


**OCCUPATIONAL SCIENCE AND  
OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY AS  
TRANSFORMATIVE ALLIES: KEY DIRECTIONS  
FOR OCCUPATION-FOCUSED SCHOLARSHIP**

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**Key Premises**

- occupational therapy (OT) and occupational science (OS) have transformative potential
- parallel ‘critical’ turn provides space to work as allies towards social transformation
- need radical expansion of ‘conditions of possibility’ for occupation-focused scholarship

**Starting definitions**

- Occupation
  - “actions that rearrange and reconstruct the world in which we live” (Frank, 2013, p.233)
- Occupational therapy/therapies (OT)
  - diverse practices mobilizing occupation to address health, well-being, participation and/or justice, at individual to collective levels
- Occupational science (OS)
  - diverse research efforts addressing occupation, at individual to collective levels

(Garcia-Ruiz, 2017; Guajardo, Kronenberg & Ramugondo, 2015; Laliberte Rudman & Aldrich, 2017; Sakellariou & Pollard, 2017 )



**Occupational therapy:  
Critical, transformative ‘turn’**

“Gradually, a **different epistemology** of occupational therapy, grounded in **social and political dimensions**, has started to emerge” (Guajardo & Mondaca, 2017, p.104)

“**critical perspectives** advance research and practices towards **addressing socio-political mediators** of occupational engagement and equity.” (Gerlach et al., 2017, p.1)

“enabling access to meaningful **occupation as a right** is not just treatment but a **political endeavour**” (Pollard, Kronenberg & Sakellariou, 2009, p.4)

**Calls for Socially Transformative OT**

- roots in early practice
- emancipatory agenda
- commit to transforming ‘roots’ of occupational injustices
- commit to working ‘with’ persons facing oppression

“need to develop a **transformative discipline**, in which occupation is contributing to **social changes**” (Van Bruggen, 2017, p.418)

(Farias et al., 2017; Kronenberg & Pollard, 2006; Malfitano et al., 2014)

**Conceptualizing socially transformative OT (Farias & Laliberte Rudman, 2019)**


- **Disrupts broader systems** that extend beyond individuals’ control and cause injustices
- Spans continuum from **individual lives to political systems**
- **Questions ‘status quo’** when leads to occupational inequities
- Builds partnerships across **diverse groups**
- Centers an **‘occupational lens’**
- Engages with **critical theoretical frameworks**

### Occupational Science: Critical, transformative turn

- Origins at University of Southern California, late 1980s
  - generate basic knowledge about occupation
- Debates about foci and relation to OT
  - “guard against adopting a singular definition of ‘real science” (Laliberte Rudman et al., 2008, p.144)
- Emergence of other forms, such as:
  - occupational justice and population health foci
  - **critical, transformative turn**

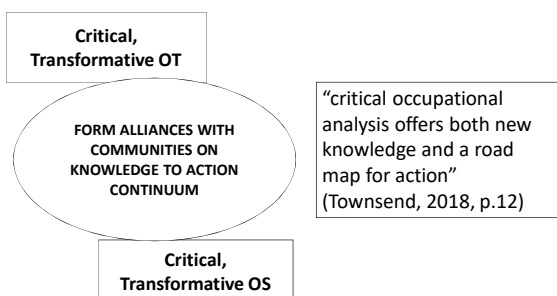
(Galheigo, 2011; Njelsani et al., 2012; Townsend, 2012; Wilcock, 2007; Yerxa et al., 1990; Zemke, 2019)

### OS: Critical, transformative turn



- roots in early scholarship (e.g. Dickie, 1996; Frank, 1996; Townsend, 1997)
- “An **emancipatory agenda** is emerging within occupational science, building on the work of scholars who have advocated for a **more critical, reflexive and socially responsive discipline**” (Farias & Laliberte Rudman, 2016, p.33)
- “growing number of occupational science scholars have argued to **apply an occupational perspective to injustices** experienced throughout the world” (Sofa & Wicks, 2017, p.244)

### OT/OS : Forging critical, transformative alliances



“critical occupational analysis offers both new knowledge and a road map for action” (Townsend, 2018, p.12)

### OS & OT: Centrality of a critical lens for transformative directions

- Focus on power relations and socio-historical construction of realities
  - Attend to production of privilege/marginalization
  - Question ‘status quo’/taken-for-granted
- Problematize structures, systems, and practices that perpetuate unjust conditions

(Canella & Lincoln, 2011; Gerlach et al., 2017; Sayer, 2009; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2003)

### OS & OT: Centrality of a critical lens for transformative directions

- Incorporate on-going critical reflexivity


Adding ‘transformative’...“embodies a commitment to revealing unequal relations or conditions that cause injustices and altering such relations or conditions by promoting new viewpoints and possibilities for resistance and justices” (Farias et al., 2017, p.2)

