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Expanding Knowledge on Occupations, One Harmful Occupation at a Time

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Abstract

Humans are both natural doers and occupational beings, but in order to consider them as such, one must understand all occupational choices, the meanings and human behavior behind the choices, and the environment in which the choices take place (Helbig & McKay, 2003). Considering self-harm, substance abuse, and addiction as occupations advances this understanding of humans as occupational in nature who are molded by their occupational choices and factors surrounding them (Wasmuth, Brandon-Friedman, & Olesek, 2016). This study aimed to gain an understanding of the occupational nature of humans that engage in occupations defined as harmful by society in order to expand on the overly positive view of occupation. The current focus on occupation has silenced a compelling part of the experiences of humans due to the inherent focus on the health-enhancing capabilities of occupation. Using themes gathered from a literature review to guide observation of video testimonials, a qualitative analysis was done with the aim of acknowledging engagement in substance abuse, self-harm, and addiction as occupational in nature, and to broaden the understanding of occupations and their relationship to health and well-being. Specific accounts of engagement from the video testimonials were interpreted by the researcher and classified into three categories developed from existing literature. The results were discussed in relation to the three categories, and connections from the testimonials were made to ideas in the existing literature.

Keywords: addiction, substance abuse, drug abuse, patterns, self-harm, participation

Expanding Knowledge on Occupations One Harmful Occupation at a Time

With an abundance of research on occupations perceived as normal or good by society, comes an increased need to add perspective around the engagement in occupations viewed as less than normal or harmful because of an alarming prevalence in this same, defining society. Understanding occupation is complicated in itself due to the high subjectivity and individual nature behind participation. When reviewing the literature, understanding of the engagement in harmful occupations seems limited. There are studies looking into things such as risk factors, environmental factors, and effects of harmful occupations (Helbig & McKay, 2003; Townsend et al., 2016), but what about the actual doing of the occupation? Occupational therapists look to define the importance of and break down occupations in order to understand a variety of ways to allow clients to engage in those that are meaningful. If one was to take a perspective against the societal norm on harmful occupations and attempt to understand the doer and the doing, would it be possible to break the occupation down to reverse engagement? Although society identifies certain occupations as harmful, these occupations are still occupations and deserve to be understood.

This study aimed to explore the occupational nature of humans that engage in occupations defined as harmful by society in order to expand on the overly positive view of occupation. To initiate this exploration, a literature review was completed to define relevance and need for such a study to be performed. This was followed by a qualitative analysis using themes developed from the literature review to guide observation of 10 testimonial videos with the aim of acknowledging engagement in substance abuse, self-harm, and addiction as occupational in nature, and to broaden the understanding of occupations and their relationship to health and well-being.

Literature Review

Occupation can be defined as active involvement in an apparent, everyday life venture (Christiansen & Townsend, 2010). An occupation is personal, subjective, has a beginning and an end, is observable, holds meaning, and is defined individually (Pierce, 2001). Engagement in occupation can be defined as the act of occupying time amidst a combination of experience, purpose, and meaning (Christiansen & Townsend, 2010). Additionally, occupations can also be defined as providing structure (Stewart & Fischer, 2015). Wasmuth, Crabtree, and Scott (2014) noted that occupations are organizing activities which provide meaning, detailed structure, roles, habitual tendencies, and routines for humans. For the purposes of this study, harmful occupations will be defined as occupations that are deviant, violent, aggressive, damaging, and have negative impacts on health (Pierce, 2014). It is vital to indicate that societal view was used by the researcher when defining and choosing what denotes harmful occupations for the purpose of this research.

