

Using historical documentary methods to explore the history of occupational therapy

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Abstract

Introduction: Historical research can benefit health professions by providing a basis for understanding how current beliefs and practices developed over time. From an occupational therapy perspective, a need for deeper critical understandings of the profession has been identified; historical research can facilitate this process. Documentary research is a significant methodology in historical inquiry, but there is a dearth of guidance for occupational therapists wishing to employ this method.

Method: A conceptual literature review was conducted to describe how to use documentary sources to understand the development of the profession, drawing on literature from the disciplines of history and occupational therapy.

Results: The stages of historical documentary research are described: choosing a topic, sourcing and selecting evidence, and managing sources. How to consider the authenticity, credibility and representativeness of historical material is discussed. Various means to determine the meaning of historical evidence are considered, with chronological, thematic and theoretical approaches proposed.

Conclusion: Methodological transparency is central to the process of historical documentary research. To enhance understanding of the quality of historical source material, adoption of the guidelines outlined is recommended. Adopting a clearly defined questioning perspective promotes more substantial conclusions and professional understandings.

Keywords

History, research methods

Introduction

Calling on occupational therapists to engage more frequently in historical research, Hall (2013) identifies that exploring the history of occupational therapy can 'provide insight on how to face new clinical challenges and reshape the profession itself' (p. 389). Taking a broader perspective, Stearns (1998) describes the purpose of studying history as twofold. At its most fundamental, history provides a basis for understanding how people function in society and informs how they live their lives. History also facilitates comprehension of social change and how society develops over time. According to Tosh (2008) '... it enables us to look at our own circumstances with sharper vision, alerts us to the possibility that they might have been different, and that they will probably turn out

differently in the future' (p. 28). History is a valuable resource for considering the human condition, and exploring the factors past and present that contribute to social change. For occupational therapy researchers, history can deepen understandings of how the profession has been shaped over time, and can enable critical perspectives on contemporary theory and practice. Striking at the core of the profession, critical perspectives on human occupation are increasingly called for in occupational therapy and occupational science (Whiteford and Townsend, 2011). According to Hammell and Iwama (2012), that exploration must encompass the impact of inequitable environments on participation and health (for example, poverty, patriarchy, racism, unemployment,

pollution, etc.). Recognising those impacts, Pollard et al. (2009) propose that occupational therapists become more active advocates for occupational justice, negotiating the rights of all persons to engage in meaningful occupation. Some of the deficiencies in knowledge, according to Hocking (2012), exist because current understandings of occupation are subject to bias, preventing occupational therapists from more broadly engaging with the entire spectrum of human occupation. This bias, she argues, is connected to the history of the discipline, which was founded (broadly) by Western, middle-class and female practitioners. Research in the history of the profession can untangle professional beliefs and be instrumental in expanding understandings of occupation from different 'ontological standpoints, including, for example, as gendered, socio-cultural and socio-economic constructions' (Hocking, 2012: 54) Exploring the historical basis of this perspective does not seek to condemn occupational therapy; rather critiquing historically situated assumptions can broaden understandings of occupation and strengthen theory and practice.

Historical knowledge can be situated across a spectrum of epistemological perspectives, including positivist, interpretivist and critical. Researchers in a positivist tradition believe that there exists a single, historical truth that can be described in a precise, value-free manner (Eustace, 1993). This type of historical inquiry can be seen in traditional accounts of history, which contain grand historical narratives of powerful and influential people (Thompson, 2000). Positivist accounts of history have been criticised for only focusing on one aspect of historical truth (Thompson, 2000). Researchers in interpretivist traditions recognise that there is no 'single history' and that events can be described from diverse perspectives (Eustace, 1993). Interpretivist researchers attempt to understand and interpret human behaviour in its historical context and use this knowledge to deepen understanding of historical events. In the

main, the research methods described in this paper are based on an interpretive epistemology and demonstrate that drawing on perspectives from different sources can capture multiple, complex viewpoints. However, critical theory paradigms (such as feminism and Marxism) can also provide a useful perspective on history; these methods indicate that reality is shaped by factors, such as social class and gender, and explore the oppression of marginalised groups of people. Positivist, interpretivist and critical approaches to understanding history are presented in the table in the Findings section of this paper.

Historical documents were created by people who were affected by the context within which they wrote. Tosh (2013) identifies that historical researchers are not passive observers but actively create historical narratives, which are affected by their social, political and historical perspectives (Hocking, 2004). It is important to consider the historical documents within the context that they were written; Trueman (2010) advises historical researchers to familiarise themselves with the broader culture of the time and place they are interested in. Developing an understanding of the bias and present-day understandings that researchers inevitably bring to historical research and analysis, is an essential element of conducting high quality historical research.

