Introduction

Occupational therapists regard meaningful occupations as a key therapeutic tool in promoting health and well-being. One aspect of the meaning of an occupation is that it usually expresses the individual’s moral values (Christiansen, 1999). There is a relationship between doing what one feels is right and a personal sense of well-being. There is also a relationship between occupational engagement and the well-being of social and physical environments. In societies which are increasingly fractured by individualism, and where a sense of community has been diminished, people’s occupations can be a force for civic engagement, community building and the active protection of the environment (Arai & Pedlar, 2003; Whiteford, 2007).

This study used an analysis of narratives to explore the relationship between occupation and the well-being of society.

Method

As part of a larger piece of research exploring occupation and identity, research participants told narratives about various specific events in their leisure lives.

The 78 narratives were analysed using, in part, a sociolinguistic approach to narrative structure (Labov & Waletzky, 1966).

Analysis enabled a focus on meaning.

Findings

Some of the narratives that people told demonstrated that they were aware that their occupations contributed to the well-being of the environment or others in the community. This understanding made the occupations meaningful and helped individuals to construct a satisfying identity. Through their occupations, people contributed to society by:

- Nurturing future generations
- Giving pleasure to others
- Caring for the environment
- Seeking to empower others

Occupational therapists regard meaningful occupations as a key therapeutic tool in promoting health and well-being. One aspect of the meaning of an occupation is that it usually expresses the individual’s moral values (Christiansen, 1999). There is a relationship between doing what one feels is right and a personal sense of well-being. There is also a relationship between occupational engagement and the well-being of social and physical environments. In societies which are increasingly fractured by individualism, and where a sense of community has been diminished, people’s occupations can be a force for civic engagement, community building and the active protection of the environment (Arai & Pedlar, 2003; Whiteford, 2007).

This study used an analysis of narratives to explore the relationship between occupation and the well-being of society.

Method

As part of a larger piece of research exploring occupation and identity, research participants told narratives about various specific events in their leisure lives.

The 78 narratives were analysed using, in part, a sociolinguistic approach to narrative structure (Labov & Waletzky, 1966).

Analysis enabled a focus on meaning.

Findings

Some of the narratives that people told demonstrated that they were aware that their occupations contributed to the well-being of the environment or others in the community. This understanding made the occupations meaningful and helped individuals to construct a satisfying identity. Through their occupations, people contributed to society by:

- Nurturing future generations
- Giving pleasure to others
- Caring for the environment
- Seeking to empower others

This man works hard at his leisure occupation knowing that it brings a lot of pleasure to other people (Fig 2).

This woman uses her leisure occupation as a force for empowering young black women from an inner city area, and providing them with a positive role model (Fig 3)

Implications

Although the narratives were about leisure occupations, the use of theory driven sampling enables some generalisation to other occupations to which people show commitment. Through their occupations people can harm or benefit society and the physical environment. This research supports the idea that there is considerable potential to develop practice based on a positive relationship between the occupations of individuals and groups, and the well-being of communities and the physical environment. A focus on the moral meanings of occupational behaviour can make the world a better place.

Should occupational therapy be giving more attention to the well-being of communities?

Acknowledgements

I acknowledge the ongoing and invaluable support given by my PhD supervisor Prof. Stephen Kay, the Institute of Health and Social Care Research and the School of Health Care Professions, University of Salford which has enabled my studies. The contributions made by my research participants are also gratefully noted.

References


Jackie Taylor, Directorate of Occupational Therapy, University of Salford, England J.taylor@salford.ac.uk