Untangling Occupation and Activity

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Key Words: classification • human activities and occupations • occupational science

Activity and occupation are two core concepts of occupational therapy that are in need of differentiation. Occupation is defined here as a person's personally constructed, one-time experience within a unique context. Activity is defined as a more general, culturally shared idea about a category of action. The ways in which subjectivity and context are handled within the concepts of occupation and activity are keys to disentangling them. The proposed untangling of the two concepts into distinct definitions is congruent with their historical origins as well as with current definitional trends. Once occupation and activity are recognized as two separate and equally valuable concepts, they offer a rich set of theoretical relations for exploration. The clarity that will result from differentiating occupation and activity will enhance disciplinary discourse and research as well as enhance the intervention efficacy, moral surety, and political strength of the profession.


Occupation and activity are two core concepts of occupational therapy, yet their meanings have remained tangled since the inception of the profession. Occupation and activity are often used interchangeably (Golledge, 1998). Lack of differentiation between the two has a chilling effect on disciplinary discourse, impedes research, reduces practitioners' moral surety and effectiveness, and muffles the profession's political voice. Like pulling apart a tangle in a macramé project or freeing the key log in a logjam, disentangling the meanings of occupation and activity will release constraints on the discipline and the profession. I argue in this article that occupation and activity are two distinct concepts, each of which carries a primary burden of meaning and offers specific strengths. It is time that occupation and activity be untangled.

The urge to puzzle over definitions of the primary concepts of a field is irresistible to scholars. Such debates unveil a healthy, evolving scholarship that pushes understanding forward (Pierce, 1996; Wood, 1996). In anthropology, more than 500 definitions of culture have been proposed (Moore, 1992). Typical of a discipline's perspective on its central constructs, anthropologists view culture as ever-present, acting within all aspects of life. Definitions of core concepts are the base of a discipline's research and shape the research tradition through their emphases and values.

In occupational therapy, the need for clear definitions of occupation and activity are also impelled by strong competitive forces in the current health care climate. The profession's claim to its market share is supported by defining how occupation and activity give meaning to human life.
and hold therapeutic power for recovery. Perhaps impatient with the slow-published and conflicting deliberations of disciplinary scholars, the American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA] has attempted to clarify concepts through committees and official documents (AOTA, 1983, 1994, 1995). It is not the function of professional associations, however, to critique theories or create fresh concepts. “The purpose of a profession is to provide a service needed in society. The purpose of a discipline is to generate and refine a body of knowledge” (Ottenbacher, 1996, p. 329). Luckily, scholars remain persistently true to their natures, and discourse is thriving.

To resolve the entanglement of occupation and activity, several strategies have previously been suggested. Nelson (1997) proposed that we banish activity and cleave solely to occupation. The advent of occupational science (Zemke & Clark, 1996) seemed to advance occupation in scholarly cachet, whereas activity has received limited empirical attention. Some authors have resorted to placing occupation and activity within hierarchical relationships with each other (AOTA, 1994, 1995; Cynkin, 1995; Gray, 1997). The use of categorical structures as a way of organizing varied imported concepts has a venerable history in occupational therapy (AOTA, 1994; Christiansen, 1994, 1996; Lamport, Coffey, & Hersch, 1993; Gray, 1997; Kielhofner, 1978; Mosey, 1992; Trombly, 1995; Yerxa, 1998). On the basis of the differentiating definitions proposed here, however, construing occupation and activity as subclasses of each other would not be logical (Foucault, 1970; Russell, 1989). Further, such attempts would act against clarification of the two concepts into distinct and equally important entities.

In this article, I propose definitions of occupation and activity that untangle them into two distinct and uniquely valuable concepts. The definitions will be followed by (a) an explanation of how activity and occupation are different in terms of their handling of subjectivity and context, (b) a description of the congruence of the proposed definitions of occupation and activity with their historical origins and current definitions, and (c) a brief overview of the potential relations between the two concepts. Lastly, I comment on how untangling these two central constructs can be expected to invigorate the discipline and the profession.

