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# A communal perspective of occupation: Community change in a senior center welcoming Spanish-speaking immigrants

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## ABSTRACT

Occupational scientists across the globe are increasingly attending to social change and its connection to occupation and communities. The discipline is actively studying the role of communal everyday doing in social movements, community development, and systemic transformation. This paper describes a 6-month ethnographic study that explored community change at a senior center as it welcomed Spanish-speaking older adults into its programming and spaces. Data collection was informed by both pragmatist and critical theoretical perspectives to explore communal change in a manner that honored the potency of societal power structures without dismissing human agency. Focusing on communal processes of occupation during semi-structured individual interviews and participatory group community mapping revealed complex and interwoven sociopolitical relationships among the community. Additionally, this communal perspective of occupation seemed to contribute to rapid action toward positive community change. A communal perspective of occupation shows promise in further understanding how communities change and the role occupational science may have in contributing to positive community development.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

Occupational science;  
Community occupation;  
Communal inquiry; Social  
change; Community research

Occupational scientists are interested in supporting and protecting the rights to participation and occupation of all individuals, especially those who are marginalized or vulnerable. To work in and understand the complex networks through which vulnerable populations experience opportunity or oppression, an approach based in occupation and community relationships is beneficial (Lavalley, 2017). To more fully understand the relationships between occupation and community situations, it is necessary to move beyond a narrow individualist lens to consider occupation as situated among various sociocultural, political, and historical forces (Dickie et al., 2006; Laliberte Rudman, 2013). This shift has challenged occupational therapists to recognize and consider societal inequities that shape occupational possibilities. As occupational

scientists turn their attention toward addressing health disparities and social inequality among communities, further research is needed to effectively examine these enfolded social layers of community (Hocking & Mace, 2017).

Critical theoretical perspectives have encouraged occupational scientists to examine the occupations of marginalized groups by assessing how issues of power and domination manifest across complex sociocultural relationships and institutions to generate unjust occupational outcomes (Angell, 2014; Farias et al., 2017; Laliberte Rudman, 2013). Occupational scientists are developing theory based on pragmatist perspectives to conceptualize how community change occurs across communities while accounting for the entangled occupational processes that occur when communities do together (Aldrich,

2018; Cutchin et al., 2017; Laliberte Rudman et al., 2019; Lavalley, 2017). This theoretical development situates occupation as a social nexus of potential for both encouraging or dismantling oppression and liberation across communities. Occupational scientists who strive for positive community change must honor the situatedness of occupation and seek to understand the role of occupation in the creation of social relationships and everyday culture. In particular, occupational scientists must explore how communities experience change in communal doing as their constituencies respond to marginalized and vulnerable populations.

This paper presents a study that explored the role of communal doing in the transformation of a community and its relationships in response to a marginalized population. The study utilized an approach informed by pragmatic theory and critical perspectives to understand how a community, as a whole, was changing through communal experiences of everyday living. Study aims were to *describe* how a community, as a whole, was changing through communal everyday occupation over time, and to *examine* the social processes of a community that was undergoing “observable consequences” at a communal level (Lavalley, 2017, p. 467). The study was not an intervention that aimed to effect community change; rather, it sought to identify how disparities, liberations, injustices, and progress manifest through everyday occupation, social processes, and community culture. Despite not being an explicit intention of the study, this paper also describes how the approach generated positive community change that addressed injustice. We begin with a discussion outlining the theoretical perspectives that informed the study. Second, we discuss how those theoretical perspectives were translated into study methods. Finally, we present a reflection regarding how the study unfolded, including the community’s response, to highlight implications for occupational science research.

### **An Approach that Made Sense**

To explore communal occupation and its impact on marginalized populations as it unfolds in the everyday requires examining community relationships across multiple layers of functioning as dynamic and integrated phenomena (Lavalley,

2017). While occupational scientists are increasingly exploring community level processes, there is a need for theoretical perspectives and practical methodologies that can elucidate the integrated community level dynamics of humans doing together over time. Traditional individualist perspectives are insufficient for studying communal processes, which must honor the forces that bind communities and bend their everyday doings. Occupational scientists must ask questions such as: How can community change be understood through an occupational lens? How does positive community change occur through individual and communal experiences of occupation? How might a community, as a whole, respond in its social relationships and everyday practices to marginalization and injustice through doing together? How do communal relationships across communities – integrated with individual experiences – contribute to the formation of communal doings?

