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### **Abstract**

As scholars engaged in processes of knowledge production and knowledge sharing, occupational scientists are afforded a degree of social privilege, authority, and legitimacy and are therefore accountable for the ways in which constructs of occupation are produced. As the concept of ‘occupation’ broadens to encompass a wider range of lived experiences, an opportunity to critically reflect on how discursive choices shape epistemic knowledges is presented. This paper begins with an overview of contemporary, evolving conceptualisations of occupation, followed by discussions about the constructive potential of discourses and considerations for writing and talking about occupation and people who engage in occupation. It is not intended as a summative review; rather, it is a continuation of conversations within occupational science.

### **Keywords**

Occupational science; Non-sanctioned occupation; Dark side of occupation; Othering; Representation; Discursive construction; Reflexivity

### **Introduction**

As scholars engaged in processes of knowledge production and knowledge sharing, occupational scientists are afforded a degree of social privilege, authority, and legitimacy and are therefore accountable for the ways in which constructs of occupation are produced. As the concept of “occupation” broadens to encompass a wider range of lived experiences, this presents an opportunity to critically reflect on how discursive choices shape epistemic knowledges. This paper evolved from a invited themed presentation at the SSO:USA 2019 conference. The conference theme was *The darker side of occupations: Illegal, taboo, risky*. The paper begins with an overview of contemporary, evolving conceptualisations of occupation, followed by discussions about the constructive potential of discourses and considerations for writing and talking about occupation and people who engage in occupation. It is not intended as a summative review; rather, it is a continuation of conversations within occupational science.

### **Shifting conceptualisations of occupation**

Over the past two decades, occupational scientists and occupational therapy scholars have increasingly applied a critical lens to examine disciplinary tenets. I provide a brief historical overview of select scholarship that shifted thinking and set the foundation for emergent themes like *the darker side of occupations: illegal, taboo, risky*. This is followed by an introduction to discursive influences on conceptualisations of occupation.

#### **Spectrums of grey**

“...the single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story...

The consequence of the single story is this: It robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasises how we are different rather than how we are similar.” (Adichie, 2009)

The early 2000s marked a scholarship shift where occupational therapists engaged more in critical reflection on assumptions underpinning the profession. Whalley Hammell’s early work challenged universalism in contemporary models, bringing attention to ableist, class-bound, and culturally specific assumptions (Hammell, 2004; Hammell, 2009a; Hammell, 2009b). In 2011, Kantartzis and Molineux contended that occupation was based on “the way of life and associated ideology of middle-class, white, economically secure Westerners” (p. 73). In a sense, characterisations of occupation as active, purposeful, temporal, and meaningful (ibid.) tell a *single story* of occupation. Similar to Adichie’s (2009) recollection as a child in Nigeria of her exposure to fiction featuring exclusively White characters, conceptualizations of occupation are critiqued as situated in Western ideologies that may not be relevant for the majority world and

can disempower people and collectives with varied values, abilities, and lifestyles (Kantartzis & Molineux, 2011).

Authors in *Enabling Occupation II* comment that "Not all occupations lead to health, well-being and justice or have therapeutic value, even if they hold meaning, organize time, and bring structure to life", and occupations can be risky, unhealthy, illegal, and illicit (Polatajko et al., 2007, p. 22). They drew on Golledge's (1998) mention of "maladaptive occupations" that could be "damaging to self or others" (p. 102). Stadnyk et al. (2010) wrote of unvalued and economically invisible occupations, like prostitution and scavenging for food. In examining activities categorised as addictions or impulse control disorders, Kiepek and Magalhães (2011) contested dominant conceptualisations of occupation focussed only on positive contributions to health, well-being, and justice, asserting that "occupations are neither inherently healthy nor unhealthy but are associated with positive and/or negative consequences" (p. 254). Twinley (2013) later introduced to occupation the term 'dark side', proposing occupation "has aspects which are less acknowledged, less explored and less understood... that have been left in the shadows" (p. 302). Twinley noted some occupations may be anti-social, criminal, deviant, violent, disruptive, harmful, unproductive, non-health-giving, non-health-promoting, addictive, and/or politically, socially, religiously or culturally extreme, while also being "meaningful, purposeful, creative, engaging, relaxing, enjoyable, entertaining, that can provide a sense of wellbeing" (p. 302).

Kiepek, Phelan and Magalhães (2014) examined the single story of occupation through the 'figured world' discourse analysis tool. The authors suggested occupation has been approached in scholarship with "tendencies to identify occupations as 'positive' and to focus on the relationship of occupational engagement to enhanced health and well-being" (p. 1). Counter

to dominant framings of occupation, the authors contended occupations are “complexly related to health, well-being and social justice and the implications of those relationships are subjective, contextually situated, and defy efforts to categorise occupations as ‘good’ or ‘bad,’ ‘healthy’ or ‘unhealthy.’” (p. 10).

