

The current and future contribution of occupational therapy and occupational science to transforming the situation of forced migrants: Critical perspectives from a think tank

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the collective ideas of the occupational scientists and therapists who attended the “Refugees – Addressing Key Social Issues” think tank at the Occupational Science Conference held in Hildesheim (2017). Forced migration is recognized as a prevalent issue in today’s society. Forced migrants face many occupational challenges, which are being exacerbated by restrictive migration policies. This paper outlines the discussions held during the think tank and presents an occupational perspective of forced migrants’ needs, followed by a desired vision of what an occupationally just world would look like for forced migrants, and future directions to guide occupation-based social transformation.

KEYWORDS: Occupational science; Occupational therapy; Critical perspectives; Forced migration; Social transformation

Occupational scientists and therapists interested in the theme “Refugees – Addressing Key Social Issues” were invited to form a think tank group at the Occupational Science Europe Conference held in Hildesheim (2017). This group consisted of international, although mainly European, occupational scientists and therapists with diverse experiences of working with refugees and forced migrants in clinical, fieldwork, and educational settings, in a range of roles including program development, research, teaching, and advocacy. Given the varied experiences and expertise of the think tank participants, lively discussions ensued. The group quickly agreed to extend the topic of discussion to cover all forms of forced displacement. The UNESCO (2017) definition of displaced people is used within this paper, as it outlines both the reasons for forced displacement as well as the impact of forced migration from an occupational and social perspective. The displacement of people refers to the forced movement of people from their locality or environment and occupations. It is a form of social change caused by a number of factors, the most common being armed conflict. Natural disasters, famine, development, and economic changes may also be a cause of displacement (UNESCO, 2017). A sub-group of the think tank participants interested in presenting the discussions from their meeting and their reflections on it to a wider audience met in several on-line meetings to author this paper. The contributions of the other two participants are recognized in the Acknowledgements.

Specific details of the think tank can be found in Laliberte Rudman et al. (2018). The organizers advised participants to use an adapted Future Search methodology developed by Weisbord and Janoff (2010). This methodology consisted of the following stages: 1) Develop a shared vision (utopia) to be materialized in 20 years, 2) Identify the necessary steps to achieve this vision, 3) Clarify the tangible actions participants would take to follow the steps. The aim of this paper is to provide details of the “Refugees – Addressing Key Social Issues” think tank discussions and reflections using that methodology.

Context of the Small Group Discussion

Whilst the first stage of the Future Search methodology required a utopic vision, participants felt it necessary to first discuss their experiences and understanding of issues surrounding forced migration from an occupational and social transformative perspective, in order to establish a common ground on which such a vision could be based. Forced

migration was acknowledged to be a globally prevalent issue with over 71.4 million people worldwide experiencing the consequences of displacement by the end of 2017 (UNHCR, 2018). It is also apparent that this trend is unlikely to change, considering that key drivers of forced migration such as armed conflicts, anti-democratic political trends, and global warming remain unresolved.

Forced migrants are a marginalized group that is often subject to human rights violations and occupational injustices (Amnesty International, n.d.), highlighting the need to develop interventions based on human rights (Guajardo & Mondaca, 2017). Occupational injustices include restrictions to employment opportunities, healthcare access, and participation in education. Additionally, restrictive policies are used as a deterrent to immigration in many countries (Castles, 2003). Occupational injustice was identified as a common concern to occupational scientists and therapists considering their theoretical underpinnings, which include that engagement in a varied and full occupational lifestyle is essential for health and well-being (Wilcock, 1993). In a similar vein, the World Federation of Occupational Therapists (WFOT, 2014) has adopted a position statement on human displacement highlighting how forced migrants experience occupational injustices due to a complex relationship between social and political contexts.

