Is the Use of Life History and Narrative in Clinical Practice Fundable as Research?

Janet M. Duchek, PhD. is Assistant Professor, Occupational Therapy and Neurology, Washington University School of Medicine, 4444 Forest Park Boulevard, St. Louis, Missouri 63108.

Veronica Thessing, MS. is Graduate Student, Program in Occupational Therapy, Washington University School of Medicine, St. Louis, Missouri.

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Life history research represents one of the many methodologies that fall under the more general rubric of qualitative research. Specifically, life history and narrative analysis involve the use of discourse to study human performance. This research method provides a rich description of a person's representation of meaningful experiences and events. The major source of data is the interview, which results in copious transcripts that are coded, analyzed, and interpreted as meaningful themes or plots. This analysis culminates in a narrative account of the meaning of experiences for a particular person that is jointly created by the person and the researcher. The accuracy of the resulting narrative is judged by how closely it matches the intentions of the storyteller (Polkinghorne, 1988).

We have seen examples of the use of life history and narrative analysis in the occupational therapy literature (e.g., Clark, 1993; Frank, 1984; McCuaig & Frank, 1991). For example, last month's special issue of the American Journal of Occupational Therapy, 50(4), provided the reader with several life history and narrative reports relevant to the practice of occupational therapy. Another example of the use of life history and narrative research methods can be found in Clark's 1993 Eleanor Clarke Slagle lecture (Clark, 1993). Intertwoven throughout this eloquent lecture was the story of a woman coping with a newly acquired disability. Through the extensive use of interview and personal contact with her client (and friend), Clark developed a life history and narrative that detailed this woman's history, onset of disability, and struggle toward independence and living with a disability. It was quite clear from this story how her experiences (including childhood), family, friends, and cultural and environmental context affected her acceptance of and adjustment to her disability.

In her lecture, Clark (1993) spoke of the interweaving of storytelling and science. She suggested that she took the role of occupational therapist and occupational scientist at the same time, thereby merging both the therapy and research process. The term occupational storytelling was used to describe the process by which her client provided stories of her childhood that influenced her present sense of self and engagement in activity as an adult. This occupational storytelling provided the data or discourse from which this life history emerged. Clark claimed that this method or approach to research is "uniquely designed for occupational science inquiry" (p. 1076).

It is apparent that this approach to research has an inherent appeal for occupational therapy. Some of the more influential voices in the field have touted such qualitative approaches as the scientific method of choice for the profession (e.g., Hasselkus, 1991; Kielhofner, 1982; Yerxa, 1991a). Specifically, Yerxa has argued that qualitative research methods provide a valid, ethical, and humanistic way of knowing for occupational therapy. Given the primary characteristics of qualitative research in general, and life history and narrative research specifically, it is clear why one would make such an argument for the practice of occupational therapy. Life history research focuses on the person and the meaning of experiences and events within the specific context of his or her life. The person's history and present social, cultural, and physical environment are considered vital elements that shape the life narrative that is created. It is evident that the holistic and individualized nature of this approach, as well as the awareness of the person within a social and environmental context, speak directly to the basic philosophical tenets of the practice of occupational therapy.

However, the questions of concern are (a) Does this approach meet the objectives of science for occupational therapy? and (b) Is this type of research fundable? To answer the first question, one must consider the objectives of science and the purpose research serves for any professional discipline. Science can
be defined simply as a systematic approach to asking and answering questions. The product of research is the accumulation of knowledge regarding phenomena of specific interest to a particular discipline. The objectives of science are traditionally described as description, explanation, prediction, and control (Christiansen, 1985). To gain a scientific understanding of any phenomenon, one must first have a clear, detailed description of that phenomenon. When a full and accurate description exists, then an explanation for that phenomenon can be proposed. After a viable explanation exists, then specific predictions can be made regarding the occurrence of and changes in the phenomenon. In other words, if phenomenon X is due to Y, then one would predict that specific changes in Y should systematically affect phenomenon X. Predictions allow one to test the viability of one’s explanations. Finally, to test these explanations, one needs to exert control over the situation to systematically ensure that phenomenon X is specifically due to Y and not myriad other potentially confounding variables.

