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“Making change by shared doing”: An examination of occupation in processes of social transformation in five case studies

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ABSTRACT

Background: As social and health inequalities deepen around the world, scholarship in occupational therapy and occupational science has increasingly emphasised the role of occupation as a powerful tool in transformative processes.

Objective: To explore how opportunities for everyday doing together may contribute to processes of social transformation by identifying ways occupation is being taken up in socially-transformative practice.

Material and Methods: A generic descriptive qualitative case study design was utilised in order to describe current practice examples and identify ways occupation was being taken up in five initiatives working towards social transformation located in Canada, Germany, South Africa and the United Kingdom.

Results: Focussing on the positioning of occupation within the initiatives, three themes were developed: The intentionality of the process, the nature of occupation within the initiatives, and the role of occupation within the processes of social transformation.

Conclusions and Significance: Providing examples of agency on the micro level and of engagement with socioeconomic, political and cultural power structures at the societal level, this analysis raises important considerations in addressing how occupational therapy practice can move in socially responsive and transformative directions.

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Introduction

Societal inequalities and the role of occupation in the mediation of social injustices have been a concern of occupational therapists from the origins of the profession, although for long periods medical influence has demanded a more reductive and narrowly aligned approach to practice [1]. In the last decades since the introduction of occupational justice as a concept [2], occupational therapists and occupational scientists have increasingly investigated societal inequalities and the role of occupation in the production and mediation of social injustices [3–11]. Critical occupational science and occupational therapy call for addressing these injustices through occupation-based approaches that foster social transformation [4,12–15]. Conceptualising occupation as deeply socio-political [16–19] and emerging across groups, communities, and societies [20–25] provides a

lens to study ‘doing together’ in processes of social transformation. Despite this increased focus on these issues, more fully exploring occupation in relation to initiatives that seek to address systemic inequities is needed, not least to more fully problematise and delineate the potential contribution of the occupational therapy profession to these.

For the purposes of this study, social transformation was understood as enacting ‘changes in social practices, systems and structures so as to promote positive outcomes at a community or societal level’ [15,p.6]. Social transformation through occupation, therefore, encompasses efforts that deploy occupation as a means to enact changes at group to societal levels so as to enhance occupational justice [3,15,25–30]. Communities resist or challenge existing structures that limit their possibilities for participation in everyday living [31]. The

complex, multi-faceted ways such community action can contribute to social transformation have been highlighted and analysed using a number of established theories of social change such as those proposed by Lefebvre, De Certeau and others [32–38]. Therefore, any exploration of social transformation from an occupational perspective needs to be in dialogue with these established theories. Furthermore, communities and societies function through particular power relationships in unique socioeconomic and political contexts. Understanding the role individual and collective occupation plays in social transformation requires appreciating these real and distinctive situations through which this transformation occurs.

The aim of this study was to examine specific initiatives that were utilising occupation to foster social transformation. By understanding everyday co-creation of social space and social processes through doing together [39–40], we endeavoured to gain an understanding of the powerful processes for action through which occupation can be mobilised for positive social change. Such initiatives offer an opportunity to understand both the utility of occupation through a socially informed lens and how opportunities for everyday doing together may contribute to social transformation. The occupations explored in this research address the everyday life situations of diverse groups of people who are negatively affected by the current social system and experience marginalisation resulting, for example, in occupational limitations [2,41]. These processes have been studied by other social sciences for many years. Deepening understanding of such processes through including an occupational lens will support occupational therapists and occupational scientists in more fully mobilising the potential of occupation to encourage social transformation across communities.

Our specific objectives included: (a) identifying forms of practice being developed and their aims; (b) analysing how occupation is enacted within these forms of practice; and (c) unpacking assumptions and guiding ideas about occupation and transformation in these initiatives. The research undertaken was in two parts. The first resulted in the development of cases presenting six initiatives that were working towards social transformation. These cases were published as part of an e-book [15]. The second part is presented in this paper.

Materials and methods

A group of researchers from Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain and the United Kingdom, engaged

in this research project as members of a project group of the European Network of Occupational Therapy in Higher Education (ENOTHE). We utilised a generic descriptive qualitative case study design to describe current practice examples of social transformation through occupation, and identify ways occupation is being taken up in five initiatives working towards social transformation. This design was chosen to enable a rich description of the initiatives; that is, we aimed to detail ‘the real-life doings’ [42,p.120] carried out in the initiatives within their various contexts. Consistent with a descriptive qualitative approach [43] and the use of an occupational perspective [44], we aimed to understand how the initiators of these projects understood the aims of their initiatives and how these were working towards social transformation, with a particular focus on how they understood and integrated occupation.

