

EMOTIONAL INVESTMENT IN THE ENVIRONMENT: PSYCHOANALYTIC RESEARCH IN OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY

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Introduction

The environment where occupations take place is central to occupational therapy theory, but the subconscious meaning of the environment has been largely ignored by occupational therapists. Harold Searles in *The Nonhuman Environment in Normal Development and in Schizophrenia* uses psychoanalytic theory to describe the deep meaning that objects and surroundings have for human beings. Psychoanalysis uses the term object relationships to refer to human relationships and the human "object" is the focus of emotional investment. Searles brings our attention to the emotional investment in nonhuman objects as well and how this can enhance and facilitate human relationships.

During occupational therapy sessions nonhuman objects are present or created or brought from home and strongly influence the outcome of the therapy. The Vivaio Model of Occupation in the Relationship (MOVI) developed in Milan, Italy, considers the nonhuman environment with all of its unconscious components to have great therapeutic value and has studied the inner value of the objects produced in occupational therapy over the past thirty years.

Objectives

The study's aim is to focus on significant nonhuman objects present in various occupational therapy settings and to examine their relational and emotional significance as introduced by Searles and described in the Vivaio Model.

Method

Ten occupational therapists from diverse fields of the profession are asked to describe an object constructed or used in therapy which elicited strong emotional investment. The participants are then asked to talk about the experience and to link the significance of the object to the therapeutic process.

Results

Each object described tells a story which links a person, an object and a therapist. Common themes are identified and discussed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis.

Contribution to the practice base of occupational therapy

Knowledge of the inner significance of objects used during therapy can help therapists to better understand their clients. For example, helping devices, wheelchairs and other aids are part of the nonhuman environment and often contribute to ambivalence and strong emotion which when understood by occupational therapists, can be of assistance in meeting therapeutic objectives.