Occupation-based community development: strategies for promoting potential

R Galvaan, L Peters, C Cornelius, L Richards

Abstract

'Occupation' in this paper refers to the ordinary, everyday things people do to meet their various needs, interests and aspirations. As such it is inclusive of but broader than the concept of 'work'. Poverty and inequality compromises peoples' capacity to participate or "do" in daily life. Restricted 'doing' narrows their possibilities for experiencing health and well-being as resources for living and for making a living. Possibilities for reducing poverty and inequality are restricted not only by limited structural opportunities, but also by states of 'being': entrenched mindsets and internalised notions of personhood that perpetuate self-limiting responses to available opportunities. This paper will describe how an occupational perspective recognises "doing" as contextually situated relational action which provides opportunities for *reflexive engagement of capacities and potential.* Practice examples of working with senior citizens at Ikamva Labantu, groups of people with disabilities at the Association for the Physically Disabled, and youth in Lavender Hill will illustrate the value of applying occupation-based strategies that consider diverse opportunities for participation in building individual and collective agency, together with changing social structures and institutions. The examples will describe how critical thinking about participation while "doing with and doing together" contributes to changing the quality of current participation and grows envisioned futures. The practice examples show how and what the possibilities are for creating an alternative participation trajectory for groups of people who face inequality and poverty. The unique proponents which support the continued possibility for changes in participation are considered. Ideas about how to effectively make such interventions more readily accessible will be identified.

Introduction

Given the entrenched inequality in South Africa and the struggles to promote productive participation, this paper advocates that strategies for capacitating individuals, groups and communites to create change and be changed is integral to reducing poverty and inequality. Occupation-based community development as a strategy is a long-term process where hegemonic practices in and of everyday life are confronted through promoting participation; in this process structural inequalities and entrenched mindsets are challenged (Galvaan & Peters, in press). A strategy such as this is integral to facilitating uptake of

1

opportunities, or challenging limited social structures. The end products of occupation-based community development are always focused on actualising more liberated forms of participation, while the process entails participation in occupations in context. The term "occupation" in occupation-based community development refers to "human occupation" which are the ordinary, everyday things people do to meet their various needs, interests and aspirations (Watson and Fourie, 2004). Occupation in this sense, asserts that doing is more than just work. Occupation always occurs in relation to contexts and is not just shaped by context, but also shapes contexts (Aldrich, 2008). In contexts where poverty is prevalent, people's capacities to "do" and participate in daily life are compromised (Fourie, Galvaan & Beeton, 2004). Productive participation in occupations that allow for health and wellbeing to be experienced is conceded. Occupation-based community development advocates that to achieve productive participation, poverty reduction strategies should consider and impact the occupational choices that may contribute to perpetuating inequalities.

Occupational choices are co-constructed through the individual, group and community's transactional relationship within their contexts (Galvaan 2010). The co-construction of occupational choice is shaped during participation in occupations – affording importance to the opportunity and quality of peoples' existing participation in occupations. Through this participation, occupational choice may be deliberate, or informed by a practical consciousness that influences how people are able to participate in occupations (ibid). Practical consciousness here refers to a practical sense, or know-how that guides the way that people operate as social agents (Bourdieu, 1977). Peoples' occupational choices, are steered by practical, instinctual interpretations. These instinctual interpretations are most often historically-predicated and tied to the "doing" of the social group to which individuals belong. Occupational choices are ever present in the selection of "what to do" for individuals and groups, meaning that the doing for individuals is tied to "doing" of the group in context.

By drawing on the idea of changing occupational choices, occupation-based community development appreciates that possibilities for poverty reduction are restricted not only by structural inequalities (Seekings, 2007), but also by forms of internalised oppression. Entrenched mindsets with limiting views for what is possible is characteristic of states of internalised oppression (Harro, 2000). Such entrenched mindsets emerge from embodied histories where identity constructions provide ideological continuity with existent inequalities. The case examples that follow illustrate that in situations of poverty, entrenched mindsets associated with oppressive constructions of race and socio-economic class may be sustained by daily occupational choices. Since occupational choices are constructed through participating in occupations (Galvaan, 2010), the proposed intervention strategies, highlighted within the case examples, pay attention to

the actual participation during occupation-based community development in relation to fashioning prospective participation. It is further advocated that the way that choices are made to engage in particular occupations perpetuates inequalities (Galvaan, 2010). The mechanisms by which these choices are made and sustained thus requires substantial consideration.

