

Narratives, reflective processes and professional practice: contributions towards research and training

Narrativas, processos reflexivos e prática profissional: apontamentos para pesquisa e formação

Narrativas, procesos reflexivos y práctica profesional: contribuciones para investigación y formación

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ABSTRACT

This study offers methodological contributions for research and educational projects involving the use of narratives and reflective processes. Based on a study of professional practice, written narratives from clinical sessions within Occupational Therapy were analyzed using the categories proposed by Hatton and Smith (1995), to show the process of reflecting on actions: descriptive narration, reflective description, dialog reflection and critical reflection. The results presented in this paper concern the details involved in putting this methodology into operation, especially regarding the format (grammatical structure) and the content (manifested reflection) of each category. In this respect, complementation of the work of Hatton and Smith was sought by providing better systematization for using these categories.

Key words: Narrative inquiry. Education. Research methodology. Reflexive practitioner. Occupational therapy.

RESUMO

Este trabalho oferece contribuições metodológicas para projetos de pesquisa e formação que envolvam o uso de narrativas e processos reflexivos. Com base em um estudo sobre prática profissional, foram analisadas narrativas escritas de sessões clínicas de Terapia Ocupacional utilizando-se as categorias propostas por Hatton e Smith (1995), para evidenciar o processo de reflexão-sobre-a-ação: narração descritiva, descrição reflexiva, reflexão dialógica e reflexão crítica. Os resultados apresentados referem-se ao detalhamento da operacionalização da metodologia, sobretudo em relação à forma (estrutura gramatical) e aos conteúdos (reflexão evidenciada) de cada categoria. Neste sentido, procura-se complementar o trabalho de Hatton e Smith, oferecendo uma melhor sistematização para o uso dessas categorias.

Palavras-chave: Narrativas. Educação. Metodologia de pesquisa. Profissional reflexivo. Terapia ocupacional.

RESUMEN

Este trabajo ofrece contribuciones metodológicas para proyectos de investigación y formación que envuelvan el uso de narrativas y procesos reflexivos. Con base en un estudio sobre práctica profesional, han sido analizadas narrativas escritas de sesiones clínicas de Terapia Ocupacional utilizándose las categorías propuestas por Hatton e Smith (1995) para evidenciar el proceso de reflexión sobre-la-acción: narración descriptiva, descripción reflexiva, reflexión dialógica y reflexión crítica. Los resultados presentados en este trabajo tienen por objetivo detallar la ejecución de tal metodología, sobre todo en relación a la forma (estructura gramatical) y al contenido (reflexión evidenciada) de cada categoría. De este modo, se busca complementar el trabajo de Hatton e Smith y ofreciendo una mejor sistematización en el uso de las categorías.

Palabras clave: Narrativas. Educación. Metodología de investigación. Profesional reflexivo. Terapia ocupacional.

INTRODUCTION

Ever since the 1980s, interest in investigating professional practice has been increasing in many professions, especially after Donald Schön's contributions (1983, 2000) on the nature of this practice, which is understood not as the use of theories, but as the knowledge produced by the

practitioner based on situations where uncertainty, singularity, complexity and conflict of values occur.

These assertions have also contributed to changes in the teaching practice of professions, not only in the initial education, but also in the continued education, mainly because they value formative-investigative activities, referring to how the students and/or practitioners construct their understanding of their professional activity (Mizukami et al., 2002; Almeida, Feuerwerker, Lhanos, 1999).

The knowledge demonstrated in everyday situations is tacit, or implicit; practitioners know that they know but they cannot explain what they know (Schön, 1983) and it needs to become explicit in order to be known and assessed. Thus, practitioners must get involved in reflection on the process of action, which will allow them to discover whether their actions are coherent with their beliefs and personal understanding, redefine the meanings and even produce new knowledge based on these reflections.

