed, så de faciliterende egenskaber ved ROL kan anvendes i mere terapeutiske sammenhænge, hvor emnerne kan være svære at sætte ord på.

Der anvendes en kvalitativ tilgang i dette speciale, for at kunne opretholde en nuanceret og detaljeret beskrivelse af informanternes egne narrativer. Specialet anvender en narrativ tilgang, med fokus på konstruktionen af viden gennem fortællingerne i interviewene. Det er samtidig subjektivt, hvad der opleves som livsomvæltende for et individ, men baseret på tidligere projekter og eksisterende forskning, tillader vi os at antage det at blive forælder som værende en livsomvæltende begivenhed, hvorfor dette er den udvalgte case for specialet. Datamaterialet blev indsamlet på baggrund af seks semi-strukturerede interviews, hvor samtalen var baseret på ROL, hvor deres tegnede livsflod fungerede som fælles tredje. Data blev bearbejdet gennem tematisk analyse, hvor de valgte temaer blev 1) visualizing who I am through life changes, 2) identifying sources of support, samt 3) "I did not see it until I drew it" (se Artikel). Vores undersøgelse indikerede at den kunstbaserede metode ROL fungerede fyldestgørende som facilitator og fælles tredje for meningsskabelsesprocesserne relateret til livsomvæltende begivenheder. Floden gav muligheden for at åbne op og få indsigter og refleksioner i forbindelse med anvendelsen af inkluderede symboler og metaforer. Disse fund vurderes relevante at undersøge yderligere både indenfor forskning og mere praktiske områder såsom terapi.

Abstract

This thesis aims to examine how the art-based method ‘the River of Life’ (ROL) can facilitate the meaning-making processes that occur in relation to life-changing events. Our study is based upon the assumption that life can be seen as a river (of life), where certain events can trigger a transition process in which meaning-making is crucial for re-establishing a sense of balance in life. In addition to mapping and evaluating ROL as a facilitative method, there is also focus on concepts relevant to meaning-making processes. Furthermore, the potential for developing these findings in a research context are outlined so the facilitative qualities of ROL can be applied in more therapeutic settings, where articulating experiences might be challenging.

A qualitative approach is employed in our thesis in order to provide a nuanced and detailed description of the informants’ own narratives. This thesis adopts a narrative perspective, with a focus on the construction of knowledge through the interactions during the interviews. It is inherently subjective what is perceived as life-changing for an individual but based on our previous projects and the existing research, we allow ourselves to assume that becoming a parent is perceived as a life-changing event – therefore it has been chosen as the case study for this thesis. The data-material was collected through six semi-structured interviews, where the conversations were based on the ROL, serving as a common third. The data was analyzed through a thematic analysis, leading to the identification of three main themes: 1) visualizing who I am through life changes, 2) identifying sources of support, and 3) “I did not see it until I drew it” (see Article). Our study emphasized the facilitating role of the art-based method ROL, and how this could serve as a the mentioned common third in communication. The river revealed feelings and thoughts hard to express through words and also provided access to new insights. In light of these findings, future research within research settings as well as therapeutic settings are recommended.

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1. Introduction

Focus on mental health is as high as ever, and yet this seems to be steadily decreasing – inhibiting a meaningful productive living (Ludowyke et al., 2024, p. 45; WHO, 2022). When concentrating on mental health, Smith (2002) states that wellbeing concerns adaptation, acceptance and sense-making, which he finds achievable through art (p. 1432f). Rogers (1996) further emphasizes how alternative approaches to biomedicine need to be more prioritized (p. 73f). Additionally, a Health Evidence Network Synthesis from WHO highlighted art as a possible significant tool in preventing mental and physical health (Vaartio-Rajalin et al., 2021). Creativity has also been referred to as a 'healing, life-affirming activity' in relation to living with mental health conditions (Gillam, 2018 according to Ludowyke et al., 2024, p. 46). These aspects all indicate an increasing interest in the possible implication of art as a tool in relation to mental health challenges. We share this interest in mental health and find alternative ways fascinating to explore. Furthermore, the former indications about comparing wellbeing to meaning-making align with our understanding of this as a significant factor in relation to living a meaningful life. Given the abovementioned, the aim of this thesis is therefore to create a better understanding of how art-based methods can help facilitate individuals' processes of meaning-making in their lives within research settings. With this, we aim to contribute with new knowledge that can support future production of new standardized methods regarding art. Additionally, the findings could be interesting to explore in a more therapeutic manner, where art may play a meaningful role in relation to improving the individual's wellbeing in life.

This method and the perspectives mentioned above on integrating art in relation to wellbeing form the foundation for this thesis. A proposed way of understanding the psychology of the lifespan, is to study the uniqueness of the individual's life within the social and cultural milieu – thus giving each individual a unique melody of living (Zittoun et al., 2013). Here, semiotic processes and imagination are highlighted as means to draw on earlier experiences, choose alternatives, and plan the future (Zittoun et al., 2013, p. 2f). This way of describing a melody as a metaphor for the lifespan aligns with our understanding in this thesis. Instead of a melody as a symbol of life, we use the metaphor of a river, building upon the River of Life (ROL) method. Here, the course of the river along with the symbols inside and around it reflect both positive

and negative elements as well as turning points in life (Denov & Shevell, 2021; Howard, 2023; Moussa, 2009; Prasko et al., 2024; Warming et al., 2023). Taking all these considerations concerning art, wellbeing, and the lifespan into account, the problem formulation for this thesis is:

How can the art-based method 'the River of Life' facilitate the meaning-making processes in relation to life-changing events?

To answer this problem formulation properly, we find it relevant to further explore the relevant concepts incorporated in the meaning-making processes and highlight how the facilitating role of ROL can be found in the participants' narratives. We therefore present the following research questions:

- What psychological processes seem relevant in relation to making meaning of life-changing events?
- In what ways are the facilitating function of the arts-based method reflected in the participants' narratives about their life-changing events?

The research questions will be sought answered throughout this thesis, which consists of two main components: a framing part and a research article. First introduced is the research article, which is conducted according to the general norms for a scientifical paper, including the aim, background, methods, findings, and discussion of the study. Since the article includes the findings of the problem formulation and research question, it is placed early on. Secondly, the remaining sections consist of the framing part of this thesis, elaborating on the theoretical, methodological and ethical considerations deemed relevant to the research topic. Furthermore, additional discussion points relevant for the framing part are presented, ending with a summary of this thesis.

1.1 Clarification

Prior to answering this problem formulation and the related research questions mentioned above, it is essential to clarify what is meant. An elaboration of this, along with other relevant psychological phenomena, will be found in the following section.

We understand a life-changing event as a turning point in the individual's life course, that necessitates a transformation, marking a distinction between 'before' and 'after'

that event. In this thesis, meaning-making is understood as the processes by which individuals attempt to make sense of their life-changing events. These processes involve various elements, such as identity, supportive elements, and social others. Identity is understood as a dynamic series of interrelated self-narratives connecting past, present, and future in order to construct a meaningful life and make sense of who one is within a social and cultural context. Also, we are interested in exploring how elements such as specific symbols, objects, or social others can influence the meaning-making of the life-changing event of becoming a parent. Our understandings are based upon the theoretical assumptions of Glynis M. Breakwell, Dan P. McAdams and Tania Zittoun, which will be elaborated in the theoretical section (see section 3.1).

Furthermore, life changing events are not predetermined – it is the subjective experience of the event, that determines whether to clarify it this way (Awad, 2021, pp. 86–89). Despite having this in mind, we chose the case of becoming a parent. Knowing that not every parent experiences it as a life-changing event, we still believe that this is an event where many would acknowledge it as such based upon our earlier projects on this topic as well as existing literature (see section 3.2).

Creativity and art-based methods encompasses a wide range of approaches (see section 4.1), along with our chosen art-based ROL method. In this thesis, the individual's river is a metaphorical representation of their entire life course, though still emphasizing the particular experience of becoming a parent – consequently, earlier and later life-changing events are explored in relation to this event.

To summarize the above, this thesis strives to explore and elaborate on how and through which processes the individual makes meaning of life-changing events – in this specific case the event of becoming a parent and related events – while also unfolding how an art-based method, the ROL method, can facilitate these meaning-making processes.

Meaning-Making through Creativity: Exploring Life-Changing Events Facilitated through the Art-based Method "the River of Life"

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Abstract: Within the field of qualitative research, there has been increasing interest in art-based methods with debates around their relevance and contribution to more established qualitative approaches. This article contributes to this ongoing discussion by examining the facilitative potential of the specific art-based method *The River of Life* (ROL). With a narrative approach, our study combines ROL and the well-known semi-structured interview, in which the river serves as a facilitation tool for meaning-making during periods marked by life-changing events. Six Danish women participated in individual interviews, sharing their experience of becoming mothers. The article begins with an introduction to the topic and an overview of the applied theoretical framework, followed by a description of the chosen research method and process. The findings in this article are intended to support the development of more general and requested guidelines for future research. Additionally, the use of ROL in a therapeutic context is discussed – particularly in situations where individuals may find it difficult to verbalize their experiences.

Keywords: Art-based methods, the River of Life, meaning-making, identity, life-changing events.

Introduction

In recent years, art-based methods have been of growing interest within qualitative research, particularly due to their potential in accessing complex experiences (Denov & Shevell, 2021; Prasko et al., 2024; Vaartio-Rajalin et al., 2021; Warming et al., 2023). These creative methods have been praised among others for their ability to elicit rich data, expand understanding and foster reflective engagement (Chilton & Leavy, 2014; Chilton & Scotti, 2014; Ingram, 2023; Woollett et al., 2023). Still, their methodological legitimacy and contributions remain under debate, and more detailed and standardized methods are needed (Callinan & Coyne, 2018; Chilton & Leavy, 2020) alongside a combination with more traditional data collection methods in order to expand the validity of studies (Denov & Shevell, 2021). Our study strives to add knowledge to this ongoing discussion by elaborating on the methodological and meaning-making potential of the specific art-based method *The River of*

Life (ROL) combined with the well-known semi-structured interview. It is believed that the use of metaphors, symbols, and a visual structure enable individuals to reframe, and make sense of their experience, while often revealing aspects difficult to articulate through language alone (Howard, 2023; Ingram, 2023; Moussa, 2009). In our study, we aim to address how the art-based method 'the River of Life' can facilitate the meaning-making processes in relation to life-changing events. The aim is supported by the following research questions:

1) What psychological processes are relevant in relation to making meaning of life-changing events?

2) In what ways are the facilitating function of the art-based method reflected in the participant's narratives about their life-changing events?

Thus, this study examines processes of meaning-making in times of disruption. In addition, this study explores how ROL can help facilitate those meaning-making processes and thereby contribute to further studies or therapy.

We understand life-changing events as turning points in individuals' lives, that challenge their sense of continuity and meaning-making and force them to establish new patterns. In this case, focus is chosen to be the specific event of becoming a parent, since this seems to indicate disruptions in various ways (Choma et al., 2024; Schytt & Hildingsson, 2011; Young et al., 2022). Further, meaning-making is understood as the processes by which individuals attempt to re-establish continuity in their lives within their lived context. These processes involve identity, imagination, social others, and supportive elements, which will be elaborated in the background section.

Background

This study draws on a narrative theoretical approach rooted in social constructivism. Our narrative approach emphasizes storytelling as the way individuals make sense of life. This way, social reality and knowledge are co-constructed within culturally and socially situated narratives, while still acknowledging the existence of a physical reality (Collin, 2015; Crossley, 2000; Spector-Mersel, 2010). In line with this, McAdams (2001) emphasizes how life stories have an impact on meaning-making and identity. Similarly, we examine how the participants construct meaning in life and identity through their life narratives.

In order to unfold these meaning-making processes, with the specific focus on the life-changing event of becoming a parent, our study draws upon perspectives from McAdams's (2001) *life story model of identity*, Glynis M. Breakwell's (2015) *Identity Process Theory* (IPT), and Tania Zittoun's (2006) sociocultural developmental framework. These perspectives are presented in the following sections.

Identity and life-changing events

Our study shares McAdams's (2001) emphasis on life stories as psychosocially constructed and meaning-making narratives, coauthored by the individual and the situated, cultural context, and norms. These life stories create coherence between past, present, and future, and facilitate resilience and transformation during times marked by life-changing events (McAdams, 1995, 2001). Life stories are related to the third of three independent and non-hierarchically organized levels of personality: *dispositional traits*, *personal concerns*, and *identity as a life story* (McAdams, 1995, 1996). Level three indicates how and to what extent

the individual creates unity, purpose, and meaning in life. Especially in Western societies, the challenging question 'who am I?' becomes essential to answer (McAdams, 1995), since identity has become an everchanging project that individuals work on in everyday social life – thus, meaning-making through narratives is an essential tool in constructing coherence during times of change (McAdams, 1996). This view on identity aligns with the applied ROL method, where the river metaphorically represents the life course of an individual, serving as a facilitator to this life story.

Whereas McAdams (2001) emphasizes construction and meaning-making in relation to narrative identity, Breakwell (2015) highlights identity as dynamically structured and protected through ongoing processes of *assimilation-accommodation* and *evaluation*, with guidance from four core identity principles; *continuity, distinctiveness, self-esteem,* and *self-efficacy*. Assimilation implies incorporation of new elements into one's identity, and accommodation modifies existing structures to integrate new inputs (Breakwell, 2015; Breakwell et al., 2022). The uphold of the core identity principles relies on their *identity resilience*, which is the balance and interplay between these principles (Breakwell et al., 2022). Thus, identity resilience becomes vital in coping with life challenges (Forbes et al., 2024). If one or more core identity principles are compromised, *identity threat* emerges, which individuals can manage through coping-strategies from three interrelated levels: *intra-psychic, interpersonal,* and *intergroup* (Breakwell, 2015; Breakwell et al., 2022).

To further elaborate on resources to adaption, Zittoun's (2006) emphasis on growth, development, and learning in times of disruptions are essential. Central to her framework are *ruptures*, which occur when already established ways of acting, interpreting, or understanding are no longer sufficient (Zittoun et al., 2013). Ruptures can be either positive, negative, expected, or unexpected and caused by internal or external events (Zittoun, 2006). The extent of a rupture depends on the numbers of *spheres of experiences* being affected – domains such as work, family, or education (Zittoun et al., 2013). This aligns with IPT's identity resilience, and it could be an argument in identifying transitioning into parenthood as life-changing events, since having a child affects many areas of the individual's life.

Ruptures initiate *transitions,* which are dynamic processes of psychological reorientation through three mutually interrelated and reinforcing processes: *learning processes, identity processes,* and *sense-making* (Zittoun et al., 2013). Various resources support transitions: *institutional resources, interpersonal relationships* (Zittoun, 2012), *symbolic resources* (Zittoun, 2006), and *imagination* (Zittoun et al., 2013; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2016). Transitions end when the individual regains internal coherence through new ways of acting, being in and making sense of the changed conditions (Zittoun et al., 2013).

To summarize, experience of ruptures, threats to identity, and disruptions in one's life story are subjective and never determined by standard phases or events. Yet, findings in present research within the chosen case of transitioning to parenthood indicate that this is often experienced as a disruption (Choma et al., 2024; Schytt & Hildingsson, 2011; Young et al., 2022). Accordingly, we focus on parenthood as a central case for examining processes of meaning-making with ROL serving as a facilitator.

Methods

In this article, the aim is to investigate how the specific art-based method ROL can serve as a tool for research to facilitate the processes of meaning-making during life-changing events. Therefore, a combination of the well-known semi-structured interview with the relatively unfamiliar and less applied ROL method is used as a facilitating tool in this study. Further, it is the intention to contribute to research in this area in order to enable more well-defined guidelines for the ROL method in the future. The ROL method applied in this article integrates elements from the guidelines of Howard (2023) and Moussa (2009), our own pilot study from fall 2024, and the studies of Denov and Shevell (2021), Prasko et al. (2024) and Warming et al. (2023). The included studies focus on children or youth, and the main part of the included studies and guidelines also focus on groups in various ways – in this study, we focus on adults and the interactions between only the participant, the interviewer and the observer.

What unites these former studies is that the ROL method encompasses a metaphor for the individual's whole lifespan with positive as well as negative turning points, drawn as a river with bends, narrower passages, and various symbolic elements, reflecting the dynamics and complexity of the processes in life. Likewise in this study, the participants were asked to draw their life as a river with fluctuations and symbols such as stones, trees, waves, flowers e.g. symbolizing turning points, obstacles, opportunities, and significant social others. They were informed to include both the life-changing event of becoming a mother as well as relevant turning points prior to and after. Thus, the river became a constructed life narrative told through a visual method which enriches and expands the traditional semi-structured interview format and brings in a complementary layer of meaning. This combination is also preferred in the study by Warming et al. (2023). Also, Carmody (2023) argues that ROL is used in a more comprehensively manner when combined with a semi-structured interview, since the interview guide facilitates additional questions regarding the drawing and the participants lives. Thus, combining these two approaches in our study makes the interviewee able to construct and tell their life story based on their drawn river, while the interviewer still has the capacity to further elaborate on topics mentioned during the interview.

Data collection

Participants were recruited from a post on the authors' personal accounts and relevant groups on Facebook (see attachment A), searching for individuals in Northern Jutland willing to share their first-time experience of becoming a parent. In order to ensure adaptation to this transition, but also a detailed reconstruction, this life-changing event required a time frame of six months to five years. Since focus regarded the specific rupture of becoming a parent, no limitations such as age or gender were made. In order to provide the participants with an option to reflect on their decision to participate, each received a phone call, explaining the details for the interview. Additionally, the informed consent statement was also sent in advance. A total of six women from mid-twenties to mid-thirties were interviewed individually, either in their own or in one of the authors' homes to create a calm and trustful atmosphere. The participants ranged in both socioeconomic status and number of children.

To set the stage, each interview began with an introduction of the interviewer and observer followed by an overview of the purpose of this study and an outline of the interview. Before drawing, the participant was briefly shown examples on how to draw their river. However, it was explicitly communicated that there was no right or wrong way to do so. Subsequently an introduction speech was held to help the participant visualize what to include in the drawing. The participant was then given 30 minutes alone to draw their river with colored pencils without disturbance, except a midway check-in to ensure that the setup was alright and proceeding as expected. When finished drawing the interviewer and observer reentered the room, initiating the interview. This was recorded for later transcription using the AI program "Transcription" and then the draft were reviewed and corrected according to the included transcription guidelines (see attachment D). Each author transcribed their unattended interview in order to enhance a comprehensive understanding of all data. In this study, we followed the national ethical guidelines as well as the EU GDPR, concerning the protection of personal data.

