

# Theorising social transformation in Occupational Science: The American civil rights movement and South African struggle against apartheid as 'occupational reconstructions'

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## ABSTRACT

This article introduces a new way to think about social transformation in occupational science. The theory of occupational reconstructions is presented through examples of collective action by disempowered communities to achieve racial justice. An 'occupational reconstruction' is defined as what people do to remake ordinary life in response to a problematic situation. Occupational reconstructions are characterised by: (1) problematic situations; (2) meaningful and purposeful action; (3) embodied practices; (4) narrative structure; (5) creative transformations; (6) voluntary engagement; and (7) hopeful experimentalism. We apply the theory of occupational reconstructions here to large-scale situations of political activism in the American civil rights movement and the South African struggle against apartheid. The authors suggest that occupational reconstructions offer a distinctive theory of social transformation that can help occupational science and occupational therapy engage in both mass movements and more local situations relating to human rights and social justice.

**Key words:** Occupational reconstruction, social activism, civil rights, protest music

*Transformation may occur at a personal, community or social level. It can make a difference where democracy, the rule of law, fundamental social services, job creation and/or sustainable enterprises and the sharing of power are lacking.*

Ruth Watson

## INTRODUCTION

This article introduces the theory of *occupational reconstructions*. This new theory is intended to enable occupational science to describe, explain and study - in occupational terms - how people act to change their situations for what they believe will be for the better. Applying the theory to the American civil rights movement and the South African struggle against apartheid, the article aims to demonstrate how political activism functions occupationally. The theory is intended to provide a bridge between current thinking in occupational science and future occupational therapy practice for social change. Occupational reconstruction theory brings an action-oriented framework to occupational science and occupational therapy regarding social justice, occupational injustice, collective action, political approaches, and critical theories.

The theory of occupational reconstructions builds on important steps to date. First, occupational therapy already holds social participation to be within its scope of practice<sup>1,2</sup>. Second, occupational science as an academic discipline has made it possible to conceive of occupations, such as social participation, more expansively than occupational therapy practice typically does in today's health care systems<sup>3,4</sup>. Consequently, it has become possible to glimpse a near future when occupational therapists will use occupational science theories and empirical research to help to change lives not only individually but more widely, in the aggregate, through public health policy interventions and community-based collaborations<sup>5,6,7,8,9</sup>.

Further, concepts and theories in occupational science are emerging that re-imagine societal participation on a global scale. The literature concerned with occupational injustice, for example, addresses human rights and capabilities in the broadest possible sense<sup>10,11</sup>. The growing 'occupational therapy without borders' literature starting with the edited volume by Kronenberg, Pollard and Simó-Algado<sup>12</sup> describes innovative practice that treats not only individuals but social problems. These approaches may partly map onto community-based practice as currently described in occupational therapy<sup>13</sup>. But many take place outside of professional

practice as currently defined and some are conceived as part of broad social transformations<sup>14</sup>.

As occupational science expands its use of critical theories to analyse how inequality, injustice, and disempowerment are socially produced<sup>15,16,17</sup>, occupational therapists may desire increasingly to engage in politically informed practice. Toward such an end, Townsend calls for a critical literacy of occupation so that societies can address the effects of environmental changes on the world's aging population<sup>18</sup>. There is a need, further, for occupational science to study how people actually organise themselves to create social change.

## A THEORY OF OCCUPATIONAL RECONSTRUCTIONS: SOURCES, DEFINITION AND PRINCIPLES

The theory of occupational reconstructions draws on American pragmatism<sup>19</sup> as a starting point for empirical research and theoretical elaboration. Pragmatist philosophy contributed a distinctive perspective on human experience - especially, the concept of occupation, to both occupational therapy and occupational science. The theory of occupational reconstructions builds on the work of, John Dewey (1859-1952), the most articulate and influential of the 20<sup>th</sup> century pragmatists. Dewey had his political awakening during the Pullman Strike and boycott in 1894 when he was traveling by train from the east to teach at the University of Chicago<sup>20</sup>. Once established there, Dewey began his association with social reformers such as Jane Addams and Rabbi Emil Hirsch who helped to shape the emerging profession of occupational therapy<sup>21,22</sup>. Dewey's political theorising, his participation in left liberal and sometimes socialist politics and reforms, and his influence on political thought have been well-documented<sup>23</sup>.

Psychiatrist Adolph Meyer, who met Dewey through an associate at Addams' Hull House settlement, helped to move the pragmatist perspective more firmly into occupational therapy. Meyer saw occupations clinically as a means to provide opportunities



rather than prescriptions for psychiatric patients<sup>24,25,26,27</sup>. Although less often mentioned in the occupational therapy literature, Meyer also focused on social policies to prevent mental illness and on the reform of public institutions<sup>28</sup>. Meyer did not limit his expectations of patients' ability to reintegrate into society or even to recover from mental illness. Like Dewey, his approach to reality was open and emergent, reflecting a view of truth as the product of experimentation in the sense of trial and error, followed by intelligent reflection upon experience and the revision of prior beliefs or doctrines<sup>29</sup>.

*Occupations are to be seen in pragmatism, then, as an embodied form of inquiry—that is, an experimental search for truth.* This viewpoint embraces a commitment to *human freedom*. It is a disposition that Wilcock<sup>30</sup>, more recently, appears to invoke when characterising health through occupation as 'doing, being, becoming, and belonging.' Understood as *experiments*, occupations are by nature *creative*, rather than standardised. *Engagement* is a hallmark of occupational therapy when *intrinsically motivated*—that is, voluntary, not coerced. In an essay on the psychology of occupations in education, Dewey<sup>31</sup> distinguished occupation from ordinary consciousness by describing the former as the quality of the individual's engagement of mind and body in a task that is intrinsically interesting and undertaken for its own sake. Occupation according to this definition is crucial to the theory of occupational reconstructions. Occupation is to be understood in a theory of occupational reconstruction not as any activity or embodied action<sup>32</sup>, but as a particularly heightened form of *mind-body* action to deal with a problematic situation and that is inherently transformational.

