

**Promoting critically informed learning and knowing about occupation through conference engagements**

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## Promoting critically informed learning and knowing about occupation through conference engagements

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### ABSTRACT

As occupation-focused discussions and applications of critical theoretical perspectives increase, attention must also be paid to how different spaces of knowledge dissemination, exchange, and production support critically informed learning and knowing about occupation. This paper presents the reflections of a group of international scholars and lecturers whose shared interest in critical theoretical perspectives prompted the incremental co-development of a series of conference engagements. We describe how our group came together, what kinds of learning experiences we developed to promote and support engagement with critical theoretical perspectives, and what understandings we gained through ongoing critical reflexivity about those learning experiences. Our discussion addresses two problematics related to conferences as learning spaces: inclusion, and sustained engagement with epistemic communities and ideas that may form through critically oriented conference sessions. We also discuss how enacting critical pedagogies and principles of ‘unconferencing’ may better promote critically informed ways of learning and knowing occupation than typical conference structures. The paper ends with a call for continued integration of varied critically informed teaching and learning opportunities at conferences, as a means of further encouraging diverse types of knowledge production, sharing, and learning about occupation.

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Arising from broader recognition of the limits of individualistic and Western conceptions of occupation (Dickie et al., 2006; Gerlach et al., 2018; Hammell, 2011; Kantartzis & Molineux, 2012; Laliberte Rudman, 2013), attention to critical theoretical perspectives has grown steadily

during the third decade of occupational science (Farias & Laliberte Rudman, 2016). Broadly speaking, critical theoretical perspectives (also referred to as critical social theory or the critical paradigm) have two goals: to illuminate and question taken-for-granted assumptions about

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what knowledge is and how the world works, and to transform oppressive conditions that perpetuate an inequitable status quo (see Farias & Aldrich, 2021 for further explanations and lists of various critical theories). Scholars have suggested that engaging with critical theoretical perspectives can make knowledge about occupation more inclusive (Kiepek et al., 2014; Magalhães et al., 2019; Simaan, 2020; Whiteford & Hocking, 2012) and generate occupation-focused practices that contribute to social transformation (Farias, Laliberte Rudman et al., 2019; Farias & Laliberte Rudman, 2016; Farias et al., 2016; Laliberte Rudman, 2014). Yet, the uptake and application of critical perspectives in occupation-focused education, scholarship, and practice has not been straightforward (Farias & Laliberte Rudman, 2016, 2019).

By offering opportunities to present, discuss, and evaluate new applications within a field (Jacobs & McFarlane, 2005; Ravn, 2007), conferences can provide important extra-institutional spaces to facilitate critically informed and co-constructed learning and knowing about occupation. Conferences have played a central role in developing occupational science (Clark & Lawlor, 2009) by further challenging and developing what are perceived to be the conditions of possibility, or boundaries, for studying occupation (Laliberte Rudman, 2019); yet there has been limited consideration of the ways in which conference presentations – and the structures that surround them – promote and bound particular ways of learning and knowing about occupation. Given the increasing interest in critical theoretical perspectives and their relevance for enabling dialogue regarding varied ways of thinking about and studying occupation, the time is right to analyse how critical theoretical perspectives can be mobilized through conferences.

In this paper, we (the authors of this paper) describe and reflect on the evolution of our own efforts to enhance engagement with critical theoretical perspectives through conferences. We describe how the idea of doing this work came about and detail the learning opportunities we subsequently co-created, facilitated, and experienced at four international conferences. We draw on our observations as presenters, educators, and co-learners, as well as feedback from people who attended our conference sessions, to

ground our analyses of conferences as spaces for facilitating critically informed learning and knowing about occupation. In particular, we reflect on the fit of traditional conferencing approaches with the motives and ethos of critical theorizing and praxis. Based on our experiences, we argue that attending to the structure and inclusive nature of conference spaces is key for supporting the reflection, (re)imagination, and contestation that is essential for critically informed co-learning and knowing. We conclude by proposing the need for varied teaching and learning opportunities at conferences as a means to promote diverse types of knowledge production, co-learning, and studies of occupation.