The think tank participants discussed the current state of research on forced migration in occupational science and therapy. To date, published research into occupational therapy intervention with forced migrants has mainly focused on individualistic aspects of forced migration, e.g. health issues, increasing opportunities to participate in the host country community, and the effects of occupational deprivation on the individual (Adrian, 2013; Bishop & Purcell, 2013; Copley, Turpin, Gordon, & McLaren, 2011; Horghagen & Josephsson, 2010; Morville & Erlandsson, 2013; Smith, 2015; Stephenson, Smith, Gibson, & Watson, 2013; Suleman & Whiteford, 2013). These contributions are more recently being supplemented and extended to consider the social-political context of forced migration (Blankvoort, Arslan, Tonoyan, Damour, & Mpabanzi, 2018; Huot, Kelly, & Park, 2016; Mayne, Lowrie, & Wilson, 2016), which the authors of this paper contend is necessary in order to critically examine the contextual impact on occupational opportunities for forcibly displaced people.

Since the general topic of the think tank was “Occupation-Based Social Transformation,” the participants discussed the relationship of forced migration and social transformation.

There is a growing body of literature that suggests that people's occupations are fundamental to social transformation (Laliberte Rudman, 2014, 2018; Laliberte Rudman et al., 2018) and that social transformation is required to truly address complex global issues resulting in population inequities, including those caused by forced migration. Occupational science and therapy literature discusses the significance of social transformative approaches (Townsend, Wicks, van Bruggen, & Wright-St Clair, 2012; van Bruggen, 2014) and the potential of using occupation to achieve social transformation (Farias, Laliberte Rudman, & Magalhães, 2016; Galheigo, 2011; Goodman, Sirriyeh, & McMahan 2017; Guajardo & Mondaca, 2017).

The arguments and approach of Farias et al. (2016) illustrate the importance of critical reflexivity to critically examine assumptions that are often taken for granted and to unveil contextual elements, such as power-relations, culture, societal issues, that impact on occupational rights. The participants in the workshop identified critical reflexivity (Farias et al., 2016) as an essential prerequisite to approach the situation of forced migrants and their occupational rights, both in practice and in research. This critical reflexivity applies not only to the contextual elements, but is a necessary underpinning to any work or research being done within occupational therapy practice or research in this field. Critically examining the assumptions and theoretical foundations informing occupation based theories and approaches will help to avoid perpetuating these assumptions in the work being done with forced migrants, and will avoid a euro-centric framing of the occupational lives of migrants (Blankvoot et al., 2018). The danger of this arose throughout the think-tank discussion, and was described above, when participants recognized that the majority of research done to date focuses on individualistic perspectives, and analyzes these perspectives through existing, often individualistic, occupation-based theories. The need to move beyond these approaches to truly ground understandings in a social transformation approach was evident.

Our Desired Vision: A Utopia to Move Occupational Therapy and Science Forward

Following the Future Search methodology, discussions on a desired world in a 20-year time frame led to the development of a common Vision:

To co-create a more occupationally just, inclusive and sustainable society in which forced migrants have the right to engage in meaningful occupations, supported by the provision of opportunities, capabilities, and resources, and in which the contribution of occupational disciplines (reflective of the diversity of society and underpinned by research) is realized and acknowledged.

Next Steps and Reflections

This vision embraces the social transformation perspective, refocusing attention from the individual to the societal structures which are governing them. Having agreed on a desired Vision, the participants brainstormed feasible next steps to achieving this utopia. This process acknowledged the relatively new role of occupational science and therapy within the domain of forced migration, the effects of which includes a poor understanding of their role both within and outside of the discipline and the profession. Thus, in order to encourage a critical occupational understanding of forced migration issues, to address the corresponding occupational issues, and to evolve the idea of occupational-based social transformation, the authors contend that occupational scientists and therapists need to draw on and be informed about other works when designing approaches. Further, they need to communicate and disseminate their current work and potential in this field, both inside and outside their own spheres. Therefore, they must address diverse channels of dissemination including social media, educational institutions, academia, and mainstream media, beyond the boundaries of occupational perspectives.