Pragmatist themes are evident not only in occupational therapy but in the founding literature of occupational science. The themes of *optimism* and *hopefulness*, for example, concern the human capacity to grow, adapt, experience and create positive change through occupational engagement<sup>3,4,5</sup>. But such change is not assured or guaranteed. For this reason, occupational therapy in its pragmatist form is *ameliorative* without expecting to be necessarily curative<sup>28</sup>. Further, this optimism is not a surface sentiment but an expression of pragmatism's theory of reality and of knowledge. *Occupational therapy and occupational science carry a hopeful view of human beings as agents who can ameliorate that is, improve their situations.*

This reflection on hopefulness brings us to comment briefly on a dimension of occupational reconstructions that is partly a legacy of early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century pragmatism but also of more recent narrative theories. Narrative entered social theorising in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, after Dewey's career had ended and with the so-called linguistic turn in philosophy. Yet Dewey's attention to the temporality of experience anticipates narrative approaches such as Mattingly's ethnographies of occupational therapy treatment<sup>33</sup> and of relations between health care providers and the African American families of the patients they treat<sup>34</sup>. In these works, Mattingly elaborates a social theory in which interactions are seen as embodying stories that anticipate possible, hopeful futures. Mattingly uses the term 'narrative emplotment' for such coordinated action. There are no occupational reconstructions *per se* in nature, but rather storied or emplotted attempts to make meaningful and purposeful change. Mattingly's approach, with its own strands of pragmatist thinking about the nature of human experience, helps to reinforce occupational reconstruction theory's focus on experience and agency, including elements of temporality, cooperation, purpose and meaning.

Pragmatism's persistence and relevance remain evident<sup>35,36,37,38,39,40,41,42</sup>. Occupational therapists enact a pragmatist approach when they use occupations in treatment with patients and clients to facilitate skills, adaptation, growth, creativity, and increased life satisfaction<sup>43,44,45</sup>. But not every activity produces these effects. The occupational dimensions of mind-body engagement and intrinsic motivation must be evoked<sup>46</sup>. This is why a theory of social transformation is needed that puts at its center a well-elaborated conceptualisation of human occupation.

## Reconstructing Problematic Situations

Dewey's pragmatist philosophy is organised around human experience. He viewed truth as the product of problem solving in

response to challenges that arise in everyday routines and expectations. Dewey refers to such moments or events, when our habitual patterns of thought and action are disrupted, as *situations* or *problematic situations*. Problematic situations are uncomfortable and may prompt us to question the truth of our expectations and to try doing things differently. This doing of things is *occupational*, arising from a heightened state of awareness and engagement: We are jarred out of our routines to consciousness, seeking new ways of thinking and acting in order to make the situation better. We reflect on the effects of our action to arrive at a new truth. This set of thoughtful, deliberative actions is the process we are calling *occupational reconstruction*.

Dewey describes human experience as an incremental form of problem-solving through which creativity emerges and learning occurs. His experience-centered philosophy is built around human agents to whom the doing of an occupation is purposeful and the results matter. Whatever such agents learn from their attempts to change the problematic situation will be incorporated into new truths. This reconstruction process occurs at the level of individuals who are enculturated in their society and its customs but face problematic situations that require them to reflect and make a change. It also happens among communities and other social units that face shared problematic situations that require collective action. Thus Dewey's ideas in his important work, *Experience and Nature*<sup>47</sup>, account for both individual and collective change non-dualistically as a transaction.

In *Democracy and Education*, published in 1916, Dewey<sup>48</sup> had already begun to articulate his anti-authoritarian theory of democratic action and social transformation. The period in the United States, 1890 to 1920, was characterised by rapid industrialisation, explosive urbanisation, mass immigration, vast income inequality, and labor exploitation. In response to these problems, Dewey viewed democracy as a cooperative, problem-solving endeavour that could be taught and cultivated as a habit or disposition<sup>49</sup>. A communitarian, reformist perspective on democracy and periods of identification as a socialist remained a staple of Dewey's nearly century-long life and career<sup>50,51</sup>.

## Seven Principles of Occupational Reconstructions

In this article, the authors explain the theory of occupational reconstructions through examples of problematic situations of racial injustice shared by broad communities in the United States and South Africa. In these situations, political activists seeking change took collective action. The following principles of occupational reconstructions are based on a comparative analysis of activism and social movements in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries<sup>52,53,54</sup>.

1. *Occupational reconstructions respond to a problematic situation.* There is a meaningful 'something' that participants do, either together in a coordinated fashion or as aggregations of individual acts in order to address the shared problem that they experience.
2. *Occupational reconstructions have meaning and purpose to ameliorate the situation.* Occupational reconstructions occur when people feel that there really is no choice but to act, in order to transform the situation in some way that they perceive as being for the better.
3. *Occupational reconstructions are comprised of embodied practices.* Occupational reconstructions concern more than beliefs, ideas, symbols, thoughts, feelings, and words. They involve mind-body engagement.
4. *Occupational reconstructions have a narrative structure.* Purposeful actions have a temporal structure, so that participants can experience doing something specific and anticipate a desired outcome.
5. *Occupational reconstructions open up spaces for creative transformations.* Because they aim to solve problems, occupational reconstructions include the search for and discovery of new ways of thinking about and doing things.



