

Reflection Article/Essay

Reflecting on conceptualisations of ‘meaning’ in occupational therapy

Refletindo sobre a conceptualização de ‘significado’ em terapia ocupacional

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Abstract

In this reflection essay, the authors explore how meaning is represented in occupational therapy literature. A review of occupational therapy and occupational science literature uncovers framings of meaning, meaningful, and meaningfulness that are almost exclusively ‘positive’. Positioning of occupations as inherently ‘positive’ and assuming universal experiences of positive meanings for all members of society, overlooks individual and collective diversities. To perpetuate framings of occupations as inherently and exclusively ‘positively meaningful’ effectively silences experiences that do not conform to dominant assumptions and perspectives. Approaching concepts of ‘meaning’ more broadly may allow occupational therapists and scholars to better comprehend what people do and do not do, and why, better situating the profession to promote the espoused goals of equity, justice, and rights. Neglecting nuanced understandings of meaning may forfeit more complex examinations of occupation to other disciplines, thereby undermining disciplinary claims of expertise in the realm of occupation.

Keywords: Occupational Therapy, Concept Formation, Social Justice.

Resumo

Neste ensaio reflexivo, as autoras exploram como o significado é representado na literatura de terapia ocupacional. Uma revisão da literatura em terapia ocupacional e ciência ocupacional revela enquadramentos de significado, significativo e significância que são quase exclusivamente ‘positivos’. Posicionar as ocupações como inherentemente “positivas”, assumindo experiências universais de significados positivos para todos os membros da sociedade, ignora as diversidades individuais e coletivas. Perpetuar os enquadramentos de ocupações como inerente e exclusivamente

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“positivamente significativas” efetivamente silencia experiências que não estão em conformidade com as suposições e perspectivas dominantes. Aproximar os conceitos de “significado” de forma mais ampla pode permitir que terapeutas ocupacionais e acadêmicos compreendam melhor o que as pessoas fazem e não fazem e o porquê, situando melhor a profissão para promover os objetivos defendidos de equidade, justiça e direitos. Negligenciar entendimentos matizados do que é significativo pode privar exames mais complexos sobre as ocupações, oportunizando que outras disciplinas o façam, minando assim as reivindicações disciplinares de especialização no domínio da ocupação.

Palavras-chave: Terapia Ocupacional, Formação de Conceito, Justiça Social.

Introduction

The intent of this reflection essay is to critically examine how meaning is represented in occupational therapy literature. While meaning is central to the study of occupation, and the practice of occupational therapy, it remains poorly defined and often oversimplified, with determined emphasis on positive meanings. Greater attention to nuanced complexity of meanings, even contradictory meanings, may open greater conceptual space for understanding occupation more deeply.

‘Meaning’ in occupational therapy

Within occupational therapy and occupational science literature, ‘meaning’ (Reed et al., 2010), ‘meaningful’, and ‘meaningfulness’ tend to be viewed as central to definitions of occupation, positioning occupational therapists as “custodians of meaning” (Englehardt, 1986). American occupational therapist Mary Reilly purported, “For us, in occupational therapy, the most fundamental area for research is, and probably always will be, the nature and meaning of activity” (as cited in Hasselkus, 1989, p. 654). The concept of meaning is associated with occupation as early as 1956, when it was observed that occupational therapy appeared to transform people’s lives through the meaning clients experienced when engaged in action (as cited in Helfrich & Kielhofner, 1994). In 1967, Elizabeth Yerxa espoused that central to occupational therapy was “commitment to the client’s realization of his [sic] own particular meaning” (as cited in Grajo & Da Cruz, 2017, p. 445). As Table 1 shows, ‘meaning’ is central to numerous definitions of occupation-related concepts. The first and fourth authors searched all national associations listed on the World Federation of Occupational Therapists (WFOT) website to include diverse countries, but many of these sites are, understandably, not in English.

Table 1. Centrality of [positive] 'meaning,' 'meaningful' and 'meaningfulness' in constructs of occupation.

