

Exploring dating as an occupation for young heterosexual women in Ireland

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Abstract

Purpose – Dating is a meaningful occupation for many single people. The occupation of dating has transformed considerably in Ireland due to recent changes in Irish culture and the advent of online dating technology. The purpose of this study was to explore the complexities and intricacies of dating in an Irish context.

Design/methodology/approach – A qualitative research approach was used and data were collected using semi-structured interviews with ten heterosexual women (age 24–34) living in urban areas of Ireland. Data were analysed using inductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Findings – Dating did not fully resonate with their experience, but they did not have an alternative term. The form of dating was influenced by cultural, temporal, physical and virtual contexts. Beliefs about dating, fluctuating emotions and feelings of mortification because of the stigma of online dating created meaning for participants and influenced their use of strategies to improve resilience. While dating was not a preferred occupation for participants because of its arduous nature and fluctuations in emotion, it was seen as essential to fulfil the function of finding a romantic partner or partner in occupation. Connections between participant experiences and occupational science are discussed to address the lexicon of dating and the form, function and meaning of dating.

Originality/value – This study contributes to occupational science knowledge by revealing the occupational understandings of dating as an emerging and dynamic occupation in a rapidly changing culture of Ireland.

Keywords Ireland, Occupational science, Online dating, Co-occupation, Dating

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Dowries, fairy spells and matchmaking. These were just a few of the historical Irish traditions that underpinned finding a partner. The occupation of dating has significantly evolved from ancient Ireland to the modern-day, with remarkably rapid changes over the past decade due in part to online dating technology. More than 1,000 dating websites and apps are available, where terms like “ghosting” and “swiping right” can sound like someone is speaking another language to the uninitiated (Smith and Anderson, 2016). In 2016 the proportion of single people in Ireland aged 15 and over was 41.1% (1,544,862 people) (Central Statistics Office, 2022). The sheer volume of single people and the plethora of online dating technology suggest that dating is a relevant occupation for many.

The discipline of occupational science has called for an increase in research focusing on the study of occupations including in-depth descriptions and narrative interpretations of what people do, the contextual element entwined with human doing and the personal, interpersonal, social and cultural meanings (Clark *et al.*, 1991; Hocking, 2009; Yerxa, 1990). Clark *et al.* (1991) argue that occupational science should focus

on the “form, function, meaning and sociocultural and historical contexts of occupations” (p. 302). This article will examine the form, function and meaning of dating within an Irish culture at a time in history when there is rapid cultural change. This study aimed to add to the dating literature by exploring the occupation of dating for young (age 24–34) heterosexual women in urban areas of Ireland. The research question was: What is the experience of dating for young (age 24–34) heterosexual women living in urban areas of Ireland?

Background

History of dating in Ireland

The historical context of dating is critical as Ireland has undergone a significant transition in its dating culture spanning

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ancient Ireland to the 21st century. In early Irish society women in Ireland had little choice in their partner and marriages were arranged by families, with the bride's family paying dowries, matchmaking or by abduction (Ballard, 1998; Mierke and Rowland, 2007; Power, 1977). There were few options for choice or a love match, leaving some couples choosing to "run away" as a strategy to escape a marriage arranged by the parents (Luddy, 1995) and others to use divination practices, such as love spells and consorting with fairies, perhaps a countermeasure to the lack of personal control (Ballard, 1998). Sexuality and shame were also part of the cultural context that shaped dating practices for women in Ireland. Virginity was held in high regard, influenced by the Virgin Mary and women could face a devastating loss to reputation if they engaged in sex before marriage (Luddy, 1995; O'Dowd, 2016).