We sought to understand the emergence, conceptualization, and struggle joining the power of sociopolitical structures and that of human agency in the processes of communal occupation. Social structures are often cast as immovable and deterministic or individuals are portrayed as autonomous and unsituated. A theoretical framework that eschews the dichotomy of social structures and human agency can support an integrated perspective that positions those constructs as dynamic and emergent processes among the social functionings of a particular community.

### ***A conceptual framework***

John Dewey’s action theories have been used within occupational science to situate occupation amid the social sphere, recognizing the relational and situated nature of action (Aldrich, 2008; Aldrich & Cutchin, 2013; Cutchin et al., 2008; Dickie et al., 2006). Additionally, his theories have been used in conceptualizing community level understandings of occupation (Aldrich, 2018; Cutchin et al., 2017; Lavalley, 2017). Dewey’s pragmatist theory recognized the potential for community change through growth and democracy (Dewey, 1927). By examining real consequences across associated community relationships, Dewey offered a

groundmap for characterizing and understanding communal experiences of doing together (Lavalley, 2017). For our study, this theoretical perspective celebrated the optimistic potential for community change to occur through everyday doing. However, while Dewey's (1927) optimistic theory of communities and education grounded the study in real and situated occupation, his theory does not sufficiently integrate power relations and structures in his conceptualization of action (Cutchin et al., 2008).

Critical occupational science, informed by social theorists such as Bourdieu (Cutchin et al., 2008) and Foucault (Laliberte Rudman, 2010), conceptualizes occupation as nested in and emerging through historic power structures, oppression, and dynamic community formation (Farias et al., 2017). Critical perspectives, particularly Bourdieu, highlight the need to consider power relationships and historical social structures whenever studying occupation and can provide insights into understanding community occupation and social processes that are complementary to the Deweyan approach (Cutchin et al., 2008; Magalhães, 2012). A theoretical approach that recognizes power and political structures is integral to understanding how change occurs across communities. However, critical perspectives often situate individuals as the product of their sociopolitical situation struggling against a durable social order, beholden to their positionality among social fields (Swartz, 1997). Embracing critical perspectives that complement a Deweyan approach enables us to attend to the role of sociopolitical structures while honoring the agentic and generative potential of communities to grow.

Renouncing a dualism between structures and individuals was necessary to fully honor the societal positionality of an oppressed population without removing their agency completely. It was important to avoid giving ontological supremacy to either the individual or societal structures (Swartz, 1997) to prevent overestimating the cause of injustice from the individual perspective (i.e., blaming marginalized populations for their oppression) or alternatively underestimating individual resiliency in the face of precarious social structures (i.e., removing the possibility of action and change from those in positions of less power). Our

aim was to emphasize communities as emergent *relationships* across various stakeholders and structures. This study integrated both pragmatist *and* critical theoretical perspectives to recognize the agency of community change among political and historical power structures in analysis and data collection. The study also sought to employ participatory methodologies (e.g., Trentham & Neysmith, 2018) to support the deconstruction of historic power structures in knowledge generation. Accordingly, study participants were offered the opportunity to actively engage in study processes as consultants in interviews, group activities, and collaborative analysis. The study conceptualized community change as a convalescence of humans doing together through an integrated and evolving sociopolitical situation. This approach challenged us to orient data collection and analysis toward emergent and unfolding processes of doing together as a whole instead of focusing solely on individual outcomes or socio-political structures.

## Exploring Community Occupation

To fulfill the study's purpose, we sought a community where change was observable and occurring at a communal level specifically in response to a marginalized population. We identified a local senior center that fit these criteria: it was transitioning in response to a recent increase of Latinx immigrant older adults into its programming. Older adult Latinx immigrants are a marginalized population who face health disparities, inequity, and racism throughout the United States, contributing to poorer health outcomes and significant economic injustices (Allen & Perry, 2012; Brotman, 2003; Lum & Vanderaa, 2010; Scommegna, 2013).

