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Mobilizing occupation for social transformation: Radical resistance, disruption, and re-configuration

Debbie Laliberte Rudman

Key words: occupational inequities, critical reflexivity, occupational science, radical sensibility

Abstract

Background. Given the sociopolitical roots of widening occupational, social and health inequities, it is imperative that occupational therapy move forward in mobilizing occupation for social transformation. **Purpose.** Three key aims are addressed: articulating the imperative to mobilize occupation for social transformation; highlighting the political nature of occupation and occupational therapy; and providing guideposts for embracing a radical sensibility to inform moving forward in mobilizing occupation for social transformation. **Key issues.** Conditions of possibility within occupational therapy leave the profession ill equipped to enact social transformation. Enacting calls to mobilize occupation for social transformation requires radically reconfiguring these conditions of possibility to inform practices that resist, disrupt, and re-configure sociopolitical conditions perpetuating occupational inequities. **Implications.** Mobilizing occupation for social transformation holds much potential to contribute towards creating more equitable, humane societies. Realizing this potential involves committing to transforming our profession, as well as societal discourses, structures, systems, relations, and practices.

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The Muriel Driver Lectureship has established a tradition of critical thinking addressing the past, present and future of the occupational therapy profession. I have been simultaneously overwhelmed and energized by the task of thinking through what to add to this tradition at this sociohistorical moment, one characterized by uncertainty, growing awareness of inequities, and inter-linked social and occupational transformations. I cannot evade the profound implications of COVID-19, but, at the same time, I think it is crucial to acknowledge that social and health inequities that have increasingly come into public view are long-standing. Thus, effectively addressing such inequities requires transforming the sociopolitical forces that have held them in place over time. Within my scholarship, I have increasingly focused on explicating the sociopolitical production of occupational inequities, seeking to challenge boundaries within and outside of occupational therapy that have constrained the enactment of a socially transformative agenda (Laliberte Rudman, 2013, 2014, 2018). Grounded in scholarship addressing the sociopolitical production of inter-related social, health and occupational inequities, I use this space to challenge occupational therapy to become increasingly radical, in the sense of moving forward in resisting, disrupting, and reconfiguring the power relations and associated modes of thought and doing, within and outside our profession, that sustain inequities.

Articulating my Positionality: Two Key Acknowledgements

Prior to articulating my key aims, I begin with two acknowledgements that underpin my positionality as an occupational therapist, occupational scientist, and citizen. As a critically located scholar, I acknowledge the necessity of transparency and on-going critical reflexivity regarding my positionality (Farias, Laliberte Rudman & Magalhães, 2016), as my intersecting social locations shape what I feel compelled to study, how I view the problems that I study, and ways forward I identify as imperative.

Within London Ontario, I am located on the traditional lands of the Anishinaabek, Haudenosaunee, Lūnaapéewak and Attawandaron peoples, on lands connected with the London Township and Sombra Treaties of 1796 and the Dish with One Spoon Covenant Wampum. I respect the longstanding relationships that Indigenous Nations have to this land, as original caretakers and contemporary stewards. I also acknowledge social, health and occupational inequities that Indigenous Peoples endure in my community and in Canada, and I, as a settler and occupational therapist, underscore my own and our collective responsibility to respectfully partner with Indigenous Peoples so to as disrupt inequities and power relations that sustain them. My first acknowledgement is connected to a key lesson I have thus far learned through my relations with Indigenous colleagues, students and Elders, relations fostered through opportunities I have had to partner on research and educational initiatives. This lesson is eloquently encapsulated in the following quote from a speech to the United Nations during the 2019 Global Landscapes Forum by Autumn Peltier, a young woman from the Wiikwemkoong First Nation and Chief Water Commissioner for the Anishinabek Nation: “One day I will be an ancestor and I want my descendants to know that I used my voice so that they could have a future.” (The Canadian Press, 2019). This commitment to those who follow us and to all living things is an important lesson to carry forward, one which challenges us to reflect on the question: How can occupational therapists use their collective – and individual – voice to make a better future?