The term ‘non-sanctioned occupation’ was introduced to “encompass occupations that, within *historically and culturally bound contexts*, tend to be viewed as unhealthy, illegal, immoral, abnormal, undesired, unacceptable, and/or inappropriate” [italics added] (Kiepek et al., 2019, p. 2), and was set against the preceding term, ‘unsanctioned,’ introduced by Spitzer (2003). The subtle terminological shift was purposeful: in English, ‘un-’ has a meaning of ‘not’ or an opposite, whereas ‘non-’ is a more general negation or an absence. The term ‘non-sanctioned’ was suggested to provide an “important contrast to what we perceive to predominate in occupational science: namely the examination of occupations that are largely socially ‘sanctioned’ from a Western perspective” (ibid, p. 2). In positioning an occupation as *either* sanctioned or non-sanctioned, the authors acknowledge a potentially problematic dualism that “likely fails to reflect the complexity of processes that shape social ideals, and that such a categorization is dynamic across time, social groups, and contexts” (ibid, p. 2). The authors advised, “it is thus vital to examined [sic] how an occupation has been socially constructed, in a specific place and time, how those constructions shape and are shaped by broader social values, power relations, and discourses” (p. 10).

This framing of non-sanctioned occupations, intended to shift analysis toward *societal factors* that *frame* certain occupations performed by certain people in certain contexts as more or less desirable or acceptable, builds on Laliberte Rudman’s (2013) critique that occupational science literature maintains a focus on the individual, which “individualiz[es] the social” (p.

298). Her work draws attention to complex contextual factors that shape “ways and types of doing that come to be viewed as ideal and possible within a socio-historical context, and that come to be promoted and made available within environments” (Laliberte Rudman, 2006, p. 188). Engagement in occupation is presented as situated in and influenced by context rather than solely individual ‘choice.’

This summary does not reflect all of the work furthering the discipline in the last twenty years. It provides a snapshot of certain discussions occurring in the literature when the terms ‘dark side’ and ‘non-sanctioned’ were introduced. While these terms may legitimize a broader range of occupations being conceptualized *as* occupations, they are not unproblematic and will be revisited.

#### **Constructing occupation through discourse**

What is an occupation? This is an open question (or an open construct) debated extensively in articles, conferences, classrooms, health institutions, and conversations. As such, occupation is a discursive construct; it does not exist in the world outside *words*. This aligns with the Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists’ (2008) definition of occupation as “groups of activities and tasks of everyday life, named, organized, and given value and meaning by individuals and their culture” (p. 24).

As occupational scientists explore a broader range of occupations, it is important to attend to processes through which “knowledge generation, in occupational therapy [and science] is a complex social process, and therefore carries (often hidden) responsibilities for those who are part of our epistemic community” (Kinsella & Whiteford, 2008, p. 249). Among researchers, particularly those engaging with social constructionist and postmodern epistemologies, it is acknowledged that, while frequently invisible, decisions about how research is designed,

conducted, and shared can reify particular dominant worldviews and inadvertently harm individuals who experience marginalized status (Kincheloe & Tobin, 2009). Within these paradigms, many theorists understand discourse to be both *constructed* and *constructive*, such that “people’s expressions of their ideas through dialogue constantly (re)produce discourse (i.e., system of ideas, attitudes, beliefs and practices), which in turn construct reality” (Farias et al., 2019, p. 238). In this way, critical discourse scholars suggest discourse is not an “invisible glass” (Sherzer, 1987, p. 305), but a “medium” through which knowledge is “produced, conceived, transmitted, and acquired” (ibid.). Fairclough (2003) maintains “Discourses not only represent the world as it is (or rather is seen to be), they are also projective, imaginaries, representing possible worlds which are different from the actual world, and tied in to projects to change the world in particular directions” (p. 124).

Inherent in the articulation of social life is an element of *power* (Holstein, 2018). Holstein (2018) advocates for reflection on “the ways in which narratives are produced and conveyed and for particular circumstances and audiences” (p. 403). Chase (2018) develops this idea by inviting questions about “the circumstances under which certain stories get told (or don’t get told) in everyday life, what narrators (whether people or organizations) are doing in relation to various audiences as they tell their stories, and the social consequences of their storytelling” (p. 553).

Critical discourse scholarship has tended to offer a *retrospective* analysis of existing discourse, focusing on analysis of text, talk, images, gestures, and semiotics in existing discourse to examine not just what is being *said*, but what is *achieved*. I aim to navigate a discussion about social responsibilities associated with critically applying awareness of discursive constructiveness *prospectively*. In other words, if we imagine that “discourse structures, enact, confirm, legitimate, reproduce, or challenge relations of *power* and *dominance* in society” (van

Dijk, 2008), how are occupational scientists positioned within these discursive structures? What are the implications for ethical discursive constructions of occupations, people who engage in occupations, places where occupations occur, and so on?