6. *Occupational reconstructions involve voluntary participation.* Occupational reconstructions emphasise choice and freedom. The action is intrinsically motivated. It has a strong affinity with democratic and consensual forms of politics and governance, versus authoritarianism and coercion.
7. *Occupational reconstructions are hopeful experiments.* The purpose is to improve or ameliorate the situation. Anticipation is hopeful, but there is no guarantee that the desired outcome will be achieved.

## THE AMERICAN CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT AS AN OCCUPATIONAL RECONSTRUCTION

The American civil rights movement, 1954-1968, provides rich examples of political activism as an occupational reconstruction. This phase of the freedom struggle of African-Americans was distinguished by the successful use of non-violent mass protest by civil rights organisations to challenge racial discrimination in the southern states.

After the Civil War, in 1865, slavery was abolished, persons of all races born in the United States were affirmed to be citizens, and voting rights were extended to citizens regardless of race, colour, or previous enslavement. But segregation was soon enacted in the southern states. In the case *Plessy v Ferguson* (1898), the United States Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the southern states' 'separate but equal' laws.

Half a century later, however, the Supreme Court overturned segregation in education in *Brown v Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) under the equal protection clause of the United States Constitution. This watershed moment triggered the mass protest phase of the freedom struggle, which was carried out by a coalition of church, labour, and civil rights organisations, most prominently, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), led by Dr. Martin Luther King, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Conference on Racial Equality (CORE), and Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). They adopted a strategy modeled on Gandhi's philosophy of non-violent resistance in India's struggle leading to independence from Great Britain in 1947. Among the non-violent tactics used in the United States were marches, boycotts, freedom rides, and sit-ins.

In 1955, bus rider Rosa Parks' refusal to give up a seat she had taken in the Whites Only section touched off a campaign by the SCLC to end segregated public transportation in Montgomery, Alabama. The SCLC's full-scale boycott of the buses in Montgomery had a powerful economic impact made possible by *creative solutions* to the problem of finding alternatives to public transportation, such as car pools, giving rides to hitchhikers, and a decision by black taxi drivers to charge passengers a reduced ten-cent fare to compete with the fare on the public buses. In 1956, a federal district court declared the segregated buses to be unconstitutional, a ruling that was appealed but later upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court.

Despite the Supreme Court desegregation rulings, however, the southern states did not move to dismantle segregation and other forms of discrimination. As anticipated, mobilisations by civil rights activists were met with brutality and even death at the hands of state troopers, local police, and lawless citizens. The desegregation of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, 1957, was a test by the NAACP of the Supreme Court ruling three years earlier in *Brown*. The nine black students who volunteered to desegregate the all-white school were threatened by a mob and had to enter the premises under police protection. The governor of the state then deployed the Arkansas National Guard to block the students' re-entry, but NAACP lawyers were able to get a federal court injunction to force the governor to desist. Civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. appealed to the president of the United States, Dwight Eisenhower, who, aware of the international embarrassment caused by the events in Little Rock, ordered federal troops and the Arkansas National Guard to protect the students throughout the rest of the year.

The capacity to confront, expose, and accept the oppressor's brutality without resorting to violence gives non-violent movements their moral authority and ultimately leads to political power<sup>55,56</sup>. In 1960, sit-ins to desegregate lunch counters organised by CORE and SNCC became a mass tactic of civil disobedience, as described in the section below. In 1961, CORE initiated the freedom rides, to integrate interstate public transportation. Many other tactics and incidents, such as black voter registration drives and freedom schools ensued in the coming years. Analysing the civil rights movement as an occupational reconstruction helps to explain how protesters individually withstood the threats, abuses and injuries they faced and how collectively they maintained their focus, purpose and solidarity. Drawing on first-person memoirs of American civil rights protesters on film and in print and published research on the civil rights movement, we consider below the occupational reconstruction aspects of *sitting-in* and of *singing protest songs*.

### Sitting-in to Desegregate Lunch Counters

Sit-ins to desegregate lunch counters were an effort to do something about racial injustice as a *problematic situation* (Principle 1). It was a situation in which other viable options for change were not available. The organisation initially most committed to Gandhi's teachings of non-violent resistance, CORE, introduced sit-ins as the early 1940s<sup>57</sup>. The tactic became a tool of mass protest only when SNCC entered the scene, using its ability to recruit and help organise large numbers of young people from black churches to scale up the protests<sup>58</sup>.

Ezell Blair Jr., a student member of CORE, expressed the *meaning and purpose* (Principle 2) of these actions the night he returned from viewing a film about Gandhi and told his mother: "Mom, we are going to do something tomorrow that might change history"<sup>59,55</sup>. In fact, history did change the following day, on February 1, 1960, when Blair and three other black students walked into Woolworth's department store in Greensboro, North Carolina. The Greensboro Four, as they were later known, made some purchases, kept their receipts, and took seats at the lunch counter to order doughnuts and coffee. They stayed in their seats all day but were never served. They were joined in the next days by increasing numbers of students willing to sit-in.

The sit-ins were *embodied practices* (Principle 3) requiring a heightened mind-body engagement. In every sit-in a battle had to be won demonstrating the value of non-violent protest. The philosophy of non-violence alone did not constitute the occupational reconstruction without participation in specific actions. Training provided by civil rights leaders included role playing, so that the protesters knew what to expect and could prepare their responses to the anticipated violence with which they would be met. Former student activist John Lewis later reflected, 'We were prepared to sit-in... We just didn't wake up one morning and say we were going to sit-in... We studied the philosophy and discipline of nonviolence'<sup>60</sup>. The sit-ins required young people to put their bodies on the line while maintaining awareness, judgment and self-control.