Analysis

A thematic analysis tool based upon Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases step-by-step guide was chosen for its flexibility in application to different approaches, and to help organize, describe, and interpret the dataset. The different themes and subthemes emerging were organized through Attride-Stirling's (2001) *thematic network analysis*. For this article, the themes included represented both content of the interview and direct associations with the facilitative role of ROL (see figure 1).

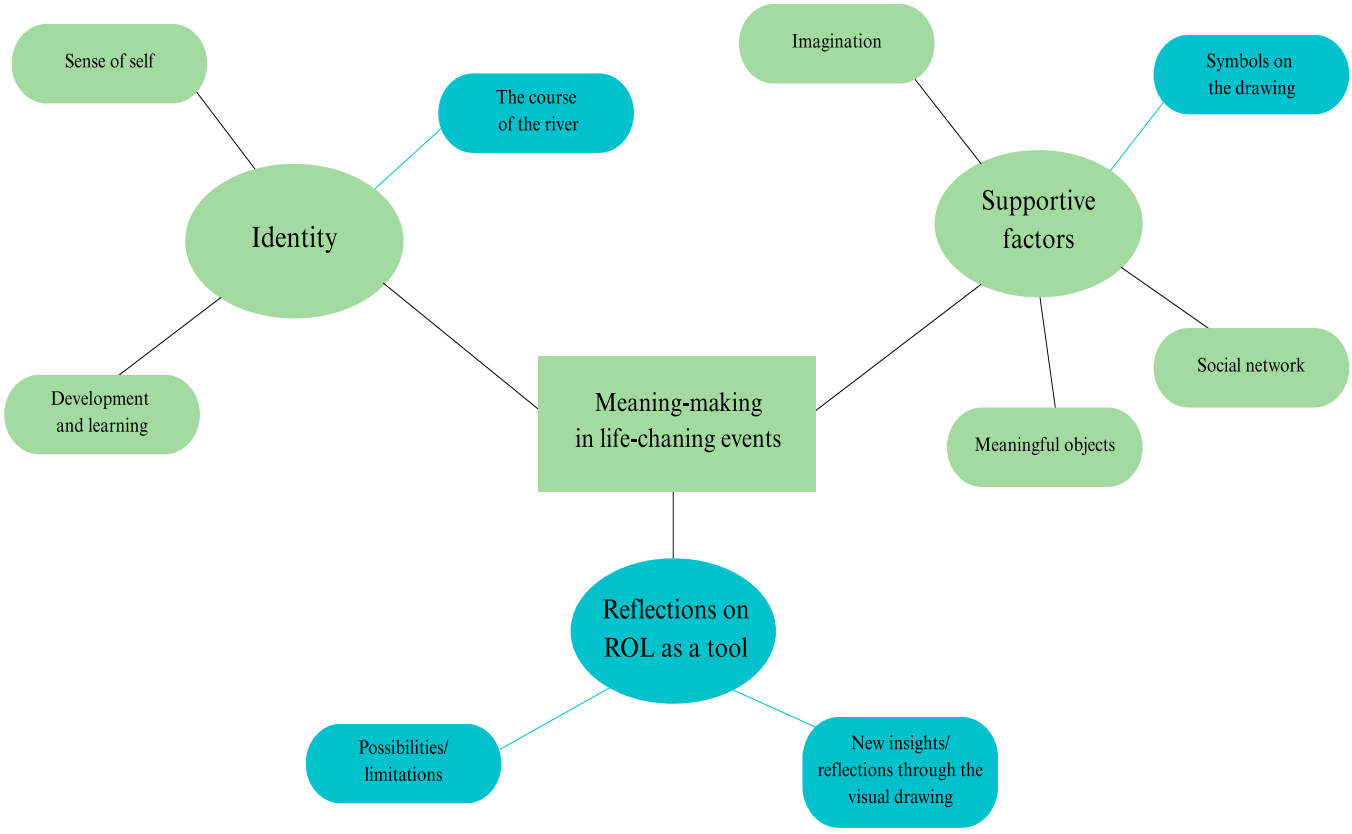

Figure 1: Network Analysis

Findings

The included findings have been organized around three emerging themes: 1) Visualizing who I am through life changes, 2) Identifying sources of support and 3) "I did not see it until I drew it*".* The selected quotations are drawn from the full-length interviews with the participants, and the transcripts can be found in Attachment F-K. In the quotations, square brackets […] indicate omitted content, while parentheses (…) signify pauses in the participants narration during the interviews.

Visualizing who I am through life changes

The six ROL drawings each illustrated the participants' life story, with different symbols, widths, and tones of colors, indicating various objects, people, and events in their lives (see figure 2.). Though focusing on their experience of becoming a parent, they also included other relevant life-changing events, thus the whole course of the river constituted a metaphor of their life story. In all interviews, participants highlighted becoming a parent as one of the turning points in their river. Anna referred to the drawing, when she characterized birth itself as the most challenging and unexpected part of the experience. She symbolized it as a waterfall to indicate the new chapter in life:

> […] maybe that's where the biggest change is. That waterfall […] a real break or a new chapter, or whatever one would call it. Then I've drawn [daughters' name] as like a little water lily [refers to the drawing] sort of floating down my river [laughs a bit] (Attachment F, ll. 64-68).

It seemed that to Anna, the changes appeared early on from the birth of her daughter, as illustrated with a symbol in her drawing. The early appearance of change was also the case with Barbara, who experienced not being able to show her newborn to her family as her turning point: "But we weren't allowed visitors. And THAT was what broke me." (Attachment G, ll. 116f). She illustrated this critical factor as a narrowing in her river, painted in dark blue colors (see figure 2.B). Whereas these ruptures were triggered by rather concrete events such as childbirth and visitation bans, turning points could also be rooted in more emotional grounds – for instance, having to relate to a new human being, shifting the focus away from oneself. This perspective was described in different ways in the interviews with both Clara, Eva, and Fay. For instance, Eva stated: "I think it's a thing to go through a life change when having a child, because then the child's needs always come first" (Attachment J, ll. 444-446). In addition to the child's needs being more important than one's own, the question about self and roles also appeared to some of the participants. Clara described a process of choosing between different versions of self:

> And I also felt like I had lost a bit of myself when I had a child, because I was like 'I can't focus on myself'. Now it's just about having this other, another thing, this little being, that has needs – and whose needs have to come before your own […] should I still be Clara, who just had a child, or was I supposed to become someone entirely different now, to adapt to this other being?' That's how I remember thinking a lot beforehand, but I very quickly realized that I couldn't exist in it if I tried to be something else (Attachment H, ll. 293-304).

Whereas Clara highlighted the evaluations of choosing either an extended or entirely new version of self, Dora described her experience as losing herself, her former life, and the following task of reclaiming some of her former self in her new life:

> I actually think it distinguishes pretty clear with a line – the feeling of the life you had before, and the feeling of the life you have now. […] because you find a new role of yourself, but you've also lost everything you were before […] Um, it's as if there hasn't really been space for that. Um, but you try to make space for it, by sort of climbing up [refers to drawing] (Attachment I, ll. 56-62).

Dora also described how making space for the lost self is hard: "But it's more about having LOST yourself in that way (…) and then trying to get her back again. That's the complex part, I think." (Attachment I, ll. 235-237). It seemed that there was a distinction between the former and present self, and Dora had illustrated this sense of 'losing oneself' in her drawing by depicting herself as someone hanging outside her river, trying to climb back into it (see figure 2.D). Dora further described that she worked on navigating in the challenge of balancing her roles:

> I try to make room for it being fifty-fifty Dora and fifty-fifty mother. So before, it was 100% Dora (…) then it became 100% mother. And that was the case for 8-9 months. And then I started working. And gradually, I'm trying to find myself again […] So I would say that now I'm [thinking] 70% mother and 30% Dora (Attachment I, ll. 245-252).

Dora was still in the process of finding a balance between being herself and being a mother, and she pointed out work as a means to achieve this. Anna, Eva, and Fay also emphasized work as something important to them – while at the same time, they acknowledged that their priorities in relation to work had shifted, which Anna also reflected on:

> And I think I've actually figured out that being with [daughter's name] and family life. Well. That's something that really brings me joy. So that's probably something I'll focus more on. And now it sounds like I'm not happy with my job at all [laughs shortly]. But I am, too (Attachment F, ll. 109-112).

It seemed that there was a transition from primary identifying as a career woman, to increasingly adopting the role of a mother as the dominant identity, making the career secondary. Fay also emphasized earlier experiences in all as a significant factor in finding herself, which she illustrated as waves in her river (see figure 2.F):

> […] it's been part of shaping me, figuring out, well, who am I, and what is it that I want, um, with my life. And now I'm in a place where I feel like I've gotten what I wanted out of it. And that calms me (Attachment K, ll. 318-384).

The questions about ‘who am I?’ and ‘what do I want with my life?’ also appeared in Eva’s life story, where she stated that her time at university had been an important factor to answering these questions: “It’s probably only at that point I settle into, ‘who am I really? And what do I actually want?’” (Attachment J, l. 307f). Fay and Eva both revealed events throughout their lifespan that influenced them differently, which was also the case for the other participants. For example, Anna mentioned using her experiences from her first child to prepare for the next: “We have given it some thoughts. We’ve talked about how he can support me better. And (…) we’ve done some more birth preparation and so on” (Attachment F, ll. 469-472). Whereas Anna used learnings from her first birth, Eva’s insights gained from her experience during her period of stress contributed to focus on not ending up in the same place again: “To me, it’s really mostly about, ‘how do I avoid ending down there again?’ Like ‘what did I learn from that experience?’” (Attachment J, ll. 633f). Experiences from earlier life-changing events could be used in different ways. To Anna and Eva, it seemed important to use their former experience in relation to prepare for the future. In the interview with Fay, it emerged, that she already used her experience in her present: “[…] I’m much more at ease with it now. Now that we’ve had our second child and (…) well, she’s actually allowed to scream a bit and (…) whereas with the first one it was like, ‘oh no, he absolutely

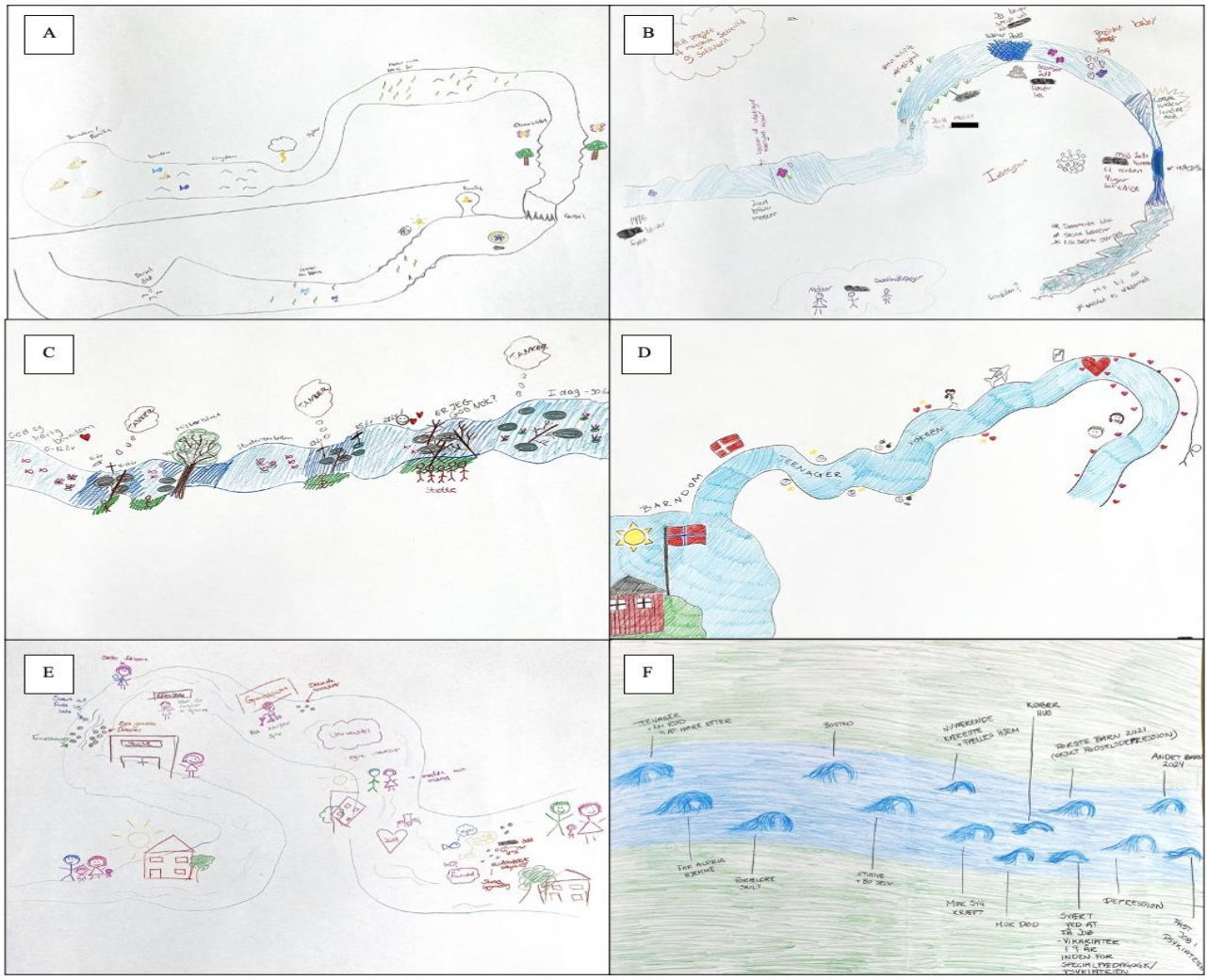

Figure 2: The Participants’ Drawings

mustn't cry'" (Attachment K, ll. 296-299). It appeared that Fay was calmer in response to her second child's behavior, as she drew on previous experiences. It also seemed that these events could not be isolated but were coherent with each other.

In addition to different ways of using learnings from past life-changing events, it seemed that one could also experience ruptures in very different ways. Clara both compared and distinguished between the ruptures of losing her hair and becoming a mother, which she also illustrated in her drawing (see figure 2.C). The tree indicated a harder and more negative obstacle of dealing with the loss of her hair, than the obstacles related to her new role as a mother, depicted as branches: "So it's more like a lot of branches (…) I feel like that tree, if we're speaking more symbolically [laughs shortly], you can't really just get through it, but I feel like you kind of can with the branches." (Attachment H, ll. 340-342). It appeared that Clara distinguished between different ruptures and symbolized this with different obstacles. Though every participant stated the event of becoming a mother as a life-changing event, the extent of this change differed.

Throughout the abovementioned sections, it seemed that in times of lifechanging events – here transitioning to parenthood – changes appeared in relation to one's feeling of identity and navigating in one's life story in order to make coherence.

Identifying sources of support

A recurring theme among the interviewed mothers was the contrast between their expectations of motherhood and the reality they encountered. For many, the transition was more overwhelming and emotional than they had imagined. Anna, for example, looked back on her pregnancy as a time filled with excitement and hope. In her ROL drawing, she included butterflies and trees to express how joyful and: "[…] almost naïve" (Attachment F, l. 50) she felt. However, this feeling was met with a very different reality during birth. While referring to her ROL drawing, she described the experience as:

> I just found it really REALLY hard, and it hurt a lot, and I was actually kind of, kind of in shock about (…) giving birth, so it's a bit like a waterfall where you fall onto some rocks […] (Attachment F, ll. 58-61).

Similar reflections were found in Clara's story, where the image she had built up during pregnancy fell short when facing reality. Just like Anna, Clara looked back on her pregnancy as positive and with a clearer structure and expected the transition to motherhood to be similar. Yet her expectations, shaped partly by what she had seen on social media, was challenged: "[…] I like having a clear answer (…) and also facts, like, this is what I see, and this is what I get" (Attachment H, ll. 223-225). Clara further added: "I found it really hard. Because it just didn't match reality for me" (Attachment H, l. 232f). This disconnect also led to more ambivalent thoughts: "We got what we really wanted, but was this really what we wanted?" (Attachment H, ll. 190-192). Clara's reflections illustrated how conflicting feelings could arise, even when motherhood had been a long wish. This gap between expectations and reality was expressed more directly from Fay: "You can think about how it might be, but you just can't know in advance […] because damn, it's hard" (Attachment K, ll. 255-257). In contrast to these inconsistencies, Eva felt that her experience aligned with her expectations: "I

actually, think it matched my expectations quite well" (Attachment J, l. 219f). Still, she emphasized just how significant the shift was: "It's been a huge life change to have her. But I think, for us, it was also a wish. So, it was something we were ready to (…) set things aside for" (Attachment J, ll. 785-787). Thus, motherhood unfolded as hoped for Eva, but it still demanded a significant personal adjustment. Across the interviews, the transition into motherhood appeared as a time shaped by contrasts – between expectations and reality, control and unpredictability. For some, this led to confusion or doubt, for others to readjustment. To navigate these tensions, the women drew on various supportive factors that helped them find stability within unfamiliar roles.

A crucial source of support across the interviews was the women's social networks, including family, friends, and professionals. Dora, for instance, emphasized how her mother and mother-in-law, both included in her drawing, became central in supporting her transition: "[…] my mom and [partner's name]'s mom [laughs a little], have been a HUGE resourceful network for us. And they still are" (Attachment I, ll. 47-49). Similarly, Anna relied on her family for support: her mother-in-law, a midwife, offered not only practical advice but also emotional reassurance. Her support also came from long-standing friendships, symbolized as fish in her ROL drawing:

> And I think it's actually been my friends from primary school, the ones I've known my whole life, who (…) yeah, I've been able see myself in. And we have talked about what our experiences have been like becoming a mother and so on (Attachment F, ll. 86-89).

The value of shared experiences could also be found in Clara's reflections, where participating in baby motor skills and swimming classes provided her with a sense of belonging:

> […] it was those kind of things that got you out and made you feel like 'okay, you're not just stuck behind four walls' […] And you're with others whose kids are also screaming and pooping and refusing to eat. And then you kind of felt like you were part of something, and not just really, like, pushed aside" (Attachment H, ll. 489-493).

While Clara found validation in peer groups, Fay mentioned a former teacher who continued to be an important figure: "I have a teacher who actually supports me a lot, someone I still talk to too this day, even though it's been 10 years" (Attachment K, l. 92f). Through these various connections, the mothers created supportive networks that helped them find meaning, adapt, and move forward during a time of change.