Participants

The researchers used purposive sampling to identify initiatives and participants amongst their professional networks who were working in partnership with people at a group, community or population level and integrating some form of occupation, with an expressed intention to benefit the structural conditions of the everyday lives of those involved. This resulted in the recruitment of seven participants from five initiatives. The five initiatives were located in Canada, Germany, South Africa and the United Kingdom (UK) (two cases). Occupational therapists were involved in two of these initiatives, a project conducted with vulnerable women in a marginalised community in South Africa using the occupation-based community development framework [45], and a participatory action research project conducted with members of a senior citizens’ advocacy organisation in Canada. They were interviewed about these initiatives. The other three initiatives did not involve occupational therapists. These participants included: two retirees in the UK who started a knitting group in their community; the head of programmes for an initiative using football with several marginalised communities in the UK; and the managing director of a community gardening association in Germany that started in low-income communities. Thus, although occupation was clearly part of each initiative, it was not necessarily named and framed as such from a theoretical or professional perspective. All participants were leaders or collaborators on the initiatives and were asked for verbal confirmation that they were

speaking on behalf or with the agreement of others involved in the initiative. In addition, all participants engaged in an informed consent process and provided written consent to be interviewed and audio-recorded. Two interview partners from one initiative were interviewed together.

Data collection

Five members of the research group (H.v.B., Claire Craig, D.L.R., S.K., S.S.) conducted interviews, with each researcher connected to one of the five initiatives and interviewing either one (for three initiatives) or two participants (for two initiatives). Research group members conducting these interviews had varying relationships to the initiatives and the persons being interviewed, ranging from having heard about the initiative through discussions with colleagues to having played a part in contributing to the initiative at some point in its development. It is acknowledged that the positionality of each interviewer contributed to the co-construction of the data; to work towards generating comparable data across the initiatives we co-developed and used a semi-structured interview guide. The main sections of this guide addressed:

- Description of the initiative, including how it was initiated, undertaken, and sustained
- Theoretical perspectives and guiding assumptions, including those specific to occupation
- Obstacles and facilitators experienced during the processes of the initiative.

Most interviews were conducted in person, though some were done *via* electronic media given geographical distance. Two interviews were conducted for most initiatives, but second interviews were not possible with two initiatives (gardening association, knitting group) for pragmatic reasons. Given informants' other commitments it was not always possible to arrange a second interview within the study's timeframe. This may have impacted on data collection, for example, limiting opportunities to further explore data from the first interview. However, all topics were covered in the first interview.

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. All interviews were conducted in English, except for one where the interview transcription was translated from German into English for analysis. The file share service 'Syncplicity' was used for storage of data to ensure secure access for all members of the research group across national borders.

Data analysis

Consistent with a qualitative descriptive approach [43], thematic analysis of the interview transcripts was undertaken [46]. Analysis began with an open reading of the transcripts pertaining to the initiatives by four members of the research group (H.v.B., D.L.R., S.K., S.S.). Each of these the researchers independently generated initial codes for selected transcripts based on the objectives of the study, including exploring types of theoretical influences, social issues being addressed, ways occupation was thought about and integrated into the initiative, and how social transformation was understood. These researchers met in person to share these initial codes and collaboratively generated a list of codes to use across interview transcripts. In continuation, transcripts pertaining to a specific initiative were coded twice, once by the researcher who had taken the role of primary analyst for this transcript, and once by an additional member of the research team to enable application of diverse perspectives to the data. When coding was completed, the full research team met online to bring together similar codes into categories and to discuss the interrelationships amongst categories. Several ways of bringing the categories together into themes were trialled against the categories and codes to refine thematic results, with the resulting themes finalised through discussion by all research group members. In this article, we focus on themes pertaining to how occupation was thought about and enacted in the initiatives and how it was implicated in processes of social transformation.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval was obtained from Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh, UK, and, as required, from partner institutions of the researchers involved in data collection.

Results

This article specifically focuses on the positioning of occupation within these five initiatives, referred to as the senior citizens' advocacy project, the community gardening initiative, the women's support project, the football initiative, and the knitting group. Three themes were developed, which, although presented individually, in practice were inextricably intertwined. The first theme concentrates on the intentionality of the process. The second theme explores the nature of occupation within these initiatives. The third theme

explores occupation within the processes of social transformation in which the initiatives are involved.

The intentionality of the process

As has been shown in the introduction, understandings of occupation and social transformation are broad and diverse. As a consequence, the participants' understanding of social transformation and occupation (whether or not it was named as such), and their interconnectedness is essential to examine. Thus, this first theme concerns intentionality of what the initiatives were trying to achieve and what purpose they assigned to occupation in this context. Regardless of the diversity of issues addressed by the initiatives or how they navigated the transformative process, the participants' views can be analysed through two major dimensions: (a) starting with a concern; and (b) providing opportunities for participation in occupation.

