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A. Wicks*

G. Whiteford†

*University of Wollongong, wicks@uow.edu.au

†Charles Sturt University

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Conceptual and practical issues in qualitative research:

Reflections on a life history study

Alison Wicks (PhD)

Director, Australasian Occupational Science Centre

University of Wollongong

PO Box 5080

Nowra DC

NSW 2541 Australia

Gail Whiteford (PhD)

Professor and Chair, Occupational Therapy

Charles Sturt University

PO Box 789

Albury

NSW 2640 Australia

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Abstract

Although qualitative research is becoming increasingly popular as a means of understanding not only occupation but also a range of other human health related phenomena, the complex conceptual underpinnings of the paradigm remain relatively unexplored in the literature. This article addresses such a perceived gap. Context specificity, emic perspectives, its iterative nature and power relations are four distinct conceptual dimensions of qualitative research which are discussed. The article also includes reflections on conceptual dimensions and practical issues in relation to a qualitative study which adopted a life history approach. These reflections highlight how the conceptual dimensions underpinning qualitative research guide the process in life history research and shape the experience of life history researchers. The practical considerations which focus on participant qualities, effects on the researcher and the participant-researcher relationship are particularly relevant for potential life history researchers. The article concludes with a discussion on the value of life history as a qualitative research approach for occupational therapy and occupational science.

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Conceptual and practical issues in qualitative research:

Reflections on a life history study

Qualitative research has truly found its ‘place in the sun’ as a paradigm of choice in addressing complex phenomena in the broad arena of health and human services. ‘Qualitative’ is a broad descriptive term that includes various approaches to answering research questions that require an understanding of a given phenomenon within its own context. Qualitative research approaches focus on the way people interpret their experiences and the world in which they live.

In occupational therapy qualitative approaches are appropriate for comprehending the complex and situated nature of occupation^{1, 2, 3}. Consequently, there are increasing numbers of occupational therapists world wide conducting qualitative studies which are contributing to deep understandings of the complex way in which contextual forces interact to influence what people do in their communities. Yet despite the increase in qualitative studies, the conceptual foundations of qualitative research which render it suitable for occupational therapy research remain relatively unexplored in the literature.

As a way of addressing this perceived gap in the literature, we draw on a variety of qualitative studies by occupational therapists to discuss the conceptual foundations of qualitative research. Additionally, we draw on our experience as life history researchers to discuss conceptual and practical issues as they relate to life history research, a distinct qualitative approach. Our reflections reveal how the conceptual dimensions of qualitative research guide its conduct and shape the experience of the researcher and the participants. We conclude with a discussion on the

value of life history research and its ‘goodness of fit’ with occupational therapy and occupational science.

Distinct conceptual dimensions of qualitative research

The conceptual foundations of qualitative research are shaped by the philosophy that underpins it. All research is based on philosophical assumptions about what is real (ontology) and how we know (epistemology). Qualitative research is underpinned by a subjectivist ontology and a subjectivist epistemology, which means individuals create their own subjective realities and there is an interrelated and interdependent relationship between the knower and the known⁴. There are four conceptual dimensions of qualitative research which reflect these philosophical assumptions and create the distinctive nature of qualitative research.

Context specific

The first dimension of qualitative research approaches is that they are context specific and capture context bound narratives. This dimension is important in assisting us to understand the “life world” of the research participants and the myriad of influences upon it⁵. The use of context bound narratives in qualitative studies facilitates understanding of the complex relationship between what people do, their health and the contexts in which they live. In occupational therapy, for example, developing deep understandings of the complexities of how contextual forces interact to influence what people do in communities, must (or should) be one of the main projects of the profession internationally. A cogent example of such research was Townsend’s study of mental health service delivery in Atlantic Canada⁶. Townsend used an institutional ethnography design to inquire into occupational therapy service delivery for people with mental illnesses. She sourced data from multiple sources, then interpreted the data relative to institutional and

provincial mental health policy. As such, it remains a landmark study in its foregrounding of contextual complexity and its critical analysis of the power relationships inherent in organizational structures.

