Occupational Therapy as a Process to Promote Social and Cultural Participation

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Occupational therapy has a historic foundation supporting community and social participation (Schwartz, 2009). The end product of occupational therapy is typically directed towards a person’s ability to participate in life roles. However, occupational therapists often view participation in life roles, and social and community experiences only as an end product and not as a primary therapeutic process. Other scholars have reflected on the place of therapy as process or product (Gray, 1998; Stav, Hallenen, Lane, Arbesman, 2012). This commentary will briefly discuss why social and cultural participation should be a primary therapeutic process in occupational therapy.

Participation is the involvement in life situations within the context in which a person lives (World Health Organization, 2001). Social participation is involvement in a person’s daily activities within meaningful contexts such as the home or community and involving reciprocity with other people (Hyyppa, 2010; Cosbey, Johnston, Dunn, 2010; Pellerin, Rochette, Racine, 2011; Orsmond, Shattuck, Cooper, Sterzing, Anderson, 2013; Richard, Gauvin, Gosselin, LaForest, 2008). Cultural participation is individual or collective involvement in activities that have a shared meaning and understanding among a group, and to interact and experience the artifacts and values of a group (Hyyppa, 2010; Glaveanu, 2011; Rogoff, Moore, Najafi, Dexter, Correa-Chavez, Solis, 2007). Social and cultural

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participation are life contexts and situations. Hence, if occupational therapy is promoting participation in life it is critical occupational therapists know how to embed social and cultural contexts and situations as a therapeutic process. The concepts of social and cultural participation should not be seen as therapy tasks to be done but as agents of change that emerges, strengthens, and self-reinforces through the therapeutic process. Social and cultural participation is a context, process, and outcome of life participation.

For occupational therapists to embed a social and cultural participation in the therapy process there should be a belief that the human experience is essentially social and cultural. Additionally, other reflective thoughts to consider include whether:

1. Humans desire social and cultural connectedness
2. Humans survive as a result of social and cultural connectedness
3. Naturally occurring activities and environments are necessary for optimal social and cultural participation
4. All persons have access to a broad range of social and cultural opportunities
5. Social and cultural participation is a process resulting in adaptive outcomes.

These reflective thoughts help to frame the therapist’s concept of human occupation as a social and cultural process. An argument can be made that all people exist in a social and cultural world and this existence is the framework for human experiences. Social participation is the interactive reciprocity between people and the environment; whereas cultural participation is the process of creating and knowing the meaning of actions, activities, and experiences in both individual and collective ways. Social and cultural participation are distinct from each other but occur concurrently.

A person can live in isolation and be self-sufficient in all aspects of daily activities. However, conceiving human experiences in this manner is not very practical nor does this perspective of humanity lead to the existence of humans since there would be no reproduction of the species. Even the most private, intimate, and personal activities are indirectly influenced by a social existence. For example, going to the toilet in modern society typically involves public water and sewage systems, the development and manufacturing of toilet seats and toilet paper, and a socially normative routine that this activity typically occurs in a