Per the 2017 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, approximately 16.7 million Americans, 12 years of age and older, were reported to be heavy drinkers. In 2017, 30.5 million people, 12 years of age and older, were reported as illicit drug users, and of those, 3.2 million abused prescription pain relievers. It was also estimated that 11.4 million individuals misused opioids. Approximately 19.7 million people, 12 years of age and older were reported to have experienced substance use disorder, 14.5 million people reported to have alcohol use disorder, and 0.7 million people reported having heroin use disorder. Further, in 2017, it was reported that about 10.6 million adults, 18 and older, had thought of killing themselves, 3.2 million reported to take it further by making plans that were suicidal, and 1.4 million made suicide attempts that were nonfatal (Bose, Hedden, Lipari, & Park-Lee, 2018).

The prevalence of harmful occupations is considerably high despite the societal definitions. Investigation into these occupations, specifically addiction, has been done to attempt to discover more regarding the occupational nature of them. Further, attempts to understand risk factors, influences from the environment, biological needs, and use of time with regards to harmful occupations have helped to identify complex relationships between the definition of occupation and the harmful occupations themselves (Helbig & McKay, 2003). Kiepek and Magalhães (2011) introduced the idea that the occupations that society formed negative views on, may potentially have positive effects for some individuals. They also unveiled themes to help support the occupational nature of addiction, such as participation in the addiction becoming central for a person's doing, thus, defining it as a central meaningful occupation. There have been some attempts to understand experiences prior to engagement in harmful occupations, such as self-harm, in order to help identify risk factors (Townsend et al., 2016). While there has been some investigation into harmful occupations, there remains a need to amplify the research.

Occupational science seeks to discern the link among occupation and health and well-being. However, a narrow view of occupation has been developed because of the failure to account for those occupations that are considered detrimental to health and well-being even though an increasing number of people continue to engage in them (Stewart, Fischer, Hirji, & Davis, 2016). A narrowed view such as this brings about a limited understanding of ways of doing, being, becoming, and belonging (Kiepek, Beagan, Rudman, & Phelan, 2019). The current focus on occupation has silenced a compelling part of the experiences of humans due to the inherent focus on the health-enhancing capabilities of occupation. This is potentially due to the nature of the study of occupation being grounded in emphasizing the positive essence of occupation in relation to health and well-being (Kiepek et al., 2019). Discussion on the positive

association amid occupation, health and well-being is so commonly found in the literature that it could be assumed to be inherent (Stewart et al., 2016). Alternatively, the discussion of the negative potential of occupations, and negatively labeled occupations themselves, is limited. The understanding of what constitutes an occupation or how an occupation is understood is narrowed and capturing the multifaceted nature of occupation is impossible (Stewart et al., 2016). The narrowed view on occupation reflects the societal construction of what constitutes a healthy life and the expected way to live. When acknowledging the multifaceted nature of occupation, the possibility for engagement in occupation to result in positive or negative impacts on individuals is understood (Stewart & Fischer, 2015). Therefore, studying only those occupations that have positive implications limits the ability to understand an individual's full occupational repertoire (Stewart et al., 2016). The neglect of understanding harmful occupations has damaged the potential for understanding the complex nature, occupational engagement, and the meanings associated with occupations. Relevance of occupational science is largely impacted by how well the variety of engagement in occupation is represented, even those deemed as harmful (Kiepek et al., 2019).

Humans are both natural doers and occupational beings, but in order to consider them as such, one must understand all occupational choices, the meanings and human behavior behind the choices, and the environment in which the choices take place (Helbig & McKay, 2003). Considering self-harm, substance abuse, and addiction as occupations advances this understanding of humans as occupational in nature who are formed by their occupational choices and factors surrounding these choices (Wasmuth et al., 2016). Addiction is not considered an occupation in itself, but rather is considered a consequence of excessive engagement of harmful occupations (Stewart & Fischer, 2015). However, for the purpose of this paper, addiction will be

examined as an occupation due to its similarity to key factors of occupations such as its ability to occupy and organize time, shape individual's identities, habits, roles, routines, and values. Examining addiction as an occupation, provides potential to broaden the understandings of addiction (Wasmuth et al., 2016) which may help explain potential barriers to recovery (Wasmuth et al., 2014). Further, substance abuse and addiction will be considered as two different entities that are occupational in nature. These two entities are being examined separately because it is known that those who abuse substances maintain control in their lives while those who have an addiction bear a disease that impacts multiple facets of their lives, and they lose control (Bradford Health Services, 2019). Addiction also applies to more than just excessive use of substances, for example, eating or sex (Wasmuth et al., 2016).

