A Reappraisal of Anthropological Fieldwork Methods and the Concept of Culture in Occupational Therapy Research

Terry A. E. Litterst

Incorporating information from anthropology into the knowledge base of occupational therapy displays an intriguing pattern. Discussions of fieldwork methods derived from anthropology are included in articles that describe qualitative research as a product of social science research traditions. The concept of “culture,” another important anthropological contribution to occupational therapy, can be found more often in articles and texts addressing client characteristics or program planning, or both, (7–12).

The segmented pattern of information suggests that a reappraisal of the nature of fieldwork and the concept of “culture” as used in anthropology and in occupational therapy may lead to greater integration of clinical practice and research in occupational therapy.

The Qualitative/Quantitative Dilemma

In response to occupational therapy articles that draw strong distinctions between qualitative and quantitative research, Anderson (5) and Philips and Pierson (6) comment on the need to recognize the continuous and cumulative nature of inquiry; they emphasize that the most fruitful research combines elements of both qualitative and quantitative methods. Under the assumptions that there is order in the universe of human action, the order can be observed, and the order and observations can be verified, the progressive task of identification, categorization, and quantification unites rather than divides the logical analyses and technical methodologies from all research design strategies.

Anderson (5) rejects the formulation that fieldwork methods of observation should be associated with inductive analytic processes in the absence of a priori hypotheses. Rather, she points to the necessity of having antecedent theoretical constructs to guide question formulation and the systematic collection of data over time and space. The decision about what evidence to collect and which data logically constitute adequate answers depends on the nature of the problem selected and the research questions asked. Construct validity, theoretical orientation, and data collection should all be explicitly linked.

The use of theory in qualitative research integrates and makes relevant a meaningful presentation of data, preventing the data from being a mere report of bits and pieces of intriguing information. A potential danger exists when individuals using the participant observation technique collect data and draw conclusions without regard for social science theory to help interpret the data. Lack of a theory base can lead to distortion of data analysis and research findings. (5, p 144)

Not only should fieldwork be guided by theory, but the use of theory should be substantiated by empirical studies demonstrating the practicality and predictive accuracy of proffered theoretical statements. For example, the concept of “culture” has been used in occupational therapy literature primarily to label ethnic or subgroup traits without empirical potential range of variation. The use of this concept remains constricted and static because it is not grounded in direct observation or disciplined theoretical analysis.

Philips and Pierson (6) note that the incorporation of qualitative research methodology can contribute to the development of a research tradition in occupational therapy. This elucidates the impact of purposeful and meaningful activity on the health of clients and provides for “the smooth transition of new information from the research setting to its application in patient care.” (p 169)

Fieldwork Methods

Wax (13) reports that fieldwork is as much a social phenomenon involving reciprocity, rule making, and other complex social relations as it is an individual experience involving research activities of observation, recording, or analysis. She notes the transformative potential of the fieldwork experience on the fieldworker. In anthropology there is an expectation that fieldwork experience matures students and solidifies their identity as social scientists. This proc-

Terry A.E. Litterst, MS, OTR, is Assistant Professor, Boston School of Occupational Therapy, Tufts University, Medford, MA 02155.
Fieldwork was conceived in Britain and Europe by professionals who were concerned about the conditions of the poor and working class. It was assumed that human suffering was a result of inadequate social institutions that could be improved through intelligent action. Academically-oriented social research later replaced fieldwork using "armchair" analysis to explore the tenets of social darwinism. Fieldwork associated with modern social anthropology emerged out of the practical needs of colonial administrations, a resurgence of interest in social reform and justice, and the need for empirical data to substantiate and test theoretical formulations about the nature of human social life. Thus, there are precedents in anthropology for the use of fieldwork methods to test theoretical constructs and to investigate social institutions in complex and non-western societies.

Both ethnography, the descriptive study of societies, and etnomethodology, the analysis of systematically-collected ethnographic data, are impossible without the detailed evidence provided by fieldwork methods. Firth (14) claims that the intensive methods of field study using observation as much as questioning help anthropologists keep close to the social reality they are trying to study. The use of small-scale societies as a unit of study provides an opportunity for analysis that considers peoples' actions as part of a system of actions. A similar perspective is possible by delineating the boundaries of the unit of study clearly when investigating social phenomenon in a complex society. Firth (14) describes two conceptual perspectives from which to study social action: structure and organization. Both have influenced current anthropological theory and resultant fieldwork, and reflect anthropological concerns with the processes of form and change in social life.

