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The Promise of Occupational Therapy: Occupational Engagement

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The Promise of Occupational Therapy: Occupational Engagement

Abstract

Occupational engagement was first described in 1980 by Elizabeth Yerxa. Forty years later, the concept has no consensual definition in the literature. Despite a lack of common agreement, occupational engagement has been used to describe the ultimate goal of occupational therapy in several documents of associations and research articles. The opinion piece discusses the importance and implications of a lack of consensual concept definition for the profession of occupational therapy and focuses on five descriptions of occupational engagement in the literature. The word "promise" expresses the message occupational therapists send through their organizations, institutions, clinical practice, and research to society and stakeholders that can benefit from occupational therapy services. The descriptions of occupational engagement are presented to illustrate how the literature understands the phenomenon differently. The literature presents definitions that diverge in four meanings: (a) occupational performance; (b) occupational participation; (c) occupational balance, routine and skills; and (e) beyond performance. As a final consideration, this opinion piece highlights the need for action in exploring the concept of occupational engagement in the profession of occupational therapy and in the discipline of occupational science.

Keywords

foundations, occupational engagement, occupational therapy philosophy

Cover Page Footnote

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In this essay, I will discuss the implications of a not well-defined concept for the profession of occupational therapy, with a focus on the description of occupational engagement. I define the word “promise” to express the message we send through our organizations, institutions, clinical practice, and research to society and stakeholders that can benefit from occupational therapy services. I bring to the discussion occupational engagement in occupational therapy and how using the two words “occupational engagement” together illustrates different understandings in the literature. I discuss five descriptions of occupational engagement and group them into four different meanings: (a) occupational performance; (b) occupational participation; (c) occupational balance, routine, and skills; and (d) beyond performance. To conclude, I emphasize the need for more investment in exploring this concept in the profession of occupational therapy and the discipline of occupational science.

Why Do We Need Attention to the Concepts We Use?

A theory can be compared to an image that reflects or explains why and how a phenomenon occurs (Crepeau et al., 2009). In this sense, a theory is not reality but a conceptual system or framework used to organize, understand, and shape our reality (Creek, 2012). Melton et al. (2009) describe the importance of using theory in practice. These authors state that theories are:

Connected sets of ideas that form the basis for action. Theories explain the way things are and predict what will happen if we make changes. Because they provide explanation and prediction, theories can be scrutinized, debated, and tested. This is important because it is the way in which knowledge and understanding move forward, guiding actions by making them better-informed. (p. 10)

Concepts are part of the theory, and their description is essential to identify and define a phenomenon. A concept can describe a phenomenon in terms of meaningful categories and unique attributes (Podsakoff et al., 2016). Podsakoff et al. (2016) define concept as:

Cognitive symbols (or abstract terms) that specify the features, attributes, or characteristics of the phenomenon in the real or phenomenological world that they are meant to represent and that distinguish them from other related phenomena. Thus, a concept is a cognitive symbol that has meaning for the scientific community that uses it. Moreover, the fact that it specifies the attributes or features that define it suggests that it is the combination of these features that allows one to distinguish the concept from other, related concepts. (p. 61)

In occupational therapy, we can further develop concepts through research and constant feedback from practice by defining them precisely and accurately. By doing this, we build “blocks of theory” (Podsakoff et al., 2016, p. 165). The profession’s development in research and practice can be compromised if there is a lack of clarity or no consensus. Nevertheless, we understand that: “clear conceptual definitions are essential for scientific progress and provide a concrete set of steps that researchers can follow to improve their conceptual definitions” (Podsakoff et al., 2016, p. 59).

The discussion around a concept reflects on the professional discourse, international dialogue, and in a broad sense, development of theories, conceptual models of practice, frameworks, and measurements related to core values in the profession and therapy outcomes.

Clarifying “The Promise”

Why a promise? According to the Oxford English Dictionary (n.d.), a promise can assume different meanings, such as (a) “to give verbal assurance of;” (b) “a declaration or assurance made to another person

(usually with respect to the future), stating a commitment to give, do, or refrain from doing a specific thing or act, or guaranteeing that a specified thing will or will not happen;” (c) “to engage to do or give something.” Using these definitions from the dictionary, I can describe here that a promise is what occupational therapy contributes to and can facilitate in people’s lives and their communities based on what is important to them.

Furthermore, in the 1968 Eleanor Clarke Slagle Lecture “Facilitating Growth and Development: The Promise of Occupational Therapy,” Lela Llorens affirmed on several premises that occupational therapy could facilitate “growth experiences” (Llorens, 2017, p. 125). I understand that we grow with our experiences and are shaped by what we do. In this direction, I believe occupational engagement can facilitate humankind’s growth and development as occupational beings. However, in this article, I will use the word “promise” to reflect on what we say we do, how we conceptualize occupational therapy’s ultimate goals, and how we achieve these goals. In other words, what occupational therapy delivers as a promise. If engagement is a promise, we need to understand what we are promising, starting by defining the concept.