To some of the participants, reflecting on the future also became a strategy to stay grounded. Eva, drawing from difficult experiences with breastfeeding her first child, articulated a clear alternative for her second child: "I have also told him [husband] that 'I don't want to breastfeed at any cost', then I'd rather bottle feed, so we can share it together" (Attachment J, ll. 433-435). Eva's reflections also extended beyond specific tasks and into broader life envisions: "[…] it's not like we stop dreaming because we now have kids. Our dreams just become different" (Attachment J, l. 487f). Similarly, Dora reflected on how her earlier dreams of adventure did not end but changed, due to motherhood. In her ROL drawing, she

represented herself with a backpack (see figure 2.D) and described her life as adventurous: "[…] it sounds really cliché, but my life is like an adventure" (Attachment I, l. 32). She talked about including her child into her and her partner's shared interests, especially motorsports and travel: "And we have slowly started bringing [daughter's name] along. […] it's great that we get out fix, and she's a part of it too" (Attachment I, ll. 311-313). While Eva and Dora found strength in imagining adaptable futures, Barbara struggled to envision a way forward:

> It was probably just kind of, giving up. I mean (…) yeah. It. It was hard to see beyond the sleepless nights with a boy who wouldn't sleep. […] So, it was. It was very uncertain what the future would bring (Attachment G, ll. 452-456).

To Barbara, the immediate challenges seemed to narrow the horizon of possibilities. Across these various examples, imagining different futures emerged as part of navigating the transformation of motherhood. In this transformation, several of the participants also described how certain familiar elements, objects, or practices took on special meaning. Clara shared how returning to familiar objects, like getting dressed and putting on make-up, helped her in reconnecting with herself again after giving birth:

> […] even though I was just at home, I actually put on makeup and wore something comfortable, like slightly nicer clothes, where I really felt like myself. And I just, when I looked at myself I the mirror, you suddenly had a different body, and you had to deal with that, but you still (…) wore some of the clothes I wore before I got pregnant (Attachment H, ll. 508-513).

Although Clara's body had changed after pregnancy, familiar objects helped her re-establish a sense of continuity. She associated this with an earlier experience of losing her hair. Make-up, clothes and styling her wig as she used to with her own hair became a strategy to maintain a feeling of self. Similarly, Dora described how listening to music she used to enjoy before becoming a mother helped stay connected with her former self:

> […] it can also be on the way home, listening to music you used to listen to, instead of listening to "Lille Bille" and "Ramasjang" and "Mimi Sjang" and all those children's songs […] Being able to listen to something you recognize yourself in from before you became a mother. So, you're trying to bring that part of yourself into the new life again (Attachment I, ll. 218-222).

Reflecting on these practices, Dora pointed out how small, everyday rituals offered a source of continuity as she navigated her transition. Eva described how returning to work after maternity leave helped her reconnect with a part of herself beyond the demands of motherhood: "Today I'm HAPPY [uplifted tone] that I've gone back to work, because I can really feel that it does something for ME. I mean, it gives me back my own identity again" (Attachment J, ll. 524-527). To Eva, work appeared as a way of regaining a sense of continuity too her past self. Barbara also reflected on how engaging with social media, particularly Instagram, became part of her motherhood journey. In her

ROL drawing, she included Instagram as a resource that helped her navigate this period: "It's also wonderful to be a mom. I love being a mom. But I also really want to share the things that weigh on me" (Attachment G, ll. 323f). Barbara described how sharing both the positive and challenging aspects became important – not only for her own processing, but also for supporting others, like her best friend who later decided she wanted to become a mother: "It makes me happy to know. That even if a lot of the hard parts get shared […] it still gave her the thought: 'It's damn great. I want to be a mom'" (Attachment G, ll. 333-335). Throughout the participants' stories it became clear that elements, objects, and practices thus offered important ways for the mothers to stay connected to familiar parts of themselves while navigating the transformations that followed entering motherhood.

Across the diverse experiences, the participants demonstrated how coping with the life-changing event of transitioning to motherhood was an ongoing, multifaceted process. Through social relations, imaginative reflection, and the preservation of familiar elements, they found ways to sustain a sense of continuity, navigate emotional challenges, and gradually reshape their everyday lives as mothers in order to live meaningfully.

"I did not see it until I drew it"

This section highlights how the meaning-making process is facilitated through the ROL method. While elements of ROL are included in the previous themes, it is still considered important to center and emphasize how the method influenced this study, which can be seen in the participants experience with ROL – the insights the participants gained during or after the drawing, how it supported them in telling their story, and the possibilities or limitations they found in the method.

Most participants initially expressed skepticism and found it difficult when asked to draw a river representing their life. The uncertainty of not knowing what to draw or where to begin made the participants hesitate about drawing, as seen with Barbara, who got: "[…] the feeling of doing it wrong." (Attachment G, ll. 549-550). Despite their doubt about the task, all six participants completed their drawing. Notably, many of them expressed how they experienced new insights or reflections about their life throughout the process. These moments of recognition were highlighted during the interview, where it became clear that the act of drawing their life had aroused a notable self-reflection. When asked why a section of Anna's river was changed from a straight line to a wavy one, she mentioned: "So, to begin with, [I] thought, that: 'well, everything went well'. But when I think back, it was still, like, a more turbulent period than you would (…) have thought" (Attachment F, ll. 171-173). Drawing the river induced a reflection of her past experiences, which lead her to realize how this period may not have been as positive as originally believed.

Similar reflections were seen with Clara, who also changed parts of her drawing: "[…] this bank over here, I made [points to the drawing], I originally drew a blue line. But I did not think it was fitting, because I actually thought it was too *wide* to (…), how bad I felt." (Attachment H, ll. 592-594). In this case, the original drawing did not fully illustrate how Clara actually felt at that time – something she came to notice during the process of drawing the river. These reflections emerged during the creative process, where others arose afterwards, as the participants gained an overall perspective of their

complete life story. These perspectives were clearly illustrated in Barbara's statement after reflecting on her drawing as a whole:

> […] right now, I can see: 'Had there just been a round dot down there [points at the end of the drawing]. Then it is actually a question mark, that I have drawn.' And uhm (…) I think, that is a bit scary. (Attachment G, ll. 550-553).

Gaining an overview of the drawing made her question whether something subconsciously affected the way she drew her life. The fact that she drew a question mark frightened her, since she interpreted it as a representation of uncertainty about the future. In contrast to Barbara, the other participants' reflections had a more positive perspective in general. For instance, Eva focused on the new insights she gained about herself throughout the drawing (Attachment J, ll. 926-935). Only Fay did not feel that she received any new insight from the drawing: "[…] in this [life process], I have been working – or in these years, in many years – I have worked a lot with myself also. So, I do not think, that there is something that surprised me." (Attachment K, ll. 537-539). The many years of processing her life had allowed for a greater understanding of herself, making new insights hard to obtain.

The drawing itself also supported several participants in facilitating their thoughts and feelings. Throughout the interviews, the participants referred to their drawing between 10 to 15 times, except Fay, who only referred to her drawing three times – this did not include the times where the interviewer urged the discussion of the drawing. When the participants referred to their drawings, it was typically to highlight key points in their stories or to explain the reasoning behind drawing specific aspects of their life. Furthermore, ROL became a tool to navigate their life story. The facilitating role of the drawing was clearly seen in the case of Dora, who explained how:

> I think maybe, I notice how much all these hearts, they are present [referring to the drawing] now, versus earlier in my life. Yes, and it fits well with my feelings inside. (…) What a great – and it sounds very much like a cliché again – what a great love I have for my little *family* […] (Attachment I, ll. 621-624).

The hearts she drew as symbols alongside her river helped express her feelings and how her life had changed. In this way, the drawing facilitated an emotional reflection of her life and what held greater importance to her now, without her being fully aware of this at the beginning. This facilitating effect was also reflected more indirectly in the participants' use of metaphors related to ROL. Anna, for example, tried to explain: "[…] when [children] get a bit older, becomes a bit more independent. And they do. And they also get their own river and like […]" (Attachment F, ll. 451-453). She used the river as a metaphor to explain how her daughter one day gets a life of her own.

Another example was Dora drawing herself outside her river, hanging on a string, which: "[…] shows, how I *lost* myself in it all, uhm, but I did not lose myself entirely, so I am crawling a bit up again" (Attachment I, ll. 44-46). This showed a symbolic way of using her own river to further explain her feelings and experiences during this period. In these examples, it seems that the metaphorical or symbolic use of the river had enabled access to

further reflections, possibly helping to facilitate the expression of feelings and thoughts that could be hard to explain. The metaphorical understanding of life as a river also had Eva reflect on the drawing of her life: "[…] when you draw a life. (…) It is not just [straight] lines. It is always twisted or turned, with ups and downs, right?" (Attachment J, l. 1010f). She utilized the course of the river to create a point of life, not being as straightforward as otherwise expected.

Both challenges and possibilities appeared in relation to ROL. As mentioned earlier, the participants initially expressed insecurity about the drawing part. However, at the end of the interview, when the participants were given the opportunity to freely express their thoughts surrounding the experience with drawing the river, many described the process as surprisingly positive. Clara stated that it was difficult to draw the river in the beginning, but talking from it was easy – she further explained how:

> Well, I think most definitely that it is *easy* to have something to talk from, […] like, I can think of many more things, when you are sitting and looking at it. And the symbolism in 'what those this even mean' […] (Attachment H, ll. 677-680).

Additionally, both Barbara, Eva, and Fay supported the idea that the drawing acted as a common third. This provided both the participants and the interviewer with a focus point, while also helping facilitate the conversation. Another positive experience with the method was found with Anna, who expressed that: "[…] I think it was very good to close your eyes and then get that reflection over (…) uhm, what you should think about" (Attachment F, l. 796f). Anna highlighted the opening visualization part (see Attachment C), as it initiated a reflection process about what aspects to include and helped her create the river.

When reflecting on ROL as a method, Barbara stated that: "Well I think, if I had to think that I should sit at a therapy session (…) and had to draw. Then I think that I would get into something that I might not have thought had a meaning." (attachment G, ll. 578-580). In Barbara's experience, the method could be of great therapeutical potential to help uncover previously undiscovered aspects of people's lives.

This point was further supported by other interviews, in which the participants highlighted the ROL's helpfulness in creating an overview and possibly deeper understanding of their life. Dora mentioned: "So it is maybe also easier to find myself, when you get a bigger understanding of, what it is, you are doing" (Attachment I, ll. 609-610) and further elaborated it with: "[…] It has really just helped with, not thinking, that it is so *confusing*. It is still complex sometimes, but it is not as *confusing*. So that is a great feeling!" (Attachment I, ll. 613-615). In her case, the ROL method provided her with a better insight into her life, which created a positive feeling. These positive experiences were found in all six interviews, though improvements will be considered in the section concerning future studies.

The ROL method was considered a valuable tool for the participants, providing them with an opportunity to share their stories and highlight what they found to be the most important aspects of life. This visual method offered an overview of their life story, causing a process of reflection both during and after creating the river – which led them to new insights of their lives.

Discussion

Each participant used the ROL drawing as a metaphor for life. ROL served as a scaffold for the interview, beginning with a general narrative of the entire river and the events the participant found relevant for their story and then delving into the specific life-changing event of becoming a parent. These stories can be aligned with McAdams's life story model of identity. In this model, identity is constructed through narrative meaning-making and reflections over the past (McLean & Breen, 2009), where the ROL drawing can be seen as facilitating this overview of the past to make sense and coherence when reflecting and talking about it in the interview. McAdams (1995, 2001) describes identity as a dynamic way of organizing the self and combining the past, present, and future in a coherent, sense-making narration of self. This also came clear in the drawings, as the participants only drew the events in the river, they found relevant to include in their life story regarding their experience of becoming a mother.

In the findings, it was highlighted how some of the participants tried to navigate questions about who they were, and what they wanted to do with their lives after becoming a mother. This can further be elaborated through McAdams's (1995) third level of personality, where in Western societies the question about who one is becomes crucial in finding unity, meaning and purpose in life. This life-changing event of becoming a parent creates a mismatch in the participant's existing life narratives and sense-making. Thus, the participants are required to revise their series of stories and reconstruct their narratives in a way that re-establishes a sense of coherence and personal meaning. This can further explain, why some of the participants reflected on, how they used to see themselves as career women, but now they prioritize their child and family above anything. The child's impact on the mother's life triggered a redefinition of identity, aimed at restoring coherence. These new priorities were visualized in their rivers in various ways, for example some of the participants drew flowers or hearts indicating their child's impact, and one of the mothers drew a broader river from the time of birth, emphasizing the new chapter of becoming a family as more meaningful than being an individual.

In several of the interviews, the participants described a sense of losing themselves and feeling disoriented. One even depicted herself in her ROL drawing as 'hanging outside her river', trying to find her way back. Such expressions can be interpreted as moments of identity threat (Breakwell, 2015), where one of the four core identity principles, continuity, was challenged. Zittoun (2006) conceptualizes such moments as ruptures – disruptions of existing meaning frameworks that open a transitional space for reorientation. For instance, Miller (2007) reported comparable dynamics and found that first-time mothers often struggled with feelings of disconnection when their lived experiences of motherhood failed to align with dominant ideas or expectations. The ROL drawings in our study seemed to help participants give form to such experiences throughout their drawings, making abstract disruptions visible. The ruptures were for instance represented visually by drawing a waterfall or a very dark and narrow river highlighting how this period of life was especially hard. However, some participants depicted this turning point in life more positively, illustrating this with more heartwarming symbols such as flowers and hearts. In addition, the symbols helped illustrate aspects difficult for the participants to

fully express, such as strong emotions. For example, hearts were drawn to symbolize their deep love for their relatives, and different colors in the same part of the river reflected inner chaotic feelings.

While some reflections were immediate, others unfolded gradually as participants revisited their drawings, sometimes noticing symbolic elements they had not initially been aware of. One participant realized that the shape of her river resembled a question mark, which sparked reflection on emotional uncertainty. In other cases, participants altered visual elements mid-process to better reflect previously overlooked emotional nuances – in this way ROL may have provided them with new insights during and after the drawing process. For example, it became clear to one participant when drawing her river that giving birth had actually been harder than thought. These spontaneous recognitions and evolving interpretations further suggest that the ROL method served both as a narrative structure and as a reflective catalyst for meaning-making. As Zittoun (2006) notes, meaning-making involves linking past experiences and future meaning – a process which the ROL appeared to facilitate by offering a visual and symbolic field for reinterpretation. In this study, the ROL method thus seemed to foster symbolic engagement that extended beyond what could initially be articulated in words. This echoes Scotti and Gerber's (2017) findings, where visual montage helped first-time mothers express emotional complexity and access 'beyond-words' experiences.

Most participants in our study did not seem to perceive these disruptions as a permanent loss of identity, but rather as temporary or fragmented. Over time, many expressed how they began to reclaim a sense of being 'someone' again beyond the maternal role, gradually integrating their new experiences into a broader and evolving sense of self. These processes reflect what Breakwell (2015) describes as intrapsychic coping, through the mechanisms of assimilation-accommodation and evaluation. In terms of assimilation-accommodations, participants navigated the threats by either deflecting its implications or gradually restricting their identity to accommodate their new maternal experiences. Evaluation was also evident, as participants redefined the significance of certain identity elements, such as motherhood, making them more acceptable towards developing their self-understandings. This suggests that coping can help restore or preserve threatened identity principles, supporting prior findings that link such strategies to identity resilience (Breakwell et al., 2022) These patterns align with findings from Ben-Ari et al. (2009), who demonstrated that mothers with stronger internal and relational resources tended to perceive the transition to motherhood as less threatening and experienced greater psychological wellbeing. In contrast, those with fewer internal resources experienced the transition as more costly. Notably, mothers who perceived the transition as challenging but had strong external resources reported greater growth. These distinctions reflect the variation of coping observed in our study, where the participants' coping strategies influenced how disruptions were navigated. Strong external resources were often depicted in the drawing, through symbols such as fish, ducks, and flowers. This process of reclaiming coherence in life was rarely immediate or linear. Rather, it unfolded dynamically and was often marked by a gradual rediscovery of selves beyond the maternal roles.

Disruptions associated with becoming a mother appeared to arise from both internal and external sources. Some participants described ruptures in their self-understanding, while others described how their daily routines had been altered. Whether experienced as inner or outer ruptures, these disruptions often created opportunities for reflections. As Zittoun (2006) argues, ruptures can initiate transitions that eventually lead to reconfiguration. This resonates with the findings of our study, where the participants' stories came to reflect not only what had been lost or challenged, but also what could be reimagined or newly integrated. The former described metaphor of 'climbing back into the river' illustrates not a return to a former self, but the establishment of a new trajectory that embraces change while seeking coherence and making sense. This dynamic aligns with McAdams (1995) conceptualization of identity as a life story, where individuals create meaning by linking past, present, and future. In this light, the ruptures experienced by the participants can be viewed as narrative turning points, a moment where their life stories adapted through revisiting them. To some, this involved redefining central values or priorities. For others, it meant reactivating previously meaningful roles and routines. In these processes the objects, habits, and sensory elements such as clothing, rituals, and music, seemed to help bridge the gap between their pre- and post-motherhood lives. Some participants explicitly described using such resources and emphasized their emotional significance. When meaningfully engaged with, these elements functioned as symbolic resources (Zittoun, 2006). Such acts may appear minor, but their symbolic function allowed the participants to reconnect with familiar aspects of themselves, supporting them in remembering who they were. In one case, a participant described how familiar music helped her 'feel like herself again' – not as an expression of nostalgia, but as a considered act of meaning-making that mediated change. In this way, symbolic resources were not seen as resistance to transformation, but as bridges supporting continuity across a shifting sense of self. This supports Zittoun's (2006) view on how symbolic resources can facilitate transitional processes. The impact of these resources is evident in the participants' drawn symbols.

In addition to symbolic resources, participants frequently emphasized the importance of social others and institutional resources when navigating their transition. Social others were often depicted in the participants drawings as deeply meaningful in their unfolding life stories. In a time of profound change, relational relationships provided a safe and reflective space, echoing Zittoun's (2012) view on how interpersonal resources can provide a sense of continuity. Family members and close friends were among the most frequently mentioned figures, often depicted in their ROL drawings. One participant illustrated her family as ducks in a pound, while another drew wide riverbanks with significant others positioned along the edge, symbolizing something 'to hold on to'. Likewise, institutional support seemed meaningful for some participants, particularly in one case, where a trusted health visitor was depicted in the ROL drawing. The inclusion of an external person in one's life story suggests more than temporary support; it points to lasting narrative imprint. Reflecting on their ROL drawings and seeing how they depicted supportive figures throughout their life stories, several participants expressed that it made them realize just how meaningful these significant others had been. This points to a potential facilitative aspect of the ROL method

itself, as it seemed to foster self-reflection and narrative awareness during the interview.

The value of interpersonal resources became especially salient when considering the depth of the rupture. While some participants described motherhood as primarily emotionally disruptive, others experienced simultaneous ruptures across personal, relational, and environmental domains. Most participants were able to maintain continuity in other spheres of life, often within their social networks. However, for one participant, disruption across multiple spheres seemed to make it difficult to envision a way forward. This underscores Awad's (2021) argument that when ruptures span across multiple spheres, the process of meaning-making can be challenged. In addition, this aligns with Breakwell's (2015) identity resilience, where the many changes in the mothers' lives challenge the maintenance of resilience and thereby continuity.