Harmful occupations, such as addiction, have desired and maybe even therapeutic effects (Kiepek & Magalhães, 2011). They have been found to provide meaning and organize individuals' lives, which coincides with various definitions of occupation (Wasmuth et al., 2016). Further, studies have shown that engagement in these occupations can create identities, roles, habits, and routines. Roles, habits, and routines can be considered performance patterns, and in one study, it was found that performance patterns were commonly discussed when dealing with the subject of substance use (Martin, Smith, Rogers, Wallen, & Boisvert, 2011). Another study discussed how individuals obtained an identity through their actions while engaging in an addiction, and how without the actions the individuals lacked purpose, direction, and organization leading to a breakdown of self (Wasmuth et al., 2016). When considering individuals as doers, it is known that individuals deeply embed themselves into their occupational lives, which shapes their surroundings, identities, values, and personal roles (Wasmuth et al., 2016). The degree at which addiction becomes intertwined in the lives of

individuals suggests difficulties in removal from the lifestyle surrounding the addiction (Martin et al., 2011). Wasmuth et al. (2016) went further to suggest that addiction shapes relationships and routines and provided an example of this by discussing how people adjusted their lives in attempts to stop engagement in an addiction. One challenge noted was that behavioral patterns used to stop engagement in addiction would simulate the cycle of the addiction itself. For example, Wasmuth et al. (2016) discussed how an individual who would continuously move to find new places to live so that he could engage in drugs, continued the pattern of frequent relocation in search for more socially allowable ways to occupy his time. Another individual who coped with a divorce by using drugs, consumed himself with other activities to avoid or subside the pain, such as work. When the attempts at change simulated the addictive patterns, relapse would most often occur. On the other hand, when occupational patterns were altered, one individual was able to overcome the identity originally formed through engagement in his addiction.

Further positive contributions of harmful occupations were discussed by Kiepek and Magalhães (2011) and included enjoyment, social engagement, and stress relief. It was mentioned that harmful occupations such as drug use could potentially reduce social anxieties. There was also a discussion regarding the potential for harmful occupations, such as addiction, to remove loneliness, sadness, boredom, and low self-esteem by providing alternative feelings, such as feeling desirable or alive. With addiction, such as gambling addiction, Kiepek and Magalhães (2011) noted that memory skills, problem solving skills and concentration could be improved by engagement in the occupation of gambling. What Kiepek and Magalhães (2011) understood was occupations hold perceptions and expressions by the doer of the occupations. They communicated about an idea where occupations are neither healthy nor unhealthy, but instead

engaging in certain occupations, depending on the doer, could be associated with positive and/or negative outcomes.

In the literature, graffiti was given as an example to show how an occupation labeled as unacceptable by some could enhance the health and well-being of others. In North America, there have been spaces dedicated for engagement in graffiti along with the use of harm reduction strategies to allow for individuals to participate in the occupation (Kiepek et al., 2019). By altering certain aspects of the occupation, such as the legality and level of risk, the unacceptable or “bad” occupation becomes acceptable. This ponders the question, could it be possible to alter aspects of harmful occupations so that the negative outcomes can be removed or reversed?

