

Editorial

Social occupational therapy on the agenda: contemporary practices, research, and reflections

Terapia ocupacional social em pauta: práticas, pesquisas e reflexões contemporâneas

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How to cite: Bardi, G., Pereira, B. P., Vasters, G. P., Braga, I. F., Oliveira, M. L., & Souza, R. G. M. (2023). Social occupational therapy on the agenda: contemporary practices, research, and reflections. *Cadernos Brasileiros de Terapia Ocupacional*, 31(spe), e2301. <https://doi.org/10.1590/2526-8910.ctoED312023012>

This Special Issue of the “Brazilian Journal of Occupational Therapy” focuses on the theme of social occupational therapy and aims to bring together articles from authors (professionals, educators, researchers, and undergraduate and graduate students) from Brazil and around the world. Its purpose is to establish and/or deepen the dialogue on the advances in research and practices within this subarea of occupational therapy.

The proposal for this thematic edition emerged from discussions held within the Social Occupational Therapy Work Group during the VI National Seminar on Occupational Therapy Research, which occurred in September 2021. Occupational therapists, educators, and researchers came together to engage in dialogue about the advances in research and practice in social occupational therapy. They also discussed the importance of enhancing and strengthening the theoretical and methodological framework of this subarea, as well as strategies for promoting it.

It should be emphasized that the emergence of social occupational therapy occurred within the context of the struggles for the democratization of Brazilian society in the 1970s and 1980s, amid various social movements advocating for amnesty, such as the labor union, student, and women’s movements and the movement against the high cost of living. These movements also sought better living conditions, healthcare, and education (Barros et al., 2007a).

The processes of deinstitutionalization have triggered and enabled the development of a new practice in occupational therapy, guided by the principle of territorial responsibility in assistance. This new approach encompasses various conceptual shifts, including a focus on the user as a rights-bearing subject, an emphasis on transdisciplinary actions and socio-anthropological knowledge, professionals as political



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and social actors, and activities tailored specifically to each person and situation but always referring to group history, social class, and the symbolic and cultural universe (Barros et al., 2007a).

These principles were pillars in the construction of social occupational therapy, with emphasis on the outcome of health-disease mediation from the spillover of the health field and confrontation with social realities also in the scope of other social policies (Barros, 2004; Barros et al., 2002). Thus, it is understood that there are social phenomena that can result in the social exclusion of individuals, groups, and communities based on factors such as social class, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, deviant/disabled bodies, and other social markers of difference. In these cases, the demands placed on occupational therapists do not fall within the scope of the health sector, and their models, methodologies, and frameworks are not capable of addressing the needs of those people.

Since then, social occupational therapy has supported the professional practice of occupational therapists concerned with the impacts of the social question on the lives of subjects, families, groups, and communities and notably active in the sectors of education, social assistance, culture, human rights and justice, and health (Barros et al., 2007a; Farias & Lopes, 2020).

In the first decade of the 21st century, social occupational therapy, in search of deepening the understanding of the identity dimension in the processes of belonging and in the intersection of social markers of difference in the production of inequalities, revisited its concepts and procedures seeking support in socio-anthropological studies on culture, always combining them with politics (Melo et al., 2020; Monzeli, 2022).

The actions of social occupational therapy aim at autonomy, access to citizenship, and social participation of the subjects, through interventions in their everyday life, with culturally relevant activities (Barros et al., 2007b), seeking to foster changes (Malfitano, 2005). Galheigo (2003), it is necessary to understand the complexity of social relations based on how the actors interpret them, identifying and acknowledging their unique experiences and the representations they create from those experiences. Therefore, the focus of actions shifts from “just” the individual in their singularity to the group and the relationships established within it (Barros et al., 2007a), while still respecting and valuing individual dimensions and freedoms. This approach also considers group experiences and seeks to comprehend the elements that shape these relationships.

Professionals also take the role of thinking and developing public policies, knowing the specific legislation regarding the population group they are assisting, constructing proposals, and acting in the public sphere seeking to incorporate political aspects into their work routine (Malfitano, 2005).