The power of the sit-ins came from the aggregation of individuals doing something, the same action, in similar situations over time. National media amplified the impact as SNCC coordinated sit-ins in eleven other southern cities in the two weeks following the action of the Greensboro Four. In the months from February through October, sit-ins took place in 112 cities throughout the south<sup>61</sup>. Student protester Julian Bond later commented that because so many black students wanted to sit-in, the police were rendered ineffectual: Even after the police arrested protesters seated at the counter, the students were immediately replaced by others waiting at the door<sup>60</sup>. Going to jail became a mark of pride, lessening the stigma and fear in the black community and among white supporters of breaking unjust laws<sup>59</sup>.

Moreover, these acts of civil disobedience embodied moral claims on the part of the black community. The actions were collective and cumulative. Sitting-in, day after day, allowed the black students to make a greater impact collectively than they could individually in their shared situation. Each protester sat in for him or herself, and also for every other African-American. John Lewis recalled that students



spent their time not merely sitting, but busily engaged in reading books and writing papers. By carrying on their academic work at the lunch counters, the student activists challenged racist stereotypes that portrayed blacks as intellectually inferior to whites. The students' moral claims to equal rights were more than symbolic: These claims were literally embodied in acts of civil disobedience.

The sit-ins had a *narrative structure* (Principle 4). This might also be seen as a dramatic structure of temporally organised, embodied actions that have a beginning, middle and ending. The setting for the narrative consisted of the decision by CORE and SNCC to mount a protest at a particular time and place. Protesters were then trained in non-violent resistance. Taking a seat at the counter of a Woolworth or other five-and-dime store initiated a problem for the servers and store owners on how to handle the protesters' disruption of the status quo.

A series of interim events followed, testing the protesters' determination. They were taunted, physically abused, and ordered to leave. Their crisis consisted of remaining steadfast to their philosophy and training of non-violent resistance. The climax came when the police arrived to handle the situation, which typically ended in beatings and arrests. The students began the sit-in knowing what might happen. They may have been frightened, but they were prepared.

The fact that this drama was repeated and televised in situation after situation throughout the south helped to bring the awareness of the entire nation to an understanding of segregation as a brutal and immoral institution. The sit-ins became part of a collective narrative about the growing civil rights movement as more and more people joined the protests. This in turn was set within broader historical and spiritual narratives about the nation and the African American quest for freedom and justice. At the same time, each protestor in his or her own conscience experienced a crisis embedded in a personal narrative leading to the decision to face danger for the cause of civil rights.

Sit-ins opened up spaces for *creative transformation* (Principle 5). Building on the success of the sit-ins in 1960, civil rights leaders experimented with new forms of civil disobedience to confront and publicise the specific features of institutionalised racism in America. In 1961, CORE introduced the freedom rides, for example, a tactic designed to integrate public transportation in the southern states by summoning the federal government's constitutional authority over interstate commerce. Whites and blacks sat together on buses traveling south from northern states. Once they crossed the border into a southern state, they refused to move to racially segregated sections. Interstate commerce was governed by the federal authority but state authorities in the South upheld their own state laws calling for segregation. They looked on passively so that the greatest danger in the freedom rides came from locals in the southern states who met the protesters with rocks, clubs, and torches to set their buses on fire.

Despite the known risks, activists in the sit-ins and freedom rides *freely chose to participate* (Principle 6). Intrinsic motivation was a driving force, powerful enough to overcome warnings from parents or friends. The sit-ins were *hopeful experiments* (Principle 7). Ezell Blair, Jr. sounded hopeful when he announced to his mother in Greensboro that he and three friends were going to do something that would change the world. The outcome they hoped for was equal treatment and human dignity. The sit-ins did change things for the better, as Blair had hoped, but there were no guarantees.

## Singing Protest Songs

While mass sit-ins emerged as a new political tactic in the civil rights struggle, singing was a different kind of practice responding to the persistence of racial injustice in America as a *problematic situation* (Principle 1)<sup>62</sup>. As a scholar of protest music around the world notes, music supports people to 'act in concert' in response to political oppression<sup>63</sup>.

The traditional hymns and spirituals sung in black churches, where civil rights activism was organised and sustained, provided a rich repertoire of songs that were brought into movement. The anthem of the American civil rights movement, *We Shall Overcome*,

for example, affirmed the struggle's *meaning and purpose* (Principle 2): "Deep in my heart I do believe, we shall overcome some day"<sup>60</sup>. As activist Harold Middlebrook noted, such songs shaped the community across the generations: "You take that which has expressed your innermost feelings over the centuries, and you use it as the vehicle, the tool, to express where you are, and the oppression and the suffering that you feel at this given time"<sup>60</sup>. Thus individual and collective experience were fused together transactionally when protesters sang the traditional repertoire.

Contemporary blues written and performed by skilled artists and recorded in professional studios also strengthened the movement by promoting empathy and also educating audiences. The song *Strange Fruit*, a wrenching blues written and performed by Billie Holiday, protested the practice of lynching<sup>64</sup>. The song, *I Wonder When I'll Get to be Called a Man*, written and performed by Big Bill Broonzy, protests white racists' demeaning treatment of black men as 'boys.' Performers of commercially recorded folk music also played a key part in educating youthful audiences and building the movement. Organisers of demonstrations invited popular groups such as Peter, Paul and Mary and individual performers such as Joan Baez and Richie Havens to attract, entertain, and rally white college students. One civil rights activist Paul Breines later reflected with certainty that listening to protest music on the radio led people to participate<sup>60</sup>.

