Looking Back

Historical Research Methods in Occupational Therapy

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Key Words: education • history • research

This article discusses the process and methods of historical research in relation to occupational therapy. The paper reviews the process of writing history, including data gathering, organization, and interpretation as well as the responsibilities of the historical researcher. The authors propose that the methods of historical research can be used by occupational therapists as a means to develop a body of knowledge about the profession's history.

The Importance of Recorded History

Writing history serves many purposes. One such purpose is that it provides a good story (Barzun & Graff, 1985; Winks, 1968; Viseltear, 1987). Indeed, historical inquiry began in ancient Greece as storytelling and served both to inform the public about foreign cultures and to analyze human actions. Written histories also provide interpretations of events and ideas. These interpretations are influenced by the thinking of the times in which they are written. For instance, in the Middle Ages interpreters of history were heavily influenced by theological and religious considerations. During the Renaissance, historical interpreters adopted a more secular and humanistic posture. Contemporary historians have been greatly influenced by the methods of the physical and social sciences.

Documenting the history of past events can provide a greater understanding of contemporary ideas and movements. Within the context of occupational therapy, several leaders have supported the idea that a knowledge of the profession's origins can aid in examining current actions and thinking (Bing, 1981; Cromwell, 1977; Reed, 1986; West, 1979). Attempts to reclaim some early concepts have resulted in particular interpretations of the founders' intentions (Kielhofner & Burke, 1977; Reilly, 1985; Yerxa, 1979). Other recent historical work has contributed to an understanding of the evolution of the profession by describing early ideologies and movements that may have been influential in the profession's development (Colman, 1986; Serrett, 1985; Levine, 1987; Litterst, 1983).

Writing the History of Occupational Therapy

An important consideration in documenting the history of a profession centers on who is to write that history. There are two basic approaches: One approach employs scholars outside the profession who have been educated as historians. This is an approach that the graduate schools of education have taken by adding scholars with a PhD in history who are also knowledgeable about education to their faculty (Cremin, 1980; Tyack, 1974). The other approach develops historians from within a profession. Nursing,
for example, has pursued this avenue as is evidenced in the development of its PhD programs (Brody, 1986). The Written History Committee of the American Occupational Therapy Association also has taken this approach by directing its efforts toward developing a forum for historical scholarship within occupational therapy.

The question of who is qualified to do historical research is debated within academic circles. The debate focuses on who is capable of writing good history. Is the writing of history restricted to historians or can scholars from the social or medical sciences also write good history? For example, Starr (1982), a professor in sociology, has received accolades for his history of the medical industry. At the same time, his work has been criticized because his background is in social science and not in history. On the other hand, Carr (1962), a well-known historian, claims that an interplay between the two intellectual disciplines can strengthen the outcome of historical research: “The more sociological history becomes, and the more historical sociology becomes, the better for both” (p. 84).

Becker (1932), a Professor of History at Cornell University, argues against the view that only the person trained in history can do historical inquiry. “If the essence of history is the memory of things said and done, then it is obvious that every normal person, Mr. Everyman, knows some history” (p. 222). Indeed, we all reconstruct past events, build generalizations on these reconstructions, and learn to discern which facts are relevant. Accordingly, there are parallels to be found in writing history and in doing clinical practice. History and clinical practice both require good analytical skills, informed observation, judicious selection of information, and the ability to synthesize data and to interpret them in a meaningful way.

However, neither Becker’s (1932) “everyman” nor an occupational therapy clinician can be considered historians simply because they engage in their daily pursuits. As Winks (1968) points out, Becker was presenting a democratic alternative to the constricted view prevalent in historical circles that only those trained as historians can do historical inquiry properly. Fischer (1970) takes this point further when he argues that what is important is one’s logic and not one’s discipline. He posits that if one follows the systematic thinking demanded by historical research, then one can produce a sound piece of history.

From Fischer’s perspective the critical task is to develop a logic of historical thinking. This requires attention to each step in the process of historical inquiry and an understanding of the many methodological problems that can arise. Much has been written on historical methodology (Bloch, 1964; Elton, 1967; Landes & Tilley, 1971; Lukacs, 1985; Porter, 1981; Renier, 1982). The following offers a distillation of that information, presents the key elements in the process of historiography, and provides a discussion of some of the potential problems writers of history may encounter.

