

Guest Editorial

Potential for Improved Outcomes and Quality of Life through Social Justice Awareness

Social justice inequities permeate societal structures throughout the world and are present in every aspect of our work and social lives. Acknowledgment of this fact is crucial in order to provide quality services and care and to recognize how we, as individuals, can engage ourselves in the promotion of social and occupational justice for our clients and for the communities we work within.

Social justice is a term that refers to unequal and unjust distribution of resources and economic capital within societies. These inequalities in distribution result in a lack of equity of access to opportunities in education and work, along with diminished social rights and political power. Occupational justice, developed by Wilcock and Townsend [1,2], focuses on issues that stem from social inequalities with a focus on what people do, how they spend their time, and access to occupational engagement that is both meaningful and fulfilling. Employment, or lack of employment, is a critical factor in both social and occupational justice but not the only factor. For example, many people with physical disabilities and mental health issues suffer from lack of financial resources, political power, and access to activities or occupations they consider personally meaningful. Those who have been forced to reside in refugee camps and those who have been incarcerated also cope with similar circumstances and injustices.

The topics of social justice and occupational justice are critically important and, for the most part, go unmentioned in professional rehabilitation literature even though there are direct connections to work environments. These connections include: the likelihood of injury in the workplace, a decrease in access to healthy living environments, and greater challenges accessing healthcare. The articles in this journal contribute to the limited number of journal publications on this topic

and provide a small sampling of the diversity of populations coping with the daily impact of social and occupational injustices that are beyond their control.

Five articles are included in this special section of *WORK* on social justice. There is a striking diversity in range of populations and research methods employed in these articles. Four of the five articles directly address gainful employment and income generation, a logical occurrence in a specialty section which addresses the topic of social justice. The majority of authors come from the profession of occupational therapy which is why the concept of occupational justice is referred to frequently.

Aldrich and Dickie, using ethnographic methods, examined the unemployment experience and daily routines of unemployed people in a North Carolina town, in the United States. In, “It’s Hard to Plan Your Day When You Have No Money: Discouraged Workers’ Occupational Possibilities and the Need to Reconceptualize Routine”, the authors argue that daily routines of unemployed and discouraged workers comprise a justice-related concern. Convincing evidence is provided to support their findings which highlight daily routines around securing the most basic of resources. They call for increased scholarly attention to the nature of daily routine and its relationship to occupational engagement.

Examination of unemployment issues for residents of North Carolina continues in, “Untapped Resources: Refugee Employment Experiences in Central North Carolina” by Sienkiewicz, Mauceri, Howell and Bibreau. Using a phenomenological approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with French-speaking Africans who came to the United States with refugee status. All happened to be either unemployed or under-employed, although this was not a condition for recruitment. They conclude that the process of

refugee resettlement did not provide the necessary support to help these individuals to prepare adequately for the U.S. job market and the challenges they would face in securing employment. Concerns related to insufficient income generation, and an inability to provide for self and family, were significant and contributed to issues around self-identity and loss of familiar roles. The impact of forced migration is clearly linked to both social justice and occupational justice concerns.

The themes of refugeeism, income generation, and maintenance of self-identity are further explored in a case study by Smith, Stephenson, and Gibson in, "The Meaning and Value of Traditional Occupational Practice: A Karen woman's story of weaving in the United States". The Karen are an ethnic group from Burma with a long history of traditional weaving for the production of personal clothing that signifies Karen culture. After coming to the United States, this Karen woman was initially unable to participate in this occupation due to a lack of supplies. Her story demonstrates the negative consequences that can occur when people are restricted from meaningful occupations and how participation in a particular activity can influence involvement in social networks and maintenance of self-identity. The article also addresses how an occupation can shift from one that is primarily for family use to one that generates income to support family life in a new economic context. This case study also brings in the concept of occupational deprivation, a form of occupational justice [1], which occurred when this weaver was deprived of an occupation which she viewed as valuable in terms of cultural preservation and support of family.

The topic of employment continues in research completed by Nygren et al. but in this case the research took place in Sweden and with a population coping with mental health disorders. In, "Predictors of Vocational Outcomes using Individual Placement and Support for People with Mental Illness", the authors used quantitative methods, specifically logistic regression, to analyze data generated from 65 participants, most with a diagnosis of anxiety or depression. Their results suggest that more appropriate interventions in vocational rehabilitation could be offered to clients if an effort is made to understand how psychiatric symptoms influence occupational performance. The issue of social justice is significant here due to the barriers people with mental health disorders face in securing gainful employment.

"Bridging Theory and Practice: Occupational Justice and Service Learning", Takes another angle on the

topic of social and occupational justice, using student reflections on their experiences. Hansen examines occupational therapy curricular pedagogy at Duquesne University in a service-learning context and demonstrates that university students, given appropriate academic coursework, can learn to advocate for the rights of all people and inspire others to do the same. Recognition that curricular experiences can influence future practitioners to engage in occupational justice, becoming agents of change in their work settings and communities, provides us with the hope that more will be done for the benefit of clients who are denied positions of power and influence.

The five articles included in this special section of *WORK* take widely varying approaches to the gathering of evidence and populations examined, but common themes run throughout. Unemployment, underemployment, forced migration to a foreign country, and mental health disorders can all result in lack of basic resources and barriers to participation in meaningful daily life activities. Although research does exist on this topic more attention is needed in vocational rehabilitation literature and mainstream medical journals. The inclusion of sensitivity to social justice issues by rehabilitation practitioners will result in improved intervention outcomes but awareness of the issues is required before this is possible. I would like to thank of the editor of *WORK* for the addition of this topic in their publication. The five articles presented here provide one more step toward bringing social and occupational injustices to the forefront of public recognition, thereby improving the likelihood that more will be done to diminish their occurrence.

References

- [1] Townsend E & Wilcock A. Occupational justice and client-centered practice: A dialogue in progress. *Canadian Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 2004; 71(2) 75-87.
- [2] Townsend E & Whiteford G. A participatory occupational justice framework: Population-based processes of practice, in: *Occupational Therapy Without Borders: Learning from the Spirit of Survivors*, F. Kronenberg, Algado, S.S., and Pollard, N., eds, Elsevier, New York, 2005, pp. 110-126.

Guest Editor

Yda J. Smith

Division of Occupational Therapy

University of Utah

520 Wakara Way

Salt Lake City, UT 84108, USA

Tel.: +1 801 585 9589

E-mail: yda.smith@hsc.utah.edu