Proposed Definitions of Occupation and Activity

An occupation is a specific individual’s personally constructed, nonrepeatable experience. That is, an occupation is a subjective event in perceived temporal, spatial, and sociocultural conditions that are unique to that one-time occurrence. An occupation has a shape, a pace, a beginning and an ending, a shared or solitary aspect, a cultural meaning to the person, and an infinite number of other perceived contextual qualities. A person interprets his or her occupations before, during, and after they happen. Although an occupation can be observed, interpretation of the meaning or emotional content of an occupation by anyone other than the person experiencing it is necessarily inexact.

An activity is an idea held in the minds of persons and in their shared cultural language. An activity is a culturally defined and general class of human actions. The common sense meanings of activities, such as play or cooking, enable us to communicate about generalized categories of occupational experiences in a broad, accessible way. An activity is not experienced by a specific person; is not observable as an occurrence; and is not located in a fully existent temporal, spatial, and sociocultural context.

Examples: Differentiating Between Occupation and Activity Using the Proposed Definitions

To illustrate the difference in the definitions, think about “eating.” The idea of eating is likely to conjure up a series of images and thoughts, all involving foods; sensations; actions; maybe a commercial image; associated eating places; common utensils; and perhaps some slightly off-topic images of cooking. When someone converses about “eating” in a group, each listener creates a different mental representation, yet all share an understanding of eating as a culturally defined class of actions, or an activity. Eating is an idea. “Working” or “bungee jumping” are other broad activity ideas. One does not have to have done an activity to understand its cultural meaning.

Now, recall eating breakfast this morning. What comes to mind may be when and where your breakfast was; what was eaten; your mood at the time; what eating breakfast meant to you at that moment; who was there; other things going on around you; your thoughts while you ate; the beginning and end points and the sequence in between; the lights and sounds; and the smells, tastes, and textures. It was an experience, your experience, and will not be repeated in that exact way ever again. It had a certain meaning within your life. It was fully situated in a real context—the time, the place, the social grouping, and the cultural meaning that you perceived then. Eating breakfast this morning was an occupation.

The First Key Knot in Untangling Activity and Occupation: Subjectivity

A key perspective for differentiating between occupation and activity is subjectivity. An occupation is the experience of a person, who is the sole author of the occupation’s meaning. Activities are more general, descriptive categories whose meanings are culturally shared rather than originating with the person.

Examples: Differentiating Between Activity and Occupation in Terms of Subjectivity

Consider the example of “shopping.” Shopping can fit all kinds of people, contexts, and daily meanings. Shopping is an activity—a culturally shared, general idea about doing.
But when individual shoppers are asked about what they are doing, they report specific occupational experiences. “I’m looking for an engagement ring.” “I’m building a deck, and I need 14 6-inch carriage bolts.” “I’m just hanging out!” They report their immediate, subjective, personally constructed occupations.

The Importance of Valuing the Individual Perspective in Occupation

Occupations and activities are intimately related because the person’s experience is shaped by, and shapes, the culturally shared idea (Bourdieu, 1977; Heidegger, 1962; Malinowski, 1978). Harris (1981) described the complementary existence of emic (from phonemic), or individually interpreted, meaning and etic (from phonetics) meaning, which is derived from a cultural classification (Christiansen, 1994; Pierce & Frank, 1992). Both perspectives are essential to occupational therapy practitioners and researchers.

By defining occupation as a personally constructed, individual experience (emic perspective), the humanistic values of the profession are clearly represented within a base definition on which education, research, and practice can be built. The profession honors the person's interpretation of his or her experience above that of the culture (Yerxa, 1983, 1991). Occupational therapy practitioners are educated to understand the illness experience and to seek change within the client’s experience of occupations (Mattingly & Fleming, 1994). For occupational therapy practitioners, the well-lived life is defined by the person living it. The increasing use of qualitative methodology in occupational therapy research is an indicator of the profession's commitment to the subjective perspective (Carlson & Clark, 1991; Yerxa, 1991). The greater theoretical focus of research on occupation, compared with activity, also suggests that the emic, subjectively constructed perspective is more valued than the etic perspective provided by activity.

