Introduction

The process of learning to be a doctor, doing a PhD, can be seen in new ways, when viewed through the spectacles of the occupational scientist. Wilcocks has described occupation as doing, being and becoming (Wilcocks, 1998). In ‘doing-a-PhD’, an occupational form can be described, as can an occupational performance (Nelson, 1988). An occupation can also be examined for social and personal meaning if we examine the dimensions of ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ (Hasselkus, 2002). Who I am when engaging in an occupation such as a PhD, relates to who I am becoming through that engagement; occupation helps to shape identity.

The reader is invited to join me in constructing an understanding of the experience of an occupation. Each reader brings her or his own perspective to this understanding.

The aim of the study is to construct an understanding of the lived experience of an occupation: ‘doing a PhD’.

Method

Autoethnography is used here to record and explore the experience of an occupation, ‘doing a PhD’. Autoethnography is a methodology which makes the researcher’s own experience the focus of study (Ellis & Bochner, 2003).

Ellis and Bochner would regard the normal focus for such work as turning points in life. As someone interested in occupations, however, I am drawn to study everyday experiences, which can be equally transformative.

Autoethnography requires the recording and study of the concrete, detailed minutiae of life – the traces and records that give clues to experience and meaning. This level of personal detail can be examined hermeneutically against broader cultural and societal contexts.

Sources of Data

The concrete traces of my engagement with this research include physical artefacts, real and virtual documentary evidence, and personal narrative accounts contained in memory or written records. They include:-

- Work diary
- PhD logbook
- Computer files
- Filing cabinet
- Bookshelf
- Study walls
- Correspondence
- Easel
- Lever arch files
- Desk
- email discussion groups etc
- Miscellaneous: wall charts, scraps of paper, telephone messages

How is this research useful?

• it helps the researcher to understand the experience of others
• it may help others to understand their own experiences better.(Ellis & Bochner, 2003)

Generalisation from the findings of this study are not possible in the positivist assumption that subjective accounts of research are not possible in the positivist epistemology (Green, 1998).

References


Findings

Some aspects of the exploration are illustrated on the adjacent diagram. 

The following factors appear to be closely interwoven with the shaping of my identity through occupation:-

My past history: who I have been

My emotional and intellectual reactions and development

The organization of time and my physical environment

My position in relation to other people

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Jackie Taylor, School of Health Care Professions, University of Salford, M6 6PU. Email: j.taylor@salford.ac.uk

www.shire.salford.ac.uk

Am I playing out my father’s ambitions for me to become an academic?

A woman of the 21st century, born in the 50s. I struggle with the ingrained self-fulfilling prophecies of my class and gender. Can I be a researcher??

I have bird watching binoculars on my desk, and a potted fern on a high shelf which tucks me on the head and reminds me that there is more to life! ‘Doing-a-PhD’ is grounded in the reminders of the pleasures of life-outside-the-PhD.

The PhD is everywhere! In my kitchen, in my car! Always in my bag!

My past might jumper my ambitions, but I do not believe that they block them. I am an active (and reflexive) agent, constructing my own life (Green, 1998).

Cautiously, I expose my ideas to the world of occupational science. Raising your head above the parapet is a difficult thing to do. I am becoming an academic ……

Who will I be in 3 years time?

Will I finish it?