### **Discursive construction and choices**

*All I need is a sheet of paper; and something to write with, and then; I can turn the world upside down.* (Nietzsche, F., n.d., as cited by Kirov, 2016)

Given the early 20<sup>th</sup> century's influences from constructionist paradigms and the linguistic turn regarding knowledge as discursively constructed and morally and socially situated, there is surprisingly little written to guide researchers about prospective discursive choices when 'sharing' knowledge (orally and textually). While social science researchers and theorists acknowledge responsibilities associated with subjectivity, research design, meaning, and (re)presentation of research 'subjects,' critical discourse researchers largely analyze the function of text, talk, and semiotics retrospectively. The constructive nature of writing and talking is more explicitly grappled with in communication studies (e.g., journalism, fiction, biography, translation), gender studies, critical race studies, and critical disability studies; I bring together ideas from these fields to inform a prospective approach to writing and talking, attending to discursive choices that may influence occupational science scholarship.

Discourses are multiple, fluid, and changing. Even "dominant discourse" is "not a single process, nor is it a monolithic, static, or unitary; rather, it represents a plurality of discourses that constitutes the field of possible meanings" (Henry & Tator, 2002, p. 26). Discourses are sites for struggle and contestation (Lazar, 2005) with implications for the "production, reproduction, and transformation of ideologies" (Henry & Tator, 2002, p. 8). This is a reason that *choice* "is the heart and soul of communicating with language" (Gee, 2018), though many choices are not

consciously deliberated (Fairclough, 2003). In this section, choices pertaining to lexical semantics and representation of others are introduced.

### **Lexical semantics**

Lexical semantics refers to the meaning of words, sub-units of words (e.g., the difference between “un-“ and “non-“ described earlier), and phrases. Deliberation at the level of words is not unfamiliar to occupational scientists. Rudman and Molke (2009) examine how discourses “contribute to the shaping of what come to be seen by aging individuals and collectives as ideal, possible and non-ideal occupations for later life and influence the social structures and conditions in which aging individuals can make choices and enact occupations” (p. 386). While these authors *overtly analyse* discourse in other texts, they *covertly construct* knowledge and shape understandings; for example, whereas data collection uncovered terms such as “older workers,” “retirees,” or “Boomers,” Rudman and Molke (2009) used phrases such as “aging individuals” and “later life workers” to frame the topic. Word selection is a matter of description as well as a political and moral decision that shapes perspectives about people and the things they do (or do not do). Horner and Lu (1999) note that such linguistic decisions have “profound epistemological consequences” (p. 499). Through the choices we make, consciously and unconsciously, Lather (1991) notes “we do not so much *describe* as *inscribe* in discourse” (p. 90).

Personal and social factors influence these decisions and “we must not overlook the crucial fact that any projected definition of [a] situation also has distinctive moral character” (Goffman, 1959, p. 13), as certain attributes are considered more or less socially desirable within different contexts (Goffman, 1963). For instance, occupational scientists have harnessed the power of words when reconstituting concepts such as ‘social justice’ to ‘occupational justice’

and ‘human rights’ to ‘occupational rights.’ This appropriation of terms with certain social connotations is a discursive choice that simultaneously conveys *alliance* with certain values and *distance* to indicate unique contributions. Similarly, when an occupation or aspect of occupation is labelled ‘non-sanctioned’ or ‘dark,’ we have cast the occupation as being somehow unhealthy, immoral, illegal, to have an undesirable outcome, or on the fringe of dominant social norms – in other words, something that does not conform with values underlying the concept of a general ‘occupation.’

When drawing on the word ‘dark’ as a metaphor, occupational scientists further contend with centuries of imbued meaning. In *Metaphor and Style*, Osborn (2018) concludes the “light-dark images serve generally as value judgments upon the actions and conditions of men” (p. 69). The metaphor of light is associated with day, good, innocence, chastity, purity, truth, happiness, and virtue; dark is associated with night, evil, malevolence, impurity, ignorance, despair, and sin. Osborn (2018) explains, “such metaphors express intense value judgements and may thus be expected to elicit significant value judgments from an audience” (p. 63). With respect to the light/dark metaphor, Decter (1994) explains, “the challenge of writing is to convey what you mean, and avoid conveying what you do not mean” (p. 118). As such, when scholars in occupational science refer to an occupation or aspect of an occupation as dark, a dualist connotation of undesirability is implied and the writer may need to explicitly clarify if this is not the intended meaning.

