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Applying the Ecological Model of Human Performance and the SlutWalk Movement to Support those Affected by Rape Culture in the Context of Occupational Therapy

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Abstract

Improving the occupational lives of others is at the heart of occupational therapy practice. Advocacy for clientele is central to this improvement, both at individual and structural levels. We argue that interventions in the Ecological Model of Human Performance (EHP) and the social movement *theSlutWalk* can offer increased opportunity for occupational therapists to address the harmful implications for clients affected by sexual assault and rape culture. In addition, through the principles of the EHP and *the SlutWalk*, we propose that occupational therapists can have a hand in eradicating the culture that facilitates and tolerates sexual violence. This paper highlights the barriers women and sexual assault survivors may face to equitable occupational participation, where occupational therapists may establish/restore, alter, create, prevent, and adapt intervention approaches in the client's context to elicit optimal engagement in meaningful activity.

Keywords

rape culture, occupational therapy, occupational justice, Ecological Model of Human Performance, sexual assault survivors, women

Cover Page Footnote

The authors declare that they have no competing financial, professional, or personal interest that might have influenced the performance or presentation of the work described in this manuscript.

Credentials Display

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In the United States, someone experiences sexual violence every 73 s (Rape Abuse and Incest National Network [RAINN], 2020). Efforts to prevent these attacks have been implemented, such as the CDC's Rape Prevention and Education Program (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2020). However, despite such efforts, rape and sexual violence remain a reality for hundreds of thousands of Americans, a vast majority being women (Smith et al., 2018). Some suggest that the prevalence of sex crimes in the United States is related to the "rape culture" perpetuated in American society (Baum et al., 2018; Canan et al., 2018). Rape culture is an environment where the prevalence and tolerance of sexual violence are high and permitted (Marshall University, 2020), particularly against women. Occupational therapists stand at the forefront of occupational justice and thus have a central role in combating the alarming restrictions that rape culture inflicts on individuals' occupational lives.

Aspects of rape culture are often subtle. For instance, rape is a crime that most people deem morally reprehensible; however, commonplace actions and words often imply otherwise. This is illustrated in several facets of mainstream culture, including but not limited to jokes about rape or violence against women (e.g., "That exam raped me."), dress code enforcement in schools focusing predominantly on women and girls, victim-blaming (excusing the perpetrator and blaming the victim), slut-shaming (condemning women for appearance or actions that violate traditional sexual gender norms), catcalling, hyper-sexualization of women and girls, rape prevention efforts emphasizing how to avoid rape rather than not to rape, and excusing male behavior (e.g., "boys will be boys"). The normalization of former President Trump's infamous comment "grab 'em by the pussy" as a mere aspect of masculine banter or "locker room talk" underscores this culture (Fahrendhold, 2016).

In this paper, we explore how rape culture restricts women's (and sexual assault survivors') engagement in occupations. We discuss a global response to rape culture, the SlutWalk, and apply the Ecological Model of Human Performance (EHP; Dunn et al., 1994) to highlight and support occupational therapists' role in supporting the occupational participation of rape victims and eradicating rape culture.

Background

The SlutWalk

A Cable News Network (CNN) article from 2011 highlighted the SlutWalk movement as a response to a Toronto police officer stating, "Women should avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimized" (Armstrong, 2011, para. 3). The statement ignited rage, spurring a global movement known as the SlutWalk. This movement aims to claim and redefine the word "slut," which has been used for decades to degrade and dehumanize women based on their presumed sexuality or sexual behavior. Overall, the primary goal of this movement is to empower women and eradicate the culture that facilitates the attacking and blaming of sexual violence victims.

The SlutWalk points to rape culture as the main factor for sexual assault. Common phrases, such as, "But look at what she was wearing" or "She was asking for it," in response to an attack, illustrate rape culture perceptions held by society: the victim is responsible, especially if she is a slut. Illustrating this point, Dartnall and Jewkes (2013) note: "Sexual violence is an unusual violation in that, irrespective of the setting, the victim is often roundly blamed for its occurrence" (p. 4). Moreover, rape is often perceived to be synonymous with defiling, ascribing labels of uncleanness to victims of sexual assault (Ward, 1995, as cited in Dartnall & Jewkes, 2013). Similarly, the slut label can connote a lack of morality and cleanliness.