The senior center was in North Carolina and offered services and programming for local older adults. Three to four years before the study began, Spanish-speaking older adults began integrating into the center community, adding to an already diverse population that included a large population of Chinese immigrants. It was a nexus of cultural, social, political, and health-related relationships that were influencing the Latinx population and causing significant and observable community change.

We sought to identify and describe the evolving personal, group, and communal experiences of Spanish-speaking older adults and staff of the senior center and how those changes moderated individual Spanish-speakers' occupations in the center community overall. The intended purpose of the research was not to foster immediate change in the community, but to explore and understand processes of change as they unfolded.

This study consisted of a 6-month ethnographic exploration of the community relationships and processes at the senior center. Study procedures were approved by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Institutional Review Board (IRB). The study's design sought to investigate how the community as a whole was changing in its everyday practice and routines as it responded to an increase in Spanish-speaking older adults participating in occupation in the center.

**Table 1.** Examples of Community Oriented Individual Interview Questions

Questions to Spanish-speaking Older Adult Consultants

- Tell me about the community here when you began participating?
- What expectations do you think the community had for you?
- Were there rules or policies that made it difficult or easier for you to participate?
- Are there rooms or areas that are important to the group of Spanish-speakers here? Or that you stay away from?
- In what activities do you feel like Spanish-speakers interact most with other members of the community?
- What about the community has been important in continuing your participation here?
- Describe your typical social interactions in the community.
- How do you expect the community to change in the future?

Questions to Staff Consultants

- Tell me about the community here when Spanish-speakers began participating?
- What expectations do you think the center community has for Spanish-speakers' participation?
- Are there rules or policies that make it difficult or easier for the center to serve Spanish-speakers?
- In what activities do staff most often engage with Spanish-speakers?
- What activities foster interaction among the other groups in the center with Spanish-speakers?
- What physical aspects of the center affect the community's engagement with Spanish-speakers?
- How do you expect the center community to change in relation to this population?
- How might the atmosphere of the center change as Spanish-speakers continue to participate?

## Community members

Community members were staff and patrons of the senior center, including individuals present in public spaces in the center during participant observations. The typical population at the senior center was about one third White, one third African American, and one third Chinese. Spanish-speaking elders were a small minority. After providing informed consent, seven Spanish-speaking older adults and six staff members elected to be consultants. Older adult consultants were from Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Colombia and their ages ranged from 66 to 82 years old. Only one was male. Staff consultants held positions across the aging department structure including: Department Director, Senior Center Director, Operations Manager, Facility Manager, Nutrition Coordinator, and Transportation Specialist. All staff were women. Four staff consultants were white. The operations manager was African American and the nutrition coordinator was a bilingual immigrant from Mexico.

## Data collection approach

This study included semi-structured individual interviews, participant observations, document reviews, and participatory group mapping activities to broadly explore community relationships and change in the center with particular attention to the experiences of Spanish-speaking participants. For the purposes of this paper, we discuss strategies for shifting the focus of data collection methods from individual experiences of occupation to the community's experiences of everyday communal occupation. We believe this shift played a role in offering space for consultants to discuss and embrace opportunities for community change despite not being the focus of the study.

## Semi-structured individual interviews

After obtaining written informed consent, the first author conducted individual interviews with both groups of consultants. Interviews were conducted in the consultants' preferred language (i.e., English or Spanish). All interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Interview guides included a variety of cueing questions

that sought to facilitate reflection on the community as a whole rather than focusing on personal experience (See Table 1). With Spanish-speakers, we discussed community relationships and habits that might impact their participation in occupation. Interviews encouraged participants to identify past, present, and future processes, barriers, facilitators, and expectations across the community that influenced Spanish-speakers' participation. This included how the community participated together in physical spaces, during activities, through communication, and any other topics that were evoked by participants. With staff members, we examined how everyday relationships, policies, social norms, and habits had changed among the community as it continued to respond to Spanish-speakers' increasing engagement. Staff members described their perceptions of what relationships and processes impacted Spanish-speakers' occupations and experiences at the center.

