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## Embracing and Enacting an 'Occupational Imagination': Occupational Science as Transformative

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Embracing and enacting an 'occupational imagination': Occupational science as transformative

Debbie Laliberte Rudman

Key words: praxis, sociological imagination, radical sensibility, socio-political, dualisms

## Abstract

This paper addresses the question of how occupational science can move forward in its development as a socially and politically engaged discipline. It is argued that a transformative approach to scholarship needs to be embraced, and that enacting such an approach requires a radical reconfiguration of the sensibility underpinning occupational science. After reviewing the key defining characteristics of a transformative paradigmatic approach, key insights regarding how to foster a radical sensibility in occupational science are drawn from C. Wright Mills (1959) conceptualization of ‘the sociological imagination’. Embracing an occupational imagination premised on these key insights would foster the transformative potential of occupational science by providing a sensibility that challenges scholars to make critical, creative connections between the personal, occupational ‘troubles’ of individuals and public ‘issues’ related to historical and social forces. Five key areas of action crucial to attend to in order to move forward in cultivating an ‘occupational imagination’ are outlined, including: pushing beyond the limits of dualistic thinking; attending to the socio-political nature of occupation; addressing the moral and political values that shape and energize occupational science work; questioning the familiar, and exploring the unfamiliar; and, engaging in innovative interdisciplinary syntheses.

Consistent with directions I have taken in my work in occupational science, I situate this lecture in the growing body of work highlighting the importance of enhancing our commitment and capacity to address key social problems of relevance to occupation (Angell, 2012; Hocking & Whiteford, 2012). Overall, I invite and challenge occupational scientists to be imaginative in moving forward with a transformative agenda that addresses issues of occupational rights, equity and justice as “every great advance in science has issued from a new audacity of imagination” (Dewey, 1929 in Boydston, 1984, p.247).

In preparing this lecture, and article, the guiding question was: how can occupational science move forward in its development as a socially and politically engaged discipline? My answers to this guiding question are built upon two key premises: i) for occupational science to make contributions to addressing social problems of relevance to occupation it is vital that scholars embrace and enact a transformative approach; and, ii) moving in a transformative direction is not simply about changing or expanding theories or methodologies, but rather requires a radical re-thinking of the sensibility underpinning occupational science.

To inform this lecture, I read work from a variety of disciplines that addressed the question of how to stimulate transformative research. In this process, I was drawn to the foundational work of American scholar C. Wright Mills, particularly his conceptualization of social science put forth in ‘The Sociological Imagination’ in 1959. Building on Mills’ work, as well as contemporary critical scholars who locate their work within a transformative paradigm, my central argument is that enacting an intent to be transformative requires a radical reconfiguration of the sensibility underpinning occupational science work, that is, of the modes of thought and orientation to both science and occupation that set the conditions of possibility for thinking about and doing occupational science. In turn, my aims, in this paper, are to both enrich dialogue about

the ‘use’ of occupational science research, and also to provoke the radical sensibility, or imagination, of occupational science.

To achieve these aims, I first review what I mean by a transformative approach, and then display how a call for such an approach has been forwarded within recent occupational science literature. I then present aspects of Mill’s work, particularly as published in ‘The Sociological Imagination’ (1959), which provide guideposts for why and how to provoke and enact a radical sensibility, or occupational imagination, within occupational science. After presenting some initial ideas regarding the contours of such an occupational imagination, I outline five keys areas of action to spark such an imagination. I end by emphasizing the importance of continuous critical reflexivity regarding why and how transformative work is done, and invite readers to engage in imagining the potential of an occupational imagination.

#### Transformative paradigmatic approach: Key defining features

When I began my graduate studies in the 1990s, one of the first clear messages I heard, conveyed I think to help reduce my anxiety about what to study, was to keep things in perspective by realizing that my one study would not change the world or even really solve the problem I was concerned with. This message is commensurate with a particular scientific paradigm, often labelled positivist or post-positivist, which embodies an incremental, building block notion of scientific knowledge, leaving the work of application to others (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011). As a foundational theorist in the development of a critically-informed transformative approach to research, Mills existed in the post-World War II period of social science. This period was characterized by the ascendancy of logical positivism, leading to narrow boundaries of what was considered ‘scientific’ and a clear separation between scientists and advocates (Mir & Mir, 2002). In this context, Mills (1959) boldly argued that positioning social science as disinterested in or incapable of changing the world was a retreat away from it

ethical and political responsibilities. In turn, he proposed that social science frame itself as a resource for social change, pointing out that: “The future of human affairs is not merely some set of variables to be predicted. The future is what is to be decided – within the limits, to be sure, of historical possibility. But this possibility is not fixed.” (p.174).