Richardson and St. Pierre (2018) note, “No textual staging is ever innocent” (p. 81), because “Language is a constitutive force, creating a particular view of reality and of the Self. Producing ‘things’ always involves value – what to produce, what to name the productions, and what the relationship between the producers and the named things will be” (ibid.). Minh-Ha

(1989) call for “a conception of writing that can no longer naïvely be reduced to a *means* of expressing a reality or emitting a message” (p. 21). In occupational science, we construct conceptualisations of occupation and of people who engage in occupations, social and contextual factors, meaning, health, illness, family, community, impairment, (dis)ability, function, justice, empowerment, equity, and so on. One’s writing and talk about these concepts is influenced by context, social beliefs, and social knowledge. Kincheloe and McLaren (1994) note that “Facts can never be isolated from the domain of values or removed from ideological inscription” (pp. 139-140); however, researchers can take steps to acknowledge, articulate, and mitigate these influences. Self-reflexivity can bring “to consciousness some of the complex political/ideological agendas hidden in our writing” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2018, p. 823), and will be discussed later in the paper.

Bringing critical awareness to the constitutive potential of discourse does not imply research or writing should strive to be value- or judgement-free; neither am I suggesting we could or should reframe all occupations as acceptable. Some aspects of behaviour may not be considered conducive to civil society, though contextualisation is relevant to such claims. Accordingly, it may be prudent to avoid terms like ‘non-sanctioned’ or ‘dark’ in a rhetorical capacity. Instead, a rationale for according the occupation a subjugated status pertaining to particular norms, values, or laws should be explicitly articulated and substantiated through peer-reviewed literature, grey literature, policy, ethical theory, and/or legislation. As a discipline situated on ideologies of moral ethics and justice, occupational therapists and scientists need to recognize how we are reifying and/or contesting dominant positioning.

### **Representation of others**

*The real, nothing else than a code of representation, does not (cannot) coincide with the lived or the performed.* (Minh-ha, 1989, p. 94)

Occupational scientists attend to elements of differences in lived experience – be those age, gender, ideology, ability, attribute, or a myriad of other factors that distinguish one person from another. This work frequently involves representation of individuals and groups distinct from one's own. How one writes and talks about “difference” (among individuals, collectives (e.g., clients, research subjects), and communities) is a discursive process that structures the world and produces stable meanings (Maclure, 2013). I discuss representation considerations pertaining to a range of occupations, including recontextualization, othering, and exoticising.

### ***Recontextualisation***

Constructivist researchers determine how to work with data involving interviewees/informants/participants' personal accounts. When sharing 'findings,' researchers select and (re)frame participants' discourse. Karnieli-Miller et al. (2009) observe “the story shared with the interviewer is ‘separated’ from the participant, and the researcher becomes the ‘storyteller’ who recasts the story into a ‘new’ historical, political, and cultural context” (p. 283). The researcher is positioned as the “big interpreter,” retaining “an exclusive privilege to interpret and report what the interviewee really meant” (Brinkman, 2018, p. 589), “discover[ing] that which others (including the participants) have not seen or understood” (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2009, p. 281). In discourse analysis, this might be referred to as recontextualization, whereby a piece of discourse is removed from a context (decontextualised) and reframed by another. Decontextualisation and recontextualization are inherent discursive features effective for critical inquiry; however, it is nevertheless advisable to recognize researchers' power differentials

through social processes, legitimacy, and authority to offer “accurate” interpretations of other people’s experiences.

Severns (2004) cautions that silencing can arise from recontextualization: “Silence is fostered by the assumption of dialogue when, in fact, the voice of the other has been appropriated into a monologue that reproduces itself and thereby maintains the version of truth by which it was created. Not only is the serviceable other silenced, but this silence itself becomes invisible” (p. 150). As such, Lather (1991) challenges, “how we speak and write tells us more about our own inscribed selves, about the way that language writes us, then about the ‘object’ of our gaze” (p. 199). Regardless of attempts at neutrality, researchers’ ‘selves’ are reflected in their writing and talking.

### ***Othering***

‘Othering’ is a discursive process whereby a ‘normal’ is established and the ‘other’ is compared in relation to a norm. Staszak (2009) explains, “the creation of otherness (also called *othering*) consists of applying a principle that allows individuals to be classified into two hierarchical groups: us and them. The out-group is only coherent as a group as a result of its opposition to the in-group and its lack of identity. This lack is based upon stereotypes that are largely stigmatizing and obviously simplistic. The in-group constructs one or more others, setting itself apart and giving itself an identity. Otherness and identity are two inseparable sides of the same coin. The other only exists relative to the Self, and vice versa” (p. 43). Phelan (2011) points to the representation of disability in occupational science: “allowing the non-disabled world to decide how disability is represented and who can be identified as ‘disabled’ creates unequal power relations and excludes the voices of people with disabilities, which in turn may negatively affect their lives socially, economically, and psychologically” (p. 167).

