Definition of Occupation as the Core Concept of Occupational Therapy

In 1979, the Representative Assembly of the American Occupational Therapy Association adopted Resolution 53,279, with resulting Policy 1.12, "Occupation as the Common Core of Occupational Therapy." The purpose of this paper is to clarify the use of the term occupation.

Occupation is defined as the active or "doing" process of a person engaged in goal-directed, intrinsically gratifying, and culturally appropriate activity. The founders and early pioneers in occupational therapy conceptualized occupation as an essential part of human nature that is manifested by active participation in self-maintenance, work, leisure, play, and rest (Meyer, 1977). Engaging in occupation facilitates skills in these areas. Adopting occupation as the core concept of occupational therapy is a confirmation and commitment to the original mission and purpose of the profession.

Setting forth some basic propositions about the meaning of occupation clarifies this concept and provides a framework for further exploration and testing. Central to the formulation of statements about occupation are the concepts of hierarchy, developmental sequence, biopsychosocial unity, and adaptive capacities.

Concepts Underlying Occupation

**Hierarchy.** The term suggests that there are levels of occupation. Each level is prerequisite to the higher and more complex levels. At the same time, each level is integrated, coordinated, and controlled by higher levels. A disturbance at any level will cause a disturbance in levels above it (Feibleman, 1954).

The human organism is designed to process input from the environment and to act at all functional levels, from discrete body systems to human interaction with the external world. All levels of these actions are purposeful, that is, they serve some functional purpose ranging from basic physiological survival to a sense of belonging and human self-actualization. Involvement in occupation can have an organizing effect on the nervous system and facilitate integration of function (Kleinman & Bulkley, 1982). The focus on the object or outcome facilitates the input to and output from the subcortical centers, where input and output are processed most efficiently and adaptively. Integration at subcortical or lower levels supports organization at higher levels (King, 1978).

**Developmental sequence.** The ontogenetic and phylogenetic nature of systems, behavior, skill, and role maturation and acquisition are reflected in descriptions of developmental sequences (Mosey, 1970). Because the human organism is always in a dynamic state of development and change, occupation serves as the mechanism for growth, adaptation, and learning and for effective interactions with the internal and external environments. Occupation is the primary agent for learning and development and an essential source of satisfaction (Hightower-Vandamm, 1981). Skills and capacities emerge from lifelong experiences that provide structure and challenge for further exploration, adaptation, and mastery. The purposeful activity involved in occupation must match the individual's sensorimotor, cognitive, psychological, and social maturation along with his or her developmental needs and skill readiness (Fidler & Fidler, 1978).

**Biopsychosocial unity.** The concept of biopsychosocial unity describes the wholeness of mind and body and acknowledges the interactive influence of the sociocultural milieu and intrinsic motivation on function. Humans, as social beings, have the intrinsic capacity and need to explore and master their environment in ways that satisfy not only internal...
needs, but also the requirements of their society (Kielhofner & Burke, 1980). When a person engages in activities, he or she (a) explores the nature of his or her interests, needs, capacities, and limitations; (b) develops or refines motor, perceptual, and cognitive skills; and (c) learns a variety of interpersonal and social attitudes and behaviors that are sufficient for coping with life tasks and assuming appropriate roles that aid in mastering elements of the environment.

Adaptive capacities. The capacity to respond adaptively, with a wide range of behaviors, to changes in the internal and external environments is evidence of the ability of the human organism to learn and to cope with novel situations. An adaptive response is viewed as goal-directed, purposeful, and providing intrinsic gratification (Medical College of Georgia, 1982). Through occupation, with feedback from both the human and nonhuman environment, the individual comes to know the potential and the limitations of the self and the environment, achieves a sense of competence within those limitations, and is able to establish a balance between work, self-care, and leisure activity (Fidler & Fidler, 1978).

Conclusion
Occupation, as the core of the profession, defines the boundaries of the profession's domain, which encompasses the use of occupation (a) in a variety of therapeutic situations for the purpose of promoting a person's ability to influence his or her own state of health; (b) with people of all age groups having occupational performance dysfunction resulting from illness, trauma, deprivation, stress, or developmental insults; and (c) for the purpose of preventing occupational performance dysfunction and for remediating, habituating, or maintaining occupational performance skills for self-maintenance, work, leisure, and play.

Thus occupational therapy, through its central focus on the use of occupation, validates its efficacy by providing opportunities for individuals to achieve expression of their capacities to act, to adapt, and to master their world.

References


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