The purpose and product of research in occupational therapy should be the accumulation of knowledge regarding human occupation and its impact on the well-being and quality of life of persons with disabilities. Clearly, one specific research study cannot possibly address this monumental and global task. Instead, knowledge in occupational therapy, as in any discipline, accumulates in small increments over a long period. So the question remains: Does life history and narrative analysis meet the objectives of science, and will knowledge regarding human occupation accumulate from this research approach? It is evident that life history and narrative analysis result in elaborate and rich descriptions of the phenomenon or focus of study. The focus of study is typically a person and the experiences and events surrounding his or her life. Often, the descriptions or life histories that are created from this process can lead to different proposed explanations for a person’s reactions to varied life experiences. Thus, a life history and narrative research approach can potentially fulfill the first two objectives of science—description and explanation.

However, can life history and narrative meet the scientific objectives of prediction and control? Typically, these goals are neither met nor even pursued in most qualitative approaches. The emphasis in life history and narrative research is on a holistic understanding of a person’s life in a larger context and in a more dynamic and flowing manner. One is typically not interested in drawing specific predictions from these descriptions and in testing them under controlled conditions. The notion of control, that is, isolating specific variables systematically and measuring the outcome of this manipulation, runs counter to the qualitative research process and desired outcome. Thus, life history and narrative analysis do not seem to meet the traditional scientific objectives of prediction and control. Therefore, one might argue that a narrative research approach is deficient in meeting all the objectives of science, and, thus, the accumulation of knowledge in the field will be limited, stifled, or both in the process.

The latter value judgment is based on a positivistic view of science. According to this view of science, knowledge in a particular discipline is based solely on the traditional method of scientific inquiry, which involves the systematic manipulation and control of variables that are operationally defined and measured. A positivistic science promotes a one-way relationship between practice and science (Hoshmand & Polkinghorne, 1992). That is, knowledge from science informs practice, but knowledge from practice does not inform science. According to our observation, knowledge that is derived from experience and practice is not considered legitimate or scientifically sound. Instead, theory and theory testing inform practice, and practice represents the application of knowledge that is derived from the basic science (Hoshmand & Polkinghorne, 1992). Thus, ideally, practitioners should apply the concepts of science. For the field of psychology, Hoshmand and Polkinghorne posed the question of whether the practice of a discipline can inform the science of that discipline. They asserted that practitioners, with their experiential base of knowledge, can also contribute to the overall knowledge base of the profession. In a postmodernistic view of science, they argued that “the knowledge base of a profession should be derived from diverse methods and from multiple sources, including the knowledge of the practice” (p. 55).

Although Hoshmand and Polkinghorne’s (1992) arguments were intended for the discipline of psychology, others have made similar arguments in occupational therapy. For example, Yersa (1991a) even suggested that occupational therapy needs to part with the traditional method of scientific inquiry in favor of more qualitative methods that better reflect the philosophy and practice of occupational therapy. In support of this paradigm shift, Hasselkus (1991) described the researcher’s experience in somewhat emotional terms:

For some of us, then, there is beauty and elegance in a qualitative research study—not only in the conceptualization of the study, not only in its rich findings and interpretations, but also in the very process of carrying out the research. Inherent in the process is a delicious sense of free engagement as the researcher experiences the phenomenon under study. And in the experience of experiencing, the researcher finds excitement in the discovery of new and substantive understandings and a powerful sense of mutuality with the people and phenomena. (pp. 6–7)

Although we can understand the clinical appeal of life history and narrative analysis and how such an approach speaks to the practice of occupational therapy, we have serious concerns regarding how life history methods speak to the science of occupational therapy. We can now pose our second question: Is this type of research fundable? It is
important to note that the American Occupational Therapy Foundation has established qualitative research studies as a funding priority and has been willing to fund such studies. However, we argue that it will be difficult to obtain funding in the larger scientific arena for qualitative research using life history and narrative analysis. The larger federal granting agencies (e.g., National Institutes of Health) have always been, and continue to be, driven by the basic sciences and traditional scientific methods. Grant reviewers typically have been trained within the basic sciences and are members of prestigious academic institutions wherein the positivistic view of science remains highly valued.

