

Social interaction: How do our theoretical frameworks impact upon our interactions with clients and the way we deliver therapy?

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Introduction:

Occupations are performed within social and relational contexts. A number of theories and models attempt to explain the nature of social interactions. When applied in clinical practice each can lead to different reasoning and interventions. Given this impact it is important to assess the fit of the theories with people engaged in everyday activities. This presentation describes research aimed at achieving that end.

Objective: To compare six selected theoretical frameworks that address social interaction with the everyday social interactions of one group of people.

Methods: Ethnographic data collection methods were used within a study design based upon hypothetico- deductive reasoning.

The researcher participated in the fitness group as a participant observer for three months. Fieldnotes were recorded after each session. Six open structured interviews were also conducted with four group members. Data were analysed concurrently with data collection using a multistage thematic analysis.

Six theories and models were analysed to produce statements representing core aspects that dealt with social interaction. These were then used to compare and evaluate the fit between the data and the theories.

Results:

The data showed that the informants did not behave according to socially, predefined expectations, (in the way that some frameworks described) rather they created their own unique relationships. An evaluation of each theory was conducted, noting the strengths and weaknesses, relating to goodness of fit, with the everyday experiences of people in this context. These strengths and weaknesses were related back to the use of the theories within Occupational Therapy practice.

Conclusion: Process based theories more accurately explained the social interactions observed and spoken about in this study than theories based upon structuralist understandings of relationships. Process based theories were also found to be more compatible with the aims of occupational therapy and occupational science. It is proposed that the use of structuralist theories be reconsidered in future research and clinical practice.

Contributions to the practice/evidence base of occupational therapy: Refining theoretical understandings that underpin clinical reasoning and practice has the potential to impact all areas of practice. These findings contribute to the ongoing evaluation and comparison of theoretical frameworks.