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Navigating Occupational Injustices through Morgan's Story

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OT: 601 Foundations of Occupational Therapy

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Navigating Occupational Injustices through Morgan's Story

Social factors, encompassing elements such as race, gender identity, and socioeconomic status, reflect the many complexities of identity and circumstances, shaping the daily experiences, aspirations, and overall well-being of individuals. Morgan, a 16-year-old Black nonbinary individual from Tacoma, was kicked out of the house after coming out as transgender four months ago, and has since been living with their friend Jamie's family. Despite previously excelling academically and actively participating in school clubs, Morgan's academic performance and social participation has declined, and they are facing financial uncertainty. Occupational justice emphasizes the right of every individual to engage in meaningful activities that contribute to their overall well-being (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). For marginalized populations like Morgan, the intersection of race, gender identity, and socioeconomic status can result in occupational injustice, hindering their ability to participate fully in education and social activities. This paper aims to explore the occupational risks that Morgan faces within the broader context of their identity and current circumstances. Furthermore, it seeks to highlight the importance of addressing occupational injustice in marginalized populations and proposes occupational therapy interventions as a means to provide resources, encouraging resilience and social participation.

Risks for Occupational Injustice

Occupational injustice refers to the barriers individuals face in participating in meaningful occupations due to social, economic, or political factors (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). These barriers include discrimination, systemic inequalities, and lack of access to resources or opportunities based on an individual's identity or circumstances. Addressing occupational injustices for individuals like Morgan requires a comprehensive understanding of the social

determinants and systemic barriers they face. Social determinants, including race, gender identity, familial support, and economic stability, intersect to create occupational injustices for Morgan, hindering their ability to participate fully in education and social activities. Specifically, Morgan is at risk for occupational injustice due to the intersections of their identity as a Black nonbinary transgender person, the rejection by their family, and the financial instability faced by Jamie's family.

Housing instability is a critical social determinant that negatively impacts mental health and academic performance, especially for children and adolescents (Padgett, 2020). Additionally, the financial concerns of Jamie's family further jeopardizes Morgan's stability and access to essential resources. For Black individuals, systemic racism limits educational and economic opportunities, potentially impacting Morgan's future career goals, educational attainment, and socioeconomic mobility (Braveman et al., 2022). Furthermore, transgender and gender non-conforming individuals often face discrimination and lack of societal acceptance, negatively affecting mental health and hindering engagement in meaningful occupations (Sherman et al., 2022). Racial biases present significant additional risks of discrimination for transgender people of color. These contexts of systemic discrimination reflect the many interconnected systems of oppression and privilege, further exacerbating the challenges Morgan faces and limiting opportunities for overall occupational engagement.

Occupational Barriers

Morgan faces considerable challenges in social participation and financial management due to familial rejection, isolation, and financial instability. Adolescence is a time of identity development and social participation develops astronomically (Branje et al., 2021). Adolescents are particularly influenced by their peers and high-quality peer relationships protect against

mental health problems, increasing resilience (Orben, Tomova, & Blakemore, 2020). Morgan's withdrawal from most social activities and peer relationships indicates challenges in maintaining social connections. This social withdrawal and isolation can lead to feelings of loneliness and negatively impact mental health and well-being (Orben, Tomova, & Blakemore, 2020). The stigma and discrimination associated with being transgender can exacerbate these challenges, affecting Morgan's ability to engage in social activities and maintain healthy relationships. Furthermore, family plays a pivotal role in an individual's social participation, providing emotional support and a sense of belonging (Dworkin & Serido, 2017). Morgan's eviction from their home after coming out as transgender has severed a crucial social support system, hindering their ability to further develop, navigate, and maintain relationships.

The financial instability of Jamie's family poses risk to Morgan's current living arrangement and highlights challenges in financial management. This uncertainty can lead to stress and anxiety about their future, impacting their ability to plan and make informed financial decisions. Homeless adolescents have difficulties with age-appropriate financial literacy skills, reporting a lack of important skills relating to money management, locating safe and permanent housing, and searching for employment (Shaver et al., 2019). Furthermore, students from low-income communities consistently scored lower on financial literacy assessments than peers from wealthier areas (Ferrero & Kushner, 2021). Financial education is a critical component of students' long-term outcomes in life, helping them meet financial obligations, feel secure in their financial future, and participate in meaningful activities (Financial capability & literacy, n.d.). Recognizing the role of financial education in shaping long-term outcomes is imperative to address these disparities and promote financial well-being for Morgan.