### ***Community mapping activity***

Each cohort, Spanish-speaking older adults and staff members, participated in a recorded community mapping activity designed to encourage conversation about diverse aspects of the space and social relationships and processes of the center. The mapping activity was flexible, predominantly driven by the consultants, and informed by evidence-based participatory mapping approaches (Parker, 2006; Townley et al., 2009). Situational mapping has been referenced in occupational science (Aldrich & Laliberté Rudman, 2016); however, the present study differed by recruiting participant consultants to draw the maps and by orienting analyses toward the community as a whole rather than individual, albeit situated, experiences.

Other disciplines, such as social geography, have explored 'activity spaces' but these often span large geographic areas, focus on the physical features of space, and study space through the lens of individual experience (Nemet & Bailey, 2000). For the purposes of this study, the community mapping activity focused on the senior center community and prompted consultants to explore communal occupation, relationships, and other community processes. This encouraged consultants to consider processes and occupations from the perspective of the community as

a whole instead of through individual experiences and outcomes. During the mapping activity, consultants could depict the space, relationships, occupations, systems, and everyday processes of doing together in the center community using markers, scissors, glue, brochures, and other materials relevant to the center. Through any methods they chose, consultants were asked to visually represent the senior center on a large poster board, describing spaces, activities, relationships, people, and community occupations, and any other aspect of the center that influenced the participation and experience of Spanish-speaking older adults. Consultants were encouraged to collaborate together to create the final product. After the initial instructions, both mapping activities spurred vibrant discussions with little need for facilitation.

These methods created space for consultants, both Spanish-speakers and staff, to purposefully discuss their everyday occupational experiences in a way they had not previously experienced in the community. Consultants were able to reflect on group dynamics without blaming individual actors or unyielding social structures. As a whole, each group cultivated perspectives among the data to co-construct a rich depiction of the community while considering how it had or had not responded to the presence of Spanish-speakers over time. The process shifted the focus away from personal stories toward everyday concrete communal practices and narratives.

A combination of participatory methods, an orientation toward occupation, and a communal lens of occupation was helpful in fostering a space for dialogue. Since the study did not attempt to facilitate direct communication between Spanish-speakers and staff at the center, there were no study processes that involved both cohorts at the same time. Since there was an undeniable power differential between staff and the marginalized Latinx population at the center, we concluded that combining the cohorts during the study would unjustly amplify the voice of staff at the expense of the older Spanish-speaking adults. Due to the differences in power between staff and Spanish-speakers, the challenges inherent to communicating in a foreign language, and the availability of resources to support a full community process, we believed

that an integrated community conversation was not appropriate nor feasible for the scope of the study. Further engagement from researchers, relationship building among community members, and community leadership in the study design would be necessary to achieve this level of dialogue across the community in an ethical and respectful manner.

## **A Community Transforming**

### ***Setting the stage***

Spanish-speakers began participating at the senior center approximately 3 years prior to the study. In the first year, there was a sharp increase in occupational opportunities for Spanish-speakers due to increased bilingual support from a social worker. This bilingual social worker functioned as a major catalyst for communication and program development for Spanish-speakers at the center. However, both staff and Spanish-speakers became dependent on the social worker to manage communication and program development. She often couriered information to Spanish-speakers and the rest of the center community – effectively maintaining a barrier between the cohorts. After a year, the social worker left the position and was not replaced. This absence left Spanish-speakers without consistent and reliable bilingual support. Activities and programs stagnated and Spanish-speakers began feeling separated or compartmentalized in the center. Because Spanish-speakers and staff had relied so heavily on the bilingual social worker, minimal community processes or habits had been developed to facilitate communication. Information was rarely available in Spanish and fewer events were offered in Spanish or with interpretation support. Spanish-speakers wanted to continue participating but felt there were few activities available to them. Language and cultural barriers among staff and Spanish-speakers exacerbated these feelings of isolation because they stalled communication and communal engagement. The sense of alienation was best exemplified by one Spanish-speaker, “*siempre nosotros nos sentimos como cosa aparte*” [we always feel like a separate thing]. It was during this time that the study began.

