

Reflection Article/Essay

Occupational therapists as “intellectuals”: learning from Edward Said

*Terapeutas ocupacionais como “intelectuais”:
aprendendo com Edward Said*

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Abstract

Introduction: Palestinian philosopher, Edward Said, claimed that the role of intellectuals is to interrogate the unquestioned assumptions on which their discipline's practices depend, resist the uncritical acceptance of authoritative discourses, and stand in opposition to injustice and oppression. Said defined some professionals as “maintainers”, whose work contributes to preserving the status quo of power and practice. He differentiated these people from “intellectuals”: those academics, and practitioners (“organic intellectuals”) who challenge orthodoxy and provoke change. **Objectives:** To highlight the importance of Said's ideas to the work of those occupational therapists striving towards an anti-ableist, ethically-consistent, and socially-accountable profession. **Method:** This paper explores aspects of Said's work that have particular relevance for occupational therapists seeking to contest the injustices of the profession's status quo and realign the profession's professed values and Position Statements with its actions. **Results:** Said exhorted intellectuals to contest the proclamations and platitudes of those wielding power within their discipline. Because he refuted professionals' collusion with classificatory practices that reinforce colonialism's hierarchical systems of injustice (for example, by assessing and documenting physical and functional differences from constructed “norms”), his work has clear relevance to an occupational therapy profession informed by, and promoting an ableist ideology. **Conclusion:** Intellectual integrity obligates occupational therapists to expose hypocrisy within their profession's discourses and practices, demand accountability, and engage in, and promote sceptical critical consciousness. Said's work provides inspiration for those occupational therapists contesting the ableist status quo, and demanding that their profession enact its stated commitment to resisting injustice and supporting human rights.

Keywords: Anti-Ableism, Classification, Colonialism, Human Rights, Occupations.

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Resumo

Introdução: O filósofo palestino Edward Said afirmou que o papel dos intelectuais é interrogar os pressupostos não questionados sobre os quais se baseiam as práticas de sua disciplina, resistir à aceitação acrítica de discursos de autoridade e posicionar-se contra a injustiça e a opressão. Said definiu alguns profissionais como “mantenedores”, cujo trabalho contribui para preservar o status quo do poder e da prática. Ele diferenciou essas pessoas dos “intelectuais”: aqueles acadêmicos e profissionais (“intelectuais orgânicos”) que desafiam a ortodoxia e provocam mudanças.

Objetivos: Destacar a importância das ideias de Said para o trabalho dos terapeutas ocupacionais que lutam por uma profissão anticapacitista, eticamente consistente e socialmente responsável. **Método:** Este artigo explora aspectos da obra de Said que possuem relevância particular para terapeutas ocupacionais que buscam contestar as injustiças do status quo da profissão e realinhar os valores declarados e as Declarações de Posicionamento da profissão com suas ações. **Resultados:** Said encorajou os intelectuais a contestar as proclamações e os superficialidades daqueles que detêm o poder dentro de sua disciplina. Como ele refutou a cumplicidade dos profissionais com práticas classificatórias que reforçam os sistemas hierárquicos de injustiça do colonialismo (por exemplo, ao avaliar e documentar diferenças físicas e funcionais em relação a “normas” construídas), sua obra possui relevância para a profissão de terapia ocupacional informada por, e que promove, uma ideologia capacitista.

Conclusão: A integridade intelectual obriga os terapeutas ocupacionais a expor a hipocrisia presente nos discursos e práticas de sua profissão, exigir responsabilização (accountability) e engajar-se na promoção de uma consciência crítica e cética. A obra de Said oferece inspiração para os terapeutas ocupacionais que contestam o status quo capacitista e exigem que sua profissão cumpra seu compromisso declarado de resistir à injustiça e apoiar os direitos humanos.

Palavras-chave: Anticapacitismo, Classificação, Colonialismo, Direitos Humanos, Atividades Cotidianas.

Introduction

The Palestinian philosopher, Said (1996), contended that the role of intellectuals in any discipline is to interrogate and challenge the unquestioned beliefs and assumptions that underpin their profession's practices, resist the uncritical acceptance of authoritative statements, confront orthodoxy and dogma, contest conventional and accepted ideas, expose hypocrisy, and stand in opposition to injustice and oppression. For more than two decades, his work has both influenced, and inspired my own (e.g. Hammell, 2004, 2006, 2009, 2011, 2023).

