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# Broadening understandings of occupational identity: illustrations from a research study of homeless adults.

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## **BROADENING UNDERSTANDINGS OF OCCUPATIONAL IDENTITY: ILLUSTRATIONS FROM A RESEARCH STUDY OF HOMELESS ADULTS**

Occupational identity is an emerging construct that is relatively unexplored in occupational science and occupational therapy literature. It has been described as a broad and value-laden concept, (Wiseman and Whiteford, 2007) that is often discussed without clarification of the theory that underlies it (Phelan and Kinsella, 2009). Laliberte-Rudman and Dennhardt (2008) have suggested that the evolution of occupational identity has been limited due to the prevalence of Western cultural norms held amongst theorists developing the concept. Therefore, they argue that the focus of occupational identity is on “emphasising a future orientation, achievement-based doing, individual choice, and mastery of individuals over nature” (Laliberte-Rudman and Dennhardt, 2008, p153). It is important for the credibility of the occupational therapy profession, and the usability of occupation-based concepts, that the theoretical underpinnings of occupational therapy practice encompass the diversity of human experience.

The aim of this chapter is to broaden understandings of the concept of occupational identity. This will be achieved by firstly exploring key concepts from the wider literature on identity theory. Secondly, the concept of occupational identity will be examined from its historical beginnings to current occupational science conceptualisations. Finally, findings from a British study of homeless people are used to explore links between occupation and identity. This will provide a basis on which to broaden current thinking around occupational identity.

### **The Concept of Identity**

Within the social sciences, there is a significant body of literature pertaining to the concept of identity (Vignoles, Schwartz and Luyckx, 2011). This literature is complex and diverse, emanating from disciplines including psychology, anthropology, sociology, education, and criminology, among others. It should be noted that within psychology there is a division of this work which includes a dimension called occupational identity, which refers to “the conscious awareness of oneself as a worker” (Skorikov and Vondracek, 2011, p693).

Examining the breadth of social science identity theory could be illuminating for occupational science because the literature considers identity from many more parameters than have previously been explored in relation to occupational identity. For example, identity scholars debate two different but equally significant aspects of identity: the content of identity and identity processes. The content of identity could include such diverse subjects as self-esteem, or a person’s role (for example spouse)

or a nationality (for example British). Identity processes are concerned with how identity is formed, maintained or changed (Vignoles, Schwartz and Luyckx, 2011).

Scholars from diverse theoretical backgrounds tend to explore different levels of identity content and processes. For example, those who adopt a psychological approach may focus on identity at the personal or individual level. In this approach, the content of the identity might be a personal goal or belief and the process is the self agency through which a person works towards a set of goals. Those from a sociological background consider relational identity and argue that an identity can only be established if it is recognised socially within a relational group (Swann, 2005). There is also recognition of wider social influences. For example, collective identity is related to associations with groups, such as ethnic and religious groups, and the beliefs or behaviours that occur as a consequence of identifying with them (Vignoles, Schwartz and Luyckx, 2011).

Additionally, there is debate in the identity literature about whether identity remains stable or whether it changes. Erikson's (1968) seminal theory on identity proposed that adolescence was the time when identity was developed and that it remained comparatively fixed once it was. Vignoles, Schwartz and Luyckx (2011, p10) argue that "developmental psychological approaches continue to view identity as relatively stable once it has been formed." In contrast, other social perspectives suggest that context can influence conceptions of the self (English and Chen, 2007) and that identity is more dynamic, albeit in relation to short-term changes. As an example, being made redundant may cause a person to reconsider their previous identity as a worker.

It is clear from this brief overview that the construct of identity is multifaceted and layered. It is seen by some scholars in the field to be problematic because it is difficult to develop a clearly defined and demarcated body of work, due to this complexity (Rattansi and Phoenix, 2005). This may have implications if scholars from occupational science wish to further develop the concept of occupational identity by drawing from existing identity theory. The following section considers how the concept of occupational identity has been developed within occupational science to date.

### **Development of the Concept of Occupational Identity within Occupational Science**

In occupational science, occupational identity was first addressed by Christiansen (1999) who suggested that occupation was the primary vehicle through which a person would communicate their personal identity. He suggested that personal identity is shaped by relationships with others; is tied to what people do; provides coherence and meaning through life; and is an essential element in promoting wellbeing (Christiansen, 1999). From an occupational perspective, Christiansen suggested that identity construction might be considered as "becoming who we are

through what we do" (2004, p121). However, Christiansen (1999) also stated that his ideas were speculative and required further research to determine their appropriateness. A number of writers have taken up this challenge, and there is a small but growing literature base within occupational science that considers the links between occupation and identity.

