Occupational deprivation is a relatively new term which describes a state in which people are precluded from opportunities to engage in occupations of meaning due to factors outside their control. As we face the new millennium, it seems likely that, due to widespread social and economic change as well as increasing civil unrest, occupational deprivation will be experienced by increasing numbers of people globally.

This article describes the conceptual origins of occupational deprivation, presents definitions of the term and discusses specific populations that may be vulnerable to being occupationally deprived. Global, contextual issues of economic reform and technological advances are addressed with specific reference to these populations. Finally, consideration is given as to how an understanding of occupational deprivation is of relevance to occupational therapy and its concern with social and occupational justice.

Occupational Deprivation: Global Challenge in the New Millennium

Gail Whiteford

Introduction

Occupational deprivation is, in essence, a state in which a person or group of people are unable to do what is necessary and meaningful in their lives due to external restrictions. It is a state in which the opportunity to perform those occupations that have social, cultural and personal relevance is rendered difficult if not impossible. It is a reality for numerous people living around the globe today.

To highlight that occupational deprivation is a real and pressing phenomenon affecting the lives of many individuals, consider the situation of Trkulja Ljubica. She is a refugee living in Belgrade and reflects here on her former life:

> I remember my violets that remained blooming in the window of my kitchen. And all the flowers too. My violets flourished in various colours: blue, pink, white. I watched them there, one next to the other as if in conversation, not knowing that I would go from there and that my hand would not nourish them any more. Oh God, where is the end of this hell, when will I have violets and other flowers in my flat again? I always think how my violets dried up and died, dropping their gorgeous flowers (Ljubica 1996, p6).

Ljubica's story is part of a compelling collection of narrative accounts of the experience of refugeeism. This is the experience of being forcibly removed from home, family and community, of being disenfranchised and of being unable to engage in the everyday occupations of life such as growing violets. In other words, it is preclusion from those everyday occupations that bring meaning and coherence to existence.

This is an experience that is difficult for many of us to imagine as we orchestrate the numerous occupations that compete for time on a daily basis. Most of us have the freedom and opportunity to make choices about what we will, or will not, do today based on personal preference and individual or social need. The lives of Bosnian women like Ljubica, as well as the numerous refugees around the world in Rwanda, Kosovo and, more recently, East Timor, stand in sharp contrast. Their lives speak of trauma, upheaval, dislocation and occupational deprivation. While their situation is extreme, they are, however, not alone. Globally, groups of people that (arguably) include ethnic, cultural and religious minority groups, prisoners, chronically unemployed people, political prisoners, child labourers and women exist in the context of restricted occupational choice and diminished occupational opportunities.

In this article, definitions of occupational deprivation are presented and explored alongside the related phenomena of occupational disruption and dysfunction. Populations susceptible to the experience of occupational deprivation are identified, as are the impacts of occupational deprivation and the social, political and economic contexts in which it occurs. Narrative accounts from individuals are included to highlight their realities. In conclusion, some ideas as to how occupational therapists can address occupational deprivation as part of their orientation toward social and occupational justice are posited for consideration.

Defining and clarifying: what is occupational deprivation?

Wilcock (1998) originally defined occupational deprivation as being characterised by 'the influence of an external circumstance that keeps a person from acquiring, using, or enjoying something' (p145). Based on this original definition

of Wilcock and on focused inquiry into the phenomenon, the author's definition of occupational deprivation is:

> A state of preclusion from engagement in occupations of necessity and/or meaning due to factors that stand outside the immediate control of the individual.

The intention of the latter is to highlight the occupational and meaning dimensions within the definition so as to bring to the foreground their importance and relevance both to occupational therapy (Christiansen et al 1999) and to occupational science (Zemke and Clark 1996).

The important concept tacit to both these definitions, however, is that occupational deprivation as a term implies that *someone or something external to the individual is doing the depriving.* This concept is of central importance in understanding occupational deprivation. The state of deprivation arises not as a result of limitations inherent within the individual, but due to forces outside his or her control. The forces and conditions that may cause such deprivation are complex and are discussed more fully below.

Occupational disruption

There are two other occupational terms that, while sounding similar, describe quite different phenomena. These are occupational disruption and occupational dysfunction. Occupational disruption is a state that is usually temporary or transient rather than prolonged. Occupational disruption occurs when a person's normal pattern of occupational engagement is disrupted due to significant life events (such as having a baby), environmental changes (such as moving house or location), becoming ill or sustaining an injury from which full recovery is expected. The most important thing to remember about occupational disruption is that it is a *temporary state and one that, given supportive conditions, resolves itself.* Occupational deprivation differs in that it usually occurs over time and in a context in which there is an absence of supporting conditions. More often, the forces that create a state of occupational deprivation, such as civil conflict leading to refugeeism or the economic constraints necessitating a redundancy, are experienced as hostile.