### **Origins of our Conference Engagements and Reflexivity Regarding Collaborators' Positionality**

We came together as collaborators through a series of in-person and virtual interactions. In 2015, some of us joined a small group of scholars, educators, and practitioners at the Canadian Occupational Therapy Association conference to share varied experiences with and interests in critical theoretical perspectives. The group discussed how critical theoretical perspectives have helped occupational scientists and occupational therapists to de-centre occupation from individual experience, disrupt the disciplinary status quo, and expand the conceptualization of occupation used in teaching, practice, and research. Drawing on personal experiences with infusing critical theoretical perspectives into various work endeavours, discussants at this gathering expressed the need for more colleagues to share in this effort. Discussants also highlighted the challenge of integrating critical theoretical perspectives with curricular content that frames occupation in ahistorical and apolitical ways or unreflexively applies middle class, positivist or post-positivist, and/or Western lenses (Kantartzis & Molineux, 2012; Magalhães et al., 2019). Shortly after this meeting, a subset of the discussants expressed interest in continued dialogue and connected virtually with additional colleagues – including some authors of this paper – who were unable to attend the initial conversation. This online dialogue included people from African, North

American, South American, European, and Australian regions who were working in diverse educational, research, and practice contexts. As the online dialogue evolved, this smaller group began to explore the possibility of creating a network, inspired in part by an analogous international network among physiotherapists (Critical Physiotherapy Network, n.d.), to connect with colleagues who engage with and take up critical theoretical perspectives in their work.

These group explorations occurred simultaneously with movements in occupational science and occupational therapy to understand occupation as situated—that is, as always shaped within and contributing to the shaping of social, cultural, political, and economic contexts (Laliberte Rudman, 2012; Whiteford, 2010)—and as embedded within power dynamics and dominant practices that privilege certain groups (Pollard & Sakellariou, 2014; Ramugondo, 2015, 2018). Mirroring moves by other disciplines, activists, and scholars (e.g., Abrahams et al., 2019; Behari-Leak & McKenna, 2017; Browne & Reimer-Kirkham, 2014; Cannella & Lincoln, 2019; Gibson, 2016; Hall & Tandon, 2017; Loisel et al., 2012; Pritzker & Lane, 2017; Walker, 2018), occupational scientists and occupational therapists had also begun calling for occupation-focused education to be oriented more explicitly toward issues of rights and justice (Hocking & Townsend, 2015; Sakellariou & Pollard, 2013). These moves evidenced a broader questioning of the status quo consistent with, and in some cases informed by, critical theoretical perspectives such as governmentality (Foucault, 1983; Rose, 1999), decolonial (e.g., Mignolo, 2011; Santos, 2014), and feminist theories (e.g., Crenshaw, 1989; Haraway, 1988).

Against this backdrop, we incrementally developed a series of presentations and workshops by participating in four international occupational science and occupational therapy conferences. We envisioned our conference sessions as having multiple purposes, including providing a means to determine broader interest in a critical occupational network; offering opportunities to learn about efforts to incorporate critical theoretical perspectives into teaching, research, and practice; and facilitating connections among people across the world who shared interest in critical theoretical

perspectives. Our intention was to expand our collective learning and dialogue with colleagues beyond our collaborating group. Our work was guided by a collective stance of humility and knowledge of how we were variously socially located through our respective intersectional identities and professional affiliations and positions. Accordingly, rather than viewing these sessions as unidirectional presentations, we conceptualized them more dynamically as engagements.

We conceptualized our conference engagements as vehicles for direct deliberations about critical theories as well as occupation-focused applications of them. We believed such deliberations could foster knowledge co-construction and shared, transformative learning among conference presenters and participants. Standing outside the constraints of formal learning opportunities (such as those provided in accredited degree programs), we saw conference engagements as having the potential to provide reflective spaces for analysing 1) which knowledges and ways of knowing, being, and doing come to be legitimised in occupational science and occupational therapy; 2) how dominant power relations foster particular constructions of problems that affect practices; and 3) what positionalities, assumptions, and privileges shape learning processes more broadly.

As we received feedback on and refined our conference engagements through interactions with diverse attendees, the topic of critical theoretical perspectives continued to gain wider support and recognition in occupational science and occupational therapy. More educators published their reflections on the occupation-focused concepts and models that are taught to students, interrogating how Western ideas perpetuate colonising agendas and constrain future professionals' abilities (Gerlach et al., 2014; Gibson & Farias, 2020; Hammell, 2020; Mahoney & Kiraly-Alvarez, 2019; Simaan, 2020). Educators also began to publish about efforts to utilize concepts such as occupational consciousness (Ramugondo, 2015), which are informed by critical theoretical perspectives (cf., Aldrich & Peters, 2019; Mahoney & Kiraly-Alvarez, 2019; Simaan, 2020), or describe inspiration drawn from critical pedagogical theorists (e.g., Castel, Habermas, Freire) in their

teaching (cf., Bottinelli et al., 2016; Celegati Pan & Esquerdo Lopes, 2019; Muñoz Espinosa, 2007). Despite these developments, occupational science literature currently contains few examples of efforts to directly advance knowledge regarding critical theoretical perspectives (e.g., Foucault's governmentality or Crenshaw's intersectionality) in occupation-focused learning contexts (cf., Walsh & Pollard, 2020). In light of that gap, we offer the following reflections on the development of our conference engagements.

