The culture of soup

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to demonstrate the way in which our cultures influence our occupations. It looks at how a woman's occupation of cooking and distributing soup is influenced firstly by the broader culture of the community in which she lives; secondly, by her religion; and lastly, by the Cape Malay culture to which she belongs.

The information for this paper was gained through two unstructured interviews, which were analysed to identify the aspects of the above that influenced her occupational performance.

During the occupational therapy process, it is important that occupations, that are meaningful for clients, are supported and sustained. This paper demonstrates that in doing so, we, as occupational therapists should recognise, acknowledge and respect the impact that culture has, on not only clients' choices of occupation but also the meaning they attach to these occupations and their engagement in them and that we need to develop an understanding of other cultures to do this.

Key words: culture, occupation, Muslim, Cape Malay, cooking

Introduction

The American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA)[1] defines occupation as "…the ordinary and familiar things that people do every day". Within their position paper on occupation, AOTA stated that this simple definition "…reflects, but understates the multidimensional and complex nature of daily occupation". The same can be said for the Canadian definition as the Canadian Occupational Therapy Association[2] defines occupation as "activities or tasks, which engage a person's resources of time and energy …". They also look at the task and the person only and do not reflect on other influences on occupation.

Other authors[3] address occupation within a somewhat more multi-dimensional context by defining it as "…chunks of daily activities that can be named in the lexicon of [the] culture". This is more in line with Kielhofner's description[4], which states that human occupation is "…doing culturally meaningful work, play or daily living tasks in the stream of time and in the context of one's physical and social world". These definitions highlight the fact that there is more to occupation than only a task that people engage in and suggest that context plays a major role.

Occupational behaviour on the other hand is defined as the "set of responses which allow the individual to maintain role competence"[5]. This "set of responses" or behaviour usually has some socially agreed-upon function and is performed according to a socially accepted code of norms. This means that society and / or the context defines how a person should behave within a certain role or while engaging in occupations.

It is, therefore, safe to say that occupational behaviour as such, is not only influenced by the individual's skills and abilities but also by contextual cues and features that support performances or that press for a certain performance[4,6]. Consequently the person, the environment and the nature of the task shape occupational behaviour. This is in line with Bonder's model for occupational analysis[7], which suggests that the occupational choices that people make are a consequence of the interaction between the environment (social, cultural and physical) and the individual and this leads to specific roles being chosen or ascribed, to which the individual responds by acting in a certain way.

Features such as purpose, value, attitudes towards and meaning are attributed to occupations[8] by those who participate in or benefit from them. These features are influenced by factors like the gender, context, culture, economy and political situation of the participant. For example, the meaning and purpose that a mother who lives in poverty attributes to the occupation of securing food for her children may be different from that of a mother who is financially secure. The mother with no money may make it her main task for the day to secure food for her children for that day, whereas the mother who is financially secure will see it as a routine task that can be performed in a five-minute visit to the shop.

Over the past two decades, there has been renewed interest in the concept of 'occupation' within Occupational Therapy circles[2, 3, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14] and there has also been an increased awareness of the importance of culture in occupational behaviour and patterns of individuals[7]. Occupations are culturally embedded[13, 15], therefore features (as mentioned above), can be stable within a specific culture, but can vary between cultures. To understand what this means, we need to define culture and look at why it is important when discussing occupation.

There are many definitions of culture in the literature. Krefting[16] defines culture as "a blueprint or organising framework to guide daily behaviour". Barris, Kielhofner, Levine and Neville[18] define culture as "…the beliefs and perceptions, values and norms, and customs and behaviours that are shared by a group or society…" guiding the traditions and common beliefs of the people who belong to that particular group[7]. These shared beliefs and customs lead to common behaviour or behavioural patterns within a particular group. Occupational choice and engagement can also be guided by beliefs and customs. For example: it is a custom in the gang culture that the gangs have to defend their territory. The gang members will therefore participate in gang fights to protect their area. Other behaviours that are also common within this culture are tattooing of gang names or symbols on gang members and participating in illegal activities. The gang culture guides the choice of occupations for gang members.

On the other hand, it is important to remember that although culture can guide behaviour and occupational choices, it is up to individuals within a culture to interpret beliefs, traditions and customs for themselves. This can lead to a variation in expression and behaviour[18]. For example: within the Cape Malay culture, it is customary for grooms to give a pre-decided amount of money to the bride on their wedding day. Some bridal pairs do not think that this custom is important and therefore ignore it or the groom only gives a small token amount. Other brides abuse this custom and ask for large amounts of money or Kruger rands that the groom cannot afford. Each bridal pair who is aware of the custom interprets it, as they want to.

It is therefore important to understand both the individual and the culture when looking at the impact of the culture on occupation. Bonders[7] suggested careful analysis of an occupation in order to do this.

Methods

The aim of this paper was to provide an understanding of the role of culture, the individual and the inherent properties of an occupation, and to understand how these influence choice and motivation for a particular occupation. A single case study design[17] was used to examine the story of Shahieda, a woman from Cape Town, to provide this information and her reasons for engaging in the occupation of making and distributing soup to the needy were analysed.

