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# Occupational Justice: A Conceptual Review

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This paper, the first of two examining the concept of occupational justice, presents the findings of a scoping review of how occupational justice and its associated concepts (occupational deprivation, marginalization, alienation, imbalance or apartheid) have been conceptualized. Its purpose is to examine potential avenues and barriers for development and application of these concepts. The results indicate that perspectives on occupational justice emphasize individuals' unique sets of occupational needs and capacities within particular environments. Based on the idea that participation in occupation can affect health, occupational justice is underpinned by a belief in the right to engage in diverse and meaningful occupations to meet people's individual needs and develop their potential. In the literature, barriers to engagement in meaningful occupation are considered injustices. One impediment to enabling occupational justice in practice is the lack of conceptual clarity about occupational justice and its related terms. Before an occupationally just perspective can be further developed and utilised, the conceptual basis of occupational justice needs to be clarified and models for occupationally just practice need to be further developed.

**Keywords:** Occupational justice, Occupational science, Social justice, Scoping review

Occupational justice theorists argue that individuals have a unique set of occupational capacities, needs and routines within the context of their environment and that individuals have the right to exercise their capacities to promote and sustain their health and quality of life (Stadnyk, Townsend, & Wilcock, 2010). Originating in the field of occupational science, these ideas extend current thinking by focusing on access to meaningful occupation as a matter of justice. Theories of occupational justice are discussed, developed and taught in occupational science and occupational therapy programs around the world, however, generally accepted ideas about occupational

justice have not yet been consolidated. The lack of a consolidated understanding and approach to occupational justice limits its potential for further development, as well as utilisation.

This paper is the first of two related papers examining the concept of occupational justice. The purpose of this paper is to explore how occupational justice has been conceptualized in the literature and to examine its potential for development and applicability for practice. The purpose of the second paper is to further examine occupational justice from different theoretical, practitioner, organizational and bioethical

perspectives to provide insights for future developments of occupational justice concepts in broader multidisciplinary and theoretical realms (Durocher, Gibson, & Rappolt, 2013). First we examine how the concept of occupational justice emerged and outline how ideas of ‘occupational justice’, ‘occupational injustice’ and frameworks of occupational justice have been proposed in the literature. The discussion will then consider possible barriers and potential application of the concept of occupational justice.

## Methods

A scoping review of the literature (Arksey & O’Malley, 2005) was undertaken to examine concepts of occupational justice. Scoping methods map “key concepts underpinning a research area”, particularly when “an area is complex or has not been reviewed comprehensively before” (Mays, Roberts, & Popay, 2001, p. 194). Scoping reviews explore the depth, breadth and nature of existing research, draw conclusions about current research activity in the literature, and identify gaps where evidence is not yet provided (Arksey & O’Malley, 2005). The methods for this study differed from traditional scoping studies in that both empirical and theoretical literature was analyzed.

The search was completed in four stages. In the first stage, literature was identified by searching the following electronic databases for the phrase ‘occupational justice’: Ovid-MEDLINE, EMBASE, AMED, Ovid-Healthstar, Pubmed, Scholar’s portal, Scopus, Web of Science, BIOSIS, and CINAHL. This search yielded nine books or book chapters and 105 articles. As with systematic reviews (Higgins & Green, 2009), in the second stage, inclusion/exclusion criteria were applied to identified literature to ensure consistency in evaluating and identifying relevant works. Those criteria were applied through a review of the abstracts. If the abstract indicated clear relevance, the full article was reviewed. To be included, the article had to meet each of the following criteria: discussed occupational justice or closely related concepts (i.e. occupational injustice); conceptualized ‘occupation’ as all activities in which people

partake; was not a review of a book or article; was written in English. Using these criteria, eight book chapters and 58 articles were included for full review.

The third stage included hand searching key journals (those yielding more than three articles in the initial search: American Journal of Occupational Therapy, Australian Occupational Therapy Journal, British Journal of Occupational Therapy, Canadian Journal of Occupational Therapy and Journal of Occupational Science) and the writings of key authors. The reference lists of literature identified in stage two were also reviewed for key authors and recurrence of citations. Stage three added a further 16 works, for a total of 19 book chapters and 63 articles.