### ***A community oriented research process***

Orienting the research process at the community level fostered consciousness from both Spanish-speakers and staff about community functioning for Spanish-speakers as well as in general. By considering questions like, ‘how are we as a community functioning in relation to Spanish-speakers’, staff members and Spanish-speakers stepped out of habitual daily routines as individuals in the community to investigate the community’s everyday practices. By exploring community doings, they considered processes, habits, and norms that may have been taken for granted previously. Through the process of analyzing the community as a whole, staff experienced significant revelations such as realizing that there was dearth of information and signage posted in Spanish by staff despite the increasing presence of Spanish-speaking patrons. During this process, Spanish-speakers identified their own potential for advocacy and program development. Instead of only focusing on their individual participation at the center, consultants collectively recognized that a stronger group presence within the center had previously increased their programming and, through this revelation, they realized their potential to shift community norms around program delivery and options.

Consultants were invited to actively investigate the everyday doings of their community as a whole and to explore the relationships among those everyday doings and the functioning of the center community. The emphasis on community avoided a narrow focus solely on political structures or individuals’ experiences that are disconnected from the rest of the community. Unexpectedly, consultants almost instinctively identified and acted on feasible opportunities for community change through their own everyday individual occupation and larger community processes. The following paragraphs offer examples of the changes that emerged during data collection processes.

### ***Staff actions***

This community-oriented occupation-based research process created space and time for reflection on the tacit cultural knowledge and habits permeating the center’s everyday doings.

As both groups reflected on their communal doings, they revealed barriers for Spanish-speakers. This collaborative form of communal inquiry focused on everyday occupation at the community-level and encouraged staff to identify processes that influenced the participation of Spanish-speakers. For example, the day after her interview, a staff consultant approached the first author with excitement wanting to share something she had discovered.

**Table 2 Staff Identified Actions**

**Built Environment**

- Increasing Spanish language signage in the center
- \*\*Move and improve the Spanish resource board
- Place a multi-language "Welcome" board behind the front desk
- Translate static information in digital monitor in lobby
- \*\*Place a sign in Spanish in lobby informing guests that there are staff who speak Spanish
- Implement a tear-off process for event registration of Spanish-speakers

**Information Access**

- Offer more Spanish language transportation information
- Tabling near the Spanish-speakers
- \*Translate special events flyers
- Host a center orientation tour both for seniors already present and new ones
- Advertise events in all three primary languages
- \*Translate the Conduct Policy
- Investigate Spanish capacity of transportation services in the area
- Reach out to ongoing instructors and teachers to identify which ones speak Spanish
- Organize a volunteer translation/interpreter program

**Leadership and Interpersonal Relationships**

- \*\*Ask the program assistant to more regularly check in with the social group
- Cultivate leadership and volunteerism within the Spanish-speakers
- Create booklet of bilingual Spanish-speaking volunteers for staff
- Connect with a bilingual participant to support communication
- \*Ask a Spanish-speaker to be on the program advisory board
- \*Connect the Spanish Meet-Up group with the Social Group
- Connect Spanish Classes at the center with the Social Group
- Reach out to a recent Spanish-speaking client to come to the center's social group

**Felt Presence from Staff**

- \*Be friendlier, learn names, or "hang out" more with Spanish-speakers
- Learn short phrases in Spanish

**Programming**

- \*\*Increase Spanish-language programming such as lectures

Note: \*Actions that were taken prior to the end of the study.

\*\* Actions that have been taken since the end of the study.

*When searching for a program using the word 'Chinese', she noticed the large amount of programming for the Chinese population and then decided to compare this to the Spanish-speaking population. With exasperation in her voice, she scrolled through multiple pages of programs with the word 'Chinese' in them. Yet, for the Spanish-speakers she did not need to scroll beyond the first screen; 'I'm just saying that there's so much going on for the Chinese population and I don't see that for Spanish and that's probably one of the main reasons [why Spanish-speakers were not participating as much]'. (Fieldnotes)*

Because she had taken the time to consider the community and how it served Spanish-speakers during her interview, she was primed to continue considering them in her future work. This encouraged her to engage in her own inquiries related to community functioning and prompted her to discover the disparity in available programming and occupational engagement for Spanish-speakers.

