

## Viewpoint

# The dark side of occupation: A concept for consideration

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## Introduction

Occupation is the core concept of the occupational therapy profession and its underlying philosophy, and has long been the primary topic of concern for occupational scientists. As a result, occupation has been continuously defined and discussed by occupational therapists and scientists, with our understanding of what constitutes occupation ever-evolving. The focus of occupational therapy and science literature has been upon occupation and its link to good health and wellbeing. Occupation has therefore largely been understood as something positive and productive for the individual, groups and communities. Only recently has this belief begun to be challenged (Kiepek & Magalhaes, 2011). This article presents the assertion that occupation must be viewed as many-sided, multifaceted and that, of these many 'sides', there is a dark side to occupation (Twinley & Addidle, 2012). The dark side is understood to include various dimensions of occupation that have not, traditionally, been examined by occupational therapy theorists, researchers and practitioners and occupational scientists, and which may not lead to good health and/or wellbeing. Reference is made to an online discussion forum in which a talk about the dark side of occupation was facilitated; contributions from this discussion are included as examples of some people's current opinions regarding the dark side of occupation. The article concludes with recommendations for how to implement a

consideration of the dark side into research, theory, education and practice.

## Occupation: Our core concept

The question considered is how adequate, all-encompassing and holistic are the current definitions of occupation that exist, and which therefore inform our associated understanding of occupation? There are certainly definitions of occupation that could be seen to attempt to incorporate every potential aspect of human occupation. To illustrate, Law & Baum assert occupation is everything we do in life, including actions, tasks, activities, thinking and being (2005). It is anticipated that utilising a broader, more inclusive definition such as this can enable an analysis of any of the occupations a person engages in, performs or experiences. However, currently our professional literature and evidence-base has a dominant focus on those occupations that can restore or maintain good health, development, growth, social interaction, productivity and that promote a state of wellbeing. Leclair's (2010) examination of various definitions of occupation found that several agree upon the notion that occupation is subjective because it is something experienced by an individual and also that, as each of us participate in our daily occupations, we are able to positively contribute to our respective communities. Leclair also discusses another important feature of occupation as being something that can be shared with at least one other person and can therefore be described as a shared, collective or co-occupation. However, still the explanation of these occupations relates to those that are traditionally viewed as positive, such as the family occupation of having a meal.

Many authors profess occupational therapy is a holistic profession, but how can occupational therapy – very much a discipline that sees therapists working with a diverse population of individuals with such an equally diverse range of occupational performance, participation, engagement and justice issues – have come this far without truly considering the whole picture in terms of what occupation is? And what every occupation a person, group or community might engage in?

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## Start at the very beginning

The importance we place upon occupation is clearly inherent in the curriculums of pre-registration undergraduate programmes. Occupational therapy students are encouraged to learn about occupation: what it can constitute; the reasons for promoting engagement in occupation; how to measure and analyse occupation; how to use it as a tool for assessment, a therapeutic tool for intervention and as a tool for evaluation. Occupation is learnt about in terms of its health-promoting potential. Crucially, this means occupational therapy students can appreciate the power of occupation and its integral role in each of our daily lives.

We ask that students learn to observe and analyse people performing, or attempting to perform, their daily occupations. We encourage them to understand individuals as occupational beings. And, in understanding occupation, we expect students to be able to go out and 'use' occupation in their practice. The impact of this is reflected in studies such as that conducted by Aguilar, Stupens, Scutter and King (2012). They explored the professional values of Australian occupational therapists and found that the participants clearly valued occupation, and appreciated the importance of using it as the therapeutic medium. Their participants understood the focus on 'what people do' as the unique feature of the occupational therapy profession. Occupation was understood as a human right. What would be interesting to explore further is what specific occupations were the participants considering? And what do they perceive as constituting human occupation? This is important to dissect when we consider the assertion that participation in occupation should be a human right.

However, can we be confident we are educating truly holistic, client-centred and occupation-focussed therapists when they are only expected to learn about occupation as something positive, productive and health-giving, and as something that we must therefore work with individuals to be able to engage in and perform? We do expect students to learn about reasons for impaired or limited occupational functioning, performance and engagement. However, it is suggested that we do not sufficiently ask that they consider the impact of non-health-giving, anti-social or unproductive occupations upon an individual and his/her daily routine. Exploring the dark side of occupation might promote a far more balanced, broader and inclusive appreciation of human occupation. Notably, Pierce (2012) suggested occupational science can increase its social relevance by describing occupations that are self-damaging, deviant or disrupted. This is about both widening and deepening our understanding of occupations in which people participate in, perform and can find meaningful.

