Theorising occupational therapy practice in diverse settings

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Background to the project

In the early twenty-first century, governments all over the world are having to demonstrate their capacity to manage spending on health and social care services against their ability to meet population needs. World health policies demonstrate growing concern over anticipated demographic change towards older populations with complex needs, combined with rising inequalities.

Yet systems are fragmented and the parts do not communicate effectively with each other; professional knowledge is developed in silos, gathered and disseminated along privileged channels; professional and institutional cultures are resistant to change, and strong interests are protected.

Increasing numbers of occupational therapists are seeking new ways to provide services that are relevant for and accessible to diverse populations. Yet, the majority of theories and models used in occupational therapy practice were developed within mainstream services and have little to offer the practitioner trying to navigate the complexity of working in diverse settings.

In 2017, during the 2nd conference on Occupational Therapy in Diverse Settings, held at the University of Brighton, three occupational therapists discussed the possibility of theorising the practice of occupational therapy outside mainstream health and social care settings. Over the next two years, Jane Clewes, Jennifer Creek and Rob Kirkwood, together with Nick Pollard, wrote a book proposal on this topic and submitted it to a UK-based publisher.

What are diverse settings?

The settings where occupational therapists are working with marginalised individuals, groups and populations include, among many others, communities, prisons, refugee camps and disaster zones. In these settings, they work to meet the occupational needs of:

- People living with structural poverty
- Refugees
- People displaced by natural disasters
- Prisoners
- People who have been trafficked
- Homeless people

Aims of the project

The goal of this collaboration was to produce a practical guide that will support the professional reasoning of occupational therapists working in diverse settings outside mainstream health and social care services.

This would be achieved by exploring the nature of the many systems within which occupational therapists practise, such as local government, corporations, social enterprises, unions and political organisations.

An appropriate theory would be selected to analyse the components of a diverse practice of occupational therapy in order to:

- relate occupational therapy aims and objectives more effectively to social and public health needs
- construct a framework to support the professional reasoning of occupational therapists working with the complexity of diverse settings

- provide a language for explaining occupational therapy to managers, colleagues and service users in terms that make sense to them.

Theorising occupational therapy practice in diverse settings

Social practice theory was chosen as the lens through which to examine occupational therapy practice in diverse settings (Nicolini 2012, Reckwitz 2002, Schatzki 1996, Shove et al 2012).

Social practice has been defined as 'doing, but not just doing in and of itself. It is doing in historical and social context that gives structure and meaning to what people do' (Wenger 1998: 47). Practice theory is a type of cultural theory.

Occupational therapy was conceptualised as a social practice and theorised in terms of:
- Space-time
- Temporality
- Place
- Access
- Resources
- Change.

The outcome

The book, *Theorising occupational therapy practice in diverse settings,* is being published this year, in paperback, hardback and electronic formats, by UK-based publisher, Taylor and Francis.

The book is designed to:
- help practitioners find ways of navigating the systems within which or through which they work, by supporting them in developing strategies, resilience and other means that enable the therapist to survive and progress in the context of current and predicted health and social care needs and systems
- make explicit the ways in which social rules shape/ constrain practice
- show how professional reasoning has to include finding pragmatic ways of achieving or working towards the achievement of our professional goals.
- offer strategies for working in grey areas; acknowledging that our practice does not take place in a black and white universe.

References
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