I also acknowledge the pervasive influence of my roots growing up in a ‘low income’ neighbourhood in Sarnia, Ontario within a working-class family. I was immensely privileged to grow up in family anchored by parents committed to creating conditions that enabled occupational possibilities for their children that neither they nor many in our neighbourhood or

extended family had experienced. As one example, both of my parents ended schooling prior to their teenage years to contribute to their families' survival. From these early years, my father worked in physically strenuous, dangerous jobs. His work was not definitive of his identity nor was it inherently health promoting, but it was a means, facilitated by union membership, to enable his children to pursue diverse occupational paths. For example, I was one of the first females in our extended family to go to university; this would not have been possible without the conditions shaped by my parents and the on-going support of my siblings and many mentors. Grounded in these roots, I have long been uneasy with discourses that individualize occupation, framing success and failure as solely resulting from individual choices, attributes, or efforts (Laliberte Rudman, 2006a, 2006b, 2010). Thus, my 'roots' as a critical scholar are in these formative years. As such, I dedicate this lecture to my father, John Laliberte; his approach to life, as well as his far too early departure from this world, are integral to the mother, citizen, occupational therapist, and scholar I continually strive to become.

Key Aims

My first key aim is to articulate the contemporary imperative to mobilize occupation for social transformation. In addressing this imperative, I do not dismiss the importance of occupational therapy in the present, as the work done with individuals facing occupational disruptions is integral to supporting well-being. However, I am arguing that there is much more occupational therapists should be doing together to build more equitable societies. To clarify this aim, it is important to delineate what I mean by 'mobilizing occupation for social transformation'. Drawing upon work done with graduate students and the International Social Transformation through Occupation Network (ISTTON) (Farias & Laliberte Rudman, 2019; Laliberte Rudman et al., 2019), I use the phrase to encompass approaches that mobilize

occupation in social change efforts that shift beyond a focus on individuals and their occupational needs to address sociopolitical forces contributing to occupational inequities. Such approaches aim to disrupt discourses, defined as taken-for-granted ways of thinking about and addressing occupation (Laliberte Rudman, 2010), social structures, systems, relations, and practices that shape and perpetuate occupational inequities.

My second aim is to counter the position that occupational therapy has neither the responsibility nor capacity to attend to sociopolitical forces, given that is somehow ‘too political’. To achieve this aim, I highlight how occupation and occupational therapy are inherently political.

My final aim is to provide guideposts to inform moving forward in mobilizing occupation for social transformation, in hopes of helping further shift our increasingly recognized collective responsibility into action. I contend that moving in transformative directions is not simply about adding to existing concepts or models. Rather, pushing forward requires work that will be both uncomfortable and revitalizing, work that embraces critically reconfiguring the conditions of possibility for thinking about and doing occupational therapy. I propose shifting towards a ‘radical sensibility’ to inform practices marked by resistance, disruption, and reconfiguration, aimed at building more equitable societies through transforming our profession and broader sociopolitical conditions.

Contemporary Imperative for Mobilizing Occupation for Social Transformation

Although the call to contribute to social transformation is part of the historical foundations of occupational therapy (Friedland, 2003), the necessity to enact occupation-based social transformation has increasingly been fore fronted within Canada and globally over the past decade (Farias & Laliberte Rudman, 2019; Galvaan, 2020). The imperative to mobilize

occupation for social transformation is also reinforced by broader international and national reports addressing the sociopolitical roots of inter-related health, social and occupational inequities.

Articulations within occupational therapy.

Within Canada, in the 1993 Muriel Driver lecture, Townsend challenged occupational therapy to move its social vision forward. Highlighting the need to shift beyond individualism and centralize social justice, Townsend (1993) posed a vital question: “What social outcome might be realized if occupational therapy developed its social vision?” (p.176). Although several subsequent lectures centred issues relevant to this social vision (e.g., Thibeault, 2002; Friedland, 2003; Krupa, 2008), an examination of the Muriel Driver lectures produced over the past decade demonstrates that calls to engage in social transformation have become more urgent and radical, in the sense of addressing sociopolitical forces. For example, Finlayson (2013) urged occupational therapists to extend advocacy efforts into community and population change arguing that “we must be loud and courageous to break our silences and develop the change agent role in our profession” (p.211). Kirsh (2015) highlighted the necessity of becoming a more “socially and politically responsible discipline” (p.212) emphasizing the centrality of reconfiguring social, economic, and political constraints operating within neoliberal contexts that prevent particular collectives from moving forward in their occupational lives. Hammell (2017) implored occupational therapy to increase its social relevance through centering actions aimed at “equalizing opportunities for the achievement of well-being through occupational engagement of all those whose occupational rights are inequitably constrained” (p.216).