The idea of science as a resource for social change was a radical idea within Mills’ temporal, social and political context and, not surprisingly, his work was not widely accepted in academia. Indeed, at times, his work was publicly critiqued as excessively radical, anti-establishment and rhetorical by his sociological contemporaries (Gane & Back, 2012; Summer, 2008). However, this key notion – that research is inherently about and for social change - subsequently informed many of the rights movements of the 1960s as well as theorists who sought to develop socially engaged scholarship (Mir & Mir, 2002; Summer, 2008). Subsequently, this key notion has been taken up by scholars in a multiplicity of social sciences, whom, commensurate with authors such as Denzin and Giardina (2009) and Mertens, Sullivan and Stace (2011), I group together as calling for a critically-informed transformative paradigmatic basis for the social sciences.

At its core, the transformative paradigm is a particular answer to the questions of: what is the role of the researcher in contributing to the resolution of social problems, and how can science ‘be of use’? (Fine, 2006; Mertens, 2010). It emphasizes the radical potential of research, seeking to “be unruly, disruptive, critical, and dedicated to the goals of justice and equity” (Denzin & Giardina, 2009, p.29). Based on the premise that all research can contribute to societal reproduction or transformation, it is argued that even research which claims to be neutral has effects as “doing nothing is taking action” (Payton, 1984, p.395) that often supports the status quo. On the contrary, researchers operating in such a paradigm consciously and transparently work against social structures and systems that result in oppression and fail to attend to the

diversity in opportunities associated with differential access to power and privilege, associated with age, race, gender, disability and other social conditions (Mertens et al., 2011). As such, research is framed as radical in the sense that a key aim is to challenge power relations contributing to oppression (Canella & Lincoln, 2011; Denzin & Giardina, 2009).

Another key element of a transformative paradigm is a commitment to praxis; that is, to inter-connecting research and action towards re-building societal and political practices, systems, relations and structures in ways that support human rights and work against oppression (Lather, 1986; Lincoln et al., 2011). As articulated by Blustein, Medvide and Wan (2012), in their call for the deployment of a transformative approach in research addressing unemployment, “it is necessary but not sufficient to call attention to political and social injustice. Voices of opposition must be accompanied by action aimed to overturn oppressive systems” (p.349).

Given the commitments to enhancing awareness, advancing understanding and embracing praxis, researchers who employ a transformative paradigm frame research as a morally and politically responsible enterprise (Mills, 1959; Mir & Mir, 2002). Moral and political commitments are re-framed from biases to a “public responsibility to disrupt the sense of inevitability and to engage with communities on questions of justice” (Fine, 2001, p.175). Within this paradigm, researchers aim to be explicit regarding the values and ethics which energize their work, often drawing upon a human rights agenda, a commitment to justice and equity, and a valuing of working with those who are disempowered (Mertens et al., 2011).

A final key aspect of a transformative paradigm is the embracing of research as imaginative. This feature, particularly emphasised by Mills (1959), involves pushing beyond critique to imagine ‘what could be’, inherently embracing the idea that “in the world we inhabit, we could

enact alternative possibilities or alternative directions, even if commonsense understandings make this seem impossible” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2011, p.253).

### Embracing occupational science as transformative

Within recent occupational science literature, there has been much discussion of the discipline’s collective endeavour, roles and responsibilities (Cutchin & Dickie, 2012; Frank, 2012; Hocking & Whiteford, 2012). In parallel with calls for occupational therapy to take up politically-informed transformative approaches (Galheigo, 2011; Pollard, Kronenberg & Sakellariou, 2009), there are a growing number of voices – from diverse geographical locations - pointing occupational science in transformative directions. Based on the above syntheses of a transformative approach, I summarize this discussion in relation to five aspects: social change, being radical, praxis, moral and political responsibilities, and being imaginative.

In relation to social change, many authors have pointed to an urgent need for occupational science to actively engage with pressing societal issues of an occupational nature, such as racism, ageism, social exclusion, chronic unemployment, and inequitable opportunities to exert agency over occupation (Aldrich & Dickie, 2013; Huot, Laliberte Rudman, Dodson & Maghālaes, 2013; Galheigo, 2011; Ramugondo, 2012; Whiteford & Pereria, 2012). In essence, there is growing call to push beyond a concern with disciplinary survival or status to focus on the ‘use’ of occupational science. For example, Hocking and Whiteford (2012) articulated a key aim of their edited book, ‘Occupational Science: Society, inclusion and participation’, to be that of informing “knowledge development salient to an active engagement with pressing societal issues of an essentially occupational nature” (p.4).