Occupational Engagement in Occupational Therapy Literature

Working as a detective to explore the ontology of occupational engagement, I found in the literature that the American occupational therapist and scholar Elizabeth Yerxa (see Figure 1) named and described the concept of “engagement in occupation” primarily.

The literature identifies at least 26 descriptions of occupational engagement (Black et al., 2019). To avoid being over extensive, I explore five descriptions to address how the descriptions diverge in meaning. These five descriptions are based on the criteria of the most common descriptions identified in the study by Black et al. (2019) and also in citations on the following databases: Polatajko et al. (2007): book chapter, 310 citations on Google Scholar; Bejerholm and Eklund (2007): article, 215 citations on PubMed; Jonsson et al. (2001): article, 199 citations on PubMed; Yerxa (1980): article, 92 citations on PubMed; and Morris and Cox (2017): article, 40 citations on PubMed.

The first concept proposed by Yerxa (1980) has objective, observable elements and subjective reactions when someone is doing something, so it is related to occupational performance: “that engagement in occupation encompasses not only the observable performance of individuals but also their subjective reactions to the activity and objects with which they are occupied” (Yerxa, 1980, p. 534).

A second concept for analysis is from Morris and Cox (2017), proposing a framework for occupational engagement. The concept informs positive and negative consequences of how a person perceives of their participation. By emphasizing participation in people’s values, engagement is associated with occupational participation:

Occupational engagement is positioned within a framework of personal value and perceived consequences to participation. Occupational engagement is the involvement in an occupation with current positive personal value attached to it. Engaging occupations require more involvement than those occupations that just interest the individual, but not as much as those that absorb them. Occupational engagement is a fluctuating state influenced by complex and multiple internal and external factors. The person will perceive positive or negative consequences to participation which

Figure 1
Elizabeth Yerxa



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may change over time in response to feedback from social, cultural, and physical environments. Positive well-being occurs when people to [sic] participate in occupations with both positive personal value and positive perceived consequences for both the individual and the society in which they live. (Morris & Cox, p. 160)

Creek (2012) offers a complementary definition to the concept of occupational engagement above and affirms it is possible to participate and not be totally engaged; however, for this author, “engagement is not possible without participation” (p. 43). A third comprehension of occupational engagement comes from the study of Bejerholm and Eklund (2007). These authors describe the concept of occupational engagement as “the extent to which a person has a balanced rhythm of activity and rest, a variety and range of meaningful occupations and routines, and the ability to move around in society and interact socially” (2007, p. 21).

The raised concept associates occupational engagement with having occupational balance (the rhythm of activity and rest), routines (pattern of occupations), and social interactions (skills). It comprises not only participation but a continuum, suggesting that this concept is not a moment of involvement with an occupation.

The fourth concept is based on a Swedish longitudinal study of workers and their transition to retirement. The concept emerged from participants’ occupational narratives and addresses engagement as both participation and performance, but it differentiates occupational engagement as a special type of occupation that focuses on the individual experience:

An occupational perspective on life satisfaction suggests the importance of considering engaging occupations that provide meaning, challenge, regularity, and social interaction (. . . .) Instead of an objective outsider’s view, the concept of engaging occupation stresses the individual experience of a certain occupation regardless of whether it is performed in the area of work, leisure, or ADL (Jonsson et al., 2001, p. 430).

In addition, the authors of this concept propose six common features of occupational engagement: positive meaning, intensity, coherent set of interrelated activities, beyond personal pleasure, occupational community (connected to others with the same interest), and analogs to work associated with commitment: “although the engaging occupation is ordinarily no longer done as a means of earning a living, it is done with the same kind of seriousness and commitment formerly given to work” (Jonsson et al., 2001, p. 429).

Last but not least important is the description of the Canadian Model of Occupational Performance and Engagement: “Further, humans frequently engage in occupations without performing them (. . . .) To engage is to occupy oneself or someone else” (Polatajko et al., 2007, p. 24). In this sense, occupational engagement is beyond occupational performance; a person can engage without performing.

To summarize, these five descriptions can be grouped to illustrate four understandings of occupational engagement in occupational therapy literature related to (a) occupational performance (Jonsson et al., 2001; Yerxa, 1980); (b) occupational participation (Creek, 2012; Jonsson et al., 2001; Morris & Cox, 2017); (c) balance, routine, and social interaction (Bejerholm & Eklund, 2007); and (d) beyond performance (Polatajko et al., 2007).

