

Living Alone: A Human Rights Issue for Occupational Therapy?

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Introduction:

The number of people living alone has recently risen to unprecedented levels. The majority of this population are older women. However, the experience and meaning of living alone as a social and occupational phenomenon has gained remarkably little research or practice attention.

Occupational therapy has traditionally viewed living alone primarily as a context of 'risk', rather than exploring alternative accounts of how living alone shapes human occupations. A novel and alternative approach to thinking about living alone is from a human rights perspective. If older people living alone are seen to have the right to live in the community, and a right to be included and participate in community and cultural life, how would this inform occupational therapy practice?

Objective:

To critically explore the question:

Is living alone an issue of human rights, and if so, how could this inform occupational therapy?

Method:

A literature review will explore the issue of living alone from a human rights perspective. Specific attention will be paid to issues of gender, potential links to disability rights for older people, and issues of social justice, and participation. The strengths, limitations and implications for occupational therapy of approaching living alone from a human rights perspective will be discussed.

Conclusion:

With the number of older people living alone rising dramatically in many countries, the demands and pressures on occupational therapy to provide relevant, quality care to this group will increase. A novel and alternative approach to conceptualizing living alone as 'risk', is to consider it a human right. An evaluation of the benefits and limitations of a human rights perspective to the issue of living alone will open up new ways for occupational therapists to think about this often overlooked issue.

Contribution to Practice:

Older people living alone are often high on occupational therapy priority intervention lists. Living alone can be viewed primarily as a situation of 'risk' for older people, to the exclusion of exploring other perspectives. An investigation of living alone from a human rights perspective will contribute to our clinical and conceptual understandings of this increasingly important and yet remarkably under-explored topic.