Occupational dysfunction

Occupational dysfunction differs from occupational disruption in several key respects. Rather than conceptualising it as a discrete phenomenon, it can be viewed more usefully either as a by-product of non-resolved occupational disruption, as a result of specific occupational performance deficits, or as arising from a prolonged state of occupational deprivation. It is a phenomenon that is 'nested in a complex of factors all of which reflect and contribute to sustaining the performance, patterns of behaviour, identities, choices and so on, that reflect a life in trouble' (Kielhofner 1995, p156). Occupational dysfunction arising from a state of occupational deprivation may be characterised by atrophy of some of the innate human capacities for occupation (Wilcock 1993).

Understanding and identifying occupational deprivation

As may be evident, occupational deprivation is a relatively new term for a phenomenon that has arguably existed in human society for some time. The histories of human societies are characterised by groups of people subordinating others to themselves and depriving them of liberty (Toch 1977) and, hence, occupational freedom. In today's world, occupational deprivation still results from such direct social and cultural exclusions, but may also exist as a by-product of institutional policies, technological advancements, economic models and political systems (Wilcock 1998).

The impact of technology

If the impact of technology in particular is considered, it is evident that whole communities of people previously involved in both primary and manufacturing industries have been disenfranchised by mass unemployment due to new technologies in the workplace. As Tomlinson (1999) pointed out, technology never solves problems or creates better societies; rather, it serves to highlight social inequalities and political conflicts. That this is very much the case with the growing numbers of technology-driven redundancies is evident in the 'ghosting' of the blue-collar worker (Toulmin 1995). In an excellent analysis of the complex technological, economic and market-driven forces that have an impact on unemployment, Jones (1998) suggested that the twin phenomena of high levels of unemployment and high levels of participation occur because:

> ...males who were traditionally in work are now out of it and females who were traditionally out are now in. This phenomenon illustrates the development of a dual labour market and is broadly characteristic of most OECD countries. However, this is of no consolation to the unemployed, especially unskilled and semiskilled workers (p129).

Maldistributed labour

As indicated, economic conditions coupled with the new fiscal rationalism in many Western countries seem to be shaping occupational trends of concern. Of note is the paradoxical rise of chronic unemployment alongside overemployment; in other words, fewer people are doing more while lots of people are doing less. Bittman and Rice (1999) cited the Geneva-based International Labour Organisation (ILO) which suggested that the new flexibility demanded of modern employees about when and for how long they worked resulted in a *maldistribution* of working hours. Such a maldistribution, they argued, generated still more unemployment as well as increasingly precarious employment, and had 'the overall impact of reducing the bargaining capacity of organised labour' (p1).

Such an increasing trend towards maldistributed labour reflects an increasing polarisation of working hours, creating a scenario of two distinct groups in society: those with too much to do and those with too little. Those in the latter

category, that is, those deprived of opportunities to engage in the occupation of paid employment, have the time in which potentially to engage in other occupational pursuits but have little available financial resources with which to do so. This is problematic in a modern context because, as Lobo (1999) suggested, leisure has become commodified to the extent that it requires significant discretionary income. Increasingly, as he pointed out, you need money to be a leisure participant in Western society. This situation, that is, one in which people are already marginalised through lack of paid employment, lack of discretionary income and, subsequently, diminished opportunities to engage in leisure occupations, can over time evolve into a scenario of occupational deprivation.

Marginalisation

Besides unemployed people, underemployed people and those living in poverty, Wilcock (1998) included prisoners of war, prison inmates, minority groups (particularly indigenous peoples) and women in her list of people who are most vulnerable to occupational deprivation. This list reflects a collection of those individuals and groups who have traditionally had little or no legitimated 'voice' in mainstream society. Voice and representation reflect levels of participation in mainstream forms of cultural production (Giroux 1996). If you are occupationally deprived, such legitimate participation is difficult if not impossible. When this is the case, engagement in non-legitimated occupations, such as vandalism and participation in occupational groups like gangs (Snyder et al 1998), may become a seemingly attractive alternative.

Certainly, from an occupational perspective, such participation represents an understandable response. However, while there exist some perceived individual benefits in terms of identity construction and structured time use, engagement in such occupations is also potentially dangerous. Involvement has the potential for serious and negative consequences that represent a 'downward spiralling trend' (Snyder et al 1998, p134) at both personal and social levels. Antisocial activity, gang participation and marginal group identity are modern and largely urban phenomena and certainly beyond the scope of full exploration in this article. However, if framed as essentially occupational phenomena, that is, as by-products of sustained, socially constructed occupational deprivation, they warrant further inquiry as a matter of some urgency.