In addition, there have been many calls to “address social injustice through the development of a critical occupational science” (Angell, 2012, p.1) that is both radical and praxis-oriented.



These calls have pointed to the need to draw upon critical perspectives to critique and expand the boundaries within which occupation has been addressed, and also attend to ways occupation is shaped within relations of power (Kantartzis & Molineux, 2012; Laliberte Rudman, 2013b; Njelesani, Gibson, Nixon, Cameron, & Polatajko, 2013; Ramugondo & Kronenberg, 2013; Townsend, 2012). Praxis has also been forwarded as essential to embrace (Angell, 2012; Magalhães, 2012; Urbanoswki, Shaw & Chemmutut, 2013; Wicks, 2012). For example, Aldrich and Marterella (2012) noted a growing “ambition – or imperative – for occupational science to be more politically and real-world oriented” (p.10).

In relation to taking up a morally and politically responsible approach, there has been a focus on issues of justice, human rights and the politics of occupation (Ramugondo & Kronenberg, 2013; Stadnyk, Townsend, & Wilcock, 2011). Several authors have argued that values and ethics cannot be separated out from research; specifically, that the “concern for social justice, inclusion and participation can never truly be separated from the study of occupation” (Cutchin & Dickie, 2012, p.34). In previous Zemke lectures, Frank (2012) emphasized the importance of clearly articulating the moral philosophy that guides the commitments of occupational scientists and therapists engaged in praxis-oriented work, while Hocking (2009) emphasized ethical responsibilities to dispel normative assumptions regarding occupations, attend to sociocultural forces shaping occupations, serve occupational justice and consider sustainability.

Addressing being imaginative, there has also been discussion of the potential for occupational science to open up spaces for different ways of researching, addressing and enacting occupation (Dennhardt & Laliberte Rudman, 2012). For example, along with an increasing recognition of the epistemological and ontological boundaries within which conceptualizations of occupation have been developed, there have been calls for opening up

understandings of occupation through work based upon a diversity of worldviews and social positions (Hocking, 2012; Kantartzis & Molineux, 2012; Ramugondo & Kronenberg, 2013)

### Enacting occupational science as transformative: The need for a radical re-configuration

Excitingly, a growing body of work has enacted this call to be transformative (Laliberte Rudman, 2013b). For example, along with Dr. Susan Forwell, I co-edited a special issue of the *Journal of Occupational Science* addressing social policy (Laliberte Rudman & Forwell, 2013). We received more high quality articles than we could fit within the issue, with many enacting a transformative approach, in that they critically analyzed ways policies and structures set boundaries on the occupations of particular collectives – such as immigrants, aging citizens, and women with rheumatoid arthritis - resulting in situations of inequity, and put forward directions for social and political change based on principles of occupational justice. However, several scholars have identified a hesitancy to embrace a transformative approach within occupational science, a lag between stated intent and action, and a continued tendency to overlook socio-political mechanisms (Aldrich & Marterella, 2012; Frank, 2012; Laliberte Rudman, 2013b; Whiteford & Hocking, 2012). This gap between intent and enactment likely arises from an array of contributing factors, such as institutional structures that narrow what counts as research or under-attention to critical theoretical perspectives within educational programs. At base, this gap highlights the need for a radical re-think of foundational assumptions in occupational science.

An emerging body of critically reflexive work regarding the ‘conditions of possibility’ in which occupational science has operated has pointed to an array of ontological and epistemological assumptions that have set boundaries on scholarship, such as tendencies to look at occupation in middle class, ahistorical, and apolitical ways (Hocking, 2009; Kantarzikis & Molineux, 2012). These boundaries not only lead to distortions in knowledge production, but

fundamentally constrain the field's contribution to transformative scholarship. On the basis of such work, challenges to radically re-thinking various aspects of the foundations of occupational science have previously been put forth. For example, Frank (2012) contended that in order to fulfill a moral obligation to address issues of occupational justice and rights “debates over methodology cannot substitute for a more fundamental reassessment of the foundations of occupational science” (p.30). Hocking (2012) contended that “achieving the goal of generating knowledge that is not individualistic, sexist or classist will require a mind shift, from ideas that sit comfortably with middle class assumptions” (p.62), while Sellar (2012) argued that to expand its critical capacity occupational science “must seek not only new targets for existing critical discourse, but also draw upon new understandings of what critique can mean” (p.98).