Finally in the fourth stage, additional inclusion/exclusion criteria were used to ensure that the literature focused on the conceptualization and development of occupational justice. These additional criteria required that each article or chapter must not be limited to repeating information, or citing material, from another included article; and must include conceptual and theoretical discussion about the concept of, or concepts pertinent to, occupational justice (i.e. occupational injustice). Literature was reviewed in its entirety, and that which did not develop the theoretical or conceptual discussion, such as works demonstrating applications of occupational justice (or injustice) with minimal theoretical discussion, was excluded (69 items). Though we acknowledge that applications of theoretical concepts can further theoretical discussions, a detailed examination of the applications of occupational justice was beyond the scope of this review. Consistent with scoping study methods (Arksey & O’Malley, 2005), the quality of the literature was not assessed as this could have excluded relevant discussion based on criteria that were not relevant to the purposes of this review.

The following questions were used to systematically review and extract information from the identified literature: 1. How is ‘occupational justice’ conceptualized? 2. How are other terms

related to occupational justice conceptualized and how do these relate to occupational justice? 3. Do the authors present an occupational justice framework or model to explain their conceptualization? These questions framed the interpretation of how occupational justice is conceptualized in the literature, what related concepts might contribute to, or distract from, a coherent conceptualization, and how occupational justice is developed using models or frameworks. Conceptual contributions were extracted from each publication using a standard template that had been developed in collaboration by the authors of this paper; the information was then examined and summarized, compared to contributions of other works, and analyzed for internal conceptual consistency, completeness and overall contribution to the discussion.

## Findings

The search strategy yielded a final total of 13 works for inclusion in the review: four articles (Hammell, 2008; Townsend & Wilcock, 2004; Whiteford, 2000; Wilcock & Townsend, 2000) and nine book chapters (Kronenberg & Pollard, 2005; Stadnyk, 2008; Stadnyk et al., 2010; Whiteford, 2010; Whiteford & Townsend, 2011; Wilcock, 1998, 2005, 2006; Wilcock & Townsend, 2009). Two theorists, Wilcock and Townsend, were dominant in the literature and authored or co-authored eight of the pieces of literature, and two more theorists, Stadnyk and Whiteford authored or co-authored two or three works respectively. The remaining two works were authored by Kronenberg and Pollard (2005) and Hammell (2008).

### *What is occupational justice?*

The term 'occupational justice' emerged in the late 1990s with the integration of the work of Wilcock and Townsend (Stadnyk et al., 2010; Townsend & Wilcock, 2004; Wilcock & Townsend, 2009). According to Wilcock, values attached to occupations are dependent on cultural and socio-political determinants (Wilcock & Townsend, 2009). Furthermore, she asserted that since occupations are central to human existence, restrictions to

participation in occupation are a matter of injustice (Townsend & Wilcock, 2004). Townsend's earlier work addressed issues of 'empowerment' and 'client-centered practice'. These authors had a common interest in occupation and its role in social justice, and questioned whether social justice sufficiently addresses individual and collective rights to participate in occupation (Wilcock & Townsend, 2009) or whether a concept having a stronger focus on occupation was required.

Stadnyk et al. (2010) described occupational justice as focusing on "meaningful and purposeful occupations (tasks and activities) that people want to do, need to do, and can do considering their personal and situational circumstances" (p. 331). Thus, an occupational justice perspective recognizes individuals as occupational beings and acknowledges each individual as having unique occupational wishes, habits and needs based on his or her unique set of circumstances and capacities, and that each individual will require different occupational opportunities to utilize their talents and flourish (Townsend & Wilcock, 2004; Wilcock, 2006; Wilcock & Townsend, 2009). In the literature, identified needs that may be met through occupations included "exerting citizen empowerment, choice and control" (Townsend & Wilcock, 2004, p. 80); "nourishment of the human spirit and spirituality" (Wilcock, 2005, p. 85); "health, quality of life, and the sustenance of families and communities . . . looking after the self or others, enjoying life, or doing something that feels or is acknowledged by others to be productive" (Stadnyk et al., 2010, pp. 334–335).

Within an occupational justice perspective, individuals have the right to equal opportunities to engage in varied and meaningful occupations in order to meet basic needs and maximize their potential (Wilcock, 2006; Wilcock & Townsend, 2009). An "occupationally just world is envisioned as one that would be governed in a way that enables individuals to flourish by doing what they decide is most meaningful and useful to themselves and to their families, communities,

and nations” (Wilcock & Townsend, 2009, p. 330). That necessitates fair allocation of resources to enable the equitable distribution of rights and privileges that can result from participation in occupations, while recognizing the unique occupational needs of individuals. Infringement of the freedom to participate in these occupations is injustice (Wilcock & Townsend, 2009).