### OS: Pushing forward as a critical, transformative ally



- “moment in its history with great potential to embrace its transformative potential and become praxis-oriented” (Farias & Laliberte Rudman, 2016, p.44)
- BUT has not yet fully embraced or realized its transformative potential (Hocking & Whiteford, 2012; Zemke, 2019)


### OS: Pushing forward as a critical, transformative ally



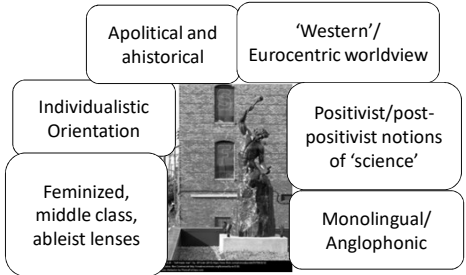
- requires critical reflexivity and radical re-thinking of 'occupation-focused scholarship'
  - "fundamental reassessment of the foundations of occupational science" (Frank, 2012, p.30)
  - "concept of occupation needs to be challenged" (Sakellariou & Pollard, 2013, p.419)
- crucial to expand "dominant mode of thought and orientation to both science and occupation that set the conditions of possibility for thinking about and doing occupational science" (Laliberte Rudman, 2014, p.374)

### Critical reflexivity: 'Conditions of possibility' in OS & OT

We "perceive a particular world, beyond the boundaries of which, beyond the conditions of which, it is extremely difficult to see" (Kantartzis & Molineux, 2010)



### Critical reflexivity: 'Conditions of possibility' in OS & OT



Apolitical and ahistorical

'Western'/ Eurocentric worldview

Individualistic Orientation

Positivist/post-positivist notions of 'science'

Feminized, middle class, ableist lenses

Monolingual/ Anglophonic

(Angell, 2012; Galvaan, 2012; Hammell, 2009; Phelan, 2011; Pollard et al., 2010; Laliberte Rudman, 2013; Wilson & Magalhães, 2016)

### The necessity of expanding 'conditions of possibility'

- Implications of continued individualization
  - "focused on helping the individual adapt to the existing form of society rather than attempting to transform the limitations of society itself" (Zemke, 2019)
- Risk of theoretical imperialism
  - need to be "open to diverse worldviews to avoid enacting colonial agendas" (Magalhaes et al., 2016)
- Limits transformative capacity

(Gerlach, 2015; Guajardo & Mondaca, 2017; Hammell, 2011; Kirsh, 2015; Laliberte Rudman, 2013, 2014; Owens, 2017)

### Expanding 'conditions of possibility': Embracing a critical sensibility

- Advance an occupational imagination that
  - enables informed, critical analyses of social and political processes
  - works to enact social practices, systems and structures that embed occupational justice
- Move forward with social transformative efforts in culturally humble, participatory and ethically responsible ways

(Canella & Denzin, 2009; Freire, 1972; Laliberte Rudman, 2013, 2014; Lather, 1986; Sakellariou & Pollard, 2012)

### OS: Critical, transformative directions in occupation-focused scholarship

- Embracing critical and transformative paradigms
- Pushing beyond dualistic thinking
- Addressing moral and political values
- Embracing diversity
- Attending to socio-political nature of occupation

## 1. Embracing critical & transformative paradigms

- Research as a resource for social change
  - “public responsibility to disrupt the sense of inevitability and to engage with communities on questions of justice” (Fine & Barreras, 2001, p.175)
- Research as radical, and “unruly, disruptive, critical” (Denzin & Giardina, 2009, p.29)
  - “as soon as one can no longer think things as one formerly thought them, transformation becomes both very urgent, very difficult and very possible” (Foucault, 1988, p.156)

## 1. Embracing critical & transformative paradigms

IMAGINE

- Research as praxis
  - “producing scholarship that critically interprets the world in an effort to change it” (Fraser & Naples, 2004, p.1103)
- Imaginative
  - “It imagines new forms of human transformation and emancipation. It enacts these transformations through dialogue.” (Denzin, 2002, p.31)

## 2. Pushing beyond dualistic thinking



## Science/advocacy

“Doing nothing is taking action.” (Payton, 1984, p.395)

- in many ‘science’ disciplines, ambivalence regarding rightful place of action (Fine, 2001)
- collapse border of science/advocacy
  - “study critically ‘what is’, to imagine ‘what could be’, and to contribute responsibility to a mobilization toward ‘what must be’” (Fine & Barreras, 2001, p.175)

## Research/practice



- Challenge dualism of research (as knowledge generation) and practice (as real world application)
- Crucial moment to integrate research/practice and form transformative alliances between occupational science/occupational therapy

“necessary but not sufficient to call attention to political and social injustice. Voices of opposition must be accompanied by action aimed to overturn oppressive systems” (Blustein et al., 2012, p. 349).