In Brazil, among the multitude of possibilities and achievements in social occupational therapy, one circumstance that expanded the number of occupational therapists working in social contexts, specifically in the field of social assistance, was the recognition, in 2011, of the profession’s qualification to be part of the reference teams and management of services and projects within the Unified Social Assistance System (SUAS), through a resolution by the National Council of Social Assistance (CNAS) (Brasil, 2011). It is estimated that approximately 8% of the occupational therapists in the country work at SUAS (Oliveira et al., 2019). Thus, in addition to setting up an

important field of professional activity, it was necessary to deepen reflections and produce new research addressing the issues that guide this practice.

Furthermore, the ongoing problems faced by socially vulnerable population groups, historically marked by difficulties in social participation and access to social rights, have increased as a result of the current economic and political crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the expressions of the social question and has disproportionately affected populations deprived of numerous rights related to basic aspects of life, access to information, social participation, and decent working conditions. The damaging and destabilizing effects of the current crisis on the everyday life of these people have required not only ingenuity from occupational therapists working in the social field but also a reaffirmation of their technical, ethical, and political commitment to professional action (Bregalda et al., 2019).

In recent years, the country has experienced a period of severe weakening of social policies, with labor reforms that intensified the precariousness of workers and the freezing of public spending in the healthcare, education, and social assistance sectors. This has resulted in the deterioration of social policies, especially during Jair Bolsonaro's neoliberal government (2018-2022), characterized by fascist discourses of hatred toward dissenting genders and sexualities, women, and indigenous and black people. These discourses have gained strength and resonated in Brazilian society, rooted in a history of slavery, making racism and everyday veiled prejudices increasingly overt.

It is also worth noting that the complexities of the current context, however, did not remove occupational therapists from the field of historical action with excluded populations who face the difficulties arising from social inequality, such as poor children and young people, migrants, traditional peoples and communities in impoverished territories and communities, among others.

With the promise of a more progressive future, as of the inauguration of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in January 2023, part of Brazilian society renews its hopes for a less conservative and unequal society, without abandoning the fight, and without the illusion that the demands for social occupational therapy will be exhausted. These are times of reconstruction, in more breathable air, but imbued with all the contradictions that the capitalist mode of production and the ultra-neoliberal tendency pose to us, with extremely active forces in current Brazilian society.

However, this situation does not occur “only” in Brazil. Global impoverishment and dilemmas surrounding the social question have attracted the attention of professionals and researchers from other countries to social occupational therapy. For example, in the five editions of the International Symposium on Social Occupational Therapy, there have been dialogues with occupational therapists from various countries. Representatives from our subarea have also participated as keynote speakers at the 18th World Congress of Occupational Therapists (Malfitano, 2022). Among foreign publications, a recent highlight was the book “Social Occupational Therapy: Theoretical and Practical Designs” (Lopes & Malfitano, 2021), which enabled a broader dissemination of reflections on the theoretical assumptions and practical propositions of social occupational therapy in Brazil to the world. In the last symposium, held in November 2022 in São Carlos, Brazil, occupational therapists from Canada, Mozambique, the United States, France, Colombia, and various regions of Brazil

participated as lecturers, presenting their work that intersects with the subarea of social occupational therapy.

In this Special Supplement, readers will find texts that address experiences in other countries, such as France, Colombia, and Canada. The issue integrates a diversity of themes, populations, practices, sectors, and theoretical approaches that underpin the work and research carried out by occupational therapists engaged in or in dialogue with social occupational therapy. The texts contribute to the debate on social occupational therapy within the context of discussions on the social question, social inequalities, social vulnerabilities, social rights, and interculturality, among others. There are also publications addressing issues related to childhood, adolescence, youth, migrants, and refugees. In addition, some texts explore the dialogue with social markers of difference, such as gender and sexuality, ethnicity/race, and territory, among others.

We hope that the manuscripts presented here can improve and strengthen a theoretical-methodological framework centered on the social dimension of the subjects, groups, and communities that are the focus of this professional practice.

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Author's Contributions

All authors contributed to the idealization, writing and formatting of the text. All authors approved the final version of the text.

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