Emic perspectives

Second, qualitative approaches provide what is referred to as an emic or insider's perspective and experience⁷. An insider's perspective is crucial in understanding the meaning constructions of an individual, group or community in relation to a specific phenomenon. In the field of health, phenomena may range from living with a chronic condition, to youth suicide, to the experience of aged care. Enquiry into meaning constructions relative to practice should be fundamental, especially in people-oriented professions, such as occupational therapy⁸. Numerous examples have emerged with this focus in recent times. One of the most engaging studies into the meaning of occupations was Hasselkus's scholarly work in which data generated from phenomenological interviews with occupational therapists provided insights into the meanings of occupations in people's lives⁹. Jackson et al. also foregrounded the meaning of occupation in their landmark well elderly study in California, whilst Christiansen et al. undertook a study which focused on meaning constructions through engagement in personal projects^{10, 11}. These studies exemplify how situated meaning is best elucidated by qualitative approaches.

Iterative nature

A third important feature of qualitative research is that it is iterative in nature, allowing for new and at times unexpected findings to emerge. As compared to a hypothetico-deductive approach, qualitative research, through its exploratory approach and data responsive processes, is particularly important in sensitive areas of research¹². Touringy's study of inner city youth in

Detroit stands out as a compelling example of the value of qualitative research in informing healthcare practice. Her study, which originally was oriented towards HIV/AIDS educational programs, instead uncovered a practice by Afro American youths to actively choose to acquire HIV, knowing the consequences¹³. This is a shocking finding that points to extreme existential issues linked to socioeconomic milieu, including hopelessness, despair and suicide.

Power relations

The fourth dimension of the conceptual foundations of qualitative research relates to power relations. Power relations are part of any research project¹⁴. In projects adopting a qualitative research approach participants or informants have opportunity to have ownership or control over data and findings. In participatory action research, for example, participants can also become stakeholders in potential changes emerging from the qualitative research. Power relations in qualitative research are markedly different to those in quantitative research approaches. Quantitative researchers operationalise concepts in order to measure them. As a result, in quantitative studies, the concepts are framed from the perspective of the researcher, leading to the question “whose voice is speaking?”¹⁵.

An excellent example of a qualitative study which seeks to empower through actively involving participants as research partners and stakeholders, is Gwynn’s research¹⁶. In NSW, Australia, Gwynn conducted an ethnographic study to research the experience of type 2 diabetes in indigenous communities. Through the process of philosophically and theoretically situating the project and giving voice to indigenous community members, Gwynn’s study had an expected outcome of empowerment through the conjoint development of a school based program for children. Clearly, such an outcome in what is a very important and sensitive area could only have

been addressed through rigorous qualitative means and reinforces the concept of research as praxis¹⁷. Given the many inequities that continue in the health status of subpopulations of people around the globe today, research which not only generates data to serve as an evidence base for practice, but which also empowers through its process and outcomes, has to be seriously considered as the option of choice in many areas.

These four distinct conceptual dimensions of qualitative research were among the factors that influenced our decision to adopt a qualitative approach to the exploration of occupational potential, a fundamental yet relatively nascent construct in occupational science and one that is highly relevant to occupational therapy. We used life history research as a specific qualitative approach because we sought to understand the development and realisation of occupational potential over time¹⁸.

Life history research: a distinct qualitative approach

Life history research was first used as a qualitative approach by psychologists for understanding human experience and how people construct their lives. It has also been a primary methodology in anthropological fieldwork¹⁹. For occupational therapy, the narrative approach adopted by life history research renders it particularly suitable for understanding occupational experiences. A narrative approach uses narratives, the stories people tell about the things they do. Developed from the study of the form and content of narratives, the narrative approach uses the sequential nature of narratives and the cohesive role of narrative plots to reflect on experiences that people recall^{20, 21, 22}. Narratives are the basic medium through which humans speak and think and as such, narratives are uniquely suited for comprehending human lives in culture and in time²³. The relatively recent increase in the use of narrative approaches in various fields, as noted by Frank, is

understandable given that narratives render human experience meaningful, and display human existence as situated action^{24, 25}.

Life history research is distinct among narrative approaches to qualitative research. In the life history approach the narratives used are life stories. Life stories are particular narratives used to reconstruct and interpret whole lives to obtain a comprehensive, over time view of people's experiences²⁴. That is, they can be used to understand not only one life across time, but how individual lives interact with the whole. For this reason, life stories are very appropriate for understanding a life time of occupational experiences and for understanding the personal, social, economic, historical and geographical influences that shape those experiences. We used life stories in our study to uncover how the development and realisation of the occupational potential of six older Australian women were facilitated or constrained at the different stages of their life course²⁶.