The aim of this paper, is to sketch the relevance of Said's ideas to the work of those occupational therapists who are striving toward an anti-ableist, ethically-consistent, and socially-accountable profession. Said's work was wide-ranging – embracing literary criticism, music theory, postcolonial theory, philosophy, politics, and more - so this paper will focus on three main themes within his voluminous work that have particular relevance for the occupational therapy profession: his challenge to resist and contest the status quo of disciplinary dogma; his challenge to expose and contest systems of injustice; and his challenge to resist and contest the colonial practice of classifying people. The paper begins there; with an exploration of the ableist, colonial practice of classifying people.

Contesting Colonial Classificatory Practices - Classifying People

Colonization entails the systematic use of power to dispossess, appropriate, settle and commodify the lands and resources of Indigenous peoples, exploit their labour, and destroy their languages, cultural and spiritual practices - injustices that have not ended (Pappe, 2024; Said, 1979; Young, 2003). By 1914, European colonialism had been imposed on at least 85% of the world's land and people (Said, 1994). The colonial project of domination and appropriation was - and is - “validated” in the colonial mind by a dehumanizing logic that regarded/regards the people already living on coveted lands as inferior and thus not worthy of the same rights claimed and enjoyed by the colonizers (Pappe, 2024; Said, 1979).

As a post-colonial theorist, Said sought to expose the ways in which a dominant social group asserts and maintains colonial power through privileging and imposing its own values and norms; defining, marginalizing, and excluding others deemed inferior (Said, 1979). The social organization of colonial societies relies on inequality (Namsoo & Armstrong, 1999) – advantaging specific people and disadvantaging others - and Said sought to expose how ideological hierarchies were constructed to establish and “justify” inequalities by attributing superiority (of the colonisers) through comparison with an alleged inferiority (the colonised).

Colonialism's social hierarchies focused first on positioning white people as superior to all others, positioning Christianity as superior to all other systems of belief, and establishing class hierarchies that ranked people according to their financial capital. Subsequently, bodily superiority and inferiority were constructed, not solely in terms of racial hierarchies - white/black - but also male/female, gender conforming/gender non-conforming, straight/queer, neurotypical/neurodiverse, enabled/disabled (Annamma et al., 2018; Connell, 2011; Lugones, 2007; Pihama, 2019; Wildman & Davis, 1995).

As a consequence of colonialism's classificatory practices (Foucault, 1977), people are compared, classified and categorized, and thereafter hierarchized, segregated, excluded, institutionalized and marginalized (Said, 1979, 1994). Deemed ab-normal, deficient, inferior, incapable of looking after themselves, and requiring the rule of others for their own “best interests” (Said, 1979), colonized people are “analysed not as citizens, or even people, but as problems to be solved or confined” (Said, 1979, p. 207); fixed in “zones of dependency and peripherality” (Said, 1989, p. 207). The colonial practice of categorizing (other) people has been weaponized against disabled people, with the collusion of occupational therapists (Hammell, 2006). In recognition of the colonial nature of these injustices, critical disability scholars have sought to highlight the ways in which ableism functions as a eugenic, colonial tool (Hammell, 2023; Hutcheon & Lashewicz, 2020).

Said (1979) argued that professionals must be on constant guard against the received ideas handed down in their profession. He cautioned against being too smug, too insulated, and too confident in ideological straightjackets, and against colluding with cultural and political dogma. He advocated a sceptical analysis of the ways in which humanity is divided and “thrust into pigeonholes” that classify and categorise how “others” are different from “us” (Said, 1976, p. 41). Said (1979) denounced the collusion of professionals with the classificatory practices that reinforce hierarchical systems of injustice, making his work relevant to an occupational therapy profession informed by ableist ideals, fundamentally preoccupied with people deemed “different”, and complicit in classifying the ways in which people's bodies, abilities, and functions deviate from constructed “norms” (Hammell, 2006).

Ableism is an ideology that views typical (usual) minds, bodies and abilities as superior, portrays impairments as inherently negative, and those with impairments as defective, inferior, and in need of remediation (Campbell, 2008; Hammell, 2023; Miller et al., 2004). The ideology of ableism informs occupational therapy interventions designed to induce conformity with the norms of the dominant group, and creates and justifies the unfair and unearned advantages and opportunities enjoyed by those, like the author of this paper, who most closely adhere to ableist norms.