A need for this study was determined after reviewing the literature. Neglecting the exploration of harmful occupations brings about limited understandings and furthers the silencing of large aspects of occupational engagement. By expanding the research to be inclusive of harmful occupations, more refined understandings of human engagement may be achieved. Increased knowledge and understanding of occupation could advise research which explores and looks to further develop occupational possibilities (Kiepek et al., 2019). There is a growing need for new perspectives in order to understand the increasing number of harmful occupations (Kiepek & Magalhães, 2011). Exploring harmful occupations will advance the understandings of the concept of humans being occupational in nature who are shaped and reshaped by their occupations (Wasmuth et al., 2016). Further, exploring firsthand experiences of individuals may add to an increased understanding of the occupational lives of those who engage in harmful occupations (Wasmuth et al., 2014). Occupational science may contribute a unique perspective and guide further understanding of human engagement, regardless of the labels associated with occupations (Kiepek, Phelan, & Magalhães, 2014).

The researcher chose to study these occupations deemed as harmful with an intent of understanding their nature by considering multiple perspectives and situations based on the advice of Howard Becker (Kiepek et al., 2019). Due to it being difficult to remain neutral when exploring this topic, the researcher aimed to be more reflexive about how positionality may impact any interpretations made. Further, there was an aim to abstain from positioning occupations and the occupational beings involved when reviewing videos in order to avoid unintentionally reinforcing the othering of the occupations and those engaging in them. Lastly, the researcher aimed to avoid adopting the normal lenses, which add a problematic nature to the occupations that are labeled socially acceptable, healthy, or normal (Kiepek et al., 2019).

Methodology

Relevant information from the literature review was categorized into a tracker to allow for further synthesis across articles. Common themes across the literature were considered and three rationalization categories were determined to further explore. The three determined categories included sense of purpose, identity, and organization/guidance. These categories were selected due to their reoccurrence across articles and their relation to defining factors of occupation. Once the categories were selected, 10 testimonial videos were viewed and transcribed, and observation was guided by the predetermined categories. Videos were randomly selected from YouTube using substance abuse testimonials, addiction testimonials, and self-harm testimonials as key search terms. The 10 videos used were selected due to the content portraying personal stories of those engaging in the occupations of interest to this study and being under 15 minutes long. Information from the videos was interpreted by the researcher and sorted into the three categories. Definitions from the literature were used for consistency in collecting information for the categories. Sense of purpose was defined as deriving purpose or meaning

from engagement in occupation (Stewart et al., 2016). Identity was defined simply as a personal view of oneself (Helbig & McKay, 2003). Lastly, organization/guidance was defined as something to do or a framework for the daily life of individuals (Helbig & McKay, 2003). Interpretation from the videos was then compared to gathered information from the literature review on the three categories.

Results

Sense of Purpose

From the literature review, there was an understanding that individuals could derive purpose or meaning from engagement in harmful occupations. The purpose could be things like a sense of control, temporary distraction from emotional and physical pain, acceptance, or peer interaction (Stewart et al., 2016). This theory was supported by all of the video testimonials that were viewed. In one of the videos, the individual mentioned that engagement in her addiction gave her a sense of peace and helped her be free from worrying (Johns Hopkins Medicine, 2018). In another testimonial on addiction, an individual described that she liked to feel numb from the pains she felt in her life (Dartmouth-Hitchcock, 2013). In a testimonial on self-harm, it was noted that engagement in the occupation was a way to cope with bullying and abuse (RockSolidYouth, 2013). Another testimonial on self-harm discussed using the occupation to cope with a sense of emptiness (Adam Richter, 2012). The final testimonial defined engaging in the occupation of self-harm as a way to feel in control by causing physical pain in order to feel a release from emotional pain (Octavius Extra, 2019). Also found in the literature, Helbig and McKay (2003) discussed the possibility that engagement in addiction could be used to counteract boredom or absence of meaning. They further explained a state of being where people are engrossed in an

activity causing them to be totally distracted and feel that nothing else matters. For full video testimonial results, see Table 1.

