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The Concept of Occupational Apartheid: Helpful or Hurtful?

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In 2005 'occupational apartheid' (OA) was added to the ideas around occupational risk factors and injustices, which themselves constitute debated concepts among occupational therapy (OT) scholars. As part of critical occupational science, it primes therapists to consider collective power dynamics and socially/ politically produced systemic injustices causing barriers to occupational engagement.

Objective: To determine if the concept is helpful or harmful to occupational science and/or OT. Approach: Trends in the existing literature on OA and the related socio-politically critical occupational science literature were examined in a narrative literature review, analysing a) its foundations, b) trends in its assimilation into OT discourses, c) contemporary applications and discussions on OA.

Practice implications: OA is a powerful tool for revealing how occupational inequities are socially and/ or politically produced. Providing a population-level systemic 'diagnosis', it represents a problem-based approach to situational analysis. Other concepts such as visions of possibilities, occupational choice and - consciousness may be more proactive and empowering in nature, indicating concrete avenues for possible interventions to overcome systemic injustices such as OA.

Conclusion: The concept of OA can be helpful in scholarly circles and for policy development, particularly if linked more strongly to the privilege/ oppression literature, thus making it accessible to theorists across disciplines. Care should be taken in practice contexts, where adding political tensions may worsen the situation for the community. However, combining the concept with a focus on occupational rights allows for constructive discussions, leading to practical approaches in assisting with empowerment of those we aim to serve.