Source	Concept	Definition/description
World Federation of Occupational Therapists (2020)	Occupation	"the everyday activities that people do as individuals, in families and with communities to occupy time and bring meaning and purpose to life" (p. 2)
World Federation of Occupational Therapists (2019)	Occupational justice	"the fulfilment of the right for all people to engage in the occupations they need to survive, define as meaningful, and that contribute positively to their own well-being and the wellbeing of their communities" (p. 1)
American Occupational Therapy Association (2020)	Occupation	"the meaningful, necessary, and familiar activities of everyday life" (p. 1)
Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists (2008)	Occupation	"groups of activities and tasks of everyday life, named, organized, and given value and meaning by individuals and a culture" (p. 24)
Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists (2016)	Occupational therapy values and beliefs	"Occupation gives meaning to life" (p. 5). "Health has personal dimensions associated with spiritual meaning and satisfaction in occupations..." (p. 8). "Justice concerns are for meaningful choice and social inclusion..." (p. 8)
Journal of Occupational Science (2020)	Occupation	"things people do that have meaning and occupy people's time, with a particular focus on the reciprocal relationship of occupation and health and well-being" (p. 1)
Occupational Therapy Australia (2020)	Occupation	"all the everyday things we do in our life roles, but also the things we do to be who we are, the things we do to create a meaningful life and to engage with wider society and culture" (p. 2)
Japanese Association of Occupational Therapists (2020)	Occupation	"daily activities that are purposeful and meaningful to each person" (p. 2)
All India Occupational Therapists' Association (2018)	Occupations	"the everyday activities that people do as individuals, in families and with communities to occupy time and bring meaning and purpose to life" (p. 3)

Despite its centrality in the occupational therapy literature, 'meaning' as a concept is rarely interrogated. Borell et al. (2021, p. 1), argue that the term 'meaningful occupation' "tends to be used in ways that adds ambiguity rather than specificity". As a core concept it needs the kind of critical examination that even the term 'occupation' has been subjected to (Emery-Whittington, 2021; Malfitano & Lopes, 2021). The term "occupation" imbues pejorative meanings of negativity and coercion in countries like Brazil (Malfitano & Lopes, 2021), reflecting potential adversarial interpretations associated with colonial and/or military occupation. To distance from such imbued connotations, the words "activity" and,

more recently, “cotidiano” (similar to “everyday life”) are more commonly used (Malfitano & Lopes, 2021). Similarly the term ‘meaning’ has been widely used but poorly explicated.

Despite being widely discussed in the occupational therapy and occupational science literature, there is no consensus about definitions of meaning, meaningful, and meaningfulness (Kielsgaard et al., 2021). Ellerin (2015, p. 404) cautions that without a rigorous definition of meaning, studies of occupation “may be incomplete, over-reaching, or misplaced.” It is not the intent of this reflection essay to conduct a scoping review or systematic review of these concepts in the context of occupational therapy; rather, we provide an overview of select literature that exemplifies how these terms have been defined, described, and contextualised within the English-language literature.

Approach

The fourth author conducted a search of databases through EBSCO Host, which included Academic Search Premier, APA PsycArticles, CINAHL, Gender Studies Database, Social Work Abstracts, and SPORTDiscus. Search terms included “meaning” OR “meaningful” OR “meaningfulness” AND “occupational therapy” OR “occupational science” in the title, abstract, or keywords. The search resulted in 3001 articles, books, theses, commentaries, or reviews; with 307 duplications, this resulted in 2694 sources. The first and fourth authors contributed to initial screening of the title and abstract. Papers were included if they specifically discussed the meaning of occupation. Excluded sources were: empirical studies about the meaning of particular occupations among particular populations; a focus on meaning-making; meaning related to a concept other than occupation (e.g., meaning of therapy); providing an analysis of meaning embedded in research findings; not published in English. The vast majority of excluded sources at this stage used the term “meaningful occupation” as a synonym for “occupation,” without elaborating on “meaning” in any way. Thirty-five sources were included for full text review with a further 20 excluded due to lack of detail specifically related to ‘meaning’ as a concept related to occupation. The first author undertook an expanded review of reference lists in order to identify additional sources, which included 20 sources; this resulted in a total of 35 sources reviewed and included in Table 2.