#### *Occupational justice in relation to social justice*

Of the 13 articles and chapters reviewed, 8 referred to the relationship between occupational justice and social justice, albeit all in a somewhat cursory and inconsistent fashion. Descriptions of social justice broadly center on the social nature of humans in the context of society and social relationships, and span the equal worth of citizens, equitable rights, power and responsibilities, as well as fair and ethical distribution of resources and opportunities enabled by those resources (Stadnyk et al., 2010; Wilcock, 2005, 2006; Wilcock & Townsend, 2009; Whiteford & Townsend, 2011). These concepts are not comprehensively discussed or linked by a coherent theory of social justice. Occupational justice is differentiated from social justice, framed as the belief that humans need the freedom to participate in meaningful occupations. Occupational justice and social justice are described as having in common concepts of equity (Wilcock & Townsend, 2000) and the need for just governance of society that upholds “fairness, empowerment, and equitable access to resources, and sharing of rights and responsibilities” (Wilcock, 2005, p. 84). Debate about the ‘mutual exclusion’ or ‘indistinguishable nature’ of occupational and social justice is, however, acknowledged (Wilcock & Townsend, 2009). Stadnyk and colleagues (2010) tried to clarify that debate using Wilcock’s (2006) earlier view, distinguishing occupational justice as complementary to social justice. They suggested that occupational justice extends notions of social justice by recognizing occupational rights, and through placing emphasis on the importance of enabling participation in meaningful occupation. Stadnyk et al. (2010) also distinguished occupational justice from social

justice in terms of how the former conceptualizes humans as occupational beings having a unique set of occupational needs, abilities and resources. This work builds on Stadnyk’s (2008) earlier idea that the social structures can lay the determinants of occupational injustice.

#### *What is occupational injustice?*

A number of conceptualizations of occupational injustice have been described, helping to elucidate the meaning of occupational justice by elucidating how it can be violated. Five forms of occupational injustice are described in varying detail.

#### *Occupational apartheid*

Occupational apartheid occurs in situations where opportunities for occupation are afforded to some individuals and restricted to others based on personal characteristics such as race, disability, gender, age, nationality, religion, social status, sexuality and so on (Kronenberg & Pollard, 2005). Occupational apartheid may result from occupational restrictions at the economic, social, legal or religious level and be created through “unresponsive, collusive, or exploitative policy measures maintaining privilege over poverty” (p. 66). Occupational apartheid could be considered formally institutionalized occupational injustice.

#### *Occupational deprivation*

Occupational deprivation is the most prevalent example of occupational injustice found in the reviewed literature. Drawing on Wilcock (1998), Whiteford (2000) defined occupational deprivation as “a state of preclusion from engagement in occupations of necessity and/or meaning due to factors that stand outside the immediate control of the individual” (p. 201). Whiteford (2000, 2010) and Wilcock (2006) both suggested that these external circumstances may include social, environmental, economic, geographic, historical, cultural, political or interpersonal factors. Whiteford (2010) distinguished occupational deprivation from occupational disruption, a temporary condition that may be due, for example, to illness. Occupational deprivation is argued to have a pervasive and long term effect on individuals

(Whiteford 2012; Wilcock, 1998, 2006) and can also have significant health implications (Wilcock, 2006).

#### *Occupational marginalization*

Occupational marginalization is explained as exclusion from participation in occupations based on 'invisible' norms and expectations about who should participate in what occupations, how, when, where and why (Stadnyk et al., 2010; Townsend & Wilcock, 2004). It is further described as situations where individuals or groups may not be afforded the choice to participate in valued occupations, and may be relegated to those that are less prestigious or allow little choice or control (Stadnyk et al., 2010), or opportunity for decision-making (Townsend & Wilcock, 2004). Hammell (2008) added that marginalization can be manifested through, or result in, social exclusion and limited access to opportunities and resources. Townsend and Wilcock (2004) distinguished occupational marginalization from occupational apartheid and occupational deprivation, arguing that occupational marginalization results from informal norms and expectations within a sociocultural infrastructure. In other words, persons are not restricted from participation in occupations because of explicit laws, social policy or religious edicts, but rather by habits, traditions and unexamined expectations of behaviour.

