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Rethinking transformation within occupational therapy interventions for persons with dementia

Staffan Josephsson

Karolinska Institutet, Stockholm, Sweden

Introduction: Most occupational therapy practices are situated within biomedical contexts where the individual is the unit in focus. This paper addresses how some transformation becomes invisible in these practices because they cannot be attributed only to the individual.

Drawing from more than a decade of experience in and research of occupational therapy interventions for persons with dementia, and using theoretical arguments from the philosopher Paul Ricoeur on the relations between narrative, action and sociality, the traditional tools and instruments used in occupational therapy practices will be questioned.

It is argued that these have failed to capture actual changes and transformations that individuals as well as groups experience from interventions partly because they are failing to capture processes and dynamics as well as failing to move beyond individual functioning to what happens between individuals.

Objectives: To identify ways to capture transformation resulting from engagement in everyday engagement of occupation among persons with a dementia disease and their carers.

Methods: Three persons participated in this study, two with moderate or severe dementia and one carer. Data was gathered with help of videotaping of occupational therapy interventions at a day care centre for persons with a dementia disease. Data was analyzed using narrative analyses. The local ethical committee approved the study.

Results: Results identified that mutual engagement in occupation involving the persons with dementia and carers connected these persons and enabled participation. Central processes enabling the participation was that the mutual engagement compensated for cognitive losses but also gave possibilities for stirring and recreating alternative meanings that were social rather than individual in character.

Conclusion: Engagement in occupation for persons with dementia and their carers might lead to substantial transformation if the social rather than the individual is the unit of analyses.

Contribution to the practice/evidence base of occupational

therapy: The present study contributes to development of future outcome measures within occupational therapy practice including social aspects of occupational engagement.