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Finding a meaningful life through occupation: refugee narratives from the UK

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Introduction

Refugees and people seeking asylum are identified as experiencing high levels of occupational deprivation (Whiteford 2000). For many individuals occupations have been shaped by the challenges of life in their country of origin, lost in their flight to the host country and denied by the policies and process of seeking asylum.

Objectives

This paper aims to explore the subjective meaning of occupation for people undergoing the transitional lives, and the role for occupational therapists in the well being and integration of refugees.

Methods

The presentation will use narratives gathered as part of a wider study into the meaning of occupation for refugees, people seeking asylum, and those refused asylum in the UK. The study is a qualitative exploration using narratives gathered with ethical approval and analysed using a structured content analysis. The paper will include an exploration of early study findings alongside existing literature to reflect current debate.

Results

Occupation, and particularly the right and opportunity to work, has been positively associated with many benefits post migration; yet better mental health, the maintenance of essential skills and integration with the host community is hampered by a range of practical, social and policy barriers.

For many individuals the ability to engage with occupations gives a positive connection to the person they were before they became a refugee, maintains their sense of purpose and belonging, and helps them to feel that they contribute meaningfully to their own future.

Conclusions and contribution to practice

The World Federation of Occupational Therapists has highlighted occupation as a human right and determined a role for therapists in raising awareness of occupational injustices such as these (WFOT 2006). By acknowledging the meaningful contribution of occupation in the lives of refugees we can raise concerns about inadequacies in opportunities available, whilst seeing the potential for occupation as a means to maintain or restore well being.

References

Whiteford (2000) Occupational deprivation: global challenge in the new millennium *British Journal of Occupational Therapy* Vol 63(5)

WFOT (2006) Position statement on human rights World Federation of Occupational Therapists