The Importance of Valuing the Cultural Perspective in Activity

Broad, etic, and culturally shared ideas about doing should not be discarded, however. Activities offer the field general descriptive and predictive templates regarding typical human experience. Work, play, self-care, rest, and the subsets they include are activities. Activities are also laden with cultural values, such as the “right” way to do something. Such values can act as time-tested guides to occupational experience or as oppressive systems that limit freedom and creativity. For example, in Western culture, paid work is highly valued; thus, housework and play are of low value (Primeau, 1996). Because of the cultural meanings they represent, activity ideas are not likely to apply cross-culturally. Each culture will have its own activity ideas. Occupational therapy practitioners must be masters of the norms and expectations inherent in activity ideas and of the palette of activities typically considered by persons of different ages, genders, or cultural backgrounds.

The Second Key Knot in Differentiating Between Activity and Occupation: Context

The second primary perspective differentiating between occupation and activity is context. A significant difference exists between the nonrepeatable and specifically located context of an occupational experience and the flexible, general expectations about context that are associated with an activity idea.

Context is often thought of as existing beyond or surrounding the person and has spatial, temporal, and sociocultural dimensions (Pierce, in press). Spatial context includes the body from which one acts and the objects, spaces, and conditions of the physical environment. Temporal context includes time of day, sequence, duration, and other temporal qualities. Sociocultural context includes the people, relationships, institutions, and social and cultural meanings of the situation. In an occupation, the person perceives context as rich, sensory dimensions of the experience. Occupation is embodied and located in an occurring context. Activity ideas, on the other hand, come with relatively flexible expectations for context.

Examples: Occupation’s Occurring Context, Activity’s Likely Contexts

As an example of how context differs between occupation and activity, consider “camping.” A person's occupational experience of camping will have specifically perceived conditions: who was there, the weather, the views, the hikes—the entire spatial, temporal, and sociocultural context of the experience. On the other hand, the activity of camping is an idea with general implications for context: maybe a tent in the woods, a slow pace, a campfire. But there is flexibility and lack of detail in the activity idea. Camping could also happen in Arctic snow or on a sandy beach. Activity context is not real in the sense that it does not actually occur and is not actually perceived. In an activity idea, the context is just a general association or likelihood. Activity context exists in the minds of the people of the culture, within the distributed and variable versions of an activity idea.

The Nonrepeatability of Occupation Due to Temporal Context

The nonrepeatable nature of the context of occupation further differentiates it from activity. Spatial and sociocultural aspects of occupational context may be somewhat repeatable, although that would be highly unusual. Temporal context is nonrepeatable. Occupations have a day, a time of day, a length, a pace, a duration, and a sequence that will not recur in the flow of time. Of course, time can also be perceived as cyclic (Hall, 1983). In highly ritualized occupa-
tions, for example, there can be a feeling of repeating previous experiences. Yet, one is not the same person each time he or she engages in a ritualized occupation, and the experience always differs. Even the most ardent defender of a cyclic view of time also operates in everyday life from a linear temporal perspective and deals with a life span that is, unfortunately, limited. The nonrepeatability of occupation established by time’s linear flow provides a critical differentiation here between occupation and activity. An occupation occurs only once. Activities do not exist within the flow of time, except in their varied, distributed form as ideas in the minds and communications of the people of a culture.

Critical Analysis of Historical Origins and Current Views of Occupation and Activity

The differentiation proposed in this article is supported by critical analysis of historical and current perspectives on activity and occupation. The two concepts have distinct theoretical origins that show good fit with the definitions proposed here. Despite widespread entanglement of the meanings of occupation and activity, current definitions of occupation are moving toward identification with individual experience, whereas current definitions of activity are increasingly emphasizing a shared cultural idea about human action. The congruence of the proposed definitions of activity and occupation with their theoretical beginnings and present definitional trends further supports the potential usefulness to the discipline and the profession of their differentiation.

Separate Beginnings: Historical Origins of Activity and Occupation

Activity analysis was born of our founders’ enthusiastic adoption of the theories of Frederick Taylor (1911/1967) and Frank and Lillian Gilbreth (1911, 1916/1973a, 1916/1973b, 1920/1973c), who described industrial activities in terms of their optimal performance by a skilled worker (Creighton, 1992; Peloquin, 1991). These theories supported highly detailed descriptions of the tools, movements, and muscle and joint actions of different types of factory work and physical labor. Frank Gilbreth (1911) was named as a founding member of the National Society for the Promotion of Occupational Therapy. In France, Amar (1919/1980) adapted the industrial activities approach to rehabilitation of World War I veterans. He carefully assessed the physics of work tasks, using goniometers and dynamometers. The veterans were then retrained to take up these tasks through graded exercise, crafts, and the fitting of prostheses. In this activity analysis approach, the culturally correct standard for performance guided intervention. Occupational therapy in the United States directly incorporated industrial efficiency theory as state of the art for the time, making expertise in activity a calling card of the profession (Creighton, 1992; Peloquin, 1991).