A profession based on traditional scientific knowledge will more likely be considered legitimate in the larger scholarly community. Within the traditional academic and scientific community, knowledge based on individual life histories and narrative discourse or the researcher’s experience of experiencing that Hasselkus (1991) alluded to is seen as highly subjective and contaminated by personal biases. Although qualitative researchers argue that such methods cannot be held to the same evaluation criteria as traditional scientific methods (Hasselkus, 1995; Krefting, 1991; Mays & Pope, 1995), the delineation of specific criteria for evaluating the scientific rigor of life history and narrative research are not entirely clear and are still evolving (Hasselkus, 1995; Hoshmand & Polkinghorne, 1992; Sandelowski, 1993).

At this point, one might assert that it is not important that research is fundable. However, we would argue that successful research funding establishes a profession’s place in the larger academic and scientific community. Even Yerxa (1991b) argued that academic programs in occupational therapy may be an “endangered species” (p. 680) in major research universities. She has stressed the importance of occupational therapists establishing themselves within academic institutions. She suggested that therapists can accomplish this goal by engaging in scholarly activities, such as publishing and grant writing, both of which are highly valued in most academic settings. Likewise, Dunn and Boyle (1994) placed importance on research funding in occupational therapy as a way to “solidify their rightful place in universities to advance the knowledge and science of occupational therapy” (p. 158) (see also Lane, 1990). On the basis of their review of funding patterns in academic programs in occupational therapy, they recommended that occupational therapy faculty members take a long-range, systematic approach to secure research funding to establish themselves in the larger scholarly community. They also stated that knowledge development will suffer if occupational therapy faculty members are not receiving extramural funding. Therefore, even within the profession, research funding has been given importance in legitimizing the profession.

Perhaps more importantly, the profession of occupational therapy needs to be concerned with the perception of the discipline’s legitimacy outside the profession. With the shrinking health care dollar and trend toward managed care, occupational therapists need to be concerned about demonstrating the efficacy of their treatment. Persons outside the profession will be convinced of the effectiveness of occupational therapy intervention. We argue that the benefits of occupational therapy will not be best demonstrated to others through the use of life history and narrative analysis. Instead, we argue that the powers-that-be outside the discipline will be most convinced through the use of more traditional scientific methods of inquiry.

Furthermore, it is our contention that the overselling of qualitative research methods, such as life history and narrative, can prove damaging to the field of occupational therapy. Because the traditional scientific method relies heavily on the use of measurement and statistical analysis, it is clear that one should be well versed and trained in the methodology before conducting such research. On the other hand, there seems to be a misperception that training and experience in the use of qualitative methods are not necessary in the conduct of this research. The concern is that therapists without qualitative research training will simply interview a client, make clinical observations, write up their personal thoughts, and claim they are engaging in a scientific enterprise. This misapplication of qualitative methods can only impede knowledge development in occupational therapy and damage the profession’s image of legitimacy in the larger academic and scientific community.

Conclusion

We are not suggesting that only one research method is appropriate for occupational therapy (see also Ortenbacher, 1992). The specific research question drives the methodology, and many questions in occupational therapy lend themselves to more qualitative methods. However, we are suggesting that research using life history and narrative will not completely meet the objectives of science in occupational therapy and will not add to the existing knowledge base beyond simple description. Given the subjective nature of the data collection process, the contamination of personal biases inherent in the research process, and the lack of clear criteria for evaluating the scientific rigor of the research, it will be difficult to secure research funding for life history and narrative analysis, especially extramural funding. The discipline of occupational therapy needs to be seriously concerned about others’ perceptions of the scientific legitimacy of the profession. As long as the positivistic view of science reigns in the larger academic and scientific community, occupational therapy will have a difficult time selling storytelling as science. ▲

References