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Othering can occur in oral and written communication (i.e., “discursive othering”), and requires vigilance in language and words in research and teaching. The most overt linguistic markers of alliance and distance between self and other are inclusive and exclusive pronouns and possessives, such as we and they, us and them, these and those, and ours and theirs (e.g., “we interpret,” “they experience”). However, advanced writers may integrate more covert and persuasive strategies of othering: for instance, use of person-first language (e.g., children diagnosed with ...) might reduce instances of inclusive and exclusive pronouns, but does not eliminate othering. Often, classifications according to “difference” are influenced by notions of “better” or “worse” and moral judgement (Gee, 2018; Peräkylä & Ruusuvuori, 2018).

Othering is viewed as “a manifestation of power relations in which the other is disempowered through the process of being defined as the other and not as included in the large ‘we’ of society, as ordinary members of society” (Nilsen et al., 2017, p. 47). However, Pandey (2004) contends othering need not always be inherently problematic; the issue is “what the writer chooses to do with it” (p. 165). She notes that advanced writers may effectively use discursive othering to challenge conventional us-them representations or present nuanced perspectives (ibid). As such, using terms indicative of othering presents an opportunity for reflexivity and deeper considerations of how power, status, and social values are being constituted and whether disempowerment or disenfranchisement is being (re)produced.

Othering may also occur through knowledge sharing that involves images, the study of which is referred to as semiotics. Archetypal images selected for use in lectures and textbooks can reify or challenge dominant representations. Take, for instance, occupations pertaining to soldiering: do these images include children? Women? People involved in guerilla soldiering?

Our selection of images matter – selecting an image as *representative* of an occupation or group conveys assumptions and may exclude people, experiences, and meanings.

### ***Exoticising***

Activities typically viewed as illegal, taboo, or risky possess the potential to sensationalise or exoticise the topic or people engaged in the activity. Exoticising is a particular form of othering, whereby the ‘exotic’ is discursively constructed as different from a dominant, externally positioned group of relatively higher social power (Staszak, 2009). Western societies have a long history of exotica, dating back to the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (ibid). Public exhibition of the “exotic” is evidenced through “human zoos,” when people from African homes were brought to Western communities and displayed “to prove to Western visitors that Africans were savages to be civilized by the Empire” (Konkobo, 2010). One might argue that contemporary media, through reality television and some children’s movies (Hargraves, 2015; Jones & Weber, 2015; Litwack, 2015; Silverman, 2002; Warner, 2015), enact exoticism and voyeurism. Staszak explains, “Exoticism is less the pleasure of confronting otherness than the pleasure of having the satisfaction of experiencing the sight of a reassuring vision of this confrontation, true to our fantasies, that comforts us in our identity and superiority” (p.6).

Scholarly writing, including journal articles, does not provide neutral grounds for representations of “reality.” Voyeurism arises from feelings of curiosity and strong emotions, which can be elicited through rich descriptions gathered during qualitative research (Ensign, 2003). Occupational scientists, like other scholars, constantly balance *evocative* representations with the potential to sensationalise people and occupations. Occupations viewed as somehow deviant tend to elicit both curiosity and emotions, situating ethical scholarship distinct from socially sanctioned occupations. This is not to say that difference should be rendered invisible in

our representations of others. Rather, scholars can articulate their standpoints, acknowledge interpretive tentativeness and partiality, and conscientiously reflect on the ways that discursive choices convey and shape social knowledge.

### **Discursive choice**

Occupational scientists, through their relative authority and legitimacy, shoulder a heavy responsibility for representing individuals and collectives who may be in vulnerable, stigmatised, or marginalised positions. Returning to the notion of choice and the constitutive potential of discourse, Jolley (1999) said “To most writers judgment is perhaps the hardest part. Perhaps the writer can be looked upon as a sort of sieve through which particles of one culture pass to be part of another culture” (p. 97). As writers, researchers hold social responsibility. Minh-ha (1989) purports “to write is to communicate, express, witness, impose, instruct, redeem, or save – at any rate to *mean* and to send out *an ambiguous message*” (p. 16). It is therefore important for occupational scientists to consider not only what overt content is being shared, but the covert discursive functions embedded in their writing and speech and the realities thus created. We do not write without a purpose – we write with intent, such as to ‘instil’ knowledge, to evoke, to provoke, to inspire, to invite dialogue, to dispute, and to effect change. Occupational scientists can be said to be enmeshed in historical and collective processes that include interactions between individual scholars and knowledge communities. In the next section, influences of knowledge communities are introduced.