History of occupational therapy

A number of key books have examined the history of occupational therapy internationally, using documentary research methods to present the story of occupational therapy in its national context. Anderson and Bell's (1988) research on the history of the profession in Australia is based on historical documents,

along with personal communications with pioneering occupational therapists. The book does not contain a section on the methodology used and the notes section does not provide a critique of their listed sources. However, they contextualise the historical events presented using social, political and economic information from the time in question, and present a comprehensive history of occupational therapy in Australia from approximately 1940–1960. Quiroga (1995) uses historical documentary methods to describe the history of occupational therapy in the USA, drawing on the contents of many archives and libraries (including the Official Archives of the American Occupational Therapy Association). The book acknowledges the challenges associated with accessing information about the early years of the profession and critically considers the quality of the available material briefly prior to presenting the material. The notes at the end of each chapter consider the factors (type of source, authorship, etc.) that may impact on the quality of the source; however the book does not extensively discuss methods in the main text. Paterson (2010) uses oral history and documentary research methods to develop an account of the history of occupational therapy in Scotland; detailed consideration of the sources chosen for analysis is evident in the books' footnotes. More recently, Friedland (2012) published a history of occupational therapy in Canada. She identifies that the documentary sources that she draws from in her book are sparse, and suggests that the records of occupational therapy are less complete because it is a predominantly female profession and women did not traditionally write about their work. The endnote sections demonstrate a deep understanding of the source, context and meaning of the documents analysed; however, the book does not contain a detailed methods section.

In contrast to publications that primarily draw on primary source material, several significant pieces of historical research in occupational therapy have used methodologies that also draw on secondary source material. A primary example is the history-of-ideas approach that critically examines the emergence and evolution of phenomena, and

traces how they change over time (Wilcock, 2001). Wilcock was commissioned to write a two volume history of occupational therapy, focusing on the United Kingdom (2001, 2002). She uses a history-of-ideas approach to trace the phenomenon of occupation relating to health and well-being from the earliest time to modern occupational therapy in the United Kingdom. Primary and secondary source material is explored to show how occupation was understood differently over time. Hocking (2004) also uses this method in her PhD research to examine how ideas of object use changed over time, and how this is reflected in the history of occupational therapy. Central to the history-of-ideas approach is the use of secondary literature that provides insight into how people understand particular phenomena and how these understandings develop over time. The history-of-ideas methodology has been critiqued by Betti and Van Den Berg (2014), who caution that it may produce biased narratives, suggesting that historians can never fully understand previous contexts. Hocking (2004) outlines another limitation of the method; she queries the understanding of core ideas, and if the selected idea in a piece of research is actually a universal phenomenon.

Despite these limitations, the history-of-ideas methodology is a valuable method for understanding how ideas change and develop over time.

Aim

This paper aims to provide a starting point for occupational therapy researchers who are interested in historical research, with guidance on how to select, appraise and begin to interpret primary and secondary source material concerning the history of the profession. Using these guidelines will increase the trustworthiness of historical research.

Method

A conceptual literature review (Jesson et al., 2011) was conducted to gather and synthesise literature on historical research methods. It drew on literature from occupational therapy and history to develop guidelines for identifying, evaluating and determining the meaning of historical documentary sources. Occupational therapy journals (*American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, *Australian Occupational Therapy Journal*, *British Journal of Occupational Therapy*, *Canadian Journal of Occupational Therapy*, *Scandinavian Journal of Occupational Therapy*, *Journal of Occupational Science* and the *Occupational Therapy Journal of Research*) were searched using the term 'histor* research method*' with the aim of identifying any previous methodological guidance for historical researchers in occupational therapy. A single article was identified, which discussed historical research methods for occupational therapists (Schwartz and Colman, 1988) (a number of other articles were identified that discuss the history of occupational therapy, but did not specifically address historical research methods in detail). Schwartz and Colman discussed formulating questions for historical research, types of sources and analysing the meaning of the material. The authors stated that the article was intended to provide a general introduction to historical research methods;

however, they did not specifically discuss the process of historical research using documentary sources. While only one single article specifically addressing methodology was identified in the occupational therapy journals, Hocking (2004) and Wilcock (2002) have also explored the history of ideas method in their work. However, their methodology concerns a particular type of historical research method (as already discussed) and does not contain guidance for working with primary source documents.

