

Autoethnography in Occupational Science: me, we or they?

27/09/2011 23:38

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Occupational Science: OTs Owning
Occupation
Plymouth 9th Sept 2011

Move to Authors

Hello my name is Kirsty Stanley and I was supported with this presentation by my PhD supervisor Dr Caroline Ellis-Hill

Move on to first part of title

Welcome to my paper on autoethnography as a potential research methodology for occupational science studies.

As you are all aware Occupational science is an... 'Academic discipline of the social sciences aimed at producing a body of knowledge on occupation through theory generation, and systematic, disciplined methods of inquiry.' (Creek, 2010, p. 29)

Researching occupation is extremely complex due to its multifaceted nature. Storied approaches are proposed by Molineux and Rickard (2003) as a sound research methodology for understanding occupation.

Autoethnography is... 'an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural.' (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p.739).

Patton (2002, p.84) suggests that the foundational question of autoethnography is 'How does my own experience of this culture connect with and offer insights about this culture, situation, event, and/or way of life?'

Today I will be discussing the issue of whether the autoethnography should focus on

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me, we or they?

It is important to note that there are many different ways to conduct autoethnographic research and I, by no means, cover them all here. Today can only serve as an introduction to the debates within the field and my thoughts on them.

Move prez on to they

They

I'm going to start with the idea of autoethnography looking at the 'they' as traditionally science has been very focused on recording the findings as they relate to the participants with the researcher being absent from proceedings. Novice qualitative researchers such as Piglet, and myself, may feel that we should not be seen in the research, and instead are left drifting out at sea, being pulled away by the current of traditional thought and pushed away by the participants who also see us as the other, the questioner.

Indeed an autoethnography of others may seem absurd – in this case, however the focus would be more on the literary dissemination of the researcher's engagement in the research process.

Leon Anderson (2006, p. 378) proposes what he terms Analytic Autoethnography that has the following five key features.

'(1) complete member researcher (CMR) status, (2) analytic reflexivity, (3) narrative visibility of the researcher's self, (4) dialogue with informants beyond the self, and (5) commitment to theoretical analysis.' This focus on analysis and the other is one method of autoethnography proposed.

In an autoethnography of the they the occupational science researcher could document their experience of doing the research, demonstrating particularly where beliefs have changed, (Anderson, 2006) and drawing the reader along with them on the route of discovery or use their lived experience to help bring life to a narrative about the participants.

In a study on the psychosocial aspects of Scuba diving for people with acquired physical disabilities by Carin-Levy and Jones (2007) a phenomenological approach was taken and three male divers interviewed. The first author, however, highlights a personal background in scuba diving (with no mention of disability) and notes a

subsequent maintenance of a reflexive diary that is cross-referenced with interview transcriptions to help identify biases (p.9). No further mention is made of these personal notes and the findings are presented in traditional form, with theme headings and participant quotes. Had this particular research been conducted as an autoethnography it could have been represented as a story in which the author could have used their personal experiences and feelings (Anderson, 2006) to actively compare her account with theirs, as an able-bodied woman. An alternative suggestion may have been using own memories and experience to fictionalize the accounts of the divers, e.g. highlighting the difference between the on land and underwater experience.

Anderson (2006) and similar critics, however, suggest that the 'self-narrative of analytic autoethnography is used, in part, to develop and refine generalized theoretical understandings of social process,' (p.385) and would most likely label this as evocative autoethnography.

Move prez on to Me

Me

Taking my PhD research on creative writing. I have chosen this topic of research because of a personal connection to it. Autoethnography examines a culture which the researcher is part of or becomes part of.

Ann Neveille-Jan (2005) writes as an occupational therapist with spina bifida on the topic of 'prevention' of the condition. Steve Hoppes' autoethnography is about the loss of his nephew and the impact this had on occupational routine. He suggests (2005) that many autoethnographies are about loss. Both of these papers could both be termed evocative (Ellis, 2004) or Heartful Autoethnography (Ellis, 1999).

Ellis uses an example of one of her student's investigating breast cancer as a survivor herself.