Although some participants found it difficult to imagine their future, others engaged in imaginative acts that seemed to help restore a sense of direction. These reflections were not described as escapism, but as creative and constructive efforts to envision how meaningful elements from life before motherhood could be carried forward or reconfigured. One participant included a plane in her ROL drawing to symbolize her enduring passion for travel. Over time, her imagined scenario of family travel became reality and incorporated into her evolving life story of motherhood. Such acts of imagination appeared to support meaning-making and help reshape their life stories in ways that reconnected them with core values. Through redefined priorities or imagined possibilities, participants began to reshape their sense of selves in ways that extended beyond immediate circumstances. This became visible through the many symbols and the overall course of the river, which served as an overview of the interview and provided access for these insights.

Limitations and future research

In order to contribute to future studies or the development of more standardized art-based methods, it is considered important to point out possible limitations.

Our study includes a river as a metaphor of the whole life course, still concentrating on the life-changing event of becoming a parent. Future studies could examine life-changing events during the whole life course, to elaborate on possible developmental and interrelating factors. The primary aim of our study was the facilitating role of the art-based method, making the specific rupture and the possibility of generalizations within a qualitative framing secondary. Thus, future studies could examine differences and similarities through various life-changing events to investigate any potential patterns that might occur across these. The ROL method applied in this study builds upon a research field still emerging and not yet well-defined. Therefore, further research employing this method is required in order to contribute to its development and refinement. In addition, we hope our findings can contribute to future studies by applying this method to therapeutic settings. Chilton and Scotti (2014) distinguish between clinical and practical practice, stating that in therapy, art methods are used for purposes of healing and growth, and with research, the purpose is generating new knowledge. Thus, generating new knowledge in future studies might become the basis for evolving art-based methods useable for healing and growth in therapies. Especially, it would be interesting in areas where the client finds it hard to express themselves through words.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to examine how the art-based method ROL can facilitate the meaning-making process in relation to life-changing events. During the interviews, relevant processes related to meaning-making were described. These included resources such as family, friends, professionals, and objects – all illustrated in the participants' drawings through various symbols both in and around their rivers. These symbols were used to express feelings otherwise hard to describe in words, and when reflecting on these symbols, new insights occurred for the participants. Also, the participants used these symbols to create coherence between their current life situation, their past, and the future, thus engaging in meaning-making.

The way the participants arranged a coherent narrative around the past, present, and future using ROL, also related to identity. The question about 'who am I?' was revised due to the disruption of becoming a mother, forcing the participants to reevaluate on priorities and their story about themselves. Concerns about identity were depicted in their drawings in various ways, where symbols helped explain complex feelings and details in ways beyond words. Our findings suggest that growth and identity in times of transition are not merely defended or reoriented through meaning-making, but also actively reshaped through narrative construction. Still, all three theoretical perspectives encapsule the dynamic and complexity of these meaning-making processes. Based on the findings, ROL functioned as a facilitator to extend these processes of meaning-making and communicated these in a more detailed manner than with an ordinary interview. In addition, each river served as a metaphorical representation of the whole life course, and some of the participants expressed how the drawing facilitated an overview of their lives, which helped them through telling their stories. This showed how the river served as a common third in research settings, where ROL could facilitate details and insights otherwise hard to access when dealing with life-changing events. These findings might have potential to be applied in therapeutic settings as well.

Supplementary material

The supplementary attachments included in this article can be found after the references.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

All three authors had no conflict of interest.

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References

The references can be found at the end of the framing part of this thesis.

2. Scientific Theoretical Framework

Before conducting any research, it is essential to clearly define the scientific theoretical framework of this thesis, since it directly influences the understanding of knowledge in the study. Thus, the background for our thesis and Article will be presented in the following. Scientific theoretical framework includes stating the ontological and epistemological positions. Ontology refers to the understanding of the world and reality – what can be seen as the 'truth' and to what extend is this interpreted by human perception – whereas epistemology concerns the question of what is possible to know and how knowledge is obtained (Braun & Clarke, 2013, pp. 26–29).

In this thesis, we follow a narrative theoretical approach. Despite being a relatively new approach, narratives can be found in the early works of Sigmund Freud, who used autobiographical narratives or life histories in his clinical practice. Since then, the tradition has evolved through other key figures in narrative psychology such as William James, Theodore Sarbin, and Jerome Bruner (Vassilieva, 2016, p. 10ff). The narrative approach is rooted in social constructionistic assumptions, which claims that reality is socially and contextually constructed (Crossley, 2000, p. 528; Spector-Mersel, 2010, p. 211). According to the social constructionistic view, individuals create their own reality through social interactions and cultural experiences, which allows for the existence of multiple realities simultaneously. Here, knowledge is created through social interactions, and is therefore always seen as interpretive and shaped by the cultural or social norms, meaning that no absolute truth is possible (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 28f; Spencer et al., 2014, p. 85). Although reality is perceived as situated, a division between social and physical reality is recognized in a limited social constructionistic view, acknowledging a physical world independent from our construction of it (Collin, 2015, p. 326f). Though rooted in social constructionism, the narrative approach differs when emphasizing storytelling as a main factor in how individuals make sense of themselves and their lives Here, social reality and knowledge is constructed through narratives, situated and shaped by the cultural and social framework in which they are embedded (Spector-Mersel, 2010, p. 211f). When applying a narrative approach, focus becomes the individual's life stories rather than the cultural context and social norms.

This thesis builds upon the abovementioned perspectives, recognizing the participants' stories as subjectively constructed narratives, situated in the context of the interview.

Thus, knowledge emerging from the interviews is created in the interaction between the researchers and the participant. When differing between a social and physical reality, we believe that the participants' stories build upon events from the physical reality but the interpretation and experience of this is a social reality and therefore constructed. As Crossley (2000) proposes, the narrative psychological approach can be seen as: "a useful tool which enables us to recapture the way in which selves and identities are grounded in 'cultural' forms of language and sense-making, whilst still maintaining a sense of the 'internal', 'coherent' and 'personal' nature of self-experience" (p. 533). A similar stance can be found in the following work of McAdams (2001, 2006), who uses life stories as a method to understand individuals' identity and meaning-making. McAdams (2001) views narratives as based on biographical facts yet shaped and reconstructed in ways that allow the individuals to make sense of their lives. He emphasizes, that life stories are constructed narratives, coauthored by the individual and the cultural context, in which that individual's life is situated – creating meaning in life (p. 101). In line with this view, this thesis applies a narrative approach when exploring how meaning is created when individuals construct their lives and identities through socially and culturally based narratives, without disregarding psychical realities behind these stories.

3. Theoretical Foundation

Meaning-making in response to life-changing events consists of complex and dynamic processes as presented in the Article. This section further elaborates on the included theoretical perspectives, aiming to extend the understanding of how art-based methods can facilitate these processes. This thesis draws on three complementary yet distinctive theoretical perspectives: McAdams's (2001) *life story model of identity*, Breakwell's (2015) *Identity Process Theory* (IPT), and Zittoun's (2006) sociocultural developmental framework. Together, these perspectives illustrate how individuals construct, defend, and transform meaning across significant life-changing events. Each theoretical framework will be elaborated in turn, forming a basis for understanding meaning-making in the context of profound life-changing events. Finally, existing research on transitioning to parenthood will be presented in order to justify our chosen case example for this thesis.

3.1 Identity and Life-Changing Events

From the 1980's, personality psychology began to include terms as 'story' and 'narrative' in relation to coherence and meaning making in people's lives (McAdams, 2001, p. 100). One of the major processes in identity construction is narrative meaning-making and reflections over and talks about the past (McLean & Breen, 2009, p. 702). McAdams's life story model of identity is an important development considering narrative approaches, and it claims that purpose and unity in modern life is provided through constructing internalized and evolving narratives of the self. Thus, McAdams (2001) states that identity is a life story, and does not equal identity with who you are but as a way of arranging the self (pp. 100ff). A life story is a psychosocial construct, and therefore individual life stories reveal cultural values and norms (McAdams, 2001, p. 101). Empirical research supports the central role of life narratives in psychological functioning (Adler, 2012; Bauer et al., 2005). In a longitudinal psychotherapy study, Adler (2012) collected personal narratives from 47 adults and found that increases in agency within individuals' life stories were associated with improvements in mental health over time. Similarly, Bauer et al. (2005) conducted two studies in which participants wrote about significant autobiographical memories and found that life stories emphasizing psychological growth themes were associated with greater maturity and higher levels of wellbeing, independently of personality traits. These findings reinforce McAdams' proposition that identity as a narrative not only provides coherence but also facilitates resilience and transformation during times of change.

McAdams (1995) further distinguishes between three distinct and non-overlapping domains on how to make sense of a person, divided into three levels of personality (p. 387). He states that to fully understand a person it takes more than a detailed description upon the three levels, but that these provide guidelines for determining the extent of the knowledge – when it is adequate and what may be necessary to add (McAdams, 1995, pp. 388–391). The three levels are not hierarchically divided and McAdams (1995) claims that none of the levels should be considered as derivate of another (p. 386). The three levels of personality are *dispositional traits, personal concerns* and *identity as a life story*. This thesis focusses on the latter level related to identity and life stories, since similarities can be drawn to the used ROL method where the course of the river serves as a metaphor for the life story of the individual.

The level of identity as a life story indicates how and to what extent the person finds unity, purpose, and meaning in life (McAdams, 1995, p. 382). In his theoretical and empirical work, he argues that "identity is itself an internalized and evolving life story, or personal myth" (1984, 1985, 1990, 1993 according to McAdams, 1995, p. 382), and identity is compared to dramaturgical terms such as story, setting, scenes, character, plot, and theme (McAdams, 1995, pp. 388–391). In level 3, the question about "who am I?" is very essential in Western societies, as it can be found both problematic, interesting, and challenging (McAdams, 1995, p. 381f). Thus, a person's identity is the inner story, or a series of related stories, a narration of the self which combines the past, the present, and the future, and which is continuously authored and revised to make sense in relation to both the individual, others, and the life in time. This story is dynamic, as one will continue to revise and adjust it in relation to the individuals' ever-changing social worlds, enabling them to live meaningfully (McAdams, 1995, p. 383). In times with change and insecurities, as in the case of parenthood, these life stories can provide a feeling of a stabile identity.

While McAdams emphasizes the constructive and meaning-making nature of narrative identity, Breakwell offers a complementary psychosocial perspective on how identity is structured and protected. Breakwell (2015) also views identity as a dynamic structure, though she focuses on the ongoing processes of *assimilation-accommodation* and *evaluation* (p. 23). Assimilation refers to the incorporation of new elements into one's identity, while accommodation modifies the existing structure to integrate these new inputs. Evaluation adds subjective meaning and value to both new and existing identity components (Breakwell, 2015, p. 23; Breakwell et al., 2022, p. 167). These processes are guided by four core identity principles: *continuity*, the desire to maintain a sense of self over time, *distinctiveness*, the need to perceive oneself as unique and differentiated from others, *self-esteem*, the drive to maintain a positive self-image, and *self-efficacy*, the belief in one's capacity for effective agency (Breakwell, 2015, p. 191; Breakwell et al., 2022, p. 168f). These perspectives offer insights into how identity can be seen as a dynamic and motivated construction, organized through narrative processes and core psychological principles. Thus, these theoretical perspectives on identity seem relevant for this thesis.

Building on these perspectives on identity, it becomes relevant to further explore what happens when established identity structures are challenged, as in the case of

transitioning into parenthood explored in this thesis. According to Breakwell (2015), when one or more of the former mentioned identity principles are compromised, *identity threat* emerges, which is experienced as emotionally aversive and destabilizing (p. 46f, 92). Threat is subjectively perceived, thus, an event that destabilizes one person's identity may be insignificant to another (Breakwell, 2020, p. 60f). To manage identity threat, individuals employ coping-strategies that operate across three interrelated levels: *intra-psychic*, *interpersonal*, and *intergroup* (Breakwell, 2015, p. 193f; Breakwell et al., 2022, p. 167). While all three levels contribute to how individual's navigate threat, this thesis only focuses on the level regarding intra-psychic coping. Here, internal coping strategies are employed, where the earlier mentioned key processes about assimilation-accommodation and evaluation become central. Assimilation-accommodation refers to the way individuals either deflect or accept a threat in relation to their identity structure. Deflection strategies, such as denial, fantasy, or reattribution, aim to protect the current structure by avoiding any real modification (Breakwell, 2015, p. 80ff). Acceptance, by contrast, involves a reconstructing of identity to incorporate aspects of the threat (Breakwell, 2015, p. 93f). The second intra-psychic process, evaluation, involves changing how much value is placed on certain aspects of identity, either current or potential. This does not alter the structure, but redefines the significance of the identity principles to make the threat more manageable (Breakwell, 2015, p. 193). Each strategy aims to protect or restore one or more compromised identity principles (Breakwell et al., 2022, p. 178). If coping efforts fail to sufficiently restore compromised identity principles, individuals may experience long-term emotional strain or disengagement (Breakwell, 2015, p. 194). However, Breakwell (2020) states that identity insecurity should not be equated with identity loss, as individuals often retain cognitive and creative resources that can support recovery and adaptation (p. 71f).

The balance and interplay between the four guiding principles underpin what IPT defines as *identity resilience* – a relatively stable self-schema that allows individuals to uphold the four guiding principles during threat exposure. Identity resilience supports the adaptive use of coping mechanisms and helps individuals remain psychologically grounded in the times of disruption (Breakwell et al., 2022, p. 178). Breakwell and Jaspal (2021) examined this during the COVID-19 pandemic, showing that higher identity resilience predicted lower fear and uncertainty, while higher levels of fear, mistrust, and uncertainty were associated with greater perceived identity change (pp.

342-348). The principle of continuity as particularly protective, was addressed in Sadeh and Karniol's (2012) study on job loss: individuals with a stronger sense of self-continuity were more likely to engage in emotionally detached coping, preserving psychological stability across change (p. 95ff). In a different context, Forbes et al. (2024) found that skilled singing-teachers maintained identity coherence by drawing on the principles of continuity and distinctiveness, expressed through lifelong engagement with music and a sense of uniqueness rooted in early social feedback. The authors conclude: "(…) building identity resilience is vitally important to cope with the inevitable challenges life will bring (…)" (Forbes et al., 2024, p. 13). These studies thus underscore the functional value of identity resilience in maintaining coherence across shifting life circumstances. This functional value becomes particularly relevant for this thesis, as strong identity resilience may function as a protective factor when individuals are confronted with a life-changing event, such as transitioning into parenthood.

To expand this perspective on identity threat, Zittoun's (2006) sociocultural framework highlights human growth and development as dynamic and ongoing processes throughout the life course, where moments of change can enable opportunities for learning and reconfiguration. Central to her framework is the concept of *ruptures.* A rupture occurs when established ways of acting, interpreting, or understanding are no longer sufficient – creating the need for reorientation (Zittoun et al., 2013, p. 262). Ruptures which may be positive or negative, expected or unexpected, can be caused by external events such as migration or role changes, or by internal events such as reactions to inner thoughts. Ruptures are defined by subjective experiences; what feels like a rupture for one individual may be negligible to another (Zittoun, 2006, p. 6). Zittoun (2006) emphasizes the importance of *spheres of experience* – domains such as work, family, and education – which structure everyday life (p. 4-7). A rupture that triggers only one domain may not cause a significant change due to continuity in other domains. For instance, change in the school domain might feel manageable if friendship and family life remain stable. In contrast, a rupture that simultaneously impacts multiple spheres of experience may threaten the individual's sense of consistency (Zittoun et al., 2013, p. 265). The depth of a rupture thus depends on how many of these spheres are affected.

Ruptures initiate *transitions* – dynamic processes of psychological reorientation. A transition does not end when external conditions stabilize, but when the individual

regains internal coherence through new ways of acting or being in the changed conditions (Zittoun et al., 2013, p. 263). Transitions unfold through three interrelated processes: *learning processes*, the acquisition of new knowledge or skills, *identity processes*, the redefinition of roles, values, or self-perception, and *sense-making*, the effort to create coherence by linking current experiences to past events and anticipated futures (Zittoun et al., 2013, pp. 263f). These processes are mutually reinforcing; for example, acquiring new knowledge (learning) may necessitate new identity positions, while reinterpreting the past (sense-making) can reshape future roles (Zittoun et al., 2013, pp. 264ff).

Transitions are supported by various resources. Where *Institutional resources* are structured social settings like birth preparation courses which comfort the transitioning process, *interpersonal relationships* encompass family or close friends which supports a sense of continuity across different spheres (Zittoun, 2012, p. 523f). Zittoun (2006) further highlights how cultural elements – such as books and religious rituals – become *symbolic resources* when meaningfully engaged with (p. 104). In her case study of a young university student, Zittoun (2007) emphasized how music helped navigate the rupture of grief and relocation. In the beginning, the student first used music for emotional containment, but later it served as a tool for reflection which ultimately affected her political and existential realignment (pp. 200-207). This illustrates the three functions of symbolic resources: *aboutness*, referring to the way symbolic resources point to something beyond themselves; *time orientation*, their ability to connect past, present, and future; and *mediation*, their role in helping individuals organize and create distance from emotional experiences (Zittoun, 2006, pp. 5, 104, 116).

Imagination is linked to transitioning processes and allows individuals to explore alternative and meaningful futures without immediate real-world consequences. Here, imagination serves as a way to distinction oneself from present circumstances or previous experiences and offers a way to reorganize these into new potential alternatives for the future – offering possibilities to create meaningful ways to understand and act during these changes (Zittoun et al., 2013, p. 282f; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2016, pp. 230–234). The connection between imagination and symbolic resources becomes particularly visible in long-term transitions. In her analysis of a young woman's diary written during WWII, Zittoun (2014) illustrates how the writer uses remembered conversations, fictional characters, and philosophical ideas as symbolic anchors to navigate the

rupture of forced emigration. Through these movements, she can link the past to imagined futures and negotiate new understandings, thus making the wartime hardships more tolerable. This study illustrates how imagination is not merely escapism but can be seen as a generative force for dialogical movement (Zittoun, 2014, pp. 102-105).

To summarize the above, McAdams emphasizes identity as a dynamic life story shaped through narrative meaning-making. Breakwell highlights the psychosocial processes through which identity is protected and adapted in response to threats. Zittoun expands this focus by situating change within broader sociocultural contexts, highlighting how ruptures initiate processes of adaptation, learning, and imaginative reorientation. Despite their different disciplinary orientations, their perspectives collectively emphasize the dynamic and flexible nature of meaning-making processes. In order to demonstrate these three theoretical perspectives, the transitioning into parenthood – as explored in our thesis – serves as a paradigmatic case for examining meaning-making processes for individuals confronted with life-changing experiences.