The next stage of the current review identified relevant methodological journal articles and books from the academic discipline of history. A second literature search was undertaken to locate books and journal articles on the topic of historical documentary methods. Databases including Academic Search Complete, AMED, Biomedical Reference Collection, CINAHL, Historical Abstracts, Humanities Full Text, Medline, PsychARTICLES, PsychINFO and Social Sciences Full Text were searched. The search terms were 'histor*

research method* OR history* document* research'. Each search was limited to sources published in English and to peer-reviewed articles. No restriction was placed on the date that the articles were published. The search produced 1,983 results. These were further refined by selecting articles from the subject areas of methodology, history, history of psychology, history of nursing, research methodology, historiography, historical research and occupational therapy. This resulted in 131 results. The titles of the search results were initially screened for relevance; following this, the abstracts were reviewed – ten articles were selected and the full texts reviewed. Five articles that specifically discussed historical documentary research methods were selected for review (Fealy, 1999; Lusk, 1997; Hewitt, 1997; Sweeney, 2005; Wood, 2011). Two further articles located in grey literature were included (Mogalakwe, 2009; Platt, 1981). A number of key historical research method books were also included to supplement the information found in the articles (Danto, 2008; McCulloch, 2004; McDowell, 2002; Scott, 1990).

The identified occupational therapy and history material was synthesised to develop guidelines for occupational therapists wishing to engage in historical research using documents. The methods identified across the sources was largely aligned; this review draws on the commonalities. In this paper, the stages of historical documentary research are discussed: choosing a topic, identifying sources, ensuring quality and analysis.

Findings

The review revealed a number of guidelines for conducting historical documentary research, including choosing a topic, sourcing evidence, assessing quality and determining the meaning of historical documents.

Choosing a topic

Prior to selecting and approaching source material, it is vital for historical researchers to carefully clarify their research topic (McDowell, 2002; Schwartz and Colman, 1988). There are a number of aspects to consider in choosing an area of inquiry. Existing research topics may have drawn conclusions based on misinterpreted evidence or research may not have previously explored a valuable topic. For example, Friedland (2005) used historical documentary research to explore the contributions of Helen Primrose LeVesconte, whose contributions had hitherto not been explored by occupational therapy researchers. A topic may be of particular interest to an occupational therapy researcher, for example a therapist who has worked in a particular area may become interested in researching the history of the service. It can be useful to study the previous literature in an area in great detail, to develop a comprehensive account of previous conclusions. Practical considerations are also important when selecting a topic, particularly considering access to sources and the knowledge and skill of the researcher. By choosing a topic that is situated within appropriate literature, and by

taking into account source material and personal skills, a suitable topic and scope of inquiry can be selected.

Sourcing documentary evidence

Historical documentary methods are used to identify, investigate, categorise and interpret written sources of information about past events (Mogalakwe, 2009). Documents are broadly considered text-based sources (Scott, 1990) and are differentiated from other methods that include oral history interviews, and analyses of visual imagery, objects, artefacts and architecture. Primary source material includes original documents for occupational therapy researchers this may include letters, reports, books, journals, newspapers, hospital records, diaries and photographs – material that was produced at the time in question (Lusk, 1997). These types of documents provide an important source for researchers; however, few documents are important in their entirety (McDowell, 2002) and researchers must carefully select and interpret a range of best available sources to ensure that information about a historical event is comprehensive. Using primary source material creates original perspectives on past events ((McDowell, 2002). Secondary sources encompass the work of others writing about historical events (Lusk, 1997). For example, Hocking wrote a series of articles exploring the beliefs that pioneering occupational therapists held about objects. She drew extensively on primary source early occupational therapy literature, and her written analysis of this material is a secondary source (Hocking, 2008a,b,c). Exploring secondary source material can be an important aspect of a literature review, prior to consulting primary source material (McDowell, 2002). Other documentary sources include autobiography and memoir (Danto, 2008).

