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Editorial: WFOT Special Issue

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In May 2018, the World Federation Occupational Therapy (WFOT) held its congress in Cape Town, South Africa. The discipline of occupational science has a longstanding relationship with occupational therapy and the congress was an exciting opportunity to come together to showcase diverse perspectives on a shared occupational lens framing our understanding of the world, and our collaboration with the communities with which we research and work. Increasingly there has been a call within occupational science to consider more diverse perspectives; therefore, the timing was right to hear prominent, contemporary and highly relevant voices from the Global South, specifically those from the African continent.

In an inspirational keynote, Professor Elelwani Ramugondo (2018) launched this global meeting by urging those present to take the position of intersectional decoloniality, “highlighting critical signposts, where potential traps for re-inscribing coloniality, remain” (p. 1). She called for “contextually situated practice, [that] may be well placed to advance healing work or decoloniality, in ways that not only benefit individuals or groups, but can impact society” (Ramugondo, 2018, p. 1). As an example of how we can listen to, and work

collaboratively with, Global South communities, congress registrants also had the privilege to hear from Grandmothers Against Poverty and AIDS. This is a project founded by 10 grandmothers and one practitioner applying an occupational lens to a social problem. This project aims to meet the occupational needs of older women affected by the HIV pandemic in Khayelitsh—a township near Cape Town.¹ We hope that this issue provides some of the signposts Ramugondo referred to, by presenting selected critical scholarship that deconstructs hegemonic/Eurocentric knowledge, research, theory production, and models of practice, with the aim of informing relevant and inclusive context-specific practice.

In the first of seven feature articles, titled Non sanctioned occupations: Silences around activities framed as unhealthy, illegal, and deviant, Canadian authors Kiepek, Beagan, Laliberte Rudman and Phelan (2019) make an original contribution to critical scholarship in occupation science. One non-sanctioned occupation is theft, which can be a source of livelihood and meaning, and requires specific skills and capacities from those who engage in it. The authors explain why it is important for occupational science to address such a phenomenon to diversify perspectives on occupation. Further, the authors contend that related concepts such as ‘deviance’, ‘hegemony’ and ‘resistance’ are useful constructs to frame critical scholarship in occupational science. Kiepek et al. convincingly argue that exploring such occupations can enable critique of what is negatively ‘sanctioned’ within the status quo in society, to redress the fact that occupational scientists have been conforming and participating in such a restrictive view, by encouraging research and discourse that favour dominant social values, ideology and hegemony.

Another critical perspective comes from two authors from the United Kingdom, who explore the ‘dark side of occupation’. In a paper titled ‘In the shadow of occupation: Racism, shame

and grief”, Nicholls and Elliot (2019) join other voices that were heard among the presenters at the congress, who critiqued dominant neoliberal and colonial attitudes that have led to unhelpful constructions of knowledge about occupation. The authors discuss theoretical insights from psychoanalysis, critical race theory, and black feminist theory to explore their experiences in researching ‘the other’ (i.e., black research participants). They argue for ethical and reflexive practice that encompasses acknowledgement of ‘racism’ and ‘white shame’, which are a “less conscious or hidden dimension of being human” (p. XX). They encourage occupational scientists as scholars, practitioners, and members of the community to consider themselves activists and agents of change. Doing so requires reflection on failure, loss, and shame due to getting ‘it’ wrong. This, Nicholls and Elliot argue, might lead to a helpful process of mourning that will allow a more meaningful engagement with research, knowledge production, and communities occupational scientists and therapists work with.

In seeking to be ‘more conscious’ of what it means to be human and act within systems of power and oppression, Sunday, Ramugondo, and Kathard (2019) put forth the construct of professional role transgression. Drawing on narrative interviews, observations, and document analysis of occupational therapists working within specialist education in post-apartheid South Africa, they shown how the environment can shape who people are and what they do. Professional role transgression is constructed as a response to structural power and a form of occupational consciousness, offering a path through which all professionals can critically and actively respond within oppressive professional spaces.