The meaning of occupation is rooted not in standardized task analysis, but in the experience of the person (Clark, Wood, & Larson, 1998; Meyer, 1922/1977; Peloquin, 1991). By adopting the values of the moral treatment movement, occupational therapy’s founders emphasized the perspective of the person involved in intervention and changes in his or her attitudes, skills, and health. Habit training focused on helping the client become self-organizing within a healthy daily routine (Slagle, 1922). Therapists in training were exhorted to “reach for the heart” (Carlova & Ruggles, 1946, p. 249) in devising custom-designed therapeutic occupations that would appeal to and habilitate specific persons. In 1919, Dunton called for research into the way occupation was differently experienced by different clients (Peloquin, 1991). The values of the arts-and-crafts movement are clearly woven into occupation: the importance of craftsmanship, the quality of the worker’s experience, and a spirit of resistance to the stultifying effects of industrialization (Clark et al., 1998; Cross, 1990).

By reviewing the historical origins of activity and occupation, it can be seen that the problem of their tangled definitions originates in a dynamic between two quite different theoretical perspectives on human action that were simultaneously incorporated into the knowledge base of the profession in its earliest years. The root theories from which these two primary concepts sprang were different, especially in the degree to which they emphasized the interpretation and experience of action by a person receiving occupational therapy. Yet, the field was young, and the fine work of keeping two such related perspectives differentiated was not the most pressing issue. Now, in a time of more critical theory, the tangle can be undone.

Current Definitions of Activity and Occupation: An Emerging Differentiation

There are many definitions of occupation, and fewer of activity. The definitions of occupation differ in purpose: celebratory (Clark et al., 1991; Yerxa et al., 1989), functionalist (Crabtree, 1998), or embedded in a distinct theoretical framework (Barrett & Kielhofner, 1998; Nelson, 1996, 1997; Wu & Lin, 1999). Nearly all definitions of occupation rest on the word activity. Interestingly, the urge to define activity is not as evident. Perhaps scholars have rejected activity as less worthy of investigation (Golledge, 1998, Nelson, 1997). A review of current definitions demonstrates, however, that the two concepts are slowly clarifying and separating in symmetry with the differentiation proposed here.

AOTA’s adoption of the concept of purposeful activity is an important aspect of current understandings of activity. In a Position Paper, AOTA (1983) stated that therapeutic activities should include a goal that is discernible to the client. Research gave support for this stance by demonstrating that purposeful activities were more effective than
rote exercise (Lin, Tickle-Degnen, & Coster, 1997; Steinbeck, 1986; Trombly, 1995; Yoder, Nelson, & Smith, 1989). Examination of the methods through which these studies added purpose to activity illustrates that the focus of these studies was not on how therapeutic activities were more or less personally valued by clients, but whether rote exercise and passive modalities were as effective as therapist-designed activities with clear goals, such as operating a drill press by pedaling or moving a Ping-Pong™ ball by squeezing an air bulb (Breines, 1984; Steinbeck, 1986). On the basis of this evidence, purposeful activity shows a marked lack of attention to context (Golledge, 1998).

Cynkin (1995) defined activity as “the observable result of the use of the hands as they are energized by mind and will” (p. 9), a clear adoption of the terms Reilly (1974) used to describe occupational behavior. For Cynkin, the differentiation between occupation and activity is a matter of scale. Occupations are grand sociocultural categories, such as work, play, or self-care. Activities are the more specific actions that make up those larger categories. Activity analysis, as it is taught today, has been largely converted and organized into the format of the professions uniform terminology (AOTA, 1994), which clearly delineates the component aspects of the activity to be analyzed (Lamport et al., 1993).

