The Division of Occupational Science & Occupational Therapy is rooted in a philosophy that emphasizes the complex and holistic nature of human experience, and views that human experience as a fundamental way to understand occupation. This focus on complexity and holism means that occupations are viewed first and foremost as the ongoing activities through which people and their situations relate to one another. That is, occupation is the way in which people and their environments interact. For instance, a situation we’ll call “people coming over for dinner” and the individual to whose home they are coming intersect and become the occupations of shopping for groceries, cooking, and cleaning the house. Of course, it’s also more complex than that because cultural, economic, personal and other factors enter into the equation. Perhaps the food is to be kosher, or the person having people over has a limited budget, or there aren’t enough seats at the table so some will sit on the floor…. These “occupational situations” require negotiations among people and the social, physical, cultural, political, personal, temporal, and economic dimensions of context—the complex, whole environment through which people live.

Meaning, values, and emotional experience are also part of occupation and come from the ways in which the activity creates new relationships or sustains existing ones. In addition, occupations may become “patterned,” that is, become habits, routines, or rituals that are part of everyday life. These patterns of occupation are often linked to personal, cultural, social, and other contextual aspects, such as the Swedish ritual of “Saturday candy” when children are out doing shopping with parents, or family routines for getting chores and homework done.

This orientation toward occupation and the situations in which it happens means that families, other groups, institutions, and communities cannot be ignored in the assessment and intervention processes of occupational therapy. Occupational therapy, therefore, is the process of evaluating occupation/situation relationships in order to enhance occupational engagement (and the whole situation) through interventions. Occupational science is the study of occupation/situation relationships, as well as interventions based on them, in order to generate knowledge and inform practice.