3.2 Becoming a Parent

Becoming a parent is widely recognized as one of the most profound and multifaceted life transitions an individual may experience, associated with significant emotional, relational, and identity transformations – this complex transformation is demonstrated in various empirical studies (Choma et al., 2024; Fadjukoff et al., 2016; Harwood et al., 2007; Kaźmierczak & Karasiewicz, 2019; Mathijssen et al., 2024; Smith, 1999). Harwood et al. (2007) conducted structured questionnaires during pregnancy and four months postpartum with 71 Australian first-time mothers. They observed that inconsistencies between prenatal role expectations and postpartum realities often led to identity dissonance, dissatisfaction, and lowered maternal confidence. These findings resonate with Breakwell's (2015) perspective on how identity threat may arise when one or more of the identity principles are compromised. In a semi-structured interview with participant-kept diaries of four first-time British mothers, Smith (1999) found that the focus on mothers' perspectives shifted after giving birth. Before, the focus was on external and public identities, but postpartum it shifted toward intimate and relational domains such as family or close friends, which lead to internalization of maternal identity and reorganization of life priorities. This supports the centrality of life narratives emphasized by McAdams (2001) and highlights how major life events can demand

narrative reconstruction, a process which this thesis seeks to examine through the ROL method where the river and the various included symbols serve as a facilitator to these life narrations.

Focusing more specifically on internal psychological processes, Choma et al. (2024) conducted a quantitative survey study involving 162 postpartum women in Canada. They found that higher levels of self-objectification predicted greater body shame, depressive symptoms, and negative maternal experiences, whereas self-compassion acted as a protective factor. This resonates with Breakwell's (2015) notion that self-esteem and self-efficacy serve as buffers during identity threat. Extending the developmental perspective, Fadjukoff et al. (2016) carried out semi-structured interviews combined with a Life Situation Questionnaire. They found that women generally exhibited a more coherent parental identity than men. Parental identity achievement was positively associated with authoritative parenting, such as warmth towards and knowledge of children's activities in women, and higher psychological social wellbeing in men (Fadjukoff et al., 2016, p. 87).

Extending the focus to relational influences, Mathijssen et al. (2024), who administered an online questionnaire to 465 first-time Dutch mothers, found that adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) heightened concerns across emotional and identity domains, while support especially from friends played a crucial role in fostering confidence in navigating multiple identities. Similarly, Kaźmierczak and Karasiewicz (2019), using pre- and post-birth questionnaires with first-time Polish parents, observed that although both mothers and fathers experienced identity changes, women tended to engage more deeply with relational and emotional aspects of identity reconstruction.

While these studies have provided valuable insights into the transition to parenthood and indicating it as an life-changing event accompanied by psychological, relational, and identity transformations, some scholars have pointed toward the need for broader methodological approaches when exploring such events (Scotti & Gerber, 2017; Van Lith, 2014). Traditional research methods often centered on interviews and structured questionnaires may fall short in fully capturing the emotional, sensory, and imaginative dimensions of the life-changing event of becoming a parent. In response to these limitations, researchers such as Scotti and Gerber (2017) and Van Lith (2014) have highlighted the potential of art-based methods to access deeper layers of meaning

otherwise difficult to articulate through traditional research methods. Scotti and Gerber (2017) combined visual montage portraiture and narrative reflection to explore beyond words experiences of first-time mothers, illustrating how artmaking can assist participants in expressing and processing the richness and complexity of their transitional experiences. Similarly, Van Lith (2014) argues that art-based practices offer a symbolic space for existential meaning-making, facilitating the integration of emotional disruptions into coherent self-narratives through creative expressions.

Building on these insights, we also address the need for more nuanced, participant-centered approaches to understanding meaning-making in response to life-changing events. By exploring the transition to parenthood as an illustrative example of a life-changing event, we wanted to examine how the ROL method might help facilitate narrative reconstruction, reveal coping and resilience mechanisms, and support transitional exploration and adaptation in a life-changing event. To further explore the facilitating ability of ROL, the considerations behind the method of our study found in the Article will be elaborated in the following sections.

4. Methodology and Method

The key aim of this thesis is to investigate how an art-based method can facilitate the meaning-making of an individual's life-changing events. To further elaborate on the reasoning behind the chosen methods, as mentioned in the Article, this section begins with an examination on the current research on art-based methods and an explanation of the theoretical considerations behind the choices of both the River of Life (ROL) method and the semi-structured interview. It was decided to integrate both an interview and art-based approach in the data collection, to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the research topic. In addition, the data collection process and the considerations regarding the thematic analysis method are described to enhance transparency. Finally, the ethical considerations relevant to the study conducted in the Article are clarified.

4.1 The River of Life

Creative and expressive art therapy have grown in popularity since the 1960's and is seen as complementary with an overall aim to improve individuals' mental wellbeing through creative expression and thereby meaningful reflections (Smriti et al., 2022, p. 2). Social researchers find among others that art-based methods can promote

autonomy, raise awareness, express complex feeling-based aspects of social life and offer ways to see and think otherwise (Chilton & Leavy, 2014, p. 403). Art engagement is also stated to be supportive through emotional crisis, a way to review one's life and link past with present experiences (Vaartio-Rajalin et al., 2021), and cause positive influence on self-esteem, confidence and self-expressions (Callinan & Coyne, 2018; Heenan, 2006; Smriti et al., 2022). Heenan (2006) states that: "engagement in the creative process per se is seen to have therapeutic value" (p. 182). Furthermore, she finds that arts affect mental health in two positive ways; together with a therapist art can serve as a strategy for therapeutic care, or break down mental health problems and help the individual reintegrate into community (Heenan, 2006, p. 182). In a scoping review conducted by Vaartio-Rajalin et al. (2021) art-based activities were found to be important tools for health care workers to become acquainted with individuals' narratives and meaning of experiences. Heenan (2006) claims upon her study that intervention programs need more creative and accessible solutions in order to improve the efficiency – thus, policy makers, the public, and those who use commission services should pay more attention to art therapies. Van Lith et al. (2011) also emphasize the importance of further investigation on alternatives for conventional medical approaches, and the need to incorporate the consumers' voices in research to increase knowledge on how to support mental health recovery (p. 659). Our interest in exploring art-based methods facilitating abilities arose based upon these abovementioned considerations.

Creative non-interventional activities in everyday lives of people living with mental health conditions have been examined in a scoping review by Ludowyke et al. (2024). The researchers define art-based activities as ongoing and self-initiated, motivated from the individuals subjective experiences rather than facilitated as a planned intervention by trained clinicians within certain approaches (Ludowyke et al., 2024, p. 49). The emerging interrelated themes and subthemes had among others positive influence towards the person, the environment, creating an identity and accepting challenges (Ludowyke et al., 2024). In a systematic literature review on everyday creativity conducted by Villanova and Pina E Cunha (2021), they emphasized that individuals strive to engage in creative activities stimulated by either internal or external forces. They further highlighted that these everyday creative activities are initiated by small complications in everyday situations, requiring small preparation time with trial-and-error

periods before problem solving. The need for further investigation on incorporation of everyday creativity to other fields of research is also emphasized (Villanova & Pina E Cunha, 2021, p. 690ff). This thesis focuses as mentioned on how an art-based method can help facilitate the meaning-making of an individual's life-changing events. Whereas the literature included for our thesis emphasizes the therapeutic potential of art, we are interested in providing more research to support the elaboration of more standardized methods within research settings, which might as well contribute to further work within therapy. As mentioned throughout this section, art-based interventions differs, and we believe as mentioned in Callinan and Coyne (2018) that there is a need for a more detailed and standardized art-based method. This aligns with statements in Chilton and Leavy (2014) concerning how different terminology regarding art-based research has resulted in confusion about art creation as processes or means to produce, analyze, and represent data (p. 405). Smith (2002) further states that: "the biggest savings will come not from efficiency but from reconsidering what is done" (p. 1433). Likewise, our thesis builds upon the mindset that there is a need to focus on and elaborate new aspects when it comes to wellbeing. Therefore, in our thesis we aim to contribute to further development of the ROL method as facilitating art-based method within research settings.

Up till now, it seems there is no universal and standardized method regarding ROL. The ROL method used in our thesis is inspired by the three studies mentioned underneath, guidelines from Howard (2023) and Moussa (2009), and our pilot study made in the fall 2024. ROL is a metaphor of the whole lifespan of the individual, drawn as a river, where symbols inside and around this river indicate both positive and negative points in life (Denov & Shevell, 2021; Howard, 2023; Moussa, 2009; Prasko et al., 2024; Warming et al., 2023), which is also the case for our study. Participants were asked to draw their life as a river where turning points could be fluctuations in the river, and symbols such as stones, trees, waves, or fish could symbolize among others the obstacles, opportunities, and social others important to their life course. Drawing life as a river could be compared to a narrative life story, told through visual methods instead of the classical narrative interview. This method aligns with the chosen scientific theoretical framework, as it incorporates the constructive part when an individual creates a narrative about their life.

When exploring already existing research about ROL, methodological similarities and variations emerge. Warming et al. (2023) try to include children's perspective in qualitative health examinations and increase their agency in power relations. They developed a drawing and metaphor-based interview method, the Double-View (Dovi)-river interview, to reveal an ambiguous and multi-layered life course. At first, a life course interview and a drawing of the child's life as a river are conducted simultaneously, where the child decides who draws. Then the interviewer and the child revise and unfold the stories within, where the Dovi-river interview reconstructs the child's narrative, and the river therefore serves as a common third between the interviewer and the child (Warming et al., 2023, pp. 1104–1108). The ROL was also used as an autobiographical mapping tool in Denov and Shevell's (2021) study of art-based approach with 60 youth born of genocidal rape in Rwanda (p. 21f). Here, participants individually drew their life stories on blank sheets of paper in a shared space, using a metaphor for a river with ebbs, flows and symbols as obstacles and opportunities. Afterwards, they were invited to share the meanings and key events through the life course of their river with the researchers in a semi-structured interview (Denov & Shevell, 2021, pp. 21–26). Another way to draw the ROL is seen in Prasko et al. (2024), where the ROL is a part of facilitating group schema-therapy sessions divided into six blocks ranging from birth to dreams about the future (pp. 59-64). Patients drew their six stages on separate preprinted drawings or glue collages, however, the researchers also suggest drawing the whole river on the same paper and then discuss this life representation in individual sessions (Prasko et al., 2024, p. 58). In the guideline from Howard (2023) it is proposed to draw the ROL on flipcharts and consider materials like grass and stones (p. 2) – likewise Moussa (2009) proposes blank sheets of paper and proposes additional materials such as images from magazines to cut and paste (p. 185).

In our thesis, we chose that the participants should draw their own river on blank sheets of paper. This drawing process was done individually in order to unfold their river in their own desired ways without disturbance. The river should cover both the event of becoming a parent as well as the turning points before and after parenthood which the participants found relevant. This way we strive to understand the influence of former experiences. Several studies and guidelines on the ROL have so far been focusing on groups of participants in various ways (Denov & Shevell, 2021; Howard, 2023; Moussa, 2009; Prasko et al., 2024) but the interviews in our thesis was an interaction

between only the participant, the interviewer and the observer. Furthermore, the included studies focused on children or youth, but we want to investigate this method in adults – this aligns with Warming et al. (2023), suggesting that the ROL method can be helpful with adults too (p. 1112).

As with art-based methods in general, positive effects were also seen using the specific ROL method. ROL was found helpful in several matters; to process and communicate experiences, to find closure and clarity within the past or future events, and to mark key points in life (Denov & Shevell, 2021). It was also highlighted as a tool to create symbolic images of one's life course and facilitate storytelling as a powerful tool in therapy (Prasko et al., 2024). Warming et al. (2023) emphasize that using the ROL metaphor and symbols within it can serve as a common third and help concrete emotions, reveal new directions, and add further meaning-making to both emergent and ambiguous experiences (p. 1112). It can also help examining life and find meaning as well as recognize and express emotions or values. Limitations were also reported as participants expressed difficulties or frustrations when drawing the ROL and became too aware of obstacles and weaknesses. Within group sessions it can also be uncomfortable to talk about one's life with strangers and there is a risk of comparing oneself to others (Prasko et al., 2024, p. 66f). Thus, the ROL method might not be suitable for all types of patients or problems.

As Smriti et al. (2022) state art therapy can be combined with other forms of therapy, and they recommend further investigation in this area (p. 9). Denov and Shevell (2021) also suggest a combination with more traditional data collection methods to increase the validity of the study (p. 36). In a qualitative study conducted by Van Lith et al. (2011) participants in art-based programs were interviewed in-depth on the role of art within their mental health recovery, where he researchers found that art was experienced as a transformative activity and a way to increase control in life and the whole journey of recovery (p. 652). We therefore found it useful to combine the ROL method and a semi-structured interview as a facilitating tool in our study, which will be elaborated in the following section.

4.2 Semi-Structured Interview

Qualitative interviews have been used as a method in psychology to gather data and knowledge for research in decades (Brinkmann, 2014, p. 277; Roberts, 2020, p. 3185).

Interviews are a powerful method for capturing people's everyday experiences and lived meanings, as this allows them to share their perspectives on which events helped in shaping their world. It is the interviewer's responsibility to register and interpret both the meaning of what is said and the manner in which it is expressed, seeking an understanding of the individual's unique experience of their lived reality (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, p. 14f). As a complementary research method in this thesis, the qualitative interview can provide the participants with a chance to further explain their experiences and meanings in life, to support their life story, unfolding through ROL. This combined approach enables the interviewer to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' narrative, which is why we considered it a relevant integrated part of the ROL method.

The interview itself can be seen as a knowledge-producing social practice, where knowledge is constructed in the 'inter-action' between the interviewer and the interviewee (Brinkmann, 2014, p. 279f; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, pp. 1–9). Here knowledge is shaped by the specific dynamics in the 'inter-view' situation, which is dependent on the interaction of both sides (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, p. 17). This understanding aligns with the chosen scientific theoretical framework of this thesis, where knowledge is seen as a social construction, created by the interviewer, observer, and participant, and influenced by the social expectations created in the interview setting. As described by Rapley (2001), the interview is a: "reality jointly constructed by the interviewee and interviewer" (p. 304). Although the interview is a dialogue, the distribution is asymmetrical – the interviewer will provide short questions, giving the participants the opportunity to respond with longer and more elaborating answers (Brinkmann, 2014, p. 285). It is therefore necessary to prepare well-formulated questions, as these can help inspire the participants thought process about their experiences, hopefully leading to some worthwhile knowledge being created (Brinkmann, 2014, p. 285). When planning the interviews for this thesis, knowledge regarding the ROL method had already been established from previous work with the approach (see section 4.1). Similarly, our previous work with motherhood and parenting has provided information surrounding the experience of becoming a mother. While this meant an initial insight was already obtained of the main themes, further research on the topics was not conducted until after the interviews, allowing a more open-minded perspective on the information acquired through the interview. Conducting an interview with

minimal prior research can be argued as rewarding, as it might inspire the researcher to interpret an otherwise familial phenomenon in a novel way (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, p. 9). This openness towards the topic provided an opportunity to explore it more freely, without being restrained by predetermined knowledge and assumptions. These thoughts also influenced our decision to use the semi-structured interview.

The characteristics of a semi-structured interview are flexibility and a more fluid structure, as they do not follow a specific structured sequence of questions needed to be asked (Mason, 2004, p. 1020). Semi-structured interviews can therefore make better use of the knowledge-producing potentials of the interaction, as it allows for much more flexibility to follow up on whatever topics were found important by the interviewer (Brinkmann, 2014, p. 286). This made the semi-structured interview a fitting approach to integrate with the ROL method, as these methods together provide the participants with the chance to talk about their lives based on their drawing, while still allowing the interviewer to explore relevant topics mentioned during the interview. Additionally, the semi-structured interview still includes an interview guide to ensure all key topics were covered. This way, the interview is still considered relatively open and flexible but the interview guide helps ensure coverage of the identified themes (Mason, 2004, p. 1020).

An interview guide is a script that structures the course of the interview to a certain degree. In a semi-structured interview, the guide will often outline the topics to be covered with some suggested questions, which are not expected to be covered if not relevant (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, p. 63). It can be useful to develop two interview guides – one for research questions and one for specific interview questions. Since research questions are usually formulated in a theoretical language, a distinction is often used for the interview questions, which are outlined in a more everyday language (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, p. 65; Roberts, 2020, p. 3193). This distinction was also used in the interview guide for this thesis (see attachment C), to ensure minimal confusion about the questions asked during the interview. The purpose of a qualitative interview is not to obtain information so the interview questions can be answered, but to hear the interviewees' stories and through this acquire an understanding of their experiences and lived worlds (Roberts, 2020, p. 3189).

Among various types of semi-structured interview methods outlined by Mason (2004), the life history interview is highlighted. As the name suggests, this approach focuses on creating biographies and life stories. This type of semi-structured interview incorporates life stories in the interview through documentary or visual methods such as diaries, letters, and photographs. In this way, the documentary or visual methods can be used during the interview, for example to ask about the participant's family in the photo (Mason, 2004, p. 1021). Comparisons emerge between this approach and the combined semi-structured and ROL method, since the visual methods and the river share similar purposes. In the study by Warming et al. (2023), this combined approach is also preferred over art-based methods alone. Additionally, some researchers argue that the ROL method can be more subtly integrated when used within a semi-structured interview, as it allows for additional questions to be asked concerning the drawing (Carmody, 2023, p. 168). Given all the abovementioned considerations, it is considered useful to combine the semi-structured interview and ROL method in this thesis.

4.3 Data Collection Method

To recruit participants for this thesis, a post was created on the social media platform Facebook (see attachment A), which was shared on each of the author's personal accounts. Additionally, the post was shared in relevant Facebook groups such as "Forældregruppen", which parents use to exchange experiences. These groups were considered relevant, as they were likely to include individuals open to sharing their experience of becoming a parent in an interview with psychology students. The focus in the post was on life-changing events and specifically targeted individuals willing to share their experiences of becoming a first-time parent within the past five years. The five-years limitation was chosen to ensure that the participants were able to clearly recall their experiences of becoming a parent. Additionally, people who had become parents within the past six months at the time of the interview were excluded. This decision was made to help ensure that the participants had processed and adapted to the transition in life. While these assumptions were not guaranteed, the exclusion criterion was included to enhance the likelihood of meaningful reflections. Another criterion was that the interview was to be conducted in Northern Jutland, to ensure accessibility for the interviews. No further limitations were made regarding age or gender, as the focus was on the specific event of becoming a parent.