Crepeau (1998) described activity analysis as including three aspects. “Task-focused activity analysis” (p. 136) is an understanding of typical ways of doing things, their cultural meanings, and the skills involved. “Theory-focused activity analysis” (p. 145) adds a practice theory to the task-focused activity analysis to generate ideas for therapeutic use and adaptation of the activity. “Individual-focused activity analysis” (p. 146) combines the two previous analyses with a focus on the person’s specific problems, interests, and lifestyle. Crepeau’s activity analysis approach to intervention rests on an understanding of activities as broad, culturally held ideas for doing that can be analyzed in their general forms.

In a book focused on the generally shared understandings of human action in Western culture, Fidler and Velde (1999) acknowledged their use of purposeful activity and occupation interchangeably. Although Fidler and Velde briefly described the person’s inner life, symbolism, and students’ analysis of their experience in activity labs, their primary focus was on descriptions of the common sense categories of action in Western culture, such as play, games, outdoor activities (e.g., camping, fishing), crafts, self-care, arts, and jobs.

This brief review of definitions of activity demonstrates that the meaning of the concept of activity is slowly clarifying. The definitions remain true to their historical roots in industrial efficiency theory as well as to the emphasis on a clear, goal-focused action that is at the heart of AOTA’s (1979) Position Paper on purposeful activity. Activity is being increasingly identified in the profession as a culturally shared idea regarding human action.

In an AOTA Position Paper, a blue-ribbon panel set out to “distinguish the term occupation from other terms, to summarize traditional beliefs about its nature and its therapeutic value, and to identify factors that have impeded the study and discussion of occupation” (AOTA, 1995, p. 1015). The paper describes occupation’s many dimensions, from the contextual to the spiritual, and reviews the primary terms associated with occupation. In its wisdom, the panel did not venture a definition of occupation.

Some authors have defined occupation in ways that embed it in an identified theory. The Model of Human Occupation primarily refers to Reilly’s (1974) concept of occupational behavior or “those activities that occupy a person’s time, involve achievement, and address the economic realities of life” (Barrett & Kielhofner, 1998, p. 525). Nelson (1997) defined occupation as “the relationship between an occupational form and an occupational performance. Occupational performance means the doing. Occupational form means the thing, or the format, that is done” (p. 12). In this definition, Nelson comes close to untangling the differences between occupation as an individual experience (occupational performance) and cultural ideas of activities (occupational form). However, in terms of both subjectivity and context, the two concepts remain incompletely differentiated. In popular usage, the word performance denotes doing for the sake of an audience or measuring the occupation against the standards of others. The cultural meaning of performance undermines the meaning of occupational performance as a subjective, individually interpreted experience by implying an observer perspective. Secondly, by placing the contextual features of the experience solely within the occupational form rather than within the experienced occupational performance (Clark et al., 1998), the clarity of the distinction that can be made, via context, between culturally shared activity ideas and a person’s one-time occupational experience is lost.

Occupation has also had a rebirth at the core of the emerging discipline of occupational science (Clark et al., 1991; Yerxa et al., 1989; Zemke & Clark, 1996). The mission of occupational science—to research occupation—can be expected to push definitions of occupation toward ease of operationalization across multiple theoretical perspectives. Clark et al. (1991) offered the following definition in occupational science’s debut in The American Journal of Occupational Therapy (AJOT): “We define occupation, simply, as chunks of culturally and personally meaningful activity in which humans engage that can be named in the lexicon of our culture” (p. 301). Later, Gray (1997) used a phenomenological reduction to produce the following definition: “Occupation essentially is perceived as ‘doing’ by the individual, is goal-directed, carries meaning for the individual, and is repeatable” (p. 16). Gray described occu-
occupation as a subset of activity, a reversal of the class relations proposed by Cynkin (1995). Gray’s definition of occupation is congruent with the subjective stance of the definition proposed here. By emphasizing the person’s interpretation of occupation, she echoed the movement in recent years toward an increasing identification of occupation with the person’s perspective (Clark et al., 1991; Nelson, 1997; Yerxa, 1983, 1991; Yerxa et al., 1989).

**Relations Between Occupation and Activity**

Once explored from the standpoint of a clear differentiation, the rich potential for new theories regarding the dynamics between occupation and activity becomes evident. The influences of one on the other are many, a fact that may have contributed to the length of time the two concepts have remained tangled in meaning. The relations between activity and occupation are only one case of the philosophically complex relations to be found between culture and language and the individual and his or her experiences in many disciplines (Foucault, 1970; Wittgenstein, 1980). The following is a brief overview of potential relations between occupation and activity.