Historiography

A starting point in understanding the scope and demands of historical inquiry is the identification of the field’s terminology. History represents a branch of knowledge that documents past events and provides an analysis of the unfolding of their natural sequence and consequences. That narrative is derived from the process, or methods, of historical research or inquiry. Historical research uses prescribed techniques for the collection, organization, and analysis of historical data. It incorporates the critical investigation of past events, the careful weighing of evidence regarding the validity of sources, and the interpretation and documentation of the investigation (Kerlinger, 1979, p. 307). The person who engages in historical research is known as the historical researcher. The historical researcher asks open-ended questions about past events, acts as a fully informed interpreter of those events, and documents those events as a story of explanation. The historical method is known as historiography.

The process of writing good history relies on the methods used in any good scholarship. This process includes asking questions that are researchable, identifying reliable sources of information, verifying evidence, and making some interpretations of data.

The Research Question

Each good piece of historical research begins with a research question. “Questions are the engines of intellect, the cerebral machines which convert . . . curiosity to controlled inquiry” (Fischer, 1970, p. 3). It is the research question that points the direction for proceeding and identifies the kind of information to be sought.

Proper historical questions are explicit and precise. The question clarifies what information the researcher is seeking. Historical questions are analytical, in that they divide a research problem into its component parts. Difficulties can arise when the researcher asks too many questions or questions that are too broad to be answered within the scope of the research project.

To find the answer to one question, one must frequently ask and answer related questions. For example, Levine’s (1986) work has been dedicated to answering the question “why early occupational therapists focused on arts and crafts modalities” (p. 259). However, the answer to this question requires the
posing and answering of other questions: From where did arts and crafts arise? What is the arts-and-crafts movement? What ideas in the movement were parallel to ideas expressed by occupational therapists? Thus, the answer to the original question is found through answering related questions.

Sources

Historical data are commonly divided into primary and secondary sources. Primary sources are the original repository of the historical data, for example, a letter, an eyewitness account, a photograph. They are first-hand data that directly report or record an experience. Primary sources can be physical artifacts, films or records of events, official transcripts or minutes of conventions, and personal diaries and letters.

Secondary sources are based on information that is at least one step removed from the original source. For example, a newspaper story about a meeting is a secondary source, whereas the original record of the meeting is a primary source. A commentary or analysis of an event by another historian is also considered a secondary source of information.

One of the basic rules of historical research is that, whenever possible, primary sources should be used. Events become distorted in their telling, influenced by the biases of the individuals reporting the events and by the distance of the narrator from the event. That distance may be measured either as a factor of time or by the number of intervening people between the narrator and the eyewitness. The greater the distance, the greater the probability of distortion. Even the veracity of information from primary sources needs to be assessed. It is the responsibility of the researcher to prove the accuracy of the sources.

Primary sources can be found in libraries, archival collections, museums, government offices, and private papers. For example, the researcher interested in occupational therapy would find it useful to consult the archives of the American Occupational Therapy Association, which are housed at the Moody Library of the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston (Truman G. Blocker, Jr., History of Medicine Collection). Other primary sources in occupational therapy might be found in the records of clinical departments, in health care institutions, or in individuals' private files.

The histories of the early schools of occupational therapy are based on the use of primary sources that were assembled to tell the story of each school’s development. Loomis’s (1983) paper on the Henry Fa-vill School of Occupational Therapy started by Eleanor Clarke Slagle uses letters of Slagle’s and documents from the school’s archives to describe the founding and development of the school. Similarly, Litterst's (in press) history of the Boston School of Occupational Therapy draws from newspaper clippings, letters, rummage sale receipts, and catalogues.

In addition to written sources, oral histories can also supply important information. Traditionally, oral information is valid when used to recall relatively recent events and when the individual supplying the oral history has an adequate capacity for critical judgment (Vansina, 1965).

Since 1982, the American Occupational Therapy Foundation (AOTF) has funded a project to record oral histories of occupational therapists identified as leaders in the profession. The oral histories explore each woman’s occupational and leisure history to identify the qualities and characteristics that contributed to her emergence as a leader.

Facts and Ideas

The historical researcher examines all evidence with a critical eye to distinguish what a document actually states from what may be inferred (Altick, 1950). A basic task of the historical researcher is to identify what is a “fact.” Facts are seldom recorded in their pure form; they are usually intermingled with ideas (Collingwood, 1956). For instance, if a contemporary of Eleanor Clarke Slagle were to write in her memoirs, “Eleanor Clarke Slagle was a great occupational therapy president,” part of the statement would be fact and part would be the author’s idea about Slagle. It is the responsibility of the historical researcher to separate fact from idea.

