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Being occupied, being moral and making the world a better place

Jackie Taylor

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**

Fig 1 The Dog-trainer

*and I don't know, it's –
ours is quite a friendly –
it's all about having fun with the dogs,
the display's about you and your dog enjoying yourselves
and displays are about letting other people enjoy watching
the dogs as well,
because people do like watching dogs do agility courses*

☞ This woman's leisure occupation involves friendship, fun for the dogs and offering entertainment to the local community (Fig 1)

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

Fig 2 The Railway Enthusiast

*and I'll be honest with you
I'd been wo'rk'ing!
But I'd been working at what I enjoy doing, you know

and what I got out of it was
actually, being, part of a railway family
being associated with the steam engines,
with that era,
with the children that had come,
with the families that had come,
with the people that had come,
and being able to not only enjoy myself
which was fantastic
but to see them enjoying it as well, you know.*

☞ 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)

Fig 3 The Canoeist

*So, based in Manchester,
the core group that I was working with had a remit,
both ways really,
being multi-cultural and for girls

and just accessed funding to support that initiative
and did it outside of holidays,
did it different times of the year

and it was great, it was great.
Different challenges being with young people,
or doing it with young adults –
just very different experiences.

The water adventure centre, it's wonderful.
It's still going today.
I still go there and practice,
and they have, like, young black women's days
and women's international week activities*

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?

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