

Editorial

# (Des)Connections between occupational justice and social justice: an interview with Gail Whiteford<sup>1</sup> and Lilian Magalhães<sup>2</sup>

*(Des)Conexões entre justiça ocupacional e justiça social: uma entrevista com Gail Whiteford e Lilian Magalhães*

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Since its inception in the late 1990's (Townsend & Wilcock, 2004), occupational justice has become a core concept for consideration within occupational therapy and occupational science (Durocher et al., 2014; Malfitano et al., 2016; Hammell, 2017). While the conversation surrounding occupational justice has started from the *Western* world, some non-Anglo-Saxon countries have been underpinning their occupational therapy practices on a concept called 'social justice' (Guajardo, 2021; Lopes & Malfitano, 2021).

Occupational justice is defined as the “[...] access to and participation in the full range of meaningful and enriching occupations afforded to others, including opportunities for social inclusion and the resources to participate in occupations to satisfy personal, health, and societal needs [...]” (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2020, p. 79). On the other hand, 'social justice' is perceived to address “[...] important social goals, whether acting in ways that befits an equitable and compassionate world, respecting human dignity, or creating an inclusive society [...]” (Hocking, 2017, p. 29).

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The social and occupational justice concepts have been progressively debated in the field of occupational therapy as to whether they can be realistically translated into actual practice (Guajardo, 2021; Hammell & Beagan, 2017). These debates are seen as an opportunity to further develop the mentioned concepts rather than inducing potential conflicts, hence, this Editorial aims to examine these through a reflective conversation. Furthermore, as we incorporate the debate on social justice, as we also point out the importance of taking into account the diversity of theories - concepts, ideas, and language - that inform the practices and research of occupational therapists, globally.

Based on the relevance of these concepts, we have proposed this special issue: "Bridging critical gaps in occupational justice and social justice in occupational therapy practices". The aims of this special issue are to demonstrate how occupational therapists globally address the rights to inclusive participation in daily life for all people and to illuminate the opportunities for occupational therapists to serve from traditional to less known areas of practice.

This editorial intends to ascertain the thoughts and opinions surrounding occupational justice and social justice from two experts in the field of occupational science and occupational therapy through expert interviewing, an approach to harvest knowledge and explore a concept under study (Meuser & Nagel, 2009). To do this, we invited Professors Gail Whiteford and Lilian Magalhães, to participate in a simultaneous interview. They were chosen because their research paths are related to the concepts being discussed and also because they are strategically located in different geographical places, Gail in Australia and Lilian in Brazil (she still maintains a close relationship with Canada). The interview was conducted by researchers of occupational therapy located in Chile/Australia (DCJ), Brazil (PB), and the Philippines (MS). Even though they share an interest in occupational therapy and social issues, their research has approached the topic from different perspectives.

In this interview, we approach the central theme of occupational justice and its relationship with the concept of social justice. Additionally, both interviewees addressed the need for a more situated historical, socio-economic, and political analyses for the use of concepts in general within the fields of occupational therapy and occupational science. We reproduced below parts of the interview transcription. Interview questions are italicized in order to differentiate it to the interviewee's responses which are labelled 'GW' for Gail Whiteford and 'LM' for Lilian Magalhães.

## The Interview

Hammell (2017, p. 47) wrote that "[...] occupational justice is cited throughout the occupational science and occupational therapy literatures despite little scholarly attention either to its definition or to how situations of occupational justice are identifiable". a) What is your opinion on this? b) To what extent do you feel the types of Occupational Justice (OJ) help to understand, identify, explore OJ: Deprivation, Marginalization, Imbalance, Alienation, Apartheid?

**LM:** *I am a little bit concerned when we do some sort of revisioning, historical revisioning without understanding that construct, the concept that was built in another time. So, are there limitations about the concept of occupational justice as*

*we know it? Of course. There is no such a thing as a production of a concept that is well done, well- rounded, and we are happy. There is no such a thing in knowledge production! But, the funny thing is that in those five or six papers from a recent review that I did about occupational justice, and in what we published in the last five years or six, four papers of them were built outside of the Anglophone sphere, such as Chile, a paper about same sex couples and one from Spain about youth living in small towns. So, you have a wide range of people working and producing nice, sophisticated, critical work with a concept that was built more than 20 years ago but still holds some possibility for people to push it forward.*