The 20th century heralded a shift from adherence to authority towards personal choice and as a central part of selecting a marriage partner (McDonnell, 1999). In the 1960s love or sex took precedence over family, religious or class obligations (Ryan, 2012). The sexual revolution unfolding in the UK and America influenced Irish sexual culture and some young people relinquished ideas of sexual activity as sin and "enjoyed sexual intimacy" (Ryan, 2012, p. 39). The legalisation of contraception in the 1970s had a significant impact on intimacy between dating couples in Ireland (Ryan, 2012). Despite a liberal shift in some policies, shame and negative consequences around sexuality were still present and "fallen women" were still being sent to the Magdalen laundries until the last one closed in 1996 (Smith, 2007). Despite these practices, attitudes around sexuality were shifting. According to the Irish Study of Sexual Health and Relationships, a national survey of Irish people age 18–64 ($n = 7,441$), in 1973, 71% of the population felt that pre-marital sex was "always wrong" and in 2005 just 6% of respondents thought that pre-marital sex was "always wrong" (Layte *et al.*, 2006, p. 10). Present-day Ireland is situated in, a "cultural framework that was significantly influenced by Catholic social and moral teaching" (Layte *et al.*, 2006, p. 9). As Ireland has become an increasingly multinational, multicultural and multi-faith society the influence of conservative religious values has weakened (Layte *et al.*, 2006) and a liberal political agenda has advanced, including the legalisation of same-sex marriage in May 2015 and the expansion of abortion rights in May 2018.

Modern dating has been influenced by popular media and advances in dating technology. During the last thirty years, the proliferation of mass media in Ireland, many of these international, has impacted social and attitudinal change regarding sexuality (Layte *et al.*, 2006). Popular reality TV programs such as *First Dates Ireland* (2016), *Love Island* (2015) and *Tallaforia* (2011) increased Ireland's exposure to different forms of dating. Technological advances have also influenced dating with an increase in the use of online dating in the 2000s. In 2009, 15.7% of Irish relationships began online and 55.7% met someone in person from a dating website (Hogan *et al.*, 2011). In 2015, one in ten Irish people were registered on Tinder's dating app (Jordan, 2015). Finding a partner was a blend of offline and online strategies, termed "networked individualism", as it veered away from group-based interactions (Hogan *et al.*, 2011, p. 2). Online dating has emotional implications as online daters might experience

multiple rejections (Alba, 2021) and 28% of online daters have felt harassed or uncomfortable by someone contacting them online (Smith and Duggan, 2013). The stigma around dating is still present but continues to decrease as more people have met online (Dutton and Shepherd, 2006; Smith and Anderson, 2016).

Mate selection and occupational science

The most notable occupational science research on dating has been conducted by Krishnagiri (1994, 1996; 2014). Krishnagiri (2014) sought to understand the types and frequencies of activities associated with each stage of dating for typical adults seeking a marriage licence in Los Angeles. Krishnagiri (1996) also explored the "assortative" characteristics for Indian Americans, examining a potential mate's desirable attributes. Krishnagiri (2014) investigated the activities, actions and skills required for those with a physical disability to engage in mate selection and finally researched the dating habits of older adults who are active and living independently in the community. Krishnagiri's research provided insight on mate selection in the 1990s for a range of populations living in the USA.

Following Krishnagiri's seminal work in mate selection, Man Hei *et al.* (2022) was the first research from an occupational perspective to shed new light on understanding modern dating from two diverse cultural contexts. Man Hei *et al.* (2002) explored how emerging adults from Australia and Hong Kong (ages 18–25) participate in dating activities. The study captured data on how participants meet their dates, how they initiate dates and what activities they do on dates. Pre-dating activities and communication were highlighted as important aspects of dating for participants. Man Hei *et al.* (2022) emphasised how dating is situated in a social and cultural context, where cultural norms and expectations influence how people date and the activities they do. The current study has the potential to yield expanded knowledge on the occupation of dating for occupational science and how this occupation is continually constructed over time by situating dating in a specific cultural, historical and social context.

Method

Design

A qualitative research approach was used to explore the experience of "dating" in an Irish context. The aim was to capture the participant's lived meaning and to understand how people make sense of their experiences (Carpenter and Suto, 2008; Merriam and Tisdell, 2016; Ormston *et al.*, 2014). The current research aimed to explore the experience of dating from the life-world of the participants and interpret the meaning of this occupation from participant perspectives.

Participants

To recruit participants, the research study information was posted on the closed Facebook groups for city chapters of GirlCrew that consisted of mainly single Irish women in Ireland and were located within major Irish cities. University College Cork Social Research Ethics Committee granted ethical approval for the study.

The history of dating in Ireland revealed a unique cultural experience for women in particular; therefore, this study focuses on women. The experience of lesbian, bisexual and transwomen, while also valuable, was determined to be a different phenomenon than the experience of heterosexual women because of cultural and social attitudes and history towards these populations in Ireland. The researchers utilized purposive sampling, consistent with qualitative research, to intentionally select participants based on specific purposes salient to the phenomenon of dating and the research question. Inclusion criteria comprised women between the ages of 24 and 34 who identified as Irish, single, heterosexual, living in urban areas of Ireland and actively dating in the last six months. A ten-year range was included because of the rapidly changing nature of dating culture. Participants included ten Irish women who chose their pseudonyms (Table 1). The participant sample was recruited to generate sufficient data to address the research question.