A piece of research more akin to my proposed study on occupational engagement is Taylor's autoethnography of a PhD (2008), an apparently mundane occupation (hmmmm). I can immediately relate to her comments about eating chocolate whilst working (p. 180) as whilst preparing this presentation I did just that. With a growing emphasis on occupational therapists truly understanding the link between occupations, health and wellbeing in an effort to carve our professional niche, and with the emergence of occupational science as a discipline, engagement in occupations is something we all have experience in and

have insights that would be relevant to share. Who here can't talk about a personal occupational experience that has impacted, either positively or negatively, on their wellbeing? As we said yesterday, who isn't an occupational scientist.

In an autoethnography of Me the occupational science researcher would examine every detail of their engagement with the experience under investigation. The knowledge it would give you would be detailed...the limitations might be down to memory lapses.

An account by Andrew Sparkes (2002) of an external examiner's labeling of his student's autoethnographic account as self-indulgent demonstrates a common

critique of autoethnography. But yet single-person case studies of the they are not tickled with this same feather. Indeed Denzin (2006) and Vryan (2006) critique Anderson's (2006) need to drive autoethnography towards a more traditional ethnographic analysis with Vryan (2006) suggesting that 'intense self-immersion and the discoveries it may enable presents one of analytical autoethnography's greatest potential.' Additionally he considers that when looking at one person only analysis production of abstracted knowledge is possible. How often have you felt yourself empathise with a fictional character even when they may be nothing like you?

Although OTs have long believed in the uniqueness of each individual (Barber, 2006) there is a growing awareness that there is merit in examining individual accounts and in comparing them (Dickie, Cutchin and Humphry, 2006). For example it is in the transactions of speaking to others about similar experiences that can help us truly clarify our beliefs and it has been suggested, not least by Professor Anne Roberts yesterday that there is often a social context to occupations (Fogelberg and Frauwirth 2010).

Move prez on to We

We

The great thing about autoethnography is that I think it can do both, combine they and me into we.

It is interesting, well to myself anyway, that of the four studies I have discussed perhaps the least 'evocative', on the surface, in terms of topic is the one I find myself most engaging with. I'm not 100% sure if this is because I enjoy Taylor's writing style more or whether it is simply to do with the fact that I share the same experience as a PhD student, though not nearly so far along the journey as she was. She still makes clear links to

occupational science theories but doesn't 'come out' of the narrative to do so.

Taking myself again as an example (how very self-indulgent I know), although I see me and my views as important, I recognize that they are not the only views (and to be perfectly honest I think I'd be bored just looking at myself!). It is the snippets of insight I've read from other writers on Twitter and their blogs and in published autobiographies which makes me feel there is more to learn about the occupation of writing and more to learn about my own need to engage in it though I barely get time to put fictional pen to paper or fictional fingers to keys nowadays (pesky work ruining my occupational balance again).

The benefit of having personal experience of the occupation/occupational science concept under investigation is the ability to write as both a participant insider and as a researcher outsider. One thing that could more comfortably be achieved in looking at a number of people is the use of composite characters. Not that I am necessarily shy about waffling about myself but as Taylor (2008) highlights as a writer of an autoethnography you open your life and the lives of those you refer to up to criticism. For example I could pretend it was a fictional character whose boss/family/friends were particularly convinced by a poem on the theme of suicide and that eventually the fictional

character was very flattered their poem was so powerful as to be considered real.

For the practicing therapist making sense or utilizing research may be a real concern, in a one person autoethnography any difference in parameters to what is experienced in 'real life' may lead the research to be thrown out as not relevant (though I think the storied nature would still lead to a certain level of understanding). However, by providing multiple stories on the shelf and multiple voices it is hoped that at least something will speak to the reader. It is not necessarily an explicit analysis and revealing of links such as that espoused by supporters of analytic autoethnography (Atkinson, 2006) nor a rejection of the

possibility of generalizing or 'looking beyond.'

In an autoethnography that explores the experiences of we the occupational science researcher would become a co-researcher, listening to the participants, with them also helping direct the research and sharing the power. Piglet would no longer be shunned but accepted as one of the gang. Ellis discusses interactive interviewing as one method to enable this (2004, 2011). Looking beyond your own experience can happen in both evocative and analytic autoethnography.

