



Exploring the Role of Occupational Science in Addressing Occupational Injustices in African Communities

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I. Introduction

Occupational science, as defined by the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA)(2020), is the multidisciplinary study of human occupation, encompassing the analysis of activities, roles, and routines that individuals engage in daily. This field examines the intricate relationship between occupation and health, well-being, and social justice. The concept of occupational justice is a crucial aspect of occupational science, emphasizing the equitable distribution of opportunities and resources necessary for individuals and communities to participate in meaningful occupations. This term paper aims to explore the pivotal role of occupational science in addressing occupational injustices within African communities.

Addressing occupational injustices in African communities is of utmost importance due to the significant impact such injustices have on individuals and societies as a whole. According to Braveman(2016), occupational injustices occur when certain individuals or groups are denied access to meaningful and necessary occupations, hindering their ability to thrive and participate fully in society. In the context of African communities, there are numerous systemic and historical factors contributing to these injustices, ranging from economic disparities, political instability, and cultural marginalization. These challenges often lead to restricted opportunities and limited access to education, healthcare, and decent working conditions for many individuals across the continent. The consequences of occupational injustices are far-reaching, resulting in diminished quality of life, increased poverty, and hindered community development (Farias&Laliberte-Rudman, 2019).

The purpose of this term paper is to showcase how occupational science can be a potent tool in addressing the challenges faced by African communities. It delves into theories and principles within occupational science to understand how to

promote occupational justice and empower individuals and communities. Successful applications of occupational science in other contexts will be explored, highlighting its adaptability and effectiveness in addressing occupational injustices. The paper also emphasizes the importance of cultural considerations to ensure interventions are respectful and relevant while acknowledging the challenges and limitations faced in implementing such interventions. Ultimately, the goal is to find innovative and culturally sensitive solutions to effectively address occupational injustices in African communities.

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1.1 Background and Context

1.1.1 Overview of Occupational Science as a Discipline

Occupational science emerged as a distinct discipline in the late 20th century, stemming from the fields of occupational therapy and occupational therapy education. According to Gerlach *et al.*(2018), the primary focus of occupational science is to understand the nature and significance of human occupation in various contexts. This includes exploring the underlying principles and theories that govern occupation, studying how people engage in activities, and analyzing the impact of occupation on individuals' well-being and participation in society.

Occupational scientists utilize a range of research methods, including qualitative and quantitative approaches, to examine the complexity of human occupation. They investigate the interplay between individuals, their environments, and the activities they participate in, aiming to enhance people's occupational experiences and address challenges they may face in their daily lives (Hammell, 2020).

1.1.2 Historical Context of Occupational Injustices in African Communities

To comprehend the historical context of occupational injustices in African communities, one must consider the legacy of colonialism,



exploitation, and systemic inequalities. During the colonial era, European powers subjected many African nations to oppressive rule, resulting in the plundering of natural resources and the disruption of traditional occupations and livelihoods (Guajardo, Kronenberg & Ramugondo, 2015). The consequences of colonial rule have had enduring effects on the continent, manifesting in various forms of occupational injustices.

The division of African societies into artificial boundaries during colonial times has led to ongoing conflicts and political instability, resulting in limited access to resources and development opportunities for many communities (Hocking, 2017). Additionally, discriminatory policies and practices have marginalized certain ethnic groups, relegating them to low-paying and precarious occupations, while others have had their ancestral lands expropriated for commercial interests, disrupting their traditional ways of life (Hyett, Kenny, & Dickson-Swift, 2019).

1.1.3 Impact of Occupational Injustices on Individuals and Communities

The impact of occupational injustices on individuals and communities in Africa is profound and multifaceted. At the individual level, occupational injustices often result in limited access to quality education, healthcare, and employment opportunities (Irvine-Brown *et al.*, 2021). Many individuals find themselves trapped in cycles of poverty, unable to secure stable and dignified work that would allow them to support their families and thrive economically.