The perspective of structure provides descriptions of major patterns of relationships that form systematic arrangements and regulate further action. The structural perspective emphasizes continuity, consistency, and regularities found in social life. In structural analysis there is a sense of timeless and static form. A structural analysis is inadequate to account for social change. Theoretically relevant data collected through fieldwork may consist of descriptions of groups, ideal rules for behavior, accounts of traditional ceremonies or rituals, and systems of expectations for behavior held within a group.

The perspective of organization emphasizes change and assumes that circumstances always provide new combinations of factors with fresh choices and decisions that affect social action. This perspective guides fieldwork investigation to the study of individual choice. Relevant data may consist of descriptions of available alternatives in the exercise of choice in a given situation, and attention must be paid to the magnitude of the situation and the dimension of time.

In anthropology, there is currently a theoretical debate that has generated a great deal of research. Two different views of the ultimate determinant of social form and change are involved. One view claims that the material world determines access to resources and knowledge, and is therefore responsible for the processes of social action. The other view claims that the ideas people have about the world determines the shape of that world. It is the second theoretical position that has been associated with fieldwork methods in the occupational therapy literature on qualitative research. Thus, there is an emphasis on the actors' conceptions and network of shared meanings. This perspective is consistent with the humanistic approach of occupational therapy, which considers the rehabilitation process to be determined at least in part by the clients' values. However, this perspective is not the only theoretical one that could make fieldwork relevant to occupational therapy research concerns. Although the level of client values is only one component in the therapeutic process, which also involves the therapist, the activity, and the context of treatment, it is the focus of study when "culture" is defined as a system of shared meanings or ideas.

The Concept of "Culture"

Culture is the most pervasive construct in anthropology. It has been variously defined as a system of shared meanings, the collection of folkways, beliefs and objects associated with a given people, the interconnected system of institutions characterizing human social life, and the medium of environmental adaptation that is uniquely human. There are many more definitions of culture formulated to suit theoretical orientations in anthropology. The important point to remember is the central...
ity of the concept within the disciplines of anthropology and the plasticity of its definition.

In the occupational therapy literature, the most frequent use of "culture" reflects an understanding of it as a label for ethnic identification and categorization. This reflects a structural perspective in anthropology and neglects the potential variation within identified groups. It also fails to account for change so that there is a danger of generating static stereotypes rather than genuine understanding of the diversity of social groups involved in the occupational therapy process. Llorens (7) describes a series of life-style types in the black community, which she advises therapists to use as a guide for dealing with clients. This presentation is based on personal experience and secondary sources in the social science literature. It is not based on a systematic use of fieldwork methods to substantiate these typological generalizations. Although she provides opportunities for recognizing possible variation in combinations of the life-styles, there is a sense in which the life-styles seem static. Would the same categories be adequate representations of the range of styles currently confronting clinicians working in the same area of practice? If not, what could account for the change and in what way could clinical practice and research be better equipped to incorporate dynamic definitions of cultural phenomena?

Levine (8), in an analysis of the impact of culture on home care delivery, offers essentially the same type of structural perspective on the concept of ethnic identity, but she expands the possibilities for the dynamic use of anthropological knowledge by placing it in a context of occupational therapy theory. The next step could be the generation of further case studies or the initiation of a fieldwork project that tested some of the assumptions, or both.

**Implications**

A scientist cannot immediately grasp or communicate reality. According to Firth (14), scientists can only mediate reality through their theoretical constructs and empirical investigations. Occupational therapists as participants in the social process of therapy are in an excellent position to formulate research projects that use fieldwork methods and expand on the dynamic elements in both occupational therapy theory and anthropological concepts of culture. It may be helpful for occupational therapists to see themselves as participants in a familiar process. As they have been socialized as therapists through clinical practice, they can also be socialized as researchers through fieldwork.

The safeguards of supervision and dialogue with colleagues that validate accurate clinical judgments can also assist in guarding against distortions in the process of fieldwork research. Each investigator brings his or her own perspective and personal experience to a fieldwork experience, but the explicit articulation of the theoretical assumptions guiding the fieldwork and the logical analysis of data should provide adequate information for evaluating the integrity of the research.

As Anderson (5) has pointed out, the ultimate goal of understanding human behavior is the prediction of situational responses. The integration of anthropological data collection methods with occupational therapy concerns in clinical practice could stimulate research which refines our understanding of the effectiveness of activity and its presentation in the therapeutic context to better anticipate clinical outcomes. The question is not one of qualitative or quantitative designs, it is one of commitment to disciplined inquiry and responsible clinical service.

**REFERENCES**