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In the bathroom: Live narrations as a tool for exploring the intimate task of body cleaning

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Abstract

The bathroom is one of the first places in the home that older adults face with challenge and fear. Difficulty or dependence in the act of body cleaning affects older adults' daily lives dramatically and turns a pleasurable activity into a challenging task. Despite the consequences associated with disability in body cleaning, little is known about older adults' experiences with body cleaning. One reason for this lack of knowledge may be that body cleaning is a private activity and a difficult task to explore. Innovative research methods are strongly needed to develop better products that are supportive of all people, regardless of their capabilities.

This paper will present the methodology used in a study in which older women were asked to narrate their own body cleaning experience to a tape-recorder while they were performing the task. To emphasize the 'lived experience' and to illuminate the 'core' of the body cleaning experience, these body cleaning narrations were converted into poems using Richardson's (1992) poetic representation method by using participants' words, tone and dictation and relying on poetic devices such as off rhyme, metre and pauses to convey the narrative.

The conclusions of this study showed that live narrations of body cleaning activity helped the researcher to overcome the research difficulties and to comprehend older adults' body cleaning experiences not only with narrations but also with voices.

Keywords: bathroom, body cleaning, older adults, qualitative research methods

Introduction

The bathroom is an essential part of homes and daily lives; it is an environment designed for fundamental activities of daily living as both a private and shared place and the most standardized room in homes. For many older adults, the bathroom is also a place of challenge and fear. Studies have shown that despite the importance and meaning to older adults, one of the first basic activities of daily living that they have difficulty with is bathing (Berlau, Corrada, Peltz & Kawa, 2011; Jagger, Arthur, Spiers & Clarke, 2001; Verbrugge & Yang, 2002). Moreover, older adults consider difficulties with bathing to be an inevitable experience (Ahluwalia, Gill, Baker & Fried, 2010). For these individuals, difficulty or dependence in the act of bathing is common, involves many subtasks and causes many physical and psychological problems (Naik, Concato & Gill, 2004).

Despite the consequences associated with disability in body cleaning, little is known about older adults' experiences with body cleaning. One reason for this lack of knowledge may be that body cleaning is a private activity and a difficult task to explore.

Alexander Kira's book *The Bathroom* was a milestone for the research literature on personal hygiene activities; products were subjected to a detailed examination for the first time in the history of the bathroom. Kira's book, which was first published in 1966, was result of a research programme that aimed to investigate the problems involved in personal hygiene and to establish basic design criteria for bathroom equipment. This research programme consisted of a field survey that was designed to provide further insight into current attitudes, practices and equipment and laboratory investigations, including the building and testing or the postulation of a number of prototypes. The analysis of activities conducted in the laboratory was based on established motion techniques and involved filming a number of subjects performing these activities in different experimental situations. Kira's book was later revised and reorganized in 1976, and a chapter examining the personal hygiene problems of aged and disabled people was added.

In the fields of gerontology and geriatrics, prior studies of body cleaning and older adults have primarily used quantitative methods such as home-based structured interviews (Gill, Han & Allore, 2007; Murphy, Nyquist, Strasburg & Alexander, 2006; Naik & Gill, 2005; Cohen-Mansfield & Jensen, 2005; Naik, Concato & Gill, 2004; Penn, Belfield, Mascie-Taylor & Mulley, 1989), hospital-based structured interviews (Gooptu & Mulley, 1994), home-based assessments (Gill, Han & Allore, 2007; Gill, Allore, & Han, 2006; Gill, Guo & Allore, 2006; Naik & Gill, 2005; Naik, Concato & Gill, 2004), lab-based assessments (Murphy, Nyquist, Strasburg & Alexander, 2006), telephone interviews (Gill, Han & Allore, 2007; Gill, Allore, & Han, 2006; Gill, Guo & Allore, 2006; Naik, Concato & Gill, 2004) and home-based direct observations (Gill, Han & Allore, 2007; Murphy, Nyquist, Strasburg & Alexander, 2006; Naik & Gill, 2005). These quantitative studies have described bathing disability in older persons and identified the ineffectiveness of certain environmental adaptations at preventing disability, but they have not described the attitudes of older persons towards body cleaning or their preferences for body cleaning environments or products.

The use of qualitative methods to explore the task of body cleaning and related environments and products has led to deeper understanding than would have been possible with quantitative methods alone by illuminating additional layers of complexity related to the task and related environments and products. For example, Ahluwalia, Gill, Baker and Fried (2010) used a qualitative approach to explore the bathing experiences, attitudes and preferences of older adults in order to inform the development of effective patient-centred interventions. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted in participants' homes by a research investigator, and the individuals were asked open-ended questions about bathing habits, the personal meaning and purpose of bathing, difficulties and concerns about bathing, preferences for independent bathing and attitudes towards different types of bathing assistance. The qualitative approach allowed the significance and personal relevance of bathing for participants to be observed and highlighted (Ahluwalia, Gill, Baker & Fried, 2010).

