

Article of Reflection/Essay

Intersectionality: an Amefrican diasporic concept for occupational therapy

Interseccionalidade: um conceito amefricano e diaspórico para a terapia ocupacional

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<u>Abstract</u>

This essay aims to present the concept of intersectionality, proposed from black feminism, as an epistemic and practical research analysis tool for Brazilian and Latin American occupational therapy. Lélia Gonzalez's concept of *amefricanidade* provides a basis to think about the everyday life of black and indigenous people living in colonized territories. Thus, this concept enables us to approach black and indigenous occupations and understand the exclusion and rupture processes brought about by racial inequalities. We introduce thoughts about intersectionality and coloniality from international contexts contributing to the propositions of occupational therapy. Not with the intention to close the debate, but rather with that of gathering previously started discussions, we conclude that the concept of intersectionality interests occupational therapy because it helps us understand the current processes of oppression in the face of the complex system of colonial, cis-heteronormative, patriarchal, capitalist, neoliberal and ableist oppression, as an ethical commitment and technical-professional accountability.

Keywords: Occupational Therapy, Intersectionality, Epistemology, Colonialism, Racism.

<u>Resumo</u>

Este ensaio tem como objetivo apresentar o conceito de interseccionalidade, proposto a partir do feminismo negro, como ferramenta de pesquisa e análise, epistêmica e prática, para a terapia ocupacional brasileira e latino-americana. Partindo da ideia de *amefricanidade*, conceito apresentado por Lélia Gonzalez, como categoria para pensar a vivência de pessoas negras e indígenas localizadas num território colonizado, propomos reflexões para a terapia ocupacional aproximar-se das ocupações negras e indígenas, compreendendo os processos de ruptura e exclusão a partir das desigualdades raciais.

Received on Sept. 20, 2021; 1st Revision on Dec. 8, 2021; 2nd Revision on Feb. 4, 2022; Accepted on May 2, 2022. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. Apresentamos reflexões do contexto internacional sobre interseccionalidade e colonialidade para a terapia ocupacional. Sem intenção de encerrar o debate, mas sim de reunir discussões já iniciadas, concluímos que o conceito de interseccionalidade interessa à terapia ocupacional à medida que auxilia a compreensão dos atuais processos de opressão diante do complexo sistema de opressão colonial, cis-heteronormativa, patriarcal, neoliberal, capitalista e capacitista, como compromisso ético e responsabilização técnica e profissional.

Palavras-chave: Terapia Ocupacional, Interseccionalidade, Epistemologia, Colonialismo, Racismo.

Introduction

This study presents the concept of intersectionality as an Amefrican¹ and diasporic proposal for occupational therapy, especially in Latin America. It seeks to build knowledgedoings in occupational therapy that are ethically and politically compromised, considering identity elements and their relationships and interactions. These elements mark the axes of oppression and the matrices of domination of individuals, groups, and collectives that suffer the most from the processes of exclusion and inequality of the main interrelated hegemonic powers: patriarchy, coloniality, and capitalism.

Other forms of domination, violation, and supremacy associated with these concepts, such as imperialism, classism, ableism, cis-heteronormativity, Christianity, anthropocentrism, colonialism, neoliberalism and genocide/ecocide, should also be considered; after all, these hegemonic powers are not the only forms of exclusion, but they nurture and root the social structures that maintain them.

The authors of this manuscript, who are both women, LBT² and *Amefrican* (Latin American African), and one of them is black³, are committed to the anti-racist struggle, and here they present a perspective on intersectionality based on ethnic-racial relations aiming to build knowledge and practices of Latin American occupational therapy that are interested in the commitment to counterhegemonic struggles in the face of coloniality, racism, cisheteropatriarchy, among other axes of oppression and matrices of domination.

Sociohistorical and Political Processes in the Epistemic Development in Occupational Therapy

Critical perspectives among occupational therapists in Brazil were formed mainly during the 1970s and 1980s, when social struggles emerged in line with agendas and demands for processes of political reopening and redemocratization.

This process of cultural and structural change in search of the expansion of citizenship and rights occurred together with a diversity of emerging social movements and struggles with the intention of delving into the social, cultural and economic dynamics of historically

¹ The term *amefricanidade* is an analytical category coined by Brazilian historian and philosopher Lélia González to define the racial experience of black, indigenous and mestizo people in Latin America.

² LBT means Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender (women), and the shortened acronym is used to refer to the female sexuality and gender identities included in this spectrum.