### **Knowledge communities and practices of knowledge creation**

Van Dijk (2014) distinguishes between social beliefs, which can be personal or shared by ideological groups, and social knowledge, which is “shared, accepted and used in a community as a whole” (p. 39). Occupational science is one such community. What constitutes knowledge is

“correct belief *justified* or *warranted* by socially accepted *criteria* of (knowledge) *communities*” (ibid, p. 43). In other words, “knowledge is belief that members call and presuppose as knowledge” (van Dijk, 2012, p. 479). Knowledge communities, including universities, government, media, and courts, are influential in legitimizing what constitutes “official knowledge” (van Dijk, 2014). Discourse epistemics is encouraged as a means of explaining “how knowledge is acquired and reproduced - and then presupposed - by community members and their social practices” through situated discourse and reflects the values, assumptions, norms, values, and morals that influence how occupational scientists discursively represent occupation and others (van Dijk, 2012, p. 281).

Kinsella & Whiteford’s (2009) claim that “disciplinary knowledge is neither a simple nor a neutral process, rather, it is both complex and contextually bound” (p. 249) is consistent with discourse epistemics, where knowledge is viewed as a moral issue (van Dijk, 2014). Research production occurs within knowledge systems comprising “agents, practices and institutions that organize the production, transfer and use of knowledge” (Cornell et al., 2013). Relationships within these systems are considered to shape legitimacy, credibility, and power, impacting forms of knowledge creation. Occupational scientists form a distinct knowledge-producing community, with members situated largely within universities and holding various degrees of commitment to inform occupational therapy practices. It is not my intent to analyse these influences, rather, to echo others’ calls for epistemic reflexivity (e.g., Hammell, 2009a; Kantartzis & Molineux, 2011; Kinsella & Whiteford, 2008).

A commitment to deepening awareness of discursive constructionism can serve efforts to “understand, expose and ultimately resist social inequalities” (van Dijk, 2008, p. 85). This aligns with occupational scientists’ remarks that “if we overlook complex social and structural

dynamics and accept that they are ‘just the way of the world’, we become complicit, albeit unintentionally, in maintaining the status quo and reproducing the social injustices and occupational inequities that we aim to ameliorate” (Gerlach et al., 2018, p. 39). Two potential mitigation approaches are described here: one includes broadening and deepening analysis of occupation as socially, politically, historically, and economically situated; the other permits practice of genuine dialogue and open engagement with others.

### **Situated conceptualisations**

As researchers increasingly attend to a broader range of occupations, questions of purpose and intention arise. Is research intended to understand more deeply multiple perspectives? Or to inform intervention? Drawing on discursive constructionism can permit societal analysis to inform understandings about social constructions of occupation as situated in time and place, considering factors such as personhood, citizenship, political factors, historical factors, social norms, values, ideology, intersectionality, gender norms, doctrine, moral influences, and/or racial (in)equities, among other factors. This can support deliberation on *whether* intervention is warranted, and if so, at what level (e.g., individual or societal)?

To exemplify this, I draw on an historically situated and socially acceptable occupation (as it is sometimes easier to critically reflect on values and morality outside one’s current lived experience) – playing or attending a jazz show in the United States of America. In 1938, authorities enforced a national crusade against jazz musicians (and use of marijuana). Police raids occurred in swing clubs, discursively constructed as places where “‘jazz-struck’ girls were hanging out with ‘reefer smoking’ musicians” (“Jam Spot Raided,” 1940, as cited in Lopes, 2005). Jazz and swing musicians were framed by authorities as posing threats to the social order (Lopes, 2005) and jazz was considered by many as taboo, criticized for breaking rules musically

and socially. Enforcement focussed on Black musicians and Black clubs (Lopes, 2005). Harry Anslinger, founding commissioner of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics in the United States, initiated an anti-drugs crusade in the 1930s. His decisions are now criticized as being motivated in part by racism. During testimony about the Marijuana Prohibition Act to the U.S. Congress in 1937, he claimed, “There are 100,000 total marijuana smokers in the US and most are Negroes, Hispanics, Filipinos and entertainers. Their Satanic music, jazz, swing, result from usage. This marijuana causes White women to seek sexual relations with Negroes, entertainers and any others” (Daniels et al., 2018).

The 1930s was a time of high unemployment (Mathy, 2018) as well as significant social and political transformation. Women were fighting for equality in the workplace (Triece, 2007) and entering social venues previously inaccessible to them (Murphy, 1994). Racial segregation was an increasingly challenged political and social norm (Mahoney, 1995). Prohibition prevented alcohol sales, which was protested by many (Lerner, 2008), and cannabis was framed as a social evil. Playing jazz and congregating at jazz venues could be viewed, for some, as resistive occupations where rules of music, sex norms, and racial segregation were actively and intentionally challenged.