Thus, given that foundational aspects of occupational science have been identified as constraining transformative possibilities in occupational science, I now return to my key argument – that is, fully embracing our stated intent to be transformative requires a radical reconfiguration and cultivation of our sensibility. My aim, in drawing on Mills' seminal work, is to step back in order to consider how we might move forward by fostering a radical sensibility, named an ‘occupational imagination’, as a foundational guiding framework. Such a radical sensibility has to do with consciousness raising – of ourselves and those with work with – that enables enhanced awareness of contradictions distorted by the everyday, and of socio-political processes that construct and perpetuate forms of oppression and inequity (Canella & Lincoln, 2011; Lather, 1986). Fostering such a sensibility has the potential to enable us to move forward in reconstructing occupational possibilities in an informed, ethical manner.

Foundations for a transformative approach: C. Wright Mills and ‘The Social Imagination’

Mills' work in the 1950s laid out key foundations for transformative work in providing "a passionate appeal to a certain kind of morality, a questioning of the role of intellectuals, and an attempt to recover social science as a tool of political intervention" (Mir & Mir, 2002, p.114). Although written in the 1950s, several scholars have argued that Mills' work, particularly the radical sensibility he outlined in 'The Sociological Imagination', is of particular relevance within a contemporary neoliberal political climate in which social issues are increasingly reconfigured as individual problems and responsibilities (Gitlin, 2000; Gane & Back, 2012). A key reason I was also drawn to Mills' work was that he was, as occupational scientists are, essentially interested in what goes on in the everyday world of people.

*'The social imagination' as a radical sensibility*

Two key aims Mills hoped to achieve through the publication of 'The Sociological Imagination' were to increase the uneasiness of social scientists regarding their 'sickness of complacency' with social problems, and to outline 'the sociological imagination' as a radical sensibility that would inform transformative work addressing social problems (Gane & Back, 2012). Mills argued that social science needed to re-engage with its reformist roots and be a tool of political intervention that offered up solutions for significant social problems, such as the Cold War. He pointed to three main problematics that had led to the failure of social science to inform reform. First, he argued that a growing emphasis on the search of grand theory and universal laws to explain the 'nature of man and society' led the social sciences to be concerned with abstract concepts and generalities, leading to a removal from everyday realities and the diversity of humans and societies. Second, Mills contended that social theories failed to attend to issues of power, which had resulted in sidestepping the influences of political and economic institutions on everyday possibilities for being and doing and a tendency to support existing power

structures. And, finally, he argued that an increasing emulation of the natural sciences and a logical positivist model had led to array of problems, such as a lack of awareness of the values informing research; a methods driven, rather than problem or question driven, approach; and a tendency to attribute social problems to individual traits.

In response to these problematics, Mills argued that: i) assumptions about universal aspects of human nature, doing or identity cannot be made, as individuals must always be understood within the historical and social conditions that shape possibilities for human nature and doing, and, iii) understanding the implications of history and of societal institutions demanded studying how these are taken up, experienced and acted upon by individuals. Mills contended that fostering ‘the sociological imagination’, rather than the use of any particular theories or methods, was key to re-configuring the social sciences in reformist, or transformative, directions. This radical sensibility was based on the key premise that “neither the life of an individual nor the history of society can be understood without understanding both” (p.3). Viewing individuals and societies using this sensibility involved continuously attending to the complex inter-relations of individual biographies, history and social structures (see Figure one). To embrace a transformative agenda, Mills proposed that the study of these relationships focus on the transactions between personal troubles and public issues, thereby raising critical consciousness of how the troubles faced by individuals, which are often framed as private matters, are inter-related with public issues, that is, issues that transcend local environments and inner lives and can be located in the ways society is organized and has been historically shaped.

INSERT FIGURE ONE ABOUT HERE

As such, ‘the sociological imagination’ was proposed as a means to think about, study and act in the world that would enable social scientists to understand how the inner and external lives

of individuals, including the so-called personal troubles they faced such as feeling powerless, feeling alienated from their work, or struggling with a meaningful sense of identity, were always lived out, and shaped within, a particular broader historical trajectory and social structure. To illustrate the application of this sensibility, Mills (1959) used the example of unemployment, arguing that in a city of 100,000, if only one man is unemployed it is his personal trouble, but if in a nation of 50 million, 15 million are unemployed, it is a public issue, and that therefore, “We may not hope to find its solution within the range of opportunities open to any one individual. The very structure of opportunities has collapsed. Both the correct statement of the problem and the range of possible solutions require us to consider the economic and political institutions of the society, and not merely the personal situation and character of a scatter of individuals” (p.9). Mills’ focus on placing individual experiences and social issues within the on-going dialectical interactions of three coordinates, specifically, individual biographies, history and social structures or society, underscores much of contemporary critical social theory, as well as transformative work (Gane & Gane, 2012).