³ Apagar nota.

excluded and stigmatized populations (Castro et al., 2001; Cardinalli, 2016). Dialogues and incorporation of studies from the Social Sciences and Humanities added critical perspectives engaged in social processes to occupational therapy (Galheigo et al., 2018).

Between 1990 and 2000, occupational therapists markedly expanded their fields of practice – education, social, cultural, work, human rights, territorial, community, among many others (Galheigo et al., 2018) – committed to the sociohistorical and political processes of inequality and exclusion.

Recently, the diversity of practices, theories, and epistemologies has led to "[...] a substantial complexification of occupational therapy production in Brazil and of the use of theoretical-methodological frameworks [...]" (Galheigo et al., 2018, p. 733) that invites us to discuss emerging issues.

Social and identity movements, in Brazil and in the world, have gained strength and relevance as conservatism progresses. The displacements resulting from the demands of feminist, black, indigenous and LGBTI+⁴ populations, people with disabilities, among others, increasingly demand that identity guidelines occupy spaces of representativeness and expressiveness in everyday life and call for legal, cultural and political advances.

For occupational therapy, this implies that the understanding of everyday life, occupations, and human activities should consider the demands related to identity markers (Ambrosio, 2020), and that occupational-therapeutic actions corroborate the expansion of rights, participation, citizenship, and representativeness.

According to Silva et al. (2019, p. 173), knowledge and practices in occupational therapy cannot be decolonized without understanding "[...] the processes of creation, production, and reproduction of these mechanisms of domination and exploitation [...]" of individuals, groups, and communities that have been historically marginalized by processes of colonization and coloniality.

The decolonization of occupational therapy theoretical-conceptual frameworks is a necessary continuum that concerns the proposal to review logics that have been previously instituted and made official, with the ethical and political commitment to bring out ways of being in the world that escape the standards imposed by colonization and new colonialities (Quijano, 2009).

Historical-racial Processes in Brazil and the Urgency to Guide Ethnic-racial Relations

The history of Brazil evidences a violent process of more than 500 years of colonization and over 300 years of enslavement, exploitation, and genocide of the country's black and indigenous peoples (Nascimento, 2016). The *Official Brazilian History*, which composes the vast majority of the literature on the theme, erases or marginalizes everything that preceded the European invasions, and strives to omit the effects of colonization and enslavement, which are so very present today in the lives of these populations (Silva, 2019).

Currently, the processes of extermination and exploitation of these populations are evidenced by the constant destruction of indigenous reservations, the persistent murdering of black youth (Silva, 2019), the growth in income concentration and poverty, and the mass imprisonment and lack of access to education, work, and leisure that, in Brazil, affects

⁴ LGBTI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Intersex) followed by the (plus sign) +, this being the most common acronym.

black people (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2019). These processes lead to the marginalization and genocide of these populations, directly interfering with their everyday lives (Ambrosio, 2020).

Córdoba (2020) addresses the concept of Occupational Justice based on a liberal idea of justice that tries to establish a symmetry between occupational satisfaction and the social rights of citizens. This false symmetry sustains the liberal logic of social justice and reiterates the principles of colonial, capitalist domination over individuals and collectives who occupy subordinate positions in power relations (Córdoba, 2020). Thus, production of injustice occurs simultaneously with a sociohistorical, colonial, patriarchal and capitalist process that needs to be historicized, politicized, apprehended, and taught.

Kronenberg & Pollard (2005) claim that occupational injustice occurs as a result of restriction or impediment of people's access and participation based on race/skin color, ethnicity, functionality, gender, sexual orientation, religion and spiritual beliefs, socioeconomic status, among others.

Considering racism as a structural oppression tool, Farias et al. (2018, p. 236) argue that occupational therapy needs to think about specific actions for the black population, since race is a factor that fosters injustice and impairs "[...] meaningful and necessary activities and occupations in all genders and age groups".

Bezerra & Queiroz (2018, p. 257) propose that occupational therapy previously institutionalized concepts, such as cultural diversity, human rights, power relations, among others, should be considered, from ethnic perspectives, for actions with "ethnically vulnerable populations". In occupational therapy teaching, authors point out that the revision of concepts and the inclusion of traditional knowledge that favors horizontal practices promote direct participation and belonging to these groups, as well as speech protagonism (Bezerra & Queiroz, 2018).

Ambrosio et al. (2020) point out that anti-racist occupational therapy practice, in addition to being committed to individuals and groups marginalized by racism and colonialism, should be engaged in promoting changes in institutional, social and community structures.