The experience of refugeeism

Refugees, as suggested above, are another group within society who are potentially at risk of becoming occupationally deprived. The experience of refugeeism is profound and life changing, leading to potentially serious and pervasive problems (Faderman 1998). While the temporary accommodation (which in some instances becomes long term) of refugee camps may be experienced as a holding space affording few normative occupational opportunities, the country of resettlement can prove as hostile to full occupational participation.

To highlight this point, it is worth considering a case illustration. Boua Xa Moua (1998) is an Hmong refugee who resettled in the USA. His story is compelling in that his dream of a new life in relative security sours as he finds himself isolated and occupationally restricted. He feels robbed of his previous legitimated social roles and describes his sense of being unable to 'do' in the confusing and restricting world of contemporary urban USA:

> Life in America is very tough ... I can't do anything, I would rather go back if I had the choice. I have been here so long but I have not learned how to speak English or how to read and write ... whenever you want to go anywhere, all the time, you have to wait for someone, I mean if they don't come you can't go where you want because you don't know how to go ... Like I said, if I would have a choice, I would have remained in Laos, or if I could, I would like to go back now. It's much nicer and peaceful back home. Here everything feels too lonely. Everything is too much. I always find myself lost in this world (Boua Xa Moua 1998, p101).

This account suggests that resettlement in another country does not necessarily predicate a successful outcome for refugees. Societal structures, economic and language barriers, as well as cultural and religious differences, can prevent community integration and occupational participation (Wilcock 1998). Even when financial status is secure through employment, the deprivation from occupations of meaning can have a devastating and long-term impact. As Boua Xa Moua (1998) reflected, there is little left but to wish for the place in which a meaningful occupational identity existed: home.

The human costs of occupational deprivation

A decade ago, Yerxa (1989) stated that 'Occupation is not just something nice to do, rather, it is wired into the human' and that 'Individuals are most true to their humanity when engaged in occupation' (p7). What happens, then, when people are deprived of this apparently innate feature of existence, of something so central to our humanity, as Yerxa put it? What are the consequences, both personal and social, of occupational deprivation?

There are few answers in the literature because, currently, there is a lack of existing research dealing with the negative consequences of occupational deprivation. This, in turn, is due to the fact that occupational deprivation (like numerous emergent occupational concepts) has been relatively recently framed as such within the occupational therapy profession. In order best to understand it, as well as other occupational phenomena and their respective relationships to health and wellbeing, focused inquiry using a range of methodological strategies is required in the near future (Law et al 1998). In the absence of an in-depth research base to draw upon, the following reflections on the impacts of occupational deprivation are based upon the author's experience of undertaking an occupational needs

assessment of a special assessment unit in a high security prison (Whiteford 1995, 1997).

Lack of meaningful time use

One of the most problematic dimensions associated with the direct experience of occupational deprivation is time use. Consistent with the study by Christiansen et al (1999) pointing to the positive relationship between time spent engaging in meaningful occupation and perceived wellbeing, lack of time spent engaged in meaningful occupations in the prison setting appeared detrimental to health and wellbeing. The dynamic relationship between time use, sense of efficacy and identity seemed, in the penal context, to be compromised by prolonged occupational deprivation.

Evidence of this came from the inmates' narratives. Many of those interviewed had experienced repeated psychotic breakdowns due to gross disturbances in orientation: they were unable to 'locate' themselves in time. With few occupations (except eating) to provide structure and punctuate the day, and with little variation in time use patterns between days of the week and months of the year, they reported feeling 'adrift' in an undifferentiated sea of time. Many comments reflected a sense of hopelessness born of a deteriorating sense of efficacy for, where there is little or no perceived control over occupational choices, 'there is no sense of efficacy' (Kielhofner 1995, p45).

The prisoners' descriptions reflected these themes and varied from 'Time is long and it passes slowly' to 'The days go fast but time is slow' and 'Time is nothingness'. Additionally, they commented that increased occupational opportunities had the potential to 'Keep my mind occupied and diverted from thoughts that make me crazy', 'Give me an opportunity to bring a picture of something I have in my head to life', 'Give me a chance to change my behaviour' and 'To let out anger and frustration' (Whiteford 1997, p129).

