

Translating knowledge from Occupational Science: Contributions to the Occupation-based Community Development Framework

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The Occupation-based Community Development Framework¹

In describing the powerful ways that human occupation contributes to life, Occupational Science (OS) provides ways of understanding human occupation which can be applied within Occupational Therapy.

Figure 1: ObCD: Drawing knowledge from OS

Critical OT

- Addressing moral⁵ and political aspects of human occupation
- Application of critical theory and critical reflexivity⁶
- Promoting and enabling social inclusion
- Addressing occupational injustice

OT in Community Development

- Enabling individual and social change
- Facilitating more liberated forms of participation for vulnerable groups
- Advocate for policy change and changes in participation for groups and communities

Occupation based Community Development

- Promotes participatory processes that guides practice¹
- Analysis of human occupation in context as theoretical foundation and practice tool
- Enablement through occupational engagement
- Nurturing conditions for counter-hegemonic occupational engagement

Counter-hegemonic occupational engagement:

ways of participating in occupations that represents an alternate to the socially reproduced and dominant ideological positions commonly reflected in the participation of a vulnerable individual, group or community in a historied place over time⁸.

The Ob-CD Framework¹ guides practice that focuses on working at individual and group levels to change how occupational engagement contributes to social reproduction. Applying this framework involves facilitating processes that contest how people navigate the social, economic and political struggles associated with ordinary occupations in context².

Processes includes an analysis of and focus on:

- the actual occupations engaged in
- the dominant ideologies informing participation in occupations and the structural factors (cultural, social and economic factors) shaping the performance and selection of occupations
- the occupations that are missing from the range and type of occupations that individuals and the community usually participate in
- the potential for occupational engagement that promotes social inclusion

Occupational choice in context

Gaining an understanding of the occupational engagement of a vulnerable group in their context assists in identifying the cogent aspects of this participation. These aspects can be framed using OS theory. The Lavender Hill Heroes campaign illustrates this.

This campaign was facilitated by a final year OT student* while placed at a service learning placement at a primary school in a community called Lavender Hill. This community experiences perpetuated social inequality and poverty. The student worked with a group of grade 7's to explore their participation in occupations of learning, such as homework in order to address the way that this contributed to occupational injustice.

Her analysis of their occupational engagement was interpreted using the theoretical lenses of the transactional nature of occupation and of occupational choice and revealed the following:

- that people in Lavender Hill either do not finish school or struggle to access further educational opportunities after finishing school.
- The grade 7's had a tenuous consideration of whether they would go to high school, how long they would stay at high school or what they could do instead. The jobs that they were most familiar with were precarious working-class jobs where there is little emphasis on career success, enjoyment or satisfaction and the reality of unemployment was very familiar. They saw themselves as fitting into these patterns of participation and this view was reflected in their occupational choices in relation to school performance.

Occupational possibilities⁴

The influence of the dominant discourses communicating that academic achievements had little value was evident in the grade 7's occupational performance and occupational choices. Further to this, the discourses associated with the grade 7's race and class identities limited their views of what was possible for them. Teachers and learners tended to reproduce the dominant narratives, even when these were not in their favour or when they actually disagreed with the messages. The consequence was that learners and educators remained trapped in cycles of interaction which perpetuated the poor academic performance of learners.

The student reasoned that, if learners viewed their invested efforts in schoolwork as fruitless, they would be reluctant to further invest of themselves. The understanding gained was that a space was needed to challenge the discourses related to education. These discourses were contributing to their current occupational performance and engagement and were known to limit their occupational potential⁹, an important aspect of enabling occupational justice. However, it also reflected that their occupational possibilities were limited by these discourses.

An ObCD intervention that shifts occupational possibilities

The student initiated a dialogue with teachers where alternative possibilities for life trajectories of people became the focus, allowing for relationships to be established as mutual understanding was gained. Teachers shared stories of previous learners from the school who had built the kind of lives that contradicted the usual patterns of participation associated with this community, demonstrating counter-hegemonic occupational engagement.

Celebrating these individuals – considered as “Lavender Hill Heroes” – surfaced as an important part of challenging the usual discourse regarding how children who attend school in Lavender Hill should and would participate. Heroes were identified and invited to share their personal story with the learners as a critical part of the intervention process.

Decoding the discourses that inform participation

OS knowledge was interpreted to guide intervention in 3 parts:

1. Sub groups of learners were given the opportunity to interact with and reflect critically on the stories of a diverse set of Lavender Hill Heroes. This interaction was facilitated using an action-learning approach¹² which operated as a form of critical conscientisation.

The way in which heroes were prepared initially meant that the stories told highlighted the possibility for a different life, but also linked this strategically to their occupational choices which had shaped their lives in significant ways.

Learners were given the opportunity to interrogate the heroes' choices and to decide if they should be considered a hero. Together, they constructed a star on the “Lavender Hill Heroes Walk of Fame”, similar to the glamorous “Hollywood Walk of Fame”, as a symbol of this conferred hero status. Understanding the relationship of symbolic capital with occupational choice framed this aspect of the intervention¹³. This process allowed more conversations to transpire and encouraged learners to begin to construct their understanding of what this different discourse might mean for their occupational choices.



2. In subsequent OT sessions involving facilitated reflection on the experience with the heroes learners were:

- amazed at the similarity that they shared with the heroes
- able to recognise that the heroes were in a distinct position when compared to other adults that they knew.

These realisations assisted in **challenging the assumptions that they held about the possibilities at play for them, and how this was related to their current engagement at school**. These renewed ways of thinking provided an impetus for beginning to shift their patterns of participation. These shifts were evident in a renewed interest in school work; more active participation in class, more regular homework completion and improved school attendance.

3. **Support for the consolidation of these new ways of doing** needed to be considered in order to promote opportunities for learners to become the people who they began to imagine they could be. The process was thus augmented with advocacy for changes in the landscapes of opportunities available. Supporting parents and guardians as champions¹⁴ within the school community emerged as a viable strategy, acknowledging the exceptional role that parents play when considering a transactional view of occupation. It was envisaged that the capacity of parents could be developed to encourage and support these renewed choices. This work is continuing at present.



Conclusion

This poster has described the powerful role of OT in community development practice. It introduced ObCD as framework that shapes intervention meaningfully. It showed how OS constructs guides the understanding and analysis of issues of human occupation in context. This illustrates how conditions for counter-hegemonic occupational engagement can be nurtured when OS terminology and research is deconstructed and applied.

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