Determining the ideal number of participants needed for an interview is based on when additional interviews no longer provide further knowledge concerning the study topic, and many studies would benefit from doing fewer interviews and thereby taking more time preparing and analyzing them (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, p. 48f). A total of six participants were interviewed for our study, as this number was considered sufficient to obtain the necessary information. All participants were women, since only women signed up for participation –this was therefore not a deliberate selection. Their ages ranged from mid-twenties to mid-thirties, with some already having more than one child, while others were expecting. The socioeconomic backgrounds also ranged from lower-middle to upper-middle class. Prior to the interviews, each participant received a phone call to elaborate on the details of the interview, including the drawing part, as some might have found this intimidating if not informed beforehand. When informed consent is required, it is essential to consider how this is best secured, and how to ensure that the participants can freely consent or decline (Traianou, 2014, p. 64). It was therefore decided to send the informed consent statement prior to the interview, giving the participants a chance to reflect on their decision to participate in the study. Furthermore, when studying aspects of people's lives that are personal or sensitive, an individual interview helps create an environment of confidentiality and trust between the interviewer and interviewee (Brinkmann, 2014, p. 289). All the interviews were therefore conducted individually, due to the personal experience of becoming a parent, where sensitive themes could emerge during these interviews.

Each interview began with the interviewer and observer introducing themselves and outlining the structure of the interview, including an overview of the purpose of this thesis, the drawing part and the following interview. It is important to begin the interview by setting the stage, as it provides the participants with a better understanding of the interview and allows them to feel more comfortable before sharing their experience with a stranger (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, p. 62). To further ensure trust, the participants were also informed that all data would be anonymized in the transcription. Finally, the informed consent form was signed and collected (see attachment B). The participants were then shown examples of how to draw the river, along with various symbols that could be used in the river to represent different aspects of their life (see attachment E). Afterwards the examples were removed, and the interviewer made an introduction speech prior to the drawing process (see attachment C), to help mentally

prepare for the drawing and reflect on what to illustrate in their river. Following this, it was clearly communicated to the participants that there was no right or wrong way of drawing their river, as it was meant to be a personal reflection of their lives. It is common that participants feel a desire to be "good interviewees", wanting to provide the researchers with something valuable. However, this mindset can unintentionally limit the creation of interesting stories or descriptions (Brinkmann, 2014, p. 283). It was therefore emphasized that no expectation was held towards their drawing in our study. Denov and Shevell (2021) emphasize the importance of autonomy for the participant to determine how and what to draw on their river – constructing their own life narrative (p. 35). The participants were therefore told to only include what they meant were important, to the degree they felt comfortable sharing. The interviewer and observer then left the room to allow the participants privacy and without disturbance when drawing their river. A total of 30 minutes were given to the participants to draw the river, where the interviewer checked in after 15 minutes to ensure everything proceeded smoothly, and to ask whether more or less time was needed. When the time was up, both interviewer and observer re-entered the room to begin the interview.

The audio recorder was started at the beginning of the interview. Two interviewers were present at each interview, one being the primary interviewer and the other acting as an observer. The interviewer asked the question, while the role of the observer was to support the interviewer at the end, by ensuring all relevant questions from the interview guide had been answered to some degree. The participants were made aware of the functioning of the two interviewers' roles in advance. The choice not to attend with all three authors was deliberate, as we preferred absent over risking uncomfortableness in the participants as this might lead to less detailed descriptions of their life course. At the end, the participants were given the opportunity to ask any further questions – if there were none, the interview was ended and the recorder turned off. The participant was then thanked for participating, followed by a brief informal conversation between the interviewer, observer and participants before they were sent off. A debriefing after the interview is a good way to provide the participants with the opportunity to share any concerns or thoughts that may have arisen during the interview, but which were not shared here (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, p. 62f). If any other questions were to arise the following days after the interview, the participants were offered the chance to contact us again at any time.

After completing the interviews, the transcription process began. All interviews and later transcriptions were conducted in Danish; however, the later quotations found in the Article were translated into English. Each author transcribed the interviews which they had not attended, to increase a comprehensive understanding of all the data, despite not being part of all interviews. The transcription process was assisted by the AI program "Transcriber", which was accessed through Aalborg University. The program generated a draft, which was reviewed and corrected according to the transcription guidelines created by the authors (see attachment D). Once the transcription was completed, the data was ready for analysis, which will be explained more thoroughly in the following section.

4.4 Thematic Analysis

A thematic analysis was chosen as the tool for analyzing the data gained from the interviews. Despite different approaches to thematic analysis, the publication by Braun and Clarke (2006) on thematic analysis have gained huge popularity and are now a recognized method for analysis (Terry et al., 2017, p. 18). The thematic analysis used in this thesis is therefore based upon the approach and definition as seen in Braun and Clarke (2006).

Thematic analysis is a flexible method, used for identifying, analyzing, and reporting themes and patterns within data. It helps organize, describe, and even interpret the dataset in relation to the research topic. The analysis is not bound to one theoretical or epistemological understanding and can be applied to different approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 77ff). This does not mean that thematic analysis is atheoretical – it is precisely due to this the theoretical independence of thematic analysis, that research must be transparent with the approach, as this is not predefined by the analysis (Terry et al., 2017, p. 20). As described previously (see section 2), the scientific theoretical framework for this thesis is a narrative approach. The different choices made in the thematic analysis will be taken into consideration regarding this approach's understanding of reality and knowledge.

After a theoretical stance is considered, another decision concerns whether to approach the data inductively or deductively, and whether his is done exclusively, or as a primary mode of engagement (Terry et al., 2017, p. 22). An *inductive approach* to data analysis is a bottom-up method, where codes and themes are found through the data

itself. In contrast, a *deductive approach* of analyzing data is considered a top-down approach, where theoretic concepts, ideas, or topics are used to code and interpret the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 59). However, Braun and Clarke (2012) also mentions how most analysis combine both the inductive and deductive approach, since a purely inductive approach is almost impossible, as prior knowledge cannot be set aside – likewise, it is rare to completely ignore the data from the interviews itself when coding deductively (p. 59f). This logic about intertwining approaches of inquiry aligns with the aim of this thesis: inductive when remaining open to new insights emerging from the participants' stories, while deductive when connecting it to our theoretical and methodological knowledge of the research topic.

Another analytical choice involves determining whether to focus on *semantic* or *latent* meaning in the data. A semantic analysis identifies codes from the explicit meaning found in the data, not looking beyond what is directly stated. In contrast, the latent analysis is based on implicit meaning, such as ideas, concepts, and assumptions, focusing on an 'deeper' level of analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84f; Terry et al., 2017, p. 22). The latent analytical approach was selected for this thesis, as a deeper interpretation of art-based methods is considered relevant to fully understand its role in facilitating people's meaning-making processes. These analytical choices align with the scientific theoretical framework of this thesis, since a latent thematic analysis is often more compatible with the constructivist framework, as it seeks to discover the broader assumptions, structures, and meanings underneath what is communicated in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 85). Although the narrative approach chosen for this thesis is not based exclusively on social constructivism, it shares many of the same elements of the abovementioned – though emphasizing how social reality is shaped by stories and language, while seeking to uncover the meaning behind these. Thus, the choice of latent thematic analysis strengthens the narrative framework of this thesis, making it a well-fitting approach.

The thematic analyzing method used in this thesis is based on the step-by-step guide provided by Braun and Clarke (2006) including six different *phases*. This guideline contains recommendations on how a thematic analysis is conducted, though these are only suggestions and not considered rules expected to be followed (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 86). The first phase consists of familiarizing yourself with the data. Here the data is read again in an active way, where the researcher is seeking meanings, patterns

and so on. Different ideas and possible patterns will most likely appear when reading through the dataset and are therefore considered an ideal part of the thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 86f). After transcribing all the interviews, it was decided that each of the authors of our thesis had to read all the transcriptions again, making sure that everyone was familiar with the different interviews. During phase one, potential coding themes were noted, which made it easier when starting the second phase of generating initial codes. In this phase, the initial codes from the dataset are established and can be seen as the collection of raw data, as it is based on what appears interesting. It is recommended to code for as many potential themes as possible, as one never knows what might be interesting later, and to include the context from which the data is extracted, to preserve the original meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 88f). When starting the initial coding for our data material, it was done separately by each of the thesis' authors. The different codes were organized in a table of every participant, to create a better overview of the different possible themes. This provided us with an easier comparison of each author's code for the next step. Phase three consists of searching for themes and re-focuses the analysis on an overall perspective of the themes and separate codes. Themes are created by sorting the different codes in categories, where some initial codes may form a main theme, while others may form subthemes or even seem to not belong anywhere. The excluded themes can be temporally held in a created *miscellaneous* theme, as it is not time to abandon anything yet (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 89f). The many possible themes found in phase three were then sorted into possible main- and subthemes. This was done using the same table from previously to keep the general overview, just with fewer themes included. The selection of which themes to connect and form the overall topic was done jointly by all authors of this thesis.

Reviewing themes is the fourth phase, starting by refining the set of *candidate themes* identifies in the previous phase. This process happens in two stages. First, the coded data for each theme is evaluated to ensure that a coherent pattern is formed. If not, it should be considered whether the issue lies within the theme itself or in the certain data extracts that do not fit the current theme. Once the candidate themes fit adequately with the coded data, the *thematic map* is ready for the next stage. In the second stage of this phase, the validity of each candidate theme is considered in relation to the dataset, to ensure that the thematic map reflects the overall meanings of the entire dataset

(Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 91f). The first stage was completed, ensuring that a coherent pattern was found in each candidate theme, creating the thematic map. To establish a better overview of this map and the different main- and subthemes included, *the thematic network analysis* by Jennifer Attride-Stirling (2001) was applied. A thematic network analysis is a way to organize a thematic analysis by facilitating the structuring and illustration of the themes. It offers a web-like network, connecting three different themes: the lowest order being the *basic themes* – here themes are simple characteristics of the data, which only make sense within context of other basic themes. Grouped together, these different basic themes lead to the *organizing themes* – the middle-order theme that, through clustering the basic themes in similar topics, reveals the main underlying assumptions and patterns of the dataset. The last, capturing the overall principal metaphors in the text, is the *global themes* – the super-ordinate concept which summarizes the main findings of the dataset and articulates a broader claim about the research topic, based on the patterns identified in the organizing themes (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p. 388f). In this thesis, a total of nine basic themes, three organizing themes, and one global theme were identified. These themes were divided into green boxes, representing mainly the content of the interview, whereas blue boxes represent direct association to the ROL method (see figure 1). Furthermore, the themes were reviewed to ensure that the overall meaning of the data was accurately represented in the thematic map, thereby completing the second stage of phase four in the thematic analysis.

Phase five begins when a satisfactory thematic map of the data has been collected. At this phase, a clear description of the essence and important aspect for each theme is defined. This description should be considered in relation to the broader 'story' of the entire dataset, thus also the research questions, ensuring that the themes are distinct and do not overlap. If necessary, themes can be refined and the dataset revisited. During this process, subthemes may be identified. Subthemes are essentially themes-within-a-theme. These can help provide structure, while also emphasizing the hierarchy of meaning within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 92f). The fifth phase of the thematic analysis in this thesis overlapped with the fourth phase, as the network analysis provided both a description of each theme and ensured their connection to the broader story without overlapping each other. Furthermore, sub-themes were also identified throughout the network analysis. Phase six is the final analysis and write-up of the report. This task consists of telling the complicated story found through the data,

which supports the validity of the analysis. The analysis must therefore provide with a concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive and interesting account of the data, which should illustrate the significance of the identified themes, supported by relevant data extractions (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 93f). The analysis and associated findings can be found in the Article within this thesis.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

Until quite recently ethics were perceived as a secondary matter; important but not central to the research method (Traianou, 2014, p. 62). In 1953 the American Psychological Association (APA) published its first ethics code, which guided psychologists when conducting their practice or research. Since then, the significance of ethics has grown substantially (APA, 1953, 2002; Vassilieva, 2016, p. 157). *Ethics* are commonly concerned with how researchers treat people in the field – for instance, whether they minimize harm to them, respect their autonomy and privacy. When addressing ethical considerations, it is essential to consider: "what are and are not acceptable means in pursuing knowledge" (Traianou, 2014, p. 73). Four key areas in the ethical guidelines are therefore important to discuss before conducting research.

The first consists of *informed consent*, which requires informing the participants about the overall purpose of the study, including the potential risks and benefits of participating. The informed consent further involves acquiring voluntary participation of the people involved and informing them of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. This serves as a protection for the participant. When concerning the use of research material, it is preferable to have a written agreement signed by the participant, to ensure protection for the researcher if any complaints were to arise (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2017, p. 261). Taking together, these considerations influenced how we conducted the informed consent statement for our thesis (see attachment B). This consent was also made according to the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR), included to ensure the protection of the participants' privacy. However, informed consent is a complex issue, as it can typically only be granted for the overall purpose, not the final outcome, as the claims emerging from the data analysis can be difficult to predict (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 64). As such, a distinction may arise between the participants' initial expectations of the project and its actual outcome. To accommodate this, the informed consent statement included a comprehensive explanation of the

thesis purpose, trying to minimize the potential difference between the expectations and outcome. Likewise, the analysis was conducted with careful consideration to the participants' spoken words, ensuring that their perspective was authentically represented. The autonomy of the participants should always be respected – one should not undermine their capacity or right to make decisions surrounding their own lives (Traianou, 2014, p. 63f). During the interviews, the participants were given freedom to share what they felt comfortable with and to withhold anything they preferred not to discuss. As with the end of the interview, the participants were asked if they wished to add anything else, reinforcing that their story remained as theirs to be told.

The informed consent should include a section informing the participants about their *confidentiality*, which is the second key area. Confidentiality in research implies that private data which could lead to identifying the participant will not be reported (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2017, p. 261f). Researchers can use several strategies to protect the participants' privacy. The most common is anonymization, where the actual names are replaced with pseudonyms (fake names). Other aspects of a person's life or their personal characteristics that may risk them being identified are also concealed (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 63; Traianou, 2014, p. 65). The same procedure was applied in our thesis, where the participants' names and identifying characteristics were replaced with either pseudonym or general descriptors of their role. For example, "[datterens navn]" was used in place of the daughter's actual name. This concerned both the transcript and the drawing, and these anonymizations also align with the GDPR guidelines.

The third key area is *consequences*, which concerns the potential harm or benefits that could arise when participating in a study. The central point of ethical standard in this area is that the potential benefits and importance of knowledge created through a study should outweigh the risk of harm. Also, the risk of harm to a participant should be the least possible (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2017, p. 262). Potential harm could be psychological damage, emotional distress, or impairment to the participants' self-confidence. While it is not common for harm to occur in qualitative research, it must still be regarded as a serious concern (Traianou, 2014, p. 63f). The researcher must be aware of the openness and intimacy often found in interviews, which can lead participants to share sensitive information that they might regret later (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, p. 34). To minimize this possibility, a deliberate choice was made to exclude parents, who had given birth within the last six months (see section 4.3), in an attempt to ensure

they were not still emotionally affected by the experience. Additionally, the participants in our study were given the opportunity to contact the interviewers afterwards, if thoughts or questions were to arise. This opportunity also offered them a chance to process and discuss any discomfort they experienced during the interview.

Finally, it is important to consider *the role of the researcher*. When conducting research, it is important that the researcher is familiar with ethical guidelines as these can help with choices regarding ethical versus scientifical concerns, since the researcher's knowledge, experience, honesty, and fairness is the decisive factor. Ensuring that the researcher has required a comprehensive understanding of the ethical considerations in qualitative research is therefore of great importance, as this affects their ability to make ethical judgment (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2017, p. 263f). When starting this thesis, ethical considerations and the GDPR related to conducting an interview were first taken into consideration. This helped guide the entire study, ensuring that all aspects were conducted according to the ethical principles of qualitative research and the EU regulations of data privacy and security.

5. Presentation of Participants and their Drawings

This section presents the participants alongside their ROL drawings. Each participant is briefly introduced with relevant background information, combined with a general description of the drawing and the symbolic elements included. Full interview transcripts can be found in attachment F, G, H, I, J and K.

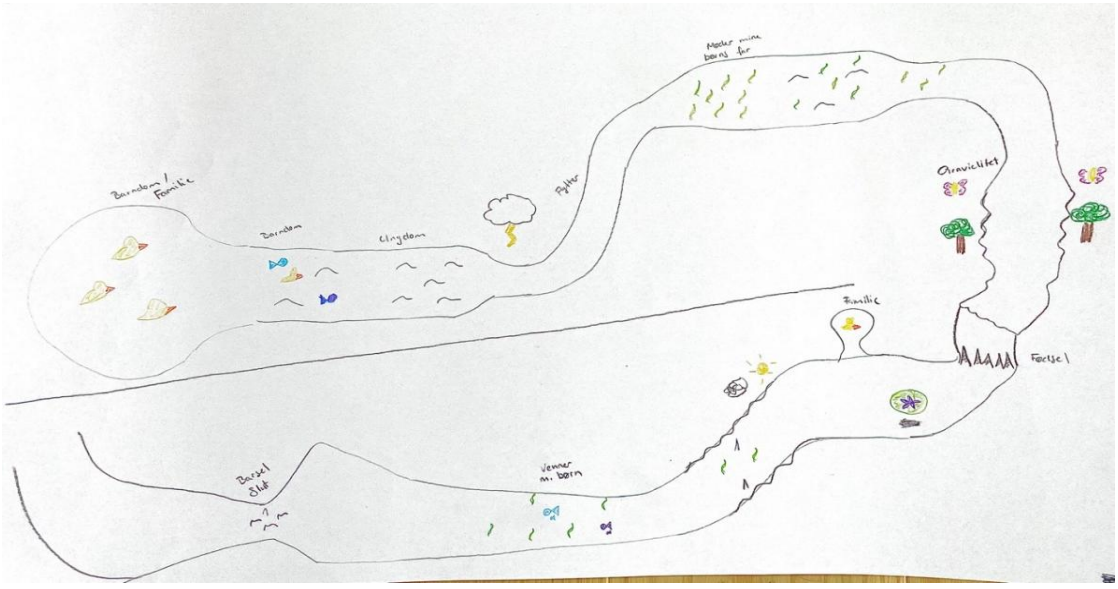

Figure 3: Anna's River of Life

Anna is in her early thirties and works as a postdoctoral researcher. She lives with her partner, with whom she has a three-year-old daughter, and is expecting their second child. In her drawing, the birth of her daughter is illustrated by a waterfall landing on rocks, symbolizing an intense and painful experience. Her supportive network includes lifelong friends, shown as fish that recur along the river, her partner, represented by soft grass. Her own family is illustrated as ducks gathered in a pond at the beginning of the river, symbolizing a secure upbringing that she also reflects on in her own parenting. Additional symbols include trees and butterflies for fertility and anticipation, as well as waves, sun, and stormy clouds to express the emotional contrasts of parenthood. Her daughter appears as a small lily pad floating in the river, symbolizing how she has become a part of Anna's ongoing life journey.