If for technical action, we are being called to rethink concepts, within the scope of research and theoretical-epistemological development, we need to follow these updates that invite us to establish new dialogues. In this sense, Grenier (2020) argues that white supremacy has dominated the epistemic underpinnings of occupational therapy throughout the world. For Lee (2019), it is evident that the profession safeguards a Western understanding of all occupations and, therefore, we should guide, create, and incorporate other points of view to embrace the cultural diversities of the globalized world.

Other authors have denounced epistemic racism in the foundations of occupational therapy, inviting us to position ourselves and reinvent our practices and scientific knowledge in a localized way in Brazil (Farias et al., 2018; Ambrosio, 2020), other Latin American countries (Mora et al., 2020), North America (Grenier, 2020), South Africa (Ramugondo, 2018), New Zealand (Gibson, 2020), and in Asian countries (Lee, 2019). In this regard, the World Federation of Occupational Therapists (WFOT) has issued, for the first time, a Declaration on Systemic Racism (World Federation of Occupational Therapists, 2020).

Before Intersectionality, the Recentralization of the Racial Question

Next, we propose possible discussions between occupational therapy and Afro-Brazilian⁵ and Amefrican diasporic movements in the Social and Human Sciences.

Franz Fanon, a black psychiatrist and intellectual, contributed to the understanding of racism as a central element in the process of psychic illness of black people. Fanon (2008) conceives the notion of racism from a sociogenic analysis, that is, analysis of the social world on the individualities and supremacy of hegemonic institutions. According to Fanon's analytical proposal Fanon (2010, p. 56), the racial question precedes economic inequality:

In colonies, the economic infrastructure is also a superstructure. Cause is consequence: someone is rich because they are white, someone is white because they are rich. That is why Marxist analyses should be slightly extended each time the colonial issue is addressed.

Lélia Gonzalez, Brazilian historian and philosopher, presented in her works dialogues with several important black thinkers, such as Fanon, DuBois, Angela Davis, and Abdias Nascimento. She is considered one of the leaders of the Black Feminist Movement in Brazil⁶ (Ratts & Rios, 2010).

Based on Fanon's sociogenic understanding of racism, Gonzalez analyzes Brazilian forms of racism and defines two different types of racism: overt and covert⁷ (Gonçalves, 2020). The first type – more common in Anglo-Saxon countries – is related to people's ancestry and characteristics of origin and, based on white supremacy, explicitly segregates non-white groups (Gonzalez, 1988), whereas the second type, overt racism (denial of racism), defined by Gonzalez as "*Brazilian-style racism*", is the most common in countries that have undergone Portuguese-Spanish colonization, and is based on the construction of justifications that encourage miscegenation as a way of whitening the population and/or trying to assimilate a supposed racial democracy (Gonzalez, 1988).

Gonzalez (1988, p. 76) invites us to understand the Amefrican experience of black and indigenous lives and occupations, with *amefricanidade* as a possible category to analyze racial violence against black (African and Afro-Brazilian) and indigenous (peoples originating in the Americas) populations:

Amefricanidade incorporates a whole historical process of intense cultural Afrocentric dynamics (adaptation, resistance, reinterpretation, and creation of new forms) [...] As a result, it leads us towards an ethnic identity.

⁵ The concept of diaspora used here concerns cultural identities maintained and transformed over time after migratory processes of groups or communities. Thus, the combination of knowledge of the Afro-Brazilian diaspora refers to the knowledge produced by black Brazilians, which may or may not be explicitly related to African knowledge.

⁶ Lélia Gonzalez is one of the most important figures of black feminism in Brazil. She contributed to the education of many black women and people from the black movement in general. She was the first person in Brazil to list racism and sexism as elements of oppression against black women in the Brazilian colonial, social structure. Gonzalez is recognized as a precursor of intersectionality in Brazil.

⁷ For more information, see Gonzalez (1988).

To recognize it is, ultimately, to recognize a gigantic work of cultural dynamics that does not take us to the side of the Atlantic, but that brings us from there and transforms us into who we are today: Amefrican.

Thus, it is advocated that the concept of *amefricanidade* dialogues directly with decoloniality, since it proposes displacements for black and indigenous people, emerging knowledge and experiences from the perceptions of these groups (Gonçalves, 2020).

In addition to race, the capitalist colonial process produces other dimensions of oppression, such as gender (Lugones, 2014) and sex (Costa & Alves, 2020) colonization, ableism, among others, based on systems of normalization and standardization of humanity.

At the crossroads of sexism and racism, Gonzales (1984) makes an extensive contribution of intersectional analyses that go back to the colonization period, and shows the consequences of this process that affect black women to this day.