#### *Occupational alienation*

Occupational alienation is described as a "prolonged experience of disconnectedness, isolation, emptiness, lack of a sense of identity, a limited or confined expression of spirit, or a sense of meaninglessness" (Townsend & Wilcock, 2004, p. 80) and in relation to limited (or forced) participation in occupations viewed as meaningless or purposeless (Stadnyk et al., 2010; Wilcock, 2006). Stadnyk et al. (2010) argued that meaningful occupations may be mentally and spiritually enriching and shape one's identity. As such, participation in occupations that do not provide positive experiences can impede formation of positive identities and, they argued, is thus unjust. Further injustice is implied in Wilcock's (2006)

examination of the potentially highly detrimental health effects of occupational alienation. Stadnyk et al. (2010) contended that situations where some individuals are subject to deprivation or alienation from highly valued and meaningful occupations while others are privileged with the same (potentially at the expense of those being alienated or deprived) could lead to situations of occupational apartheid.

#### *Occupational imbalance*

At the individual level, occupational imbalance refers to excessive time spent occupied in one area of life at the expense of other areas (Stadnyk et al., 2010); for example, individuals spending an overabundance of time in paid employment at the expense of family time. Wilcock (2006) further argued that occupational imbalance can occur when the timing of occupations is out of alignment with personal or physiological needs or routines; for example working the night shift. At the societal level, occupational imbalance is described as situations where some individuals are offered many opportunities for occupation while others are afforded few, resulting in individuals being over, under, or even unoccupied (Stadnyk et al., 2010; Townsend & Wilcock, 2004). All of these forms of occupational imbalance can have detrimental effects on health (Wilcock, 2006), with economic, political and cultural structures largely responsible for situations of imbalance, particularly with respect to the distribution of paid employment (Townsend & Wilcock, 2004). Furthermore, if those structures create or maintain situations of occupational imbalance, the result could be seen as occupational apartheid. In situations of occupational imbalance, not only may occupations be unequally distributed, but also the rights, privileges, benefits and rewards that are associated with these occupations.

The concepts of apartheid, deprivation, marginalization, alienation and imbalance denote various forms of exclusion from occupations as well as the imposition of unfavourable occupations, i.e., where individuals participate in occupations they would not ordinarily choose. Occupational

justice theorists argue that both prohibition from participation in occupations that are meaningful and the obligation to participate in occupations that are not willingly chosen or meaningful may affect individual well-being. A difficulty with these concepts lies in the lack of conceptual clarity regarding how to determine which occupations should be prevented or compelled for which individuals. For example, putting a child to bed when he or she wishes to stay up and play fits the definition of occupational injustice and marginalization, yet most people would agree that the child's general welfare supersedes his or her interest in staying up. Similarly, smoking cigarettes is linked with an increased risk of cardiac and lung disease (Lloyd-Jones et al., 2009), and thus decreased health, yet some individuals who smoke consider it a meaningful occupation from which they derive social benefit, opportunities to develop social relationships and a sense of belonging (Katainen, 2012). Is it injustice in the form of occupational deprivation and/or alienation to prevent individuals from smoking in social situations that occur in public places where they might most wish to express their individuality?

While both of these examples outline situations that meet the definitions of occupational injustice, it could be argued that these injustices are outweighed by other moral and health concerns. The more nuanced argument may be less about defining and identifying occupational injustices than whether or not the injustice obligates a response. Certainly situations of slavery, war,

poverty, abuse, displacement and countless other circumstances may indicate the need for a response to injustice, but whether or not these and other injustices indicate the need for intervention against occupational injustices requires deliberation. Closely linked to the forms of injustice described in the literature is the concept of occupational rights.

*What are occupational rights?*

In 2004, Townsend and Wilcock extended the concept of occupational justice by proposing four occupational rights, with each right linked to one of four forms of occupational injustice (listed in Table 1). The rights focus on enabling meaningful occupations, inclusion, autonomy and diverse participation, but the authors do not explain the emergence of these four rights in their theorizing. These rights are also reflected in the work of Whiteford and Townsend (2011).