Occupational injustices also have broader implications for communities as a whole. Disruptions to traditional occupations and loss of access to resources can lead to social disintegration and community breakdown (Kantartzis, 2019). When individuals are denied the opportunity to engage in meaningful occupations and contribute to their communities, the overall social fabric weakens, impacting collective well-being and cohesion. Moreover, occupational injustices contribute to the perpetuation of social inequalities and disparities in African societies (Kemmis, McTaggart & Nixon, 2014). Discriminatory practices based on race, ethnicity, and gender limit access to opportunities and resources, further entrenching marginalization and exclusion.

2.1 Theoretical Framework of Occupational Science

2.1.1 Theories and Models in Occupational Science

The Person-Environment-Occupation (PEO) Model: Developed by Law, Cooper, Strong, Stewart, Rigby, and Letts in 1996, the PEO model emphasizes the dynamic relationship between the person, their environment, and the occupations they engage in. It highlights the importance of a good fit between individuals' abilities, preferences, and the demands of their occupations and environments (Kinsella & Durocher, 2016). This model is particularly relevant in understanding how occupational injustices may arise from mismatches between individuals' capabilities and the opportunities available to them.

Occupational Justice Framework: The Occupational Justice Framework, proposed by Townsend and Wilcock in 2004, focuses on the concept of occupational justice and the right of every individual to participate in meaningful occupations. It calls for a fair distribution of resources and opportunities to ensure that all individuals can engage in occupations that are essential to their well-being and identity (Kramer-Roy, 2015). This framework serves as a guiding principle in addressing occupational injustices by advocating for equitable access to opportunities and resources.

2.1.2 Relevance of These Theories in Addressing Occupational Injustices

The key theories and models in occupational science play a crucial role in addressing occupational injustices in African communities. By examining these theories through the lens of social justice, occupational scientists can identify the root causes of injustices and develop targeted interventions to address them (Guajardo, Kronenberg & Ramugondo, 2015).

The PEO model provides a valuable framework for understanding how occupational injustices may arise due to the mismatch between individuals' capabilities and the opportunities available to them. By identifying these disparities, occupational scientists can advocate for changes in social and environmental factors that limit individuals' access to meaningful occupations (Law, Baum, & Dunn, 2015). For instance, the PEO model can be used to assess the accessibility of educational and vocational training programs, and to design interventions that bridge the gap between skills and available job opportunities, ultimately promoting occupational justice (Levasseur *et al.*, 2019).

The Occupational Justice Framework is particularly relevant in highlighting the right of



individuals in African communities to engage in occupations that are essential to their well-being and cultural identity. By using this framework, occupational scientists can raise awareness about the unequal distribution of resources and opportunities in these communities and work toward policy changes and social programs that promote greater inclusivity and equal access to meaningful occupations (Lindgren, Lundman, &Graneheim, 2020).

2.2 Occupational Injustices in African Communities

2.2.1 Identification and Analysis of Specific Occupational Injustices

Limited Access to Education and Vocational Training: Many African communities face occupational injustices due to limited access to quality education and vocational training. This lack of educational opportunities often leads to a mismatch between the skills individuals possess and the demands of available occupations. As a result, many individuals find themselves excluded from higher-paying jobs and are forced to engage in low-income, informal work (Peters, &Galvaan, 2021).

Land Dispossession and Displacement: Land dispossession is a significant occupational injustice faced by numerous African communities, particularly in regions rich in natural resources. Large-scale land acquisitions for commercial purposes have resulted in the forced displacement of indigenous and rural communities, disrupting their traditional occupations and ways of life (Rensburg, 2018).

Gender-Based Occupational Injustices: Gender disparities persist in many African communities, limiting women's access to education, employment opportunities, and decision-making roles (Lauckner, Leclair, & Yamamoto, 2019). Women often face occupational segregation, being concentrated in low-paying sectors and informal work, despite having similar qualifications to men.