As seen in Table 2, occupational therapy literature has taken up the notions of meaning, meaningful, and meaningfulness of occupation in multiple ways, framed predominantly, though implicitly, in relation to ‘positive’ experiences and outcomes. Among those who acknowledge meanings of occupation are not inherently positive are de Mello et al. (2020), Hammell (2004), Hocking (2009), Ikiugu et al. (2019), Keponen & Kielhofner (2006), Roberts & Bannigan (2018), Rowles (2008), and Wada (2011); though this is generally mentioned in a single clause with no elaboration. Nelson et al. (1982) similarly noted that affective meaning of occupations may not be positive. White et al. (2013) observes that it is possible for occupations with [presumably positive] meaning to simultaneously pose a risk to health.

Table 2. 'Meaning' in occupational therapy literature.

Source	Topic of interest	Experiences/notions of meaning reported
Mello et al., (2020)	Meaning	- Acknowledges that "Doing means being engaged in occupations that are personally meaningful, but not necessarily intentional, healthy or organized" (p. 358), and concludes that "what is meaningful, seem[s] to be connected to well-being, qualified by the person" (p. 368)
Christiansen (1999)	Meaning	- derived from fulfilling purpose, efficacy, value ["believing that we have done the right thing" (p. 552)], self-worth needs for meaning cannot be met "without engaging in occupation in a way that receives social validation" (p. 553)
Crabtree (2003)	Meaning	- embodied in intentional, goal-directed activity - distinguishable from 'meaningless' activity subjective experience of the 'doer' "represents the intangible nexus between the spiritual, cognitive, emotional self and symbols, objects, and deeds" (p. 14)
Crepeau et al. (2003)	Meaning of occupation in relation to health and well-being	- occupations as valued "day-to-day activities that are important and meaningful to their health and well-being" (p. 28)
Dubouloz et al. (2004)	Meaning perspectives	- personal beliefs, values, feelings, knowledge - can be barriers to [positive] health changes; amenable to transformation/reconstruction through critical reflection
Dür et al. (2018)	Meaningful activities	- "generally positive qualities of subjective experiences associated with human action or doing" - can foster transitions (e.g., adaptation, identity) - "generally positive qualities of subjective experiences associated with human action or doing" (p. 101)
Eakman (2013)	Meaningful activity	- social in nature (e.g., contributing to/caring for others; enjoyable social interactions); motivation, purposive action (e.g., control, success, progress); personal values, beliefs
Eakman (2013)	Meaning in life	- "making sense, order, or coherence out of one's existence and typically reflects the importance of purposive engagement in day-to-day life" (p. 101)
Eakman (2015b)	Meaningful occupation	- "valued, personally relevant, and subjectively positive experiences associated with activity or occupation" (p. 314)
Griffith et al. (2007)	Personal meaning	- acquired through belonging, doing, understanding
	Meaning	- "a subjective, dynamic experience defined by the person and given worth by his or her society" (p. 80)
Hammell (2004)	Meaningful occupations	- when derived spiritually: i) inherent meaning; ii) relationships; iii) transcendence - fulfil a drive to make a difference in the world - identity is "central to a person's engagement in life through meaningful occupation" (p. 87) - doing, being, belonging, becoming
Hannam (1997)	Dimensions of meaning	- contests framing 'meaningful' as inherently positive: "all occupations are meaningful; they all have some meaning for the individual engaged in them" (p. 297) (e.g., 'humiliating' may an experienced meaning) - meanings attributed to occupations are malleable
Hasselkus (2002)	Meaning of occupation	- elements of experience that give "personal shape" to one's "cultural world" (p. 73)
Hocking (2009)	Meaning in everyday occupation	- being: to know and express one's self - becoming: the potential for personal growth, transformation, self-actualization - influenced by "place" and culture
	Meaning	- may be "mainstream or contested, highbrow or commonplace, sacred or profane, as a site of celebration, emancipation, oppression, weary drudgery, struggle, or degradation of the environment" (p. 145) - occupations are situated and multiple meaning, varying across individuals, families, and cultures

Table 2. Continued...