The six women who shared their life stories for our study were purposively selected from the twenty-two women all aged over sixty-five years, who volunteered to participate in one of three focus groups. The purpose of the focus groups was to elucidate significant occupational themes embedded in the women's stories and to identify social, historical, political and economic events that had influenced their occupational life course. Such themes and influences were subsequently explored in-depth in individual interviews in which the six women told their life stories.

A total of twenty one individual interviews were conducted. Sixteen of these interviews were for life story data collection and five were for data clarification during which the women had opportunity to check their stories, modifying or expanding them as they wished. The data

gathered from the interviews were narratively analysed and interpreted from an occupational and a feminist perspective.

This brief description of our study provides relevant background for the following reflections on both the conceptual dimensions and practical issues with respect to our life history study.

Reflections on the conceptual dimensions in a life history study

The stories shared by the six women were context specific in that they illuminated their life worlds during the period 1924 to 2001. Their stories revealed how a variety of influences, such as a world war, the Depression, prevailing social attitudes and policies in respect of women shaped their lives. As the stories were analysed it became apparent these influences directly and indirectly impacted upon their occupational opportunities and choices, which in turn influenced the development and realisation of their occupational potential.

At this point, it is important to note that the women's stories were their interpretations of the things they have done, and that their interpretations were influenced by their personal perspectives on their life world. It is also important to acknowledge that their contexts at the time of telling the stories also influenced their interpretation. So we could effectively interpret their interpretations we became saturated in the occupations of Australian women during the same period. Visiting museums and reading the biographies of other women who were the same age became part of our fieldwork, enabling us to fully understand the contextual influences that shaped the things the women did.

In our study, understanding the women's emic perspectives was facilitated by interviewing the women in their homes. Familiar surroundings enabled the women to relax during the story telling and provided us the opportunity to appreciate those possessions and personal objects that were most meaningful to each of them and which helped define them as occupational beings²⁷. Photos of family members, special things they treasured, even the objects they used everyday, such as a sewing machine or a computer, added to our understanding of what held value and meaning for these women.

Perhaps not quite as compelling as Tournigy's unexpected findings, but nevertheless unanticipated, was our finding of the "women's ways of doing" which emerged as a result of the spiral or cyclic nature of the narrative analysis. These unique occupational strategies were developed over time by the women as responses to the explicit and tacit exclusions they experienced in relation to occupational participation within social and familial contexts. Although it is not the purpose of this article to present narrative data per se, we include the following extract from 'Sylvia's' life story to illustrate one of her effective occupational strategies. This particular extract also demonstrates the depth and detail that can be generated by successive life history interviews and the trust gained therein.

Sylvia:

I suppose I started thinking about it twenty-odd years ago, really, at least. I had a reputation within the family of being fairly forthright. The kids would sort of laugh and always say, you always know where you stand with Mum. And I thought, does that mean that I am domineering, formidable, or bossy, or is this a good thing, that they always know where they stand with Mum? And I decided that it was a good thing. And then, moving along from that, I felt that it had to be tempered a little bit, with one's own self interest. If everyone knows where they stand with you, and if you say, no, I am not going to have you for the weekend of the Queen's birthday, I would rather go down the coast and walk along the beach or something like that, that is the enlightened bit. It's the bit where they know where they stand with you. And the self-interest is being met at the same time. There is no devious, hidden agenda in me

saying that I don't want you to come to me for that weekend. It is not that I don't love you, or I am cranky with you for any reason. I am not sulking. It is just that I would rather do something else. I think it appeals to me, because I like to be upfront, but I also don't like to always do what somebody else thinks I should do. *Laugh*. So, it is a nice little two bob each way, I suppose you could say. And it works. It works for me. I hope it works most of the time for the people I care about. Does that make sense to you?

All I know is that, over time, I have thought it through. I have applied it to various things that have cropped up and wondered whether this was the right thing to do or not. And, for me, personally, I am comfortable with it. I have now reached the point where I hope it is understood by the ones I care about, and if it isn't, tough, because there is integrity and there is honesty in it. And that is a pretty good thing to give. Once again, we are talking about giving. Women always give. Well, that is not true, but I think that they always **want** to give. The fact that it might turn out to be that they are giving the thing that isn't valued (*laugh*) is disappointing, but it is still a gift, just the same. But anyway, you might like to try it and see. *Laugh*.