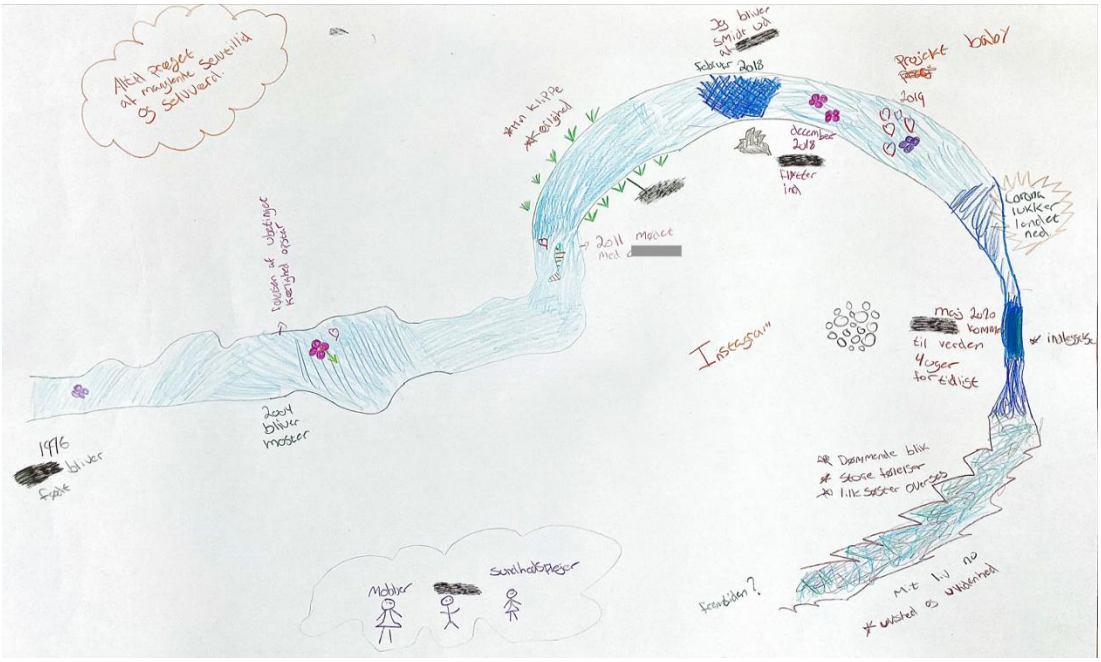

Figure 4: Barbara's River of Life

Barbara is in her late twenties and is currently in a job clarification process due to physical and psychological health challenges. She lives with her partner with whom she has two children aged five and three. In her drawing, the course of the river is shaped by the challenges of parenting a sensitive child, coping with her own health issues, and navigating first-time motherhood during the uncertainties of COVID-19. Symbols in her drawing include a flower for her own birth and a heart for becoming an aunt, which sparked her early wish to have children. Her partner is represented by a fish and a heart, and later by grass, illustrating their growing love. A period of separation is marked by stones and dark water, while the reunion with her partner and their

family plans are illustrated through hearts and flowers. Other key supportive figures include her sister and a long-term health visitor.

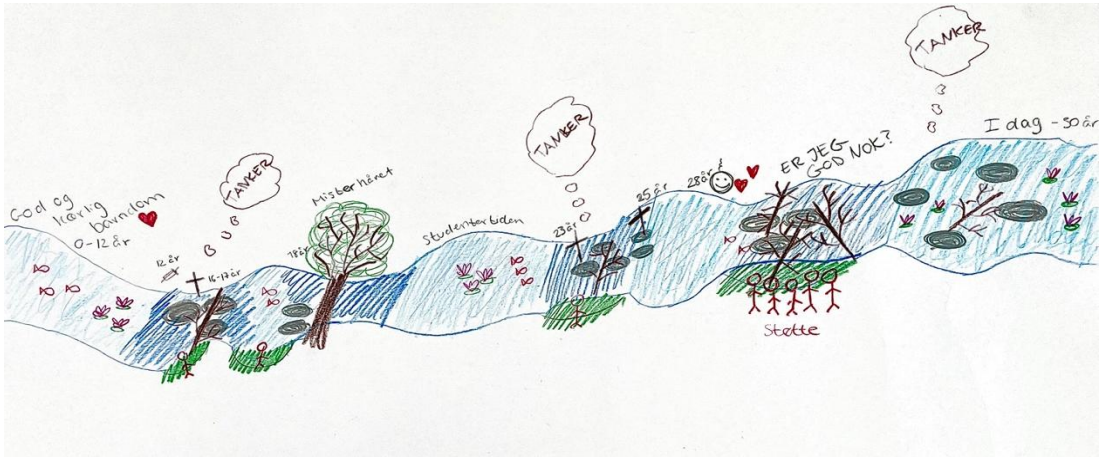

Figure 5: Clara's River of Life

Clara is in her early thirties and works as a support worker with a background in social pedagogy. She lives with her partner and their three-year-old daughter. Her ROL drawing centers around the transition into parenthood, shaped by a wanted pregnancy and a difficult birth experience. The early phase of motherhood is marked by emotional contrasts, where joy and love coexist with pain, doubt, and identity struggles. A flower marks her own birth, while hearts represent her daughter. Fish illustrates family and close friends. Thought bubbles reflect her tendency to overthink, while stones mark emotional challenges. Her identity is expressed through trees and branches at different stages. In her transition Clara drew on personal strategies such as adjusting expectations, and using make-up and clothing to stay connected to herself.

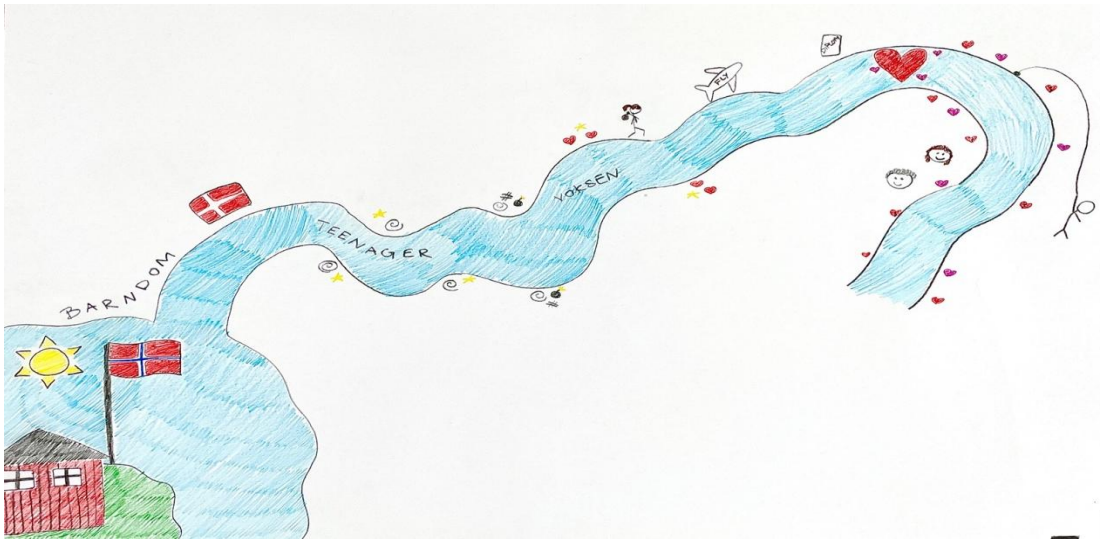

Figure 6: Dora's River of Life

Dora, who works as a social worker, is in her early thirties and lives with her partner and their two-year-old daughter. In her drawing, she highlights the transition into parenthood, where the arrival of her daughter turned life upside down in a positive, yet overwhelming way. Light pink hearts represent her child, while red hearts symbolize the relationship with her partner. Stars indicate happy moments, and small bombs represent chaotic or confusing experiences. A bubble with a house and a Norwegian flag symbolizes a childhood cabin associated with safety and joy. In her transition Dora drew on strategies such as being in nature, travelling with her partner and their daughter, and enjoying music.

Figure 7: Eva's River of Life

Eva is in her early thirties and works as a social worker. She lives with her husband and their two-year-old daughter. They are currently expecting twins. Her ROL drawing focuses on her transition to motherhood, marked by a long-term wish to have children and a fertility treatment process, symbolized by stones in the river. Her childhood home is drawn twice, reflecting both her upbringing and the fact that she and her family now live there. Key supportive figures include her husband and parents, while her dog appears as a figure that provided emotional support during periods of stress and loneliness. Her journey is characterized by an aspiration to recreate stability in her own family life, with family as the most prominent theme in the drawing.

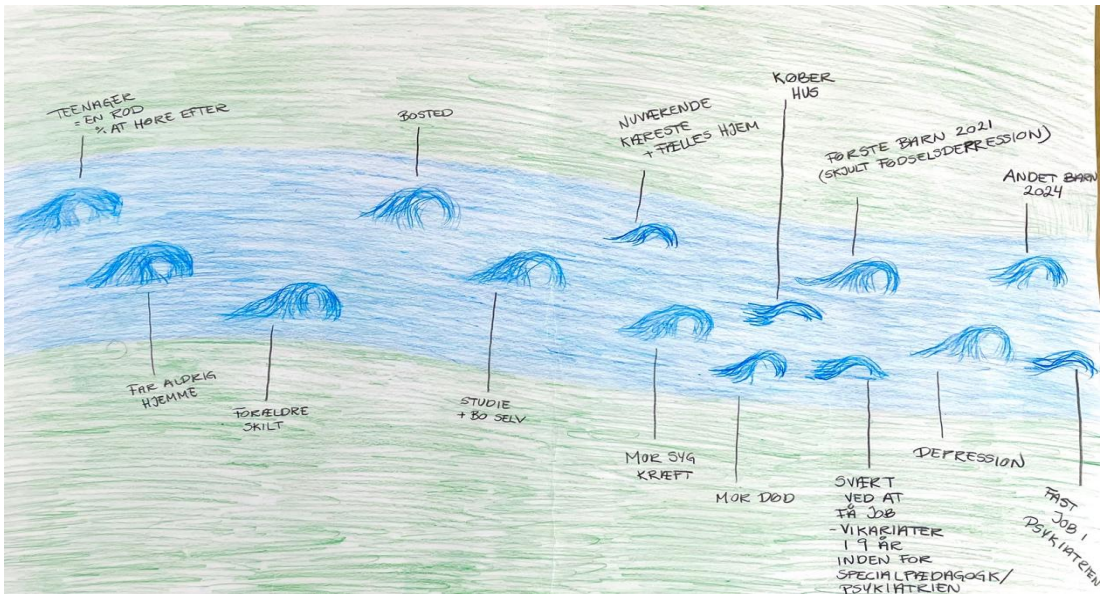

Figure 8: Fay's River of Life

Fay, aged thirty, works as a pedagogical assistant in psychiatry. She lives with her partner and their two children, aged three and an infant. Through her drawn river, she highlights the journey of motherhood shaped by a complex upbringing, the loss of her mother, and experiences of depression following the birth of her first child. Waves are a recurring symbol throughout the river, representing both highs and lows, including fertility treatment, personal struggles, and significant life events. Key supportive figures include her partner, a close friend, and a former teacher. Her late mother remains a source of strength and care. The most prominent theme in Fay's life is resilience, with motherhood and personal growth forming the course of her journey.

6. Discussion

The choice of ROL as our method, integrated with a semi-structured interview, has provided this thesis with key aspects of the meaning-making processes involved in life-changing events such as becoming a parent as highlighted in the Article. To further assess the value of this approach, as mentioned in the Article, we find it important to reflect on its methodological strengths and limitations, to fully understand its potential and possible future implications – this will be addressed in the following sections. Additionally, the theoretical framework and foundation underpinning this thesis will be discussed, to explore their influence on the findings and interpretations. Finally, the case example and its associated data collection, including the ethical considerations involved, will be discussed to assess their implications on the study.

6.1 The ROL Method

As discussed in the Article of our thesis, the ROL method provided a profound facilitating ability for the participants' life stories. While it offered an opportunity to obtain further insights throughout a reflection process, it also contributed with an alternative way to express their thoughts and feelings – something often hard to express through words. The drawing of their river functioned as a common third during the interviews, as noticed by both the interviewers and the participants. The study of Warming et al. (2023) showed similar results, as the drawing became the common third, creating a shared focal point during the interview. In our study, the participants commented on their river's ability to facilitate a common focus point and act as a guideline throughout their stories. These abilities created a more comfortable experience for the participants and helped the interviewer keep a better overview of the life stories and their different elements. When looking further into the methods used in this thesis, other aspects are relevant to point out and discuss, as these can have important implications for our thesis and future research.

When reflecting on the methods used in our thesis, a thought occurred concerning whether the ROL method could be removed from this study, and the interview alone could provide similar or more adequate findings. As seen in the Article, many of the participants initially felt uncomfortable with the drawing part, expressing nervousness and uncertainty, questioning if they were doing it wrong. A different experience was found in Denov and Shevell (2021), choosing the drawing as method when working with children to limit this uncertainty. They refer to D'Amico et al. (2016), who argues that visual tools create a situation where children and young people can be more at ease, and feel free to express themselves – not experiencing the feeling of giving a 'wrong' answer as in interviews. As previously mentioned (see section 4.3), participants in interviews often want to offer something of value to the researcher; however, this can unintentionally produce pressure on the participants and potentially limit the creation of important knowledge (Brinkmann, 2014, p. 283). These perspectives contradict the findings of this thesis, where the drawing appeared to create more uncertainty than the semi-structured interview itself. One possible explanation could be that adults tend to experience higher self-awareness about their drawing compared to when they are speaking. For instance, Patterson and Hayne (2011) found that older children exhibited increased self-consciousness about their drawing abilities, as they became

more aware of how accurate their drawing depicted the intended object. This pattern might extend into adulthood, as their self-consciousness is often even more pronounced. Adults may feel more confident in interview settings, as verbal communication resembles a more common and familial everyday conversation. In the study by Denov and Shevell (2021), the participants were young children, which might explain why they felt more comfortable drawing compared to the participants in our thesis, as children are more accustomed to engaging in drawing in everyday contexts. However, based on the participants' feedback, many ultimately viewed the drawing element positively, complementing on its useful abilities as a facilitating tool during the interview. Several of the participants did produce detailed and complete drawings which they were satisfied with, as they only experienced the uncertainty before initiating the drawing – when actually creating the drawing, this uncertainty disappeared. This positive impact is further supported by the frequency of references to the drawings throughout the interviews. The participants mentioned their drawing by own initiative approximately 10-15 times, for instance to highlight elements of their stories, supporting the drawings facilitating abilities. This frequency and the details revealed only through the river suggest that the participants found the incorporation of the drawing relevant, and it could therefore not have been removed from our study without affecting the findings.

At the same time, the interview could not be removed from the ROL method either, as several important insights emerged during the interview that were not illustrated in the drawing. As mentioned earlier (see section 4.2), the inclusion of an interview allows for further support of the rivers facilitating abilities, as it allows additional questions to be asked concerning certain aspects of the drawing (Carmody, 2023, p. 168). Still, the drawing remained the center of the interview, leading every talk back to the river. Even when meaning was expressed verbally rather than visually, it could still indirectly be related to the drawing. Therefore, we argue that neither the drawing, nor the interview could have been removed from or stand alone in our study. It is the combination of these two methods that enabled our thesis with valuable insights into the meaning-making processes that occur in life-changing situations.

The review of existing literature on the ROL method revealed that a limited amount of research has been conducted using this method, meaning that few guidelines were available for our study. Therefore, one of the aims of this thesis was to expand the knowledge of the ROL method, in order to support its application in future studies and

contribute to a more standardized description of this method. This was achieved by exploring new methodological approaches – for instance applying the ROL method on adults in individual interviews – as well as by further testing processes already applied in previous studies. An example of this concerns the period prior to the drawing process, where the participants were guided through a visualization exercise to help conceptualize the metaphorical representation of the river (see attachment C). A similar procedure was used by Prasko et al. (2024), where the therapist guided the patients' imaginations by encouraging memories from a specific period of life, helping them visualize. Although this guidance was done in sections, focusing on different parts of life, it still served as an inspiration for the visualization component of this study. Most participants in our study further stated that this initiating element was helpful, aiding them in recalling previous knowledge that they might not otherwise have considered relevant – supporting the inclusion of a visualization part in ROL. When generally looking at art-based methods, there is an increasing gain of interest, particularly in social and health science (Clift et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2016), highlighting the need for more research in this field. At the same time, there is a strong need for development of objective measurements or validations of art-based methods (Callinan & Coyne, 2018; Clift et al., 2021, 2024). Thus, we assume that this thesis could contribute to further development of art-based methods such as ROL.

In relation to further development of research, the ROL method has also created some thoughts concerning its future practical implications in therapeutic setting. The findings in this study indicate, among others, that the river is used as a common third meanwhile serving as a facilitator to new insights and extended communication of complex aspects. Therefore, this method's relevance regarding therapeutic settings is interesting, for instance in relation to circumstances where words can be hard to use as a communication method. Thus, suggestions could be situations with depression, eating disorders, (sexual) abuse or other traumas, where the river can serve as a less invasive facilitator to the conversation between the therapist and the client.

To summarize the above, there was a progression in the participants' attitudes towards the drawing going from initial negativity, such as doubts about their ability to draw a river, to more positive statements, such as seeing the drawing as a meaningful contribution to the conversation. Moreover, frequent references to the drawing support its methodological value. However, it became clear that the river's facilitating abilities

were enhanced together with the semi-structured interview, since further questions allowed elaboration of aspects not directly visibly in the river alone. The ROL method could therefore be relevant in therapeutic settings as well.