It is also the historical researcher’s responsibility to assess the veracity of the evidence. Barzun and Graff (1985) maintain that truth in history rests on probability, that is, “the likelihood that evidence which has been examined and found solid” is true (p. 122). Although much historical evidence cannot be computed mathematically, the critical evaluation of the evidence is a primary responsibility of the historical researcher. Nevins (1962) asserts that one characteristic of a good historian is skill at verification. In addition, a historical researcher is concerned with selecting evidence relevant to the question asked.

Interpretation of Data

The interpretation of data is a critical as well as an exceedingly difficult part of historical research (Woodward, 1955). Sound interpretation results from the researcher’s ability to come to an intellectual understanding of the data. Ill-conceived inferences or poor logic can substantially weaken the research. In particular, because the historical researcher cannot rely on the predictable structure of interpretation that is followed by researchers in the physical sciences,
the intellectual integrity of the researcher is of paramount importance. The following areas require the historical researcher’s close consideration.

**Causation.** Causation refers to the researcher’s desire or ability to infer cause from the data. Causation is a highly controversial subject among historians. The debate centers on the value of causal histories. Historical researchers can neither reduce events to the controlled conditions of an experiment nor classify materials into constant variables. The most common form of causal explanation in historical scholarship is one that identifies underlying conditions the nature of which renders the effect probable (Fischer, 1970, p. 186).

Some historians argue that the single-minded search for cause is wrongheaded and that historians are best at describing conditions surrounding events and at exploring associations that suggest emerging patterns and themes (Barzun & Graff, 1985, p. 187). Much of occupational therapy history has focused on ideological movements and their possible importance to the profession’s development. Serrett (1985) examined ideas that came out of the moral treatment movement and the industrial revolution. Colman (1984) analyzed ideological conflict in the profession’s educational system.

It is unlikely that those researching the origins of occupational therapy can prove that one event or idea “caused” the profession to develop as it did. It is more likely that a series of events and sets of ideas can be shown to have contributed to the profession’s evolution. Continued research into possible themes and associations can contribute to a more comprehensive history of the profession.

**Generalization and argumentation.** “What distinguishes the historian from the collector of historical facts is generalization” (Carr, 1962, p. 61). A generalization infers a general principle from certain facts through a reasoning process. During this process the researcher tries to interpret events by discerning commonalities or patterns within the data. Generalizations made by the researcher should be a logical outcome of the data. Generalizations based on insufficient data and generalizations that go beyond the scope and nature of the data are two examples of common mistakes researchers make.

Argumentation is “the attempt to proceed from a premise to a conclusion, by orderly and rational inference” (Fischer, 1970, p. 263). The historical researcher can make inferences from the data that will form the basis of an argument. That argument represents the researcher’s understanding of the data. In historical inquiry, it is necessary to approach the data with an open mind and allow the facts to shape the argument.

An example of sound generalization and argumentation is found in Drachman’s (1984) history of the New England Hospital for Women and Children in Boston. From her examination of events surrounding the founding and development of the all-women’s hospital, Drachman makes generalizations about attitudes toward women and the status of women doctors. Her argument is based on what she calls the paradox of separation: “Barred from the all-male medical schools and hospitals, nineteenth-century women doctors made their professional journey through their own, all-female medical institutions. But as the century drew to a close, the all-male medical institutions began to open their doors to women. The opportunity to work with male physicians represented a major step forward for women doctors. At the same time, it threatened the survival of the all-women’s medical institutions. The result was a paradox: whereas separatism originally laid the path to equality for women in medicine, integration gradually became a competing route to professional equality, challenging the separatist traditions of women doctors” (pp. 11–12).

**Bias.** The term is often used in a pejorative sense, suggesting that certain individuals are biased whereas others are not. In historical inquiry, the researcher is not impartial because she or he has interests that motivate the inquiry. Indeed, the historical researcher’s particular perspective is vital because it can produce a rich variety in the interpretation of a given event, augmenting our understanding of that event. Although impartiality may not be attainable, intellectual honesty should be a guiding principle. Most important for the historical researcher is an awareness and explicit acknowledgment of any underlying assumptions she or he may be making (Hughes, 1964). “The clearer we are about our own bias, the more honest and efficient we are likely to be in our own research” (Momigliano, 1954, p. 57).