Source	Topic of interest	Experiences/notions of meaning reported
Ikiugu (2005)	Meaningfulness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 4 proposition: 1. meaningfulness of occupation is personal and idiosyncratic 2. meaningfulness is inextricably bound with identity 3. meaningfulness enhances ones' sense of well-being 4. a sense of continuity (consisting of an integrated past, present, and future) is essential to perceive ones' live as meaningful
Ikiugu et al. (2015)	Meaningful occupation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - occupations that provide a sense of control, self-determination, and opportunity for self-transcendence
Ikiugu et al. (2019)	Meaningful occupation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "meaningful occupations are not necessarily always psychologically rewarding or mood enhancing" (e.g., "fun") (p. 2029)
Ikiugu (2019)	Meaning of occupation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - subjective according to personal preferences, circumstances, and past experiences
	Meaningful performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - autonomy to choose and do what one wants to do
Keponen & Kielhofner (2006)	Meaning of occupation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "meaning of occupation is not always positive" (p. 218) - occupation can be: source of enjoyment, a challenge to be solved, necessary to meet obligations without expectations of satisfaction/enjoyment
Kielsgaard et al. (2021)	Meaningful activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "personally valued occupation related to an individual's interests, preferences, personhood, motivations, autonomy, pleasure, or perceived significance of participating in specific occupations" (p. 1) - experiences of being connected to self, other, environment; maintain interest, joy, emotional, mental health; address need for control, continuation of creative thinking, maintenance of relationships, coherence in one's life story
Kinney et al. (2020)	Meaningful activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "engagement in activity that aligns with one's values and interests, thereby generating a constellation of positive subjective experiences" (p. 2)
Lawton (1993, as cited in Eakman et al., 2010a)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - denotative meaning: objective physical characteristics and uses of activities - connotative meaning: personally subjective/ affective aspects of an activity; includes experiential, developmental, social meanings
Mosey (1980)	Meaningful existence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "a life situation which allows one to be productive; to have fun; to love and be loved; and to live in surroundings which are safe, supportive, and comfortable" (p. 15)
	Meaning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "the process conducted by a person in interpreting symbolic information" (p. 382) - a person's interpretation influenced by feelings
Nelson et al. (1982)	Affective Meaning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - includes: i) evaluation - positive or negative feelings; ii) power - feelings regarding potential effect on the environment; iii) action – feelings about degree of movement/volatility
	(defined as per Osgood 1952, cited in Nelson et al., 1982)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - noted Osgood neglects certain affective dimensions (e.g., aggressiveness, compulsion, sense of competence)
Nelson (1988)	Meaningfulness of an occupation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - an individual's interpretation of an occupational form ("meaning"), which may differ from sociocultural expectations - "a personal experience" (p. 15)
Persson et al. (2001)	Meaning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - changes when disruptions or changes occur (e.g., injury illness) and may impact "global meaning of life" (p. 14) - a prerequisite is 'occupational value': i) concrete (e.g., satisfaction, competence); ii) symbolic (personal, cultural, universal); iii) self-reward (e.g., enjoyment)
Petruseviciene et al. (2018)	Meaningful occupation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - purposeful activity "selected in accordance with the person's interests and priorities" (p. 2) - positively affects health and quality of life; "absence is a major threat to human health" (p. 2) - is "at the heart of who we are" (p. 146)
Reed et al. (2010)	Meaning of occupation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - presence (or absence) of particular people can influence meaning - through occupation, people "become aware of the opportunities that open up or close down for them" (p. 147)

Table 2. Continued...