The participant was chosen through purposive sampling[17] as she was acquainted with the author and known to arrange her occupa-

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tions around the principles of her religion and culture. Information was gathered from two unstructured interviews. These were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Analysis was done through open coding[17]. Codes were linked into sub-categories, which in turn were linked to categories. From these categories, themes were identified. What emerged from the analysis were the factors that influenced Shahied's occupational performance. The author asked Shahieda to member check the analysis to ensure that the analysis and interpretation were objective and not influenced by the author's prior impressions of the participant, thus contributing towards trustworthiness of the information.

Shahieda's soup kitchen

Shadieda is a forty-one year old devout Muslim woman living in Hanover Park, a poor socio-economic suburb of Cape Town. She is married and has three children: twin girls who are twenty-two years old and a thirty-year old son. Her son was born with severe intellectual impairment and is fully dependent for all activities of daily living. Both Shahieda and her husband are informal traders. She makes clothes and sells them from home and local flea markets while he sells fruit and vegetables in Hanover Park. She finds that it is easier to work from home, as this enables her to look after her son. She shares the caring of her son with her family, but she remains his primary caregiver. Both her daughters took courses in Islamic studies at an Islamic school and are currently working at different informal Muslim schools within Hanover Park. They also help her with sewing and beading and baking cakes and snacks like 'fancies', biscuits and samoosas on commission. One of her daughters would like to study law, but presently there are no funds available for her to do so. Since her daughters started working, there has been enough money to get by, but this has not always been the case in the past. The family occupies a ground floor flat in one of the residential courts (blocks of flats) in Hanover Park. The flat has two small bedrooms and a bathroom, which is located in the back yard.

Shahieda has always been aware of problems in her community. She is actively involved in her community, has served on various committees and is reasonably well informed about her rights and the rights of others within her community. Her sister affectionately calls her an MP (Member of Parliament) because of her involvement within the community.

She has recently started a soup kitchen from her home. Once a week she cooks and distributes about a hundred litres of soup to needy children within the community. When I heard about this for the first time I was amazed that with everything that she does and with being a mother of a child with a disability, she still wants to do more. I was very interested in her reasons for doing this.

Shahieda the person

On asking her why she participates in this occupation of making and distributing of soup, she said: *" Jy wiet…die kinnertjies lui honger. Ek kannie daai laat happen nie. Dit is my duty…dit is ons almal se duty om te sien dat hulle kos kry."* [You know…the children are going hungry. I cannot let that happen. It is my duty…it is all of our duty to see that they get food.]

She explained this by firstly saying that it is her duty as a Muslim to ensure that she looks after her neighbours by making certain that the children do not starve. In the Muslim religion there are certain principles that must be adhered to; one of which is that each person must give Zakaah (food or money to the needy). She quotes a saying by prophet Muhammad (PBUH)* that states: *"He is not a true believer who goes to bed having eaten his fill while the neighbour is hungry."* It is evident that her religion contributes to informing her occupational choice and occupational engagement in this situation. Religion should however not be confused with culture. There can be various cultures within a religion as people interpret religious principles differently, which leads them to act differently from other Muslims. In her case her religion forms a part of her culture. She comes from a culture within the religion that believes in interpreting the words literally and doing something about it. Whereas others within the religion, like myself, feel that you can donate money to the mosque which then sees that my neighbours have food. Some of the Muslims, especially the younger generation, fit the principles into their lives and interpret the words differently. For example: with modern lifestyles, people feel they have little time to literally make sure that their neighbours have food. Therefore, they find a convenient alternative, like donating to a mosque. Shahieda on the other hand, like a lot of the older generation, believe that you have to fit your life around the religious principles and live according to them on a daily basis.

"Hier is mense in die community wat nettie omgie nie. Hulle care niks Fazlin wiet. Daai maak my soe kwaat, ek wil net iets doen om hulle te wys…" [Here are people in the community that do not care. Fazlin knows they do not care. That makes me so angry. I just want to do something to show them.]

Hanover Park is a community with various social problems like poverty, unemployment and violence[20]. These problems often create an environment that is not safe due to violence and gangsterism. There is an unemployment rate of about 26%, and 20% of the households have no income[20]. According to Shahieda this has lead to a culture of not caring, *"Hanover Park het 'n culture waar mense niks care nie…"* [Hanover Park has a culture where people don't care]. This has motivated her to do something about the problems.

"Hier doen ons goete vir mekaa…as jy wil hê mense moet vir jou help, dan moet jy vir hulle help…is mos reg soe?" [Here we do things for each other….if you want others to help you, then you have to help them…is it not so?]