Hearing about 'Sylvia's' strategy of adopting enlightened self interest illuminated the gendered nature of occupational potential, and enhanced our understanding of the influences that shaped the development and realisation of the women's occupational potential²⁸.

The final reflection we make on the conceptual dimensions of life history research relates to power relations. When we reflect on the power relations in our study, we realise that the women were essentially co-researchers. We have always respected the women as the authors of their stories and their authorship is acknowledged whenever data from our study is presented. To ensure that the women remain subjects rather than objects of the study we always include large extracts directly from the transcripts so the women's voices can be heard^{29, 30}. The inclusion of Sylvia's extract in this article is testament to our relationship with the women in our study.

Interestingly, as a possible consequence of the strong relationship we developed with the women over the course of the study, all six women have commented that they were interested in the research processes and that they benefited from telling and reflecting on their life stories and from

their involvement in the study. They also reported that they felt empowered when given a personal copy of their transcribed interviews for the opportunity of approving the data for analysis and for adding or deleting any information.

These reflections highlight the influence of the conceptual dimensions of qualitative research on our study. They enhanced our understanding of the contexts that shaped the women's occupational opportunities, and ultimately the realisation of their occupational potential. They enriched our appreciation of the women's personal meaning construction. The gendered nature of occupational potential was an unexpected revelation and the women reported being empowered by the research experience. For potential life history researchers we now reflect on some important practical issues to consider when gathering and interpreting the life stories.

Reflections on practical issues in life history research

When conducting life history research, there are some specific practical issues, such as recording the life stories, choosing the setting for the interviews, undertaking the analysis and considering ethical issues³¹. But in this article, we reflect on more general practical issues that relate specifically to the qualitative nature of life history research and pertain to the participants, the researcher and the participant-researcher relationship.

Participant qualities

Participants are key players in life history research because their life stories are the primary data. Consequently, there are several considerations when recruiting and selecting participants to tell their life stories. First, the participants need to be able and willing to spend long hours in interview. In our study, the number of individual interviews per women ranged from three to

four. The length of the interviews ranged from sixty nine to one hundred and ten minutes. Both the number and length of interview were determined by the point when both researcher and participant felt there were enough data³².

Second, as the participants are asked to reminisce about all the things they have done in their life, it is necessary that their long and short term memories are relatively intact and that they have to ability to think tangentially. Life story tellers often begin their story at the beginning of their life course and attempt to recount events in chronological order. However, as we found, when people talk about certain events, other events that are not in any temporal sequence are very often recalled. “Don’t ask me why I thought of that” was a phrase regularly used by ‘Fran’, who was one of the participants in our study. ‘Fran’ would be describing something, such as the house they were living in when her daughter was aged two, and then she would recall an apparently unrelated incident, such as the time her Aunt ‘Bess’ brought home from the abattoirs in the back of the old grey Page car a “dirty, smelly old lamb called Daisy”.

Third, the participants need to be psychologically robust as they are likely to confront both positive and negative memories as they tell their stories. A range of emotions may be aroused. For example, one of the women in our study reported that memories and feelings about her father were induced after her first interview and she subsequently experienced a restless night. In such instances, it is incumbent upon the researcher to ensure participants have appropriate support. For our study, a psychologist was available should any of the women request assistance to deal with feelings that were stimulated by their story telling.

Purposively selecting the women was one way of ensuring the participants in our study would be able to meet these practical considerations. In the focus groups we were able to assess their suitability to be life story tellers. We believe careful selection of participants helps them enjoy their experience as co-researchers.

Effects on the researcher

In addition to considerations relating to the participants, we now realize that life history researchers need to be cognizant of several issues that may relate to them. For example, researchers should be aware that the stories may personally affect them. At times, listening to stories can arouse personal memories or strong provocative images, and so researchers should be prepared to reflect on their own life course as well as the life course of significant others. For example, Wicks interviewed women who recounted particular wartime experiences which would have been similar to those experienced by her own mother. In addition, Wicks now has a much clearer understanding of the social expectations in relation to women's education in the 1940s and fully appreciates why her mother did not pursue tertiary education despite her expressed desire to be a teacher. Just as it is important for participants to have available support, it is also essential that researchers have opportunities to regularly debrief with supervisors or colleagues, or to seek assistance from a psychologist. Therefore, debriefing and sharing raw data with non participants should be incorporated into the ethics conditions.