Starting with a concern

According to the interviewees, all five initiatives started with a concern, which was understood as a societal rather than individual issue. The five initiatives addressed a broad variety of societal issues: low socio-economic neighbourhoods, unsafe, unpleasant (semi-)public space, social isolation, social segregation, unemployment/employment barriers, drug use, gang participation, terrorism/political extremism, ageism, homelessness, unmet health care needs amongst seniors, and the situation of refugees/migrants, single parents, abused or vulnerable women, (young) offenders, and people with additional support needs. Some explicitly identified social and/or occupational injustices that were experienced by specific groups at or near the initiation of the project included senior advocates facing barriers to being heard, vulnerable (abused) women and their children feeling unsafe due to gang activity in their community, problems faced by homeless people, and identification of tensions and social issues in a low socioeconomic status neighbourhood.

The initiatives all started with catalysts or initiators, which could be an individual person, a group of people or an institutional network. These initiators were either from within a community or from the outside but with prior connections to a group, as for example in the case of the senior citizens' advocacy project: 'I had an existing relationship with this group. I didn't go into the group planning to do a research project. I was on the board and I got to

know them and got to develop a relationship with them.'

At the community gardening initiative, the process started simultaneously from two different directions:

...inspired by these things he [a municipal employee] brought this idea [...] and found many allies from all kinds of institutions, but above all among the residents. Practically at the same time, the residents developed the wish that the green spaces [...] be treated more responsibly. [...] it can actually be said that the initial phase really came from both directions [...] top-down and bottom-up.

This two-directional approach was also described in the South African women's support project: '... and the will is to connect and the community members are like... ok... they want change and the [occupational therapy] students want change and they just partner to make change in whichever way they can.'

The intention of contributing towards social transformation varied between initiatives at the start. For example, the initiatives on football and knitting primarily focussed on fostering individual change, but interviewees saw this also in connection with community change. Regarding the soccer initiative:

The starting point is the drop-ins, but we established quite early that as the guys started to get a structure in their lives, once they started to feel part of something, they then wanted something more than that [continuing later] ... if you look at that in terms of the social impact, in terms of the benefits to your communities, the individuals and their families, [...] the knock-on effect, you can go right back, go back to prisons, to young offenders units, to [...] perhaps then target the families and then the families stop their kids going on that pathway. We don't change society but we change the community.

Some of the initiatives also intended transformation on a larger scale. This, in turn, required people to become aware of their situation and feel that they could become active: As the interviewee from the senior citizens' advocacy project stated:

that occupational perspective, or probably more occupation justice perspective, that sort of informed my questions was the prompt for them to go beyond those individual interactions to, how are the systems playing into this – reinforcing some of these issues around ageism? And so, pushing the group to think about that.

In some cases, identification of shared social issues and the way to tackle them through the initiative was then further refined through the process of collective engagement. For example, in the women's support project, students and women gathered and then identified safe play opportunities for their children as an

issue to address. The seniors started discussion of barriers to advocacy and combating ageism became a shared issue.

Some of the initiatives (senior citizens' advocacy project, women's support project, community gardening initiative) explicitly focussed on activism and advocacy as an element of social transformation from the outset. While the seniors already had long-time experience with advocacy, gaining these skills and experience was considered an essential aim for the women's support project: 'we start to think about that like working with the people we are working with for more advocacy. That is our challenge.'

This also meant questioning existing hierarchies and power relationships in society as they affect different population groups, so that marginalised groups can obtain more recognition and more rights. In this context, an analysis of societal structures and their impact on the group and its members was considered an essential prerequisite for change, as expressed by the interviewee from the senior citizens' advocacy project: 'But yeah, those kinds of things reflected their critical perspective that governments have agenda, especially around – issues around privatisation and senior services, was a big topic.'

Furthermore, the participants stressed the importance of developing an alternative model or vision of social relations, possibly supported by the use of theory. This is illustrated by the participant from the community gardening initiative:

We do want to be participatory, we want to be equitable, we want to be just, we want to offer opportunities, we want to be fair, we want to remain activist in a certain direction, we want to remain independent, we want to stimulate reflection. Well, in principle, these are the basics that the garden scene has also made for itself, which can also be looked up in the Urban Gardening Manifesto, which we also signed. Right. Oh so, in a way, on a small scale, a kind of critique of capitalism, that this is also communicated, and new models of social coexistence, that these are pointed out or worked out.

The role of developing a shared vision in the process of transformation was stressed by the interviewee from the women's support project:

So it's about using [...] occupational science theory, to both understanding the current reality, but also thinking about the vision and what it is we want to work towards and how the theory might help us to see and to structure our thinking about the change that is needed.

Regardless of whether they expected to initiate change mainly at the individual, community or at the societal

level, all the initiatives appreciated the collective dimension of the social issue they were concerned with and a collaborative or participatory approach to addressing it. Associated with this was the basic assumption that occupation played an important role in this process.

Positioning of occupation in purposeful social transformation

Looking at what kind of changes the initiatives wanted to bring about and how, we can see through an occupational lens that all five initiatives shared the intention of providing marginalised people with opportunities to participate in (collective) occupation. People could either already be involved in the initiative or encouraged to join through interests or goals in common, such as an awareness of being negatively affected by the same societal issues. In this context, two distinct roles of occupation in addressing social concerns can be differentiated, which appeared individually and in combination.

