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Performativity and occupation: Everyday occupations as a force of subjection

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The influential power of complex and transactive relations on the human subject's occupational performance has been a feature of contemporary theoretical development in occupational disciplines. Dominating political, ideological and cultural forces are understood as repressing occupational performance by limiting the subjects' capacity to fully express humanity and citizenship. Implicit in such formulations is a human subject that exists prior to occupational performance, subordinated to operations of external power.

Guided by the work of Judith Butler and Michel Foucault, I argue that the subject does not exist prior to occupational performance, but rather, it is the effect of performance. I will differentiate between the concepts of performance and performativity to show that occupation performatively brings the subject into being through historically established discursive conventions and forms of subjection.

Drawing on post-humanist philosophy, this study sought to map the conceptual and functional implications of occupational justice by discursively analysing texts within occupational disciplines. A corpus of key texts was selected from a survey of books and journals, and then expanded iteratively during analysis to produce a complex web of imbricated texts.

This study shows that occupational disciplines assume the existence of a subject that precedes occupation whose free expression is repressed by various fields of power. This assumption permeates contemporary discourses of client-centred practice and occupational justice, which each operate upon a largely emancipatory model that pursues the liberation from repression of an occupational human nature.

The theory of performativity – in which subjection is understood as the process of becoming a subject through power relations – may productively augment occupational performance and lend occupational disciplines a conceptual vocabulary with which to articulate the political dimension of occupation. That the everyday occupations employed as the means and ends of therapy might simultaneously function as regulatory mechanisms by which the subject is constituted and maintained poses renewed ethical dilemmas.

Occupation as a performative act presents therapists with the ethical and political tasks of examining what subjectivities their practice brings into being.