Similar emphases are discernable in keynote lectures outside Canada further demonstrating recognition of an urgent need to move forward in addressing occupational

inequities connected to social issues such as homelessness, forced displacement, or precarious work. For example, underpinned by the long-standing existence of social occupational therapy in Brazil, Malfitano and Lopes (2018), in a keynote talk in New Zealand, urged occupational therapists to “expand their field of practice by acting directly in the social field, and being committed to social change” (p. 26). Within her keynote at the World Federation of Occupational Therapists (WFOT) conference in South Africa, Ramugondo (2018) articulated the importance of developing contextually situated practice that addresses historical and contemporary power relations to “advance healing work or decolonality, in ways that not only benefit individuals or groups, but impact society.” (p.83). Within the 2019 Casson Memorial Lecture in the United Kingdom, Kantartzis (2019) argued for reconfiguring ways of thinking and doing within occupational therapy to better “embrace the power of occupation to be part of the processes of change and look towards the transformation of our society towards health for all” (p.562).

However, calls to mobilize occupation for social transformation are often accompanied by concerns regarding limited progress in turning such calls into a reality (Hammell, 2017; Kantartzis, 2019). Authors have pointed to constraints, noting how dominant neoliberal, biomedical and managerial approaches within health care and other systems obscure the sociopolitical forces shaping inequities and perpetuate individualistic approaches in occupational therapy (Farias & Laliberte Rudman, 2019). Given this apparent stuckness and recognition of larger restrictive forces, moving such calls into action is not a problematic to be solved by individual occupational therapists. Rather, it is essential to enhance our collective awareness of the political nature of inter-related occupational, health and social inequities, as well as the profession’s political positioning and effects. Such collective awareness, in turn, can inform collective action aimed at resisting, disrupting, and reconfiguring sociopolitical conditions that

simultaneously restrict us, as individuals and a profession, in moving our commitment into action and the occupational possibilities of the people with whom we work.

Articulations in international and national reports.

Reinforcing the imperative to address sociopolitical determinants of occupational inequities, a growing body of evidence points to the sociopolitical root determinants of persistent, widening inter-related health, social and occupational inequities. A main conclusion of the 2020 United Nations World Social Report is that “extraordinary economic growth and widespread improvements in well-being observed over the last several decades have failed to close the deep divides within and across countries” (UNDESA, 2020, p.1). In addition to highlighting inequities in income and well-being, the report addresses persistent and widening inequities in occupational opportunities related to, for example, education, work, community mobility, land rights, and social participation. A key message of this report is that the “world is far from the goal of equal opportunity for all: circumstances beyond an individual’s control, such as gender, race, ethnicity, migrant status and, for children, the socioeconomic status of their parents, continue to affect one’s chances of succeeding in life.” (UNDESA, p.20). As one example, its analysis of labour force inequities points to persisting systemic discrimination, revealing that although there have been marked increases in the proportion of persons with disabilities with secondary education or higher since the 1990s across 17 countries, educational and labour force gaps between persons with disabilities and those without have not changed. This report identifies the importance of shifting beyond dominant individualized approaches to address inequities given that root drivers are found in inter-linked economic, social, political, and environmental forces. Recommendations highlight an urgent need to reconfigure contemporary power relations and enact social transformation committed to equitable opportunities, adequate

social protection systems, and countering discrimination. At the same time, the report acknowledges the challenge of enacting social transformation, indicating that contemporary inaction is often not due to a lack of knowledge or capacity, but rather results from power relations that seek to sustain the status quo. As such, “understanding the political constraints to reducing inequality and devising ways to overcome them is key to breaking the current stalemate” (UNDESA, 2020, p. 14).

Similar findings are found in 2019 Pan Canadian Health Inequalities Reporting Initiative (HIR) report conducted in partnership with the First Nations Information Governance Centre. A main conclusion in this report is that the “persistence, breadth and depth of health inequalities in Canada constitute a call to action” (HIR, 2019, p.9). As in the UNESDA report, root causes of inequities are connected to power relations resulting in the unequal distribution of resources in relation to social stratifiers and differential “exposure to societal conditions and environments largely beyond the control of the individuals concerned” (HIR, 2019, p.60). Moreover, the need to further situate and politicize injustices faced by Indigenous peoples within historical and contemporary political, social, and economic conditions is centred, emphasizing colonialism, racism and barriers to self-determination. As one example of an inequity related to occupation, it was found that the prevalence of household food insecurity was inequitably distributed along social several stratifiers, being 30 times higher amongst lower income groups, more than 5 times higher amongst adults with severe functional impairments, and between 2 to 4 times higher amongst those who identified as Inuit, First Nations, Metis, Black or bisexual. This report explicitly concludes that “actions that focus on individual-level behaviour determinants may inadvertently increase health inequalities in the absence of accompanying efforts that target ‘upstream’ socioeconomic, political, cultural, and environmental factors.” (HIR, 2019, p.9)

