Contributing to social transformation through occupation : experiences from a Think Tank.

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Abstract

Occupational therapy is underpinned by the premise that engagement in occupation is fundamental to health and wellbeing. Through occupations people are able to orchestrate their lives in ways that enable them not only to survive, but also to experience human flourishing. Through occupation, people can develop and maintain their families, neighbourhoods and communities as sources of belonging, opportunities and common action. Occupation, therefore, is not only important to each individual, but also, through collective occupation, people develop the kind of lives that they live together. Occupation is an essential factor in life quality, the experience of being human and the social transformation of individuals and of the societies of which people are a part. This article describes the formation of an International Think Tank for Occupation based social transformation. It begins with a brief overview of the conditions and context that underpinned the development of the group, and the milestones achieved to date in the establishment of a global network.

Occupational scientists propose that through occupations, humans orchestrate not only their lives, but also their family, neighbourhoods, communities and societies (Frank & Zemke, 2009). Not only do the everyday occupations of individuals, families and communities contribute to health and well-being (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015) we maintain that people's occupations are fundamental to social transformation. Recognition that the transformation of systemic societal characteristics is essential is mounting as global change causes negative impacts at local and national levels (UNESCO, 2017). Efforts towards transformation include social and political action through occupation. Towards that end, this article describes the formation of the international Social Transformation through Occupation Network (which began with the authors of this report), with a particular focus on the process and outcomes of a Think Tank we facilitated at the 2017 Occupational Science Europe (OSE) Conference in Hildesheim, Germany. It begins with a brief overview of the conditions which underpinned the development of the group and the milestones achieved to date in the establishment of a global network. We reflect on lessons learned through this process and outline future directions to further develop the network and occupation-based social transformation.

Conditions and context

While acknowledging that a transformative agenda has long been articulated within occupational therapy and occupational science (Farias & Laliberte Rudman, 2016; Pollard & Sakellariou, 2014), increasing attention to the potential of occupation as a means of social transformation as well as the need for social transformations that address occupation are evident in the professional and disciplinary literature

(Galheigo, 2011; Guajardo & Mondaca, 2017; Farias, Laliberte Rudman & Magalhaes 2016; Hocking & Whiteford, 2012; van Bruggen, 2017). This attention can be situated within contemporary socio-political conditions. Various types of changes, such as demographic changes linked to ageing populations, increasing mobility of populations including that of refugees, globalization of industry and other industrial changes, and ecological degradation and climate change, have been framed and responded to in line with neoliberal politics of austerity and state retreat in ways that have heightened various forms of inequity (Galheigo, 2011; Gerlach, Teachman, Laliberte Rudman, Aldrich, & Huot, 2018). These factors are seen alongside expanded understandings of the impact of social determinants on inequality in health, and regional efforts for strengthening of social accountability by citizen participation in practice, education and research (Fransen, Pollard, Kantartzis, & Viana-Moldes, 2015). At the same time, the significance of professional expertise, roles, independence and critical capacity have diminished within neo-liberal economic structures (Said, 2006).

As Dewey (1969) noted, complex problems, such as demographic changes or climate change, demand intelligent action to recognise issues and resolve them. As issues arise at least in part through human occupations, occupations provide a means to contribute to the resolution of such complex problems. Moreover, these complex problems have significant implications for occupation as is it the means by which life is experienced and social connection is achieved and is fundamental to the concept of a life to which all animate things have a right. Increasingly scholars and practitioners have recognised a professional responsibility to frame occupation itself as a human right and mobilize occupation for social transformation, as well as articulating various theoretical and pragmatic challenges in doing so (e.g. (World

Federation of Occupational Therapists Position Statement on Human Rights,

(WFOT, 2006); WFOT Position Statement on Environmental Sustainability (WFOT,

2012); WFOT Sustainability Matters (WFOT, 2018)). Eliciting that responsibility, a

2014 manifesto (van Bruggen, Pollard, & Kantartzis, 2014) sought to address the

multiple factors that influence people's opportunities to engage in health-promoting

occupation. The authors recognised the need for critical analysis and coherent

conceptual development of efforts and which draw upon occupation to enact social

transformations that readdress social and health inequalities. In response, a group of

likeminded educators, researchers and practitioners came together to facilitate

collaboration and dialogue through the development of an international network.