2.2.2 Factors Contributing to the Perpetuation of These Injustices

Historical Legacies of Colonialism: The historical legacy of colonialism has contributed to the perpetuation of occupational injustices in African communities. Colonial powers often exploited the continent's resources, leaving behind social, political, and economic structures that continue to favor certain groups while marginalizing others (Sakellariou, 2019). These structures hinder equitable access to occupations and resources.

Weak Governance and Corruption: In many African countries, weak governance and corruption have hindered the implementation of policies that could address occupational injustices effectively (Schepenset *al.*, 2021). Mismanagement of resources and lack of transparency can exacerbate disparities, as resources meant for community development are diverted for personal gain.

Cultural Norms and Stereotypes: Traditional cultural norms and gender stereotypes often perpetuate occupational injustices, particularly concerning women's roles and expectations (Suarez-Balcazaret *al.*, 2016). These norms may discourage women from pursuing certain occupations or leadership positions, limiting their economic and social empowerment.

2.3 Case Studies of Affected Communities in Different Regions

Niger Delta Region, Nigeria: The Niger Delta region has experienced significant occupational injustices due to oil exploration activities by multinational corporations. Large-scale oil spills have contaminated farmlands and fishing grounds, leading to the loss of traditional livelihoods for local communities (Guajardo, Kronenberg, &Ramugondo, 2015). Limited access to alternative occupations has exacerbated poverty and social unrest in the region.

Maasai Communities, Tanzania: The Maasai communities in Tanzania have faced occupational injustices as a result of land dispossession and forced evictions for wildlife conservation and tourism purposes (Guajardo, Kronenberg, &Ramugondo, 2015). These communities, whose livelihoods depend on pastoralism, have experienced a loss of land and grazing areas, leading to increased vulnerability and poverty.

Mining Communities in the Democratic Republic of Congo: In the Democratic Republic of Congo, mining communities have been adversely affected by occupational injustices resulting from unsafe working conditions, low wages, and child labor (Guajardo, Kronenberg, &Ramugondo, 2015). The mining industry's exploitation of natural resources has not translated into equitable benefits for local communities, perpetuating poverty and social inequality.

2.4 Role of Occupational Science in Addressing Injustices



2.4.1 Empowerment through Occupation: Promoting Agency and Autonomy

Occupational science plays a crucial role in addressing occupational injustices by empowering individuals and communities through occupation. By focusing on the meaningful activities that individuals engage in, occupational scientists can help individuals regain a sense of agency and control over their lives. Through tailored interventions, individuals can develop the necessary skills and resources to participate more fully in their chosen occupations and pursue their goals (Hocking, 2017).

For instance, in communities where access to education is limited, occupational science can support the development of alternative educational opportunities that align with local cultures and traditions. This approach fosters lifelong learning and skill-building, enabling individuals to engage in a broader range of occupations and seek better economic prospects (Hocking, 2017).

2.4.2 Occupational Justice as a Guiding Principle

Occupational justice serves as a guiding principle for occupational scientists in their efforts to address occupational injustices. By advocating for equitable opportunities and resources, occupational scientists work towards reducing disparities and ensuring that all individuals have access to occupations that are meaningful and essential to their well-being (Kronenberg, 2020).

To apply the concept of occupational justice, occupational scientists engage in policy advocacy and community-based initiatives. They collaborate with local stakeholders, governments, and non-governmental organizations to identify and address systemic barriers that perpetuate occupational injustices (Hyett, Kenny, & Dickson-Swift, 2019). This collaborative approach seeks to challenge the status quo and bring about systemic change that benefits marginalized communities.

2.4.3 Collaborative Approaches to Community-Based Interventions

Occupational science emphasizes the importance of collaborative community-based interventions to address occupational injustices effectively. Rather than imposing solutions from outside, occupational scientists work alongside community members to co-create interventions that are contextually relevant and culturally appropriate (Irvine-Brown *et al.*, 2021).