Singing as an *embodied practice* (Principle 3) has a different character than listening to music and calls for a closer analysis. The songs sung by protesters were more immediate and improvisational than that of staged performances, with less demand for musical ability or technique. Unlike professional recording artists, singers in protest actions communicated directly among themselves in real time and also messaged their opponents on the scene. The content of such communication far exceeded the message contained in the lyrics because so much of music and its effects are non-cognitive.

Singing protest songs had the most galvanising effect when marchers were faced by hostile police during demonstrations or when individuals experienced the personal distress of being beaten and locked in jail. Speaking in musicological terms, an important feature of music performed in the group actions was its monophonic texture - that is, singing in unison. In addition, regular rhythm, steady tempo, repetitive forms, call and response, accelerando and crescendo, high density and hand clapping asserted an insistent collective presence marked by unity<sup>65</sup>. Rhythmic patterns such as swaying and clapping united the diverse actors into one body. John Lewis recalled: "It was the music that gave us the courage, the will, the drive to go on despite it all....It was the music that created a sense of solidarity"<sup>60</sup>.

Singing had its greatest power as a shared action. When activists were jailed, singing was a frequent response. Activist Hezekiah Watkins recalled a moment in jail when the incarcerated protesters sang the song, *Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Round*: "This particular song, at that particular moment...we felt like athletes"<sup>66</sup>. In such cases, singing was a means of ameliorating distress and restoring resolve. Activist Catherine Brooks recalled singing the song, *I Shall Not Be Moved*, as a reaction to a man putting out a lit cigarette on her face at a demonstration. Here, singing strengthened Brooks' commitment to nonviolence and distracted her from physical pain. Singing creates a differentiation from ordinary experience with its physical demands of breathing and vocalisation, and its faithfulness to patterns of melody and rhythm that corresponded to marching or other protest actions.

Singing can be seen also to have a *narrative structure* with respect to its dramatic insertion in the flow of time. There is a before-and-after structure that surrounds singing. Consequently, singing played a part within the temporal structure of protests in several ways besides to rally people at demonstrations. It was a means of practising non-violence, substituting one action for another, an action to reinforce steadfastness instead of running from dogs and clubs. At once the songs and the singers embodied the narrative in the words of the song, that they would not be 'turned around' or 'moved' by any amount of suffering or humiliation that the segregationists were inflicting on them. Later, singing helped pass time in jail and chal-



lenge the police authorities' definition of the activists as criminals rather than as nonviolent protesters. Not least, as described earlier, listening to and singing songs, such as *Free at Last*, performed by the Blind Boys of Alabama at the historic March on Washington in 1963, reinforced participants' sense of moving forward within the historical and spiritual narrative of gaining civil rights and freedom.

The use of songs may be seen, then, as having *opened spaces for creative transformation* of violent situations (Principle 5). Singing was a physical outlet for strong feelings and convictions. It served as a reminder that the protesters were prepared to experience pain and must not retaliate to physical force. And it presented an alternative course of action than that of responding to violence with escalating violence. Further, the singing of protest songs affirmed the participants' identification with and *voluntary participation* (Principle 6) in the civil rights movement. Even in jail, where freedom of movement is denied, it is possible for a person to exercise the freedom to sing.

Finally, singing was not guaranteed to change the experience of fear, anxiety, physical pain, rage, or aggression. Like the sit-ins and other examples of occupational reconstructions, singing was in each instance a *hopeful experiment* (Principle 7) in building the movement, connecting with contemporaries and past generations in the struggle, and changing the emotional weight of oppression. The words of the civil rights anthem, *We Shall Overcome*, were not a definitive prediction of success but a hopeful prophesy.

## Fighting Racial Injustice in the United States and in South Africa: A Critical and Comparative Analysis

Any social theory requires empirical case studies and comparative analyses, if it is to provide explanations, applications and even predictions. We compare the American civil rights movement with the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, in order to demonstrate that a theory of occupational reconstructions cannot be a 'one-size fits all' approach but must be closely tied to an understanding of each particular problematic situation. The American civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s was a phase in the struggle for black freedom marked by non-violent actions, such as 'sit-ins' at segregated lunch counters, protest marches, boycotts, and the rallying effects of protest music. Similarly, in the South African context, it has been suggested that non-violence played a crucial role. Zunes<sup>67</sup> argues that despite the African National Congress's willingness to use violence to bring down the apartheid regime, by the mid-1980s the ANC's return to non-violent tactics such as mass non-cooperation, strikes and boycotts was a key to the success of the freedom movement.

But why were non-violent tactics sufficient to change racially unjust laws in America's southern states, while in South Africa apartheid was not dismantled without violence against the state<sup>68</sup>? After all, the injustices experienced by blacks and 'coloureds' under the apartheid regime in South Africa were similar in many ways to those experienced by blacks in America's segregated south, as noted by Watson<sup>14:59-60</sup>:

*"South Africa's history shows very clearly the impact that politics can have on occupation. The racial segregation that occurred under the apartheid regime prevented free access for all people to certain occupations. Some people were denied freedom of movement (e.g. entry to public places was restricted by race); what they were offered was of inferior quality (e.g. education standards for black South Africans were far inferior to those available to whites); or their free and full participation was restricted (e.g. job reservation policies, whereby certain professions were available for only certain race groups)".*

Discrimination based on race violates human rights, according to Article II of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights<sup>69</sup> which is fully endorsed by WFOT<sup>70</sup>. While human rights are the international community's attempt to define minimum standards for human freedom and flourishing, this is largely a moral project that lacks a system of enforcement<sup>71</sup>. Civil rights, in contrast, have a basis in law. The apartheid regime in South Africa uniformly restricted the civil rights of blacks and coloureds throughout the nation. By contrast,

in the United States, state laws were uneven between north and south, and all were subject to the federal constitution. Once the 'separate but equal' doctrine of the southern states was declared unconstitutional, in *Brown v Board of Education* (1954), the door opened for blacks to claim their civil rights through non-violent protest without requiring an overthrow of the government.

Passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 by the United States Congress opened this door even wider. The first of these federal acts outlawed discrimination based on race, colour, religion, sex, or national origin. It ended unequal application of voter registration requirements and racial segregation in schools, at the workplace and by facilities that served the general public or "public accommodations"; the second act prohibited racial discrimination in voting anywhere in the United States. John Lewis, a southern black who in 1960, at the age of 20, was one of the thirteen original Freedom Riders, served from 1963 to 1966 as chairman of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. He was arrested 24 times, sustained beatings, and went on to organise and lead many direct actions. As a consequence of the movement, Lewis has served as the representative to the United States Congress from the state of Georgia's 5<sup>th</sup> district. Student protester Julian Bond also became a Georgia state legislator.

The use of power by the federal government to enact and enforce civil rights and voting rights averted an escalation to counter-violence from frustrated blacks. In South Africa, by contrast, the African National Congress (ANC) was not able to dismantle apartheid regime without violence. The monolithic policy of South Africa's ruling party had been imposed without exception, within a context where those oppressed were in the majority. There was no countervailing authority within the country to enforce legitimate change through an appeal to civil rights under the constitution. Hence there was greater pressure in South Africa to resort to militancy, as expressed in violence against the regime by the ANC.

The need for communities to engage in occupational reconstructions continues because the long term effects of racial injustice are hard to eradicate. Watson<sup>14:59-60</sup> notes: "The consequences of lack of exposure, underdeveloped potential and complications caused by occupational restriction of the majority of South Africans will be felt for generations to come". But as one observer comments with regard to the American civil rights movement, tactics are important: "Sometimes people may have intense grievances, they may be fairly well organized, and they may even believe that some authorities might be willing to listen to them, yet they do not protest because they are not quite sure how to do so effectively"<sup>72:259</sup>.

This need for effective organising tactics is a reason why a theory of occupational reconstructions is needed to develop an effective occupation-centered knowledge base about social change. Not all occupational reconstructions need to take place as political actions, such as the mass actions against racial injustice that we have used as examples in this article. Some, perhaps most, may take the form of community projects to raise resources to reconstruct situations less by confrontation, and more by cooperation, creating new opportunities to improve lives. This brings us to a brief discussion of current thinking about collective actions and social transformation in occupational science.

## WHAT A THEORY OF OCCUPATIONAL RECONSTRUCTIONS CONTRIBUTES TO CURRENT THINKING IN OCCUPATIONAL SCIENCE

Current thinking about occupational science is emerging to explain the role of occupations in social processes and to understand social issues from an occupation perspective. We discuss below the complementary relationships between occupational reconstruction theory and some key themes and exemplars of the emerging literature.

*Occupational injustice, human rights and political practice.* The concept of occupational justice currently binds together much of the thinking about occupational therapy, occupational science, human rights, and the possibility of political and social change<sup>73,74,75,76,77</sup>.



The discourse of occupational injustice points out areas of social disadvantage (for example Gupta<sup>78</sup>) and opportunities for advocacy (for example Whiteford<sup>79</sup>) based on its carefully differentiated areas of occupational deprivation, occupational alienation, occupational marginalisation, and occupational imbalance. These areas help to clarify the concept of occupational injustice and create a niche within a human rights framework that is new and distinctive because of its focus on occupation. A great strength of the occupational justice approach is that it helps to bridge the discipline of occupational science with the profession of occupational therapy.

This strength also may be a limitation, however, in the sense that there are problematic situations that concern occupational scientists and occupational therapists that do not easily fit into the occupational justice framework. With occupational injustice as the platform that allows occupational scientists and occupational therapists to legitimate practising in certain situations, a certain amount of theoretical slippage occurs. For example, let us say that the injustice that a community wants to address (its problematic situation) is food scarcity. An occupational injustice approach does not directly provide a justification to address this goal because it addresses injustice as a state of being or as an outcome. In other words, ameliorating the limits on occupational participation is theorised as an end, but not necessarily a means. An occupational reconstruction approach would start from the problematic situation: 'What can we do to get food?' It would recommend occupation as the means.

Bailliard<sup>80</sup> notes that there is no consensus on what is occupational justice, although the term appears broadly. Inequality and injustice are often taken as facts, rather than examined as contested human rights claims. The literature is stronger in raising literacy about the occupational impact of inequality and marginalisation, than in theorising how to accomplish change. More explicit attention may be needed to the ideas of occupation-as-ends and occupation-as-means, especially when considering that occupational injustice was initially described as a population-level concept at a social and cultural level<sup>10,73</sup>. Concerning occupational deprivation as a global problem, for example, Whiteford<sup>79,203</sup> notes: "Occupational therapists need to think and act at a broader social and cultural level. Armed with an occupational perspective of society, there is a need to invest more energy into influencing social and institutional structures and policies, which preclude people from full occupational participation".

