

HOW DO INDIVIDUALS WITH SPINAL CORD INJURY CHOOSE ACTIVITIES? A Qualitative study based on a phenomenological hermeneutic method

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Introduction: although life expectancy of individuals with Spinal Cord Injury (SCI) remains below normal it continues to increase substantially. The progress achieved in the biomedical sciences concerning SCI has an impact on this survival rate and consequently the focus shifted to the importance of the long-term consequences of SCI.

The increasing life expectancy after SCI has given "participation", as defined within the International Classification of Functioning, disability and health (ICF), a new recognition as an ultimate goal of a comprehensive rehabilitation program.

Research has shown that participation in a variety of activities positively affects health and well-being. An important aspect in this discourse is whether the individual has the opportunity to choose preferred activities.

Objectives: To add to the existing body of knowledge of SCI rehabilitation by exploring the experiences of SCI-patients about how they choose activities.

Methods: This study employed a qualitative research design. 28 in-depth interviews were conducted with 12 SCI patients to elicit individual's narratives about their activity choices. The participants were selected using homogeneous sampling. Data were analyzed according to a phenomenological hermeneutic method.

Results: The findings revealed that activities are chosen in a continuum between the individual's (a) identity and (b) the influence from his/her environment. In this continuum the choice to perform activities is influenced by two mediating factors; (a) the individual's life-(hi)story and (b) his/her occupational challenge for the future.

Conclusion: Individuals with SCI are in constant consideration which activities to choose. Their sense-making is an internal process of negotiation and appeared to be based on finding balance between their own identity and the expectations from the environment. Individuals experience a sense of occupational justice by having the opportunity to choose activities in this continuum; taking their life-history and their occupational challenges into consideration in the decision making process.

Contribution to the practice/evidence base of occupational therapy: to fully understand the impact of SCI, it is essential to understand how individuals with SCI make choices concerning their activities. It enables occupational therapists to plan a client centred occupational therapy program and to monitor people at risk for occupational deprivation.