Writing shortly after Christiansen, Kielhofner brought the words occupation and identity together to coin the phrase *occupational identity*. He described occupational identity as "a composite sense of who one is and wishes to become as an occupational being generated from one's history of occupational participation" (Kielhofner, 2002, p119). He elaborated further on this, suggesting occupational identity was linked to volition, habituation and performance, which are systems within the Model of Human Occupation (MOHO) (Kielhofner, 2008). Some of the subsequent literature used constructs (or assessments) from MOHO to explore occupational identity (see for example Howie, Culter and Feldman, 2004; Braveman et al, 2006; Martin et al, 2011; Cotton, 2012).

Further examination of the occupational science literature reveals that there is a lack of clarity around the usage of some terms in relation to identity. For example, the terms *self-identity* and *occupational identity* are used interchangeably. This is significant given the complex nature of the construct of identity described previously. Some authors suggest that occupational identity is a specific element within the wider construct of identity (Laliberte-Rudman and Dennhart, 2008). Bryson-Campbell et al, (2013) explore this further by distinguishing self-identity as a broad concept whilst occupational identity is more specific (Bryson-Campbell et al, 2013). They argue that they can infer relevant information from literature on occupational identity because it is part of self-identity. However, the focus of their discussion is on the self, and neglects aspects of social or collective identity.

Taking a solely individualistic view of occupational identity limits the potential for understanding the links between occupation and identity from a collective or culturally informed standpoint, particularly as there is growing recognition that occupation is seldom purely the domain of the individual (Hammell, 2011). Occupation is after all connected to locations, history, culture, community, politics and economics (Dickie, Cutchin and Humphry, 2006; Kantartzis and Molineux, 2011) meaning that the development of occupational identity is likely to be influenced by these aspects too.

Taylor and Kay (2013) recently undertook research to identify how engaging in 'serious leisure occupations' led to the construction of identity amongst a group of people in the United Kingdom. Serious leisure occupations were defined as those that were particularly significant to participants, where engagement was intense and often involved being part of an occupational community, specialist skills were developed, and positive meanings for individuals were derived. Their study concluded with the development of an empirically based "conceptualisation of the

occupied self” which included three dimensions: the located self, the active self and the changing self (Taylor and Kay, 2013, p12). The located self refers to the influence of cultural expectations, group membership and positive or negative aspects of social image, and as such provides a framework that broadens current conceptualisations of occupational identity because it acknowledges not only the self, but also relational and collective influences on identity developed through occupation.

In Taylor and Kay's (2013) study the sample population were leisure enthusiasts, some of whom were in employment and some retired, with the majority being educated to at least degree level. The profile of participants reflects criticism of the construct of occupational identity in that it has been developed in the affluent West where personal choice is valued. The social class of the participants may have also influenced their ability to engage in rewarding occupations that were personally meaningful to them and valued by wider society. Identity formation developed through engaging in intensely enjoyable and meaningful occupations is likely to be positive. One might therefore question what happens to identity when people engage in occupations that they experience as alienating, or society perceives to be negative? What happens to your occupational identity if you experience stigma because of what you do, or if you are excluded from society? How do you construct an occupational identity if you are deprived of engaging in meaningful occupations because of the environment you live in, for example, on the streets or in a homeless hostel? How do you construct an occupational identity without a place to occupy? These questions and others like them sparked a personal interest in finding out more about occupational identity from the perspective of homeless people. The following section explores this in more depth.

### **The lived experience of homelessness and the impact on identity; Presenting the study**

I used a phenomenological approach with the aim to understand homeless peoples' subjective experience of their occupations and how this contributed to their identity construction. Five men, aged from 18 to 61 took part in the study. The participants were residing in a homeless hostel in the south of England in the UK. They were asked to describe their day to day activities by completing a photographic diary of their daily occupations. A subsequent semi-structured interview was undertaken with each participant and this included questions about how the person felt about themselves in relation to their occupations. The analysis was guided by interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). The following section discusses the study findings.

### **Knowing who I am through occupation, fixed or sustained identity [2hd]**

Participants were able to articulate aspects of their identity in terms of who they were through what they did. For example, Sean (all names used are pseudonyms) viewed himself as a butcher: “I mean I’m a butcher by trade”.

It is apparent that this aspect of Sean's identity was relatively stable, as he talked about being a butcher in the present tense, despite not being employed at the time of the research. Mark, who participated in football games whilst at the hostel, identified himself as a goal keeper: "So I've been playing in goal like, and I'm a good goal keeper like, believe it or not."