Aims and Development of the Social Transformation through Occupation Network

The Social Transformation through Occupation Network aims to bring together a

world-wide multi-sectoral group, inclusive of professionals, service users,

researchers, students, teachers, members of the public, politicians, and others

concerned with mobilizing occupation, as a means to enact social transformations

that ameliorate social, health and occupational inequalities. The network is actively

committed to gathering information and creating pathways towards actions to tackle

such inequalities from an occupation-based perspective. It is also committed to

bringing together diverse theoretical perspectives and practices to move social

transformation through occupation forward.

Think tanks are usually composed of people who wish to influence public

policy in a particular direction, by combining their expertise and inspiring innovation

and research (Shaw, Russell, Parsons, & Greenhalgh, 2015). The founding group

decided to organize a first Think Tank at the joint COTEC-ENOTHE Congress

(Galway 2016) in order to establish: whether participants shared our interest in putting social transformation on the occupational therapy/occupational science practice, research and education agenda; their prior experience/knowledge; and how we might move forward collaboratively.

Over 70 participants voiced the need to draw on practice emerging across the world as well as furthering theoretical development. They identified several overarching priorities:

- the political responsibility of occupational therapists and scientists as advocates for participation and occupational justice;

- the need to bring practice to where people live their lives;

- changing educational standards and content to empower occupational therapy students from diverse backgrounds to be agents of change;

- making occupation central to action for change, and ensuring that its power is recognized at micro, meso and macro levels.

With this initial support for the development of an international network, the group distributed a questionnaire to all Think Tank participants and interested others to generate priorities for action. Identified priorities included:

- defining and clarifying the meaning of social transformation, including its conceptual underpinnings;

- identifying existing work and best practice;

- creating a strategy for occupation-based social transformation

- further developing the network;

- applying for funding as a group and supporting the development of projects;

- enhancing communication and dissemination activities regarding occupation-based social transformation.

One key outcome was the group's decision to apply to ENOTHE (European Network of Occupational Therapy in Higher Education) to support an on-going research project to develop case exemplars and develop understandings of their conceptual underpinnings. In addition, a Facebook group was established to facilitate communication and dissemination.

The outcomes from Think Tank I and the questionnaires also informed the planning of the second Think Tank as a one-day pre-conference workshop of the 4th OSE Conference in September 2017 in Hildesheim, Germany. The methodology used in Think Tank II and the outcomes generated are detailed below.

Social Transformation through Occupation Think Tank II: Methodology, methods and outcomes

The organization of the Think Tank II was adapted from the Future Search methodology developed by Marvin Weisbord and colleagues (Weisbord & Janoff, 2010). Future Search is an effective participatory approach to achieve organizational change and community action. It enables a large and diverse group of participants to establish common ground and to collaborate together in developing strategic directions for change. Importantly, it also provides a clear message of hope in the human capacity to improve reality, at a time when a sense of hopelessness (Torralba, 2016) is pervasive.

Prior to the meeting, the 82 participants were asked to sign up for one of nine specific themes identified from the outcomes of Think Tank I and the results of the questionnaire. These themes are outlined in table 1

<place Table 1 about here>.

The work in these thematic groups was structured in the following three steps:

1. Move from an exchange among participants regarding the current situation to developing a shared vision (utopia or heterotopia) for the future (using the timeframe of twenty years).
2. Identify the steps necessary for achieving this vision and establish a realistic timeline for them.
3. Clarify the specific actions that the participants will start undertaking to follow the steps.

Participants were thus first encouraged to think boldly and come up with their ideal scenario to be materialized in 20 years. In the next step feasible stages to bring about this scenario through actions in the present day were developed together with a realistic timeline. Finally, participants were expected to identify specific actions they would undertake after the Think Tank.

