Meaningful occupation as a fundamental principle of health and citizenship

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Participatory citizenship is defined as “participation in civil society, community and/or political life, characterised by mutual respect and non-violence and in accordance with human rights and democracy” (Hoskins & Kerr, 2012). It is a negotiated process between citizens, including a right and a responsibility to participate with others in how we live together and shape our shared world. It incorporates a wide range of activities from informal social interaction to political participation.

Farmers in Colombia

In Colombia the 60 year-civil war is a defining piece in the fabric of citizen’s lives. Recently collective efforts have produced the disarmament of some guerrilla and paramilitary groups, as well as the public admission of government involvement in human right violations. However, the healing of a nation touches every life and peace must overcome in a few years what conflict has had decades to shape, namely damage to citizenship and trust. With more than 5.7 million internally displaced people, occupational therapists in Colombia work to enable healing, shape identities and rediscover new paths. Ana conducted a workshop to develop alternative occupations for internally displaced peasants. This was part of a public funded initiative aiming to encourage engagement in entrepreneurial initiatives. Ana called for workshop participants with experience of farming occupations.

Now, with all farmers who had lost the only land they had known to be theirs sitting in the room, their common occupation provided them with a means of connecting and empathising. They realized that regardless of their stories, they could all relate to the loss of an occupation that shaped their identity. That was the common platform upon which they stood to collaborate, imagine, create and move forward. Ana saw that sometimes occupation is all we have in common; and there is room to heal in that common place (Liliana Alvarez Jaramillo, personal communication 2015) (*)

Somali migrants seeking access to UK health services

The Somali community in Sheffield, UK live in some of the most deprived neighbourhoods, with high rates of mortality and morbidity, poor quality of housing, high rates of unemployment, low income and low educational attainment. Somalis have sometimes reported problems with accessing health care, a real-life-occupation for all citizens. Somali people may be reluctant to reveal some health issues, and feel that staff may be prejudiced, not properly explaining procedures, or that professionals do not listen to them or communicate adequately. Non-verbal communication is important in Somali expectations of patient-therapist consultations, and a hospital letter or appointment can easily be lost confidence in the services.

Occupational therapists, may not understand or be aware of this combination of systems may differ from their previous experience. Health professionals such as nurses, and more inclusive societies.

Western health service cultures emphasise individual lifestyle choices; service users may be blamed for conditions such as obesity which may arise when migrants try to manage family cooking in a new context. Service users may also be blamed for not keeping appointments where health structures, messages and appointment systems may differ from their previous experience. Health professionals such as occupational therapists, may not understand or be aware of this combination of factors and assume that people from the Somali community are less co-operative (Mubarak Musa Ismail, 2017) (**)