Intersectionality as an Amefrican Analysis Tool

In the academic field, the concept of intersectionality is considered one of the most important contributions of black feminism. Crenshaw (1989) and Hill-Collins (1990) were two African-American women who pioneered the definition and defense of the concept of intersectionality to analyze the racist-patriarchal oppression undergone by black women in the USA.

According to Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality is an analysis tool that marks the differences in certain groups and produces different ways of experiencing discrimination; for Hill-Collins (1990, p. 18), it can be understood as "[...] particular forms of oppression that intertwine race and gender [...]", because the forms of oppression work together to produce injustice and, in this sense, oppression cannot be reduced to a fundamental type or understood in isolation - there are axes of oppression that intertwine within the framework of a matrix of domination.

Although the propositions of Crenshaw (1989) and Hill-Collins (1990) are slightly different, the intention of both authors is to show an instrument that helps us capture the invisibilities and perversities of oppression that interact in the different contexts of everyday life.

In the Brazilian context, since 1970, Gonzales (1984) spoke of these racism-sexism interactions among black women, referring to the crossroads of race-gender/sex⁸. Gonzales (1984) proposes a racial-sexist historical analysis of colonialism, emphasizing the sexual exploitation of black and indigenous women for the construction of Brazilian society, in addition to exploitation at work, especially in the domestic sphere.

Recently, Akotirene (2019), based on these frameworks, reaffirms the possibility of expanding the understanding of intersectionality/crossroads to other structures of oppression, such as sexuality, ableism, fatphobia, ageism, among others.

According to Akotirene (2019), however, it is not a matter of searching for a hierarchy or sum of forms of oppression, but rather of producing an analytical category that enables us to understand that there is a capitalist, patriarchal, colonial structure that must be

⁸ When Lélia Gonzalez talks about the crossroads for black women, she uses the race-sex construct. Currently, the use of this construct is considered exclusionary. The race-gender/sex construct is justified to dialogue with Gonzales's original production in an updated way.

actually faced, that is, point out "[...] repeatedly how identity cleavages are connected [...]" (Akotirene, 2019, p. 45).

Since the experiences of oppression, discrimination, violation, exclusion, and inequality are interrelated and supported by identity elements that modify interpersonal relationships, ways of being in the world, occupations and human activities, we are interested, as occupational therapists, in approaching tools that can help us fully understand these processes, seeking to break with other forms of oppression.

Intersectionality and Occupational Therapy

Sandra Galheigo (2012) invited us to think about the current problems of the modern world locating our scientific knowledge in the different sociohistorical and political processes that mark each country. Galheigo (2012) resumes the history of occupational therapy, as well as that of Latin American peoples, to review and propose concepts that reposition themselves to consider beyond social class, gender, ethnicity, and other current identifiers that complicate knowledge production in this field.

The historical resumption of occupational therapy and the repositioning of sociohistorical and racial knowledge produced in the diaspora assists us in supporting the proposition of the concept of intersectionality as an analysis tool, in the form of a critical exercise of reflection.

Souza et al. (2021) consider that a critical decolonial perspective in occupational therapy should problematize its praxis, aim at democratizing access to human rights, and value the knowledge and practices of historically marginalized individuals and groups, based on knowledge of African and/or Afro-Brazilian origin and of native peoples, and should recognize them as valid knowledge for occupational therapy, offering centrality to subordinate narratives.

We corroborate a critical, decolonial perspective that contributes to the production of theoretical-practical knowledge for the Occupational Therapy of the South (Nuñes, 2019; Silva et al., 2019) to build decolonized and decolonizing practices and knowledge (Zango Martín & Millares, 2013), for which there will be need of epistemic disobedience (Pino Morán & Ulloa, 2016).

If we consider intersectionality in our occupational-therapeutic practices with each person, group and collective, we will be able to recognize and transpose the different axes of domination, such as social status, counteracted mainly through the interdependence between neoliberal capitalism, colonialism, cis-heteropatriarchy, and ableism.

According to Ferrufino et al. (2019), intersectionality reveals, presents, and promotes a reading for occupational therapy, based on life histories and narratives, that considers systems of oppression as structural, hegemonic and interpersonal organizers of power, exclusion, and inequality in society, and allow us to analyze how different contexts are connected, determining meanings for the execution or in imposition of the execution of occupations (Ferrufino et al., 2019).

Pino Morán & Tiseyra (2019) propose to think about the body of persons with disabilities decolonizing the normative and functional look of rehabilitation that subjects the body and its functionalities from normality standards. In their opinion, ableism derives from colonial oppression and, therefore, intersectionality would assist in understanding the connection between colonialism, gender-sexuality and disability, and would enable the

constitution of scientific knowledge and historical structures that would allow us to analyze the situations of social inequality that have been perpetuated in collectives and persons with disabilities over time (Morán & Tiseyra, 2019).