In contrast, Hammell's (2008) formulation of occupational rights as "the right of all people to engage in meaningful occupations that contribute positively to their own well-being and the well-being of their communities" (p. 61), is very similar to previous descriptions of occupational justice proposed by Wilcock, Townsend and Stadnyk. While Hammell briefly acknowledged Townsend and Wilcock's (2004) definition, she did not explicitly differentiate her use of the term from theirs, nor did she comment on their definitions. The use of different terms for similar meanings and the same terms for different

**Table 1: Townsend and Wilcock's Proposed Occupational Rights**

Proposed Occupational Rights
Right to experience occupation as meaningful and enriching. <i>Occupational injustice: occupational alienation</i>
Right to develop through participation in occupations for health and social inclusion. <i>Occupational injustice: occupational deprivation</i>
Right to exert individual or population autonomy through choice in occupations. <i>Occupational injustice: occupational marginalization</i>
Right to benefit from fair privileges for diverse participation in occupations. <i>Occupational injustice: occupational imbalance</i>

\*Injustices noted are examples only. They are not categorically limited consequences of restricted rights. (Townsend, E. & Wilcock, A. ©2004, Canadian Journal of Occupational Therapy, 71(2), p. 80. Reproduced with permission)

meanings impedes the development, uptake and application of the ideas.

Conspicuously absent in most of the occupational justice literature is any mention of the World Federation of Occupational Therapy's (WFOT) Position Statement on Human Rights (2006), which uses very similar terms and concepts and reaffirms WFOT's support of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights. WFOT extended and specified the rights in the declaration using an occupational perspective by stating that "people have the right to participate in a range of occupations that enable them to flourish, fulfil their potential and experience satisfaction in a way consistent with their culture and beliefs" and "to be supported to participate in occupations" (p. 1). While the position statement did not use the terms 'occupational justice' or 'occupational rights', the principles outlined closely align with those discussed in the occupational justice literature.

The only work identified in our review that mentioned this position statement was Whiteford and Townsend (2011). While we acknowledge that seven of the works reviewed were written prior to the release of the WFOT (2006) position statement, six were written in 2008 or later, thus giving sufficient time for its consideration. Reference to the position statement could reaffirm the value of developing the theory behind, and purpose for the development of, occupational justice concepts, frameworks and models.

## Theories and Frameworks of Occupational Justice

The reviewed literature included two theoretical frameworks pertaining to occupational justice. The first is Stadnyk et al.'s (2010) Evolving Theory of Occupational Justice, which further developed the framework proposed by Wilcock and Townsend (2004) and reprinted in Stadnyk (2008). The second was Whiteford and Townsend's (2010) Participatory Occupational Justice Framework (as cited in Whiteford &

Townsend, 2011). Both frameworks are described below.

### *Evolving Theory of Occupational Justice*

Stadnyk et al.'s (2010) Evolving Theory of Occupational Justice is the only comprehensive theory of occupational justice in the reviewed literature. It consists of three parts: 1) A Framework Exploring the Creation and Outcomes of Occupational Justices and Injustices; 2) A Framework for Occupational Justice; and 3) beliefs and principles about occupational justice. See Figure 1. Part one appeared in both publications of the Evolving Theory of Occupational Justice (Stadnyk et al., 2010; Wilcock & Townsend, 2004) and was reproduced in Townsend and Polatajko (2007).

The three part framework is intended to illustrate "intersecting ideas that gave rise to an evolving theory of occupational justice" (Stadnyk et al., 2010, p. 334). While it is helpful in listing some key concepts discussed in the occupational justice literature, limited explanation and no evidence or examples are provided to elucidate these concepts, substantiate their relationships in the diagram, or explain the choice of unidirectional or bidirectional arrows. Furthermore no discussion is provided to elaborate on the emergence of the diagram or explain its theoretical or practical application. The concepts in the diagram have varied definitions in the literature and across disciplines. Definitions of the concepts and their relationships would likely assist in further understanding occupational justice and its application. Similarly, examples of actual situations explained through the lens of this framework might help to illustrate how occupational justice is embedded in practice.

Part two of Stadnyk et al.'s (2010) theory is the Framework for Occupational Justice. See Figure 2. Key ideas from Townsend and Wilcock's (2004) Exploratory Theory of Occupational Justice are reiterated in this framework. Broadly, it illustrates how 'structural factors' combined with 'contextual factors' lead to situations of 'occupational justice or injustice', which in turn result in 'occupational outcomes'. The framework suggests that if structural and contextual factors