Identity

Wasmuth et al. (2016) found that when establishing an identity, people noted a development of a prominent identity with ways that corresponded to behaviors towards others as well as themselves. Nine out of the 10 video testimonials viewed supported this construct. For example, one participant in their study described how the addiction consumed them so much that they did not care about anyone else. A video testimonial on substance abuse followed this idea because the individual described becoming a different person when engaging in the occupation and the lack of concern for anyone else (Healthy Canadians, 2015). It was also evident that individuals would obtain identities through their actions. There was a video testimonial on substance abuse which described how an individual obtained her identity through her actions and she described herself as a monster (NationwideChildrens, 2017). One idea not supported by a video testimonial was when Helbig and McKay (2003) discussed how an individual learned the role of an addict and found that it was rewarding because it gave him a personal sense of identity.

Organization/Guidance

Helbig and McKay (2003) discussed how ensuring a drug supply can become meaningful because it would give an individual something to do or a framework for the day. They further discussed findings which showed addiction as an overpowering experience, and one subject described how when it comes to addiction, lives become organized around the occupation because it is needed for daily life. The failure to occupy time with meaning as a cause of relapse in addiction was also discussed. Out of the 10 video testimonials viewed, all of them supported this construct. In one testimonial on substance abuse, an individual discussed how her

engagement in the occupation provided her with a framework for her days because she would plan to engage behind her family's back (NationwideChildrens, 2017). An individual from a testimonial on addiction described how his life became very organized around his occupation of addiction because he would constantly be thinking of how he was going to obtain his drugs or alcohol (Detox To Rehab, 2015). He also discussed how effortless it was for him to continue to fall back into his cycle because it was easier for him to just keep engaging in his occupation. One individual during the testimonials talked about getting into a routine of manipulating her family, moving away as soon as possible, drinking as soon as she arrived home from work, and even taking drugs during the day and drinking at night (Detox To Rehab, 2016). Lastly, a nurse from one of the testimonials on addiction discussed how she would organize her work time to engage in the occupation (Atrium Health, 2016).

Discussion

This study explored the occupational lives of individuals who engage in those occupations that are socially categorized as harmful. Specifically, the study examined the doing of the occupations with a goal of gaining insight into their occupational nature. The themes that were identified helped to illustrate a relationship between firsthand experiences of engagement in harmful occupations and the limited research. By selecting three themes that are defining factors of occupation, the study was able to acknowledge engagement in substance abuse, self-harm, and addiction as occupational in nature. Further, by viewing and transcribing testimonials, the study allowed for a broader understanding of engagement in these occupations. Specific accounts of engagement were interpreted and able to be organized into the three categories developed from existing literature. The study was used to give perspective to harmful occupations that otherwise are labeled as impermissible.

Limitations

Limitations of this study include limited amount of time, only one researcher with responsibility of interpretation leaving room for potential bias, and a small number of testimonial videos reviewed.

Conclusion

While this study does add to the literature on harmful occupations, there still remains a need to go beyond the dominant, socially constructed understanding of occupation with regards to health and well-being. Exploring engagement in harmful occupations will give greater insight into the doing, being, and becoming of the occupations themselves. Further, insight may be gained into understanding of successful intervention techniques with more exploration into the occupations and how they impact an individual's occupational life. Advancing intervention techniques may allow for future prevention of potential relapse of engagement in these occupations. The inherent attributes of occupational science and occupational therapy have created partial understanding into occupation by following societal constructs. This body of knowledge is ready to evolve, and additional research is needed to understand occupations beyond their positive, health-enhancing nature.