Remedies currently tend to be framed in terms of meeting the diverse and unique occupational needs of disadvantaged individuals, actions more within reach of contemporary occupational therapists in practice. Envisioning the future of the occupational justice perspective, Durocher, Rappolt, and Gibson<sup>81</sup> report a need to operationalise occupational justice across the health care professions, which may also tend to keep theory and practice at the individualised rather than social level. Theories and empirical research that address how people organise themselves and mobilise collective action seem especially timely, as Townsend<sup>82</sup> recently seems to suggest.

Watson and Swartz<sup>83</sup> called for a consideration of occupational injustices in a framework of political and social transformation. In *Occupational Therapy without Borders*, Kronenberg, Simó-Algado and Pollard<sup>84</sup> compiled examples of occupational therapists working outside typical health care delivery systems, coming from grassroots, communitarian, critical and political points of departure. The contributors called on theorists such as Freire, De Certeau, Foucault, Bourdieu, Gramsci, and others, attempting to ground the new practices in social, critical, political, and emancipatory theories. For additional literature see also Kronenberg and Pollard<sup>85</sup>; Pollard, Sakellariou, and Kronenberg<sup>86</sup>; Pollard and Sakellariou<sup>87</sup>; and Block, Kasnitz, Nishida and Pollard<sup>88</sup>.

A subsequent volume promotes a loose 'ecology' of practices<sup>89</sup>. We agree with the idea of an 'ecology' practices, meaning that diverse practices are generative and ought to flourish. They need not be forced or colonised into a single theoretical approach. A systematic review of relevant contributions such as those in the 'without borders' books, however, could help to test the face valid-

ity of the theory of occupational reconstructions. In turn, the theory of occupational reconstructions may prove useful by providing a coherent platform for the profession to move forward at the level of collective interventions.

*Transactional perspectives.* The movement toward thinking politically about occupations has coincided with a call to refocus occupational science either on a non-person centered view of occupation<sup>90</sup> or on social processes and units of analysis greater than the individual<sup>91,92</sup>. Dickie, Cutchin and Humphry proposed replacing the individualism of the founding literature with a pragmatist emphasis on 'transactions,' the non-dualistic idea that the self and its environment are mutually constitutive<sup>93</sup>.

This critique of individualism was timely and much needed, if occupational science were to become a social science beyond a clinically oriented practice. Both the transactionalist perspective and occupational reconstructions start their analyses with Dewey's 'problematic situation'. Where occupational reconstruction differs is in its core focus on social transformation. Despite the potential of pragmatism to deal with social change, the transactional perspective draws primarily from Dewey's metaphysics<sup>35</sup> and apolitical neo-pragmatists, such as theorists of habit, neglecting Dewey's rich political legacy. Cutchin and Dickie<sup>37,34</sup> do note Dewey's sense of responsibility to community when they write that "the pragmatic attitude means that a concern for social justice, inclusion and participation can never truly be separated from the study of occupation". But this idea has not yet gained traction, and the impression remains that they are concerned with the problems faced by individuals in proximal environments.

A contemporary appreciation of Dewey's work on social reconstruction, with its themes of democracy, collective action, politics and social transformation is overdue<sup>51,94,95,96</sup>. Bailliard<sup>97</sup> notes the importance of Dewey's work on public discourse, which expands the moral imagination of a community that is in the deliberative process of making change. Further, in Dewey's view, moral deliberation needed for democratic problem-solving requires an appreciation of both rational and non-cognitive dimensions of our responses in situations<sup>98</sup>. Ultimately, the transactional perspective of pragmatism that challenges dualisms as that of mind-body and self-society, will be useful in developing a theory of occupational reconstruction.

*Critical theories.* Currently, what it means for occupational science to be 'critical,' 'political,' and 'socially responsive' is a topic of intense debate (for example Farias, Laliberte Rudman and Magalhães<sup>16</sup>). Critical approaches are part of an intellectual and scholarly project to expose structures, ideologies, discourses and policies of social domination and oppression<sup>99,100</sup>. Critical work provides occupational science with analyses of processes that limit and shape the social participation of disempowered classes, communities or populations. Angell<sup>17</sup>, for example, has discussed how occupations often serve to re-inscribe the marginality of people in already marginalised social positions. Laliberte Rudman<sup>15</sup> has shown how neoliberal discourses of aging are recasting and limiting the occupational possibilities of retirees in Canada on a national scale. To date, however, critical approaches have not given occupational science an occupational approach to resist domination or a theory of social change that belongs to the discipline.

While occupational reconstruction theory helps to fill this gap, by showing how occupational engagement may be related to social transformation, critical theories remain vital to understanding the variety of problematic situations faced by disempowered groups around the world<sup>101</sup>. The need for critical theories is crucial because globalisation and neoliberalism foster growing inequality and disempowerment within nations, regions, and cities, as well as among nations<sup>102</sup>. Dewey's conceptualisation of social reconstruction was not a political theory in the usual sense of providing an analysis of power, Campbell<sup>50</sup> notes, but a methodology for change. Critical theories that explain inequalities are indispensable.

*Collective occupations.* Introducing a new term, 'collective occupations,' Ramugondo and Kronenberg emphasise the importance of intentional action within local social units and idioms. They define collective occupations as "...occupations that are engaged



in by individuals, groups, communities and/or societies in everyday contexts; these may reflect an intention towards social cohesion or dysfunction, and/or advancement of or aversion to a common good<sup>103:8</sup>. They turn to the concept of intentionality to address how collective occupations may move relationships along a continuum from oppressive or liberating. We argue that the term 'collective action' is a more relevant construct to occupational reconstruction theory than that of 'collective occupation.' Nevertheless, the concepts may overlap productively, depending on the actual situation.