*Enacting ‘the sociological imagination’ for transformation*

In addition to outlining this radical sensibility, Mills forwarded a particular mode of scholarship, framed as intellectual craftsmanship, to enact ‘the sociological imagination’. The key starting point of this mode of scholarship was a sense of a significant social problem, and a passion to solve it. Working against the model of the disinterested, objectivist social scientist, Mills argued it was essential to have an ethical commitment to solving social problems and that transparency regarding values was key to ensuring rigorous, relevant science. He proposed that the worth of science was to be located in a return to ethically and socially significant issues. Drawing on the metaphor of a prism, he called for the creative and rigorous use of a variety of

theoretical ideas and methods to critique social forms that contradicted key social values and to demonstrate that new social forms were imaginable, challenging each scholar to “let your mind become a moving prism catching light from as many angles as possible” (p.214). Another key aspect of this approach to scholarship was that of continually considering power by being attuned to ways that people are free to make history, but also mindful that some types of people are much more free to shape history and structures than others.

Mills’ (1959) emphasis on avoiding historical provincialism, that is, the assumption that the present was an autonomous creation or the way things necessarily had to be, opened up possibilities for imagining new forms. Mills fervently believed that the diffusion of the sociological imagination across the social sciences, and into the public imaginary, contained the political promise of helping individuals and collectives better understand and change the larger historical and structural forces that shaped their lives. This belief has been taken up by contemporary social scientists within a variety of disciplines, such as sociologists Gane and Back (2012) who argued that the sociological imagination “enables us to think about things, including our own lives, differently” (p.411) and organizational theorists Mir and Mir (2002) who proposed that it enables scholars to “produce work that is political and transformative” (p.115). I now consider the implications of this type of radical sensibility for the development of an occupational imagination as a basis for transformative scholarship.

### Embracing an ‘occupational imagination’

In the remainder of this paper I ask you to imagine, along with me, what an occupational imagination, as a radical sensibility built upon Mill’s work, might look like and what it might enable occupational scientists to do individually and collectively. Developing this radical sensibility would involve expanding beyond our current occupational perspective, which

Njelesani, Tang, Johsson and Polatajko (2013) recently described as an approach that takes occupation as the unit of analysis and examines its forms, functions and meanings. In a subsequent paper, Njelesani et al. (2013) also argued that an occupational perspective was an insufficient basis for critical work. I argue that the expansion required involves adopting an imagination that challenges us to critically and creatively make connections between the personal, occupational ‘troubles’ of individuals and collectives, such as occupational deprivation or alienation, and public ‘issues’, such as the rise of neoliberal modes of governing or increasing income disparities within national and international contexts.

Building on Mills and other critical scholars (Fine, 2006; Harding, 2006; Rubin, 2012), such an occupational imagination would urge us to be continually attentive to transactions of biography, history and society in the study of occupation, and challenge us to not just enhance understanding of such transactions but to also re-imagine practices, systems and structures that create conditions of occupational oppression, inequity and injustice. It could help us build upon the foundational and growing body of work that describes the experience and existence of occupational inequities, to address social relations of power and how inequities and injustices are politically and socially produced (Hocking, 2012; Laliberte Rudman, 2013b). In line with authors arguing for the need to expand the conditions of possibility in which occupational science has been carried out (Laliberte Rudman, 2013b; Kantartzis & Molineux, 2012), it would caution us against searching for the universal features, categories, outcomes or mechanisms of occupation, and turn us toward an openness to and a curiosity about its diversity.

Developing and enacting an occupational imagination would also involve taking up the dual aims of intellectual and socio-political change (Mills, 1959); committing to both building a knowledge base about occupation, and enacting a transformative agenda aimed at lessening



inequities and injustices and supporting the right to occupation. As such, our work would aim to enhance knowledge and awareness of contemporary forms of occupational justices and inequities, work against taken these as givens or inevitabilities, and awaken a sense of injustice amongst various types of stakeholders. Through such work, we could open up possibilities for dialogue and action towards enabling human flourishing and dignity through occupation. Via enacting our imaginative potential we could envision – and work towards - radically different social organizations, systems, policies and practices that embed standards of occupational justice.

### Cultivating an “occupational imagination”

Given the potential of an occupational imagination, I now draw upon Mills and other critical scholars to point to five key areas of action crucial to attend to in order to move forward in the cultivating this radical sensibility. These five areas include: pushing beyond the limits of dualistic thinking; attending to the socio-political nature of occupation; addressing the moral and political values that shape and energize our work; questioning the familiar, and exploring the unfamiliar; and, engaging in innovative interdisciplinary syntheses.