During interviews and the mapping activity, staff developed new ways of seeing and understanding their community's doings. A culture of seeking additional community changes to enhance the participation of Spanish-speakers began to emerge. Dorothy (staff) expressed appreciation for the opportunity to consider these ideas during her interview and began independently drafting action items in response to the issues she identified, "I'm like, I'm getting a lot out of this. I'm glad you interviewed me. [Both laugh] ... Let's see. That needs to happen and then some more signage. I am just writing these notes to myself."

Across all interviews and the community mapping activities, staff independently identified concrete actions they could take to specifically improve the occupational participation of Spanish-speaking older adults and sometimes other populations within the center, improving processes and accessibility in general. These actions are listed in Table 2. As the study progressed, staff became increasingly aware of when and how Spanish-speakers were participating. By the end of the study, a staff consultant reported that the Spanish-speakers were participating significantly more in the center's various programs.



Dorothy wondered if the interviews had spurred Spanish-speakers into action in the same way they had for staff. Indeed, both consultant cohorts became more aware of each other through simultaneous engagement in the research process.

### *Spanish-speaker actions*

As with the staff cohort, Spanish-speakers became more aware of their positionality at the center, including how their situation might have been different from other populations. For example, they recognized that, unlike the Chinese population, Spanish-speakers did not have a designated representative on staff or regular volunteers who supported their access and needs at the center. Differences in positionality were evoked as consultants discussed trends and patterns in accessing information and occupation across the community.

By approaching their exploration of the center community through a communal perspective, Spanish-speaking older adults were able to articulate the value of their presence at the center in fostering the development of additional programming and occupations. They leveraged this knowledge to begin considering concrete actions to further implement in the community. While Spanish-speakers had less power and opportunity to change center policy and processes, they discovered that being more present and visible through various activities in the center could steer community transformation toward their benefit. They were excited and enthusiastic about bringing more older adults to the center to “*hacer la fuerza*” [make the effort] to make their presence felt through participation. They discussed creating more activities and increasing the visibility of Spanish-speakers to create a more welcoming space for other Spanish-speakers in the future. The older adults organized themselves to identify bilingual individuals in their own group who could offer a stronger presence and advocacy in the center. Without prompting, they reported how participating in interviews generated possibilities for action.

*Marta: Y pues aquí, Francisco y yo nos pusimos de acuerdo para decirle a la gente, a todo el grupo que no está participando en las entrevistas y que no conoce que es lo que tú estás haciendo de que pues nosotros*

*como comunidad tenemos que hacer presencia, no nada más venir los jueves porque viene Carla ... hay infinidad de opciones para tomar aquí dentro del centro. En la limitación de lenguaje, es algo que prevalece, pero no por ellos, los chinos dejan de venir y de participar y de solicitar actividades para ellos en su idioma. Nosotros podemos hacer lo mismo, pero es cuestión de que todo el mundo acto de presencia.*

*[Marta: And so here, Francisco and I agreed, to tell everyone, to the whole group not participating in the interviews and that do not know what you are doing, that because we as a community have to have presence, not only coming on Thursday when Carla comes ... there are countless options to seize here within the center. Regarding the limitation of language, it is something that prevails, but not for them, that doesn't keep the Chinese from coming and participating and requesting activities for them in their language. We can do the same, but it is a matter of everyone being present.]*

By discussing community occupations and relationships, Spanish-speaking consultants were energized to change communal doings that they felt were problematic. They realized that their presence and participation at the center needed to be visible and noticed to instigate improvements in programming and service opportunities. This realization is evidenced in the following field note which depicts a powerful moment of advocacy and community building as both Marta and Carla (the volunteer leader of the group) encouraged participants to engage at the center more.

*Marta raised her hand and wanted to say how great it was that more people were coming to the center on a regular basis during the week. Carla asked people to raise their hand if they came every day. Marta raised her hand. Four days? (Francisco, Rubi) Three days? (total of six other people). Marta seemed to take pride in the fact that more people were coming. Carla mentioned that it was exciting and that they would need to make more activities and classes soon if they continued to come so often. (Fieldnotes)*

Because of their newfound ability to analyze the community together for problematic processes or promising opportunities, Spanish-speakers began to push against their sense of separation. In both interviews and their community mapping activity, they brainstormed ways to develop activities and to ask for more information at the center. Through this collaborative communal inquiry, they fostered positive relationships among themselves to transform their community and experienced success in effecting change.

