

Swimming Upstream: Promoting Participation, Health and Human Rights

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Introduction: Often the interplay of the spatial and temporal dimensions of diverse contextual factors support or hinder participation. Using examples from local (US) and global contexts, this presentation will address environmental impediments to participation of marginalized groups. Arguments for infusing a human rights approach and a political framework to Occupational therapy education, research and practice will be presented.

Objectives: This presentation will identify (1) challenges to participation for street children, immigrants, homeless families, women experiencing urban and rural poverty, and political dissenters who have acquired disability due to torture, (2) personal and environmental factors that contribute to occupational deprivation, imbalance, and alienation, and (3) reasons for infusing human rights and political approaches to enhance participation

Methods: A synthesis of multiple qualitative studies conducted by the authors will be presented. Participant experiences were captured via semi-structured interviews that were transcribed verbatim, and themes identified using the framework analysis.

Results: The overarching theme for all the groups is one of social/occupational injustice. Individuals experienced occupational loss, deprivation, alienation, imbalance, and apartheid. Major barriers to participation resided in the environment. Attitudinal barriers contributed to the exclusion of these groups from full social participation, and consequently had a negative impact on their perceived well being.

Conclusion: Occupation is a health determinant and as such the inability to engage in meaningful occupations puts people at risk for poor health and well being. As humans are innately occupational beings, denying them full participation, constitutes depriving them from being fully human. Occupational participation hence lies at the intersection of health and human rights and if occupational therapy claims to have a health-promoting mission, it must address social injustices that are barriers to full participation.

Contribution to the practice/evidence base of occupational therapy: The power of occupational therapy lies in our unique ability to promote human development through participation in everyday occupations. To attain its full potential, in adherence to its core values and its theoretical underpinnings, the profession must pay greater attention to the contextual barriers to participation. Strategies to infuse human rights into occupational therapy education, research and practice will be discussed.