Kaitlyn Mendes's work, *SlutWalk: Feminism, Activism and Media*, provides an overview of the origins of the SlutWalk (Mendes, 2015). The SlutWalk was described as a protest organized to defy the

idea that the way a woman is dressed increases her risk for sexual assault. The movement also aims to reclaim the harmful label of slut. A feminist media analysis of the SlutWalk was conducted to examine how SlutWalks have been portrayed in mainstream global media. It was found that social media played a large part in globalizing the movement, potentially drawing more attention to sexual assault (Mendes, 2015).

A longitudinal and ethnographic study by Armstrong et al. (2014) examined slut shaming in the context of social hierarchies on a large Midwest American college campus by conducting 189 interviews with 44 college women over 4 years. It was found that the use of “slut discourse” was pervasive among all women interviewed, regardless of social and economic class. The researchers found that the circumstances and consequences varied depending on class, highlighting what the researchers defined as “sexual privilege” for women considered affluent (Armstrong et al., 2014, p. 1). This finding is consistent with the critiques of the SlutWalk movement examined by Mendes; the movement has a history of exclusivity to the challenges of white women (Mendes, 2015). Therefore, the risk for the slut label to “stick” may depend on class, race, sexuality, and other forms of marginalization. Though the exact means by which women were slut shamed appeared to be dependent on status, the need for these women to justify their actions to act or dress “provocatively” suggests the vast ways they were required to adapt to avoid the negative implications of slut shaming. This point will be further explored below.

Restricted Occupational Participation

The prevalence of peer-reviewed literature related to the SlutWalk and/or rape culture and its relation to occupational participation is scarce; therefore, we expanded our literature search beyond academic search engines and included Google Scholar and sources from the media using search terms such as rape culture, rape, sexual violence, gender-based violence, etc. We concluded that newspaper articles and blogs could serve as powerful anecdotal evidence that may not yet be represented in the research literature. Furthermore, Mendes argues that the exploration of social media, magazines, and blogs is paramount when understanding modern protest (Mendes, 2015).

Existing literature illuminates how rape culture restricts occupational participation. Investigators questioned a 22-year-old woman’s character because of the nature of her sex life with her boyfriend while examining the cause of her murder (Brown, 2019). A woman recounts a social media comment on a photo of her during a road race, “That’s because she doesn’t have any damn clothes on, and she’s running for her life. No wonder joggers get raped” (Lukin, 2017, para. 2). Examples of “proper” and expected victim behaviors may consist of complying with health care providers (Bevacqua, 2016); seeking immediate assistance; and displaying expressions of fear, anger, and/or sadness, etc. Mulla witnessed a forensic nurse question the validity of a victim’s claims regarding their rape following the victim’s refusal to take emergency contraception during a forensic examination (Mulla, 2014). One perceived deviation from the norm of traditional “victim behavior” is grounds for speculation (Bevacqua, 2016, para. 15).

Armstrong et al. (2014) also illustrate how rape culture influences occupation by producing preoccupation with one’s image, specifically to avoid victim blaming or slut shaming. It was common for women to alter their behavior to avoid being labeled a slut. Hesitation and embarrassment regarding sexual activity were frequently observed. When one woman was asked to quantify her sexual partners, she stated, “Roughly . . . this is so embarrassing. Roughly, like, 12?” (Armstrong et al., 2014, p. 106). Several women shared concerns about being perceived as “slutty” because of having sex outside of a serious relationship or having sex “too soon” in a relationship, looking “trashy” (e.g., wearing short skirts), dancing promiscuously, drinking and going to parties, openly flirting, wearing too much makeup, being “easy,”

and discussing masturbation (Armstrong et al., 2014). Women also deflected the slut label away from themselves and onto other women, reassuring the interviewers that they were “good girls” who did not engage in slutty behavior. The study reported that women went to great lengths to craft a look they liked while avoiding being perceived as slutty.

Liu et al. (2020) conducted a review of news articles related to sexual violence in 48 of the most popular newspapers in the United States. It was found that 46.42% used language consistent with the CDC’s recommendation for “language to avoid” with regard to sexual violence prevention. Simply put, approximately half of the news articles reviewed used language entrenched in rape culture. In addition, 13.5% of the reviewed articles incorporated one or more “rape myths” (e.g., the victim was asking for it). It was concluded that despite public concern regarding the problematic implications of such language, it still frequently appears in popular media. The authors of the review argue that altering language used in reporting sexual violence has the potential to aid in sexual violence prevention efforts (Liu et al., 2020).