Lavender Hill Heroes

Lavender Hill heroes describes a campaign that took place at a primary school in Lavender Hill. A campaign is a form of intervention, implemented with a population of people, that is focused on intervening into a problem identified to be of importance from the perspective of all key role players who have a stake in the resolution of the problem. It employs strategies that involve some or all of the key role players in taking strategic actions that involve counter-hegemonic ways of "doing" in daily life. Utilising theory drawn from key pieces of occupational therapy and occupational science research (Galvaan, 2000; Galvaan, 2010; Peters, 2011; Rudman, 2010; Wicks, 2005) and 10 years of experience working within marginalised contexts we apply a particular way of engaging with young adolescents that works to liberate more creative ways of thinking about the situations that they find themselves in.

The Lavender Hill heroes campaign was offered as part of an occupation-based community development service, namely, Facing Up (Galvaan & Peters, in press). Facing Up aims at challenging the inequalities faced by youth in Lavender Hill. Lavender Hill is situated on the Cape Flats in Cape Town and is one of the areas to which coloured people were forcibly removed during the Apartheid years in South Africa (Group Areas Act, 1950). As a result the community lacks the infrastructure required for people to flourish and there is a perpetuated lack of opportunities for growth for youth in this community (Peters, 2011). There are few structured opportunities for enriching participation within the school and community context. Youth's occupations are historically predicated by dominant ways of thinking and acting in their community (Galvaan, 2010). Furthermore, many people living and working in Lavender Hill have been influenced by Apartheid ideologies and this still frames how they view the possibilities for people living here. These deep-rooted mindsets constrain the potential of youth in this context so that their plans for progressing to secondary education and into the world of work are often ill-conceived.

Services at Facing Up operate on the premise that youth will be enabled to thrive as citizens and shape their futures as productive citizens through fundamenatally changing what they are able to do in everyday life. Final year occupational therapy students at the University of Cape Town working at Facing Up, partnered with key role players at Levana Primary to explore the issues

associated with grade 7 learners' poor participation at school. It was found that learners undervalued school as a significant contributor to their futures. This perception was informed by their daily interactions with others in Lavender Hill, where they saw what was 'really' possible based on what others living and working in this context were typically able to achieve. Their perceptions of their possibilities negatively influenced how they chose to participate in school on a daily basis. Learners often did not complete their homework and showed no concern for their academic progression. Considering how to change this situation involved creating a strategy that challenged the way the learners' thought about their futures in relation to what they saw as possibilities in Lavender Hill.

Together with learners and teachers, the occupational therapy students had to think deeply about how to shape a different view of what was possible for youth in Lavender Hill. The "Lavender Hill Heroes" campaign was thus born. This campaign enabled learners to engage with the stories – and thus the doing – of other community members who had achieved possibilities not characteristically thought possible for people living in Lavender Hill. Learners were taken through a systematic process where they had the opportunity interact with and reflect critically on the stories of Lavender Hill Heroes (those individuals who had grown up and who had attended school in Lavender Hill but who had achieved outcomes different to that of the norm) through an action-learning process (Taylor, Marais & Kaplan, 2005). This enabled a form of critical conscientisation, similar to that which Freire (Rafi, 2003) refers to in his work. Through this process learners came to view their possibilities differently and shifted their patterns of participation in response to their renewed ways of thinking. Teachers commented that some of the learners involved began to participate more readily in class, completed their homework more regularly, and were present at school more often. This was significant in a context where high rates of absenteeism are the norm and often lead to dropping out of school. Learners themselves also showed a renewed attitude towards their school work and a determination to change when they were asked to comment on their participation in the campaign during an interview with a local newspaper.

