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## Qualitative research is consonant with the espoused values of occupational therapy: A Review of Qualitative Research in Occupational Therapy

### Abstract

In her 2001 edited text, *Qualitative Research in Occupational Therapy: Strategies and Experiences*, Joanne Valiant Cook presents an approachable and informative introduction to qualitative research for occupational therapists. As the discipline of occupational therapy continues to develop its own base of knowledge, the need for research methods which capture the complexity of occupation has become evident. Through considering the similarity between the founding principles of occupational therapy and the world-view of qualitative research, Cook presents a theoretically-oriented research guide specific to the domain of concern of occupational therapy. Examples of qualitative studies and reflections of occupational therapy researchers will be helpful to occupational therapy practitioners and researchers embarking upon the journey of qualitative inquiry to contribute to the discipline's body of knowledge.

### Keywords

Qualitative Inquiry, Occupational Therapy, Research Methods, Occupational Therapy Qualitative Studies

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*In her 2001 edited text, *Qualitative Research in Occupational Therapy: Strategies and Experiences*, Joanne Valiant Cook presents an approachable and informative introduction to qualitative research for occupational therapists. As the discipline of occupational therapy continues to develop its own base of knowledge, the need for research methods which capture the complexity of occupation has become evident. Through considering the similarity between the founding principles of occupational therapy and the world-view of qualitative research, Cook presents a theoretically-oriented research guide specific to the domain of concern of occupational therapy. Examples of qualitative studies and reflections of occupational therapy researchers will be helpful to occupational therapy practitioners and researchers embarking upon the journey of qualitative inquiry to contribute to the discipline’s body of knowledge. Key Words: *Qualitative Inquiry, Occupational Therapy, Research Methods, and Occupational Therapy Qualitative Studies**

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Having spent the majority of my professional life as an occupational therapist, I have become familiar and comfortable with relying upon quantitative research to justify the treatment methods I’ve utilized. My return to academia after many years of clinical practice has coincided with a re-emergence of pragmatism and holistic treatment in the discipline of occupational therapy. The recent advent of the field of occupational science offers further evidence of the renewed interest in client-centered occupation as the focus of intervention. With a primary concern of investigating the phenomenon of occupation in order to inform the practice of occupational therapy (Zemke & Clark, 1996), the complex nature of occupation is revealed. Understanding the meaning of occupation and how an individual engages in occupation requires a way of knowing (Yerxa, 1991). Exploring the subjective descriptions an individual’s reality is central to developing a way of knowing (Cook, 2001). Hence, methods which go beyond testing hypotheses and measuring variance of discrete events are necessary to gain insight into the definition and meaning of occupation. Having a familiarity and comfort level with using quantitative research, the realization that the phenomenon of occupation may be better understood through employing different methods was uncomfortable for me. As such, my post-professional graduate education in occupational therapy has become an opportunity for me to further investigate the clinical irritation of exploring more thorough methods for understanding occupation. Methods which are more aligned with the pragmatic perspective of occupational therapy.

In *Qualitative Research in Occupational Therapy: Strategies and Experiences*, Joanne Valiant Cook (2001) offers a perspective on research which is consistent with the emergent research needs of the discipline as well as the practice methods employed by its practitioners. To this end, Cook emphasizes the parallels between the world-views of the qualitative research paradigm and the discipline of occupational therapy. The book utilizes the experiences and knowledge of a variety of occupational therapy researchers and occupational therapy research students in order to present multiple realities and perspectives of the qualitative research process as related to occupational therapy.

Largely rooted in the effort to communicate the relevance of qualitative research in occupational therapy, Cook begins this journey by examining the fit between the values, beliefs, and language of occupational therapy and qualitative inquiry. Cook explicitly describes the purpose of qualitative research is to “gain understanding of phenomenon rather than predicting the behavior” (p. 4). Furthermore, Cook specifically indicates that qualitative research is particularly suitable to exploring issues of interest to occupational therapists. These interests are primarily concerned with understanding the meaning of occupation and occupational participation for the participants, understanding the context within which the participants exist and perform, identifying unanticipated influences upon occupational behavior, and understanding the occupational process. The open-ended nature of qualitative research methods enable the perspectives of the participants to be accounted for and drive the data collected. Subsequently, interpretive analysis is based on the stories and lived experiences of the participants. Consistent with occupational therapy, qualitative research is predicated upon developing a way of knowing of the participant’s perspective. Explored extensively in Part I, the complementarity between qualitative research and occupational therapy becomes the warp of the woven fabric which emerges through the interpretive analysis of occupation. The warp remains consistent throughout the book and provides a common thread to keep the information relevant to the needs and concerns of occupational therapists. The blank canvas of woven fabric that is quantitative inquiry is enhanced by the weft of research designs and data collection methods which can be chosen to explore the phenomenon and develop an understanding of the tapestry of occupation.