Source	Topic of interest	Experiences/notions of meaning reported
Reed et al. (2011)	Meaning of occupation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "revealed in what we are called to do, what excites, engages, or demands something of us, in contrast to those occupations that leave us bored, disinclined, or neglectful" (p. 305) - sharing an interest or "Being with" others (p. 305) - connecting the present with the past
Roberts & Bannigan (2018)	Personal meaning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - personal fulfillment (i.e., learning and development, pride and satisfaction, mastery, contribution) - restoration (i.e., enjoyment, pleasure, happiness, feelings, relaxation, 'in the moment,' sense of health and wellbeing, structure) - personal and sociocultural identity - connection (i.e., social, cultural, generational) - occasional "negative feelings" (p. 391)
Rosenberg et al. (2019)	Meaningful occupation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - self-initiated, important, valued; sense of enjoyment; achieving a sense of control (choice, autonomy); balancing challenge/demand and personal skill - "achieving a sense of worth through the process of engaging in occupation – through 'working'" (p. 128) - 'loving' through social relationships
Rowles (2008)	Pathways to meaning in life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - exercising autonomy; 'choosing' responses and attitudes - "receptivity to the richness and mystery of life, appreciation of the world in which we live and the development of an understanding of our place in the cosmos" (p. 128-129) - meaning can be derived from hatred
Tierney & Beattie (2020)	Attributes that make activities meaningful for people with dementia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - enjoyable; suited to individual skills, abilities, preferences; related to personally relevant goals; engaging; related to an aspect of identity - participation in personally 'meaningful activities' may positively impact lives
Wada (2011)	Meanings of occupation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - potential for subjectively 'positive and negative meanings attributed to an occupation' (p. 235).
White et al. (2013)	Meaning of occupation in relation to on-going health conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "occupation empowers" (p. 25) - meaningful activity that enhanced well-being could pose risk to health - illness-oriented activities could become [positively] meaningful
Wilcock (1998)	Meaningful occupation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "doing well, well-being and becoming what people are best fitted to become is essential to health" (p. 255)

Our search strategy for Table 2 excluded empirical studies of meaning of particular occupations for particular people. It was our intent to examine how meaning is described as a construct in occupation therapy and occupational science literature. In our brief scan of excluded articles, definitions of meaning often referred to one of the articles cited in Table 2. It may be the case that more nuanced findings of meanings are undercover in discussion with informants; if so, these complex and nuanced meanings have not been comprehensively integrated into conceptual framings or models in the occupational therapy or occupational science literature.

Multiple theorists have influenced occupational therapists' thinking about meaning. Drawing selectively on theorists such as Frankl and Csikszentmihalyi, and to some extent Heidegger (e.g., Reed et al., 2010; Reed et al., 2013), Gadamer (e.g., de Mello et al., 2020; Reed et al., 2010; Reed et al., 2013), Nietzsche (e.g., Ikiugu, 2005), Ricouer (e.g., Borell et al., 2021), Merleau-Ponty

(e.g., Borell et al., 2021), Mezirow (e.g., de Mello et al., 2020), and others, it is implied that occupations contribute [positively] to life’s meaning, intents, and purposes, are [positively] valued, and [positive] meanings arise through engagement in occupation. Positive outcomes of meaningful engagement include belonging, autonomy, continuity, self-esteem, enjoyment, stimulation, satisfaction, mastery, self-worth, quality of life, sense of purpose, fulfilment, happiness, mental health, physical health, and well-being (Chio et al., 2018; Du Toit et al., 2019; Eakman et al., 2018; Eakman et al., 2010b). In contrast it has been suggested that lack of meaningful occupation contributes to experiences of boredom, negative rumination, depression, and disconnection (Christiansen, 1999; Marshall et al., 2019).

Frankl and Csikszentmihalyi are two theorists whose work have shaped the profession following World War II (e.g., de Mello et al., 2020; Eakman et al., 2010a; Hocking, 2000; Ikiugu, 2019; Law, 2002; Persson et al., 2001; Roberts & Bannigan, 2018; Rowles, 2008). Both these men sought to understand the meaning of life at times of deep suffering. Csikszentmihalyi wondered how some people maintained decency, integrity, and purpose and “held the key to what humans could be like at their best” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 7), while others became “helpless and dispirited” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 6). Frankl was imprisoned in four concentration camps, including Auschwitz. Through his experiences and observations, he proposed sources of meaning in life to maintain courage and hope for the future, such as completing “unfinished work” or connecting with a loved one (Frankl, 2006, p. 80).