Looking across these reports, there are three take away messages that support the imperative to mobilize occupation for social transformation, related to resistance, disruption, and reconfiguration. The first is that of resisting individualized approaches to social problems and inequities and the interrelated neoliberal “overreliance on the capacity of markets to bring about social justice” (UNESA, 2020, p.15). Second, it is clear from these reports, as well as from social movements in action around us, that there is a need to disrupt processes of marginalization and exclusion. A third key message is that rebuilding more equitable societies requires reconfiguring the distribution of social power embedded in discourses, structures, systems, relations, and practices. These three messages highlight the need to embrace the political nature of mobilizing occupation for social transformation. However, in my own experience, and as articulated by Kirsh (2015) and Galheigo (2011), this assertion of the need to be political is often met with resistance in occupational therapy, for example, by counterarguments that being political is not practical, is outside the realm of a health profession, or is too risky.

Occupation and Occupational Therapy as Inherently Political

I now address my second aim of countering the position that the profession of occupational therapy has neither the responsibility nor capacity to attend to sociopolitical forces. I argue that rather than this direction being ‘too political’, it is impossible for occupational therapy to be apolitical given that occupation itself is political and our profession already has political effects (Guajardo, Kronenberg & Ramugondo, 2015). Thus, it is crucial to reconfigure our political effects towards social transformation aimed at countering occupational inequities.

Politicizing occupation.

A growing body of scholarship has addressed occupation as political, that is, as shaped within and contributing to the shaping of power relations. Within the confines of this lecture, I

provide an overview and a few select illustrations of ways occupation has been politicized (see Figure 1). One thread of scholarship has revealed how occupation is part of the construction and enactment of oppression, but also how it can be taken up to resist oppression and do equity. For example, research has addressed how ageism is enacted within various social systems in ways that constrain occupational possibilities, but also how more equitable age relations can be fostered through doing occupations differently (e.g., Hart & Heatwole Shank, 2016; McGrath et al., 2017; Trentham & Neysmith, 2018). Another thread has attended to how governing occurs through occupation. Such work has demonstrated how occupation is deployed in ways that sustain power relations and associated inequities, such as through policies and practices restricting occupational possibilities for those deemed not to be ‘full’ citizens (e.g., Blankvoort et al., 2018; Huot et al., 2013). Research has also exposed ways power relations sanction particular occupations as positive, normative and to be supported through social practices, systems, and structures, including occupational therapy, while simultaneously deeming other types and ways of doing as deviant, non-normative, and not permissible to support (e.g., Njelesani et al., 2015; Kiepek et al., 2019).

INSERT FIGURE OUT ABOUT HERE

I now provide two brief examples of work politicizing occupation to further illustrate how it turns attention to root causes of inequities and highlights the transformative potential of occupation. In work done with colleagues, we have unpacked how contemporary approaches to governing long-term unemployment, embedded in neoliberal policies, discourses and services, locate this problem within individual deficiencies and focus on activating ‘the unemployed’ in activities designed to enhance individual employability (Huot et al., 2020; Laliberte Rudman & Aldrich, 2016, 2017). Our work reveals how such individualization not only fails to resolve

unemployment for many given the neglect of sociopolitical forces that bound possibilities for sustainable work, such as discrimination tied to criminal record history, lack of a stable base of resources, or global labour transformations, but also shapes a life situation of being ‘activated but stuck’. This life situation is marked by intense engagement in resource-seeking occupations while being stuck in lives characterized by precarity and occupational restrictions. As such, this work points to oppressive occupational implications of policies and systems that place the expectation on individuals to resolve social problems caused by factors beyond their control.

Another timely example is work examining how occupation, historically and in the present, is part of the construction and perpetuation of racism. Scholars have examined how racism is enacted through policies, systems, norms, and everyday occupations that restrict the occupational possibilities of those positioned as racially inferior within dominant power relations (Cloete & Ramugondo, 2015; Lavalley & Johnson, 2020). This work highlights the socially transformative power of occupation revealing ways activists push against racist policies, systems, and practices through disrupting occupational restrictions (Frank & Muriithi, 2015; Lavalley & Johnson, 2020). Overall, scholarship politicizing occupation has enhanced knowledge regarding the links between oppression, resistance, and occupation, clearly demonstrating why actions to enable occupation need to be political in the sense of resisting, disrupting and transforming power relations that underpin inequities.

Political positioning and effects of occupational therapy.