### Description of Conference Engagements

One of the first conference engagements we developed was a 90-minute English language panel at the 2017 Occupational Science Europe Conference in Hildesheim, Germany (Laliberte Rudman et al., 2017). The panel included a brief introduction of the key premises and transformative potential of critical theoretical perspectives; examples of three research and educational projects that drew on feminist, postcolonial, assemblage, and governmentality theories; a dialogical exercise about intersectionality; and a space for discussion about how to incorporate critical framings and perspectives into various scholarly, educational, and practice activities. Attendees' questions and discussions evidenced both a positive response to this conference engagement as well as the need to include more individual exercises and group discussions to promote deep and transformative learning in relation to presented content.

Motivated by this positive response, our group developed a 90-minute in-congress workshop for the World Federation of Occupational Therapists 2018 International Congress in Cape Town, South Africa (Aldrich et al., 2018). This workshop again included a brief overview of critical theoretical perspectives and their contributions to occupation-based socially transformative work. The workshop also included two examples of how presenters used governmentality and decolonial theories to shape scholarly and educational projects. In response to participant feedback and presenter reflections on the previous 2017 panel presentation, the workshop also included activities designed to help

participants think about how selected critical theories might apply to their own work. These activities included: a) individual reflections on how participants' own intersectional identities and positionalities, both alone and as augmented by specific critical theoretical perspectives, shaped what they saw in data excerpts from exemplar projects; and b) small and large group explorations of decolonial, governmentality, and feminist theories via summary descriptions and an application worksheet. (Appendix A includes selected resources used to facilitate learning in this part of the 2018 workshop. These resources are provided as part of this manuscript with the hope that they may be useful tools for advancing readers' continued engagements with critical theoretical perspectives.)

Following the 2018 workshop, the group emailed a brief 9-question English-language survey to 64 workshop participants who had agreed to receive the survey. The purpose of the survey was to ascertain participants' perspectives on the value of workshop content and teaching and learning methods; the workshop's potential impact on attendees' own work (i.e., mobilisation of transformative learning into practice); and next steps for the burgeoning critical occupational network (see Table 1 for a list of survey questions).

Twenty-four participants completed the survey (a 37.5% response rate). Participants responded positively to survey items, with the majority finding the workshop very (52.17%) or extremely (30.43%) useful. Respondents' comments suggested that small and large group discussions, direct application of critical theories to practice (i.e., cases and comparisons, practical interaction), and differentiation of various critical lenses (i.e., presenting and discussing scenarios in relation to different critical lenses) were the most helpful for their learning. Some participants commented that even though they were aware of and already implementing critical perspectives in their work, they were inspired by the workshop's use of cases to stimulate reflection and discussion of the material. Other participants stated that the workshop motivated them to introduce critical perspectives to their students in diverse ways, including by: acknowledging different perspectives and ways of viewing knowledge during lectures; engaging students

**Table 1:** Survey Questions

Number	Question
Q1	How useful did you find this workshop? (1 being 'not at all' and 5 being 'extremely')
Q2	What aspects of the workshop were the most helpful to you as a participant?
Q3	What aspects of the workshop were the least helpful to you as a participant?
Q4	What will you start 'being, thinking, or doing' in your work as a result of this workshop?
Q5	What will you stop 'being, thinking, or doing' in your work as a result of this workshop?
Q6	What will you continue 'being, thinking, or doing' in your work as a result of this workshop?
Q7	How do you see the critical network moving forward/next steps?
Q8	Any other feedback?
Q9	Please let us know if you would like a handout of the workshop presentation (write your email)

with critical perspectives through cases or concepts; being more aware of their own voice and positionality as educators and sharing this awareness with their students; and reflecting more on the discourses and power dynamics that exist in classrooms and societies. Respondents' feedback, along with our own reflections on the workshop, also highlighted continued challenges with the conference format, including: the difficulty of facilitating nuanced engagement with complex topics in a short time frame; finding the right balance of overview, examples, dialogue, and application activities for participants with diverse prior understandings; allowing groups to take discussions in useful directions while also helping groups manage participants who dominate discussions; and presenting and facilitating in English without creating spaces for multilingual participation and discussion.

We shared our understandings from these first two workshops through a 12-minute oral presentation at the 2019 Occupational Therapy Australia Conference in Sydney, Australia (Aldrich et al., 2019). During the question-and-answer session that followed the presentation, we were struck by the differential ways in which our work resonated with audience members. Some people expressed that they had heard about 'critical' perspectives but were still unclear on what such perspectives were and wanted to know more; others in the audience described their own existing efforts to infuse critical perspectives in their teaching, research, and practice.