Maladaptive responses

Not surprisingly, sleep was reported by the inmates as a predominant response to their occupationally deprived state. Sleep, however, was not the only maladaptive response; the prison unit also had a high rate of suicide and suicide attempts. Whilst acknowledging the multiplicity of factors that may have contributed to it, this disturbing feature of life in the unit was discerned by the author to be, at least in part, due to pervasive occupational deprivation. Clearly, this is an area requiring further investigation.

Barrier to community reintegration

The major concern in respect of these inmates is that, for them, the experience of occupational deprivation appeared to be a significant barrier to successful community reintegration. They had, to varying degrees, adapted to the occupationally barren environment, reflected in the inmate comment: 'I've spent most of my life in institutions so the bars don't bother me' (Whiteford 1997). With severely restricted occupational role repertoires and diminished capacities for structuring and using time effectively, the inmates faced the challenge of living successful occupational

lives in the communities to which they would ultimately return. Prolonged occupational deprivation very probably diminishes the likelihood of adaptive responses to new environments, a scenario that could be remediated through the conscious creation of 'occupationally enriched' (Molineux and Whiteford 1999) prison environments.

Wider impact of occupational deprivation

While these observations have been drawn from interactions with a population of occupationally deprived prisoners, it can be argued that diminished opportunities to engage in occupations of meaning for any individual or group of people may potentially have similar results. After all, what we do in life is inextricable from the meaning we ascribe to it (Hasselkus 1997). Atrophied occupational capacities (Wilcock 1995), diminished self-efficacy beliefs and truncated identity constructions may all be by-products of this dehumanising phenomenon. Understanding just what impact this has on individuals, families, communities and societies is a central challenge in the new millennium and worthy of immediate attention.

Future challenges

The cogent question, then, is how should occupational therapists address occupational deprivation? There are three dimensions to how this can be done.

Adopting an occupational perspective

First, it requires occupational therapists to make a conceptual shift to an occupational perspective: to view the world through occupational eyes, seeing phenomena that have previously been viewed from other perspectives (for example, medical, psychological and social) as essentially occupational phenomena (Townsend 1999). An occupational perspective is a requisite to considering the occupational needs of people as individuals and within society, separately from consideration of how these can be met through the provision of therapeutic interventions. Such a perspective will serve to centralise the role of occupational therapists in being the key agents in the future to address challenging occupational phenomena. Although it has been suggested that there is a 'renaissance' of occupation in occupational therapy (Whiteford et al 2000), it still seems that a gap exists as to how occupation is incorporated into practice. This is an issue when, as Wood (1998) suggested, other professional groups are embracing occupation as pivotal to their interventions.

Acting at a broader social and cultural level

Second, occupational therapists need to think and act at a broader social and cultural level. Armed with an occupational perspective of society, there is a need to invest more energy into influencing social and institutional structures and policies, which preclude people from full occupational participation. In doing this, the profession comes closer to realising occupational therapy's social vision (Townsend 1993).

Embracing occupational justice

Third, occupational therapists need to embrace the concept of 'occupational justice': to mobilise resources with the aim of creating occupationally 'just' societies, societies based on people and their need, and indeed right, to do. Occupational justice is concerned with 'economic, political and social forces that create equitable opportunity and the means to choose, organise and perform occupations that people find useful or meaningful in their environment' (Townsend 1999, p154). Dignity, as created through the opportunity to interact with the world in a meaningful way through living diverse occupational lives, not just those focused on material gain (Fromm 1998), will be a central feature of an occupationally just future.

Embracing the principles of equity, justice, diversity and ecological sustainability will be central to the process of achieving this. In the excellent critique of a range of health promotion models presented by Wilcock (1998), that of 'social justice' appears to provide the best blueprint for action in addressing occupational deprivation. The model is described as promoting:

> ... social and economic change to increase individual, community and political awareness, resources and equitable opportunities for health ... participatory analysis of occupational disadvantage, underlying occupational determinants, and uncovering occupational injustice ... social action for change of occupational policies toward occupational equity and justice [including] social and political lobbying (p230).

Such action and activism represents a big, but necessary, brief for occupational therapy in the years ahead: the face of the new millennium is, to a greater or lesser extent, up to occupational therapists. This is because, as futurist Dator (paper given at the International Futures Conference, Auckland, 1992) suggested some time ago, we won't get the future we necessarily want, but we will get the future we deserve. It is a challenging prospect.

Summary

This article has explored occupational deprivation as a potentially challenging phenomenon in the new millennium. It has considered some definitions of the term and their origins, and has explored some related occupational phenomena. The article has considered briefly the conditions that contribute to occupational deprivation and the individuals and groups most vulnerable to it. A consideration of the human and social cost of occupational deprivation preceded a call to arms for occupational therapists to address, through social and political action, this challenging problem now and in the future.

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