However, this does not mean finding a hierarchy of ableist discrimination that is related to other types of discrimination, but understanding how ableism functions in the colonial, patriarchal, capitalist structure and discriminates against bodies with disabilities. Therefore, an intersectional analysis would not provide an understanding of discrimination against people with disabilities displaced from the ableist, colonial, capitalist, patriarchal sense, nor would it propose an occupational-therapeutic practice that fragments these structures.

Ambrosio & Silva (2021) address intersectionality as a tool of analysis and professional practice, as a possible way to unveil, recognize, and face social and/or occupational injustice, provided that the inseparability and interdependence of the structuring factors of this injustice is understood. Understanding the intertwining of acts of oppression, those authors claim that occupational-therapeutic analysis, by focusing on only one of these marginalization structures, would contribute to maintaining the oppression system and not to breaking it: "[...] silencing or rendering violence invisible based on social structures feeds the monster of oppression [...]" (Ambrosio & Silva, 2021, p. 148). In other words, no matter how far we advance in the practices and production of knowledge aimed at issues of social inequalities of concentration and distribution of work and other problems present in peripheral contexts – understanding them as produced by capitalism, only by the economic sphere, without considering intersectionality – there will always be a long distance from the networks of oppression present in the everyday life of a significant number of the individuals and collectives assisted by us.

Ramugondo (2018) points out that, anywhere in the world, occupational therapists need to question and understand how inequality is expressed at the intersection of history, economics, politics, race, gender, and sexuality. She claims that an intersectional approach helps us have a collective and community view on health processes (Ramugondo, 2018).

Ramugondo (2018) addresses the Ubuntu African philosophy, the philosophy of liberation of Steve Biko, and the sociogeny of Fanon to recentralize knowledge production in occupational therapy to promote collective, community and intersectional assistance. This repositioning functions as a "[...] path alternative to Liberalism and Marxism, as both have presented limitations in coping with collective historical oppression, such as systemic racism alongside classism [...]" (Ramugondo, 2018, p. 4). As Fanon put it (Fanon, 2010), these theories are not always able to assess/analyze situations entirely because they decentralize colonial issues.

Ramungondo considers that the decolonial position should be seen as a political and epistemological movement for the liberation of non-white people who suffer the impacts of coloniality, and locates intersectionality as a tool of this movement.

Incorporating ethnic scientific knowledge into knowledge production enables and sensitizes us to create decolonizing strategies for our interventions and use "[...] intersectionality as a tool to provide us with the epistemic cleavages necessary for these disputes in the scientific field [...]" (Ambrosio, 2020, p. 99).

Thus, intersectionality can bring the intersection of acts of oppression into focus, "[...] considering that these markers, including class, cross the bodies producing multiple acts of violence, and that analyzing them independently would not account for the complexity of the phenomena [...]" (Ambrosio, 2020, p. 35).

Final Remarks

This essay presented the concept of intersectionality seeking to build knowledge-doings in occupational therapy that are ethically and politically compromised, considering identity elements and their relationships and interactions.

Intersectionality, enunciated by black feminists as a contribution to build an Amefrican, decolonial, critical perspective in occupational therapy, brings us closer to occupations, human activities, and everyday life, considering varied contexts crossed by a series of sociohistorical and cultural processes and impacted by the crossroads of hegemonic systems of power.

Intersectional analysis assists in understanding and acting along the axes of oppression and matrices of domination, and these, in turn, are triggered by identity elements, such as race, gender and sexuality, that mark and compose the expressiveness and corporeity of individuals and collectives.

Therefore, it is necessary to understand the processes of oppression and the matrices of domination considering that the knowledge of colonized communities are erased or marginalized, resuming and strengthening the dialogue between intellectuals and decolonial, diasporic and Amefrican perspectives; recognizing their place of speaking and listening, their conscience, self-criticism, forms and experiences of oppression, as well as the reproduction of acts of oppression; affirming their ethical-political positioning and technical-professional accountability through actions, practices, and engagement in these struggles.

All this should be conducted with the aim of composing with people and collectives and breaking with hierarchies, classifications, supposed neutralities, ideas of standard individuals or universal models, overlapping values, cultures, beliefs, customs or knowledge, based on the political, ethical positioning and commitment, on the emancipation, and on the civil, political, social and human rights of individuals and groups that suffer the most from the processes of exclusion and inequalities.

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