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Occupational engagement, emotion and morality

Jackie Taylor

Introduction

When people tell stories about their engagement in occupations they “*relive*” moments of their past, re-entering the rich emotional landscape of powerful experiences...” (Mattingly & Lawlor, 2000, p5). Such stories, or narratives, might be lengthy: about a whole life, or they might be short: about a single incident. By listening to and analysing narratives much can be learned about the experiences of occupational engagement. Narrative analysis can be used to understand the meanings that people attribute to occupations. When an emotional narrative is told, then its meaning is usually related to something that the narrator cares about. Narratives can therefore be used to explore moral values.

The aim of the study was to explore what moral values were expressed in emotional narratives about occupations.

Method

Short narratives were extracted from interviews with enthusiasts who had been asked to talk about their leisure occupations. This was part of a larger piece of research exploring occupation and identity. The meanings of the narratives (Mishler, 1986) were revealed through:

- narrative content (what was said)
- narrative form and structure (how it was said)
- interaction with the audience (how the narrative was performed)

Fig 3: The Dog-trainer

At the beginning I only got my first dog because I wanted a walking companion and, er, it's all got a bit out of hand

yes, well my dog's actually - er, in November he's been diagnosed - he's got a genetic disease, he's going to go blind

so thinking that he's still only 5 years old and he's still going to be a lively active dog, I've decided that we're going to take up tracking, which is with the harness on, where they search, you know like police dogs,

so that when he goes blind we can still go out and have a bit of fun and do that instead

Fig 1: The Bird-watcher

For me, that's the only bad bit of bird watching, the fact that I feel it's a right thing to do - not just bird watching, but the environment as well, caring about the environment, er,

and other people...not that they don't care, but they're not tuned into it.

Can only say - you've got the rarest bird in the world, on a winter's morning, singing next to a bus-stop full of people, and they wouldn't know - they wouldn't even hear it - they wouldn't be able to define what it were, because they wouldn't even hear it singing...

that's always struck me as - not - it's sad, I feel sorry for them

Fig 2: The Horse-rider

and as soon as you go in the ring, of course, they ring a bell, and there's a loud-speaker that introduces you

and I could feel him tense up and he refused three times and we were eliminated

and I thought 'he's not enjoying this - and I'm not enjoying this bit' I mean to be honest, to be eliminated wasn't nice and that's when I decided it was enough

I thought - 'I don't need to put myself through this' under pressure and competition we used to go to bits it was as much m'e as him, He wasn't very brave and I wasn't very brave

Emotion in narratives

Narratives which are emotional often have certain elements:

- a strong poetic form (Gee, 1991)
- the use of metaphors & vivid imagery (e.g. Fig 1)
- dramatic devices such as suspense, or variations of voice pitch (e.g. Fig 2)
- the use of powerful words, superlatives & understatement (e.g. Figs 4 & 5)

Fig 4: The Horn-player

When I got to 18 I got the opportunity to play in a big band, jazz... and, it was a (sigh) well, it amazed me, actually It was erm it was, it was an amazing moment I thought 'oh, I like - I really like this'

and er, so it was a complete shock to hear these grown men playing music properly and these had all come out, at that time, of the Forces and out of the 50s big band era and ah so it was such an honour to be with this, this group of, of people.

And they were so happy to impart their knowledge on to some youngsters, really

Findings

Leisure choices enable people to express an ethic of care for others or for themselves (Rojek, 2005). In this study people told narratives that revealed some of the moral values associated with their leisure occupations. With positive and negative emotions they told about caring:

- for the environment (Fig 1)
- for self (Fig 2)
- for animals (Fig 3)
- for groups in society (Fig 4)
- for another individual (Fig 5)

Implications

People's stories about occupations will often reveal moral values. These will help occupational therapists to understand:

- individual motives for engaging in certain occupations.
- a person's personal and social identity
- the positive relationship that people can have with their social and physical environments, through occupation

Fig 5: The Gym-member

what I'm doing at the moment now is. I'm a personal trainer for my daughter

my role's changed, which is fantastic now, because that's just taken me to another level

so I'm a personal trainer and it's absolutely fantastic so all my years of just having fun

yes, so it's nice, what's just been fun all these years, I can just pass on to her yes, it's brilliant, it really, really is, yes

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