**The Researcher**

**Responsibilities**

A discussion of historiography would be incomplete without mention of the researcher’s responsibility to gather data and communicate the findings. Many authorities in the domain of historiography have described the various responsibilities of the researcher. Four qualities seem to be essential for doing responsible historiography. Those qualities are (a) honesty, (b) credibility, (c) self-awareness, and (d) imagination.

If one understands historiography as the charting of human actions and events one can accept the fact that in the study of those actions one will encounter incongruities, mixed reports, and various versions in
documentation and record keeping. The historical researcher's responsibility is to unwind the inconsistencies and discover the past as it emerges from a mixture of sources. To achieve that discovery, honesty in the use of sources is essential. If an argument is invalidated by a particular piece of evidence, the historical researcher has the responsibility to address that evidence and produce an understanding of its significance. One mechanism to ensure honesty is the identifying of "corroborative detail" (Tuchman, 1981, pp. 34-35) in the production of history. Details often provide the links that put particular events into perspective. Uncovering detail, knowing the relationship of particular details to a larger picture, and using that detail both to enhance the understanding of a historical situation or event and to guide additional data gathering may serve as part of a system of checks and balances that promotes accuracy in historiography.

To write history with the greatest degree of credibility it is vital for the historical researcher to be fully informed about sources. One must have an understanding of the nature of one's sources, a well-rounded view of the times from which those sources are derived, and precision in using and understanding the meaning of the terms and language used in the sources (Social Science Research Council, 1956). Such discipline in attending to the data secures a necessary level of credibility for the researcher's work.

As was previously discussed in the section on bias, the third quality necessary for the historical researcher to possess is self-awareness. For the purposes of historiography, it is essential that the researcher be aware of and be able to accurately identify her or his own biases, feelings, and negative or positive responses to particular information. Although the recognition and citation of one's own assumptions may impose certain limits on one's work, those limits provide critical information regarding the nature and scope of the historical interpretations offered. In the end, such self-awareness facilitates doing quality historiography by enabling the researcher to respond openly to the material at hand rather than imposing her or his values on the material.

The ability to use imagination has been cited repeatedly as crucial to the process of historiography (Winks, 1968). This ability to create a mental image of the period serves a twofold function: to release intuition regarding the type or location of particular sources and to enhance one's vision for interpretation. Imagination serves to extend the possibilities of the questions to be raised and the perspective from which the solutions might be sought (Tuchman, 1981). Imagination is a necessary component when human behavior and motivations are considered because it may suggest the missing links between the available facts and thus give a fuller picture of the events. Naturally, imagination must be tempered with a clear sense of purpose, ethics, and scholarship to provide the best possible contribution to history.

Communication

Once the data have been assembled, the researcher becomes responsible for communicating the results in a written report. The nature of historical research reporting follows the guidelines of any quality research report, demanding such writing skills as organization, clarity, and adherence to an accepted style. In addition, the historical researcher is expected to communicate the results of the research in an accepted report form, which includes an introduction, a statement of the problem, an identification of the assumptions and limitations of the research, a literature review, and a discussion of the findings.

The historical researcher and the researcher using statistics differ in their methods of communicating results: The reports of the latter offer a section reviewing the results as organized by statistical methods and a discussion regarding the implications of the findings. The former offers a narrative designed to describe and analyze the answers to the research question that emerged from the investigation. Since the heart of the historiographer's report is a narrative, it is imperative that the historical researcher employ good writing skills. It is the historical researcher's responsibility to distill, assemble, order, and present in a logical format the materials reviewed. Finally, the communication of history demands a good ear for language, an exacting use of words, the ability to choose the pithy and elemental examples when offering interpretations, and a talent for selecting small visual details that are readily recognizable by the reader and convey the essence of a character or circumstance (Tuchman, 1981, p. 39).

Summary

This article, which was intended for the occupational therapist interested in historical inquiry, discussed how to formulate good research questions, identify valid sources, distinguish between facts and ideas, and make sound interpretations. The qualities of the researcher, including impartiality, good writing skills, and the ability to imagine the period about which is being written, were also stressed.

Historical research, like all research, is learned by working with others educated in its methods. Those occupational therapists who learn the process through their own graduate work can then guide other budding historians.
The rich heritage of the occupational therapy profession offers many opportunities for study. Our ability to engage in good historical research will enable us to uncover these riches. It is hoped that this introduction to the methods of historical research will stimulate interest in the development of the profession's body of historical knowledge.

References