#### *Pushing beyond the limits of dualistic thinking*

Dualistic thinking separates issues into two categories that are not viewed as merely distinguishable from one another but often as exclusive and exhaustive terms; for example, basic and applied science or objectivity and subjectivity. Dualistic thinking has been critiqued as artificially channeling thinking so that more of one thing, means less of the other. Rather than seeing such categories as absolute dichotomies, critical scholarship aims to see them as expressing tensions that scholars should strive to integrate (Christians, 2011; Sprague & Zimmerman, 2006; Lather, 1986). Within occupational science, authors have pointed to an array of dualisms which constrain our scholarship; for example, Frank (2012) pointed to limits that

arise from the framing of qualitative and quantitative as a dualism, Cutchin (2012) challenged the dualism of art and science, and many scholars have pointed to the limitations of thinking of individuals and environments as separate entities (Cutchin & Dickie, 2012).

In particular, Mills (1959) problematized how science and advocacy were conceptualized as separate entities. He argued that research absent of a commitment to transform social institutions was a failure of purpose, politics and imagination (Mir & Mir, 2002). Subsequent critical scholars have argued that thinking of science and advocacy dualistically can lead to disciplinary ambivalence regarding the rightful place of action (Fine, 2006). As such, transformative scholarship works to “transcend the artificial gap between theory and practice, and turn academic sociologists into passionate and engaged agents of institutional change” (Mir & Mir, 2002, p.105). Similarly, the matter of the social and political commitments of occupational scientists is a focus of contemporary discussion, and although there are many that have called for an embracing of advocacy and political praxis (Magalhaes, 2012; Wicks, 2012), it is vital to reflect on how the realization of such praxis has been bounded by thinking about science and advocacy, or basic and applied science (Laliberte Rudman et al., 2008), as exclusive domains. In essence, I think this dualism has been a key contributor to our apparent hesitancy to move forward in transformative directions, and its integration is required if we are to be ‘passionate and engaged agents of institutional change’. Re-thinking this and other dualisms that bound our conditions of possibility is thus one required step in embracing and enacting an occupational imagination.

#### *Attending to the socio-political nature of occupation*

At a fundamental level, Mills proposed ‘the sociological imagination’ as a means to re-think various core concepts in the social sciences in ways that placed the everyday in broader socio-political and historical contexts. Within an occupational imagination built on such a radical sensibility, occupation would be viewed as always a product of history, society and agency, and

as continually shaped in relations of power. Such a conceptualization does not negate the subjective experience of occupation or the agency individuals enact through occupation – but rather it works to overcome dichotomizing the subjective and socio-political, seeing occupation as always both.

Viewing and studying occupation in this way requires continued epistemological and methodological expansion, and there is certainly scholarship that is attempting to do this. For example, in my own work I have tried to shift from thinking about politics as influencing occupation to thinking about the politics of occupation, pointing to the importance of understanding how possibilities for occupation are differentially created, and actively negotiated, within relations of power (Laliberte Rudman, 2010, 2013a,b, 2014). Another example is a 2012 publication by Angell, in which she conceptualized occupation as a site of both resistance to and reproduction of the social order, and called for scholars to attend to how social difference, along various lines such as gender and class, is constituted through occupation. Attention to the both the socio-political and the capacity for agency is also integrated into Ramugondo's (2012) conceptualization of occupational consciousness which highlights the importance of working with individuals and collectives “to identify the manner in which hegemonic practices operate to influence their occupational practices, as well as analyze the way in which their own everyday occupations serve to perpetuate the same hegemonies” (p.337).

It is also important to consider methodological expansion. Within occupational science, concerns have been raised regarding methodologies employed; for example, the predominance of qualitative research has been questioned with some indicating it may be a sign of being a science in development (Clark, 2006; Pierce, 2012). Mills and other critical scholars, again shifting away from dichotomous thinking, have argued that it is not an either/or question in which some

methodologies are inherently superior to others. As such, the key question is not what methodologies we use or do not use, but rather how we use the methodologies we do and for what purposes. For example, within, and outside of occupational science, much qualitative inquiry has focused on understanding the meaning and experience of everyday occupations. Although not negating the importance of such work, critical scholars have called for developing methodologies that avoid the “binary of seeing the person as either the autonomous origin of his or her experience or the ideological pawn of social determination” (Allen & Hardin, 2001, p.163). Avoiding this binary, in turn, would involve seeking out research practices that enable us to examine the complex embeddedness of occupations within the historical and social. It will also be vital to seek out and employ research practices that can enhance our awareness “of societal issues, rhetoric, and practices that would continue forms of marginalization or that would construct new forms of inequity and oppression” (Canella & Denzin, 2009, p.69). Again, the use of research practices in such ways has begun in occupational science; for example, authors have forwarded ideas and provided exemplars of work based upon second-generation qualitative methodologies, community-engaged methodologies, critically-informed ethnographies, and practices that link narratives and social discourses (Aldrich & Marterella, 2012; Baillard, 2013; Frank & Polkinghorne, 2010; Prodigner & Turner, 2013; Laliberte Rudman, 2013b).