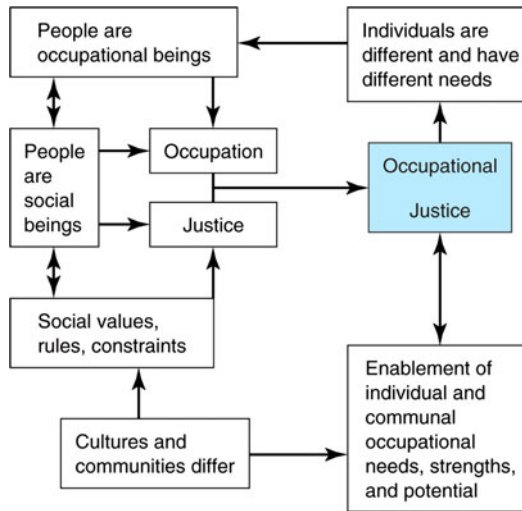


Figure 1: Framework Exploring the Creation and Outcomes of Occupational Justices and Injustices

(Stadnyk et al., 2010, p. 335; From Christiansen, Charles; Townsend, Elizabeth. Introduction to occupation: The art and science of living, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. ©2010. Printed and electronically reproduced by permission of Pearson Education, Inc., Upper Saddle River, New Jersey, USA)

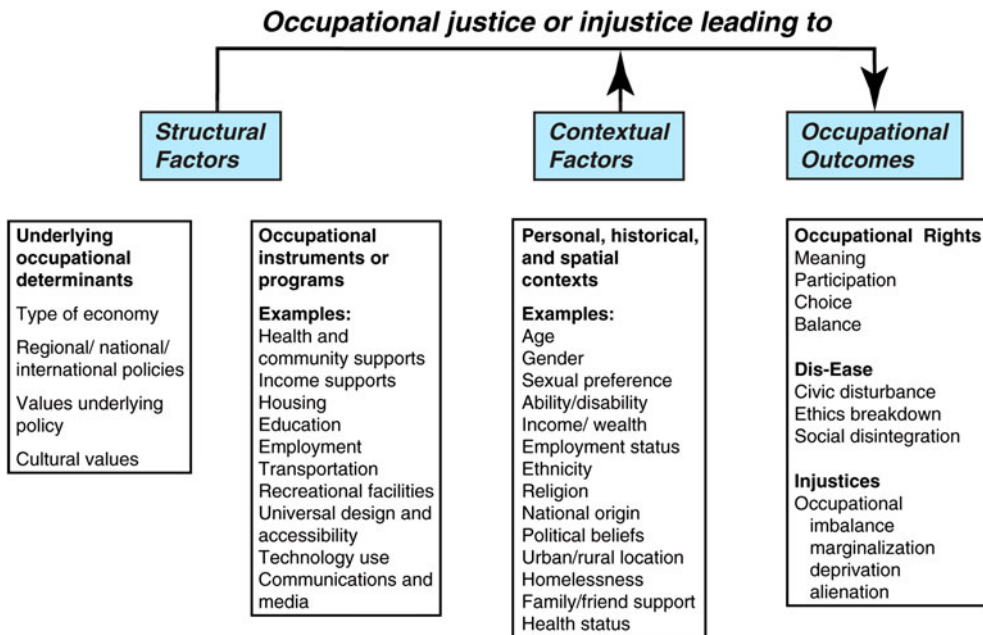


Figure 2: Framework for Occupational Justice

(Stadnyk et al., 2010, p. 336; From Christiansen, Charles; Townsend, Elizabeth. Introduction to occupation: The art and science of living, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. ©2010. Printed and electronically reproduced by permission of Pearson Education, Inc., Upper Saddle River, New Jersey, USA)

align such that occupational rights are respected, occupational justice is enabled and individuals are afforded opportunities to participate in chosen meaningful occupations. If, on the other hand, structural and contextual factors lead to circumstances where participation in occupation is hindered, occupational rights are violated and occupational injustice may arise. Occupational outcomes pertain to individuals or social groups and may be positive or negative. The authors described that “occupational injustices are thus socially structured, socially formed conditions that give rise to stressful occupational experiences” (p. 338).

In part three of the framework, Stadnyk et al. (2010) outlined four underlying beliefs and four principles. The beliefs are based on values and assumptions about humans, including that participation in “occupations [takes place] in social conditions that determine health and quality of life” (p. 340) and are informed by theories from various fields of study such as occupational science, occupational therapy, philosophy, science, and anthropology. The four beliefs are that humans are occupational beings, that they participate in occupations as autonomous agents, that participation in occupation is both interdependent and contextual, and finally, that participation in occupation is a determinant of health and quality of life (Stadnyk et al., 2010).