For their 'Future Bathroom' project, Chamberlain and Yoxall (2012) used a different approach by employing older community lay researchers to conduct the research with the provided probe packs. Subsequently, to broaden the demographic and cultural insight and to attempt to instigate a more open public discussion about bathrooms, Chamberlain and Yoxall (2012) constructed a bathroom 'field-lab' exhibition to conduct both quantitative and qualitative analysis. Graffiti walls were a key feature in the design of the exhibition, encouraging the expression of opinions and revealing the interaction between visitors (Chamberlain & Yoxall, 2012). Researchers have expressed that the inclusion of a graffiti wall inspired extensive comments and opinions that people may have been embarrassed to express in face-to-face interviews or focus groups, and the narratives provided a useful prompt for engagement and presented the research team with rich material and insights that complemented and contributed to the data collected through other methods (Chamberlain & Yoxall, 2012).

The complex, private and highly personalized nature of the body cleaning task supports the need for innovative research methods that can offer a detailed, in-depth description of this everyday activity. This paper introduces such a method used in a study that aimed to understand the conditions of body cleaning of older women living alone at home in Turkey by exploring the affordances and constraints of sanitary ware products used in performing the task. During this study, the researcher spent two days with each of the participants, residing in their homes, observing the participants in their daily lives, and attending their social activities with friends and relatives. During these visits, in addition to conducting brief, unstructured one-to-one interviews, photographing the bathroom conditions before and after body cleaning and asking the participants to create a timeline collage of their body cleaning experience with pre-selected words and images, the researcher also asked the participants to narrate their own body cleaning experience to a tape recorder while performing the task. These body cleaning narrations were then converted into poems using Richardson's (1992) poetic representation method. This paper focuses on these 'live' narrations of body cleaning activity that have helped the researcher to

overcome the research difficulties and to comprehend older adults' body cleaning experiences not only with narrations but also with voices.

Method

Because body cleaning is a private activity, it is nearly impossible to observe people while they are performing it. Even when it is possible, such as in a laboratory as Kira did, it is impossible for subjects to perform the activity naturally in such a setting. As a substitute for observation, the participants were asked to narrate their own body cleaning experience to a tape-recorder while they were performing the task. Eight women aged 65 or older who were living alone in their own houses participated in the research. Using different sanitary ware products related to body cleaning, these women are socially and physically active and able. Mentally alert and communicative individuals were intentionally chosen for this research, given that the researcher would be speaking with them extensively. The participants were not paid to take part in the research.

The research was conducted in a number of cities in Turkey: Istanbul, Samsun, Çorum and Tekirdağ. Although conducting research only in these cities cannot reflect the whole situation in Turkey, what has been learned in depth and richness can be transferred to other settings to some extent.

To gain access to older women's daily lives, the researcher used her grandmother and the daughters or granddaughters of older women as gatekeepers. The researcher briefly informed her grandmother as well as female relatives, friends and neighbours about the details of the research, asking for potential participants who would meet the criteria of the research.

At the beginning of each visit, brief information about the research and the researcher was presented orally to the participant, who was then asked to sign an informed consent form. When informing the participants about the research, the research followed an overt approach. The participants were informed that the researcher is a design academic who is interested in sanitary ware product design for all ages and who wants to learn about body cleaning activities to contribute to future product designs. The researcher attempted to place herself in the role of a granddaughter, as an empathetic companion or as an intimate friend willing to listen their problems and aspirations.



Figure 1: The tape recorder used in the research

To remove all possible concerns from the participants' minds, the tape recorder that was used in the research was presented in detail to the participants before the narrations. The individuals were shown how and from where the machine records their voice and how the buttons work. A test recording was performed, and the recorded voice was played back to them.

The names of the participants and the names that they use during the interviews have been changed to protect their identities. Hence, pseudonyms will be used to identify the participants.

Data analysis

The grounded theory techniques described in Strauss and Corbin (1998) were used to analyse the data. Verbatim transcripts of the narrations of the body cleaning activity as well as field notes, photographs and semi-verbatim transcripts of the interviews and timeline collages were examined in detail using an iterative-inductive approach (O'Reilly, 2009) to identify the affordances and constraints of sanitary ware products from several readings.

Body cleaning narrations were first transcribed verbatim and then converted into poems using Richardson (1992)'s poetic representation method by using participant's words, tone and dictation and relying on poetic devices such as off rhyme, metre and pauses to convey the narrative. Poetic representation was first used by Richardson (1992) to emphasize the 'lived experience' and to illuminate the 'core' of the case involved. Miles and Huberman (1994) described Richardson's method as a focused and partially ordered display that brings the reader very close to a condensed set of data, has a compelling flow and forbids superficial attention by the analyst.

Narrations of the body cleaning activity were also converted into a timeline list of body cleaning subtasks for each participant in order to compare the impacts of different sanitary ware products on the body cleaning task itself.

