

Occupational Terminology Interactive Dialogue

Occupational Justice

The concept of occupational justice is about recognising and providing for the occupational needs of individuals and communities as part a fair and empowering society.

Dr's Elizabeth Townsend, from Dalhousie University in Nova Scotia, and Ann Wilcock, from the University of South Australia, have been jointly exploring the concept of occupational justice, and encouraging others to share in the exploration through workshops run in various parts of the world. The term was first mentioned by Wilcock in *An Occupational Perspective of Health*¹. She drew heavily upon notions of social justice as discussed by Townsend². This led to their collaborative endeavours to raise awareness of the idea within the occupational science fraternity and the broader community.

Occupational justice and social justice are complementary ideas which share a common belief in the need for societies which are governed justly, by a set of ethical, moral, and civic principles associated with fairness, empowerment, an equitable access to resources, and sharing of rights and responsibilities. Generally, justice can be enabled by incentive, promotional processes which look to recognition, approval, celebration, and the development of meaningful experiences, as well as or instead of monetary rewards. Injustice is controlled through regulations, rules, penalties, funding formulas, policies, and other disincentives which prohibit unfair advantage, mistreatment, exclusion from opportunity, and domination by some while others are disempowered to act.³

There has been much written about the conditions required for social justice and policies which create means and opportunities. There have been calls for social change towards more equal distribution of resources to reduce gaps between the 'haves and have nots'; and institutional processes in national and civic arenas which set forth ethical and moral expectations of citizens. Many analyses have pointed to social discrimination or unjust social conditions which disadvantage some groups over others on the basis of age, gender, social class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or other characteristic. Social justice is an important concept because it draws attention to the ways in which humans treat and relate to each other, and to the distribution of material wealth and the opportunities which accompany that wealth.

Whilst social justice addresses the social relations and

social conditions of life occupational justice addresses what people do in their relationships and conditions for living. Occupational justice implies that societies value different occupational capacities and different occupational meanings. Rather than sameness, occupational equity and fairness demand respect for differences which arise in different, individual capacities, and different meanings derived from both personal and cultural influences. Occupational equity calls humans to match meaning with competence, value with capacity and opportunity. When taking an occupational perspective of justice, one needs to ask about occupational equity, occupational fairness, occupational empowerment, occupational rights and responsibilities, and other occupational expressions of justice.

The unfamiliar juxtaposition of the word occupation with the ethics and principles of justice may seem odd, but not when one considers that everyday life is characterized by occupation, by what people do in the broadest sense of doing, being, and becoming⁴. The daily round of work, play, rest, self care, and care for others, results in the growth or stunting of the future potential of individuals, communities and nations. Without occupational justice, the interpersonal interactions, communities, and the world experience inequities which touch the very essence of living. While some people may find meaningful occupations, others are relegated to a life in which they are unable to develop their occupational potential or to meet the occupational challenges of their communities.

Because people have a natural drive to engage in occupation to meet their needs, in so doing they have constructed, over time, and without particular malice or forethought, an unjust society. Unless the occupational nature and needs of people are recognised leading to the creation of policies that allow people's occupational nature and need to flourish societies will continue to be unjust.

These personal and social consequences of occupational injustice are not discrete. They are the foundations of health and well-being for individuals and communities. However, at stake is not only the reduction of illness or disability, which may be outcomes of people finding meaningful occupation, but the promotion of a notion of health broadly understood as the ability and opportunity to live, work, and play in safe, supportive communities in accord with the World Health Organization's 1986 mandate⁵.

Workshops about occupational justice have taken an

exploratory rather than a didactic stance, with a philosophy similar to the interactive tenet of this section of the Journal. Rather than providing a definition of this largely unexplored notion Townsend and Wilcock have asked participants what the term occupational justice means to them, if they see that occupational justice should be a subject of occupational scientist's enquiry, and whether it needs to be considered both separately from social justice, and as part of it.

Participants at the workshops have offered some interesting thoughts to be included in possible future definitions. These have included suggestions about 'enabling equal opportunity for meaningful and diverse occupations', 'redefining the way resources are shared and moneys distributed', and 'changing cultural values'⁶. The notion of 'the right to have satisfying, meaningful occupations', 'specific to people's needs', which 'nourish development of the mind, body, and spirit of individuals and communities' has been discussed, along with the concept of 'empowerment' to facilitate adaptation to 'changing occupational roles'.⁷ Also discussed are ideas about 'personal, environmental, societal, cultural and communal opportunity' for occupation which have included notions of 'choice', 'empowerment', and 'participation'⁸. The interconnectedness of individuals and communities assumed importance in the debate when justice was discussed in relation to occupations of choice as "an act of sharing in and contributing to the community"⁹. 'Political' dimensions of the concept have also been described as central, as were the 'reduction of disadvantage' towards 'equity in living'¹⁰.

On a slightly different tack, 'responsibilities' were linked to 'rights' in the discussion about 'acceptable or unacceptable occupations' according to the 'social and ethical standards of a community', raising such issues as the place of occupations such as gun recreation, drug dealing, or prostitution, for instance, within the occupational justice debate, when they clearly infringe on the rights and responsibility of others¹¹.

Throughout the workshop, participants pointed to contradictions and tensions between individual and community rights, and to the dilemma of seeking justice for individuals while simultaneously seeking the common good. Personal fulfilment, growth, and satisfaction were strong themes, but there was also a strong notion of the importance of community.

Within the discussions there has been a sense of the necessity for a social revolution to fully implement the action required to address the issues which are attached to the notion. Whilst most consider this to be a monumental task, overall there was a sense of excitement coupled with a wish to explore the concept further. Additionally there was a general acceptance that the idea is worthy of consideration, even in its raw state, and some of the points raised could be applied immediately within occupational therapy practice, for example.

In summary, occupational justice brings together two complex sets of ideas: one, the broad ranging ideas raised by viewing occupation as everything people do to organize and accomplish daily life; the other, the ethical and political ideas of equity - ideas such as fairness, empowerment, and civic society. Instead of a simple definition this concept can be introduced by linking equity, the common element in both social and occupational justice, with:

1. meaningful occupation;
2. recognition that humans are essentially occupational beings who develop through active engagement in unpaid as well as paid occupations;
3. nourishment of the human spirit and spirituality in individuals and communities;
4. understanding that health and well-being depend on satisfying physiological and socially determined physical, mental, social and spiritual needs;
5. political and organizational systems (national, civic, institutional) based on human and environmental as well as economic needs, designed to share material and other resources.

Weaving these ideas together, occupational justice can be described as equitable opportunity and resources to enable people's engagement in meaningful occupations. Meaning is embedded in occupation as an expression of personal capabilities and spirituality, and as connectedness with communities that create and reflect the meanings which humans, as occupational beings, give to their occupations. Engagement in meaningful occupation, then, appears to be a practical means through which personal and community transformation becomes possible. Furthermore, such transformation could be politically and organizationally directed towards health, well-being, happiness, and even the survival of humans.

Dr. Ann Wilcock and Dr. Elizabeth Townsend

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