*Addressing the moral and political values that shape and energize our work*

Moving forward also involves addressing the moral and political values that shape and energize occupational science work. Positioning himself outside of logical positivism and its foci on objectivity and neutrality, Mills (1959) emphasized that all science – beginning in what is defined as a problem – is based upon values. Mills cautioned against the notion of “morally

antiseptic methods” (p.101), stating that “whether he wants it or not, or whether he is aware of it or not, anyone who spends his life studying society and publishing the results is acting morally and usually politically as well” (p.59). In turn, Mills challenged scholars to “face this condition, avoiding drifting morally and make the values that frame their work explicit” (p.7), contending that such awareness and transparency is essential for rigorous scholarship.

Commensurate with Mills’ work, contemporary critically-informed work frames the notion of science as value-free as an ‘apolitical illusion’ (Blustein et al., 2012). As stated by Canella and Lincoln (2004), “Even research conceived with the best intentions represents particular agendas. Research has always been political and to varying degrees politicized, representing particular sets of beliefs about the world and excluding others.” (p.303). Pointing to many examples of negative implications of research which claimed neutrality, researchers enacting transformative work contend that articulation of ethical, moral and/or political standpoints are essential (Canella & Lincoln, 2011). As such, it is argued that transformative work cannot avoid standpoints and demands that scholars “shed illusions of objectivity in favor of values and actions that are clearly in service of marginalized groups” (Blustein et al., 2012, p.349)

With occupational science, scholars such as Maghalaes (2012), Hocking (2009) and Frank (2012), have raised questions regarding the extent to which occupational scientists have been seduced by the notion of objectivity, and have sought to explicate the ethical and moral bases of occupational science. In starting from the perspective that transformative research is not about value-free knowledge, enacting an occupational imagination challenges us to shed ‘illusions of objectivity’ and articulate ethical and moral standpoints in relation to justice, well-being, equity and other values that guide and energize our work. Moving in a “responsible and credible manner toward ethical, political and moral commitments” (Frank, 2012, p.27) requires

careful and thoughtful articulation of such standpoints to ensure an openness to worldviews and findings that challenge articulated values and to avoid, as recently highlighted by Baillaud (2012), imposing a particular conception of occupational justice on others.

*Questioning the familiar, and exploring the unfamiliar*

Mills (1959) contended that transformative work needed to begin with understanding the structure of the status quo, proposed that what are defined as problems are often deviations from middle-class ways of life and values. He stressed the importance of questioning why the status quo is the way it is, and of not allowing public issues as officially formulated to determine the problems a researcher studies. Contemporary critical scholars also emphasize the importance of stepping outside dominant structures and modes of thought, articulating a dual aim of taking a critical stance to the ‘familiar’ and learning to think otherwise by seeking to understand modes of thought and being that exist outside the status quo, or the ‘unfamiliar’ (Gane & Back, 2012). This dual aim is essential to achieving work that unsettles how things are defined and practiced, and imagines and moves towards more inclusive, just possibilities (Mills, 1959).

As an example, I draw on a study on long-term unemployment I am collaboratively developing with several occupational science colleagues, including Rebecca Aldrich, Suzanne Huot and Lilian Magalhães. Our starting point has been to question how long-term unemployment is officially defined by governments in the United States and Canada. Rather than accept status quo definitions, we sought to point out who is not counted in such definitions, what forms of injustice remain invisible, and who becomes marginalized from supports and services. In turn, we aim to re-define long term-unemployment from the standpoints of those who view themselves as ‘long term unemployed’. Moving forward, we plan to work with various stakeholders, including the ‘long term unemployed’ and service providers, to both make the

‘unfamiliar’, that is, the daily negotiation of long-term unemployment, visible, and to re-imagine policies, systems and services in ways that support the occupational rights of the growing numbers of citizens experiencing long-term unemployment.

Given that critiques have been forwarded that occupational scientists have tended to study what is familiar to them (Hocking, 2012), it seems vital that we engage in processes and practices to foster critical alertness and push beyond the ‘familiar’. Although space does not allow for the unpacking of various processes and practices that can be taken up to do this at individual and collective levels, there is an immense body of critical scholarship that points to such processes and practices which aim to: i) heighten sensitivity to how language is used in relation to social power and the ways it shapes what come to be taken for granted ways of being and doing; ii) foster continuous attention to issues of race, gender, socioeconomic status, citizenship, age and other axes of power and difference; and iii) enact democratized, participatory, or collaborative research practices that aim to work with, rather than on or for, collectives (Canella & Lincoln, 2009; Fine, 2006; Gane & Back, 2012; Lather, 1986).