Given that occupation is political and occupational therapy is politically positioned within systems, occupational therapists are inextricably political actors (Owens, 2017). As ‘policy professionals’ (Lopes & Malfitano, 2017) and ‘street level bureaucrats’ (Aldrich & Laliberte Rudman, 2020), occupational therapists are governed through policies, system

mandates and normative discourses and are part of such governing mechanisms. As part of governing mechanisms, occupational therapists mediate power relations within their practices in ways that can reproduce or resist oppressive conditions. As practical examples, occupational therapists enact power when they inform potentially life-changing decisions about where clients should live or what types of resources are required within school or home environments.

Occupational therapists also enact power when they implicitly or explicitly convey normative ideals through marking out particular occupations as permissible to address within services and research and others as out of bounds (Gerlach, 2015; Njelesani et al., 2015).

Failure to critically acknowledge and address the sociopolitical roots of occupational inequities and the political positioning of occupational therapy puts us at risk, within research, education and service provision, of tacitly upholding power relations that perpetuate occupational inequities (Gerlach et al., 2017; Ramugondo, 2018). For example, whose ‘normal’ and what power relations are maintained when occupational therapists privilege concepts and practices that prioritize a market-based conceptualization of productivity and valorize independence (Laliberte Rudman, 2006; Trentham, 2019)? On-going critical reflexivity regarding ways occupational therapists enact power is crucial to guard against complicity, and critically-informed practice approaches are increasingly fore fronted as means to reconfigure our political positioning and effects (Galvaan & Peters, 2017; Pollard, Sakellariou, & Kronenberg, 2008; Malfitano & Lopes, 2018). As powerfully articulated by Mondaca (2020): “We can reproduce or resist oppressive conditions, as individuals and as a discipline. We can also build better societies” (p.8).

Mobilizing occupation for social transformation: Embracing a radical sensibility

Given that the roots of inequities are sociopolitical, moving further in enacting social transformation requires extending out from critical reflexivity and the articulation of critically informed practice models which tend to remain at the margins, particularly in North America. Fully moving forward requires a radically informed re-thinking of contemporary ‘conditions of possibility’ within occupational therapy to disrupt and reconfigure dominant ways we have come to understand occupation, power, and society. Drawing on critical and transformative scholars, I point to six key aspects of a radical sensibility as guideposts for reconfiguring ourselves, as a profession, and the root causes of occupational inequities. Reconfiguring these conditions of possibility in ways underpinned by a radical sensibility can enable occupational therapy to further move in directions of becoming, as articulated by Freirean scholar Rossatto (2005), “a positive force for the change of oppressive social, historical, economic and philosophical structures, rather than an instrument of their reproduction” (p.4).

Radically reconfiguring conditions of possibility in occupational therapy.

The conditions of possibility for a profession encompass the range of assumptions that set the boundaries for knowledge production and practice (Foucault, 1970). These assumptions are implicit, so that like working inside a closed box or a fishbowl, it is difficult to see what we are addressing in other ways. In turn, attempts to understand and address occupation are anchored to these conditions (Laliberte Rudman, 2018; Kantartzis & Molineux, 2012).

A substantial body of work has identified several main orientations constituting contemporary conditions of possibility in occupational therapy, particularly in the Global North (Laliberte Rudman, 2020; see Figure 2). This work has raised crucial concerns regarding the boundaries established through these conditions, such as how they can lead to oppressive practices and perpetuate coloniality (Galvaan, 2020; Gerlach et al., 2017; Guajardo et al., 2015;

Ramugondo, 2018). The on-going power of these conditions is illustrated by two recent reviews of literature addressing occupational injustice (Benjamin-Thomas & Laliberte Rudman, 2018; Malfitano et al., 2019). Despite occupational justice being a concept designed to draw attention to sociopolitical forces, both reviews found a dominant tendency within research and practice-oriented articles to stay within an individualistic lens. Articles often explicated individual experiences of injustices and emphasized solutions addressing individuals' capacity to cope with injustices, as opposed to unpacking or seeking to alter the sociopolitical production of occupational injustices.

PLACE FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

The conditions of possibility in occupational therapy, many of which mirror dominant ways of thinking embedded in power relations tied to inequities, leave the profession ill equipped to enact social transformation. As one brief example, concerns have been raised regarding how ableist assumptions underpin occupational therapy knowledge and practices in ways that exclude and devalue ways of being and doing that do not align with those deemed normative, emphasize 'fixing' individuals, and fail to challenge the sociopolitical production of disability (Gappmayer, 2020; Phelan, 2011). If we neglect reconfiguring these conditions of possibility, the profession will continue to face a rupture between commitment and action. In parallel to the work of several Southern occupational therapy scholars, I propose adopting a radical sensibility to inform disruption and reconfiguration of these conditions of possibility (Galvaan, 2020; Guajardo et al., 2015). Such radical disruption and reconfiguration will involve hard, unsettling, but necessary work - just as it has been recognized as necessary within calls for radically reforming other professions and systems, such as policing, education systems, and long-term care.