6.2 The Metaphorical and Symbolic Meaning of ROL

As previously mentioned, the ROL drawing served as a metaphorical representation of life, illustrating – through the different curves and turns – the various directions life can take (see section 4.1). This metaphorical illustration also allows for the use of symbols, which might help express the opportunities and obstacles individuals may encounter through life. The incorporation of metaphors and symbols could therefore be argued as enhancing the methods ability to facilitate meaning-making and reflections. Throughout the interview, it became evident how some of the participants used metaphors or symbols related to their ROL drawing during the conversation. These elements supported the participants in illustrating their emotions and highlighted what holds significance in their life – for instance, using hearts to symbolize love. Others used metaphors to explain their thoughts and feelings about their current situation in greater depth, such as the sensation of 'losing yourself' or describing a daughter as 'getting her own river'. Similarly, both Prasko et al. (2024) and Denov and Shevell (2021) found in their studies that the use of symbols and metaphors provided the patients with another way of expressing and processing life experiences, emotions, and needs. Furthermore, Prasko et al. (2024) found that these elements helped the patients overcome the blockade or resistance of talking that may occur in conversations. Metaphors and symbols functions as 'tools' that invite individuals to perceive and understand experiences in another way, creating a shared understanding (Sapezinskiene et al., 2016, p. 254). They offer new insight into personal experience, by giving renewed meaning to past, present, and possibly future events (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 128). Thus, the use of metaphors and symbols may therefore offer the participants alternative ways to express themselves, allowing them to better communicate thoughts and emotions that can be hard to convey during an ordinary interview situation. This metaphorical and symbolic language also supported deeper self-understanding, providing them with further insights or new meanings regarding their life. In this way, the metaphorical use of a river proved to be a valuable methodological aspect, facilitating both inner emotions and deeper thoughts from the participants.

The metaphorical use of the river also appeared to initiate a more unconscious understanding process in the participants, as some elements first drawn on the river were later changed, suggesting that the act of drawing initiated new reflections over their lives. In one case, the participant uncovered that the overall course of the river revealed the shape of a question mark. Although this shape was drawn unconsciously, she interpretated it as a symbol of her uncertainty about life and the future. In other art-based studies, the use of symbols or metaphors in different artworks prompted an unconscious processing of meaning-making (Steinhardt, 2017; Wood & Pignatelli, 2019). Similar findings were not highlighted in other studies using ROL and only mentioned briefly as a possible factor in Prasko et al. (2024). The use of metaphors and symbols has a long history and can, for instance, be found in the work of Jung (1964), who viewed these as pathways to the unconscious, uncovering hidden meanings found in dreams, fantasies, and behavior. The incorporation of symbols and metaphors in the ROL method may have allowed unconscious thoughts to surface through the drawings. From this perspective, the river shaped like a question mark could reflect the participant's subconscious attempt to convey something. However, another possibility is that this shape was coincidental, and the meaning found in it was only attributed afterwards. In the end, it is difficult to determine which of these possibilities are most likely; however, it is worth considering if the distinction truly matters. If the method helps the participants gain new insight – whether through unconscious processes or subsequently attribution of meaning – it can still be regarded as a significant influence on the participants' meaning-making processes of their life.

While the metaphorical use of ROL has shown positive implications, the potential consequences of using metaphors and symbols are equally important to consider. Indicating that life is shaped like a river, we imply a certain underlying understanding of the course of life. Using this indirect understanding, life has a starting and an ending point, as seen in a river. Furthermore, though rivers can have twists and curves, it is often understood as linear, implying that life only goes one way – this may have unintentionally added constraints to the participants' view of life, leaving little room for alternative or more creative understandings. In contrast, some might see life more circular or as a spiral, illustrating how life continues without an end, thus, conflicts in the participants' understanding of life could occur when confronted with a more linear definition. Denov and Shevell (2021) selected the river as a metaphor to align with the

cultural context and understanding of the Rwanda citizens, though they did not consider the potential constrains it might cause. Similarly, Moussa (2009) and Howard (2023) mentioned the importance of being flexible when choosing the metaphor, to best suit the individual, and yet still selected the river as a primary metaphor. Different metaphors can be used to represent life, each offering a different perspective. For instance, other art-based studies have used a tree to symbolize life (Hughes, 2014; Jacobs, 2018; Ncube, 2006). Zittoun et al. (2013), on the other hand, describes life as a melody, providing a dynamic and unique perspective likewise the river. Her theoretical framework on ruptures was used in our thesis to support a deeper understanding of the meaning-making process that occurs during life-transitions. Similarities can be found between understanding life as a melody, tree, and river and incorporating these perspectives in our thesis could offer more flexible interpretations of life. However, the two alternative metaphors may also risk imposing a limited perspective on life, as they have a similar linear structure. Based on these considerations, we considered the river metaphor a more fitting metaphorical representation, as it did provide a fine balance between structure and flexibility; while most individuals know how to draw a river, it still allows space for personal interpretation and creative expression – for instance, it allows inclusion of different symbols like ducks or flowers, whereas a melody only contains notes. Furthermore, our previous work with ROL was conducted in the fall 2024, which laid the foundation of this method, making it a more coherent and practical choice compared to another metaphor like a melody or a tree. Despite the potential limitation of constraining the participants to a predefined definition of life, the river metaphor seemed like a generally flexible structure, making it a compelling methodological choice. Nevertheless, future research could consider elaborating on the river or introduce other flexible metaphorical alternatives to further deepen the participants' reflection and meaning-making processes.

To summarize the above, metaphors and symbols helped facilitate and reveal aspects hard to tell only through words, which had a positive impact on the participants' reflections and self-awareness. Therefore, the river might bring insight into unconscious elements in life and contribute to the meaning-making of those. That said, it is important to reflect on how conceptualizing life as a river could limit or influence the participants' life views – other alternative metaphors could be explored in future

research. Still, the balance between flexibility and structure found in the river is considered a strength of the method.

6.3 The Theoretical Implications

The chosen narrative approach for our thesis has important implications regarding our understanding of knowledge. As previously noted, our stance within the narrative approach considers social reality as filtered through the individual's subjective experiences, and knowledge is here constructed by the individual's narrative stories, which are shaped by cultural and social contexts (see section 2). Thus, the chosen framework has influenced the findings of this study and its understandings, making it important to reflect on its role. The narrative approach aligns well with the methodological choice of ROL, as the course of the river naturally encourages the participants to organize their life as a narrative. This narrative construction allowed the participants to tell their life stories and the experiences of becoming a parent, and through these processes increased a sense of meaning with these events and life in general. In this way, the narrative approach not only supports the meaning-making processes as facilitated through ROL, but it also played a central role in addressing this thesis's problem formulation and research questions.

Despite its strengths, the scientific theoretical framework of this thesis is not without limitations. Since knowledge is understood as being constructed in social and cultural contexts, the interviewer and observer were involved in the construction of knowledge during the interview. This context-dependent knowledge poses some challenges for generalization to other situations, as insights produced in one interview setting might differ within another context. The narrative approach is therefore not suitable for researchers who want to uncover a direct relation between narratives and the phenomena beyond them which can be problematic when aiming to generate standardized knowledge (Esin et al., 2014, p. 214). However, the primary aim of this thesis is not to produce generalizable results within a qualitative understanding in relation to specific phenomena, but rather to highlight the potential facilitating abilities found in ROL – providing future research with insights that can support the possibility of generating a standardized manual. Thus, we do not consider this limitation to critically compromise one of the main goals of this thesis.

Another limitation concerns the risk of over-interpretation with the narrative approach, particularly in relation to narrative storytelling and the visual elements in ROL. Within the narrative framework, the focus tends to be on how and why something is said, rather than treating it as the entire truth (Esin et al., 2014, p. 214). This interpretative stance may lead to the risk of over-interpretating the drawings or verbal accounts, reading more into it than what the participants actually intended – especially with the metaphors and symbols often used in or when referring to ROL. However, the findings also needs to be interpretated, as the data does not reveal anything in itself; instead, it is the interpretation of data that reveals meaning (Spencer et al., 2014, p. 85). Additionally, Braun and Clarke (2006, pp. 80, 86) mention the importance of relating the themes found in the thematic analysis to the data material, minimizing the risk of over-interpretating the transcription. This principle was included in the analysis of our thesis as well to ensure an accurate representation of the participants' perspective, while still interpretating them to some extent. These considerations and awareness of the potential for over-interpretation help minimize the risk, meaning that this possible limitation does not undermine the valuable contributions the narrative approach has made to the findings of this thesis.

Alongside reflecting on the scientific theoretical framework, it is also relevant to consider the implications of the theoretical foundation. This thesis drew on McAdams, Breakwell and Zittoun, each contributing with distinct perspectives on identity and meaning-making. While complementary in many aspects, the theories rest on different assumptions, which influenced how meaning was interpreted, and which aspects of the participants' experiences became visible in the data. McAdams (1995) emphasizes the narrative construction of coherence across time, while Breakwell (2015) focuses on how individuals protect core identity principles in response to threat. Zittoun (2006) adds a broader perspective, highlighting how meaning is reorganized through access to symbolic, social, and imaginative resources. These contrasting emphases brought different dimensions to the analysis and occasionally provided slightly different directions – reflecting underlying tensions in how identity and meaning-making can be conceptualized. Some participants appeared to construct meaning through a coherent storytelling, aligning with McAdams' (2001) view of identity as a dynamic life narrative. Others described moments of identity stabilization or avoidance, resonating with Breakwell's (2015) focus on identity maintenance and protection. Meanwhile,

Zittoun's (2006) framework helped interpret how the participants drew on meaningful figures to support their meaning-making process.

Several participants depicted concrete resources in their drawings. Reflecting on these appeared to reinforce their perceived value, suggesting that such symbolic representations can play an active role in meaning-making. Zittoun's (2006) framework thus helped reveal not only what was drawn, but how these resources contributed to participants' transitioning into parenthood. Although Zittoun defines her framework as grounded in developmental psychology, and not clinical psychology (Awad & Zittoun, 2024, p. 16), these findings indicate a potential relevance for applied contexts. However, rather than focusing on the broader developmental aspects of Zittoun's (2006) framework, this thesis focused primarily on the supportive aspects of the participants resources. Had we adopted this wider developmental perspective, where change can be seen as a pathway to growth, the analysis might have placed more emphasis on long-term transformation. Our aim was not to guide personal development, but alignments between Zittoun's concepts and our empirical findings suggest that her framework may be useful in settings where such transitions are explored more intentionally.

It can further be argued that the theoretical tensions can be seen as echoing the tensions within the participants' own narratives, which often held both coherence and fragmentation, control and emotional vulnerability, and were shaped by culture as well as personal factors. Rather than producing contradiction, the interplay between McAdams, Breakwell, and Zittoun allowed for a more nuanced understanding of the participants' meaning-making processes expressed through the ROL. Thus, the theoretical choices influenced which aspects of the participants' experiences were highlighted and how we understand these.

To summarize the above, positive implications emerged between the narrative approach and the methodological understanding of the ROL method. Still, the approach dealt with some challenges, such as generalizing knowledge and the risk of overinterpreting data – these potential risks were minimized through awareness. Additionally, it became clear how the interaction between the theoretical perspectives contributed with different dimensions in the understanding of identity and meaning-making in life-changing events.

6.4 The Reasoning Behind the Case Example

This thesis applies the case example of becoming a parent. By selecting a predefined case, we implied that parenthood must be considered a rupture to be included in this study. According to our chosen theoretical definition, a rupture is a subjective experience of change, whether positive or negative (see section 3.1). From this perspective, it could be argued that conceptualizing a rupture, as with this case, contradicts the theoretical understanding of the concept. What is experienced as a rupture varies from person to person, where some may experience parenthood as a rupture, while others may not – and even among those who do, the experience in itself may also differ. A way to overcome this issue of conceptualizing a rupture would be to remove the case and let the participants decide on their own ruptures. However, a case example was deliberately chosen to reduce the possibility of other disturbing factors that could complicate the analysis. Since the main aim of our thesis was to explore whether art-based methods such as ROL can facilitate the meaning-making process during life-changing events, the specific content for the rupture was considered secondary. Using a shared life event across the six participants allowed for the facilitating abilities of ROL to be in focus, rather than being clouded by different types of ruptures. That said, the case example chosen for this study is supported by existing literature, indicating many disruptions in relation to transitioning into parenthood (see section 3.2). Moreover, we did not decide how the participants specifically experienced the rupture – positive or negative, hard or easy – which in some extend allowed subjective experiences.

When focusing on a single rupture, it is also relevant to discuss how much of an individual's life course should be included in the river. In our study, the participants were told to include their entire life course in the drawing in order to provide a broader understanding of their rupture. This aligns with McAdam's (1995) dynamic model of meaning-making, where he emphasizes the importances of including the past, present, and future when constructing one's life story. Similarly, Zittoun (2006) and Zittoun et al. (2013) also value the inclusion of the broader story of life, as they describe transitioning as a dynamic and developmental process, which should be understood in relation to past experiences. However, based on the findings of this study, previous experiences expressed through the drawing were only included a few times in understanding the participants' meaning-making processes. Still, if we had chosen to isolate the rupture, we might have missed the broader life-perspective – one of the main strengths

with the ROL method. In fact, most of the participants gained new insights and reflections by considering their life as a whole. Whether this method would provide similar outcomes without a full-life perspective remains uncertain. This raises important considerations for future research; either the possibility of excluding the whole life course, and only focus on the specific rupture, or the potential value of removing the predefined case example which allow the participants to decide which of their own ruptures to include. Furthermore, ruptures often concern high emotional and personal experiences, making them more sensitive. Therefore, multiple ethical considerations were taken into account throughout the research process, in order to ensure the participants' wellbeing and uphold the ethical standard expected when conducting research (see section 4.5). We believe the same precautions should be uphold in future research with similar research topics.

Choosing a specific case also influenced the inclusion criteria structured around that rupture. While the invitation for our study was open to all genders, only mothers chose to participate. This was not intended to be a selection criterion, but nonetheless it influenced the perspectives represented in the data. As the experience of becoming a parent can differ across genders – shaped by social norms and expectations (Katz-Wise et al., 2010; Kühhirt, 2012) – this gender imbalance may have limited the diversity of meaning-making processes accessed in our thesis. Still, as the aim was not to generalize patterns about parenthood itself, but to explore the potential of the ROL as a facilitator for meaning-making during times of life-changing events, this limitation was considered less relevant. Nevertheless, this should be acknowledged and would be interesting to address in future studies.

In addition, some of the mothers already had a second child or were expecting. These variations in current life phases likely shaped whether the initial transition was perceived as recent or as more integrated into a broader life narrative. Also, the timeline for having experienced parenthood differed from six months to five years. Such differences raise important questions about how memory, timing, and repetition influence reflection and engagement with the ROL method. Similarly, the nature of the case itself – framed as a significant life-changing event – may have attracted individuals for whom the experience felt emotionally complex or transformative, resulting in a degree of self-selection. This may have further shaped the reflections and insights that emerged in this thesis. The decision to focus on a life-changing event in adulthood

diverges from much research concerning ROL, which tends to emphasize earlier life-stages such as childhood and adolescence. However, as mentioned before (see section 3.1), the question concerning 'who am I?' becomes salient from the time of later adolescence and adulthood, when individuals develop the cognitive and emotional capacity to integrate past, present, and future (McAdams, 1995). First-time parenthood was therefore considered a meaningful and theoretically grounded case to explore meaning-making through the ROL method. Furthermore, this particular theme actually emerged in the interview situations, where some participants show great reflections about the 'who am I' question (see section Article).

Finally, a total of six interviews were conducted. In line with qualitative methodology, the sample size was guided by the depth and richness of the data. As mentioned earlier Brinkmann and Kvale (2018) note that qualitative research might benefit from conducting fewer interviews, investing more time for preparation and analysis. Thus, the value does not lie in the interview's quantity, but in the richness of meaning it offers in relation to the research question. In this thesis, central themes began to emerge after the fourth interview, suggesting a degree of data saturation. However, the final two interviews contributed to reinforcing and nuancing the emerging findings. While fewer participants might have been sufficient, it can be argued that including all six helped strengthen and deepen the data analysis.

To summarize the above, the case example imply that parenthood is a life-changing event, which contradicts with the included theoretical understanding of ruptures as subjective – even so, existing literature indicates that most people find it as a disruptive experience, supporting our choice. Also, we initially focused on the entire life narrative but mostly emphasized the specific case, though including the whole life was found meaningful to the participants when telling their narratives. Further, the different inclusion criteria were considered in relation to their limitations and possibilities. All things considered, the potential of only including the specific rupture in the drawing, and the positive and negative implications of the inclusion criteria should be reflected on in future studies.

7. Summary

The aim of this thesis was to examine how the art-based method ROL can facilitate the meaning-making processes in relation to life-changing events. To fully address this issue, we found it relevant to elaborate on relevant psychological concepts in relation to meaning-making processes in life-changing events, while also placing emphasis on how the facilitating function of the chosen art-based method ROL was reflected in the participants' narratives of these events.

Our study included the case of becoming a parent, and many interesting findings appeared in the data collected from the six mothers' narratives. The method used in our study was a combination of the well-known semi-structured interview along with the art-based method ROL, and data was examined through a thematic network analysis. The findings included interesting themes related to both the content of the narratives as well as the more facilitating role of ROL, where various processes relevant to meaning-making emerged in the findings. The participants' different resources such as family, friends, professionals, objects and imagination played a significant role in making meaning of the event of becoming a parent. The different resources were depicted in the drawings in several ways, and this further helped the participants elaborate on their feelings and thoughts. Also, new insights often occurred when looking at the drawing and the symbols included. The river as a whole served as a metaphor of the participants' life courses, and together with the included symbols this became the overview which helped make coherence between past, present, and future – in addition, it helped reflect on the 'who am I?' question related to identity and meaning-making. During the interviews, many references were made towards the drawings, and many of the themes addressed in the interviews were anchored in the river as well. Together, these different aspects contributed to an overall understanding of the findings, highlighting their role in supporting the process of meaning-making during life-changing events. Thus, the art-based method ROL helped facilitate and reveal aspects hard to express only through words.

Limitations regarding the ROL method could be the participants' initial opinion against drawing where they stated to be anxious about not being able to draw properly, or in doubt about what to draw. Nevertheless, a positive progression towards the task emerged already during the drawing process, and many highlighted the river as

valuable in later conversation, due to its facilitating and revealing capacities. The interview supported this facilitation by allowing elaboration on aspects not directly apparent in the drawing through its questions, making this combination of ROL and the semi-structured interview interesting for continued investigation. A shortcoming regarding the ROL method can be the rather limited existing literature in this area – thus, future research to support or challenge already existing findings are of great interest. In line with this, it is considered important to continue the reflections about conceptualizing life as a river and its possible implications on the participants' understandings of their life course.

Taken together, the findings of this thesis indicated that the art-based method ROL served well as a facilitator regarding meaning-making processes in times of life-changing events. The river served as a common third, opening up and expanding relevant concepts, and the compelling combination between an art-based method such as ROL and the semi-structured interview deserves further research. This thesis also highlighted how symbols and metaphors could serve as important tools for insight, in this case when combined with the narrative approach. Suggestions for upcoming research are twofold; it could be interesting to expand existing findings and thereby elaborate on a more standardized manual for ROL, however, it may also be valuable to explore additional therapeutic settings, where the river could serve as a tool or common third and help the client express themself in other alternative ways than using only words. In any case, there is great value in exploring and further developing the area of art-based methods.

8. References

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