The *reflexive process*, characterized as a type of thinking linked to action and which demands a qualified action different from the routine (Rodgers, 2002; Hatton, Smith, 1995; Dewey, 1976), has become one of the most important elements to understanding the construction of professional-practice knowledge. Moreover, it has also become the main point to guide the learning of the practice, as it offers a wider understanding of the relations established with other ideas and experiences, therefore creating a condition of learning continuity (Rodgers, 2002).

Thus, several strategies have been used for research and education to access the reflection on practice, the main one being the reflexive diary (Zabalza, 1994). The contents of the diary work as a description of the practice, in which students or practitioners can report what their reflections and actions were in a given situation, offering access to the mind, fixing the action in the context where it happens and making their understandings explicit, in such a way that it permits a return to the experience (Rodgers, 2002; Cunha, 1997). The psychologist Jerome Bruner (1997) called this process descriptive thinking, which is a kind of thinking done in private and concerns the connections between the specific events in order to explain the reasons.

The process of describing their own experience allows the subject to reconstruct their discourse and offers them new senses, establishing a dialectic relation between experience and description, intervened by reflective processes (Rodgers, 2002; Cunha, 1997).

Therefore, understanding how these reflective processes occur and what they really show has become very relevant in the context of teaching and research. In a study conducted with students from the course of initial teacher education of reflexive teachers in the University of Sidney, Australia, Hatton and Smith (1995) indicated that the written descriptions proved to be the most adequate tools in order to show different types of reflection used by the students.

For the analysis of these narrations, the authors chose an operational structure based on the model of reflexive levels, as proposed by Van Manen (1997 cited by Hatton, Smith, 1995), originated from the work of the

philosopher Habermas, where four different types of descriptions were evident, varying from a simple description of an event, to reflexive modes that justified the actions and also made the understanding deeper and more explicit, including previous experiences and other contexts. They are: descriptive narration, reflective description, dialog reflection and critical reflection. Both the content and the different language structures used in the narrations assisted in the classification of the types of reflection, although this process was not explained in the article.

All types of reflection were observed in the results presented by Hatton and Smith (1995), although there were qualitative differences among them. The authors emphasize the importance of not placing these different types in a hierarchy, at least not without explaining how it might happen. One example of this fact was the quality of the descriptions characterized as *critical reflection* (awareness that actions and events are not only explained by many points of view, but also by the different social historical-political-cultural contexts), because even though these descriptions tried to include wider contexts, the content of the reflections proved to be very superficial. On the other hand, the descriptions characterized as dialog reflection showed more consistent reflective contents.

These categories were also used to analyze the data from a study which sought to understand the educational dimension observed in therapeutic procedures of Occupational Therapy based on the investigation of the descriptions of a practitioner regarding her practice (Marcolino, 2005). During the process of data analysis, it was possible to go into deeper details with the use of the categories, identifying unique characteristics for each one of them, thus complementing the work of Hatton and Smith (1995).

METHODOLOGY

This paper is part of the results from the research mentioned above, with emphasis on the details of the use of applied categories in order to show the reflective processes observed in the written narratives.

The research data come from an occupational therapist's written narratives, comprised of ten clinical appointments of a single patient, collected from March to May 2004¹. The therapist was asked to present narratives that could express the description of the events along with her reflections about what she considered relevant (reflection on action). The analysis of the data was based on the categories of the different types of reflective processes, as proposed by Hatton and Smith (1995).

At first, during the data analysis process, and after reading all the written narratives of the appointment sessions, we tried to identify the parts where there were traces of reflection. In doing so, we were able to develop a picture with parts of description, characterized as *descriptive narratives*, and reflective extracts. Each extract was called an *event*.

¹ Treatment in the area of Mental Health. At the time, the patient was a 16-year-old teenager, with a clinical diagnosis of schizophrenia, under Occupational Therapy treatment in a private clinic for six months.

After this phase, a new reading of the reflexive extracts was conducted, where it was possible to categorize the reflexive events, because in some extracts the occupational therapist justified her actions, characterizing a descriptive reflection, and in others she expanded her reflections in a conversation with herself, including past events related to the treatment, the relationship with the patient, the information previously collected in dialogues and in her observations, which characterizes *dialog reflection*. No critical reflection narratives were verified.