In Part II, several authors describe a variety of commonly recognized and accepted approaches in qualitative inquiry design and methods. Definitions, principles, methods of use, and ethical considerations are described for participant action research, in-depth interviewing, participant observation, and focus groups research. As the choice of research design and method is based upon the goals of the inquiry, understanding the basic premises of research designs and methods is fundamental to the success of the inquiry and the richness of the resulting tapestry. The thoroughness of the presented descriptions provides the reader with the information necessary to select the methods which will color the inquiry. In keeping with the premise of the book, the relevance of each research method to occupational therapy is provided. Examples from completed studies are also presented in which this is illustrated. This section of the book provides a useful introduction to conducting qualitative research and offers occupational therapists and scientists with real-life examples of implementation. Described as being “complementary to the existing literature” (Cook, p. vii), the purpose of this section is not to serve as an exhaustive resource for qualitative research methods; but rather, the content

focuses on describing the research designs and data collection methods which address the concerns of occupational therapy researchers and scientists.

The journey continues with Cook illustrating the qualitative inquiry strategy of researcher reflexivity. Through including reflections of personal experiences during the qualitative research process, Cook offers student researchers insight into the challenges experienced when undertaking qualitative inquiry. In Part III, subjective descriptions of the trials and tribulations experienced during the qualitative research process were provided by several occupational therapy researchers. The narrative styles of the descriptions allow the researchers/authors to describe in their voices the frustrations and successes experienced during the research process. Woven throughout the chapters of this section, several threads of experiences and emotions common to the researchers' multiple realities were identified. A lack of appreciation for qualitative research, the personal stress associated with immersion in the data, and the need to conduct multiple revisions of interview guides as the process emerged, were some of the experiences reported by the researchers. Through reflecting on experiences common to occupational therapy researchers conducting qualitative research, this section provides an opportunity for the readers to gain an appreciation for the emotions associated with employing a research paradigm which has not typically been utilized within the occupational therapy discipline. The section serves to prepare student occupational therapy researchers for the breadth of experiences encountered during the qualitative research process. Furthermore, this section could be useful for researchers and scientists currently conducting qualitative research as it describes several strategies utilized by the researchers/authors to successfully navigate the unavoidable wrinkles of qualitative inquiry.

In presenting a number of qualitative studies relevant to occupational therapy and occupational science, Part IV of the book ties together all of the strings of the qualitative woven fabric. Studies exploring occupation, occupational therapists, and client experiences, are shared in order to illustrate how the diversity of the qualitative research paradigm can be utilized to capture issues that are of concern to occupational therapy researchers. The presented studies employ the research methods described earlier in the book. The educational value of this book is enhanced through the provision of specific examples of qualitative research in action. Furthermore, these studies illustrate how qualitative inquiry can contribute to the discipline's body of knowledge.

As the stated intention of this book is to "provide an overview and example of the value of and usefulness of qualitative research studies of occupation, occupational therapists' practices, and the experience of occupational therapy clients" (Cook, p. vii), a more expansive discussion about the issues relevant to occupational therapy which could be explored through qualitative methods (i.e., occupational choice, occupational engagement, contextual influences upon occupational performance) would have been a welcome addition to the book and particularly beneficial for the novice occupational therapy qualitative researcher. In describing the fit between qualitative inquiry and occupational therapy, and weaving these concepts throughout the book, Cook has provided a concise and useful tool which can be used to bridge the gap in the prevailing knowledge base of research methods dynamic enough to explore the phenomenon of occupation. As Cook posits that "complex, multidimensional phenomena require complex, multidimensional, flexible, emergent strategies to examine them" (p. 6), participants in the burgeoning research tradition. within the discipline of occupational

therapy and the field of occupational science, can also benefit from the journey in qualitative inquiry herein presented. Reflecting upon my own personal experience as a student of research methodologies, I continue to regard myself as a novice in the realm of qualitative inquiry. This book has contributed to the broadening of my critical thinking skills which has enabled me to embrace the subjective and personal nature of individuals' experiences. Incorporating multiples realities into the study of occupational behavior leads to a rich and colorful tapestry of inquiry truly reflective of the complexity of human occupation.

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### Author Note

Kathleen M. DeNault, OTR/L, SIPT Cert., is a Registered Occupational Therapist who specializes in pediatric practice. She has advanced training in sensory integration. She also has completed graduate coursework in Architecture and Environmental Psychology. She is currently pursuing a post-professional Clinical Doctorate in Occupational Therapy at Nova Southeastern University in Fort Lauderdale, FL (expected graduation date: August 2010). Specific research interests include: occupational engagement of individuals with autistic spectrum disorder, environment as intervention, and the implications of the built environment upon performance of students with sensory processing disorder. She has been a guest lecturer at the Department of Occupational Therapy at Philadelphia University. She can be reached via email at [denault@nova.edu](mailto:denault@nova.edu).

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