**Activity Idea as Guide to Occupational Experience**

Simply put, activity ideas are a part of our occupational experiences. Activity ideas do not dictate occupation but serve as a general guide as we contemplate and engage in action. People are free to choose an activity idea, modify it, or completely violate the common understanding of how an activity is done. The activity is a general notion from which to start. It tells us what to expect in terms of feelings, cultural values, physical context, and timing. From there, we improvise an experience within the presented conditions (Lave, 1988; Strauss, 1993). Sometimes, the original activity we had in mind is abandoned midstream in favor of some other direction of experience.

**Occupational Experience Shapes Activity Ideas**

Experiences of occupations add detail and accuracy to the person’s activity ideas. Thus, we recognize different amounts of experience with a type of activity as an indicator of authority and expertise in that area. People also shape the activity ideas of their culture by sharing impressions and narratives of their occupations with others.

**Dissonance Between Activity Idea and Occupational Experience**

People are simultaneously aware of both the etic, cultural level of meaning of an activity and the emic, individually interpreted experience of an occupation. For example, going to watch a baseball game, you may be aware of both the immediate experience you are having and the general expectations you and others hold regarding watching baseball. Sometimes, the occupational experience does not match the activity idea, with the unexpected experience causing a cognitive dissonance in contrast with the activity idea. Maybe the game was rained out, or you caught a foul ball.

**How Many Activities Are in an Occupational Experience and Vice Versa?**

An especially intriguing relation between occupation and activity lies within occupation’s temporal context. The occupation’s beginning and end in real time, or its “chunking” (Clark et al., 1991), are constructed by the person. Lots of activity ideas may be at play, and at times at war, within that integrated segment of experience. That is, one can be reading an article in *AJOT*, listening to music, and eating an apple all at once within a single occupation. An occupational experience that is highly routine can easily incorporate multiple activities (e.g., driving, talking on the phone, and listening to the radio). Conversely, occupations that are novel and demand attention may be chunked in smaller bits and involve only one activity idea (Vallacher & Wegner, 1987). A broad activity idea, such as pursuing a degree, can guide a large number of occupational experiences spread over many years. This temporal potential for an occupation to include many activities, or an activity to direct many occupations, argues strongly against the tendency to place occupation and activity into a static hierarchical relationship.

**Activity Ideas as a Force of Culture That Shapes Occupational Patterns**

The activity idea that the person acquires from the broader culture can influence the pattern made up by a person’s occupations over time. Activities come with cultural values about what is and is not good to do, what kind of resources are required to do things, and how one will feel or live if engaging in a certain type of occupation. Work activities, for instance, are highly valued in Western culture. Activities that involve material consumption are also highly promoted. Games and media to which children and young adults are currently being exposed may be shaping their occupational patterns in ways we do not fully understand. Ritual activities can serve as guides for life transitions, as is the case in weddings, funerals, and baby showers. And certainly, the transmission of activity ideas in advertising is a powerful force.

**Occupational Patterns as a Demographic Force That Shapes Activity Ideas**

In large enough quantity, new or changed patterns of occupational experiences across large numbers of people can introduce or change culturally shared activity ideas. For example, the frequent use of computers in recent years has begun to introduce new activities, such as “surfing the
Web” and e-mailing, into our shared cultural repertoire of activities. How we think of the activity of eating today may be somewhat different from how we thought of it 50 years ago, perhaps more often calling up images of grabbing a bite at a drive-through rather than picturing a family gathered around the dinner table.

What Is Gained by Differentiating Between Occupation and Activity?

One important and pragmatic question remains: What is to be gained by untangling occupation and activity? How will separating these two central constructs clarify discourse and, thereby, enhance research, intervention power, and political efficacy?