On the one hand, some initiatives intended foremost to provide people with access to specific occupations (i.e. football, gardening, knitting), which would result in people getting together as a potential starting point for individual and/or community change. This typically required the removal or lowering of barriers so that these occupations became accessible to marginalised people. For example, in the case of the football initiative 'It was set up with free drop in sessions in Edinburgh for anyone who wanted to take part', while equipment and clothing was also provided if required.

On the other hand, occupations were used to inspire a feeling of working together towards change: Two of the initiatives started by focussing on a particular group of people (seniors and vulnerable women) and used a specific approach (participatory research and occupation-based community development) to encourage participation focussed on social interaction and deriving meaning from engaging (collectively) in transformative occupations.

Empowerment through participation in collective occupation was understood as a step towards enabling individual transformation and as a contribution to possible long-term social transformation through change in the community and/or at societal level. Examples include making an occupation newly accessible to groups of people, such as homeless people playing football or women taking care of their own affairs in a South African neighbourhood. As the interview partner from the senior citizens' advocacy

project described this process: ‘We were making change by shared doing’.

The shape and nature of occupation: occupation as coming together

This theme explores occupation itself, highlighting common dimensions of occupation in these various initiatives. In all initiatives people doing together was the grounds for *coming together*. It was the purpose of the initiatives, formed a central part of their processes, and contributed to noticeable change. Regardless of how they were introduced in the initiatives, the occupations changed the way people came together and can be seen as part of social transformation through the process in which they interacted with others.

Occupation as coming together can be explored around a number of dimensions that characterise the nature of occupation within these initiatives. These dimensions are present as a complex core through which transformation might take place, and are identified as: inviting connection; shared meanings; and occupation as a flexible open meeting ground.

Inviting connection

In some initiatives this was a first and foundational dimension. Playing football requires one person to have sufficient trust in another to pass them the ball and hope it will be passed back. This was seen to be the vital first step that football, as a team or collective sport, made essential. The community garden initiative created green space that invited occupation that generated connection: ‘this garden is actually just a room for a meeting’. The knitting project regarded mutual engagement in occupation as the means to ‘connect, no matter what language barriers you face’.

While many initiatives began with defined occupations as a starting point, in others occupation became the means through which people started to develop a relationship. In the women’s support project, ‘normally the [occupational therapy] students would help to do a sweep and put the kettle on, everybody starts the day with a cup of coffee. So the students got involved in those activities’ with local community members as they undertook daily tasks with them.

In these initiatives the focus was primarily on when occupations were done synchronously in a shared physicality with others. The occupation brought people together in time and space. However, simultaneously, the occupation was part of an ongoing process of living, and people brought with

them previous experiences of and individual meanings related to the occupation, connecting these and integrating them into the present. People brought their previous experience of football, craft work, advocacy activities, or gardening. There was recognition that the occupation might extend beyond the immediate temporal and spatial boundaries of the initiative, for example someone might continue do handicraft, e.g. crochet at home on their own.

Shared meanings

Many of the occupations carried cultural meanings that supported the emotional connection of participants with what they were doing, but also with each other. Gardening, football, craft work, sweeping the floor, making coffee, are widely recognisable occupations in one form or another. Whether or not the meaning associated with the occupation was positive, the existence of the connection was seen to be important: gardening was seen to be an important medium for bringing the community together through its ‘positive connotation’ with food cultivation, saving financial and energy resources and sustainability, and similarly ‘even somebody who doesn’t play football will know something about football’.

Engaging and having an ongoing connection in the occupation could be a strong emotional experience with particular, deeply symbolic and cultural meaning. In the senior citizens’ advocacy project, ‘people would just get so into the discussions, and it was almost animating and energising.’ For the football initiative, Homeless World Cup players ‘wear kit that represents their country... they walk in the parade behind their flag’. Contrary to underlying assumptions about the universality of occupations that are sometimes found in literature, our research stressed the importance of sensitivity to socio-cultural context if occupation were to become a driving force in processes of social transformation.

Occupations had a recognised form, shape or process around ‘how’ they were carried out. These provided, for example, roles and tools with recognised names that enabled communication through a particular cultural script around the occupation, as was evident with football, gardening, knitting and crochet. This gave the occupations a certain ‘solidity’, not in the sense of something permanent but that they were something that people could recognise and discuss, using a familiar language.

Occupation as a flexible, open meeting ground

Occupation in these initiatives created opportunities for alternative ways of doing and being with others for people with a lack of social interaction and a lack of opportunities to participate in certain occupations. While this is part of the process of social transformation that will be discussed in the next theme, here we endeavour to unpack some of the characteristics of occupation that facilitated this.

