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EXPANDING CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF OCCUPATIONAL IDENTITY: DRAWING FROM THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF HOMELESSNESS

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EXPANDING CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF OCCUPATIONAL IDENTITY: DRAWING
FROM THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF HOMELESSNESS

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Background:

Occupational identity (OI) is an emerging construct in occupational science. Critiques of OI suggest an over emphasis on achievement based doing and individual choice (Laliberte-Rudman and Dennhardt, 2008) consequently; there has been a move to broaden understandings of the construct (Phelan and Kinsella, 2009). This study aimed to expand the construct by exploring it from the position of a socially excluded population.

Method:

Data were collected from a sample of five men living in a homeless hostel in the UK and included semi-structured interviews and participant photography. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009) was used to analyse the data.

Results:

Participants experienced a range of occupational engagement that influenced their identity. This included engagement in anti-social occupations that occurred as a result of homelessness and resulted in spoilt identities. Participants did not necessarily have control over their identity; both agency (the self) and structure (society/culture) influenced the participants' ability to engage in occupations which consequently impacted on identity. Engagement in previously enjoyable occupations supported positive identity maintenance. Participants also articulated aspirations for more positive future identities.

Conclusion:

Current conceptualisations of OI are too narrow to adequately describe the relationship between occupation and identity. A multi-layered understanding of both identity content and processes is required.

Application to Practice:

Spoilt identities impact negatively on well-being. Occupational therapists working with the homeless population should support people to engage in pro-social occupations in order to experience themselves in a positive way, which could support changes in identity and consequently wellbeing.

References

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