Csikszentmihalyi (1990, p. 216) presents three ways “meaning” is used. The first is a purpose, significance, or end, such as, “What is the meaning of life?”. The second is related to intention or pursuit of goals, such as, “She means to be supportive.” The third pertains to ordering information, such as, “When the baby cries, it means it’s hungry.” Csikszentmihalyi proposes that people who “find their lives meaningful” experience “optimal experience” and act with “unified meaning” however, he acknowledges living a meaningful life does not inherently produce positive outcomes. He presents Napolean as an example of a person who may have achieved optimal experience, serving an inner purpose; yet, in Napolean’s pursuit of power, he sacrificed the lives of hundreds of thousands of French soldiers (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 217) Csikszentmihalyi (1990) further notes that excelling and finding meaning in a single occupation does not ensure satisfaction or optimal experiences in other areas of life.

Moving beyond theory and concepts, occupational therapy assessments have been developed to evaluate ‘meaningful activity,’ ensuring the positive connotations of ‘meaningful’ become embedded in practice. The criteria that is common in assessment measures reflect positive constructs of meaning (Table 3), such as competence, mastery, pleasure, self-expression, personal fulfillment, achievement, pleasure, and social connection.

Table 3. Assessment of meaning in occupational therapy.

Assessment	Concept	Criteria measured
Engagement in Meaningful Activities Survey (Eakman, 2012; Eakman et al., 2010a; Goldberg et al., 2002)	Meaningful activity	- designed to include: perceived congruency between the activity and one's value system and needs, competence and mastery, value in one's social/cultural group. 12 criteria [scale 0 (never) to 5 (always)]: self care; reflective of one's self; express creativity; sense of accomplishment; feeling of competence; valued by others; help others; pleasure; feeling of control; expression personal values; satisfaction; right amount of challenge. E.g., "The activities I do give me pleasure"
Meaningful Activity Participation Assessment (MAPA) (Cheraghifard et al., 2020; Eakman et al., 2010b)	Meaningfulness of activity	- instructions: "Please rate each activity according to how meaningful it is to you. That is, how much it matters or is personally fulfilling for you." (0 not at all meaningful, 1 somewhat meaningful, 2 moderately meaningful, 3 very meaningful, and 4 extremely meaningful).
Meaningful Activity Wants and Needs Assessment (MAWNA) (Eakman, 2015a) (Eakman, 2013)	Meaningfulness of activity	- assesses 'wants' and 'needs' associated with positive subjective experiences (or 'meanings'), such as personal competence and goal achievement, pleasure and enjoyment, and social connectedness.
Meaningful and Psychologically Rewarding Occupation Rating Scale (MPRORS) (Ikiugu et al., 2021)	Meaningful occupation	- to identify personally meaningful and psychologically rewarding occupations; namely, those that are mentally and physically stimulation, fun, and foster social connection

Certainly, efforts to understand positive aspects of meaning in relation to occupation are of value to a profession founded on a vision of enhancing health and well-being through occupation. At the same time, neglecting to examine meanings that are not framed as positive limits the profession to partial understandings of occupation, meaning, and lived experience. When an assumption of positive meaning underpins occupation-based scholarship, this can limit opportunities to elicit information that might contradict or contest that assumption.

Understanding meaning from an epistemological standpoint

Uncovering nuanced understandings of meaning in occupational therapy may be strengthened by situating 'meaning(s)' and 'meaningfulness' with respect to underlying epistemological and theoretical perspectives that may facilitate critical reflection on assumptions and biases. As with other concepts prominent in occupational therapy, it is important to ensure conceptual clarity, take into account theoretical work from other disciplines, and consider contextual influences (Durocher et al., 2014). It is thus important to situate understandings of meaning as influenced by one's epistemological and theoretical perspective.