## The dark side of occupation

This leads us to consider the dark side of occupation (Twinley & Addidle, 2011, 2012); that is the things some people do that may not always promote good health, may

not always be productive, yet may provide a sense of well-being. Amongst other things, it includes tasks, activities, routines or acts that are considered antisocial, perhaps even criminal and illegal. Use of the term 'dark side' is not intended to portray occupation as having two sides. As the definition and understanding of occupation has evolved, the great majority of accounts do now assert that occupation is something that is complex and multidimensional. It is certainly not something that can be divided into this side and that. However, in many ways the term 'dark side' seems fitting; it suggests occupation is something that has aspects which are less acknowledged, less explored and less understood. It presents occupation as something which has aspects to it that have been left in the shadows. Something that, when prompted to consider, we all know is there, yet something that many of us have not incorporated into our theory, understanding and use of occupation. Perhaps this is because there is an immense dearth of work that clearly incorporates those other aspects of occupation that could be seen to exist as part of the dark side. That is, occupations that could be one of, or a combination of, the following: anti-social; criminal; deviant; violent; disruptive; harmful; unproductive; non-health-giving; non-health-promoting; addictive and politically, socially, religiously or culturally extreme. Occupations that, to the individual performing them, could still be any combination of the following: meaningful, purposeful, creative, engaging, relaxing, enjoyable, entertaining, that can provide a sense of wellbeing and even that are occupational in the sense of being an individual's paid or unpaid work.

## Discussing the dark side

On March 13th 2012 a group of sixteen people from different countries and professional backgrounds, including occupational therapists and students, engaged in an online discussion regarding the dark side of occupation, hosted on a Twitter forum named #occhat (<https://twitter.com/i/#!/search?q=%23Occhat>, accessed 21 September, 2012). This discussion was inspired by Twinley and Addidle's (2011) presentation at an international occupational science conference – held in Plymouth, UK – where they first proposed consideration of the dark side of occupation. The group discussed topics such as: how people define the dark side of occupation; how adequate current definitions of occupation are; whether occupational therapy and occupational science frameworks support the assertion that people can and do engage in the dark side of occupation; the significance of considering all of a person's occupations, rather than only those that promote health and wellbeing and the challenges this consideration of the dark side may present in practice.

A review of the discussion that resulted demonstrates how, initially, participants felt that the concept of the dark side of occupation was relatively novel to them. There were comments posted such as: "... never considered the 'dark side' before" and "I have to say it was something

I had not really considered either” (OTalk\_Occhat, 2012). However, over the course of the discussion it became apparent that the dark side is something a few had considered in their work; two members drew upon their experiences from practice when working with clients who wished to smoke, with one recalling how she worked with a company to get a custom-made smoking aid made for a client. Others spoke about how engagement in pro-social and health-giving occupations can lead to occupational imbalance and, therefore, to people becoming engaged in the darker side of occupation. Examples included being a student with a substantial workload and how this leads to becoming a ‘workaholic’, and the proposal that: “The purpose of an occ(upation) could make it dark... e.g. Physical activity and eating disorders” (OTalk\_Occhat, 2012).

## Exploring the dark side: An example

It is possible to explore the dark side of a person’s occupations and to gain an understanding of the underlying and associated values, interests, motivations, skills, abilities, capacities, roles, meanings and satisfactions attributed to this engagement. To illustrate, it is fitting to apply Wilcock’s (2006) theory of occupation in an attempt to understand the perpetrator perspective of engaging in an anti-social occupation. We know that Wilcock described occupation as a synthesis of doing (all the things we do), being (how we feel about what we do), becoming and belonging. The balanced interaction of doing and being can enable becoming – that is the realisation of who we are as a result of the values, knowledge, skills, abilities and demands of people’s occupations. A sense of belonging is seen as something we all strive for in what we do (Wilcock, 2006). And so it is suggested that each of these aspects of occupation contribute toward the formation of identity: individual, group, local, national, sociocultural. By applying this to a male perpetrator’s account of engaging in violent football hooliganism (presented by Van De Mieroop), it seemed apparent that the occupation of hooliganism was what the man had been doing, being and becoming: “... the interviewee constructs a heroic identity that incorporates violence” (2009, p. 731). Moreover, Van De Mieroop confirms how the group membership gave the perpetrator a sense of belonging: “... he explicitly and consistently positions himself within the group of hooligans” (2009, p. 731).

## Conclusion

There is much for us to consider in our approach to human occupation, the way we teach undergraduate students and our work with individuals, groups and communities. In an attempt to truly become more holistic practitioners, theorists, researchers and educators we need to not just be aware of, but also strive to understand, the dark side of occupation. We must continue to consider the subjectivity of human occupation and an individual’s unique lived

experience, including their current life stage, recent life events and future plans. In addition to focussing on the human element and experience of occupation (be that individual or shared or collective), Hocking (2009) proposed for a focus on occupation itself, to include the development of in-depth descriptions of human occupations. This would facilitate development of our theoretical perspective and understanding of human occupations in the quest to gain in-depth descriptions of all those occupations yet to be explored. These occupations need to be contextualised; that is, explored with a consideration of the context within which they are experienced and performed, including the physical, environmental, sociocultural, political and historical context. It is crucial our analysis, construction, comprehension and critique of occupation continue to develop and evolve.

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