Within the court of the block of flats and its immediate surroundings, the neighbours have formed a support system for each other. They will help and do things for each other like running errands for each other. This is especially important to Shahieda as they sometimes look after her son during the day when she is not home. She then repays them in kind. According to Shahieda, feeding them is one way of doing this. She is also part of a group of people who feel that it is necessary to uplift the community and look after people who cannot care for themselves, like children and the elderly. They do things together like home visits to the elderly people in the community to check up on them and giving advice to people on how to access community and governmental resources. Some of them come to help her with the cooking of the soup.

From her description of the group's behaviour, it appears that this group has shared ideas and beliefs, which leads to common behaviour. According to Baris et. al's.[18] definition of culture (which was discussed earlier), it seems as if this group has a shared culture of being a group of women living in Hanover Park, living in poverty, and believing that they want to uplift the community and they act accordingly. This group and the culture of working in the community that exists within the group have also motivated her to participate in this occupation.

"Nou wat ek 'n ietsie het moet ek gie vir die annes wattie hettie. 'n Mens moet sacrifices maak." [Now that I have more than some others, I have to give to others that do not have. A person has to sacrifice.]

Here Shahieda reflected again on the fact that she feels that it was her duty to give to those who are in need. The statement not only highlights again the previous point of the culture of working within the community, but also highlights the compliance with the principles of Islam, where she has to share with others who have less than she does.

"Ek is 'n Cape Malay. Ons maak kos." [I am Malay. We make food.]

It is very common in the Cape Malay culture that the daughters, are taught to cook from a young age. The Cape Malay people are well known in Cape Town for their food and their ability to cook. They do, however, in general also follow the same belief as the Islamic religion, which is that women are carers and men are providers. By participating in this occupation, Shahieda acts as

* Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was born in 570 AD and was the first person to whom the holy Koran was revealed. He remains the most respected of all the prophets in the Muslim religion. In Islam it is believed that you will be rewarded if you follow the teachings and sayings of the prophet.

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a carer for the community by using skills that are familiar to her from childhood.

The occupation of cooking and distribution of soup

When Shahieda was asked why she chose soup, she responded that: *"Jy begin met water, dan kan jy ienage iets in gooi dan het jy sop."* [You start with water, you can then add anything and you will have soup.]

She specifically chose soup because you can literally make something out of nothing and a little can go a long way. This can be linked to the theme of poverty. She has mastered the ability to cope with little and still do what she wants and needs to do.

Shahieda starts the whole process on Tuesdays, when she goes around to the different vegetable stalls and butchers to collect donations. All her ingredients are obtained through donations. She only has to provide her time, effort, electricity and gas. Although the level of poverty in Hanover Park has led to various social problems, which in turn has led to apathy amongst various members of the community, there is still a sense of 'Ubuntu' in the community: neighbours sharing and helping each other to make their lives better[20]. This makes it easier for her to get donations as shop and stall owners feel a sense of social responsibility to help their neighbours and the community.

Together with some of her neighbours and her daughters, the vegetables are peeled and prepared on the Tuesday evening, so that they can start cooking early on the Wednesday morning. She feels that it is important that she keeps her daughters involved in activities like this so that they can understand the importance of caring for others. She also said that by doing things together as a family, you will stay close as a family and her daughters will be safe.

The whole Wednesday morning is spent cooking and the soup is distributed later in the day. She gets the children to form a line outside of her door with their own cups. This usually happens round about the time when "Dragon Ball Z" is on television. She does this intentionally as she feels that there is enough violence in their community and that the children should not be exposed to a show like "Dragon Ball Z" where there is a lot of fighting and killing in a programme that is specifically geared for children.

What does she get out of it?

According to Shahieda, she gets a great deal of satisfaction from this occupation. To know that at least one day in the week the children do not go hungry and that the mothers have to worry less about food for their children. It also provides her with contentment as she feels that she is doing her bit for the upliftment of the community and thereby doing what God wants her to do.

The occupation provides her with an opportunity to keep busy, as she enjoys being occupied. It gives her a chance to give something back to the community. She also gets time to spend with her daughters and to teach and demonstrate certain values to them. Her strong sense of community awareness, and her need to fulfill her duty and help to uplift the community (being)[12], motivates her to do[12] so she can then become[12] a better person, a better neighbour, a better Muslim, help create a better community and help shape the children's futures.

The impact of culture on her occupation

From the discussion, it is evident that Shahieda's occupation was influenced by her culture. Firstly by the broader culture of Hanover Park, secondly the interpretation of her religion, thirdly by the group of people with whom she works within the community and lastly by the Cape Malay culture to which she belongs. All of these factors not only influenced her choice of occupation, but also her engagement in the occupation.

Conclusion

This case study demonstrates that culture can impact on every aspect of occupation. Without the influence of her culture, she might not have chosen this activity or performed it in the way that she does.

During the occupational therapy process we need to ensure that we support and sustain occupations that are meaningful to clients[21]. In doing so it is important that we, as occupational therapists, recognise, acknowledge and respect the impact that culture has not only on clients choices of occupation, but also the meaning they attach to these occupations and their methods of engagement in them.

The best way to ensure this, is to become not only culturally aware and sensitive, but also cross-culturally aware.

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