Results

The narrations of the body cleaning activities of the participants have helped the researcher to observe the hidden layers of this activity. First, these narrations showed that religious acts such as full ablution, repeating certain subtasks three times or covering certain parts of the body are important elements of body cleaning. For the majority of the older women who participated the study, the task of body cleaning usually starts with prayers, continues with prayers and thanks, and ends with prayers. Although the interviews contained some clues about the relationship between body cleaning and religion, the 'live' narrations revealed all details. Akasya's body cleaning narration poem is presented in Figure 2 as an example. While performing her body cleaning with prayers, Akasya was continuously describing her age-related difficulties related to body cleaning.

First, I said: in the name of God, the Compassionate and the Merciful...
 Opened the faucet,
 Pulled the 'kurna' to myself; the water filled in.
 Properly washed my head three times.
 I cannot stand very long,
 My arms are getting tired,
 I did 'lif' as long as I stand strong.
 I thoroughly rubbed my legs, my other body parts and my dirt with the lif.
 My feet are aching;
 My arms are aching;
 Age is going up; life is something like that.
 Oh my God, make our ending good!
 Being old is so difficult; being alone is so difficult.
 There is no one to rub the back when it is itching.
 I pray to God for not leaving us apart from goodness and cleanliness...
 I am sitting on the chair,
 Because I cannot sit on the ground,
 My feet are aching.
 My God, I am begging to my God:
 Do not make me dependent, inshallah!
 The faucet is flowing;
 I am preparing the water for my ablution.
 Filling up the water now,
 It will be really hot;
 And I will turn on the cold water.
 First, I wash my hair three times,
 Soap it and rub myself with the lif.
 As long as I have my strength;
 Because my arms are getting tired, my dear.

And I say: ageing is quiet challenging.
I say in the name of God, the Compassionate and the Merciful;
I begin.
I wash that part of mine,
With three bowls of water with my hand,
Without touching.
Wash the hands three times;
Three to the mouth like gargling, two and three.
Turn the arms three times;
Clean the nose with the left hand.
Wash the face three times with one hand
And the other hand pouring the water.
Three times the arms;
First, right arm;
Then, left arm three times.
The head, give water to the ears and to the back of the neck
And finally, wash the feet.
By saying the 'Shahada'
Pouring some water to my head:
One, two, three. One, two, three. One, two, three.
The rest,
I am standing up,
Do not open the shower;
Handle the rest with the remaining water.
I am pouring it and say 'Thanks to my God'
And it is finished.

Figure 2: Poem of Akasya's narration of body cleaning activity



Figure 3: Akasya's bathroom

The sound of water as well as the silence and the sighs helped the researcher to see the whole picture of older women's body cleaning. Listening to the sound of water in these narrations revealed that many actions were taken by these women to conserve water while performing the task of body cleaning. These narrations also revealed the study participants' struggle with spending less time in the bath.

I am starting the deep shampooing of my hair,
(Water)
 Soaking my hair now.
(Water, turning off)
 Applying the shampoo and scrubbing my hair with it.
(Water)
 And I am doing the first rinse.
 Yes, it is still the first rinse.
(Water, turning off)
 Now, I am applying the second shampoo.
 The second one.
 Scrubbing up my hair.
 Still scrubbing.

Figure 4: An excerpt from the poem of Safran's narration of body cleaning activity

The researcher perceived that most participants initially had concerns about narrating their body cleaning activity. However, after feeling more comfortable with the researcher and understanding the research subject, the participants were able to narrate their experiences to the tape recorder willingly in a very informative way. All participants except Nergis narrated their body cleaning

experiences. During the researcher's visit, Nergis's health condition was not good, and the cleaning girl who helps her with body cleaning did not come for an unexpected reason; thus, Nergis could not perform the task. Fulya asked her if the 'machine' can record images, and the researcher clearly explained that the tape recorder could record only voices, not images, by showing her how the tape recorder works. Zünbül asked the researcher to 'ask her to do anything she wants' except body cleaning and narrating the activity to a tape recorder. The researcher did not insist that Zünbül do the narration but clearly explained the process. With the help of Zünbül's daughter-in-law and her neighbours, the researcher persuaded Zünbül to narrate her body cleaning experience.

Discussion

The narrations of body cleaning experiences allowed the researcher to see with her ears. They extended the researcher's abilities to explore and understand such a private subject.

The form in which researchers write shapes the content of their written text. While the form in which researchers are expected to write affects what they can write, how they present their research has consequences for their disciplines. Narrations in qualitative research are usually presented or are expected to be presented in the form of prose, even if prose might not be the most accurate way to report speech, as people do not actually speak in prose. Unlike prose, poetry allows us to present pauses through lines and between sections; therefore, it more closely reflects speech by building its text upon not only sounds but also silence.

Designers who read the poems presented in this research should treat the data set—and the person it came from—seriously because a 'poem' should be engaged with at a deep level. A poem is not simply a figurative transposition but is also an emotional statement. As Richardson (1992) notes, such a display 'breaches sociological norms' by ignoring defined variables, emphasizing the 'lived experience', illuminating the 'core' of the case involved, engaging the reader (and the researcher) emotionally, and shifting the concept of authorship.

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