### **Reflection on communal occupation**

The full process of inquiry, including interviews and community mapping, fostered consciousness among both Spanish-speakers and staff at the community level. Awareness, consciousness, knowledge, reflection, and action were all encouraged through a research process oriented toward a communal understanding of occupation. Community members identified, understood, and in some cases resolved issues among community processes and doing together. This community-level research transformed into a collaborative social endeavor that fostered community transformation. The transformation was facilitated by two willing cohorts who were engaged, welcoming, and committed to positive community change. With a goal of growth and positive community development driving their inquiry, staff identified concrete actions to improve services and explore new ways of doing together. Spanish-speaking older adults learned about their community and fostered relationships among that community to garner enthusiasm and presence. By disrupting habitual processes and actions at the center and agreeing to step into a space oriented toward reflection and analysis of communal doings, both staff members and Spanish-speakers contributed to positive community transformation toward more equitable participation and meaningful occupation of Spanish-speakers.

### **Discussion**

More than ever, occupational scientists are interested in fostering positive social change across communities through scientific research (Laliberte Rudman, 2014; Laliberte Rudman et al.,

2019; van Bruggen et al., 2020) and seek to understand the role of occupation in social and political issues across the globe. Occupational scientists recognize that occupation is political (Angell, 2014; Laliberte Rudman, 2013) and deeply rooted in issues of justice and human rights (Angell, 2014; Bailliard, 2013, 2016; Bailliard et al., 2020; Hammell, 2009; Pollard et al., 2008; Thibeault, 2013; Whiteford, 1997). They are examining the relationship of occupation to racial disparities (Kronenberg et al., 2005), community development (Leclair, 2010), violence and healing (Motimele & Ramugondo, 2014), post-war reconstruction (Frank, 2013), and more.

Occupational scientists have explored and employed community engaged (Aldrich & Marterella, 2014), participatory (Benjamin-Thomas et al., 2019), and other emancipatory methodologies in research. These methodologies are well suited to an occupation-based approach. For example, Freire's (1972) approach used drawings or photographs of everyday community living as topics of discussion in groups of oppressed community members, exploring meaning and relevance to liberation. The process led to authentic liberation through a social process of consciousness building, where community members engaged in self-emancipation. The research method photovoice was developed from this approach and has since been used by many disciplines interested in positive social change (Baum et al., 2006; Israel et al., 1998; Stevens & Hall, 1998; Wang & Burris, 1997). Community-based research and collaborative approaches support knowledge construction rooted in the everyday experience of community members. This knowledge is integral to understanding how everyday life constructs sociopolitical situations (Bayat, 2013).

Occupational therapists have explored community-based practice and community-oriented intervention approaches across the world (Simó Algado et al., 2016; van Bruggen et al., 2020; Fazio, 2017; Kronenberg et al., 2011; Sakellariou & Pollard, 2016; Scaffa & Reitz, 2013). These practitioners have recognized the complex, dynamic, and many times precarious nature of purposefully fostering positive change (Thibeault, 2013). Occupational scientists have also employed community-based research

methodologies to understand phenomena such as relationships among space use and identity for migrant populations (Huot & Veronis, 2018). In the present study, shifting the scope of inquiry to an occupation-based examination of communal doing through collaborative and participatory approaches created reflective spaces for a living, vibrant community to reflect and evolve toward positive outcomes. This study reveals the potential for community level analyses to support inclusive, diverse, and evolving communities.

Across the globe, there is increasing recognition of the potential role of occupation in fostering social change (Laliberte Rudman et al., 2019). The current study focused on understanding an already ongoing occupational process of community change at a senior center through communal inquiry as the center accommodated a growing Spanish-speaking population. Unlike participatory action research, this research process did not aim to directly generate community change. At its core, participatory action research seeks to change social situations by offering inquiry, dialogue, and reflection as tools for transformation (Baum et al., 2006). In developing this study, we did not anticipate the transformative potential of a communally oriented, occupation-based participatory approach to foster positive social change across the community.