#### *Engaging in innovative interdisciplinary syntheses*

The final issue I highlight is that of interdisciplinary syntheses. Mills contended that imagination in scholarship involves combining ideas in new ways, making improbable connections, refusing to rest with existing classifications, and considering diversity and extremes, and that this was best serviced by interdisciplinary scholarship (Mir & Mir, 2002). He urged social scientists to “seek, continually and imaginatively, to draw upon the perspectives and materials, the ideas and methods, of any and all sensible studies of man and society” (Mills, 1959, p.225)

Given that many critical scholars have also argued that interdisciplinary thinking and practices are a cornerstone of imaginative work and transformative research (Canella & Lincoln, 2011; Mir & Mir, 2012), moving forward with enacting an occupational imagination demands that we draw upon insights from other disciplines and combine these in innovative ways. As articulated by Frank (2012), the question is not one of being disciplinary or interdisciplinary, but what interdisciplinary contributions will be of value. As demonstrated by recent work that has drawn upon Black feminist theory, epistemologies of the South, governmentality, intersectionality theory, Freire's work, Bourdieu and others (Angell, 2012; Galvaan, 2012; Laliberte Rudman & Huot, 2012; Maghalhaes, 2012; Ramugondo & Kronenberg, 2013), it is time to move beyond thinking about disciplinarity and interdisciplinary as a dichotomy, and more fully embrace the exciting and ever-expanding plethora of theoretical lens that can be drawn into occupational science to provoke imagination and enhance transformative capacity.

#### Moving forward: An invitation to imagine the future

*“We were making the future, he said, and hardly any of us troubled to think what future we were making. And here it is!” (H.G. Wells, 1899)*

While embracing and enacting an occupational imagination holds much promise, it certainly is not without individual and collective challenges. Within current academic and political environments, the role of academics as agents of social transformation is certainly circumscribed and perhaps increasingly limited by the institutional structures (Mir & Mir, 2002; Canella & Lincoln, 2009; Aldrich & Marterella, 2012; Kiepek et al., 2013). In addition, in some contexts, there has been a resurgence of objectivist epistemologies and a reaction against critically-oriented work (Canella & Lincoln, 2011; Denzin & Giardina, 2009).

Moving along the path proposed may not be the quickest and easiest route for legitimating occupational science or enhancing its security and status, but perhaps our ethical and



moral commitments need to be less about this and more about social issues. In reviewing literature on the ‘risks’ of transformative work, I was particularly struck by a 1984 article by Payton, who at the time was presenting an invited keynote at a meeting of the American Psychological Association (APA). Payton ardently urged the APA as a collective and psychologists as researchers to shift away from focusing on ensuring the status of the discipline towards addressing the social issues they studied. Using the example of studying the social conditions of Blacks in the United States, she critiqued the ways in which psychological research “counted and would continue to count the number of fatherless homes and measure the intellectual competence of black children while ignoring the reality of poverty, inadequate school systems, and racial discrimination that governing their day-to-day existence” (p.393). Payton proposed that it was “shortsighted to assume that by broadening our focus to include social issues we will thereby endanger the discipline” (p.395), and emphasized that given the power of science it was the responsibility of the APA and psychologists to “do the hard things” (p.397) and take a stance on social issues. As occupational scientists, given the power we do have, we need to attend to our responsibility to do the ‘hard things’ and commit to transformative work.

As mentioned earlier, but worth repeating, in moving along this path, we also face questions of how we take actions for transformation that do not impose our truth orientations and values on others (Canella & Lincoln, 2004). In being critically reflexive regarding the values that energize our work, we must guard against being dogmatic and authoritarian, and shift away from a “saviour complex” (Thibeault, 2013, p.255) towards opening up diverse possibilities for occupation. Ultimately, striking forward demands that occupational scientists, as Kantartzis and Molineux (2012) state, “leave one’s own ontological security, to move beyond one’s own world view, to open oneself to the experience of other realities.” (p.49).

As signified in the above quote from science fiction writer H.G. Wells, the future is constantly being made. Occupational scientists are contributing to that future – of the discipline and of the societies in which we live, love, play and work. What future are we making? What future do we imagine? In 1959, Mills passionately believed that the sociological imagination had a chance to make a difference in the quality of human life, and critical scholarship since that time has attempted – with some promising examples – to do so. I have outlined what I passionately believe embracing and enacting a radical occupational imagination could mean for both occupational science and the contexts in which it exists, and I end by asking you to continue to imagine what might result from embracing and enacting an occupational imagination.

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