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Appendix

Table 1

Testimonial Takeaways

Video	Sense of Purpose	Identity	Organization/Guidance
1 (Johns Hopkins Medicine, 2018)	<p>“...gave me a sense of peace, that I didn’t have to worry about stuff anymore.”</p> <p>“I just wanted to be free of worrying about stuff all the time.”</p>	<p>Correctional officer, where her disease started.</p> <p>Didn’t have a choice. Could see nothing but her pain.</p>	<p>Had a stressful job as a correctional officer.</p> <p>Felt like she had to use to go to work.</p> <p>A lot of correctional officers used.</p> <p>Didn’t want to be looked down on, didn’t want to disgrace family.</p>
2 (NationwideChildrens, 2017)	<p>It was a fun state, she always wanted to feel this way.</p> <p>“I am definitely going to like this.”</p>	<p>“I became a monster.”</p>	<p>Scheduling to do it behind family’s back, it was part of her routine.</p> <p>If she didn’t have heroin, she used alcohol or amphetamines to get her through.</p> <p>“It was pretty much every day that summer.”</p>
3 (Dartmouth- Hitchcock, 2013)	<p>Ease some of life’s pains, liked being numb</p>	<p>Lost respect for herself and her body.</p> <p>Lost confidence in self.</p>	<p>Lost jobs, money, burnt bridges with family.</p>
4 (Atrium Health, 2016)	<p>It was never enough.</p> <p>It went from being fun to needing it every day.</p>	<p>Identified as a nurse.</p>	<p>Access to it at work, organized work time to engage.</p>

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<p>5 (RockSolidYouth, 2013)</p>	<p>Coping with bullying and abuse.</p>	<p>Dictated by the world, what others thought of her. Would go from never looking at reflection to staring for hours and picking self apart. Identified as worthless.</p>	<p>Got involved with other substance abuse, and if she engaged in those activities it made her feel as if she needed to cut. Started contemplating suicide, thinking about running away.</p>
<p>6 (Adam Richter, 2012)</p>	<p>Coping with a sense of emptiness.</p>		<p>Avoidance of God. Started with pot, started thinking suicidal.</p>
<p>7 (Healthy Canadians, 2015)</p>	<p>“It made me feel tough.” “I was just fed up and mad.”</p>	<p>“Once I started using opiates I changed into a completely different person. I didn’t care about anybody.”</p>	<p>“I would steal, I would lie.” Always in pain, sick, and freezing.</p>
<p>8 (Detox To Rehab, 2016)</p>	<p>“...seeking for something outside of myself.” “I wanted to be happy again because I had been searching for something outside of myself for so long.”</p>	<p>“Thought I was the person that wasn’t going to go to jail, they would always let me go, I could talk them out of it, because you know, I’ve been doing this with my parents for so long.” Described herself as abusive when she drinks and takes pills.</p>	<p>Manipulated family, got into the wrong crowd, smoked pot. Would take tracker off and leave it at the house where her family thought she was. Lying and manipulating family to engage in addiction. “Always had someone that would buy for me.” Would come home from work and have a bottle of wine because now no one was watching. Would take Xanax during the day and drink at night.</p>
<p>9 (Detox To Rehab, 2015)</p>	<p>A lot of fun in the moment and thought of it as innocent. “Everything’s good again.”</p>	<p>Only boy in the family “I really leaned heavily on this new world that I discovered in drugs.”</p>	<p>Progressively started to do other drugs, party scene, friends were doing it. “It was the culture.”</p>

		“I was never going to be that guy.”	Walked into grocery stores at young age and would steal alcohol.
		“I’m just a dirty junkie who is willing to do anything to get high again.”	“I had to get the alcohol.”
		“...bad son, terrible brother, terrible person of society...”	“I was thinking about how I was going to pick up heroin.”
			“You’re always trying to get high again, you’re always trying to think of the next hustle.”
10 (Octav1us Extra, 2019)	“I was looking for release.”	“Still addicted to self-harm.”	“Everything’s awful, and you’re crying, and you want to die but you don’t have the strength to kill yourself and your family and friends will be heartbroken, so you cut yourself and everything focuses on that pain.”
	“I was looking for pain.”	“It never goes away.”	
	“It’s a really lonely action but it’s something that makes you feel like you’re in control just for a split second.”		“Then everything seems clear. It’s still bad but you feel more in control.”
			“Then comes the embarrassment, then comes another scar to hide.”

Note. Not all information presented above is direct quotes, some is interpretation notes by researcher. Video testimonials were viewed, and relevant information was pulled and categorized into this chart with further analysis.