For many years, critical occupational therapists have been exhorting their profession to acknowledge - and thereafter curtail - its collusion with a hegemonic, ableist ideology (e.g. Hammell, 2004, 2006, 2023; Jongbloed & Crichton, 1990; Kielhofner, 2004, 2005; Magasi, 2008; Phelan, 2011); and have been striving to draw attention to the impact of ableism on the ways in which occupational therapists research, assess, “enable”, and intervene in the lives of disabled people (Hammell, 2023). These appeals have been largely ignored (Harrison et al., 2021), despite the obvious ethical imperative to interrogate seriously any suggestion that the occupational therapy profession promotes ableism and colludes in the disablement of people with ascribed differences from socially-valued norms (Abberley, 1995, 2004; French & Swain, 2001; Hammell, 2006). Thus; “insulated from challenging perspectives, occupational therapy has largely failed to acknowledge or critique its core ableist values, or consider how its professional practices contribute to the marginalization and oppression of disabled people” (Hammell, 2023, p. 745).

Consistent with its underpinning ableist ideology, for example, occupational therapy’s modes of assessment continue to focus primarily – and often exclusively – on classifying peoples’ deficits, dysfunctions, dis-abilities and perceived differences from bodies and functions deemed “normal” (i.e. typical, usual, preferred), while paying considerably less – if any - attention to their skills, abilities, strengths and resources (Hammell, 2020). Because occupational therapy interventions are informed and shaped by assessment findings, what the profession chooses to assess matters.

Inspired by Said’s work (Hammell, 2004), I have challenged occupational therapists’ collusion with the International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health (International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health & The World Health Organization, 2001); a tool specifically designed, not to classify people’s needs, but to classify people. I contested the culturally-specific assumptions of normality that underpin the ICF, and drew attention to the work of historians who have demonstrated that because the criteria for “normality” constantly change in response to social and cultural changes, “normality” is a shifting and unstable construct, and a singularly unscientific baseline for comparison (Hammell, 2004). Critical scholars contend that use of the ICF contributes to perpetuating a culture of ableism in both rehabilitation, and the wider society (Hammell, 2023; Mosleh, 2019).

An occupational therapy profession ideologically rooted, not in ableism, but in equity would focus, not on documenting deficits and dysfunctions, but on employing forms of assessment amenable to identifying individual and collective resources and strengths, in addition to the resources and constraints of environmental contexts (Hammell, 2020). If, as a profession, we believe that social and structural determinants impact the occupations in which people are able to engage (Hammell, 2021), our assessments ought, surely, to reflect this belief.

Phelan et al. (2014) are among those who have tried to draw attention to the harmful impacts on disabled children when they are taught - by ableist rehabilitation professionals who prioritize walking over other forms of mobility - to regard themselves as problematic, defective, imperfect, damaged, flawed and “less-than” other children. Said (1979) observed: “perhaps if we remember that the study of human experience usually has an ethical, to say nothing of a political, consequence in either the best or worst sense, we will not be indifferent to what we do” (p. 327). Assessments are part of what *we* do, as occupational therapists. Why we do what we do, and how we do what we do demand critical scrutiny.

Contesting Colonial Classificatory Practices - Categorising Occupations

Said (1996) exhorted intellectuals to care about the consequences of the ideas promoted within their profession, and believed that the role of the intellectual is to engage in sceptical critical consciousness (Freire, 1970; Said, 2002): striving to understand how social, political and economic forces shape systems of oppression and injustice. Thus, within occupational therapy, intellectuals have contested their profession’s obsession with classifying people and categorising their occupations (Hammell, 2004), noting – with Said - that as soon as categories are determined, each category becomes “[...] not so much a neutral designation as an evaluative interpretation” (Said, 1979, p. 227).

The desire to categorize the occupations of others is an expression of dominance; a value-laden and political endeavour that establishes the social worth both of the occupation and of those engaged in the occupation (Hammell, 2004, 2020). Nonetheless, categorizing the occupations in which “others” are engaged has been a long-time preoccupation among occupational therapy’s dominant theorists in the Global North.

Said (1979, p. 10) noted that “[...] no one has ever devised a method for detaching the scholar from the circumstances of life, from the fact of his [sic] involvement (conscious or unconscious) with a class, a set of beliefs, a social position, or from the mere activity of being a member of society”. Because all ideas are shaped by the geographical, historical, social, economic, political and cultural context in which they are embedded (Said, 1979, 2002), there is never a neutral, impartial, value-free or objective location from which occupational categories might be delineated or analyzed (Hammell, 2020).

