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Occupational poverty and the rights of chronically poor and disabled people

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Introduction

A new construct is proposed for the occupational science lexicon. Built on extant notions of occupational deprivation, alienation and imbalance, the idea of occupational poverty speaks to conditions that exist when chronically poor and disabled people are excluded from access to occupational resources, opportunities and experiences over long periods of time as the result of structural inequity. These deficits preclude them from full and free participation in the range and scope of roles, tasks and activities that would allow for the expression of their innate capacity, leading to stagnated potential, stunted agency and restricted learning.

Objectives

The construct of occupational poverty may serve occupational scientists as they endeavour to describe and explore the implications of the prolonged disconnection that people who live on the margins of society experience as the result of their limited chances to learn, experiment, and experience a variety of occupational challenges.

Description

The everyday things that people do, don't do or are unable to do by virtue of their positioning in society reveals the phenomenon of occupational poverty. The occupational form associated with structural inequity casts its shadow onto individual capacities, performance and potential in terms of functioning, human development and survival strategies.

Discussion

The use of an occupational lens informs the nature and extent of occupational poverty. It foregrounds the need for supported life long occupational development initiatives and provides information that helps people on the fringes of society to do things that make a significant and sustainable difference to the sort of future that they envisage for themselves, those close to them and their community.

Contribution to the practice/evidence base of occupational therapy.

The rights of occupationally poor people need to be better understood and championed by occupational therapists and occupational scientists, who may have more to offer development work with chronically poor and disabled people than is currently recognised.