Occupations provided or offered alternative ways of being through flexible, responsive engagement. They gave people an experience within which participants in initiatives could feel grounded, safe, and with little pressure to participate in a particular way. Many participants were experiencing particularly challenging life circumstances such as poverty, homelessness, recovery from addiction, and migration. Some project participants were struggling to interact with a variety of social institutions, such as housing and other public services. The interview partner from the community gardening association noted how the initiative provided ‘a space to take root again’ and recognised that ‘we try to create an open space where people can catch their breath a little.’

While all initiatives offered such flexibility of engagement in particular occupations, they created spaces where people could think about the occupations in which they engaged in new or expanded ways. The participants in the women’s support project used Tuesday and Thursdays to talk about positive and negative things in the community, and ‘discuss at length the root causes of the problems.’ It is crucial to note that some of these opportunities arose through the longevity of the initiatives and their related occupations, which enabled a participant-led flexibility and gave a sense of the initiative being somewhere to go to and be in. The football initiative recognised that whilst many institutional services offered a maximum of six months’ support, its ten-year life span meant an ongoing connection and place for its members to return to.

Some occupations (e.g. football, knitting, gardening) were inherently flexible, with multiple ways of doing, varying numbers of people involved, and varying levels of skills required. For example, football had the flexibility of playing with anything from two players to a full team, with friendly to world cup standards, thus ‘you can find a standard that suits you.’ The community gardening initiative also offered inherent flexibility in the occupation, having people on a spectrum of those ‘who have never had

a spade in their hands’ to those interested in horticultural science and continuing their education.

The flexible and dynamic nature of the occupation was not only related to its current form, but also to its future and developing potential as more people became involved. Occupations changed their shape and participants developed or moved on with related or new occupations, and this was recognised and promoted as the initiative progressed. Initial occupations often led on to others, different, but related. The advocacy group recognised that to move on they would need to learn about unfamiliar occupations such as social media: ‘we know we have to play the game, so let’s learn how to use it.’ The participants in the women’s support project deliberately came together ‘to think about what it is that they want to do together as a group’, selecting a number of occupations from making popcorn to organising a safe playground for the children of the neighbourhood. The football initiative developed education courses and also tournaments involving other organisations as players’ skills and needs changed.

Unfolding of social transformation processes through occupation

As noted in the introduction, social transformation can occur at various levels and through various processes, broadly encompassing changes in social relations, systems, and structures and the discourses, beliefs, and practices underpinning these. Building from the initial intents and rationales of the initiatives, each implicated occupation in particular ways within processes of social transformation. Specifically, occupation was drawn upon and enacted in ways that contributed to: reconfiguring social relations; enhancing awareness of shared issues and concerns; countering invisibility; and igniting other occupations aimed at social transformation.

Reconfiguring social relations and building reciprocity

All the initiatives shared the intentionality of bringing people together through various occupations as opportunities for social interaction. Coming together offered opportunities to disrupt established social boundaries that confined marginalised people and restricted their access to occupation and participation in everyday social life. It provided a means through which people who might not normally relate to each other in everyday life could ‘do together’. The community gardening initiative explicitly aimed to bring

together people from diverse nationalities, while the knitting group reached across language, socio-economic status, health status, age and citizenship status. Football was proposed as an ‘international language’ that enabled members of the organisation, who were closely identified with this occupation, to build social relationships with persons experiencing homelessness, imprisonment and poverty: ‘some of them are dangerous guys. But because I’m football they see it differently and so the relationship comes through the football, if you like, rather than build the relationship and then do football’.

Occupation was often introduced or facilitated by the initiatives with the intent of bringing people together in ways that would transform social relations, and occupations were often chosen that provided a flexible, culturally familiar and safe place to meet across diversity. As the initiatives unfolded, the aims of disrupting social boundaries and transforming social relations were not only realised within the occupations used, but extended out from these. For example, the gardening initiative was described as not only creating ‘cultural exchange of people who might never have met somehow’, but also as fostering new social relations extending beyond the garden:

Friendships have been made here in the garden by people from nations who are still in a state of war and the best thing is that they invite each other to weddings, the other families. Thus there are already units, that the garden neighbours, the garden bed neighbours, so to speak, are integrated into the family context.

The founders of the knitting group also described examples of how the connections established between diverse people in the group had extended out from the shared occupations done in the group to solidarity and mutual support in other areas of life, evoking feelings of reciprocity. Furthermore, people were viewed as realising their capacity to make a difference and to be agents who are impactful in each other’s everyday lives. A female member facing a terminal illness had limited time and finances to arrange her daughter’s wedding:

We put on the wedding for her. Someone bought a dress and we altered it for her. We crocheted a bouquet, people donated money and we put on an amazing spread. [...] She got to see her daughter walk down the aisle before she died... When people who have very little come together like that to make it better for someone else then that’s a true community.

In addition to occupations providing a common ground to make new social relations, initiatives

developed relations characterised by reciprocity that fostered a greater sense of community. For example, gardening facilitated these relations with opportunities to both give to and receive from the initiative. These opportunities were accessible to all participants, despite potential barriers such as socio-economic status or advanced age. People with limited economic resources found ‘there is nothing better for people than to be able to proudly say ‘I have nursed and tended this all year, so that I can give it to you today’’, and older people facing loneliness found themselves able to ‘stand in our gardens and [...] exchange ideas with people.’