Even so, because some fragments had a similar structure, there were still some doubts as to which categories they should be included in, and they also expressed the therapist's perception of the patient. Although these events could be considered as talking to oneself, they seemed to refer to the present moment, not a return to the past. Besides, they were not characterized by a previous or future action, and therefore did not offer a justification. Hence, although they might have seemed to be cases of dialog reflection, it was inferred that these fragments would be closer to descriptive narrative, as they described the therapist's subjective observations, where she had a hypothesis but did not explore it. Thus, these fragments were classified as *descriptive narrative*.

In the next stage, each kind of reflective narrative was analyzed separately. At this moment, it was possible to identify the similarities among them, not only concerning their content and purpose, but also the grammatical structure, which mostly contained repetitive elements.

It is important to note that the categories proposed by Hatton and Smith (1995) were not described in detail and the authors did not discuss in depth the way they worked during analysis of the students' narratives. Although such categories can be used freely, this fact does not offer a clear structure on how to use them. In this paper, we intend to offer contributions for a clearer understanding of these categories and their use in research and teaching, emphasizing that there are tenuous lines separating one kind of reflection from the other.

RESULTS

The following are the different types of narrative and reflexive descriptions observed, highlighting the content and the grammatical structure associated with each type. Each category will be followed by a narrative or reflexive excerpt, an example, in which the grammatical structure will appear underlined.

DESCRIPTIVE NARRATION

Descriptive narration is the recording of the events where there is no reason for taking an action. The excerpts of descriptive narrations are restricted to a description of the situation and its context; they present the sequence of the plot, showing the actions of the characters involved without explicit reasoning.

As previously presented, descriptive narration includes a type of fragment that presents the therapist's perception of the patient and it seems to describe the therapist's subjective observation at the present moment. Grammatical expressions typical of these events were: *it seems, I observe, I notice*. There are other grammatical expressions that seem to indicate a subjective observation of the therapist regarding what might be happening with the patient, such as: [the patient would be] *trying to understand, paying attention, tries to comprehend*.

I am going to call F. in the waiting room. F. comes into the room quickly saying that she needed to make two birthday gifts for two of her classmates, one for April 1st and one for April 4th.

I say that before we start the projects, I need to talk to her about a very important thing and I talk about the research. F. quickly says that she accepts and I mention the need to speak to her mother, as she needs to sign the approval document. F. says she loves to help people...

As soon as I finish speaking, F. asks me to help her make something to give as a present for the girls... and she says we must hurry in order to have enough time to make both presents. I say how much time she has left to finish the gifts; I tell her how many appointments she still has to finish them. But F. does not seem to listen and soon starts opening the drawers, walking around the room. (1st appointment)

REFLEXIVE DESCRIPTION

The reflexive description tries to offer reasons for the actions based on personal judgment or on literature references. It is an attempt at reflection, but in a descriptive form. It recognizes different points of view and it arises in two forms: a) centered in the personal perspective; b) centered in the recognition of multiple factors (Hatton, Smith, 1995).

Two kinds of reflexive description narratives were observed, with the same structure differing only as to the type of reasons for the actions: one of them shows the objective of the action (a); and the other shows an investigative intention (b).

In the first case (a), the most common grammatical construction is the use of the verb in the first person singular, present tense, showing the occupational therapist's directive actions, such as: *I make, I show, I try to associate, I try to do, I decide, I ask*; followed by an expression that shows reasons: *trying to, so that, with the objective, to try, I try to make, I was trying*.

I ask her if she has thought about something to give as a present, she keeps walking around and says that she doesn't know, and that I had to help her think about something. At first I start touching some materials and invite her to do the same, aiming to provoke her to reach a certain product. (1st session)

In the second case (b), the same grammatical construction (use of the verb in the first person singular, present tense) is followed by an expression to characterize the investigative state, such as: *to investigate, to understand better, trying to better understand, trying to know, to see if, to try to understand, to know better, to try to observe*.