These examples allude to ideas from social science theory on identity content and processes, where the occupations Sean will have engaged in to become a butcher (training, work experience) were part of the identity creation process. His role as a butcher is formally recognised as a qualification. Playing football would have been the process through which Mark developed his identity as a footballer, and this could have been achieved either informally or formally. The content of people's identity is the role they assume; for Sean this is being a butcher and for Mark it is being a good goal keeper. Knowing that you are good at something suggests content identity at the personal level, but being good at goal keeping relies on others to play football with you, which resonates with the relational level of content identity and also the interconnectedness of occupations.

There is a sense of participating in occupations over time that has led to these beliefs, or understandings of the self. This fits with Kielhofner's original conceptualisation of occupational identity as being "generated from one's history of occupational participation" (2002, p119). There are other aspects of identity that were sustained and came from past experiences of occupations. For example, Mark's identity as a football fan was particularly meaningful to him. One of his few possessions was an Arsenal (English football team) poster and his photo diary included a photograph of the poster in his room in the hostel.

Well, I've always been an Arsenal fan. I used to go up to, when it was Highbury [area in London], used to go to every home game for about four years I used to go. Every home game, I was a junior gunner as they say. I went when it used to cost two pound a ticket.

Being a junior gunner suggests belonging to a group and having a collective or social identity that was achieved through the process of going to home games. Holding on to this valued identity may have served to counter the negative impact of homelessness. One could surmise that the devastating losses of homelessness that Mark experienced, including becoming estranged from his young sons, would have a significant impact on his wellbeing. Perhaps having a consistent sense of self, as an Arsenal fan, supported his well-being and provided continuity when the rest of his life was disrupted. Howie, Coulter and Feldman (2004), studied older people's engagement in lifelong craft occupations, and found a beneficial effect of sustaining engagement on identity and sense of self over time.

### **Occupational engagement and fluid identities [2hd]**

There is a growing consensus in the occupational science literature that occupational identities might not be static (Asaba and Jackson, 2011; Howie, Coulter and Feldman, 2004; Taylor and Kay 2013; 1Vrkljan and Miller-Polgar, 2007). In social psychology, short term changes in identity are also recognised (Vignoles, Schwartz and Luyckx, 2011). This is contradictory to the idea of a stable identity discussed previously. However, Vignoles, Schwartz and Luyckx (201, p11) explain this as “difference of emphasis rather than a difference in the nature of the phenomena”, suggesting that there is a possible middle ground between stable and changing identity.

Participants in the study described aspects of their identity that had obviously changed as a result of the experience of homelessness and engaging in certain anti-social occupations. This engagement created a negative identity, as Neil and Mark describe:

Picking up dog ends, going through bins... it's not who I am. (Neil)

I'm not happy with myself, no. Not happy with myself at all. That's what I mean like, obviously when I'm in court, I've done a lot of bad things last, you know, over the last year, you know just theft wise and stealing and whatever. (Mark)

There is a hint of *spoiled identities* in these accounts, a term that was first used by Goffman (1963) to describe an identity that causes a person to experience stigma. However, at the time, Neil was able to override his personal standards and engage in activities like going through bins to ensure his survival. Spoiled identity was felt personally by individuals and the stigma of a homeless identity resulted in abusive behaviour from the public:

I've had erm, when I was at the soup run, I've been walking back home, so and so has thrown a water bomb at me, I've been called names, walking up you know, yeah it's just cruel, like. (Neil)

A stigmatised occupational identity has also been found in other populations following disruption including people with brain injury (Bryson-Campbell et al, 2013) and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) (Braveman et al, 2006). When Sean was asked about his identity, his focus was on past occupations, perhaps because his current identity would be spoilt by links to negative occupations.

Miranda: From the things that you do day to day, does that give you a sense of who you are? Is your personal identity linked to what you do?

Sean: No, I don't think so. Erm, my personal identity, is linked to what I've done in the past, what I've, what I've achieved in my life.

Although Sean links his identity to doing, he does not describe an identity for himself now, based on homelessness and the occupations he engages in at present. He has

**Commented [NP1]:** this might be suggested by narrative. Your participants are offering you a narrative of themselves which allows them to represent change as events occurring to a constant persona, and what is suggested in these anecdotes is an 'ideal self', a constant reference point which they are matching to events that conflict with or confirm their sense of themselves

**Commented [MC2]:** Yes, I think the idea of narrative is interesting in identity, given that we construct who we are through the stories we tell. I am not quite sure how to incorporate this though as I don't feel I have the knowledge of narrative to do it appropriately. I have considered narrative later in response to your comment NP 7 – I hope that's OK?

a stable identity as a butcher that he is prepared to reveal, but his changed identity in relation to being homeless is not one that he chooses to share in the same way. Neil stated that he would only disclose his homeless experience to others when he felt his life was back on track; for example, when he had money and a car. This illustrates how context affects identity, something also illustrated in English and Chen's (2007) study on the stability of the self-concept of East Asian and European Americans across contexts. Notably, they argue for an 'if-then' profile where 'if' relates to a situation and 'then' is the response to it (English and Chen, 2007). In Neil's case, *if* he is able to get his life back on track, *then* he will disclose his homeless experiences to his relatives.