Developing and enacting a radical sensibility: Guideposts.

A radical sensibility holds immense potential to propel occupational therapy forward in mobilizing occupation for social transformation as it would center understandings and shape conditions that: resist individualizing social problems and re-inscribing oppressive power relations; and disrupt and reconfigure power relations, within and outside the profession, that shape inequities. Within this last section, I point to six key aspects of a radical sensibility as intersecting guideposts for reconfiguring ourselves, as a profession, and the roots of occupational inequities (SEE TABLE 1).

PLACE TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

A vital starting point of a radical sensibility is resistance to fatalism, a pervasive discursive message that there is nothing that can be done to change reality, even when its implications are tragic (Jackson, 2007). A position of fatalism involves an acceptance of “current obstacles to liberation as inevitable and insurmountable” (Roberts, 2003, p.458). Fatalism is crucial to resist as it leads to acquiescence, a focus on compromising with reality rather than seeking to transform it. Compromising involves promoting adaptation of individuals to the way the world is, rather than addressing systemic deficiencies (Jackson, 2007). As provocatively articulated by Ramugondo (2018), a position of fatalism within occupational therapy reinforces an individualistic focus on fixing people broken by systems to fit them back into those systems, rather than attending to fixing systems. Resisting fatalism is particularly crucial within contemporary neoliberal contexts in which inequities are dominantly framed as inevitable and “a necessary price to pay for the ‘freedoms’ afforded by the market.” (Roberts, 2003, p.462).

In turn, moving towards social transformation involves resisting fatalism through embracing critical optimism, a position grounded in the assumption that social reality is not a natural reality but is historically induced (Rossatto, 2005). Critical optimism creates space for

being critical of the present while also being hopeful that things can be improved through labour (Thomas, 2019). Such labour involves changing social realities through critically informed human action, given that realities are always constructed through human action (Rossatto, 2005). Of relevance to occupational therapy, critical optimism centers engagement in collective doing as a necessary part of social transformation.

Moving to the third guidepost, the term ‘critical’ in critical optimism signals the uptake of a particular worldview or paradigm. This paradigm encompasses diverse critical social theories bound together by a commitment to practices that resist, disrupt, and reconfigure taken-for-granted aspects of the way the world is thought to be, or the status quo. A key task of critical scholarship is that of disrupting through exposure, with this task encompassing revealing and unpacking the sociopolitical roots of inequities (Cannella & Lincoln, 2019). Within occupational therapy, this challenges us to further enact scholarship that politicizes occupation to reveal “what is masked and produced by taken-for-granted modes of thought and activity” (Cooper, 2008), and engage in on-going critical reflexivity regarding implications of the taken-for-granted ways occupational therapy and other aspects of society are structured (Farias et al., 2016). In turn, critical scholars contend that disturbing and destabilizing the status quo through exposure is “necessary if alternative practices are to be reconstructed” (Silver, 2018, p.163). In essence, disruption of the status quo with and outside of occupational therapy can serve to open spaces for imagining and creating more equitable relations and conditions.

Moving from disruption to reconfiguration involves embracing a model of participation that transforms whose expertise is viewed as legitimate (Sandwick et al., 2018). Aligned with the demand of the critical disability movement of “nothing about us without us” (Charlton, 1983, p.3), this model resists marginalizing ways of knowing and doing outside those legitimized

within dominant power relations. In occupational therapy, this extends beyond conceptualizations of client-centred practice predicated on a Western worldview, recognizing that a fundamental reordering of social conditions requires creating spaces for collective dialogue with individuals and collectives experiencing inequities to raise consciousness of root causes and inform actions (Rossatto, 2005). Embracing what decolonial scholars have called ‘epistemologies from the margins’ (Mondaca, 2002; Mignolo & Tlostanova, 2006), moving forward requires not just an openness to ‘other’ ways of thinking and doing but resistance towards hegemonic ideas and an “epistemic openness to the uncertainty of not having the immediate answers of solutions” (Galvaan, 2020, p.3). This guidepost challenges us to resist adopting an ‘expert position’ that involves imposing our ‘truths’ and values orientations, and embrace an on-going participatory process that is equity oriented, contextually embedded, and imbued with cultural humility (Galvaan, 2020; Laliberte Rudman, 2019).