The four principles “outline rights, responsibilities, and freedoms of enablement” and “derive from a recognition that individuals have occupational needs, strengths, and potentials that affect health and quality of life” (Stadnyk et al., 2010, p. 343). They include claims about “empowerment through occupation; . . . inclusive classification of occupations; . . . enablement of occupational potential; . . . [and] diversity, inclusion and shared advantage in occupational participation” (Stadnyk et al., 2010, pp. 343–347). While the principles appear to be derived from beliefs, the discussion does not make clear how they were developed or if they are informed by theoretical or empirical work. Stadnyk (2008) attempted to apply this framework to a specific scenario in order to exemplify how it might be

useful to occupational therapists approaching situations of injustice. While helpful, a more generalized analytical approach is needed to guide practices across contexts and individual situations. The only identified framework that attempts to do so is Whiteford and Townsend's Participatory Occupational Justice Framework (2011), discussed below.

### *Participatory Occupational Justice Framework*

Whiteford and Townsend's (2011) framework is the only one attempting to apply concepts of occupational justice to practice. It is described as a conceptual tool for doing justice for individualized and population-based practice situations (p. 65), which aims to “strengthen occupational therapists' and other professionals' abilities to consistently raise consciousness of, articulate, and defend, both philosophically and theoretically, a transformative vision of a more occupationally just world” (p. 66). The framework is structured according to six processes that “profile six key enablement skills that are markers of collaborative partnerships informed by a vision of occupational justice” (p. 72). These processes are intended to enable collaboration and are set within a practice and systems context, which is further embedded in a local, regional, national and global context. The six processes can be completed in any order and “raise consciousness of occupational injustice; Engage collaboratively with partners; Mediate agreement on a plan; Strategize resource funding; Support implementation and continuous evaluation; Inspire advocacy for sustainability or closure” (Whiteford & Townsend, 2011, pp. 73–74). Each step contains a list of guiding questions aiming to stimulate critical reflection about situations of potential occupational injustice. It is not clear how the authors identified and defined the six enablement skills after which the processes are modeled. Similarly, while the authors briefly described the two levels of context in which the processes are set, how they delineated these two levels of context is unclear.

In summary, occupational justice is a concept that denotes individual and population rights to unique occupational habits, needs and wishes,

and recognizes that these are based on individual capacities and circumstances. However, its potential to inform practice and policy would be enhanced with greater clarity, consensus and guidance in its application. Below we briefly expand on the problems with applying the principles of occupational justice and point to possible future directions for development.

### **Discussion: Current State of Development of Occupational Justice and Future Directions**

Though its origins are in occupational science, Whiteford and Townsend (2011) also linked occupational justice to occupational therapy, stating that “occupational justice is occupational therapy’s implied social vision” (p. 69). That position is supported by the WFOT Position Statement on Human Rights (2006), which outlines that one of the challenges faced by occupational therapists is in “accepting professional responsibility to identify and address occupational injustices and limit the impact of such injustices experienced by individuals” (p. 2). This position statement thus asserts occupational justice as a responsibility of occupational therapists, while not excluding the possibility that others might be informed by and contribute to the achievement of occupational justice. Stadnyk (2008) also took this stance; but suggested that while occupational justice is closely aligned with the core tenets of occupational therapy and has potential to guide occupational therapy practice, barriers remain for practicing clinicians. If these barriers are present for occupational therapists whose global body has embraced this approach, similar barriers may also be faced by occupational scientists or other professions or approaches. This review has demonstrated that some of the barriers to the realization of the potential applications of the concept of occupation justice include that proposed definitions of occupational justice and related terms lack conceptual clarity, have not been developed with reference to other bodies of scholarly work, and are not supported by empirical evidence. Additionally, there is a need for

more robust models to bridge occupational justice theory to practice.

The literature is replete with descriptions of ideas, principles and concepts related to occupational justice (e.g. occupational injustice, occupational rights, occupational marginalization etc.), yet there is no clear or consistent definition of the concept. Arguably the abundance of related terms may, with refinement, contribute to the delineation of subtle nuances of occupational justice and injustice; at the same time, however, with many terms there is the risk that the overall concept loses focus and becomes difficult to understand. In the literature to date, efforts to increase the depth of understanding have been sacrificed for a focus on delineating the applicable breadth of the concept.