Despite these stigmatised aspects to identity, there were positive elements and hope for a changed identity in the future. Alex expressed how his homeless experience had contributed to changing who he wanted to become as a person:

No, 'cos when I was younger I wanted to be a care worker, I wanted to work for the elderly, so it's a total career path change, it's just what I've been through, just changed me totally.

Neil explained how his previous identity related to his girlfriend, and his employment. Here he describes his previous role as a skilled programmer, which he refers to as "C and C":

And that's why I kind of stuck with the C and C for so long, 'cos she was like, you know that's a good job, she would tell people like, oh you know my chap works in C and C, so yeah to keep her happy, keep her impressed, you know and it was like, and now I get a job, I do what I want to do.

Neil remained in this occupation that he did not particularly enjoy because his girlfriend valued it. This aspect of his identity was about what somebody else "wants you to be through what you do" and illustrates the potential powerful influence of relationships on occupational identity. However, the loss of his relationship with his girlfriend and his experiences of homelessness allowed him to consider pursuing a new career path of his own choosing. He later alludes to his decision to pursue a career as a personal trainer that he developed since living in the hostel.

Rowles (2008, p129) suggests people are "defined by a particular location and a particular time". However, both Neil and Sean resist definitions of themselves based on homelessness. For example, Neil's difficulty in accepting a view of himself as a person who goes through bins and Sean's suggestion that his identity is linked to what he has achieved previously. In Sean's experience, place and occupation are undeniably powerful in influencing his sense of self, as the discussion about his experience of hostel living illustrates:

Every now and again something happens, and I get a sense of who I am, and I, I kind of think, I am still there, I am still me, it's just I need to get, I need to



move forward a bit further than and be a bit more happier. But I think that's not going to happen until I'm in my own place, you know a remote control for my TV, you know, put on what I want to watch, put the kettle on, eat what I want to eat, do what I want to do, and then I'll get a sense of who I am [laughs].

### **Exploring theoretical assumptions of occupational identity from the lived experience of homelessness [2hd]**

Critics of the construct of occupational identity suggest that there are certain assumptions that underpin it (Phelan and Kinsella, 2009; Laliberte-Rudman and Dennhardt, 2008). These include '(a) the individual at the core of identity formation, (b) choice, (c) productivity and (d) social dimensions' (Phelan and Kinsella, 2009, p86). To examine the associations between homelessness and occupational identity further, data were analysed against these theoretical assumptions.

This research into the lived experience of homelessness challenges the idea that individuals have control over their identity, as demonstrated by the emergence of spoiled identities. The reaction of the public, such as Neil being called names when rough sleeping, suggests that identities are not just shaped by the self (Dickie, Cutchin and Humphrey, 2006) and this is also evident in literature on homelessness (Skosireva et al, 2014; Rayburn and Guittar, 2013). Furthermore, participants in this study experienced occupational deprivation which impacted on their ability to make choices about occupations, both when sleeping rough, and whilst living in the hostel. For example, Mark valued and enjoyed cooking, and regularly participated in a cooking group run by a volunteer at the hostel. The majority of his photographs were of dishes he had cooked, suggesting some correlation between this occupation and a positive sense of self, or identity. However, he was not able to make choices about what to eat or when to cook. He stated: "Yeah, I like cooking, yeah. But obviously here, you know, this [the cooking group] is on a Thursday."

This illustrates how both agency (the self) and structure (society/culture) influence identity (Huot and Laliberte-Rudman, 2010). Mark was committed to cooking and demonstrated personal agency in respect of this, however, there were structural barriers to his participation because he was only able to access the kitchen when the volunteer ran the cooking group.