Catalogues of documentary material can be located in many places – library catalogues, online catalogues, reference lists, bibliographies, directories, encyclopaedias, annuals, abstracts/indexes, book reviews, handbooks, computer databases, websites and library shelves (Fealy, 1999). Sources may exist in electronic form, but the process of converting paper documents to electronic files is time consuming, and much material remains only in its original form. When approaching

previously un-catalogued source material (for example, archives released from a hospital), the initial task is to carefully organise and record the contents of the archive. It may also be useful to make a copy of archival material, so that the document can be directly consulted during the analytic phase. Two frequent options for copying material are photocopying and photography. A copy of a document can be helpful, because the researcher can make notes on important sections of the document, which is not advisable with an original document. However, for fragile and valuable documents, the associated handling, light and heat of a photocopier may be damaging; flash-free digital photography can be a more appropriate option. Making a decision to copy a document must take ethical and copyright procedures into account; it may be that only a percentage of the material may be copied. For example, in the

United Kingdom, it is legally permitted to photocopy an amount that is not considered 'unfair' (generally around 5% is accepted as fair) or a single article/chapter of any published material under fair use legislation (Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988). However, once out of copyright (generally 70 years since the (last remaining) author's death or since publication if author unknown, for research publications and other literary work), it may be copied without limit (United Kingdom Copyright Service, 2009). In the case of material that is in copyright, only the most important aspects of the material should be copied and appropriately detailed notes can be used to record the remaining material. For more detailed guidance on locating sources, cataloguing archives, copying documents and note-taking, see McDowell (2002).

Once a topic has been chosen, and sources have been selected, historical researchers must consider the documentary sources themselves. There are a number of issues of quality to consider when exploring historical documentary material. Before analysing the documents, researchers need to undergo a process of critically considering the quality of their source and contents (Sweeney, 2005; Wood, 2011). In qualitative historical research, these constructs are authenticity, credibility and representativeness (Scott, 1990).

Assessment of quality

Stage 1: Authenticity. When using documents, the origin and authorship of the material needs to be assessed (Scott, 1990). Researchers need to consider if the source is genuine and credible; Mogalakwe (2009) cautions researchers not to take the veracity of a source for granted. A number of factors can indicate that documents are inauthentic (Platt, 1981). A document may not make sense or there may be unexpected errors in it. The content may be inconsistent, with changes in handwriting, typography and style of language indicating that it may have been altered. Different versions of the same document may exist and documents may be provided by an unreliable secondary source. It is possible that written records may be altered to advocate for a particular

position. Finally, the named author may not have written the document. It is essential for the genuineness of documents to be considered prior to analysis (Wood, 2011); if issues with authenticity are identified, this does not mean that the documents cannot be useful in analysis. If material has been changed, and this change can be identified, the implications of this can be very useful for historical researchers. Exploring the authenticity of the documents that are being analysed allows researchers to understand the source of the documents, and to make judgements about their content on this basis.

Stage 2: Credibility. Credibility considers if the source is free from error and distortion – if the information provided is reliable. A central aspect of this process explores the standpoint of the author of the document (Scott, 1990). Any written material is to a greater or lesser extent based on the beliefs of the author. The point of view of the author and the reason for the document's

creation needs to be understood. A person may have experienced an event, but lacked the expertise to fully understand it or been ill, frightened or distracted during the event. The document may have been produced as a piece of satire or comedy (McCulloch, 2004). None of these situations render the document unusable; in fact, by questioning the author's perspective and the reason why the document was produced, the credibility of the contents of a document can be explored in a more meaningful way.

Stage 3: Representativeness. Assessing representativeness explores if the selected source material is typical of similar documents and if the content can be generalised (Scott, 1990). If the material is not representative, the researcher needs to consider the extent of and reasons for the difference (Scott, 1990). Surviving documents are frequently written by bureaucrats and access may be restricted (McCulloch, 2004). Also, certain documents may have been destroyed, intentionally or unintentionally. For these reasons, it can be difficult to ascertain the representativeness of the collected documents. One method of addressing this issue is to consult documents from different sources about the same topic, and consider similarities and differences between them. The process of triangulating data sources is considered good practice in qualitative research (Krefting, 1991) and is an extremely useful tool for historical researchers.

Meaning

Understanding the meaning of documents is the most challenging aspect of the process (Scott, 1990). Initially, documentary research can provide evidence of historical fact, and can allow researchers to construct an accurate account of what happened. However, caution must be exercised in establishing the facts and a researcher must recognise that the evidence provided by the documents may challenge and counteract taken-for-granted historical narratives (Schwartz and Coleman, 1988).