Data collection

Individual semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. Participants partook in one face to face interview approximately 60–90 min in duration, in a location of their choice which included bars, restaurants, coffee shops and participant residence. Interviews were conducted by the lead author in 2016. The interview aimed to elicit personal narratives of dating experiences as they are lived by the participants. The interview began by addressing the broad topic of dating, asking participants how they would define and describe dating, followed by a series of occupation-centred questions in below list:

Sample interview questions

- 1 Defining Dating:
 - Some people use the term dating, what does that mean to you? Are there any other words than dating that you use?
 - Assume I don't know anything about dating. How would you describe dating to me?
- 2 Personal history:
 - Tell me a story about your first dating experience.
- 3 Form:
 - What does dating look like? What would I see if I observed you dating?
- 4 Function:
 - What are your reasons for dating? What do you hope to gain from dating? In an ideal world, would you even date?

Table 1 Participant demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Duration of being single
Allison	27	Less than one year
Isabel	30	Two years
Marie	33	Less than one year
Claire	27	Three years
Betty	32	Four years
Julie	31	One and a half years
Sarah	30	Four years
Amelia	24	Six years
Anna	34	34 years
Cathy	34	Less than one year

- 5 Meaning:
 - Is dating meaningful to you? Is it significant? Has its significance changed over time?
- 6 Environment:
 - Who does what in dating?
 - What tasks are there?
 - Where does dating happen?
 - What objects or items are important or used while dating?
- 7 Temporality:
 - When does dating start and end?
 - Have you noticed your dating behaviours/how you approach dating to change over time?
- 8 Dating: supports and barriers:
 - Do you find dating hard or easy? Enjoyable or not enjoyable? Tell me a story of a good and a bad experience.
 - What skills do you need to date successfully? What knowledge do you need to date?
- 9 Values and Dating:
 - Are there rules/etiquette/unspoken guidelines around dating? Are there any rules you follow?
 - How do your own personal/family/religious/cultural values play a role in dating?
 - What aspects of dating are in line with your values, and are there others that challenge your values? If so, how do you reconcile this?

Interview questions were influenced by occupational science literature, using the categories of personal history; form, function and meaning; environment; temporal aspects; dimensions of dating; dating supports and barriers; values and beliefs about dating; motivations to date; and culture (Clark *et al.*, 1991; Dickie, 2003; Hannam, 1997; Hasselkus, 2002; Hocking, 2009; Jackson, 1996; Larson *et al.*, 2003; Larson and Zemke, 2003; Russel, 2008; Wilcock, 1993; Zemke and Clark, 1996). One pilot interview was conducted to refine interview questions and obtain feedback on cultural aspects of the questions and was not used in data analysis.

Data analysis

Individual interviews were audio-recorded. Transcription was completed by a paid research assistant. Personal information that could identify the participant was removed during transcription. NVIVO qualitative data analysis software was used to analyse and organise the data. Qualitative data analysis software can be beneficial for the storage, coding and organisation of data (Carpenter and Suto, 2008). NVIVO also allowed for online simultaneous use by the two researchers who were living in separate countries during data analysis. Data were coded inductively, using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework for thematic analysis was chosen as a method for data analysis because of its flexible approach to analysing qualitative data, as thematic analysis is a method, not a methodology and does not align with a specific theoretical perspective. First, the authors immersed themselves in the data with repeated reading of the interviews. Second, the lead author coded salient data segments that were relevant to the research question and phenomenon of interest to generate 82 initial codes and collapsed them into six initial themes and seven subthemes using NVIVO software.

Initial codes, themes and subthemes were reviewed by author two. Both authors engaged in multiple discussions about the codes and themes and were able to reach an agreement about the final thematic structure. The final four themes and eight subthemes were named collaboratively by the two authors, determining each theme's essence and identifying what is interesting about each theme and why.