As a culmination of these experiences, we created a 20-minute oral presentation for the 2019 Occupational Science Europe Conference in Amsterdam, The Netherlands (Farias, Aldrich et al., 2019). This final presentation asserted that advocating for social transformation during

times of transition requires a foundation in critical theoretical perspectives. The presentation included a brief overview of core elements that define critical theories, two examples of critically oriented research projects, and a discussion of the implications of adopting critical perspectives in occupational science. The subsequent question-and-answer session surfaced the unsettling effect that critically oriented work can have, with some audience members' comments revealing a perception of critical theoretical perspectives as ambiguous, representing mere 'criticizing' for the sake of critique, and as potentially threatening scientific neutrality and objectivity through aligning with certain political ideologies or making knowledge more 'relative.' In the ensuing discussion, fellow audience members answered those comments by explaining that many different disciplines are utilizing critical perspectives as theoretical and systematic approaches to view scientific knowledge and the world from a historical perspective grounded in social reality. This last engagement reinforced the importance of and need for conference spaces as a means to constructively talk through differences and create space for thinking about, studying, and addressing occupation in ways that extend out from dominant conditions of possibility (Laliberte Rudman, 2019).

### **Considerations for Developing Critically Informed Learning and Knowing about Occupation through Conferences**

Our understandings about and reflections on the above conference engagements cover two broad categories: conference structures, and inclusion and sustained engagement with epistemic communities post-conference. First, we describe



how the structure of conferences as learning and knowledge co-production spaces shapes engagement with critically informed ways of learning and knowing. Second, we highlight the need to design inclusive learning activities that promote attendees' engagement during and beyond conference sessions. In sharing these reflections, we recognize that academic and professional conferences serve multiple purposes as vehicles for professional development, networking, career advancement, and learning (Jacobs & McFarlane, 2005). We also acknowledge that analysing conferences as sites of learning and knowing (cf., Ravn & Elsborg, 2011) raises broader questions related to who can attend conferences, whose voices are made welcome at conferences, and the privileges of participation in conference spaces (Henderson & Burford, 2020). Each of these topics can be addressed at length, so rather than discussing them in detail below, we contextualize our reflections by referencing deeper attention to these topics in other literatures.

### ***Developing critically informed ways of learning and knowing through conference spaces***

Henderson (2015) argued that a conference can be “a site that both represents what is ‘normal’ about academia today, and one that offers built-in resistance to the normalised constructions of academia” (p. 915). Although, ideally, conferences are spaces for learning and developing new knowledge, they are not always structured, organized, or executed in ways that support critical reflections and deep learning (Belliappa, 2020; Wiessner et al., 2008). Existing literature suggests that the structure of most conference presentations can limit participants' learning and knowledge development (Haley et al., 2009; Henderson & Burford, 2020; Kordts-Freudinger et al., 2017; Ravn, 2007; Serrat, 2011). Specifically, the typical structure of conference presentations (i.e., brief presentations by ‘experts’ to passive audience members) does not necessarily lend itself to activities such as critical reflection, personal application, and engagement with topics of politics, power, and privilege (Eakin & Mykhalovskiy, 2005). This structure, with its positivistic underpinnings,

largely supports one-way communication (Ravn & Elsborg, 2011) and reinforces hierarchies of knowledge and ‘who’ is positioned as an expert. In turn, such hierarchies can limit concrete opportunities for exchange among participants (Belliappa, 2020) and prevent knowledge co-construction and transformation that might support broader societal and institutional change (Sethi, 2011; Wolf & Troxler, 2008).

Our last two oral presentations in 2019—one of which was allotted 12 minutes and the other 20 minutes within the respective conference programs—conformed to this typical structure at the expense of the deeper engagement we were hoping to promote. However, we also saw a similar outcome in relation to our first 90-minute panel presentation in 2017, and we realized that considerations other than conference session duration need to be addressed to foster participatory co-learning in alignment with a critical approach. Typical conference structures can limit learning and reproduce existing knowledge hierarchies through both temporal constraints and spatial configurations that physically position ‘expert’ speakers behind a lectern apart from a passive ‘audience.’ In reflecting on the structures that shaped our various conference engagements, we identified a mismatch between our aspirational learning goals for our sessions and the ways in which we developed the sessions in line with conference structures.