The EHP

We suggest that a deeper examination of the principles of the SlutWalk through the EHP (Dunn et al., 1994) lens can focus and enhance occupational therapists’ work, not only with victims of sexual assault but all people impacted by rape culture.

In what follows, we offer suggestions for interventions using the EHP for necessary harm reduction for survivors of sexual assault that address the individual needs of victims while also expanding our focus to the larger societal construct of rape culture. It is our hope that this EHP-based approach supports victims not only through individual interventions but also through greater advocacy efforts that target problematic aspects of society.

In the EHP framework, several guiding principles of the SlutWalk can be applied to occupational therapy practice with individual victims of sexual assault as well as the larger societal contexts of rape culture. The SlutWalk movement postulates that rape occurs regardless of the victim’s behavior, that rape culture perpetuates sexual violence, and that the derogatory term slut holds significant power over individuals (Mendes, 2015). The EHP suggests that a client cannot perform tasks effectively if contextual factors, such as physical, temporal, social, and cultural aspects of their lives, do not align with personal factors, such as personal experiences and cognitive, sensorimotor, and psychosocial abilities (Dunn et al., 1994). Simply put, “The primary theoretical postulate fundamental to the EHP framework is that ecology, or the interaction between person and the environment, affects human behavior and performance, and that performance cannot be understood outside of context” (Dunn et al., 1994, p. 598). Therefore, in applying the EHP, we suggest occupational therapists support victims of sexual assault to overcome harms inflicted by violence while concomitantly addressing rape culture at large and, more specifically, how sexual assault survivors’ contextual factors may have been altered to restrict meaningful participation in areas such as work, education, leisure, activities of daily living, and instrumental activities of daily living. The EHP uses five therapeutic interventions, including establish/restore, alter, adapt, prevent, and create. Table 1 illustrates how these five intervention types may be applied to practice with individuals and advocacy efforts at the societal level to address adverse consequences of sexual assault and rape culture.

Table 1*Applying the EHP to Address Consequences of Sexual Assault and Rape Culture*

EHP construct	Application
Establish/restore	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Establish strategies for coping with social and environmental triggers. ● Establish and restore routines to promote holistic health. ● Restore pelvic floor function <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Preparatory methods involving strength and functional range of motion to address any physical injuries restricting occupational performance (Fryszter et al., 2022).
Alter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Alter sociopolitical contexts by advocating for cultural change: illuminate insidious elements of rape culture, their prevalence, and their impact on occupational participation and the health of individuals and communities. ● Bolster the work of activists by further illustrating the negative impacts on health and wellness that result from occupational deprivation.
Adapt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Adapt sensory environments and experiences to support occupational performance and participation. Tactile sensory experiences can trigger adverse reactions, such as a flashback or a panic attack, therefore negatively affecting social participation as well as the activities of daily living of sex and intimacy (Gerney & Muffly, 2015). Occupational therapists can help their clients safely identify what type of sensory experiences are triggering (i.e., light touch, unexpected touch, etc.) and help them communicate their new sensory needs to their friends, family, and romantic partners.
Prevent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Involving a trusted friend or family member in therapy could be beneficial to ensure that interventions are transferable (Fryszter et al., 2022). ● Assisting clients in identifying strategies for responding to sensory, social, environmental, and psychological triggers can empower clients and prevent secondary challenges in order to support social and occupational participation.
Create	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Introducing resources, such as social support groups (Fryszter et al., 2022). ● Assisting clients with locating supportive health care providers with minimal bias and/or who have worked to address and reduce the impacts of misogyny and rape culture.

Conclusion

The promotion of successful occupational engagement for those affected by an oppressive culture is dependent on both individual and societal change (Paul-Ward, 2009). The principles of the SlutWalk movement could assist occupational therapists in confronting the impacts of rape culture in order to provide better care for all clients. Occupational therapists, having vast knowledge of the importance of occupation and the contextual factors that contribute to occupational deprivation, have a unique skill set for treating those who have experienced sexual assault, and those who are affected by rape culture.

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