Multiple steps were taken to enhance trustworthiness. The researchers acknowledged that the researcher is an integral part of the research process, and it is impossible to completely present an unbiased or objective view of the lived experience of the participants (Carpenter and Suto, 2008). In alignment with a reflexive approach to thematic analysis the authors engaged in ongoing critical reflection on their personal assumptions and understanding of dating throughout the research process (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The lead authors are American, and although both resided in Ireland for over five years, they are not members of this insider group of Irish women. While the first author did engage in dating in Ireland, her culture, values and beliefs around dating significantly differed from the participants. Journaling included reflective entries which enabled the researchers to identify their assumptions while remaining open to different perspectives and meanings before conducting interviews and during data analysis. Reflective audio memos were also made by the researcher after completing each interview noting what was surprising, confusing and what resonated with or challenged their assumptions and life experiences to enhance reflexivity. Member checking was used by sending the transcripts to participants to verify transcription and to ask clarifying questions. The two researchers reviewed each interview during data analysis, confirming consistent coding and collaboratively determining the final themes.

Findings

Four main themes and eight subthemes emerged, which illuminated the experience of dating for participants (Table 2).

Defining dating

The first dilemma that emerged from the data related to the term dating. Dating was a phenomenon the participants recognised, but that did not resonate with their experience in Ireland:

Table 2 Themes and subthemes

Main Themes	Subthemes
Defining dating	
Form	Temporal context Cultural context Physical and virtual context
Meaning	Beliefs Emotions Mortified Emotional rollercoaster Resilience
Function	

For me, I grew up hearing about dating on TV and for me, that didn't exist like that whole formal I want to meet up with you thing did not happen in my life. I understood the concept of it, but that's not what happened here (Ireland). (Cathy)

Participants felt hesitant using the word dating because it did not map onto their experience:

I suppose I wouldn't name it as much, you know. I think it happens more here, but we don't name it. I think it's more that you're seeing someone and then suddenly you're going out with them. I don't think we put the name dating on it as much, but I think I have the same idea of what it is if you get me? (Amelia)

Cathy felt that the term dating was aligned with the advent of online dating, stating, "I don't think I or anyone that I know would have used the word dating until the whole online dating thing happened."

"Meeting up" was a term used frequently by participants that involved the physicality of meeting in person and the temporality of convening on multiple occasions over time. Amelia described her experience as "repeatedly meeting up with someone". Sarah explained her experience as "going out with someone every so often". The intention was also an essential factor, with Sarah depicting her experience as "doing things with the person, hoping it would lead to something else". Participants did not describe themselves as dating nor did they identify an alternate word when asked. For the purposes of the interview, "dating" was used to represent their unnamed occupation.

Form

Dating is a dynamic phenomenon whose form is shaped by temporal, cultural, physical and virtual contexts.

Temporal context

Participants described dating in relation to time. Participants felt that dating for past generations was a more straightforward process with fewer options. Isabel mentions her mother's relationship history:

And I think that's part of her generation as well. You had a relationship, got married, had kids, and when you were done, you were done [...] she has never had the opportunity or the freedom. Back in her day, if you went on multiple dates regularly, you were a slut, and nobody wanted to date you. (Isabel)

The form of dating also evolved over the participant's lifetime. They shared that in their teenage years, they socialised with mixed groups of friends in shared spaces such as a park or teenage disco. In college, dating remained informal, with groups of people meeting at parties or college activities. As they approached their thirties, dating became more serious, with some pressure around finding someone with more potential for a long-term commitment. Cathy shared, "When I was younger, dating was just for fun whereas now it is more that I'm not doing this for fun; I want it to be serious and turn into something".

Cultural context

Dating in Ireland is deeply entrenched with traditional gender expectations. Allison and Claire referred to gender "rules" that can be helpful if you don't want to be too forward or appear desperate. Because of the changing nature of dating, the "rule book" is confusing:

I think there are rules for both genders, but I do think that it's expected that, for girls, the guys should be making more of an effort. There definitely is a

whole rule section that I don't understand, like the timing of texts. It's been an hour, and you should not text back straight away. You should leave it. (Claire)

Participants could decide to break these gender rules but subtly demonstrate that they are flexible and open to change:

I do break the rules sometimes say depending, but I probably wouldn't message a guy and say, 'oh do you want to meet again?' or whatever, but I may text them, let's see if they said they had something on. (Allison)

Dating comes with uncertainty, in particular uncertainty around gender norms.