Retrospectively, it may seem irrational to see a role for occupational therapists in relation to jazz, alcohol, or cannabis as occupations; however, dominant conceptualisations of certain problematic or unacceptable activities are highly persuasive and often governed in law. In what ways are occupational therapists today complicit in conforming to social constructions of certain occupations as problematic or unacceptable? Are there other interpretations? Sex work may act as an occupation assumed to be detrimental. Sex work tends to be studied in relation to vulnerable populations and undesired consequences, such as powerlessness, trauma, street work,

mental health, parenting, health risks, and substance use, which may contribute to problematizing discourses. However, only 5-20 percent of prostitution is estimated to occur as street work (Van Der Meulen, 2012), which may foster a partial and incomplete understanding of this occupation. Other studies reveal sex work (e.g., prostitution, escort services, brothels, hotels, massage parlors, strip clubs, or by phone or Internet) allows a person to earn more income for fewer hours of work and people are often able to set their own hours (Van Der Meulen, 2012), which can be beneficial to financially struggling and busy students and parents (Duff et al., 2017; Sinacore et al., 2015). Advantages to sex work reported by students include enjoyment, more time to study, the development of friendships and support networks, feelings of empowerment, personal reward, a sense of providing healing and companionship to another, and a sense of independence (Sinacore et al., 2015). Applying a critical, societal level of analysis to occupations affords their understandings as socially situated constructs, and re-envision implications for responses. With respect to sex work, societal analysis may examine factors (e.g., socioeconomic status, gender, racism) that influence involvement in forms of sex work.

Farias et al. (2019) call for increased commitment to the “responsibility of occupational therapy to address socio-political conditions that perpetuate occupational injustices” (p. 235), attending to transformative practices, transformative scholarship, and expanding beyond predominant ways of thinking. This can inform how we come to understand occupations, people who engage in occupations, and the contexts in which occupation are engaged. It also situates occupational science *within*, not outside, structures of power with the authority to name aspects of the world and actively construct social knowledges. Aligned with the preceding discussion, representations of occupation that fail to articulate the situatedness of interpretations (i.e.,

political, historical, cultural, racial, gendered, ability) may be incomplete or impartial at best and discriminatory, silencing, or colonising at worst.

### **Dialogical understandings**

To support critical awareness of the situatedness of lived experiences, it can be valuable to integrate dialogical understandings, a concept introduced by Bakhtin. A dialogical approach is one that “struggles to bring together different voices, worldviews, value systems, and beliefs so that they can have a conversation with each other” (Conquergood, 2013, as cited by Chase, 2018, p. 548). It is posited “nothing in human consciousness or discourse (and they are often the same thing in human experience) occurs in isolation” (Bowers & Moore, 1997, pp. 71-72); that is, it may not always be necessary or desirable in research to present a single, cohesive interpretation of peoples’ storied experiences. It is important to attend to and recognise that people hold multiple, even contradictory, beliefs. Sullivan (2007) explains, “we are constantly engaged in a multiplicity of sometimes competing and sometimes collaborating dialogues between voices both inside and outside the self” (p. 108).

By centralising interpretation to members of a knowledge community, the richness of possible meanings may be unintentionally overlooked. Chase (2018) encourages an “attitude of humility” where the “the skill of listening to another’s story involves acknowledging the limits of one’s ability to imagine the other’s experience” (p. 557). Wyatt et al. (2018) discuss a process of collaborative writing featuring listening: “it involved listening without judgment, giving up on moralism, giving up on the ego that seeks to defend and criticize and judge. It involved willing vulnerability to the other, an openness to the breakdown of what one knows already, an openness to the knowledge that undoes the already known, an openness to the abjected other that lives at one’s borders.” (p. 750-751).

This openness to understanding others and to “give up on one’s ego” can then influence our representation(s) of others. When we share information about occupation, we are not obligated to represent *all* forms or constructions. Yet, our work often has influence across cultures and internationally, echoed in the research criterion of generalizability. It might be warranted, then, to acknowledge explicitly the conceptual boundaries of any given occupation and the potential for diversity of experiences and meanings across culture, gender, age, ability, socio-economic status, ethnicity, etc., recognizing in doing so that generalizability is not irrefutably desirable or feasible. We have a social responsibility to recognise how our ideas and ways of framing ideas can constitute “ingroups” and “outgroups,” and the ways in which our decisions about populations, questions, and occupations for exploration can contribute to the construction of the other and the potential for marginalisation and stigmatisation.

Increasing the involvement of people with lived experience in research projects’ design and curricula may broaden one’s scope of understanding, challenge personal assumptions, and confront dominant discourses. This requires processes to involve individuals and groups in decision-making, design, and implementation, while avoiding tokenistic representation. Additionally, there is a need to be aware that all citizens’ lives are embedded in dominant discourses. Authoritative discourses and interpretations of lived experiences tend to be associated with status and legitimacy, so that people often learn to understand their *own* experiences through the lens of ‘experts.’ Eleanor Longden’s TedTalk entitled “The voices in my head” explains how she contests assumptions that hearing voices is inherently problematic and challenges the value of masking these voices through use of pharmaceuticals. Her insights followed several years of involvement in the mental health system, where she was taught to fear the voices. Clients whose experiences put them in contact with health care systems and,

potentially, legal systems, are expected to adopt ‘proper’ or ‘accurate’ ways of understanding their actions and change their own interpretations. When collaborating, it may be helpful to see critical reflexivity as a process of development among all team members, including those with lived experience.