Moreover, social relations characterised by reciprocity extended out from the garden, through small services ‘repairs, artisanal activities or, for example childcare’, through which members supported each other. The founders of the knitting group also foregrounded the development of social relations characterised by reciprocity: ‘Refugees and asylum seekers were able to develop key language skills and in return to share rich cultural insights and experiences. Individuals from the homeless hostel next door have found support and friendship. Everyone contributes and receives something’. In the football initiative this stimulated continued involvement with the organisation, where members returned ‘because they got so much out of it, they’ve seen a change in their own lives.’

Enhancing awareness and analysis of shared issues and concerns

On-going engagement in occupation over time served as a means through which awareness of shared issues and concerns was enhanced in initiatives. Within the women’s support project participants coming together and working with occupational therapy students to build after-school play opportunities for their children fostered community awareness: ‘and they started recognising that even though they were in different stages of their lives, we’re still, we still belong to the same community’.

Through this occupation the women had opportunities for

chatting about the contexts, what they do, what are the things that are difficult in their lives [and] could think about how they wanted to be agents in their community. What did they want to change, what actions did they want to take, and what did they want to initiate with their actions.

This growing sense of shared issues enabled the women to start working together to address problems

faced by them, and their community, as a collective. The members of the senior citizens' advocacy project had already worked together as a Social Action Committee and came together to 'understand what the barriers were to the group's advocacy efforts.' Through participating in reflexive dialogue and engaging in occupations such as putting together presentations and letter writing campaigns, the group 'were collectively making sense of things when it was coming to unpacking ageism and resisting ageism.' The shared occupations of the group were described as deepening their understanding of ageism. They explored how it affected them individually and built awareness of how it operated as a barrier to their organisation's advocacy efforts. In one of their annual general meetings:

we looked at how ageism shows up in the media, how ageism shows up at policy level, education, health care, wherever, and we pulled from the literature, we pulled from people's experience, but it was an interesting process because we developed our own understanding as we put together presentations for the various annual general meetings.

While this awareness raising was welcomed it led to challenging reflections on how group members themselves might internalise ageism: 'Like, how have we, without even knowing it, internalised some of these age – these observations of ageism that we're seeing? So, there was that personal transformation, seeing things from another perspective.'

Countering invisibility and experiencing agency

The case examples provided various occupational means through which persons experiencing marginalisation became more visible in their community in ways that lead to more positive social perceptions. Occupation provided a means to display strengths and abilities, as well as make a recognised contribution to a community. E.g. knitting provided a space described as an opportunity for people to gradually become more involved and become recognised as leaders with skills to share: 'individuals who started simply by calling in for minutes with few skills, are now leading and sharing sophisticated craft abilities with other group members.'

This effect could also be observed beyond the immediate interactions among group members. For example, it was noted how the Homeless World Cup produced changes in other community members' perceptions of homeless people:

they tend to start to become little heroes for the community, and it starts to change the perspective of

folk who are watching that and you start to see that it is not just a guy who is sitting in the doorway begging.

Enhancing the visibility of seniors and changing how their contributions and needs were recognised within society was a stated aim of the senior citizens' advocacy project, which was achieved through various occupations, such as putting together and delivering presentations addressing ageism: 'a senior citizen gave a big presentation in the morning and challenged people's language, and in the afternoon, Ministers, physicians, were correcting themselves and saying senior citizens.'

Igniting occupations aimed at social transformation

Extending beyond initial intents, a final way in which occupations appeared linked to social transformation was connected to how engagement in a particular collective occupation ignited other forms of occupation in (unexpected) ways, with those ignited occupations having a shared intent of mobilising social transformation. It was as if engaging in an occupation together created a nutrient rich space for other collective occupations to grow through relationships formed and growing awareness of social issues. For example, pamphlets and other resources created through the senior citizens' advocacy project led to forming a broader network that used theatre to enhance awareness of ageism:

a few people who carried on and developed vignettes on our stuff, like some of our thinking. They gave a series of interactive theatre kinds of things... which really brought in a whole lot of people, sort of experiences of ageism and how it plays out.

The knitting group has evolved into planning and doing outings together, an occupation that was connected to opening up new life possibilities for group members: 'Some people haven't ever been out of the borough so the idea of going somewhere different can be life-transforming.'

The flexible boundaries of the initiating occupation which offered the space for people to come together and grow could lead to igniting new occupations, valuable for the participants, creating an organic process of change.