Although altering ways of thinking is a significant step forward, on its own it is not enough to change entrenched ways of doing that are the product of practical consciousness (Galvaan, 2010). The next step in the intervention process was thus to support learners in their choices regarding different ways of doing in their daily participation that would result in different possibilities for their future. This happened through a second process where learners critically evaluated their daily occupational choices and their link to what may be possible in their future. The process of supporting them in these new occupational choices is a continuous one. The way in which this should happen is being considered through the development of parents and gaurdians as champions

within the school community. These champions would act in ways that encourage renewed choices for participation while at the same time enable learners to strategically consider the opportunities available to them that would help them attain positive possibilities for their future engagement.

This example shows that productivity would be enabled if youth were provided the opportunities to participate in occupations that would significantly challenge their mindsets. This involved shifts in their sense of identity and their understanding of their 'place' in the world as they came to understand more opportunities available to them. This has the potential to shape their future possibilities differently since an individual's sense of who one is and who he/she wishes to become evolves in relation to what he/she does over the course of their lives (Kielhofner, 2002). The opportunity to do differently and to change mindsets through reflecting on this doing is significant because interventions focused on poverty reduction tend to focus on the visible structures that create and perpetuate poverty, without considering those invisible structures which also powerfully influence its existance. These invisible structures tranlate at a grassroots level, to the experiences of "doing" in everyday life and require that practitioners incrementally engage with challenging entrenched mindsets. For the learners here, the liberation of occupational choices from an entrenched way of thinking about engaging was essential for change to occur. The value of utilising the opportunity to learn from others' doing in a similar context was key. The case example, however, also emphasises the need to consider further strategies that assist individuals to enact new choices through a continued process of critical conscientisation. It is through this dual process of critical reflection on doing, coupled with the opportunity to 'do' differently that creates the synergy required to realise the desired change.

Nonzamo Seniors Club

Ikamva Labantu (IL) is a non-profit organization dedicated to providing services to the most vulnerable people in South Africa's township communities. In response to the challenges facing seniors, as well as the lack of services and support for them in the township communities, Ikamva Labantu volunteers and community leaders began supporting and establishing community-based seniors clubs during the South African Apartheid era. The organisation formally oversees seventeen seniors clubs under the umbrella of its Senior Sector. The aim was to create a supportive environment for vulnerable older persons and to keep them active in their communities for as long as possible through the provision of community-based care and support. Services provided by Ikamva Labantu aim at reducing vulnerability and increasing dignity. These services were based on the premise that older persons know what they need and that they can provide

support to each other. It is with the support of Ikamva Labantu that they are able to organize themselves and access resources that enable their needs to be met. Ikamva labantu's response is not about bringing the services to the people. Rather, it is about utilising the resources of the people to create more opportunities for them. One strategy applied in providing support is to develop leadership structures within the seniors clubs which encourage club members to critically consider their preferences for self governance.

Nomzamo is one of the Ikamva Labantu seniors clubs and is situated in Langa. The club currently lacks an appropriate venue in which to meet and has no cook or club assistant. Although Ikamva Labantu has assisted seniors clubs to attain such resources the provision of these is not always possible. Final year UCT occupational therapy students were placed at this club are were required to consider interventions that focused on occupation-based community development. At the point of the intervention described below, Nonzamo club members did not draw on their authority to effectively run their club in the way that they desired. Initially they held the view that they were the subjects of change rather than the change agents. As a result the club members tended to wait for Ikamva Labantu to sort out their problems for them and did not all participate in the day-to-day running of the club. There were few opportunities for participation in meaningful occupations available to them at Nonzamo Seniors club, despite this being one of the central reasons for the club's existence.

Occupational therapy students recognised the need to consider how they wanted to view and enact their self-governance as warranting consideration. The occupational therapy students thus created opportunities for the club members to view themselves differently through a process of critical storytelling which enabled the members to gain a different and deeper understanding of themselves as a collective (Taylor, 2003). This involved an opportunity for club members to view their participation from the "outside-in" through the use of photographs of the club members engaging in daily tasks during the course of the week. Club members were shocked to realise both what they were missing and what was beneficial about their current participation. For example, a particular photograph displaying club members engaged in the informal activity of reading the newspaper on a particular morning provided members with the insight to realise that some of their occupational choices could be shaped into more formal opportunities for participation which would benefit all the club members. This opportunity for critical storytelling was coupled with opportunities to dialogue (Senge, 2006) together as a club. This created the platform to engage with the outcomes of the storytelling process and to consider together what mechanisms they required to more effectively self-govern. The outcome was the development of an active and participatory approach to electing an executive committee, as well as a cooking committee. This has meant

that all club members now contribute to the provision of their daily meals. They have also begun to work collaboratively to put a more structured activity programme in place for themselves. The process has resulted in a more envisioned group of seniors who are more fully committed to their own processes of change. The experience of engaging differently has substantially begun to alter their occupational choices.