Ramugondo and Kronenberg<sup>104</sup> argue that occupational scientists need to understand how people engage together in occupations within their society and culture. The authors refer to the non-western Southern African concept, *Ubuntu*, which expresses a human ethos of interconnectedness and mutual benefit. Just as Kantartzis and Molineux<sup>105</sup> argued with respect to occupation itself, understanding occupation depends on cultural contexts.

This is also an interesting and important move, because of the question of values. Is an occupation 'positive' or 'negative'? According to what standard: the act itself, the intention, or the outcome? And according to whom: the actor(s) or an external judge? Ramugondo and Kronenberg focus on the social actors' intentionality within the ethos of the local community.

In contrast with the term 'collective occupation,' a theory of occupational reconstructions begins with that of 'collective action' because of its long-established usage to describe social movements and political activism<sup>106,107,96</sup>. Laverack's recent book on health activism helps to make our distinction clear. Laverack defines activism as "action on behalf of a cause, action that goes beyond what is conventional or routine"<sup>108:201</sup>. He gives the example of singing, which resonates with the description of civil rights activism earlier in this article: "Singing in a choir is not activism, but singing as a protest, for example in prison, can be"<sup>108:201</sup>. We can think of 'singing in a choir' as collective occupation and 'singing as a protest, for example in prison' as collective action.

*Systems theories*. It should be clear that the key question in the recent literature concerns how to theorise about occupation beyond the individual. Dickie<sup>90</sup> achieved this by taking a non-person centered approach to an occupation, pottery-making, which demonstrated the relevance of socially organised processes beyond any individual pottery-maker. Another approach, proposed by Fogelberg and Frauwirth<sup>109</sup>, uses complex dynamic systems theory to understand occupational processes, which again expands analysis beyond the individual. As with Ramugondo and Kronenberg<sup>103</sup>, the overarching question is how to bridge or get beyond the 'individual-collective dichotomy'.

Laszlo and Krippner define a system as "...a complex of interacting components together with the relationships among them that permit the identification of a boundary-maintaining entity or process"<sup>110:2</sup>. From that standpoint, Fogelberg and Frauwirth<sup>109</sup> present a typology of increasingly complex social units, such as dyads, families, and nations in which occupational processes occur. A complexity approach typologised in this way may be illuminating, but may also risk losing a focus on human agency at more complex levels of organisation. While an occupational reconstruction approach embraces experience, purpose, and meaning, these agentic qualities drop out and are replaced by the impersonal qualities of systems at more complex levels. Aldrich<sup>111</sup> makes a similar criticism, questioning the 'explanatory utility' of systems theories with respect to 'occupational constructs'. Systems theories may usefully contribute to occupational science, but the problem of agency will need to be thought through.

The analysis of power is another area of concern. Systems theories, such as the dynamic systems theory or cybernetic theory introduced in the occupational behavior approach in the 1960s by Reilly<sup>112</sup> and developed by her student Kielhofner<sup>113</sup>, examine control, but not power as a cultural and political phenomenon. Emerging theories about global networks, however, address the production and circulation of social power and inequality<sup>114</sup>. Such theories can enable occupational science to study how information, regulation and resistance flow in an acephalous system of nodes in digital net-

works (i.e. the internet) and embodied experience. Regarding the anti-globalisation and #Occupy movements, for example, Juris<sup>115</sup> addresses how protesters organise virtually and in person for 'sustainable socio-economic, political, and cultural transformation'<sup>116</sup>. He theorises the different effects on mobilising and sustaining activism of a 'logic of networks' (in the anti-globalisation movement) and a 'logic of aggregation' (in the #Occupy movement). Such practices, within and against governance by states and corporations, can be seen as occupational reconstructions at 'the systems level.'

## CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY PRACTICE

The theory of occupational reconstructions complements current thinking on social transformation in occupational science and can be applied to some occupational therapy and other occupation-based interventions. To summarise: Occupational reconstructions are characterised by principles of: 1) problematic situations; (2) meaningful and purposeful action; (3) embodied practices; (4) narrative structure; (5) creative transformations; (6) voluntary engagement; and (7) hopeful experimentalism<sup>52,54</sup>. We have taken the example of mass movements and political activism in the United States and South Africa, but as noted above, occupational reconstructions can also take less confrontational forms.

Principles of occupational reconstructions can provide guidelines for studying, designing and evaluating interventions in at least some community-based practice<sup>117,118,119,120</sup>, as well as community development<sup>83</sup>, participation and inclusion<sup>121</sup>, empowerment<sup>10</sup>, health activism<sup>108</sup>, occupational injustice<sup>75,81</sup> and political practices<sup>87,88</sup>. This will be accomplished by viewing occupation-as-means to changing situations of injustice, as well as occupation-as-ends. McLaughlin-Gray<sup>45</sup> argued that occupational science can enhance the occupational therapy profession's ability to help individual patients and clients improve their life by using 'occupation-as-means' and not only 'occupation-as-ends' in treatment. Occupational reconstruction theory recommends 'occupation-as means' for social transformation, as can be seen in exemplars of innovative community based practice described by Black<sup>122</sup>; Thibeault<sup>123</sup> and Kronenberg and Ramugondo<sup>124</sup>.

The theory of occupational reconstruction should prompt occupational scientists and occupational therapists to ask: How can social transformations be theorised occupationally? How and why have certain collective actions succeeded? What kind of knowledge base is needed for occupational therapists to work professionally, beyond the level of the individuals and their proximal environment? What kinds of demonstration projects might be built to elaborate and refine the theory? Can principles of occupational reconstruction and methods of community organising be taught to students entering occupational therapy? How can occupational therapists organise themselves to carve out professional venues for community development and political engagement?

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