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Remembering Camperdown: Auto-ethnographic tales of an occupational therapist

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Auto-ethnography is a way of writing that connects personal and cultural worlds. My doctoral research is an auto-ethnographic study of my life as an occupational therapist. The purpose of the research is to re-inscribe the everyday world of practice into public accounts, at a time when occupational therapy as a profession is becoming a scholarly discipline.

Every profession has rich oral and practice traditions that are located in the everyday. Occupational therapists have a 'double dose' because the work we do explicitly concerns the everyday activities of others. This auto-ethnographic inquiry into my professional life restores something of the intimacy, viscosity and particularity of practice, which, I argue, has been left behind in the search for scholarly and professional legitimacy for occupational therapy.

The thesis consists of a portfolio of tales together with layers of historical and theoretical framing. The fictional tales are in direct dialogue with my published work about a youth-specific occupational therapy project undertaken at Camperdown Children's Hospital in the 1980s. A critical commentary connects new writing with old, related to the problematic of everyday life and to constructions of professionalism in the bigger picture of occupational therapy.

This portfolio of tales of sexuality, food and death dramatises 'paradigmatic scenes' from a remembered world of occupational therapy. These tales are twice-told, first, by an Anglo-Australian occupational therapist in her 30s and then by girls of Pacific Islands, Aboriginal and Turkish heritage. The particular approach of crafting twice-told tales in dialogue with selected publications is what makes this auto-ethnographic project distinctive. These fictive engagements with practice may 'recover' subjugated knowledges from lost and repressed places. Such 'writing the ordinary' may have ethical implications for (re)presenting interactions between actors involved in moments of practice.