Physical and virtual context

Modern dating is performed in physical and virtual environments, though not always simultaneously:

I'm on POF [Plenty of Fish] now. I suppose it's online now for the moment, but I'm just going to see and [...] it might happen that the guy I met would be online [...] or if I met someone through a hobby or through work or whatever, it would probably nearly be better or it might not though. (Allison)

Participants might prefer one method over the other, but for most, it is a mixture. Marie stated, "So I joined up in September to Plenty of Fish and to Tinder as well; they would be the main tools and then just out and about." Using both online apps and going to social spaces to meet people can be a strategy used for different purposes. Anna stated, "I went on it [Tinder] purely for the reason of meeting people outside my comfort zone [...] to widen my social circle a little bit".

Meaning

Meaning involves the beliefs and subjective experience that influence the way participants engaged in "dating". Participants experienced tension between beliefs and fluctuation of emotions, to which they adapted by finding coping strategies and becoming more resilient.

Beliefs

Participants simultaneously held two beliefs to varying degrees: Dating is outside your control and has an element of fate, and dating is something you do have control over and you need to take a practical and proactive approach. The tension between beliefs was evident in their approach:

I don't know maybe fate is telling me that 'you can't play a role in this, when the time is right for you to meet someone it will happen but then also there's another part of me going, 'well if you dated a little bit more your chances would increase so maybe you should give that a go'. (Claire)

Deciding on a partner entailed a balance between both allowing attraction to determine their partner and practical elements. Cathy expressed how feeling an attraction was necessary to move forward with someone, "But I wasn't attracted to them [...]. And he kept pushing for it and I just felt nothing for him. I thought oh this is getting awkward". Participants described feelings of attraction or "clicking" with someone, as an emotional signal that it was a good match. When asked if she believed in "the one", Anna stated, "Yes, I do. some part of me does, that there will be one person that it clicks with, you feel at ease". Others had practical requirements, including significant "deal-breakers" when deciding on an ideal partner, including profession ("not a farmer" [Betty], employed), lifestyle (non-smoker), location, personality (not a "weirdo" [Cathy], "good manners" [Allison], "courteous and not so rude" [Allison]), religion, height and whether they were looking for sex or a

relationship. Participants felt it was helpful to have deal-breakers yet be open-minded with someone:

I suppose a feeling more than anything I don't have a list sitting here thinking, oh he has to have this job or he has to drive this car, that's not the way that I will be at all. That's not the value that I put on this but someone that you click with someone that I actually, who I have feelings for basically. (Amelia)

Emotions

Dating left the participants riding the highs and lows of emotion, changing how dating was approached and performed.

Mortified. The assumption that people who date online are unable to attract a partner in person was a noticeable stigma. Strategies to avoid being discovered included using pseudonyms (Anna), removing profile pictures (Anna, Cathy) and lying to friends about being online to avoid judgement (Claire). Some participants believed that others would see them as desperate if they were online and it would send a message that they were unable to meet someone naturally:

I would be kinda embarrassed in a way [...] It's like you need help to get it [...] yeah, some technology to find somebody for you as opposed to met in a bar, it's like and happened naturally. (Betty)

Other participants acknowledged the stigma but felt that it is improving with more people being online. Anna mentioned that "Everybody's on it now. It was kinda like a stigma [...] but if everybody knows about it, it seems to be normalising".

Emotional Rollercoaster. Participants described emotional highs and lows when dating. Some shared the excitement of meeting someone new, the "butterflies" (Amelia) they felt and how it was nice to have "someone finding me attractive" (Cathy). Dating was also vulnerable and involved "more of an emotional thing [...] It's high stakes of it like I'm actually putting in effort putting myself out there" (Amelia). Dating involved a variety of emotional experiences, including: "overthinking everything" (Allison), "waiting and waiting and worrying" (Allison), "mind games" (Betty) and "personal torture" (Betty). Feelings could be hurt when they weren't reciprocated, as Betty shared her experience of "the rollercoaster where only one person is interested or like the person just disappears".