Following the Future Search methodology, each small group collected the results of the three steps recorded during the discussions on large sheets of paper. In a plenary session, each group presented a shared vision around their specific theme and concrete steps for achieving this.

Workshop outcomes

Table 2 presents the vision statements that were created by the groups. Given the number of participants aligned with each theme, some themes were associated with two groups. Due to overlapping concerns, one group was formed out of participants who had signed up for the poverty theme and those who signed up for the unemployment/underemployment theme. As reflected in the table, groups used different approaches to frame their vision statements, but all reflect a goal or process to be in place by 2037. There is an emphasis on the socio-political situation of

occupation and an aim to centre occupation within the framing of social issues and enactment of practices. The vision statements share an element of working towards broad social recognition of an occupational perspective that is integrated into social policies and systems, and the need for dialogue and collaboration with diverse stakeholders including people and groups experiencing marginalization and oppression. Thus, in addition to moving the various working groups forward, these vision statements identify some shared elements of the evolving idea of 'occupation-based social transformation'.

<place Table 2 about here>

To underpin their statements, each group developed action statements and strategies. In some instances, groups specified an outcome to work towards, such as a conceptual paper addressing the meaning of occupation-based social transformation, review papers on particular social issues and how they have been framed in occupation-based literature or more broadly, and videos, websites and creative means to disseminate knowledge beyond occupational therapy and science. Almost all groups identified action strategies related to building ways to support each other, expanding membership, sharing resources and examples, as well as identifying and reaching out to partners from outside occupational therapy and science. All groups noted the importance of establishing mechanisms, both virtual and in-person, to facilitate continued dialogue and collaboration.

Next Steps and Reflections

Social transformation has been a constant agenda through the last 100-150 years, coinciding with the formation and consolidation of major health professions, including occupational therapy. Today, the combination of factors behind the need for social

transformation continues to be immense, while civic unrest combined with environmental challenges is making this increasingly urgent.

Both Think Tanks brought together occupational therapists and occupational scientists from throughout the world. Some brought many years of experience while others were inspired by their daily practice observations or education experience of the imperative to work towards change. The Think Tanks highlighted a number of areas of occupation-based social transformation that participants are engaged with or see as particularly important, as well as the complexities involved in developing and implementing these ideas.

One area is the emergence at a micro level of a mosaic of local social projects for change through occupation-based social action, civil rights, and grass roots activity. Here, there is a need to relate practical examples to theoretical understandings of the sustainable development and maintenance of projects to support both education and practice whilst maintaining local ownership.

In addition, participants were acutely aware of the need to take social transformation beyond that level to meso (e.g. regional) and macro (e.g. national) structures, while recognising the limited voice that the related disciplines currently have in wider arenas. Participants highlighted their ideal of occupation as a recognised central element of societal change, contributing to the development of powerful collective action and voice aiming at changing the status quo. This includes engagement in social and health policy development as well as building partnerships across sectors, where the nature of occupation in relating to transformative health and social goals may be particularly important.

At the same time transformative educational practices are required. Think Tank participants recognised the need for collaborative education with citizens that

address real needs, supporting Holden's (2010) suggestion that educators work individually or collaboratively on problems of practice using a process of trial and error experimentation, with workplace conditions that support risk-taking and promote ownership of learning.

Responding to these identified areas, the Social Transformation through Occupation network continues to aim to support and facilitate a socially transformative agenda in occupational therapy and science across practice, education and research. It operates in an inclusive way, that is, as an international, inclusive and, potentially, interdisciplinary group. The process and outcomes of Think Tank II will continue to frame the work of the network, that is, by:

- establishing pathways into various topics (including identifying necessary and feasible first and next steps, useful foundations in existing occupational science research etc.)

- promoting connections between occupational therapy/occupational science and interdisciplinary interests and expertise,

- facilitating connections between people internationally,

- facilitating coordinated action on various topics by individuals and groups through the network.