In contrast to our sessions in 2017 and 2019, our 2018 workshop in Cape Town exemplified some principles of ‘unconferencing,’ which privileges active learning and participation among attendees (Kordts-Freudinger et al., 2017; Ravn, 2007; Serrat, 2011). Unconferences have existed since the mid-1980s as a means to tap into some of the most stimulating aspects of conferences, including opportunities for reflection, discussion, and exploration with other attendees (Budd et al., 2015). In their purest form, unconferences are events where participants collectively determine meeting topics, formats, and logistics, prioritizing flexibility and conversation over formal presentations (Budd et al., 2015; Wolf & Troxler, 2008). As such, unconferences have the potential to challenge the status quo of academia by dismantling expert-recipient hierarchies and provoking more critical



thoughts and discussions. However, characteristics of unconferencing, including the priority given to active participation, group knowledge sharing, and building on participants' knowledges and experiences, can also be infused within more typical conference program formats (Serrat, 2011).

Although we did not consciously design our 2018 workshop as an unconference, our use of individual critical reflection and facilitated group work signalled the infusion of unconferencing principles, and participants reacted positively to this structural change. Specifically, we reduced the time we spent modelling our own ways of working with critical theoretical perspectives and increased the time allocated to participants' reflections, individual and group collaborative explorations, and discussion; these changes aligned our conference session with the learning approaches (e.g., active dialogue and critical reflection on one's political and moral stance and positionality) that critical theorists advocate (Farias et al., 2016). Our use of active and reflective learning strategies also reinforced the signature pedagogies and best practices that are already promoted within classroom-based occupation-focused education (Hooper, 2006; Schaber, 2014; Schaber et al., 2012). Finally, we abandoned some of our planned material and activities when engagements with participants revealed a desire and need to modify and extend some workshop elements.

One benefit of moving toward critical pedagogies that align with unconferencing is that they support one of the ostensible reasons for having a conference, which is "inducting inexperienced members into the community of practice by making aspects of practice explicit and therefore capable of being apprehended" (Jacobs & McFarlane, 2005, p. 319). As described above, one of our motivations for creating conference engagements was to strengthen and expand the community of people who were interested in beginning or continuing to do critically informed work. To that end, we saw the benefits of our 2018 workshop structure manifested in attendees' engagement and excitement, their requests to use our materials in future endeavors, and their indications of interest in joining any network that might subsequently be formed.

### ***Designing inclusive learning that persists beyond the conference session***

Critical scholars have highlighted challenges associated with existing 'at the margins' within various disciplinary spaces, pointing to the need for connections across institutions and disciplines to build local, national, and international capacity for teaching and carrying out critical scholarship (Cannella & Lincoln, 2019; Hart et al., 2017; Kontos & Grigorovich, 2018). In reflecting on our conference engagements, those that created more spaces for reflections and discussions seemed to provide one way for attendees to begin to form such connections. During and after our sessions, participants spoke about being the only one, or one of a few persons, within their context who engaged with critical perspectives. Attendees conveyed gaining a sense of reassurance through meeting others who shared struggles in enacting critical approaches to research, practice, and teaching. Thus, critically focused conference sessions may help combat the isolation that scholars, educators, and practitioners can feel if their primary work environments reflect dominant ways of thinking and doing that sustain the status quo.

Although we did not initially envision these engagements as mechanisms to build a community of practice, such communities are recognized as an outcome of conferences (Haley et al., 2009; Jacobs & McFarlane, 2005; Kordts-Freudinger et al., 2017). As spaces to introduce, talk through, affirm, and deepen understandings about critically informed work, reflexive and interactive conference sessions may be especially useful for building epistemic communities of practice. The relational and transactional nature of learning in epistemic communities, especially those that are inclusive of members with diverse social identities, locations, and lived experiences, builds ties that have the potential to generate and mobilize critical ways of knowing that can challenge the status quo. However, equity, diversity, and inclusion are not inherent or inevitable characteristics of conference spaces. Conference participants and presenters bring diverse and contextually situated knowledges and experiences into learning spaces, and their different lived experiences and worldviews influence their interpretations of and responses to ideas

that are discussed. Acknowledgement of presenters' and participants' situatedness is therefore essential to engaging with the diverse perspectives that arise in conference learning spaces (Andreotti, 2016). Not acknowledging such situatedness risks implying that the ideas and applications presented in conference sessions reflect universal understandings.

In addition to acknowledging presenter and participant situatedness, it is important to attend to the systems of meaning and assumptions that accompany the lingua franca of conferences. Due to a tendency to position Anglophone and Western styles of communication as superior within occupation-focused conferences (Magalhães et al., 2019), participants and presenters who speak English as a second language may find it difficult to convey the full complexity of their understandings, and they may also feel restricted in their abilities to share alternative values or challenge dominant views. Several participants raised these points following our 2018 workshop, noting that discussion and application activities privileged participants who were comfortable communicating in English. Being required to communicate in a second language subverted these participants' opportunities to have their ideas equitably considered and legitimized within the knowledge dissemination, exchange, and production space. By not proactively developing strategies to address the official medium of communication, our conference engagements risked maintaining and reproducing power differentials and colonial legacies by privileging ideas and norms of the dominant group as 'right' or universal (Alasuutari, 2004). In reflecting on this issue, we recognized that creating authentic democratic exchanges to support critically informed learning and knowing about occupation requires going beyond translation to ensure equitable participation and reflexivity.

