

## **Critical Reflections on Patient Empowerment, Occupational Therapy, and Occupational Justice**

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The term empowerment is often used in reference to occupational justice, but rarely is it clear how patients might be empowered in the context of clinical settings or how occupational therapists can facilitate that process. Furthermore, as there is increasing evidence that patient empowerment is linked with positive outcomes, both in terms of perception of healthcare encounters and secondary health outcomes such as chronic disease management and mental health recovery, the term “patient empowerment” is gaining traction in medical literature. But as empowerment gains attention in medical contexts it is important to consider the roots of the term (which were based in social justice, equitable participation, and an emphasis on structural elements of power) and whether the term “patient empowerment” is maintaining these elements or acquiescing to the individualist bias in healthcare. To examine this empirically, a systematic review of qualitative literature on patient empowerment was conducted. Included studies represented a highly cross-cultural sample, with perspectives from 10 countries represented (the United Kingdom, Norway, Taiwan, China, Australia, Iran, Belgium, New Zealand and the United States). Despite important cultural variation, themes indicate that structural elements of power are often overlooked and empowerment has shifted to become the patient’s responsibility, or at best, the patient and provider. Results lend important theoretical and practical application for occupational therapists who wish to promote empowerment in clinical settings in pursuit of occupational justice, and critical reflections for qualitative researchers.