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Infusing an Occupational Justice Perspective to Technology use in Occupational Therapy Practice

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Infusing an Occupational Justice Perspective to Technology use in Occupational Therapy Practice

Abstract

Vital to building best and evidence-based practices in technology use in occupational therapy is the understanding of technology access, the lived experience of clients from diverse backgrounds who use technologies every day, and the understanding of many various factors (e.g., socioeconomic, political, geographical) that may influence the use of and access to technology. In this Letter from the Editors, we want to infuse the notion of occupational justice in the way that we, occupational therapy practitioners, understand and assess the impact of technology use in daily occupational participation.

Keywords

occupational justice, assistive technology, enabling technology, universal access

Cover Page Footnote

We would like to thank Dr. Sharon Gutman of Columbia University for her feedback and guidance on this Letter from the Editor and the “They Said” article for this special section.

Technology is now well-infused into many facets of everyday life and the everyday practice of occupational therapy. Many of us use some type of technology from the moment we wake up each morning (e.g., coffee maker, battery-operated toothbrush, hair dryer, cell phone). Occupational therapists use various technologies to evaluate clients, provide interventions, and document services for reimbursement. We often recommend that clients access and use a variety of technologies to assist them in daily occupational performance. Technology is critical in the way that occupational therapy educators teach in classrooms and labs, and occupational therapy practitioners are experts in incorporating technology into everyday practice. In the early 1900s, prior to the U.S. government providing a legal definition of assistive technology (AT), occupational therapy practitioners used floor looms, human-powered saws, and jigs during therapy projects (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2016). Technology has also been a core part and building block of daily occupational participation (Smith, 2017). For this special section on technology in *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy*, we highlight various studies that have explored how technology has been used in different interventions, either as a modality for intervention or to enable occupational participation.

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Occupational Justice and Technology

Occupational justice is a powerful idea that bridges the gap between people's well-being and harmful social conditions that restrict what they can do and be (Hocking, 2017). One definition of occupational justice is the provision of equitable opportunities and resources to do, be, belong and become, explore what people have the potential to be, and ensure the absence of avoidable harm (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). Critical to the understanding of occupational justice is that humans need and want to participate in occupations to enhance health and quality of life for themselves, their families, and their communities (Galvin, Wilding, & Whiteford, 2011). One outcome of infusing occupational justice in the practice of occupational therapy is empowerment (Agner, 2017). Agner (2017) stated that empowerment and occupational justice can be promoted through policy changes to improve access to health care, increase opportunities for clients to participate in health care decision-making, and increase client and family engagement in the therapeutic process. In our "They Said" article for this special section on technology, we highlight global perspectives shared with us by a panel of international AT experts. These global perspectives exemplify several points asserted by Agner on empowerment in relation to AT access and use. When incorporating technology in occupational therapy practice, it is important that we understand the perspectives and experiences of our stakeholders and clients and the various ethical and justice considerations that may influence the use of and access to AT for occupational participation.

Ethical and Justice Considerations on Technology Use

Hansson (2007) described some ethical considerations when including enabling technologies in everyday health care practice: patient reluctance to use compensatory and assistive technology, self-inflicted harm, subordination to technology, and reduced human contact. Infusing occupational justice to Hansson's ethical considerations, it is imperative that occupational therapy practitioners understand

and help address the factors that make clients who initially use AT to abandon it and revert back to their old habits and patterns of doing occupations. Occupational therapists also provide necessary family, caregiver, and client education to minimize harms due to inappropriate use of technologies, which may also lead to overdependence on technologies. Practitioners must also ensure that technologies truly enable and facilitate occupational participation and not facilitate isolation and withdrawal from human connection.

The right to experience meaningful and enriching occupations can be facilitated by access to everyday technology (Kottorp et al., 2016). Further, Kottorp and colleagues (2016) asserted that limited resources in accessing and using everyday technology may lead to occupational alienation and occupational imbalance, as it may exclude people from engaging in occupations that require the use of everyday technologies. Occupational justice in the field of assistive technology can also be applied from two perspectives according to Arthanat, Simmons, and Favreau (2012). First, from a client and consumer perspective, occupational justice can be applied to ensure the practical use and usability of the AT device in his or her natural (occupational) context, including the client's cultural context. Second, from the practitioner perspective, occupational justice can be infused in the way we assist an individual with a disability in the selection, acquisition, or use of an AT device.

Culture, Disability, Justice, and Technology

There is also a need to expand our cultural critical consciousness in the selection, assessment, and prescription of technologies with our clients. In understanding our clients' perspectives, we need to broaden our understanding of their disabilities in terms of the cultural patterns of meaning, values, and purposes of social life in their particular contexts (Hammel, 2006). It is a common belief of AT providers that technology is needed and wanted by those who they perceive could benefit from it (Parette, 1999). These ideas are supported by current AT theory and practice based on Western philosophies and ideologies that favor autonomy, independence, and self-determinism (Ripat & Woodgate, 2011). Occupational therapy practitioners must be careful and reflective when asserting these philosophies in client care and when making technology recommendations.

There is a learning curve, an assimilation and accommodation process in new ways of doing, and a reintegration to one's cultural contexts that may often be overlooked when recommending technologies. Some of these considerations may include: How does the technology impact the client's way of life and way of interacting with significant others? How much effort, time, and resources will the client need to maintain, continue to use, and integrate the technology in everyday life? Is the technology accessible in all of the client's contexts of occupational participation? How does the technology impact the natural human dynamics between caregivers and loved ones who may have been used to providing the care and assistance to the client that may now be replaced partially or completely by the technology? All of these must be considered in daily practice.

We hope that you find the articles in the special section on technology stimulating in terms of adding to practice-based research and applications of technology in occupational therapy practice. We also hope that emphasis on technology may develop a new, broader, and more global perspective on the impact of and the factors that influence technology in daily occupational therapy practice.

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