Epistemology is defined by Hamlyn (as cited in Crotty, 1998, p. 8) as “the nature of knowledge and its possibility, scope and general basis” while a theoretical perspective is defined as “a way of looking at the world and making sense of it” (Crotty, 1998, p. 8). Within objectivist epistemologies and positivist theoretical approaches, things (in this case, occupations) “exist as meaningful entities independent of consciousness and experience, that they have truth and meaning residing in them as objects ('objective' truth and meaning, therefore), and that careful (scientific) research can attain that objective truth and meaning” (Crotty, 1998, p. 5-6). Constructionist epistemologies and interpretivist theoretical approaches appear to align more closely with the descriptions of meaning listed in Table 2. From these perspectives, meaning is thought to arise in different ways for different people, taking into consideration factors such as time, place, and culture. In contrast, epistemologies of subjectivity approach meaning as ascribed to objects (e.g., occupations) from external influences, such that “[...] meanings are thus at once objective and subjective, their objectivity and subjectivity being indissolubly bound up with each other [...]” (Crotty, 1998, p. 48). However, this definition of ‘subjectivity’ differs from the predominant ways ‘subjective meaning’ is used in the occupational therapy literature. In those instances, ‘subjective’ typically refers to meaning that arises from an interaction between the object (occupation) and subject (person), where the subject attributes or experiences meaning(s) in relation to the object. In an epistemology of subjectivism, meaning is created outside the subject (Crotty, 1998). In occupational therapy literature, the meaning of occupation is understood, to some extent, outside the subject, with dominant social and cultural meanings identified; however, depending on theoretical and methodological approaches, these meanings may reflect subjectivist or objectivist epistemologies.

Aligned with the ways meaning is predominantly described in occupational therapy, meaning has been described as “qualities of human ‘experience’ or ‘subjectivity’” (Parker, 2005, p. 137). Some common interpretivist theoretical perspectives that guide research methodologies in occupational therapy to examine meaning include phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, and hermeneutics. The influence of phenomenology is evident in the amount of research exploring meanings of human occupation (Absolom & Roberts, 2011; Alsaker & Josephsson, 2010; Berger, 2011; Degrace, 2004; Eriksson & Tham, 2010; Gibbs & Klinger, 2011; Križaj et al., 2019; Pereira & Stagnitti, 2008; Reed et al., 2011). An advantage of phenomenology is the view that “meaning in people’s lives is given by the context of the world in which they live” (Wilding & Whiteford, 2005, p. 100). The influence of social interactionism is also apparent. Symbolic interactionism is grounded on the belief that the meaning something holds for a person impacts how they act and this meaning arises through social interactions and individual interpretations (Blumer, 1969). Understandings are framed through the lens of individuals, whereby, “The situation must be seen as the actor sees it, the meanings of objects and acts must be determined in terms of the actor’s meanings, and the organization of a course of action must be understood as the actor organizes it” (Psathas, 1973 as cited in Crotty, 1998, p. 75). Hermeneutics involves systematic interpretation of meaning(s). Dithley (as cited in Weinberg, 2008, p. 29) suggested that, “because it is purposeful, meaningful, and creative, social life cannot be explained by natural laws but can be grasped only through Verstehen, or interpretive understanding” Giddens (as cited in Crotty, 1998, p. 56) observes that social scientists

engage in ‘double hermeneutics,’ whereby they are simultaneously “entering and grasping the frames and meanings involved in the production of social life by lay actors” and “reconstituting these within the new frames of meaning involved in technical conceptual themes”.

Outside occupational therapy literature, the concept of ‘meaning’ is not exclusively associated with positive attributions. For instance, ‘negative meanings’ are explored in relation to pain or certain diagnoses (Chio et al., 2018; Du Toit et al., 2019; Eakman et al., 2010b). Indeed, in fields outside occupational therapy, meanings of activities/occupations are examined with complex attention to nuanced experiences. Meanings of “family work” (e.g., domestic chores, childcare) are recognized to potentially include love and care, as well as subordination and powerlessness (Kroska, 2003); a potential meaning of parenting is “role captivity,” described as feeling trapped in the parenting role and attributed to experiences of emotional strain (Nomaguchi & Brown, 2011). Another example is meanings around the occupation of coaching sports, which are complexly linked to safety, trust, and protection of children, as well as the perceptions around potential vulnerability and risks for child abuse (Garratt et al., 2013). In numerous fields of inquiry other than occupational therapy, meaning is explored as complex, nuanced, contextual, variable, shifting, and contradictory.