This case example has highlighted how the opportunity to view ones' participation in context can fundamentally begin the process of altering unconscious occupational choices. This, together with the space to engage in critical dialogue as a collective enables groups to transform their own mindsets and ultimately, their experience of participating. The process enabled the group to assume the power they had as a resource at their disposal and utilise this to contribute as productive citizens.

The Mitchell's Plain Workgroup

Mitchells Plain is located on the Cape Flats in Cape Town. High unemployment, low education levels, substance abuse, gangsterism and crime are typical challenges in this area. Marginalisation and limited participation are common experiences for people with disabilities living in this community. The recognition of the way in which people with disabilities are compromised here led to the development of the Mitchell's Plain Work Group, supported by the Cape Town Association for Persons with Physical Disabilities (APD). This group consists of people with physical disabilities who live in Mitchell's Plain, are unemployed and who are dependent on a disability grant. The group was registered as a satellite workgroup of Cape Town APD and started to receive a subsidy from the Department of Social Development on a monthly basis.

The original purpose of the group was for the members to earn an extra income by making products to sell. The group meets everyday and currently consists of nine members. When the group initially began the Cape Town APD social worker was primarily responsible for the day-to-day operations of the group. This included recruiting members, registering them, purchasing stock and consumables, bookkeeping and organising refreshments for the members. This led to a situation where the members in the group were totally reliant on the social worker and the attendance of the group was poor. The products manufactured by the group were not being sold which compromised the main goal of the group – to generate an additional income for people with disabilities and their families. Members were unhappy and indicated that they desperately wanted to change their situation.

The occupational therapist who contributed to the development processes within Cape Town APD was approached to assist. Through the application of an occupation-based community development approach she thought strategically about the way in which the group viewed themselves, their participation and the potential of the group to succeed. As a result she collaborated with members to construct a space that could be used to enable the members to view their participation differently and begin to reconstruct a more strategic action plan that would assist them to redirect the development of the group. This space provided the members with the opportunity to begin to recognise their needs and to reflect on the purpose of the workgroup in addressing these. The group members were given the opportunity to critically examine their own role in the direction and development of the workgroup and to consider how their own needs interfaced with this. The occupational therapist used key questions (Taylor, 2003) that assisted members to open up their own thinking to new possibilities while facing what their own shortcomings have been in their participation and evident failure of the workgroup to meet their needs. Through this opportunity to think differently about the interface between themselves and their situations members began to recognize that they owned the power that could direct the group.

In order to capitalise on this renewed sense of power the occupational therapist supported the group to consider the options at their disposal to move the group forward. This was done by encouraging members to re-evaluate the goals for their group and to develop an action-plan for the future. Although this was a good strategy to support the development of new occupational choices the group found that acting on their identified goals was not easy because of the way in which practical consciousness informed their usual occupational choices. As a result the group have faced challenges, but have managed to overcome these through continued support to recognize their own power through a reciprocal process of doing and reflecting simultaneously. The outcome has been that the group is now more well-established, has negotiated a crafts contract with the City of Cape Town, is completely responsible for managing their own finances and have not been dependent on a social worker for the last three months.

This case example emphasizes the importance of letting people do in order for them to reflect and learn. Although the occupational therapist enabled the opportunity to critically reflect on their situation the workgroup had to act on their more conscious occupational choices in order to realise change. This proved difficult, although not insurmountable, and illustrates the power of practical consciousness and the way in which it perpetuates poverty and inequality. Through strategic support in the form of challenging usual occupational choices and liberating ways of thinking at crucial times individuals and groups are able to carry their own agenda forward and realise their own

development. This particular case also highlights that when responsibility is placed with community members and a partnering approach is promoted it prevents the waste of resources and funding. If the roots for sustainable planning and learning have been planted groups of people are able to carry forth their own goals with little professional support.