Another central guidepost involves drawing upon utopic imagination to think “in terms of the kind of society we want to achieve, rather than what seems possible” (Levitas, 2003, p.449). Utopic imagining works against acquiescence by marking out possibilities and strategies for action and serves to sustain hope (Ackhurst, 2019). For Paulo Freire, his utopian dream, one that is hard to refute, was expressed in an interview as: “the dream of having a society that is less ugly and less unjust...a decent society, striving to overcome discrimination and the negation of others...a society that struggles for equity” (Rossatto, 2005, p.19). Although there are many contemporary forces working against enacting imagination (Laliberte Rudman, 2014), this is an essential aspect to take up in efforts to push out of contemporary conditions of possibility and disrupt barriers to mobilizing occupation for social transformation.

The final key element of a radical sensibility, generative disruption, incorporates moving forward in collaborative, iterative actualization processes that center occupation. Although the word disruption often has a negative connotation in the Global North, decolonial scholars emphasize its generative potential, in that new ways of being and doing can be generated through combining disruption with action (Galvaan, 2020). Of central relevance to mobilizing occupation for social transformation, various theoretical frameworks and processes forwarded in critical and transformative scholarship reinforce the centrality of everyday doing for generative disruption (Ackhurst, 2012; Frank & Muriithi, 2015; Levitas, 2003). For example, Silver (2018) and Cooper (2014), in work addressing everyday radicalism and everyday utopias, center the transformative power of doing everyday activities differently, particularly as collectives. Grounded in a collective project that involved women living in poverty creating alternative ways of negotiating everyday life, Silver (2018) proposes that collective re-imagining and re-configuration of everyday life can counter acquiescence, transform social relations, and generate knowledge to inform the broader project of “the transformation of everyday life and the institutions that govern society” (p.161). Cooper’s (2014) work on everyday utopias, defined as spaces and networks that reconfigure everyday life towards “more egalitarian, democratic, and emancipatory ways of living’ (p.3), also highlights the transformative potential of collective projects that disrupt everyday practices. Further, both Silver (2018) and Cooper (2014) emphasize that learning occurs through the enactment of alternative ways of doing in ways that feedback into local and broader transformative projects. The transformative potential of occupation as part of generative disruption has also been centred in critically informed models in occupational therapy, particularly models generated in the Global South (Guajardo et al., 2015; Malfitano & Lopes, 2018). For example, the Occupation-Based Community Development framework developed in

South Africa centers counter-hegemonic occupational engagement and aims to reconfigure occupational possibilities with communities (Galvaan & Peters, 2017). For me, a key message is that occupation holds immense potential to be taken up in social transformation when such efforts are underpinned by a radical sensibility.

Stepping outside the privileging of standardized practice guidelines, a radical sensibility provides guideposts to enact such work as a process over time. I now provide two brief examples that I interpret as enacting generative disruption to provide a glimpse into approaches and spaces for such work in occupational therapy. The first is from dissertation work completed by Mondaca (Mondaca et al., 2017, 2019) which aimed to reconfigure the boundaries of everyday life in a Swedish nursing home. This participatory project engaged nursing home residents, family members and staff to resist the structural production of vulnerability and the normalization of lack of resident control over everyday life. Through engaging residents in imagining and enacting different spaces and forms of doing occupation, power relations embedded in institutional rules were disrupted resulting in expanded occupational possibilities and reconfigured practices of care. The second is dissertation work recently completed by Benjamin-Thomas (2019; Benjamin-Thomas et al., 2019). This project aimed to reconfigure occupational possibilities using a participatory filmmaking approach, creating a space for children in a rural community in India to participate in this collective occupation to unpack injustices in their community they sought to resist. Through engagement with children, community members and service providers, sociopolitical forces to disrupt, such as contested responsibility and individualization, were identified. In turn, generative disruption was enacted through community dialogue sparked with the video and formation of community action teams focused on reconfiguring sociopolitical conditions. For further examples, I invite you to explore

an e-book created by ISTTON titled ‘Case studies for social transformation through occupation’ (<https://enothe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/ISTTON-booklet-final.pdf>). I also invite you to consider adding case examples to this dynamic resource to further spark imagination regarding possibilities for mobilizing occupation for social transformation.