Productivity is also an element that is emphasised in occupational identity theory (Phelan and Kinsella, 2009). The participants were embedded in a Western culture and were subject to society's values. The norm for males of a working age is to be in employment. This socially constructed aspect to occupational identity influenced the men in the study and it is therefore unsurprising that all of the participants articulated aspirations in relation to a productive role. Arguably, achieving that aim might be more problematic for them because of the social discourse surrounding homelessness and prevailing negative attitudes that influence the occupational

choices of homeless people. Moreover, some of the participants acquired criminal records as a result of engaging in illegal occupations, and commented on how this engagement impacted on them:

To be honest the part, being in that situation you get in rocky roads, and where I got in got in rocky roads, I used to go and steal, just to have funds and get somewhere in life, and look at me now, it's caught up with me and I've got burglary charges, I'm on bail so, not good. (Alex)

The influence of society on identity formation has been acknowledged in the literature (Phelan and Kinsella, 2009). For Neil, his previous occupation as a computer programmer carried status in society and influenced his identity in a positive way (Christiansen, 2004). However, thinking has extended beyond the idea of socially approved occupations to suggest that society can actually “form, shape or even produce identities” (Phelan and Kinsella, 2009, p89). This was the case where negative identities were formed due to stigma and discrimination. Participants did not wish to belong to the homeless population and sought ways to distance themselves from other homeless people, as the following quote illustrates:

I think, I think, that people saw that I wasn't a criminal, a proper homeless person, erm, but I think everyone, everyone, staff wise, saw the potential in me you know. (Neil)

This illustrates the power of socio-cultural influences on identity (Kantartzis and Molineux, 2011). In a similar way, people with disabilities often reject labels given to them. A study by Asaba and Jackson (2011) that explored disability, identities, and occupation discussed the case of Sam, a wheelchair-user with a recent spinal cord injury who did “not consider himself as disabled” (Asaba and Jackson, 2011, p142) because of the negative social discourse around disability. The participants in this study disassociated themselves from negative connotations of homelessness which they achieved either through describing identity in terms of previous achievements (Sean) or future aspirations (Neil and Alex).

## Conclusion

This chapter has added to the occupational identity literature by examining both existing identity theory *and* occupational identity theory whilst relating these to the lived experience of a group of homeless people in the UK.

Identity scholars discuss both identity *content* and *process*. It does appear that engaging in occupations is one of the main *processes* through which identity is formed, and this was Christiansen's original premise (1999). Being able to call yourself a footballer would necessitate engaging in playing football. It is interesting that for Sean, the content of his identity as a butcher remained long after he stopped engaging in the occupations that were part of the process of forming that identity. His memory and the narrative he constructs allow him to integrate his memories with his

present experiences, which supports his connection to others. Kielhofner (2002) alluded to both content and process in his original definition of occupational identity. This was in terms of: who one is and wishes to become (content) generated from one's history of occupational participation (process). Generally, however, the distinction between identity content and process has not been elaborated upon in the occupational science literature and this may be a useful area of future research, particularly as both aspects can impact on sense of self and wellbeing.

This chapter has shown that identity content and processes can be experienced as humiliating or alienating by people; the spoiled identities discussed illustrate this (for example going through bins and picking up cigarette ends, and being labelled as homeless by others). However, Kielhofner's (2002) original definition does not allude to these more negative aspects. To understand humans as occupational beings, occupational science needs to be inclusive of the full range of human occupational experience. It is important to understand that structural factors can impede personal agency and choice in respect of engaging in meaningful occupations (Mark and his cooking), and make the development of a positive identity challenging. Working therapeutically with others, one might therefore need to consider the impact on identity of "who you are unable to be because of what you are excluded from doing" and "who you do not want to be through what you have done" (for example Mark and his criminal record).

The idea that a person's previous and ongoing positive identities (e.g. football fan, Sean's previous achievements) might provide protection against adversity is useful because these aspects of a person's occupational history may provide a base against which other new positive identities can be formed. It was clear from this research that participants had aspirations to change their future occupational identity. Whilst in a time of crisis, like homelessness, identity might become damaged. Opportunities to experience the self in a positive way, such as through engaging in new, more constructive, occupations could support changes in identity and consequently wellbeing. Finally there is the collective or social aspect of identity that might be described as "who you are perceived to be by others through what you do". The participants in this study were motivated to take part and described future occupational aspirations. They also disassociated themselves from wider society's negative connotations of homeless people by mentally distancing themselves from fellow residents. This raises questions as to how a person might experience belonging when they are within a socially excluded section of society. These aspects merit further research.

The study presented in this chapter has shown that understanding occupational identity as "who we are through what we do" is far too simplistic. A number of other valid permutations of this simple definition have been suggested for example "who you don't want to be through what you've done". There are doubtless many other

permutations, which suggest a simple definition of occupational identity is not realistic. What is useful from a therapeutic perspective is to continue to take an occupational lens to considering issues of identity, as this links to a person's or community's self-esteem and wellbeing. Occupational therapists need to consider how occupations support identity construction, maintenance and change, but this should continue from a multi-layered approach in relation not only to the individual, but their relationships and also from the wider societal perspective.

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