Conclusion

The three case examples illustrate that changing mindsets through doing can result in more productive participation. This is achieved by creating opportunities to challenge automatic occupational choices. Strategies to combat these occupational choices focused on how hegemonic ideologies were accepted and enacted for different groups. It illustrated that getting individuals and groups to envision and begin to enact a different future facilitated the journey towards more productive participation.

Although the strategies outlined have been implemented at a grassroots level and with small groups they demonstrate potential in their effectiveness to bring about real change towards desired futures. Reducing poverty and inequality might involve investing in interventions for smaller groups and facilitating opportunity to participate differently through a process of critical reflection and engagement. The initial human resource investment in such strategies might appear excessive. However the prospect of realizing the benefits of such an investment later holds much value. If peoples' capacity to reflect on and do differently is enhanced, they draw on this, which shapes their future participation positively. This results in more equitable and productive opportunities for participation. This paper has illustrated that beginning to invest in the invisible contributors to the systems of poverty and inequality at a group level is a mechanism that shows potential. Further participatory action research into how processes of occupation-based community development contribute to capacitating for change and reducing poverty and inequality is recommended.

References

Group Areas Act, Act No. 41 of 1950. Retrieved. from.

Aldrich, R. (2008). From Complexity Theory to Transactionalism: Moving Occupational Science Forward in Theorizing the Complexities of Behaviour. *Journal of Occupational Science, 15*(3), 147-156.

Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a theory of practice translated by Richard Nice*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Fourie, M., Galvaan, R., & Beeton, H. (2004). The impact of poverty: potential lost. In R. Watson & L. Swartz (Eds.), *Transformation through Occupation*.

London and Philadelphia: Whurr Publishers.

Galvaan, R. (2000). The Live-in domestic workers' experience of occupational engagement: Unpublished Masters Dissertation: University of Cape Town.

Galvaan, R. (2010). A critical ethnography of young adolescents' occupational choices in a community in post-apartheid South Africa (pp. 236): University of Cape Town.

Galvaan, R., & Peters, L. (In press). Open Education Resource: A strategy for occupation-based community development.

Harro, B. (2000). The cycle of socialisation. In M. Adams, W. Blumenfeld, R. Castañeda, H. Rhackman, M. Peters & X. Zúñiga (Eds.), *Readings for Diversity and Social Change: A South African Agenda*. Cape Town: HSRC Press.

Kielhofner, G. (2002). Dimensions of Doing. In G. Kielhofner (Ed.), *Model of Human Occupation* (3 ed., pp. 124-144). Baltimore, MA: Lippincott Williams and Wilkins.

Peters, L. (2011). A biographical inquiry into the occupational participation of men who drop out of school: Unpublished masters thesis: University of Cape Town.

Rafi, M. (2003). Freire and Experiments in Conscientisation in Bangladesh Village. *Economic and Political Weekly, 38*(37), 3908-3914.

Rudman, D. L. (2010). Occupational Terminology: Occupational Possibilites. *Journal of Occupational Science, 17*(1), 55-59.

Seekings, J (2007). Poverty and inequality after apartheid. Paper prepared for the second 'After Apartheid Conference', Yale, 27-28 April 2007[2]

Senge, P. (2006). *The Fifth Discipline. The art and practice of the learning organisation*. London, UK: Random House Business Books.

Taylor, J. (2003). *Organisations and Development. Towards Building a practice*. Cape Town: CDRA.

Taylor, J., Marais, D., & Kaplan, A. (2005). Action Learning. A Developmental Approach to Change *CDRA Nuggets*   Retrieved 05/12, 2011, from http://www.cdra.org.za/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=59:action-learning-a-developmental-approach-to-change

Watson, R., & Fourie, M. (2004). International and African influences on occupational therapy. In R. Watson & L. Swartz (Eds.), *Transformation through Occupation*. London and Philadelphia: Whurr Publishers.

Wicks, A. (2005). Understanding Occupational Potential. . *Journal of Occupational Science, 12*(3), 130-139.