One can argue that Concepts 1 and 2 are the same. If this hypothesis is true, there is a terminology problem where participation and performance are synonyms. I understand that this can vary across the theory. For example, in the Model of Human Occupation, participation is defined broadly as work, play,

and activities of daily living. At the same time, performance is “larger chunks of actions that make up a coherent undertaking” (Kielhofner, 2008, p. 101), for example, cooking, paying a bill, playing the piano, and so on. To exemplify the implications of the difference between participation and performance on occupational engagement, we can hypothesize two things: (a) If we consider participation as a broad term, then engagement is represented by the continuum of engagement, for example, someone working for years as a barber; (b) If we consider occupational performance, engagement is the moment-to-moment with a particular occupation on time and space, for example, a musician enjoying playing at a music hall.

The complexity of the concept of engagement is not only present in the occupational therapy arena. Western definitions like hegemonic Models of Practice, Practice Frameworks, and current evidence published are not consensual on the definition of occupational engagement. As a consequence, it reflects how this concept will be employed differently in practice and research. However, the diversity of understandings around engagement can suggest that occupational engagement is a concept with several attributes. Ultimately, Bond et al. (2020) recognize, based on studies on student engagement, that no standard definition or terminology is resulting in inconsistencies, such as disagreement around the components (e.g., affective, cognitive, behavioral) and confusion of motivation as equated to engagement (Bond et al., 2020).

Moreover, the review identified that most of the studies of student engagement come from the United States of America and the United Kingdom and less from the Global South (Bond et al., 2020). In a similar way, all concepts from occupational engagement in occupational therapy are from the United States (Yerxa, 1980), United Kingdom (Morris & Cox, 2017), Canada (Polatajko et al., 2007), and Sweden (Bejerholm & Eklund, 2007; Jonsson et al., 2001). No discussion from the Global South is identified in the literature, perhaps because Southern epistemologies about occupational therapy are not under the paradigm of occupation as proposed by Kielhofner (2009) and where engagement is presented. Instead, the Global South is possibly under a social paradigm toward critical perspectives, such as the emerging social occupational therapy, as is the case of Brazil, advocating for actions against social injustices and the exclusion of marginalized populations (Malfitano et al., 2014).

Two articles support the need for clarification around the use of occupational engagement in the occupational therapy literature. Black et al. (2019) raised concern about how “the lack of consistency in definitions and measurement of occupational engagement presents significant issues for occupational therapy practice and evaluation” (p. 271). Suppose we do not know how to define precisely what occupational engagement is, its conditions to happen, attributes, and features. In that case, we probably will struggle to identify engagement issues to address in our interventions, measure engagement levels, and the continuum across time (Cruz et al., 2023). Kennedy and Davis (2017) add that although occupational engagement has been considered a core construct, the broad concepts and confused descriptions are problematic. They support that clarifying occupational engagement can help therapists “to explicate the nature of their practice” (p. 98).

Final Considerations

The World Federation of Occupational Therapists states that the mission of the profession is to promote health and well-being through occupations, supporting people’s occupational engagement:

Occupational therapy is a client-centred health profession concerned with promoting health and well-being through occupation. The primary goal of occupational therapy is to enable people to participate in the activities of everyday life. Occupational therapists achieve this outcome by

working with people and communities to enhance their ability to engage in the occupations they want to, need to, or are expected to do, or by modifying the occupation or the environment to better support their occupational engagement. (WFOT, 2012)

Suppose our primary goal is participation, and we need to support or facilitate engagement. In that case, the concept of occupational engagement must be understood in-depth: to inform our practice, our evaluation, and our outcomes on health and well-being. Moreover, although occupational engagement is related to health and well-being, the mechanisms in which engagement promotes these aspects are not fully understood, as pointed out by Reid (2011).

I recommend some studies that can be part of the agenda of occupational scientists to clarify occupational engagement. Occupational science can have a prolific contribution by investigating the phenomenon of occupational engagement. From the occupational science perspective, studies of occupational engagement can focus on clarifying the concept and its attributes with an investment in qualitative research methods and designs “to employ creative new research approaches” (Yerxa, 2020, p. 19). I agree with Jonsson (2008) that one possibility is to conduct empirical studies that consider people’s experiences rather than classify them based on the traditional categorizations of occupations, for example, ADL, leisure, or work.

Studies interviewing occupational therapists can contribute to illuminating what occupational engagement is, as the example of the study by Kennedy and Davis (2017). However, the possible findings might be related to interventions or specific clients, groups, and communities with which these therapists work. In this sense, a broad study with different therapists can contribute to describing the concept and its attributes, generating evidence for occupational therapy practice.

Furthermore, I recognize that this opinion piece has limitations because of the discussion of only five descriptions of occupational engagement. However, this paper can be seen as a call for action for future debates in the arena of occupational therapy internationally.

Finally, we need to reflect that our promise of enabling participation in everyday life will not be achieved if we do not address engagement issues. This is why I titled this opinion piece occupational engagement as the promise of occupational therapy.

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