Discussion

Consistent with the aim of this descriptive case study to learn from specific initiatives using occupation to foster social transformation, we now focus on insights about processes for transformation gleaned through

looking across these cases and connect these insights to theoretical perspectives addressing social change. All five cases illustrate how occupation, in the sense of doing together and providing a medium for people to come together, is a means for social transformation. Even though the interview partners with no background in occupational therapy were not familiar with the concept of occupation as it is used in occupational therapy and occupational science, they described their intentions and proceedings in similar ways. Parallel to an occupational lens [44], their understanding of the interconnected relationship between social transformation and doing together was essential to their work. To be clear, we do not imply that interview partners unknowingly were using 'occupation' or that an 'occupational lens' is in some way a more effective perspective. We arrived at this notion through a history and lineage of occupation-oriented ideas, while they arrived through other, equally valuable means.

Taking up an occupational lens may provide occupational therapists and scientists a systematised, explicit analytic approach to establish a basis from which to work towards social transformation. It is also clear that such work requires attention to relationships and the willingness to assume a supporting role. To avoid, inadvertently, using an occupational lens to occupy or colonise processes we do not sufficiently understand, the case studies make clear that the occupational lens also needs to be turned inward [47] so that understanding the perspective of those engaged in these processes becomes a point of departure for joint activity. As a first step in this direction, the nature of occupation as it became apparent from the case studies is described, and based on this, ways forward for occupational therapy and occupational science are proposed.

Participants described a range of occupations from football to advocacy, through which many further occupational opportunities were developed from international competitions to campaigns, and which were connected to individual life changes (e.g. abandoning harmful behaviour due to newly developed competences and self-confidence) and enabling people to meet life goals (e.g. gaining a respected position in their community). Across this range, the cases illustrated characteristics or features of occupation that appear to be particularly relevant to this work related to inviting connection, shared meanings and providing a flexible, open meeting ground. Therefore, as a profession interested in and founded upon the value and mobilisation of everyday living, we suggest that

occupational therapy should and can be engaging with and contributing to the development of these sorts of initiatives through occupation, while simultaneously learning about occupation from them. This learning can occur both through new initiatives and also through drawing upon published examples of occupation-based initiatives linked to social transformation [e.g. 48–49].

In all the initiatives, the limitations and harmful effects of present conditions on individuals or groups were initially recognised and a vision for change was developed. Consistent with a common thread of many social change theories which emphasises the centrality of generating a shared vision for community action [32,37,50], these visions for change involved providing opportunities for interaction and participation, enabling agency and engagement. The vision for change arose from particular catalysts recognising that occupations such as gardening, knitting or crochet can be a basis for organising social transformation initiatives in communities, who often had their own personal connection with a particular occupation. The vision also developed from contributions that other individuals may bring based on their own experiences and knowledge or desire to overcome the occupational limitations of their current situation. Doing this work together, across the cases, was a shared process described as developing organically through interchange and reciprocity. Sparking this process seems to require generating a shared vision of an alternative way of living and interacting, a place to meet, people to meet with, sharing things to do together and time to develop the relations and constancy that can make it a lasting force in a community and beyond. Two of the five initiatives (football, knitting) do not seem to have started with a particular theoretical perspective, although these have emerged with the growing understanding developed over time, articulated in a deep understanding of what helped and what hindered the group processes and the processes of change.

A repeated aspect of these occupations has been their flexibility and adaptability, their reciprocity and capacity to respond to and work around members' needs, through which enhanced understandings and connections have been established. Examples included how people enabled one of their members to afford and stage a wedding for her daughter, homeless football players found international connections, and people continued to find ways to connect to their groups or connect with nearby groups. They are people who might otherwise not have met, brought together by

doing things together. It is from this connectivity that social relations are disrupted and positively reorganised. People find new ways of contributing to a wider community despite their lack of resources, regain their visibility, and discover new, alternative places to be. It is through what de Certeau [38] might describe as the micro possibilities and the strategies which are developed reciprocally within them through micro practices, that people recognise ways in which social changes are possible.

Thus agency on the micro level also addresses socioeconomic, political and cultural power structures on the macro level, for example when people campaign for ecological transformation, against the negative effects of ageism or against social exclusion of homeless people. As occupations reflect the cultural values in a society or community, being able to engage in them opens not only occupational opportunities, but also the possibility of receiving social recognition and altering perceptions of what occupations are possible in the present and future [51]. The five initiatives focus on groups that are marginalised and experience social stigmatisation within society at large but also limited opportunities for everyday participation in their immediate local contexts. This confirms the importance of equity of access to participation in the occupations of daily life [52]. As these occupations are used to open up new community spaces, both conceptually and materially, people can meet and continue to create occupations through which social transformation can gradually be articulated: two people kicking a football, a space for knitting, or a garden [39–40]. Perhaps at such micro levels it is easy to ignore or overlook the potential for these occupations to contribute to social transformation. Even small openings up of occupational possibilities resulting from community initiatives should not be underestimated. This is shown by the example of feminist campaigner Sheila Capstick setting off a national campaign for women's rights to play snooker in the sexist environment of British working men's clubs in the 1980s [53–54]. Similarly, repair cafés, where people can learn from each other how to repair anything from electrical appliances to bicycles, are a contemporary example of how a grassroots initiative started in the Netherlands in 2009 has turned into a widespread community practice based on circular economy values and sustainable thinking [55]. Focussing on the American civil rights movement and the South African struggle against Apartheid, Frank and Muriithi [21] have highlighted the interplay between activism and everyday occupations.