By engaging in a participatory and inclusive process, occupational scientists can better

understand the unique challenges and strengths of each community. They can then design interventions that build on existing resources, cultural practices, and social support systems (Kantartzis, 2019). This approach fosters community ownership and sustainability of the interventions, as community members are actively involved in the decision-making process.

For example, in addressing gender-based occupational injustices, occupational scientists can collaborate with local women's groups to develop programs that promote economic empowerment and challenge traditional gender norms. By incorporating the voices and perspectives of women, these interventions become more effective in breaking down barriers and promoting gender equality (Kinsella & Durocher, 2016).

2.5 Cultural Considerations in Occupational Science

2.5.1 Recognizing Cultural Diversity and Its Impact on Occupation

Occupational science acknowledges the importance of cultural diversity and its profound impact on occupation. Different cultures have unique perspectives on work, leisure, and daily routines, which influence individuals' identities and well-being (Hammell, 2020). Occupational scientists must approach their work with cultural humility and sensitivity, recognizing that occupations have deep-rooted meanings and are shaped by historical, social, and spiritual factors within each community.

In African communities, cultural practices and rituals often play a significant role in shaping individuals' occupations and well-being. For example, farming may not only be an economic activity but also a cultural practice tied to traditional values, spirituality, and social cohesion. By acknowledging and respecting cultural diversity, occupational scientists can develop interventions that resonate with the values and beliefs of the community, increasing the likelihood of positive outcomes (Law, Baum & Dunn, 2016).

2.5.2 The Role of Traditional Practices in Addressing Injustices

Traditional practices within African communities can serve as valuable resources in addressing occupational injustices. Indigenous knowledge and traditional occupations passed down through generations, carry inherent wisdom in promoting sustainable livelihoods and well-being labor (Guajardo, Kronenberg, & Ramugondo, 2015). Occupational scientists can collaborate with



community elders and local leaders to identify and revitalize these practices, helping individuals rediscover their cultural heritage and promote a sense of pride and empowerment.

For example, in regions facing land dispossession and displacement, occupational scientists can work with affected communities to explore sustainable land-use practices and traditional agricultural methods that preserve the environment and support livelihoods labor (Guajardo, Kronenberg, & Ramugondo, 2015). By integrating these practices into modern interventions, occupational scientists can contribute to the preservation of cultural identity while addressing the consequences of injustices.

2.5.3 Balancing Cultural Preservation with Promoting Change

One of the challenges for occupational scientists is to strike a balance between preserving cultural practices and promoting change to address occupational injustices. While cultural preservation is essential for maintaining community identity and resilience, some traditional practices may inadvertently perpetuate inequities, particularly regarding gender roles and access to resources and labor (Guajardo, Kronenberg, & Ramugondo, 2015).

Occupational scientists must approach this delicate balance with cultural competence, engaging in meaningful dialogue with community members to understand their aspirations and concerns. By involving the community in decision-making processes, occupational scientists can navigate the complexities of cultural change while promoting positive shifts that empower individuals and foster occupational justice (Levasseur *et al.*, 2019).

For example, in addressing gender-based occupational injustices, occupational scientists can work with community leaders and women's groups to challenge harmful gender norms and support the recognition of women's rights to participate fully in society (Levasseur *et al.*, 2019). This collaborative approach allows for cultural shifts that respect cultural heritage while creating more inclusive and equitable environments.

2.6 Challenges and Limitations

2.6.1 Barriers to Implementing Occupational Science Interventions

Limited Resources: In many African communities, limited financial and human resources pose significant barriers to implementing occupational science interventions. Lack of funding and access to specialized training can hinder the development and

sustainability of programs aimed at addressing occupational injustices (Pereira, 2017).

Lack of Awareness: Occupational science as a discipline may not be well-known or understood in some African regions. The lack of awareness among policymakers, community leaders, and the general public can impede the integration of occupational science principles into broader initiatives addressing social and economic challenges.