Thus, occupations sanctioned and prioritised by occupational therapists are inevitably those that perpetuate the status quo, and that protect the assets, interests and privileges of élites (Kiepek et al., 2025), while occupations, for example, of survival (Babish, 2025; Bdier et al., 2025), dissent and resistance to oppression and injustice are ignored and obscured (Emery-Whittington, 2021, Simaan, 2017). For many years, dominant theorists in the Global North deemed only three occupational categories to be worthy of occupational therapists’ attention – self-care, work/productivity and leisure/play (Kielhofner, 2008; Townsend & Polatajko, 2013). Revealingly, the categories of self-care, work and productivity were always listed before leisure and play (Hammell, 2020); an ordering neither random nor alphabetical, but a reflection of theorists’ own values (Hammell, 2009). Similarly, doing has always been listed before being, becoming and belonging in Wilcock’s d+b³ formulation (Wilcock, 2006), despite the preeminent importance of belonging to those within collectivist cultures (Iwama, 2003), who constitute the majority of the global population (Hammell, 2020). Because intellectual integrity “requires an unwillingness to accept easy formulae or the conventional, received ideas of the powerful” (Said, 1996, p. 23), the analysis of occupational engagement within so few, simplistic categories has always demanded sceptical scrutiny (Hammell, 2009).

It is thus apparent that the occupational categories prioritised by occupational therapy’s dominant theorists have ignored and devalued every occupation undertaken by the need to do *with* others, or *for* others (Hammell, 2020). And because the practice of categorising people’s occupations is a colonial practice, what “counts” as an occupation and is considered worthy of analysis by dominant theorists in the Global North inevitably ignores and excludes many occupations of central importance to Indigenous peoples (Emery-Whittington, 2023). The epistemic erasure of these important occupations continues the long process of settler-colonialism, wherein cultural practices, the planting, care and gathering of food and healing plants, and occupations that provide care for the land and oceans, have been denigrated, outlawed and criminalized (Babish, 2025; Emery-Whittington, 2023; Simaan, 2026).

Few occupational scientists or therapists have sought to explore how people – globally – categorise their occupations (Hammell, 2020); or indeed, whether they categorise their occupations at all.

Occupational Therapists as Intellectuals: Resisting the Status Quo of Disciplinary Dogma

Said (2002) described those academics and practitioners whose work serves to preserve the status quo of power and practice as “maintainers”. He differentiated maintainers from people he termed “intellectuals” – those academics and practitioners who engage in critical consciousness, who seek out knowledge that challenges orthodoxy, who raise questions, who contest the proclamations of those wielding power within their discipline, and who provoke change (Said, 2002).

Said (1996) built on the work of the Italian theorist Gramsci (1971), who had evolved the term “organic intellectuals” to refer to those practitioners who are deeply engaged with marginalized people, and who develop innovative and counter-hegemonic knowledge and practices grounded in the realities of everyday lives. Organic intellectuals may attain positions through which they are accorded the social function of intellectuals – gaining doctoral degrees and becoming occupational therapy theorists, for example – but they remain grounded in, and connected to their base; refusing acquiescence with the status quo (Said, 1996). Gramsci (1971) differentiated organic intellectuals from those academics and theorists who have the social function of intellectuals, yet who fail to innovate or to contest hegemony (the people Said termed “maintainers”).

Said was influenced by Gramsci’s (1971) concept of “hegemony”, which refers to the widespread diffusion of – and spontaneous compliance with – ideas that benefit the powerful (Bocock, 1986). Gramsci (1971) asserted that hegemonic ideas prevail, not because of their intrinsic superiority or correctness, but because they are transmitted so successfully by those wielding power that they acquire the aura of “truth”. Said (1996) asked uncomfortable questions concerning the role of academics, theorists and practitioners (“maintainers”) in perpetuating hegemonic ideas and in failing to challenge the authority of ideological straightjackets.

Intellectuals – according to Said – are those who strive to “speak truth to power” in an effort to resist injustice (Said, 1996, p. 102); those who expose hypocrisy within their profession’s discourses and practices, those who demand accountability, and who engage in, and promote sceptical critical consciousness. Thus, within occupational therapy, intellectuals are demanding that the occupational therapy profession’s actions are ethically-consistent with its self-declared “obligation” “to support occupational justice and human rights” (World Federation of Occupational Therapists, 2020, p. 2).

Contesting Systems of Injustice and Demanding Accountability

The World Federation of Occupational Therapists has named human rights advocacy a “core purpose” of international occupational therapy education and practice (World Federation of Occupational Therapists, 2016), and has asserted that all occupational therapists are “obligated” to promote human rights (World Federation of Occupational Therapists, 2019). The WFOT has further claimed that “the profession advocates wherever the socio-political context violates the human need and rights for healthy participation in occupation” (World Federation of Occupational Therapists, 2014, p. 2), and has stated publicly that “since its inception in 1952, WFOT has advocated for human rights. It always will” (World Federation of Occupational Therapists, 2020, p. 1).