Measures to support these goals can include creating group norms to acknowledge diversity, power differentials, positionalities, and shared expectations for engagement; modelling of group norms by session facilitators; planning for multilingual discussion groups; or identifying a range of participatory media through which participants can contribute their ideas (Bellappa, 2020). The notion of democratic exchanges can be furthered by unpacking the

use of praxis as conceived by Freire (2018). Although our conference engagements occurred in privileged arenas accessed through international travel and study leave, they were grounded in broader commitments to scholar-activism (Piven, 2010; Richter et al., 2020; Tilley & Taylor, 2014) that are built on practical engagement and reflection on action, or praxis (Freire, 2018). As Mayo (2020) emphasized, democracy is a continuous process that moves beyond dialectical exchange itself to enact greater consciousness and liberation. It is the reflective and collective dimension of Freirean praxis that renders possibilities for authentic transformation of reality. This emphasis on reflection and collective transformation-oriented work reveals the fit of praxis-focused unconference engagements with efforts to mobilize critical theoretical perspectives. By coming together to examine reality from diverse standpoints, conference presenters and participants can co-create and co-experience what Mayo (2020) described as "temporary estrangement" (p. 459) of their own reality. In turn, this co-experience can entice individuals to access and transform their perspectives, taking into consideration the larger contexts through which they are engaged.

### ***Moving forward in the 'new normal' of virtual conferences***

The above considerations regarding conference structures, pedagogical approaches, and inclusive, praxis-oriented epistemic communities require further exploration and research in relation to existing occupation-focused conferences. These considerations are perhaps even more relevant in light of recent and widespread transitions to virtual conference formats beginning in 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The conference engagements we have reflected on in this paper all occurred in face-to-face conferences, and it is beyond the scope of this manuscript to address the rapidly growing evidence regarding best practices for virtual conferences. However, existing literature suggests that the concerns we raised regarding conference structures, pedagogical approaches, inclusion, and community building align with extant literature about virtual conferences (cf.,

Gichora et al., 2010; Roos et al., 2020; Thatcher et al., 2011). Given the likelihood that remote or at-a-distance conference formats are here to stay, future work in this area must attend to how critically oriented learning and knowing about occupation might be facilitated through synchronous and asynchronous virtual conference—and unconference—engagements. Lessons learned from existing virtual groups (e.g., the OS4OT Facebook group) may also provide fruitful directions going forward. In this future work, continued attention to issues of privilege and access will be necessary to ensure that technological and language design choices do not inequitably constrain or disadvantage people's participation in virtual conference and unconference events.

## Conclusion

Given the continuing marginalization of critical theoretical perspectives within many educational, research, and practice institutions, as well as the lack of support that occupation-focused scholars and practitioners may experience in trying to learn about or expand their understandings of these perspectives, conferences provide important opportunities to promote, encourage, and legitimize engaging with a diverse community of peers (Henderson & Burford, 2020; Ravn, 2007) around critically informed ways of learning and knowing occupation. As our reflections in this paper have illustrated, it is important to attend to how conference structures support or hinder the integration of varied opportunities that promote engagement with critically informed ways of learning and co-constructing knowledge about occupation. Through the process of collectively designing, enacting, and engaging in critical reflexivity regarding such conference engagements, we have become increasingly attuned to the disruptive dimensions of critically informed learning and knowing about occupation and its disjunction with traditional forms of professional training, knowledge, and teaching hierarchies (Galvaan, 2021).

Conferences can present opportunities for disrupting traditional knowledge hierarchies and dissemination practices and collectively exploring intersecting social categories (i.e.,

class, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation) and relations of power relative to occupation. Yet, institutions, the discipline of occupational science, and all members of an academic community are responsible for ensuring that conferences provide inclusive spaces for exchanging and mobilizing diverse knowledges along those lines. Moving forward, we hope our reflections will prompt other conference organizers, presenters, and attendees to join us in further exploring how to best support engagements with critical theoretical perspectives in ways that foster enduring, inclusive, and diverse epistemic communities of practice.