Anderson (2006) however highlights the difficulties the dual role of researcher/participants can create in terms of role conflict. To overcome this

perhaps following initial stages of data collection the researcher could share their 'researcher' beliefs, e.g. that occupation and health are interlinked (Wilcock, 2007). By sharing preconceptions with participants this enables their role as co-researcher where they are free to dispute the beliefs. A storied autoethnography of the we I believe could be a strong methodology to overcome what Professor Hocking (2009) termed the challenge of occupation and describing what people do. A multiple perspective account could better cover an awareness of variety in context, history of the occupation, rules and norms, form, function, meaning etc. (Molineux and Rickard, 2003). And it can do this through story with or without explicit analysis. For example in the

second term of our programme I use the short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1899). Perkins uses her own experience of post natal depression and the imposition of the 'rest cure' to demonstrate how the removal of her occupation of writing drives her to insanity. Students with just one term of training were able to pull from this links with occupational science concepts without any attempts at analysis by the author. Stories can 'reveal meaning without the error of defining it.' (Arendt 1973 cited Ellis and Bochner, 2006, p. 438) and are generally considered strongest when they show more than they tell.

Move prezi on to Poem by Spry (2011) –
just up in background – make reference to
it.

Autoethnography Lost and Found (Tami Spry, 2011, p. 497)

Autoethnography is body and verse.
It is self and other and one and many.
It is ensemble, a cappella, and accompaniment.
Autoethnography is place and space and time.
It is personal, political and palpable.
It is art and craft. It is jazz and blues.
It is messy, bloody and unruly.
It is agency, rendition, and dialogue.
It is danger, trouble and pain.
It is critical, reflexive, performative, and often forgiving.
It is the string theories of pain and privilege
Forever woven into fabrics of power/lessness.
It is skin/flints of melanin and bodies
in the gendered hues of sanctuary and violence.
It is a subaltern narrative revealing the understory of hegemonic
systems.
It is skeptical and restorative.
It is an interpreted body
of evidence.
It is personally accountable.
It is wholly none of these, but fragments of each.
It is a performance of possibilities.

Conclusion

There are many qualitative research methodologies available to novice and experienced occupational scientists, each providing a focus on a topic in a different way. My suggestions today are only my unique perspective on how I think autoethnography might contribute to the dissemination of OS research and appeal to me as a writer – your story may well be different. Research is set on a continuum, and autoethnography is no different, it can lean more towards being evocative or analytic, I personally can't see why, in a skilled creative academic writer's hands (Antoniou and Moriarty, 2008) it couldn't be both. Taylor (2008) suggests that further autoethnography studies will help to illuminate occupational values and meanings. Obviously the major limitation

of autoethnography is where the researcher is not part of the group to be studied, though they can still use narrative methods.

After all writers talk of world building as an important part of story creation. It is no less important for a researcher to create as realistic an image of the world under investigation and they can learn from creative writers how to do this. The richer the detail, the more engaging the story, the more it sticks in the mind of the reader and comes back to them at a time when it may become relevant in practice. No criticism of any of the speakers yesterday but the bit I can remember the best was the story of Beryl's chair.

Policies are unlikely to change based on the account of one person, unless in extreme situations but accounts of many people experiencing positive outcomes from occupational engagement may serve to raise awareness of our profession and occupation as a whole. Maybe libraries and pottery classes might stay open!

The title of the conference is about OTs owning occupation. This shouldn't ever mean that we keep all the good stuff about it to ourselves or wrapped in our jargon. Sometimes our jargon is not even accessible to everyone within the same profession. Who hasn't, like Ellis (and Bochner 2006) become a 'detached spectator' reading a journal article. So please do consider stories as a

dissemination as well as a collection method – they are after all how we pass information from generation to generation. Reeder (2007) suggested that in the year 2050 evidence should come from ‘All voices and life patterns of expression’. There is a distinct move away from the positivist paradigm as the gold standard and towards human science and what is more human than a good yarn, about yourself, about the lady down the street and about all of us together.

I end with a quote, ‘I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story truth is truer sometimes than happening truth. What stories can do I guess is make things present...[T]his is true stories can save us. (Tim O’Brian cited Ellis and

Bochner 2006). Maybe they can save occupation and occupational science too?!

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I will enable access to this prezi online and provide the link to go on the conference website. A word file of these notes which include my 'impromptu, non scripted 'jokes' and reference list will be attached to this.

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Move prezi on to thanks and inviting questions

Thank You very much for listening – any easy questions for me?