It is reasonable that when historically establishing occupational therapy as a legitimate and valued profession, the therapeutic potential of occupation was emphasized and occupations, as outcomes, were described as inherently positive. These types of arguments were rhetorically persuasive and politically advantageous. As the profession matures and scholarship expands, such longstanding epistemic ‘myths’ are being confronted. Critical perspectives need not be viewed as threatening to the legitimacy of the profession; rather these form a part of an ongoing conversation that builds on – rather than negates – preceding scholarship. Integrating understandings of occupation beyond presumed positive meanings of occupations can better inform occupational therapy assessment and, subsequently, approaches and intervention.

Future directions

‘Negative’ meanings may be more prominently acknowledged in newer literature regarding non-sanctioned occupations; however, to avoid inadvertently reifying dominant and potentially stigmatising understandings it is important to approach ‘meanings’ as diverse and complex. For instance, whereas Huglstad et al. (2020) uncover ‘positive meanings’ of sex work (framed in the article as a non-sanctioned occupation) with respect to self-identifying as a sexual being, personal development, interpersonal relationships, professional pride, and well-being and quality of life, they also identify that negative meanings were viewed as emerging from public perspectives and sociocultural and political contexts that infringed on one’s sense of belonging. Personally speaking, in the first author’s work, the perspective of occupations as being positively meaningful was adopted as a means of bringing credibility to positioning of substance use as a legitimate occupation (Kiepek & Magalhães, 2011) and to challenge predominant one-sided assumptions of this occupation as inherently negative (Kiepek et al., 2019). When occupations are assumed to be positively meaningful, research may inadvertently be designed to more explicitly elicit these types of

experiences, potentially overlooking approaches (e.g., interview questions) that will simultaneously elicit meanings of occupation that are not positive.

Despite acknowledgements in scholarship of occupations that meaning may not always be positive, this perspective remains underdeveloped. Furthermore, there is a need to shift attention from reinforcing dualistic perspectives of meaning being either positive or negative. Meaning is diverse, fluid, temporal, contextually situated, and multiple. If occupational therapists (and occupational scientists) are to be “custodians of meaning” (Englehardt, 1986), it is essential to explode understandings of meaning beyond an oversimplified emphasis on positive valuation. To perpetuate framings of occupations as inherently and exclusively positively meaningful effectively silences experiences that do not conform to dominant assumptions and perspectives. Approaching ‘meaning’ more broadly may allow occupational therapists and scholars to better comprehend what people do and do not do, and why, better situating the profession in espoused goals of promoting equity, justice, and rights. Neglecting diverse experiences of meaning can inadvertently contribute to oppressive practices that silence non-idealized experiences.

Conclusion

Understandably, as a profession whose purpose is to facilitate health, wellbeing, and rights-based outcomes, the positive potential of occupation is liberally discussed in occupational therapy literature. At the same time, it is essential to deliberately examine diverse and varied meanings of occupations, for collectives as well as individuals and for these types of findings to inform concepts, models, and assessments. To neglect nuanced meanings risks undermining the credibility of our professional knowledge base and, subsequently, our practices. Assuming that occupations socially constructed as “positive” will necessarily have exclusively positive meanings, or that occupations constructed as “negative” cannot hold positive meanings (or worse yet, are “meaningless”), undermines claims to person-centredness. Furthermore, neglecting nuanced understandings of occupations, focusing solely on the positive, forfeits more complex examinations to other disciplines, thereby undermining occupational therapy’s claim to expertise in the realm of occupation. It is essential to critically reflect on how personal, cultural, social, and professional views influence the degree to which nuanced and varied experiences and interpretations of meaning are legitimized and voiced. Greater attention to nuanced complexity of meanings, even contradictory meanings, may open greater conceptual space for understanding occupation more deeply and further contribute to occupational therapy assessment and intervention.

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