The network will continue to endeavour to provide a space for dialogue, both through virtual groups and workshops at national and international conferences, while working to stimulate further practice and research, and the incorporation of related content in educational programmes. We affirm that we need to learn hope (Bloch, 2007); hope to see possibilities, a transformative praxis.

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Table 1 – Specific Themes Developed from the Outcomes of Think Tank I (2016) and the Questionnaires (2016-17)

Theme	Key questions
Clarifying and defining	Which areas of social transformation are we looking at? What do we mean by occupation-based social transformation? Why might this be necessary? How does it differ from other practices?
Promoting good practice	What does good practice look like? What are key aspects of occupation-based social transformation practices?
Communicating and networking	What partnerships are important to establish and foster? How can we best move forward in building bridges and establishing partnerships? How can we facilitate communication (knowledge exchange) within and beyond the network?
Establishing resources	What key resources are required to develop and enact occupation- based social transformation projects? How can we work to establish these resources?
Enabling students and practitioners	What needs to be within our educational curriculum to support occupation-based social transformation? How can we redesign educational curricula towards social transformation?
Addressing key social issues – Unemployment/under employment	How well are we addressing this social issue via occupation-based social transformation? What would it be like to address this social issue via occupation-based social transformation and what steps can we take to achieve our vision?
Addressing key social issues – Refugees	How well are we addressing this social issue via occupation-based social transformation? What would it be like to address this social issue via occupation-based social transformation and what steps can we take to achieve our vision?
Addressing key social issues – Poverty	How well are we addressing this social issue via occupation-based social transformation? What would it be like to address this social issue via occupation-based social transformation and what steps can we take to achieve our vision?
Addressing key social issues – Ecological sustainability	How well are we addressing this social issue via occupation-based social transformation? What would it be like to address this social issue via occupation-based social transformation and what steps can we take to achieve our vision?

Table 2 – Vision Statements Generated by Thematic Groups

Thematic Group	Vision Statement – By 2037…
Clarifying and defining (Group a)	Occupation-based social transformation views occupation as situated, uses an occupational lens and relational perspective, addresses collective health and engages in transformative processes over time.
Clarifying and defining (Group b)	Occupation-based socially transformative activists will be reflexive key players in opening anti-oppressive spaces that support diverse ways of living.
Promoting good practice & Establishing resources	To work with inter-professional teams to address the occupational needs of individuals/groups/communities experiencing the greatest disparity in occupational participation using emancipatory approaches.
Communicating and networking	To be where the people are in education and practice to communicate knowledge of occupation for positive transformation, and to be a valid, integrated, usual member of health and social structures at all levels.
Enabling students and practitioners (Group a)	As educators we are committed to being social responsive in promoting and maximizing health and well-being for individuals, communities and societies through occupation and the knowledge of occupational science with an open mind and respect for diversity in all approaches, stakeholders, and human rights. Occupational science embedded in the curricula facilitating contributions to policy, development and advocating for social transformation.
Enabling students and practitioners (Group b)	We have a new model of education in which learning is located in the community, and students and lecturers are involved in citizen-driven practice. That means that they experience engagement in social transformation projects, becoming better enabled through occupation in process-oriented education. On graduation, occupational professionals will actively work in society to enable people to flourish to their potential through occupation. They are recognized by the community as specialists in occupation-based social transformation.
Addressing key social issues: Unemployment/ underemployment	Move away from employment towards experience of meaningful occupational life in addressing this issue, and governmental statistical agencies ask about other aspects of meaningful occupation.

Addressing key social issues: Refugees	To co-create more occupationally just, inclusive and sustainable societies, in which all citizens (especially those who have experienced forced/migration) have the right to respectfully engage in meaningful occupations. This will be supported by the provision of opportunities, capabilities and resources. Thus, this contribution of occupational disciplines, reflecting the diversity of society and underpinned by diverse/multiple knowledges, will be realized and acknowledged.
Addressing key social issues: Ecological sustainability	Keeping our occupations in balance with the planet.