Highlighting another aspect of the environment and an example of occupational injustice, MacAdam, Franzsen, and Casteleijn (2019) discuss the ‘Identification of occupations in a rural less-resourced community in South Africa’. In exploring the impact of limits on daily

occupations such as water and fuel collection in a rural setting in South Africa, the authors analysed quantitative data using traditional measures including the International Classification of Functioning (ICF) and the Occupational Therapy Practice Framework III. They identify that such measures do not account for the essential occupations of fuel and water collection in this ‘non-white’ rural setting. This observation raises questions about the applicability of such tools, which seem more suited to urban and Western contexts. The paper further demonstrates an empirical example of occupational injustices experienced by rural black women, more specifically occupational imbalance and deprivation, prevalent in that context because of resource restrictions.

The theme of injustice is carried through into the next article by Australian researchers George and Stanley (2019) in their paper ‘Exploring the occupational injustices of human trafficking’. In what could be considered another example of a non-sanctioned occupation, that is, human trafficking, the authors skilfully unpack four case studies to reveal the negative impact this issue has on well-being and the violation of individuals’ occupational rights through marginalisation, alienation, deprivation, and imbalance. This paper brings to light an issue that extends beyond the individual to become a social and political issue with global ramifications. It is yet another call for occupational scientists to become more politically active.

The notion of occupational deprivation also appears in Bartolac and Sangster Jokić’s (2019) paper ‘Understanding the everyday experience of persons with physical disabilities: Building a model of social and occupational participation’. From conversations with 15 adults with physical disabilities, living in Croatia, a key finding of “exclusion as a consequence of occupational deprivation and social marginalisation” (p. XX) emerged. The participants’

voices are to the fore in this study, and comments such as “You are actually a prisoner in your own body” (p. XX) challenge readers to think about how concepts such as occupational deprivation and social marginalisation are experienced at the individual level. More broadly, the authors contend that addressing issues of participation must happen across multiple domains including education, public policy, health, and social care; all areas in which occupational scientists can have a powerful influence.

Occupational deprivation and injustice emerge as powerful themes in this issue, and are again fore-fronted in a paper by South African occupational therapists Schalkwyk et al. (2019). ‘An occupational perspective on infants behind bars’ gives readers an insight into the lives of mothers and children up to age 2 years residing in South African prisons. The authors reveal the discrepancy between current policy and the reality of environmental structures that pose barriers to infants’ engagement in occupation and threaten their health and well-being. While supporting mothers and their infants to be together is, in theory, positive for all concerned, current practices suggest that infants are at risk of occupational deprivation, thereby impeding their development and adjustment when removed from the prison setting (potentially without their mother). Once again, the authors call for occupational scientists and therapists to be advocates for policy change.

Rounding out this special issue from the WFOT Congress is an Occupational Terminology piece by Parnell, Whiteford, and Wilding (2019), ‘Differentiating occupational decision-making and occupational choice’. Drawing on examples from Parnell’s doctoral thesis, the authors argue for consideration of occupational decision-making as a lifetime process through which people actively construct their occupational engagement. As the discipline of

occupational science continues to grow, it is timely that we are offered a new piece of terminology as a way of continuing to extend our thinking and research.

This is the first time that the *Journal of Occupational Science* has called for submissions for a special issue from a WFOT congress; and it is a privilege to be able to showcase some of original scholarship presented in Cape Town, exemplifying diverse and critical perspectives on occupation and the praxis of social and political change. That said, we are left with questions surrounding marginalised communities and nations such as Palestine, Yemen, and some parts of South America, who were not represented in Cape Town. We hope to hear such voices represented at the next WFOT Congress to be held in Paris, 2022, along with an even greater presence of occupational science research and potentially another special issue dedicated to WFOT Congress presentations. In the meantime, we continue to encourage the submission of manuscripts addressing research and examples of practice from the perspectives of Global South communities, such as women of colour, LGBTQ groups in the Global South, indigenous groups, and people seeking refuge—all of whom might have insights to share about how knowledge production and dissemination can be decolonised, and finding alternative ways of working to enable social and political change globally. It remains to be seen if the community of occupational scientists and occupational therapists in the Global North will whole-heartedly adopt such perspectives and praxis, and not only in theory and discourse.

End Note

¹ For more information about Grandmothers Against Poverty and AIDS (GAPA), go to <http://www.gapa.org.za>

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Figure Captions

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