Conclusion

I began with a guiding question: How can occupational therapists use their collective – and individual – voice to make a better future? I have argued that this can occur through mobilizing occupation for social transformation to address sociopolitical roots of occupational inequities, transforming “our world into a more humane one” (Mondaca, 2020, p.8) and fostering “anti-oppressive spaces that support diverse ways of living” (Laliberte Rudman, 2018, p.5). I have also proposed that further moving into action requires drawing upon a radical sensibility to reconfigure conditions of possibility within and outside of occupational therapy. Our collective task entails radically reconfiguring our own practices, for example, within our educational programs, our research, and our work with communities and individuals, to optimize our capacity to mobilize occupation for social transformation.

I am under no illusion that moving in the proposed directions will be easy, but also contend that neglecting root causes of persistent occupational inequities leaves us at risk of being complicit. Maintaining critical optimism that we can engage in this hard work, transforming ourselves and making a better future, I end by inviting critical reflexivity on words written by the late John Lewis (2017), a leading civil rights activist in the United States and a long-standing actor against oppression: “Freedom is the continuous action we all must take, and each generation must do its part to create an even more fair, more just society”.

Key messages

- Widening intersecting occupational, health and occupational inequities rooted in sociopolitical forces create an imperative to mobilize occupation for social transformation.
- It is crucial to further generate knowledge regarding the political nature of occupation and reconfigure the profession's political effects towards countering occupational inequities.
- Moving forward in mobilizing occupation for social transformation requires embracing the challenge of drawing upon a radical sensibility to reconfigure the conditions of possibility within occupational therapy, and inform resistance, disruption and reconfiguration of broader sociopolitical conditions perpetuating occupational inequities.

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Figure 1. Politicizing occupation – Examples of threads of scholarship. (see attached jpeg file)

Figure 2 – Contemporary conditions of possibility. (see attached jpeg file)

Table 1

Intersecting guideposts for developing and enacting a radical sensibility.

Guidepost

Resist fatalism and acquiescence

Embrace critical optimism

Engage critical stance towards the ‘status quo’

Embrace transformative model of participation

Enact utopic imagination

Enact generative disruption through occupation

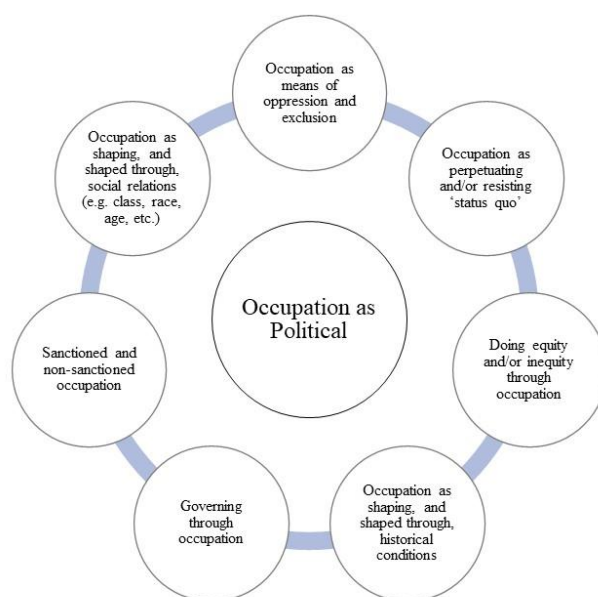


Figure 1. Politicizing occupation – Examples of threads of scholarship.

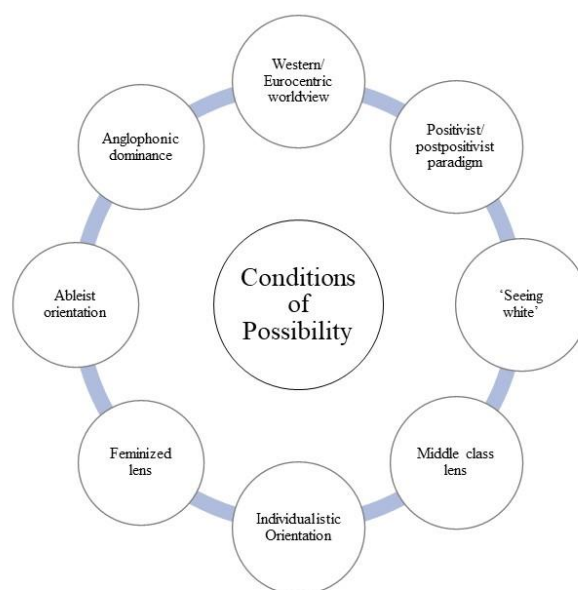


Figure 2. Contemporary conditions of possibility.

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