I ask her to explain to me more about her religion, which I did not know very well, and I wanted to learn (I do this to try to learn how she related to religion, spiritual relationship and psychotic symptoms, hallucinations). (4th session)

DIALOG REFLECTION

Episodes of dialog reflection were common in the occupational therapist's narratives and they appeared in almost all narrations. Dialog reflection is characterized by a form of discourse with oneself, a return to the facts using different alternatives to raise and explain hypotheses. As with the reflexive description, it appears in two forms: centered in personal judgments and in the recognition of multiple factors (Hatton, Smith, 1995).

The grammar structure associated with this type of reflection is observed in the following ways: *I remember the times in which, I think that, I thought that, I was thinking, I could observe, I raise hypothesis, I try to remember, I had observed, I have noted moments in which, I have noticed, I have associated*; often in conjunction with expressions that refer to a past time: *there have been sessions in which, in other sessions, in many sessions, in previous moments*.

As soon as I finish speaking, F. quickly asks me to help her make something to give as present for the girls. (I observe that she does not say "friends", seeming far and unknown, as if her life is empty of friends, socializing only with her mother and grandparents, something that came up in other sessions, the patient recognizes the lack and need of these people in her life, I believe she is in a process of getting closer to some people in school) (1st session)

DISCUSSION

Outlining the workability of these categories offered parameters to identify the different types of reflection presented in the written narratives, focusing on the grammatical construction of each type associated with the intention of the reflection. Thus, reflexive description, which is characterized by the evidence of reasons for the action, showed a grammatical construction including the action of the practitioner (verb in the first person singular, present tense) associated with expressions that indicate either intentionality or an investigative attitude, both of which clearly showed what was implicit in the decision made by the practitioner.

In dialog reflection, characterized by an enlargement of the mind based on previous experiences, to explain and raise hypotheses, the grammatical construction includes expressions indicating a reflective action, followed by the reflection target, and expressions that refer to a past time, followed by narrations of previous experiences related to the present situation. This structure seems to promote understanding of how past experiences are recovered for the construction of meanings regarding a specific situation.

It is important to note that often there is no well-defined line between categories, as observed when specific fragments were included with reflexive structure to describe subjective perceptions in the *descriptive*

narrative category, because there was no future exploration of the line of thinking. However, this can be best explored in future research, together with clearer characterization of the *critical reflection* category, which was not observed in the data of this research.

In general, the use of this methodological formalism in research that includes written narratives and reflexive thinking may favor understanding of the following: the knowledge construction process of the practitioner; the ways in which practitioners organize their thoughts to make decisions and act; how theoretical references are accessed; how previous experiences are incorporated in professional practice, not only for the construction of meaning in specific situations, but also in the recognition of standards (throughout their careers).

Use of the analysis of the different types of reflection in formative experiences may favor improved comprehension by the student or practitioner regarding the reasons for their actions in practice; enable discussion of these actions; raise awareness concerning how theoretical references are present in practice; widen the reflection possibilities when the practitioner faces uncertain situations and conflicting values. The analysis also serves as an evidence source for improved practice.

On the one hand, all of this evidence shows the relevance of using these categories in formative and investigative projects regarding the reflexive practitioner, while on the other, it shows the need for more in-depth investigations in this field.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The construction of the theoretical-methodological framework for this research, focusing on elements of professional practice, includes the paradigm of practical rationality, narrative thinking, narratives and reflexive processes.

Written narratives proved to be capable tools for fixing the action in its time and context, thus allowing access to the mind of the practitioner involved in a process of reflection on action. The link between reflection and action, first proposed by Dewey (1976), and assumed by the authors who reference this paper, characterizes the specific type of reflexive thinking analyzed.

Therein, in order to contribute to improved classification of the research, which includes reflexive processes and their use in professional learning, the present paper attempts to clarify how to work with the categories proposed by Hatton and Smith (1995), by creating criteria for the identification of these categories.

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