Occupational engagement, emotion and morality

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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)

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)

Implications

People’s stories about occupations 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

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References