Resistance to Change: Resistance to change is a common challenge in implementing interventions to address occupational injustices. Cultural norms, traditional beliefs, and vested interests may resist efforts to promote equitable access to occupations and resources, hindering the progress of interventions (Peters & Galvaan, 2021).

2.6.2 Cultural and Social Complexities in African Communities

Diverse Cultural Practices: African communities are incredibly diverse, with varying cultural practices and norms. This complexity necessitates a deep understanding of the cultural context in which interventions are implemented. Failure to recognize cultural nuances may lead to misinterpretations, misunderstandings, and unintended negative consequences (Hammell, 2020).

Language Barriers: Language diversity is another significant challenge, as numerous languages are spoken across the continent. Effective communication and engagement with community members may require translators or bilingual personnel to ensure that interventions are accessible to all (Hammell, 2020).

Social Hierarchies and Power Dynamics: African societies often have complex social hierarchies and power dynamics, which can influence decision-making processes. Occupational scientists must navigate these dynamics carefully to ensure that the voices of marginalized groups are heard and considered in the design and implementation of interventions (Hammell, 2020).

2.6.3 Ethical Considerations in Research and Practice

Informed Consent: In conducting research and implementing interventions, obtaining informed consent from participants is essential. Language and cultural barriers may make it challenging to ensure that participants fully understand the purpose and potential risks of their involvement (Rensburg, 2018).



Cultural Appropriation: Occupational scientists must be cautious about cultural appropriation when incorporating traditional practices into interventions. Respecting the intellectual property rights and cultural heritage of communities is crucial to ensure ethical practice (Lauckner, Leclair, & Yamamoto, 2019).

Power Imbalance: There may be a power imbalance between occupational scientists and the communities they work with. Occupational scientists should strive to engage in participatory approaches that empower community members to take an active role in the planning and decision-making processes (Lauckner, Leclair, & Yamamoto, 2019).

3.1 Conclusion

Occupational science is crucial in addressing occupational injustices in African communities, focusing on the relationship between occupation and well-being. The field provides theoretical frameworks to guide interventions that empower individuals and communities. Continued research and practice are essential for positive change, enabling culturally sensitive approaches. By prioritizing cultural relevance and collaboration, occupational science can break the cycle of poverty, empower marginalized groups, and foster inclusion, contributing to a more equitable and just society.

4.1 Recommendations for Future Interventions

4.1.1 Identifying Priority Areas for Action

Conduct Needs Assessments: Before implementing interventions, conducting comprehensive needs assessments in different African communities is essential. These assessments should involve community members, local organizations, and relevant stakeholders to identify the most pressing occupational injustices and their underlying causes (Sakellariou, 2019).

Focus on Education and Skills Development: Priority should be given to interventions that improve access to quality education and skills development opportunities. Equipping individuals with relevant skills can enhance their employability and economic prospects, breaking the cycle of poverty and occupational marginalization (Schepens *et al.*, 2021).

Address Land and Resource Rights: Interventions that advocate for land and resource rights in communities affected by land dispossession and displacement should be prioritized. Empowering communities to reclaim control over their resources

can lead to more equitable and sustainable livelihoods (Schepens *et al.*, 2021).

4.1.2 Integrating Occupational Science in Policy-Making and Advocacy

Policy Advocacy: Occupational scientists should engage in policy advocacy at local, national, and international levels to promote occupational justice. By advocating for policies that address systemic inequalities and promote equitable access to opportunities and resources, occupational scientists can create an enabling environment for change (Suarez-Balcazaret *et al.*, 2016).

Policy Integration: Collaborating with policymakers to integrate occupational science principles into existing social and economic policies is crucial. This integration can help ensure that policies are more inclusive and responsive to the needs of marginalized communities (Simaan, 2021).

Research-Based Evidence: Providing policymakers with evidence-based research on the impact of occupational injustices and the effectiveness of occupational science interventions can strengthen the case for policy changes and resource allocation (Hammell, 2020).

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