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## Appendix A: 2018 WFOT Workshop Resources

### CRITICAL PRACTICE IN CRITICAL TIMES: FORGING RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN CRITICAL THEORY AND SOCIALLY RESPONSIVE OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY

#### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK EXAMPLE – DECOLONIAL PERSPECTIVE

##### Key Focus & Aims

- To re-orient the geo-politics of knowledge and body politics of knowing in the way that actions are shaped
- To continue re-inscribing, embodying and dignifying those ways of living, thinking, and sensing that were violently devalued or demonized by colonial, imperial, and interventionist agendas
- To problematise hegemonic practices that privilege whiteness, individualism, and individualistic competitiveness

##### Foundational Concepts & Premises

- Knowledge is contextually constructed and diverse contributions to knowledge generation processes are necessary for epistemic reconstitutions (Mignolo, 2010)
- Coloniality of knowledge, being, and power maintains asymmetric power relations and social inequalities (Quijano, 2007; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2011).

The impact of this coloniality is evident in knowledge production and practices in disciplines, such as occupational therapy. Approaches to practice guided by the Occupation-based Community Development Framework (Galvaan & Peters, 2017) and application of critical concepts such as occupational choice (Galvaan, 2015) allows for reasoning in ways that may build decolonising practices

##### Coloniality of knowledge (Quijano, 2007)

- Knowledge as intersubjective, recognising that knowledge is produced and applied in relation to, with and between contexts and people over time
- Diverse contributions to knowledge generation are needed
- Questioning the purpose and relevance of applying and producing knowledge

##### Coloniality of being

- Questioning Euro-American knowledges and ways of knowing as being universal
- Recognising lived experience of colonialism and racism
- Questioning the way that extraordinary events are normalised as being part of the experiences of some people

##### Coloniality of power (Quijano, 2007)

- Maintains global model of capitalist order
- Recognise the influence of heterarchies of domination, such as race, class, gender, sexuality, religious, ethnic, politicomilitary, epistemic and linguistic forms on knowledge production (Grosfoguel, 2012) and everyday life

### Application to the Study and Practice of Occupation – Igniter Questions

What are the context(s) in which knowledge that you are applying has been generated and how do gender or racial hierarchies shape the occupational therapies that are implemented?

For example, what is the geographical, economic, and political position and background of concepts and theories being applied in research and practice?

How are occupations shaped through economic systems such as capitalism and how does this relate to perpetuating occupational inequities and injustices?

For example, precarious access to decent work; reasonable accommodation for mental health service users

How can occupational therapists/scientists apply knowledge to reflect a decolonial perspective and how may this address occupational inequities and injustices?

### **Suggested entry-point reading**

- Galvaan, R. (2015). The contextually situated nature of occupational choice: Marginalised young adolescents' experiences in South Africa. *Journal of Occupational Science*, 22(1), 39–53. <https://www.doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2014.912124>
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## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK EXAMPLE – FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES\***

### **Key Focus & Aims**

- To dispute and discuss the global underpinnings of gender inequality and its consequences for human occupation
- To critically consider the context in which females and males engage in individual and collective occupations
- To articulate several components of such engagement, identifying individual, collective, familial, economic, political, and global consequences/opportunities

### **Foundational Concepts & Premises**

A feminist theoretical standpoint seeks to expose global power disparities between men and women.

Usually, feminists distinguish sex (being female or male) from gender (being a woman or a man). While ordinary language uses the two terms interchangeably, feminists argue that these expressions imply different notions.

Feminist lenses challenge simplistic and naturalized accounts of patriarchal social practices while disputing monolithic assumptions about the sexual division of labour.

Feminist research enacts theory-building through disruptive methodologies and critically informed activism.

A thorough scrutiny of representation and positionality are key components of a feminist theoretical framework.

### **Gender inequality as a naturalized universal fact**

Contemporary scholars have been voicing the circumstances in which colonialism intersects with patriarchy. As such, Indigenous peoples and other groups facing colonial legacies have been producing transformative perspectives such as the African Womanism and Peminism, put forward by African and Filipina researchers. Across the globe, social movements have advanced their very own stances against women's subordination, which can be seen in Latin America, Middle East and Asia, for example.

While recent occupational science scholarship has exposed in some degree the relationship between gender and occupation, it remains framed within a narrow and biased worldview.

### **Changing gender power disparities through occupation – Enabling Occupational Justice**

### **Application to the Study and Practice of Occupation – Igniter Questions**

Considering the recent past, have we changed the way we articulate notions of gender within our work (research, intervention or teaching)?

How can occupational therapists/scientists contribute to advancing knowledge about the underpinnings of gendered occupation? What are the main methodological and theoretical issues to unpack?

How can occupational therapists/scientists enact social dialogues to give visibility to the gender disparities impacting occupational opportunities?