Presenting the literal and descriptive meaning of documents can provide a close representation of events (Danto, 2008). Constructing a literal account of events is essential before proceeding to a deeper analysis. Two broad methods of describing the material can be chosen – a thematic or a chronological approach (McDowell, 2002). A chronological approach seeks to present the findings in a linear fashion, recording events according to time. It can be an overly simplistic method of capturing events, and can make dealing with complex or simultaneous events difficult. A thematic approach groups historical evidence into patterns guided by the research question; however, it can lead to repeated discussions of distinct events as they are analysed from different perspectives. McDowell (2002) identifies that thematic events can provide a snapshot of history, but can be perceived as a static account. He recommends combining both methods, with research findings presented chronologically and thematically. An example of occupational therapy historical research that combines

chronological and thematic analysis is Peter's work (2011) on occupational therapy leaders from 1950–1980.

Once the thematic and chronological meaning of the documents has been determined, the researcher can proceed to a more in-depth analysis of the meaning (Hewitt, 1997). There are a wide variety of analytic perspectives that can be chosen to consider the meaning of historical documents. Choosing an appropriate theoretical basis for analysis depends on the fit between the research aim, source material and the researcher's perspective. Table 1 provides some examples of theoretical paradigms that can be used to generate deeper understandings of historical material.

Challenges associated with working with/analysing documents

Some researchers propose that documentary sources represent the 'gold standard' for historical evidence (Danto, 2008). Historical documents frequently contain primary source accounts of events, and are extremely valuable in constructing historical fact. However, documentary evidence is generally written by those in positions of power to record and advocate for their position. Historians identify that documents frequently do not record the experiences and events as perceived by less powerful people; relying only on documents risks creating a biased account of history (Thompson, 2000). Also, the reasons for document survival need to be considered – why have documents been kept, and was some material altered or destroyed? While documents provide an excellent source of information about the past, they do not tell the whole story. By engaging in the critical processes detailed above, the true value of documentary evidence can be considered, and the results of historical research can be more accurate and applicable.

Discussion

Previously published occupational therapy

research will now be considered in light of the recommendations for historical research outlined above.

We have recommended that occupational therapists researching the history of the profession choose an appropriate topic. Quiroga (1995), Friedland (2012), Anderson and Bell (1988), Paterson (2010) and Wilcock (2001, 2002) chose to study the history of occupational therapy in a specific country, identifying a gap in the literature. Hocking (2004) had a clear research topic and question, using historical research to examine the relationship between identity and objects. It has also been suggested that researchers need to draw on a variety of documentary sources. The research on the history of the profession sourced documents from diverse places, including occupational therapy literature published in the early years of the profession, archives of professional organisations, hospital archives, secondary source literature that details the history of the profession, personal communication and oral history interviews. While the types of sources are varied, there has been an emphasis on secondary source material. Using primary source evidence to trace the history of the

Table 1. Theoretical paradigms.

	Philosophical assumptions	Key authors	Approach to historical research	Typical data used	Examples of this approach
Positivism	Assumes that reality can be understood by hypotheses, established as facts or laws (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008).	August Comte; Émile Durkheim	History can be generalised – there are ‘laws’ governing how events happen; there exists an absolute historical truth. Includes the use of statistical and computer tools to quantitatively analyse history (Danto, 2008).	Official documents, questionnaires, surveys and biographical information.	Barry et al. (ongoing) ‘Early Medical Practitioners – The medical world of early modern England, Wales and Ireland, c. 1500–1715’ uses a prosopographical approach to develop accurate biographical accounts of medical practitioners.
Interpretivism	Assumes that reality is subjective and constructed by social actors (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008).	Max Weber; Wilhelm Dilthey	There are multiple historical truths – historical events can be interpreted from a variety of viewpoints (Willis, 2007).	Multiple sources can be used to develop interpretative accounts; official records, case studies, media material, ethnographic material, personal writings such as diaries, letters etc.	Hocking (2004) <i>The relationship between objects and identity in occupational therapy: A dynamic balance of rationalism and romanticism</i> . PhD thesis. Takes an interpretative approach to understanding object use in occupational therapy.
Postmodernism	Assumes that there is no underlying logical and objective reality; there is no absolute or true way of representing social reality (Johnson and Duberley, 2000).	Michel Foucault; Pierre Bourdieu	No historical truth – inquiry focuses on structures and contexts within which events occur. Seeks to deconstruct accepted historical narratives (Danto, 2008) often using discourse analysis.	Official records, case studies, media material, personal writings etc.	Molke (2011) <i>Authentic occupational therapy: A genealogy of normative technology in occupational therapy</i> . PhD thesis. Takes a postmodern perspective on the role of technology in occupational therapy.
Feminism	Assumes that reality is shaped by gender, and that feminine perspectives tend to be silenced or disadvantaged (Olesen, 2008).	Ann Oakley; Claire Wallace	Historical research must aim to capture female voices and experiences, which have been marginalised from mainstream history (Danto, 2008).	Oral history interviews, case studies, personal writings such as diaries, letters, blogs, etc.	Royeen (2005) ‘Ongoing Wisdom after the Lecture: ‘Her-story’: A Polemic for Action, or a Pink-collar Call for Feminist Development in Occupational Therapy’ suggests several potential strands for feminist perspectives on the history of occupational therapy.
Marxism	Assumes that social class, capital markets and the commodification of labour shapes reality (West, 1991).	Karl Marx; Friedrich Engels	Social class and economic factors determine historical outcomes; history is deterministic and directed towards an endpoint (Danto, 2008).	Economic and political data, business records, perspectives of workers (oral history interviews, letters, diaries, newspaper articles, etc.).	Wenocur and Reisch (2002) <i>From Charity to Enterprise: The Development of American Social Work in a Market Economy</i> examines the history of social work contextualised by political and economic factors.