Said (1996) believed that intellectual integrity “depends upon sustaining a critical stance: an unwillingness to accept ready-made clichés, or what the powerful or conventional have to say” (Said, 1996, p. 23). Despite what is frequently asserted, it is apparent that the WFOT only rarely – and only selectively – advocates for human rights. In March 2022, the WFOT “spoke out clearly and swiftly” (AnonymOT Collective, 2024, p. 19) by issuing a “statement of concern” about the “devastating war” on Ukraine (World Federation of Occupational Therapists, 2022a): a nation populated, primarily, by white people.

For those enduring devastating, and “entirely manufactured humanitarian cris[es]” (Smith et al., 2025, p. 1) elsewhere – for example, in Gaza, and Sudan – there has been silence from the WFOT. Some intellectuals have noted that this reflects a troubling double standard, with the WFOT’s silence perceived to be “rooted in hypocrisy and white supremacy” (Abu Mostafa et al., 2025, p. 9). Moreover, this silence effectively undermines the following public statement, issued by the WFOT in 2022:

WFOT fully endorses the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights and collaborates with international partners including the World Health Organization for the protection of access to health systems through education, advocacy and humanitarian support. As an international occupational therapy community, we remain united as a profession to advocate for human rights and occupational justice. (World Federation of Occupational Therapists, 2022b).

For the record; the WFOT has *not* advocated publicly for protection of access to health systems in Gaza, nor for protection of the health systems themselves, nor for protection of the health care personnel – including occupational therapists and students – working heroically within those devastated health systems (Babish et al., 2024; El Hallaq, 2024; Jagoe et al., 2024; Smith et al., 2025). When global organizations representing over 47 million of the world’s physicians, nurses, physiotherapists, dentists and pharmacists issued a joint statement calling for urgent action to protect health personnel from violence and persecution in Gaza, Iran, Sudan and Syria – in accordance with international law (World Health Professions Alliance, 2026) – the World Federation of Occupational Therapists remained silent.

Throughout his work, Said advocated for recognition of the universal applicability of human rights, and called for intellectual resistance in the struggle against injustice (Said, 1996). Said (2025, p. 33) referred to intellectuals as those who refuse “the quietism of non-involvement”; those who take “a position” (Said, 2025, p. 504).

Faced with injustice, health care professionals can choose between two positions: “resistance or collaboration” (Mohd Fathil & Shariffuddin, 2024, p. 8). Resisting collaborative silence, occupational therapy’s intellectuals are not waiting for permission from their global leadership to enact their profession’s espoused values and their own ethical obligations. Instead, they are demanding that the WFOT’s proclamations and Position Statements become documents of action, not performance. Thus, papers published in disability (Jagoe et al., 2024), nursing (AnonymOT Collective, 2024, 2025), occupational therapy (Gamielidien, 2025; Zafran et al., 2026a), and medical journals (Zafran et al., 2026b) have all denounced the WFOT for its complicit silence concerning appalling human rights’ abuses, and have called for the profession’s World Federation to align its actions with its public statements, and with the ethical standards it demands of its own members.

Zafran et al. (2026a) noted: “Nowhere does the WFOT identify the option for occupational therapists to be silent or ‘neutral’ in the face of injustice or human rights abuses” (p. 10). Accordingly, some intellectuals contend that “if [WFOT’s] actions do not accompany public statements, then statements must stop” (AnonymOT Collective, 2024, p. 22). Other critics have gone further, suggesting that “if certain academic disciplines and associated cadres of practitioners cannot muster the moral and political courage to confront genocide as the most horrific manifestation of orchestrated violence and systemic injustice, then we must urgently re-examine their moral, epistemic, and broader societal utility” (Smith et al., 2025, p. 6). For occupational therapy, that time, is now.

Conclusion

Said (1996) encouraged intellectuals to challenge the beliefs and assumptions inherent in their field, to raise questions, and unmask and contest conventional and accepted ideas. He insisted that the role of academics and educators is *not* to reproduce and reinforce the ideas and discourses promoted by those wielding power within their discipline, but to resist the uncritical acceptance of authoritative discourses; to advance alternative ideas, provide alternative readings from alternative sources, and to expose injustice (Said, 1996, 2002).

Said’s work provides inspiration for all those occupational therapy intellectuals – academics, students, researchers and practitioners - committed to achieving an anti-ableist, ethically-consistent, and socially-accountable profession; an occupational therapy profession committed to resisting injustice and oppression; a profession *always* advocating for human rights.

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Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, upon reasonable request.

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