

0017

Non-sanctioned occupations: Silences around activities framed as ‘unhealthy’, ‘deviant’, and illegal

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Introduction: Occupational therapists endeavour to enhance health and well-being through engagement in meaningful and purposeful occupation. Focus on health promoting qualities of occupation have effectively silenced a significant realm of the human experience; namely, occupations that dominant social groups frame as ‘unhealthy’, ‘deviant’, and/or illegal.

Objective: The intent is to enhance epistemic reflexivity by investigating underlying disciplinary assumptions that shape what occupational therapists consider taboo occupations and enactments of social power that occur through this.

Method: A critical examination of values, theories, and moral standpoints that inform knowledge production in occupational therapy was conducted. Interpretations were framed in reference to deviance, power, and resistance.

Results: The study of occupation implicitly and explicitly focuses on the positive, health inducing nature of occupation. Non-sanctioned occupations are predominantly constructed as ‘deviant,’ in relation to marginalised or at-risk populations. The role of occupational therapy tends to be corrective, such as reducing harm or conforming to other social conventions.

Conclusions: The relevance of occupational therapy depends on nuanced understanding of the diversity of human engagement in occupation, including occupations that are not sanctioned. Occupational therapists must examine their own assumptions, interpretations, and intentions as well as those of the profession. We need to resist the pre-emptive expectation for clients to adopt socially normative forms of occupational engagement. To truly be client-centred, it is essential to re-examine our notions of harm reduction and corrective practices grounded in particular assumptions and worldviews, to honour principles of respect and dignity.