profession may provide unique insights into the realities of occupational therapy theory and practice in the past, and future research focusing on this type of material would be beneficial.

Occupational therapists need to address the authenticity, credibility and representativeness of documentary sources when conducting historical research. In all of the literature on the history of the profession, the sources chosen can be considered authentic. As material was chosen from published sources and official archives (such as professional association archives and hospital archives), it can be presumed that the documents are authentic and have not been forged. The authors of the occupational therapy literature demonstrated an awareness of credibility when they identify the gender of the source authors and discuss the impact of gender on the document content. The representativeness of the documentary sources is not considered explicitly by the history of occupational therapy literature. However, all of the literature reviewed draws on a variety of material from different sources and this increases the likelihood that the material is representative across a broad range of documents.

One of the strongest elements of the reviewed literature on the history of occupational therapy is the chronological presentation of how occupational therapy developed. Quiroga (1995), Friedland (2012), Paterson (2010), Wilcock (2001, 2002) and Anderson and Bell (1988) all present comprehensive and thoughtful accounts of how occupational therapy developed in specific countries. The authors also incorporate a thematic approach in their work, examining the history of the profession in different contexts. The combination of chronological and thematic approaches is in accordance with McDowell's assertion that this is the most appropriate way to describe history.

Some of the literature has used critical perspectives to conduct a deeper analysis of occupational therapy and its history. Quiroga (1995) and Anderson and Bell (1988) exam-

ine occupational therapy as a profession that largely consists of female practitioners; however, they do not draw on broader feminist literature to contextualise their perspective. In contrast, Wilcock (2001, 2002) and Hocking (2004) use a history of ideas methodology that analyses the aims, beliefs and practice of occupational therapy and provides a critical perspective on current practice. This literature demonstrates the value of historical research when an appropriate critical perspective is employed.

Implications for future research

The literature on the history of occupational therapy to date has been conducted using rigorous research methods. However, from the perspective of historical documentary research, some areas for future development have been identified. Primary source material from hospital archives and other institutions where occupational therapists practiced may provide a unique perspective on occupational therapy. As much research on the history of the profession has drawn on secondary sources, using primary sources would complement the existing historical literature. As

demonstrated by Wilcock (2001, 2002) and Hocking (2004), using critical research paradigms can provide a deeper understanding of the central ideas and current practices of occupational therapy.

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Conclusion

When researching the history of occupational therapy using documentary sources and historical literature, there are a number of important quality measures to bear in mind. Central to this is an approach that interrogates history and does not take it for granted. Like much of history, the history of occupational therapy is a good story (Royeen, 2003). Learning about the pioneers of the profession and the early years of practice is enjoyable and illuminating. However, as already discussed, history can benefit the profession beyond this. Occupational therapy researchers interested in history need to conduct research using relevant historical evidence, even if it threatens the accepted historical narrative – researchers must exercise a sense of scepticism with regard to the taken-for-granted version of events. It is the use of appropriate methodology for data collection and analysis that situates history within the broader political, linguistic and cultural community (Danto, 2008). An essential component of historiographical methods concerns understanding the quality of the chosen sources, and how they relate to each other. Doing so provides more information on the historical event in question, deepens understandings of the broader perspective within which events were situated and facilitates critical analysis of the history of occupational therapy. By incorporating methodological clarity into history of occupational therapy research, the resulting benefits for theory and practice will be more powerful.

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Research ethics

As the study comprised a review of published literature, ethical approval was not required.

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