Hammell (2008) argued that too many terms “which are culturally specific and lacking in distinct parameters – may serve to muddy rather than elucidate [the] theoretical waters” (p. 62), and the same critique may hold for others attempting to apply the concept of occupational justice to the alleviation of pressing social issues such as racism or poverty. Hammell’s proposed solution, however, was to suggest yet another overarching term, ‘occupational rights’, related to human rights. It is not clear however if this addresses the issue and it may raise others. For example, should understandings of occupational justice be centrally focussed on rights? What would this leave out? Is the term occupational rights any more useful than the term occupational justice? Moreover, the definition of occupational rights suggested by Hammell does not align with other descriptions of occupational rights in the literature (Townsend & Wilcock, 2004) and appears very similar to definitions of occupational justice. As such, would it also require related terms such as occupational injustice and its variants? Other than her criticism of the overabundance of terms related to occupational justice, Hammell (2008) did not provide a clear rationale for her preference of the term occupational rights.

Additionally, as has been noted, the number of scholars contributing to this literature is small, where 11 of the 13 works were authored by combinations of only four theorists; three additional authors contributed the final two papers. Perhaps the lack of conceptual clarity and the resulting hindrance in understanding discourages additional scholarship in the field? This lack of understanding may also hinder further development of ideas of occupational justice and occupational rights and related practice models.

We acknowledge that occupational justice is a rich and complex concept and as such, a succinct definition may not be possible. What we are suggesting, however, is that a carefully worked through conceptualization would delineate clearly the relationship between occupational justice and social justice, acknowledging the diverse approaches to social justice and making unambiguous which approaches to social justice are aligned. (We discuss this idea in more detail in the second article in this series). Furthermore, if a breadth of related terms is needed to capture the complexity of occupational justice, then the relationships between these terms and concepts has to be mapped out and developed in more detail. Increased clarification would render concepts of occupational justice more accessible, thus facilitating its application to achieve occupationally just policies and practices. Additionally, an increased understanding could stimulate further work and interdisciplinary collaboration between occupational scientists and other disciplines.

With respect to current theories and models of occupational justice, while Stadnyk (2008) helpfully provided one example of the application of core tenets of the Evolving Theory of Occupational Justice to a scenario involving the care of older adults, more examples would further an understanding of the theory and help to illustrate its application. More importantly, however, such examples should be used to complement a general guideline of how the application of this model can inform practice across different situations. Such a guideline has yet to be developed. The only framework attempting to guide occupational

therapy practice is Whiteford and Townsend's (2011) Participatory Occupational Justice Framework. While a depth of information is provided, some of the concepts may remain intangible. For example, the framework is described as "a conceptual tool for doing justice" (p. 65). This is a rather vague and imposing claim that may hinder efforts to engage with the framework. Additionally, while the questions guiding the six processes are very detailed and would likely prove to be helpful in guiding critical reflection about situations of occupationally injustice, these processes are set in two levels of context that are only briefly and very generally described. A set of questions for each of the two levels of context, similar to those posed for each of the processes, would facilitate answering questions for the six processes as it would help to delineate the boundaries and resources in the context, thus further guiding its practical application. As well, examples applying the framework to tangible individualized and population based practice situations would help to model how the framework can be used.

Finally, in the discussion of their framework, Whiteford and Townsend (2011) mentioned the use of the model by diverse professions and their potential application of concepts of occupational justice several times. Although there is reason to engage different disciplines and the broader healthcare community, with the exception of Wilcock (2006), work towards that end has not yet been delineated. While great strides have been made in the development of theories and models since the inception of concepts of occupational justice, more is needed to bridge the gaps between concepts of occupational justice and the work and practice of occupational science, occupational therapy and the various other professions and disciplines working to address health injustices and social disadvantage.

## Conclusions

The concept of occupational justice has become more prevalent in the literature and has potential to inform social change. Occupational justice is linked to the concept of social justice but

emphasizes individuals' unique occupational needs, habits and capacities, and that participation in meaningful occupation has an impact on individual and community health. There is evidence in occupational science literature of ongoing development of concepts of occupational justice, with a small number of scholars offering different definitions for terms and proposing new, overarching concepts. It is unclear whether the additional of terms further or hinder the development and uptake of an occupationally just approach to practice. The practical application of occupational justice theories is also likely to be impeded by inadequate links between these theories and practice models. In order to improve understanding and the usability of the concept of occupational justice, further rigorous critique of the terminology, concepts and definitions is required, and models to guide practice using an

occupational justice framework are needed. Additionally, an exploration of occupational justice from different disciplinary perspectives may provide insights into how development of occupational justice concepts, theories and models can be furthered.

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