Occupational Therapy Interventions

Considering Morgan's identity as a Black nonbinary person, occupational therapy interventions need to be culturally competent. Understanding the barriers and challenges that individuals from diverse backgrounds face is crucial for targeting health disparities and improving intervention outcomes. The Model of Human Occupation (MOHO) emphasizes the dynamic relationship between motivation, habituation, performance capacity, and environmental factors influencing occupational performance (Forsyth et al., 2019). It is a client-centered approach, recognizing the importance of personal meaning in occupations and the impact of their environment on occupational engagement. The emphasis on volition allows occupational therapists to collaboratively explore values, interests, and personal goals to guide interventions that align with an individual's intrinsic motivations. MOHO also acknowledges the significance of the environment in shaping an individual's occupations. By exploring Morgan's internal motivations and environmental challenges, interventions can be approached holistically, exploring the factors that influence Morgan's engagement in various occupations. This makes MOHO well-suited to address the complex and multifaceted challenges that Morgan is facing, including social participation and financial management difficulties.

Given that Morgan's current living situation with Jamie's family is uncertain, it will be important to help navigate the many resources available, emphasizing independent living and financial management skill development. In 2021, 35% of transgender and non-binary youth reported experiencing homelessness or housing instability at some point in their lives (DeChants et al., 2021). This makes it very difficult to access high-quality health care, educational services, and other essential resources. The Loft Youth Shelter is a short-term emergency shelter in Tacoma that provides youth a safe place to live while working towards sustainable housing and employment (Benjamin, 2019). They also provide family reunification while ensuring safe and

unconditional care of LGBTQ+ youth. They seek to determine whether the attitudes or beliefs of the family have the potential to negatively affect the immediate health, safety, and well-being of the youth or expose them to future harm. Morgan's volition and safety will be important to identify. Recognizing that the home environment often sets the foundation for social emotional learning, reunification can play a significant role in encouraging a positive and supportive context for individuals. If the relationship with their parents is irreparable or unsafe, the occupational therapist can encourage them to form healthy relationships with other individuals in the school or community, providing tools to help further develop and maintain relationships.

Occupational therapy can address social participation challenges through real-life situations, practicing and rebuilding social connections. Group interventions, such as social skills training and peer support within the Pride club, can provide a supportive environment for Morgan to re-engage with others. Engaging in support group activities can enable LGBTQ+ youth to build meaningful relationships that enhance their ability to navigate challenging school environments and cope with various life stressors (McLaren, Schurmann, & Jenkins, 2015). Additionally, participation in support groups such as Gay-Straight Alliances and Pride clubs have been shown to foster a more inclusive and supportive environment for LGBTQ+ youth within educational settings, with members reporting higher grade point averages and a greater sense of belonging (Toomey et al., 2011). This emphasizes the importance of social participation in academic success and highlights the potential for these interventions to create a more inclusive and supportive environment. By leveraging the principles of MOHO and drawing on evidence-based practices, occupational therapists can contribute to creating a more inclusive and supportive environment for individuals like Morgan as they work towards overcoming social participation challenges.

Financial education can increase intergenerational outcomes, equipping individuals with the skills needed to make informed decisions, navigate unforeseen challenges, and consistently progress toward achieving their goals (Ferrero & Kushner, 2021). In a study that utilized a leisure-based occupational therapy financial management program, Shaver et al. (2019) found that homeless adolescents had substantial gains in financial literacy skills following participation in collaborative group sessions. With Morgan, it is important to collaboratively set short- and long-term financial goals, breaking them down into manageable action steps. This can include prioritizing needs, exploring income sources, and identifying potential financial support. By addressing financial management difficulties, occupational therapists can empower individuals like Morgan to overcome systemic barriers and achieve their financial goals.

Conclusion

Morgan's story highlights the significant impact of social determinants and life circumstances on occupation, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive understanding of the contextual factors that shape occupational engagement. Analyzing the occupational challenges within the broader context of Morgan's identity and circumstances highlights the widespread prevalence of occupational injustice, hindering their social participation and financial security. Drawing on the Model of Human Occupation (MOHO), occupational therapy provides a holistic and culturally competent approach to addressing the multifaceted challenges Morgan faces. By addressing social participation challenges and financial management difficulties through evidence-based practices, occupational therapists can play a pivotal role in fostering inclusivity, resilience, and well-being for marginalized populations like Morgan. The proposed interventions, encompassing support group activities and financial education, aim to empower individuals to overcome systemic barriers, emphasizing the importance of addressing occupational injustices to

promote a more equitable and supportive society. By acknowledging and actively working towards dismantling barriers, occupational therapists can promote inclusivity, resiliency, and well-being, enabling individuals to engage in meaningful occupations.

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