The group identified the importance of sharing practice examples of occupation-based actions and interventions that work towards occupational justice, to relate theoretical concepts and practical examples. Currently, several European funded projects are being developed concerning forced migration with a strong presence of occupational scientists and therapists. UNINTEGRA (UNINTEGRA, 2018) and InterACT (IB Hochschule, 2019) are two examples, focused on university education integration and the psychosocial and occupational attention of the forced migrated communities.

The importance of establishing and promoting a support network within occupational science and therapy was highlighted, which could also function to ensure that professional practice is not limited to an individualistic approach and that occupation-based practice

examples and interventions are widely disseminated. The online presence of social media groups including the Facebook group Forcedmigration4OT (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1801393130103531/>), the Occupational Opportunities for Refugees and Asylum Seekers (OOFRAS) group (<https://oofras.com/>) and the development of the OT Europe Interest Group Displaced Persons (<https://sites.google.com/site/oteudisplacedpersons>) were identified as potential vehicles to achieve these goals. These groups not only aid in the sharing of knowledge, a requirement for any theorizing of practice which is necessary in (re)-emerging fields, but it also allows for the position of the profession to address the societal structures that are so greatly impacting migration and migrants to date. The OT Europe Interest Group Displaced Persons has also drafted a report on forced displacement within Europe and a call-for-action for transformation in occupational therapy education, research, and practice with displaced person (Blankvoort, Moore, Roos, & Schiller, 2018a,b).

Dialogue and partnerships with diverse stakeholders (including policy makers) were considered imperative. Research alliances beyond those of occupational science to connect to ongoing work in migration and integration are also important when developing the approaches further. This includes collaborating with forced migrants themselves as experts of their situation (Blankvoort et al., 2018; Morville & Jessen-Winge, 2019). Parallel groups existing in, for example, the professional groups of mid-wives (<https://oramma.eu/>) and public health (EUPHA), have and will continue to provide opportunities for inter-disciplinary exploration and collaboration within this field.

A prioritized research agenda, including evidence based practice, was also considered important. This would guide and support occupational therapists and scientists in their research. The think tank provided group members with the opportunity to reflect on their own research work and practice. One member suggested that additional attention should also be given to people displaced by environmental issues related to climate change, which demands the development of an Eco-social Occupational Therapy practice from an occupational ecology perspective (Simó Algado, 2012; Simó Algado & Townsend, 2015). Since the think tank, other members are actively disseminating their forced-migration research within and outside of occupational therapy and sciences, including two recent papers (Roosen & Brandt, 2018; Trimboli & Halliwell, 2018). Additionally, it can be said that the think tank was a foundation stone for current and future collaboration

between the participants. The method supported participants to join forces to promote and work on the topic nationally as well as internationally. This is of particular relevance when working and researching a global issue such as forced migration.

Conclusion

This paper summarizes the discussions and reflections generated during the think tank on “Refugees - Addressing Key Social Issue” during the Occupational Science Europe Conference held in Hildesheim in 2017. A common ground for occupational therapists and scientists in this domain was established, with the importance of mitigating the negative occupational effects of forced migration being identified as a common challenge across domains. Changes to societal structures that create these effects were envisioned as a promising area of further development. Whilst individually focused occupational therapy approaches can bring positive change in forced migrants’ lives, the think tank participants contend that the occupational opportunities for forced migrants should be critically examined and contextualized to identify occupational injustice and to make better use of the potential of occupation for both improvement in individuals’ circumstances and social transformation. To achieve this goal, the various strategies identified included increasing recognition and better dissemination of the current and potential benefit of using occupation for social transformation, interdisciplinary dialogue, and establishing support networks and a research agenda.

Acknowledgements

We thank the additional think tank participants: Dr. Anne-Le Morville, Ute Davies, Jordi Tolra (Acsar foundation) and Dr. Volker Paelke for their contributions.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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