Based on this analysis, we see that such occupations can be mobilised (and consciously integrated) to contribute to positive social change. We see that drawing on 'doing' as a powerful tool for social transformation from the beginning of an initiative can support understandings of possible ranges of initiatives and processes. These cases illustrate that while an occupational science or occupational therapy perspective may be explicitly employed at the outset, there is much to be learned from projects that situate 'doing together' from the beginning of the initiative in organic ways that are developed through interaction and growing, or evolving, together around specific community interests. These local knowledge formations are distinct from theoretical understandings drawn from occupational therapy or occupational science to support our developing understandings of possible initiatives and processes. An occupational therapist might work with people in a community to instigate and support such developments, yet there is a need for on-going critical examination of the evolving occupational science literature around its conceptualisation of social transformation, as well as the positioning of occupational therapists in relation to these types of initiatives. This should extend to the consequences of their involvement, whether currently they understand them sufficiently, and whether current health systems or social sectors – often organised according to neoliberal ideals of restricted short-term project funding – are effectively supporting this involvement.

In moving forward, we recommend expanding the practical and theoretical sources that occupational therapists and scientists draw upon to further their understanding of processes of social transformation. For example, often the development of small community organisations has not been well documented, since they are often not well funded, if at all; keeping their records may not be as much a priority as running these organisations and developing their actions [56]. Often – where it exists – it is buried in grey literature, blogs, and files in community centre cupboards. These are sources that occupational therapists and occupational scientists should specifically seek out to learn about processes of social transformation.

As occupational therapists and occupational scientists explore further their potential to be part of initiatives that mobilise occupation for social transformation, our five cases highlighted the potential value of the experiences and perspectives of occupational therapists who are also activists in a professional and/or personal capacity. Although it has

rarely been inserted into statutory service practices, a tradition of activism has been represented through such approaches as social occupational therapy [3]; occupation based community development [45], and as advocates for policy changes [57]. Positioned as activists, these professionals could inform catalysing processes similar to those seen in these initiatives as well as new directions in occupational therapy. Their experience could support development of understandings of empowerment, advocacy and political knowledge [18] in the context of initiatives for social transformation. Such expanded understandings are essential for occupational therapists to counter dominant modes of thinking in occupational therapy (from the Global North) that stem from experiences in the health sector or institutions of higher education, such as those tied to biomedicine, neoliberalism, positivism or managerialism [58]. As many professionals work to explore how public service sectors can meet and contribute to community and citizenship initiatives, our five cases illustrate that a shared basis and mutual vision is a necessary prerequisite for establishing and building trust as a basis for a meaningful cooperation.

Findings from this study are also consistent with the on-going conceptual development of the concept of collective occupations that emphasises how various forms of ‘doing together’ can contribute to the on-going dynamic negotiation of the social fabric [23,24]. These initiatives highlight various ways occupations provide means for negotiation towards transformation, such as consciousness raising through addressing local problems, finding practical solutions and creating spaces for reflecting on and organising responses to the issues encountered by members of the initiatives. In some groups this was connected to developing relationships between participants and recognising that they have similar issues, as with the football initiative. In others, such as the senior citizens’ advocacy project, the women’s support project and the gardening initiative, there was an articulation of larger and systemic difficulties arising from poverty, ageism or the inhospitableness of contemporary urban spaces. Here again it is useful for occupational therapists and occupational scientists interested in such work to explore these phenomena through the number of conceptual explanations which already exist and are well understood in the intersectional field of social transformation, such as Freire’s [59] critical consciousness, which he describes as emerging from tacit level discussion of local issues. A further example are radical utopian scholars who have

pointed to the centrality of changing everyday ways of doing and relating as a means to mobilise social transformation, positioning the everyday as a powerful site for resistance and transformation [50,60].

Limitations and conclusions

We acknowledge that we have looked at a small purposive sample of grass roots initiatives developed at a community level. As such, our findings do not represent a radical or universal understanding of social transformation or occupation, where there are very many such initiatives around the world. In addition, this analysis and its implications represent the responses and perceptions of key individuals from each of the initiatives, but do not necessarily reflect the opinions of other group members. This is potentially limiting the voice of members and other staff and professionals.

While the recognition by occupational therapists and occupational scientists of the importance of occupation for health and well-being, with an interest in justice is important, we also see that this interest is not unique to our discipline or profession. Transformative initiatives stem from the belief that individual and community flourishing is only possible if the conditions shaping everyday life experiences are altered. This points to the importance of stepping beyond our disciplinary and professional base as a means to think about and enact occupation differently, learning through these types of initiatives as well as from other disciplinary spaces addressing everyday doing as part of social transformation.

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