

Editorial

Are we the victims of our history?

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Having travelled along the road as an Occupational Therapist (OT) and lecturer in OT for the past 38 years and now reaching that stage in my life when I will shortly pack up my office and move into the comfort of a rocking chair ('I'll be damned if I really will!!), I would like to share some of the conclusions, both controversial and challenging, reached after many hours reflecting on the profession.

I believe that South African Occupational Therapy has become more and more colonised by the world views of our Western Occupational Therapy colleagues. We camouflage these views in our training curricula with what I will refer to as *token titbits* of the Anglo-Afrikaner-African world view which is laden with the baggage of our oppressive history. Our current view is further polluted by the tendency to believe that everything Western and particularly American is perfect and right¹.

We earnestly need to decolonise our way of thinking and commence on the challenging and very exciting road of reconstructing an African world view based upon relevant and pure African philosophies. Why have we clung so dogmatically to western models of practice such as the medical model, the Model of Human Occupation and others without assessing their real validity when set against the various cultures and beliefs that make up our own country? Occupational therapy models have been developed exclusively in the western world which means we should question their validity to other cultures. Models are also culturally bound and do not exist or are not derived in cultural isolation². How then can we accept that the models we use in South Africa are appropriate to our unique set of variables?

The notion of occupation as being culturally embedded is central to many conceptualisations of occupation; occupations are thus shared and understood within a particular cultural context³. Have we as South African OTs really explored this within our own very diverse cultural context?

We need to seriously explore African world views such as the now well known concept of "ubuntu". According to people such as in Coetzee & Roux⁴ *Ubuntu* is not only an African way of life, it is a world view centralised in the *collective consciousness of the people of Africa*. This distinctive collective consciousness is manifested in the way they behave, express themselves and are spiritually self-fulfilled and in which values such as the universal brotherhood of Africans in *sharing and treating other people as humans* is concretised⁴.

Contemporary European philosophy and African philosophy are contrary to each other, African philosophy embodies a conception of human beings that is neither dualistic nor materialistic. *Ubuntu* is epitomised in the maxim "umuntu ngumunthu ngabantu" which basically means "a person is a person through persons". This is very different to the general European concept of dualism i.e. "I think therefore I am" wherein the self is always envisaged as something "inside" the person or at least "as a kind of container of mental properties and powers". In African philosophy this concept of positioning oneself as being distinct from and controlling the world and in some sense being "above" it, does not exist. It is an African communalism which is opposite to European collectivism⁵.

To illustrate this we need only draw a comparison of the term *participation* so commonly used in South African occupational therapy to the term as it is viewed within the *ubuntu* context. Mulago cited in Shutte⁵ defines "participation" in terms of denoting the way in which the individual is seen as belonging to a group thus "*participation is the element of connection which unites different beings as beings, as substances, without confusing them. It is the pivot of relationships between members of the same community, the link which binds together individuals and groups, the ultimate meaning not only of the unity which is personal to each (person) but of that unity in multiplicity, that totality, that concentric and harmonic unity of the visible and invisible worlds*".

In *ubuntu* as we grow older so we become more and more of a person and more ourselves, hence the generally high respect apportioned to elderly people in African culture. How splendid! How good! How excellent to know that in my country there is a world view that sees me not as a silly dementing and physically deteriorating old fool but rather as someone becoming more complete!

The above is but a *soupçon* of the many aspects of this particular philosophy which should force us to sit up and think about how these

views can be incorporated into a more realistic and appropriate model to guide the implementation of occupational therapy for the majority of the people of South Africa. The more I get to know about *ubuntu* the more I see the *totality* of mankind as seen through our OT eyes.

We have our very own model of Creative Participation as developed by Vona du Toit. Yes we do apply it in most, if not all, of our training curricula but have we really made an effort to develop this model in relation to the needs of the country and market it to the Western world?

The 'new' South African community psychology differs from the 'old' in almost every aspect. For example, professionalism is rejected in favour of community participation; elitist academic knowledge in favour of lay understanding and the consulting room in favour of community based interventions. The 'new' should be about trying out new roles, breaking old rules and discovering things that are impossible to discover in the consulting room⁶ and if we are to reconstruct our OT identity to more appropriately meet the needs of the diverse communities we serve, then we have to do these "new" things. This means a shift in emphasis and situation and a taking on of new roles. It means a change in attitude and a new becoming. A becoming that is proud and assertive together with being gentle and sensitive. A becoming that can move just as easily within tar roads and white coated clinics as it can within dirt roads and brown earthed communities⁷.

Therefore, my beloved colleagues let us rise up proudly as African OTs and really exploit the wonderful heritage we have. Let us really begin exploring more African perceptions of human occupation and its effects upon health and wellness. I am getting past it now but I would love to read some of the research you younger OTs are going to implement in this exciting area while rocking in my rocking chair!!!

References:

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Note:

The editor invites comments, in the form of a letter to the editor, on the concept of "ubuntu" and whether it has been successfully integrated into health care services in general and occupational therapy in particular.