### **Discussion**

Occupational science literature is replete with concepts that afford opportunities to examine lived experiences. Perhaps understanding concepts and conceptualisations as unfinished and tentative will expand opportunities for discussions beyond what the concept *is* to what the concept *does*. What are the underlying morals and values? How is the concept influenced by social, historical, political, and cultural (and other) standpoints? Who benefits from certain conceptualisations? Who is harmed or excluded? What is the influence of institutional, political, economic, social, and cultural structures on *the researcher*, how research is produced and shared, and what constitutes rigour? As an international community of researchers, teachers, and students, “the knowledge that we produce and embrace is an important collective responsibility” (Kinsella & Whiteford, 2008, p. 251). When undertaking critical scholarship to expand and extend understandings of occupation inside these systems and outside dominant conceptualisations, researchers are pressed to ask new questions in new ways.

Calls for critical reflexivity are well situated in occupational science. Reflexivity is recognised to shift beyond the individual “and begins to turn one’s reflexive gaze on the social conditions under which knowledge is produced within the discipline” (Phelan, 2011). Greene (1995) asserts the intention of reflexive work is in “search of a social vision of a more humane, more fully pluralist, more just and more joyful community” (p. 61).

Thomas (2010) and Lather (1991) guide their critical reflexivity through reflection on questions, such as:

- What type(s) of theory inform my work?
- What is my standpoint (including social and economic status)?
- What epistemological approaches guide my understandings and interpretations of others?
- What is my ethical and moral stance?
- What methodological approaches are appropriate?
- In what ways have I “policed the boundaries of what can be imagined”? (Lather, 1991, p. 84)
- In what ways have my choices shaped, subverted, complicated?
- What are the limits of my own conceptualizations?
- Who are the “others” in my work?
- In what ways does my work extend beyond critique?
- How are pluralized and diverse spaces produced?
- Are there opportunities for the emergence of subjugated knowledges and resistance?

When engaging in critically reflexive work that takes into consideration our positions of power in the discursive construction of knowledge, there are many ways to remain vigilant. Surround yourself with people who challenge you and point out your blind spots in thinking and writing. It can help to draw on others to bring attention to the discursively constructive nature of our critical work and critical writing and help remain true to intended meanings. Familiarise yourself with opinions that differ from your own. These actions can keep you accountable, increase the likelihood you considered the broader picture and alternative perspectives, and

encourage continued commitment to inclusive, critical, credible, ethical, and compassionate approaches. At the same time, awareness of counter-positions can help you develop more persuasive arguments. Finally, occupational scientists are one of many disciplines critically examining occupation (though others may call it something different). It can be advantageous to develop broader awareness of multiple perspectives to inform our disciplinary knowledge(s).

Occupational scientists often grapple with institutional and political constraints, and need to reflect on factors that place boundaries around research processes and discursive practices. Talk and text is influenced, and sometimes constrained, by social conventions and institutional practices considered acceptable and appropriate (e.g., peer-reviewed articles, teaching) (Gee, 2018). Within academic contexts, engaging in critical work that does not conform to dominant models, theories, social norms, epistemologies, and/or methodologies can impact one's "productivity" (e.g., funding, publications). Krog (2018) confronted the rigidity of what constitutes knowledge in academic institutions, which is dominated by English language, Western theorists, and what constitutes data: "quality 'on-the-ground experience' was being crushed into dispirited nothingness through weak English and the specific format of academic papers. We learned how easily an important story died within the corset of an academic paper, how a crucial observation was nothing without a theory, and how a valuable experience dissolved outside a discipline" (p. 488).

Furthermore, funding justifications tend to be perceived as stronger when framed as a response to an imminent social problem, or, ideally, a "crisis" (Kiepek et al., 2019). Many peer-reviewed journals in health fields favour problem-focused framing of phenomenon, pathologisation, and development of therapeutic approaches. Accordingly, researchers constantly balance framing the importance of examining occupations in ways that are persuasive, but not

misrepresentative. It should also be noted that in some countries and settings, critical work can pose risk to personal and/or safety and professional security, so it is important to support one another across our varied lived realities.

In conclusion, occupational scientists are not innocent observers of the world – we are social actors. The ways in which we write and talk about occupations, people who engage in occupation, and the contexts in which occupations are engaged is a social discursive process. We are complicit in shaping the world around us, influencing future therapists and scholars, and are well advised to continue to support one other and reflect on the values and moral positionings that influence the knowledge(s) we produce.

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