Resilience. Dating impacted the emotional health of participants, but they used strategies to improve resilience, such as taking a break from dating or using positive self-talk:

A little bit of confidence doesn't go astray, so like for me, I know I have to consciously psych myself up to go and be like, 'look, what's the worst that can happen? You can always leave'. You know all these things that I kind of reassure myself with before I go. (Claire)

The emotional impact of dating changes the person. Participants felt that they became more resilient and gained confidence over time while still experiencing emotional vulnerability:

I think it's your self-esteem how you cope because, at the end of the day, you reject people, and you get rejected, and that's all fine [...]. It's normal, but it's just how you perceive it, so I suppose it's more to do with your confidence. I'm definitely better now than I would've been years ago because I'm definitely more confident, but I would still be nervous going on dates and stuff because there is that attachment of vulnerability. (Amelia)

Function

The function involves the participants' purpose for engaging in dating. Dating was a means to an end, with the aim to meet a partner. Dating also provided time and space to make an

informed decision. Marie shared, “It’s nice to have the discovery phase and you know, but also, I wouldn’t like somebody to take that from me. I like to choose my own.”

When envisioning the outcome of dating, participants had different opinions regarding partnership. Allison and Sarah mentioned marriage, while the other participants had a range of acceptable partnerships:

I’m the kind of person who doesn’t want to get married, but I wouldn’t mind a partnership for a couple of years, then maybe something else, but I do like the concept of growing with somebody. That’s what drives me. I know how good it is when it is good. I know how shit it is because boys are pretty shit, but when it’s good, it’s really good. (Isabel)

The majority indicated their desire to share their everyday life with someone. Dating is an occupation to enable them to find a partner with whom to share their life and occupations: an occupational partner. Anna shared:

I don’t necessarily believe in marriage or monogamy, and I don’t see it as the be-all and end-all [...] I do want a partner. I want somebody to share things with. I want someone to go and have dinner with.

Their potential partner can participate in occupations with them so that they don’t have to go alone. “It would be nice to have someone in your corner in a way [...] so you could go to things that other people don’t wanna go to” (Betty). Having a partner also opened up the possibility of engaging in everyday occupations and planning for future occupations. “I want someone to grow with for a couple of years, someone to make plans with. I’d like to travel. I want someone to kind of share the bills with, save for the holidays, that kind of stuff” (Isabel).

The function of dating is to give time and space to figure out who would be a good partner. It is also seen as a means to an end, to find a partner whom you can engage in occupations with, a partner in occupation.

Discussion

Young heterosexual women living in urban areas of Ireland experienced dating as a dynamic and evolving process that was difficult to define. In this discussion, we will address four important findings that emerged: the lexicon of dating, meaning of dating, dating as a co-occupation and partner in occupation.

Lexicon of dating

By their very nature, occupations shift in their purpose, performance and meaning as individual, group and community activities situated within specific temporal, historical, social-cultural and political environments evolve (Jackson, 1998; Bailey and Jackson, 2005; Zemke and Clark, 1996). Likewise, new occupations such as posting on social media emerge as social-cultural needs and affordances for engagement change. Although dating was a term socially recognised by participants, it was not the preferred term to authentically reflect their experiences, and there was no consensus on an alternative word. It is also possible that participants felt uncomfortable with the term dating because labelling dating often implies a socially prescribed or normative way of doing things, yet they experienced an occupation in flux without clear socially prescribed guidelines. Therefore, the participants experienced walking a fine line between the socially understood phenomenon of dating and a new unnamed occupation.

Meaning of dating

The advent of online dating and rapid cultural changes in Ireland was experienced as a cultural revolution that unveiled the opportunity to meet up with multiple partners, expanded options for potential partners and increased the frequency of dating cycles. Although these changes brought new opportunities, the participants experienced a preponderance of uncertainty, especially regarding gender expectations. They embraced the freedom to have autonomy, yet the traditional gender notions lingered to the extent that they questioned whether online dating was “natural” (meaning in line with tradition). Despite the internal conflict, they continued with these new autonomous dating behaviours and, in doing so, re-wrote what they called the “rule book.” Dating is an avenue where women are negotiating their actions and enacting choices previously denied to them in Ireland before the late 20th century.

Participants wanted to find a connection, but online dating could feel like an interruption to this natural process as it involved a more practical approach and might indicate they needed the help of technology. While some of the stigmas around dating have decreased as more people have met online (Smith and Anderson, 2016), participants still feel “mortified” and adapted how they dated to avoid this feeling. The introduction of online dating can quicken the pace and increase the volume of potential partners, leaving participants to grapple with more rapid cycling of excitement, disappointment and rejection (Alba, 2021). To cope with this emotional distress and foster resilience, participants altered the form of dating by taking breaks, using positive thinking and reaching out to those who could support them without judgement.

