Universal Human Rights and Occupational Justice

Brought to you by MiOTA’s Research & Education SIS

December is Universal Human Rights Month

In 1919, Dr. William Rush Dunton Jr., one of the founders of occupational therapy stated that “occupation should be considered a basic need and human right, like eating, drinking and breathing.” On December 10th 1948 the United Nations General Assembly codified the basic human rights of every person in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Universal Human Rights Month is a time to reflect on the way we treat others and to do what we can in the fight for equality.

Because justice is such an important issue in the United States and worldwide, it is important for occupational therapists to discuss the profession’s practices with reference to occupational justice. The American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) states that occupational justice is part of the domain of occupational therapy and that occupational justice is “both an aspect of contexts and an outcome of intervention” (AOTA, 2020, p. S11). Despite the increasing focus on justice in OT over the past 30 years, many practitioners in traditional settings do not see its relevance to their everyday practice or have difficulty envisioning how to enact a justice-informed practice. In *Doing Occupational Justice: A Central Dimension of Everyday Occupational Therapy Practice* Ballaird et al. (2020) demonstrate how occupational justice is relevant to all settings of occupational therapy, and how it can be enacted at micro, meso, and macro levels of practice. Below are a few examples to get you thinking about justice in your own practice:

*Micro Level Occupational Justice Interventions -* Practitioners should become aware of micro-occupational injustices. This form of implicit bias targets ways of doing and ways of being. Therapists can enhance their ability to identify micro injustices and provide justice-oriented practice when they engage in reflective practices that scrutinize how their clinical habits and clinical reasoning impact therapeutic encounters, including whether they address or recognize situations of injustice. Engaging in reflective practices with colleagues and mentors can help therapists become aware of situations when their sociocultural assumptions interfere with therapy.

*Meso Level Occupational Justice Interventions -* Efforts at the meso level include activities such as creating community-level occupational therapy programs to target the occupational needs of groups or modifying organizational policies and processes to increase their sensitivity to the occupational rights of the people they affect. OT practitioners can increase sensitivity to the various injustices faced by clients in their particular setting.

*Macro Level Occupational Justice Interventions -* Implementing justice work at the population level requires practitioners to address power relations with respect to broad environmental forces such as policy, economic structures and laws. Without adequate support from policy, including those related to reimbursement, OT practitioners are significantly constrained in their ability to reach populations in need of occupational justice.

Occupational therapy is a justice-oriented practice and our principles of client-centered care, narrative clinical reasoning, and our focus on occupational participation are key tools to helping clients achieve a life of dignity that they value and experience as personally meaningful.

The Co-Chairs of the Research & Education SIS, Jayne, Katie and Regina, wish all of the members of MiOTA and their families the happiest holiday season. Let’s all do our part in 2024 to advance occupational justice at all levels.

AOTA (American Occupational Therapy Association). (2020). Occupational therapy practice framework: Domain and process (4th ed.) *The American Journal of Occupational Therapy,* 2020, Vol. 74(Supplement\_2), 7412410010p1–7412410010p87.

Bailliard AL, Dallman AR, Carroll A, Lee BD, Szendrey S. (2020) Doing Occupational Justice: A Central Dimension of Everyday Occupational Therapy Practice. *Canadian Journal of Occupational Therapy.* 87(2):144-152. doi:10.1177/0008417419898930

Dunton WRJ (1919). *Reconstruction therapy.* Philadelphia: WB Saunders.