### **Suggested entry-point reading**

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colonialism and heteropatriarchy. *Feminist Formations*, 25(1), 8–34. <https://doi.org/10.1353/ff.2013.0006>

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Note: This worksheet reflects ideas and phrasing from early 2018 (when it was originally created). For more contemporary understandings, please see Gerlach, A. J., & Magalhães, L. (2021). Intersectionality: Feminist theorizing in the pursuit of justice and equity. In S. D. Taff (Ed.), *Philosophy and occupational therapy: Informing education, research, and practice* (pp. 209–219). SLACK.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK – GOVERNMENTALITY PERSPECTIVE

### Key Focus & Aims

- Illuminate and critique how everyday life (ways of thinking, being and doing) is governed
- De-stabilize ways of thinking, being and doing that are taken-for-granted – particularly when they result in inequities – so as to open up new possibilities

“As soon as one no longer thinks things as one formerly thought them, transformation becomes both very urgent, very difficult and quite possible.” (Foucault, 1988, p. 156)

## Foundational Concepts & Premises

### Governing/government

- Occurs through “the insertion of a certain way of thinking and doing within the fabric of everyday life” (Kendall & Wickham, 2004, p. 143)
- Encompasses all actions that aim to shape everyday conduct (‘conduct of conduct’)
- Enacted by various agencies and authorities (e.g., health care professionals, educators, researchers, policy makers) whose texts and practices aim to influence the actions of others

### Power as dispersed and productive

- Power operates through producing and circulating knowledge that outlines possibilities for thinking about reality, the self, and everyday conduct
- Power often exercised by ‘governing through freedom’, where people self-govern in ways that align with aims and values of agencies and authorities (e.g., take up lifestyles aligned with a ‘responsible’ approach to health)
- Disciplinary, punitive mechanisms enacted when people do not self-govern in expected ways (e.g., surveillance and blaming mechanisms directed towards people with ‘lifestyle diseases’)

### Political rationality

- Broad systems of thought that guide how power is enacted within specific socio-political contexts, tying together governing through diverse authorities
- In many contexts, neoliberal political rationality is dominant; emphasizes individual activation and responsibility and promotes austerity in social supports and services

### Discourse

- Key type of technology that shapes conditions of possibility for thinking, being, and doing
- Way that a phenomenon (e.g., disability, childhood, work/unemployment) is textually, visually, and verbally constructed within various types of texts and institutions
- Although not deterministic, discourses progressively come to be taken-for-granted as normal, natural, ethical, and ideal

### Governing through subjectivity – Identity possibilities

- Creation and promotion of ideal identities through discourse as a means of conveying messages to people about who they should strive to be as individuals and

as parts of collectives (e.g., the ‘good mother’ or the ‘responsible citizen’)

What is the relationship between the shaping of occupational possibilities, inequities, and injustices?

**Governing through occupation – Occupational possibilities**

- Creation and promotion of possibilities for occupation differentiated along various social markers (e.g., age, gender, citizenship status, ability status, ethnicity, etc.)
- Occupational possibilities refer to “what people take for granted as what they [and others] can and should do, and the occupations that are supported and promoted by various aspects of the broader systems and structures in which their lives are lived” (Laliberte Rudman, 2010, p. 55)

For example, think about occupational possibilities, inequities, and injustices for collectives such as refugees, persons with disabilities, or aging citizens?

How can occupational therapists/scientists re-shape discourses to enhance occupational possibilities for persons/collectives facing occupational inequities and injustices?

**Application to the Study and Practice of Occupation – Igniter Questions**

What discourses about occupational possibilities do occupational therapists/scientists shape and reinforce through texts and practices?

For example, what taken for granted assumptions about particular ‘types’ of people (e.g., persons with particular mental health issues, children with intellectual disabilities, persons with dementia) influence thinking/acting in relation to what people can/cannot do?

**Suggested entry-point reading**

Laliberte Rudman, D. (2010). Occupational terminology: Occupational possibilities. *Journal of Occupational Science*, 17(1), 55-59. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2010.9686673>

Laliberte Rudman, D. (2012). Governing through occupation: Shaping expectations and possibilities. In G. E. Whiteford & C. Hocking (Eds.), *Occupational science: Society, inclusion and participation* (pp. 100-116). Wiley-Blackwell.

Kendall, G., & Wickham, G. (2003). *Using Foucault’s methods*. Sage.

Nasedan, M. H. (2009). *Governmentality, biopower and everyday life*. Routledge.

Rose, N. (2001). The politics of life itself. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 18(6), 1-30. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02632760122052020>

Exploring how critical theoretical perspectives can enhance your practice

	What are some of the key elements of this perspective?	What does this perspective make visible?	How can this perspective enhance your current/future projects?	What challenges do you anticipate in using this perspective?
Decolonial theory				
Feminist theory				
Governmentality theory				