But the emotional energy involved in life history research is not the only challenge for researchers. As with most qualitative research, large amounts of time need to be invested in the gathering and then the interpreting of life stories. This type of research is not for those who prefer a pre-planned research journey with a pre-determined time schedule. There are no rules or

formula for analyzing life stories and so researchers are largely guided by the form and nature of the data³³. From personal experience, analyzing life stories can be a circuitous and tortuous process, and at times quite messy, as described by Dickie³². Life history researchers usually develop their own strategies for managing the inevitable large amounts of data and for interpreting the various stories³⁴.

Participant-researcher relationship

The final practical issue to be addressed concerns the special relationship that develops between the researcher and the participants. To be given the opportunity to listen to someone's life story is indeed a privilege and warrants special consideration because the researcher and the participant become part of each other's story and are inevitably transformed by the life history research experience. Unlike other research approaches, a strong, ongoing relationship may be formed between the researcher and participant in a life history approach, possibly due to the very personal and at times intimate nature of the data. The researcher needs to be aware of the potential for emotional involvement and of the potency of life stories. Also, it is important that the researcher is prepared to give as well as to take. That is, the researcher must be willing to share personal insights that develop during the research process. Reflecting on and sharing insights facilitates the interpretations of the researcher and the participant, and such reciprocity, as discussed by Lather is an essential component in qualitative research¹⁷.

Our reflections on practical issues related to life history research show that emotional robustness and a willingness to be open and to share are important qualities that both the researcher and the participant require. Having time to tell a life story is pre-requisite for the participant while the researcher needs ample time to gather data and then to analyze it. Whilst these criteria may limit

the use of history research, it is nevertheless a valuable qualitative approach in both occupational therapy and occupational science.

Value of life history research

There are two main reasons the conceptual foundations of life history research render it a distinct qualitative approach, one that is particularly valuable for occupational therapy. First, as life history research preserves the integrity of individuals and accepts their experiences as credible, it is philosophically compatible with the humanist values and assumptions that underpin occupational therapy. Second, the sharing of life stories in the life history approach can enable people to become conscious of their own actions and situations, giving them a clearer perspective of the things they have done in the past and the influences that have helped or hindered their participation. In so doing, life story telling can assist people in planning their future occupational course. Such outcomes resonate with the aims of enabling occupation and the principles of empowerment and facilitation of participation, which are essential components of occupational therapy practice⁶.

For occupational scientists, the life stories gathered in life history research provide a rich account of people's occupational experiences over time, as well as a contextual framework within which to understand these experiences. These accounts enhance understanding of people as occupational beings and contribute to the knowledge base of occupational science.

Conclusion

Qualitative research has become increasingly popular in health and human services, a response which may be read as a postmodern realization of the limitation of quantitative approaches to

understanding complex human phenomena. The particular features of qualitative research such as context sensitivity, emic orientation, iterative processes and power sharing are attractive to researchers seeking to explore important questions through the lived experiences of those centrally involved.

When the domain of concern is occupation, qualitative approaches are particularly powerful in illuminating its complex, situated nature. Specifically, through the utilization of a life history approach, occupational therapy researchers can conduct in-depth explorations of individuals' experiences of engagement in occupations. This enables insights into the forms, functions and contexts of people's occupations across the life course and the sociocultural, political, economic and geographic influences that shape their occupations. The collective and iterative analysis of life stories are the means by which researchers can unravel the multi-layered nature of occupation, developing the expanding knowledge base of occupational science as they generate new and unexpected findings.

Perhaps more importantly for the profession, however, the development of in-depth understandings about occupation as it is lived and interpreted by diverse peoples has the power to reinvigorate everyday occupational therapy practices, focusing them towards personal meaning and context relevancy. Such a development may be seen as long overdue and one that, through centralizing the narrative of our clients in all dimensions of service planning and delivery, will ensure the continued relevance of occupational therapy.

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