## 3. Addressing moral and political values

- challenge apolitical illusion of ‘science’, and articulate standpoints
  - “shed our illusions of objectivity in favor of values and actions that are clearly in service of marginalized groups” (Blustein et al., 2012, p.349)
- take up new ways of addressing the quality of scholarship
  - “ability to successfully awaken the reader’s sense of obligation to transform social injustice rather than simply watch it unfold” (Blustein et al., 2012)

#### 4. Embracing diversity

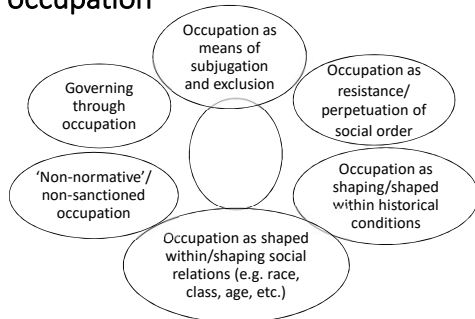
- de-stabilize ‘status quo’ by making “the unfamiliar more familiar” and treating “the familiar as a source of astonishment” (Gane & Back, 2012, p.405)
  - study occupations outside those aligned with middle class, ‘Western’ lifestyle
- examples from OSE 2017: non-sanctioned occupations; survival occupations; occupations of refugees/asylum seekers, gender-variant people, persons living in poverty, and persons living in occupied lands (Laliberte Rudman, 2019)

#### 4. Embracing diversity

- commit to democratization of knowledge and knowing regarding occupation
  - enact “permanent exercise of cultural sensitivity, political awareness and self-awareness” (Galheigo, 2011, p.60)
  - embrace participatory practices, that work ‘with’ (not ‘on’ or ‘for’)
  - engage in critically-oriented interdisciplinary syntheses

(Canella & Lincoln, 2009; Fine, 2006; Lather, 1986; Mills, 1959; Payton, 1984)

#### 5. Attending to the socio-political nature of occupation



(Angell, 2012; Galvaan & Peters, 2017; Guajardo, Kronenberg & Ramugondo, 2015; Nielsani et al., 2013; Laliberte Rudman 2012; Pollard et al., 2009)

#### 3. Attending to the socio-political nature of occupation: Examples

- Rivas-Quarneti, Magalhães & Movilla-Fernandez (2016) – structural violence and occupational struggles
- Kearns Murphy & Sheil (2019) – power relations and occupational possibilities in residential mental health facility



#### Fracturing Individualism and Neoliberal Modes of Governing:

Possibilities and Boundaries in the Socio-political Shaping of Long-term Unemployment

D. Laliberte Rudman, R. Aldrich, S. Huot, L. Magalhães, in partnership with Goodwill Industries

Website: [www.possibilitiesandboundaries.ca](http://www.possibilitiesandboundaries.ca)

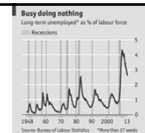


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#### Disrupting Neo-liberal Problematization of Long-Term Unemployment



- individualize ‘problem’ of, and solutions for, long-term unemployment
  - individual deficiencies, activation and ‘employability’
  - neglects social, political and economic conditions producing unemployment
- homogenize the ‘long-term unemployed’
  - obscures differences in relation to age, immigrant status, criminal history, gender, etc., and inequitable distribution of unemployment

(Boland, 2015; Grundy & Rudman, 2015; Porter, 2015)

### Methodology, aims and methods

- Two-site (Canada/U.S.), critical ethnography
  - Reveal how possibilities and boundaries for occupation are socio-politically shaped during long-term unemployment
  - Work with collaborators to open up possibilities for different ways of thinking about and addressing LTU

### Examples of critical insights and transformative directions

- occupational implications of contradictions between 'individualizing' problem frames/solutions and complexities of people's lives
  - 'activated but stuck' (Laliberte Rudman & Aldrich, 2016)
  - 'resource seeking' (Aldrich, Dickie & Laliberte Rudman, 2017)
- informing social transformation
  - collaborator in community-led project to advocate for job networks and cross-sector collaboration
  - study findings mobilized to inform public transportation changes
  - integration of material regarding unemployment, poverty and resource-seeking occupations into OT curriculum

### OS and OT as Transformative Allies: Concluding thoughts

- crucial within contemporary neoliberal times
- collaboratively expand conditions of possibility to enact occupation for transformation
- integrate critical study of occupation and diverse forms of action aimed at human flourishing through occupation