Dating as a co-occupation

Dating is an occupation that always involves others either directly or indirectly. The findings of this study suggest that dating was experienced as a co-occupation. Pickens and Pizur-Barnekow’s (2009) definition of co-occupation was particularly related to the participants’ experience as “the nature of engagement in co-occupation involves aspects of shared physicality, shared emotionality and shared intentionality, embedded in shared meaning” (p. 151). The elements in their definition forefront the experiences of co-occupation for the participants in this study, emphasising physicality, emotionality and intentionality.

Shared physicality or meeting up in person and engaging in an occupation together was a key defining feature of dating. The physical “being with” over a cup of coffee progressed to the physical “doing with” while co-making meals as the relationship evolved. Shared emotionality or “reciprocally responsive to the other’s emotional tone”, was essential to keeping the momentum of the date (Pickens and Pizur-Barnekow, 2009, p. 152). Participants were energised by the excitement of meeting someone new and disappointed when there wasn’t a connection. Deciding whether to continue to see someone was based on intangible feelings of attraction or clicking with someone.

Intentionality stems from “an understanding of each other’s role and purpose during engagement of the co-occupation” (Pickens and Pizur-Barnekow, 2009, p. 152). The participants indicated that to progress from meeting up, the couple needed

to have shared intentionality to advance the relationship. While physicality (importance of meeting up) and emotionality (feelings of connection) were necessary components to advance the relationship, intentionality defined this co-occupation. The shared physicality, emotionality, intentionality and other aspects of this co-occupation interacted and functioned as a trial period to gauge future potential.

Partner in occupation

When participants were asked why they dated, responses included sharing daily life with another person. Although a couple of participants wanted a marriage partner, some participants expressed a longing for an occupational partnership. They wanted someone to be with and do with. Co-occupations are not only part of human nature but can also impact wellbeing, including providing fulfilment and decreasing social isolation (Pickens and Pizur-Barnekow, 2009). Participants engage in shared occupations through dating and search for a partner to intertwine their lives and create shared experiences. As Larson and Zemke (2003) wrote, “the architecture of our daily lives is not only a product of our own making but a complex interweaving of our life with others’ lives” (p. 80). Participants were looking for a partner in life and a partner in occupations. Dating allows a space to engage in shared experiences with another; these shared doings help make a connection and form a partnership, not only in life but in occupation. Despite not being explicitly named, dating is an occupation that is significant for the participants. This occupation is an emotional process, a shared experience and has the potential to find a future partner in occupation.

Limitations and implications for future research

Researchers could have enhanced trustworthiness and depth to findings by conducting multiple interviews over time, using multiple forms of data collection and keeping a detailed audit trail. Participants were primarily recruited from closed Facebook groups for single women in Ireland. It could be possible that recruiting from online groups skewed participants to be more familiar with socialising online and therefore online dating and therefore did not gather perspectives of those who were not using online dating. Another potential limitation would be that the term “dating” was used in recruitment. The findings revealed that “dating” might not be the best term and that dating is more linked to online dating, therefore the recruitment might have only attracted persons who are dating online. Participant recruitment did not include participants from rural areas who may have had different values in their approach to dating. All participants were heterosexual and cisgender. Subsequent research exploring experiences of dating from diverse subcultures, such as LGBTQ+ and polyamorous people, would diversify our understanding of this occupation. Representations from different ages, cultures and backgrounds would support the findings’ transferability to a broader population and application to an international context. An understanding of dating from diverse countries with strong communal values might add to our diverse knowledge of dating as a collective occupation (Simaan, 2017).

Conclusion

This research contributes to occupational science by both providing an understanding of dating as an occupation and also expanding the knowledge of what occupation is, in its form, function and meaning. Dating has undergone a significant transformation historically from ancient Ireland to the modern-day. In addition to social, historical and cultural changes, the introduction of online dating has changed the trajectory of dating so significantly that it could potentially be on the horizon of an emerging occupation. Dating was an occupation that involved a myriad of emotions and participants found ways to cope, adapt and be resilient in the face of such emotional hardships. The intention to find a partner in life and occupation impelled participants to continue in this process. Dating was an occupation that provided a pathway to partnership, which could not be circumvented if they were to find a partner in occupation.

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