Occupational science and occupational therapy have an integral role in working toward the resolution of problematic and unjust community relationships. The findings of this study reveal the potential for adopting an occupation-based, communal perspective along with a collaborative and community-based approach to contribute to positive community change. The study's methodology required consultants and the researcher to consider the everyday doings of the whole community, rather than solely individual experiences and doings. This fostered dialogue about proximal community norms, assumptions, processes, habits, and doing together.

### **Communal inquiry**

The process of community change through occupation has been explored through Dewey's

notion of *inquiry* (Aldrich & Cutchin, 2017; Cutchin, 2013; Cutchin et al., 2017; Madsen & Josephsson, 2017). Dewey defined inquiry as "the controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole" (Dewey, 1938/1960, p. 104). Inquiry is the process through which a situation is reorganized and understood in order to grow (Cutchin, 2013; Madsen & Josephsson, 2017), and a fundamental ingredient in the process of occupation and the unfolding of everyday doing of humans (Cutchin, 2013; Madsen & Josephsson, 2017).

Humans are consistently and naturally engaged in individual inquiry in all forms of participation and engagement. This study revealed one example of how a structured occupation-based inquiry could occur collaboratively at the community level. The dialogue regarding communal occupation that occurred among consultants, the researcher, and the community is pursuant of the collaborative process of social inquiry described by Dewey (1927) and further explored by (Cutchin et al., 2017). Community members are experts in how their community as a whole functions. Through the dialogic process of the study, community members had opportunity to assess power structures, precarious processes, and problematic experiences that they experienced everyday at the center. Because these factors were a part of their communal experience of everyday doing, they became tangible and realistically changeable. A communally oriented collaborative process of social inquiry excavated the assumptions and tacit knowledge embedded among the community's everyday occupations and offered occasion for community change.

This collaborative communal inquiry was a social process wherein community members focused their analysis on the community doing occupation together. This allowed community members to evaluate communal habits and processes – including but not limited to individual habits. Dewey (1927) celebrated collaborative communal inquiry of community norms and values as a tool for social reconstruction. While this study was not meant to replicate Dewey's process of social reconstruction, it was clear

that community members had an integral role in the formation and use of knowledge generated by the collaborative process. It is through the evaluation and application of generated knowledge that positive changes in communal occupation occurred across the community. In this instance, collaborative communal inquiry led to transformative community integration supporting more occupational opportunities for Spanish-speaking immigrants.

Occupational scientists are identifying complex communal processes that demonstrate the potential of occupation in offering opportunities for community growth at a variety of scales across the globe. From urban gardening movements to football leagues for homeless people, researchers are exploring multi-layered mechanisms of diverse communities doing together (van Bruggen et al., 2020). For researchers interested in this work, it is vital to engage in deep critical reflections regarding the idiosyncratic political, financial, and practical processes each community experiences as it changes and grows. This community, while small and service-oriented, still managed politics and power struggles among its members. This paper described opportunities for growth in a community with a particular configuration of these tensions. Other communities, regardless of size, may face more or less challenging complexities in fostering positive change for marginalized populations. The specific mechanisms that foster positive transformation will vary across communities and according to the unique configuration of tensions that entangle them.

## Conclusion

Bringing people together to discuss communal occupational processes and doing together brought forth opportunities for change and re-coordination. Creating space for both staff and Spanish-speakers to simultaneously reflect on their community's doings was most often met with enthusiasm and allowed for actions to be taken by many community members. The process of communal inquiry, as a community occupation in and of itself, instigated a doing together for community members that cultivated reflection and cooperation around a specific topic. Conversations based on community level

occupation, participation, and everyday life as a whole had the power to underline problematic relationships or processes in the community and how they created disparities in individual occupational experiences. By identifying those processes and relationships together, the community quickly moved to change in hopes of resolving those issues. Further research is needed to determine how a communal level perspective on occupation and the attitude and willingness of the community within this study influenced a quick shift into action. This study offered initial exploration of the potential of deploying a communal occupational perspective along with collaborative and community-based methods to generate community growth. Continued research is needed to reveal the full potential of these approaches in supporting positive social change, community equity, and occupational justice.

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The authors have no conflict of interest regarding the contents of this article and will not receive any financial or other benefit from the publication of this article.

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