Once discourse moves beyond the confusion caused by melding such distinct phenomena as culturally shared activity ideas and the occurring occupational experiences of persons, research will progress at a quicker rate. Discoveries will not be preempted by basing studies in value-laden, overly descriptive, or nonoperationalizable definitions. The aspects of occupation that we celebrate (e.g., meaningfulness, purposefulness, complexity, degree of engagement) no longer will narrow research by being placed within definitions, but will broaden it by becoming variables for examination. Data-free taxonomies will not be used as the starting point for structuring investigations into relatively unexplored areas. Armed with clear definitions, research can begin to attack important questions previously presumed too vague, such as measures of life balance, cultural differences in activity repertoires, or the influence of the media on occupational experience. The interactions between activity and occupation can begin to be examined. By using definitions that are minimal and not embedded in a complex theory, results of varied research can be more easily synthesized within the discipline, and a more mutual conversation can be carried on with related disciplines. The effects of disentanglement on research will be energizing.

Differentiation of activity and occupation will enhance the power of our interventions by supporting the development of the knowledge base, which provides practice with a “map” (Ottenbacher, 1996, p. 329) of where we are going and what skills are needed to get there. Occupational therapists require sophisticated understandings of both the cultural repertoire of typical activities for persons of different ages and backgrounds and the complex nature of the personally constructed and fully contexted occupational experience. Viewing occupation as a person’s one-time experience will lead practice toward more insightful techniques for gaining access to the client’s unique perspective and goals. Seeing occupation as located in real context will push practice toward more intact, naturalistic, community-based applications. Understanding activities as culturally shared ideas will require occupational therapy practitioners to constantly update potential interventions to typical activities of the day, instead of those of a generation or two prior, and to recognize more clearly the cultural variation in activity ideas.

Differentiation of occupation and activity will also support practitioners morally by assisting them in being clear about when they are serving the values of the individual and when they are serving the values of the society. Therapists are in positions of power in relation to those they serve. At times, clients do not seem to see clearly the demands of the culture for appropriate behavior and levels of productivity. When we unquestioningly translate the cultural values embedded in activity into expectations for the outcomes of intervention, regardless of the person’s values, ethnicity, or limitations, we become enforcers of propriety. Being clear about when we are making use of cultural ideas about activity and when we are working with a person’s occupational experience or desired occupational pattern will assist us in negotiating the morality of the client–therapist–society relationship and support our intentions to act from the humanistic base of occupational therapy.

Politically, the profession will be most assisted by the differentiation of activity and occupation by reclaiming activity as an important domain of expertise for the field rather than abandoning it as unworthy. In the postmodern world, we cannot cleave to a single language but must adapt our communications to the audience: clients, third-party payers, students, and researchers. Activity is a common sense word that serves quite well for communicating in a simple, general way. The usefulness of claiming the imprecise cultural meaning of activity within our knowledge base is parallel to the usefulness of staking out the concepts of play and work as the specialities of occupational therapy, despite their value-laden histories.

Activity is also used in important ways in the health care system within definitions of billable service, assessments of function and degree of disablement, and even the naming of entire fields. Occupational therapy has long held unique responsibilities in health care for the return of function in areas of activities of daily living. In the revised ICIDH-2, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2000) defined disability as barriers to participation in activity. The WHO’s (2000) use of the concept of activity refers to “the execution of a task or involvement in a life situation in a uniform environment” (p. 9). The ICIDH-2’s use of the term activity is highly congruent with the definition of activity proposed here. The WHO’s term participation resembles occupational experience in the sense that it is a measure of a person’s actual entry into and interaction with the contextual world of their “current environment” (p. 9). Activity is an area of expertise with which occupational therapy has long been associated. We should claim it in every political arena and use it to vigorously expand our ability to offer service.

Conclusion

Activity and occupation are two uniquely meaningful con-
cepts and, perhaps, the most central concepts of the field. They require differentiation. Untangling them will be a tonic to the discipline and the profession, contributing to the clarity of our discourse, the sophistication of our research, the political power of the profession, the moral surety of practitioners, and the efficacy of interventions. It is time, and past time, that both activity and occupation were claimed, honored, studied, and better used within the lives of those we serve.

Acknowledgments

I thank Ruth Zemke, PhD, OTR, FAOTA, for years of shared theoretical exploration; Florence Clark, PhD, OTR, FAOTA, for her persistence and challenge; and the American Occupational Therapy Foundation and Diane Parham, PhD, OTR, FAOTA, for supporting the extensive analysis of infant play that incubated much of the thinking presented here.

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