**GW:** *I'm not really sure why occupational justice was singled out because actually you know what, there are many constructs in occupational therapy and occupational science that remain [to be] still in development. [...] What we need to do is enact critical epistemic reflexivity... we need to critically engage with these constructs so that we're always working on them. People need to [do] that relative to their cultural, social, historical, and economic contexts. We don't want to be guilty of universalizing. So, like any construct, occupational justice needs to be continually reworked, understood, and is a work-in-progress. When I think about the purpose of the development of occupational justice, it serves a very important purpose in both occupational therapy and occupational science. [...] I have tried to say that about 'occupational deprivation', that there are very soft ways in which people are occupationally deprived and they are very absolute forms of occupational deprivation because of legislative frameworks. For example, if you are an Asylum seeker in Australia, you can't work and you'll probably never work, that's a very hard exclusion and that's a very real occupational deprivation that comes from that. But then, there's occupational deprivation, for example, that comes from stigmatization [such as having] a chronic mental illness. So, you know, we still need to develop these areas, but I'd still say that when Wilcock developed these, these were really important ideas and enabled us to think about the people we were working with in a very different way, rather than in ways that the institutions we are working for really steered us as having problems, or having impairments, or having illnesses.*

What is the relationship you identify between the concepts of occupational justice and social justice? Complementary, independent, overlapping?

**GW:** *There's a really essential difference in the underpinnings of social justice and occupational justice, simply put, social justice is about the sameness. We want, in a social justice framework or worldview, to ensure that all people have the same resources and the same opportunities. In occupational justice, we're interested in people having different resources and opportunities relative to need. That's a really defining difference in my mind. So, if we think, for example, about people only [given] supportive equipment because they may have a disability. We have a policy here in Australia that allows for equipment provision to people with disabilities. Now, in a social justice framework, all people should be allowed to have a wheelchair. In [an] occupational justice framework, actually you [would] know where this person lives in, that is, a remote property with really rough ground [and inaccessible]... they need a different type of wheelchair. So, their need is different;*

*therefore, occupational justice for them [is to] have the resources that's required for them [and meet] their particular needs in that particular context. [...].*

**LM:** *Well, here comes the trouble. So, social justice is such a complex area of social practice, right? And like democracy, it's a concept that we understand as universal, and we all have different takes on democracy. Justice was an obsession of Paulo Freire. Paulo Freire was a lawyer and he started working as a lawyer and then very quickly he realized that justice was not something for everybody, treating everybody as same, and very quickly he realized that because people couldn't read, he worked with them, as they would not be able to present themselves in the justice system in Brazil because they were signing contracts and papers that they didn't know what was written on them. So, I think 'justice in context', like the Brazilian one, is something that we have a lot of room to discuss. I also want to add that Sandra Galbeigo and a large group of thinkers in Brazil have dedicated their work to the concept of 'citizenship'— a concept that is actually well known in other contexts. Citizenship means that you have some folks in the population, they are full citizens, they have all the rights, all the possibilities, all the opportunities. And you have some folks, of course, most of the population, that have no rights—that have second-hand rights. So, they are 'second-hand citizens'. All the work, from Paulo Freire to Boaventura de Sousa Santos, is aimed at achieving plain citizenship for everybody. Actually, what we normally are looking at, is more occupational injustice than justice. We normally are working in the reverse, right? That is, we still have a long way to go to convey those concepts and place them into the practice of occupational therapy.*

Do you consider OJ a hegemonic concept in occupational therapy, or not? and which other concepts for you best express the field of justice to inform the practice of occupational therapists?

**LM:** *I just want to make a little comment about the word 'hegemonic'. Hegemonic means that it has in itself power and is appraised for, and I think some work is coming from several places—work coming from South Africa, Chile, Australia. I'm talking, for example, about choice. I'm talking about occupational possibilities, occupational opportunities. And so, I wouldn't say it is hegemonic at this point, but I would say that it is constitutive. It [OJ] builds the discipline of occupational science.*

**GW:** *I think it is a situation where occupational therapists might know that occupational justice is important but not know how to address it in everyday practice. So, to me, there is still a gap there between 'know that' and 'know how', which actually is one of the key purposes of this special edition, right? To help people bridge that gap between knowing that and knowing how in everyday work. I think that one of the best structural frameworks that can inform justice-oriented [practice] is the concept of 'structural inequalities'. I've been thinking a lot more, and doing a lot more on this in the last couple of years relative to things like COVID, for example, things like natural disasters. Structural inequalities become really apparent in situations of natural and other disasters because it's really clear, in those situations, who were the people who have resources and opportunities, and*

*have social capital, and those that do not. And we've seen that particularly [and evidently], I think, in the United States. You just had to look at who was most vulnerable to COVID. So, structural inequalities, thinking about inequalities in whatever nation-state you're in. Again, it's very contextually bound [and] allows us to identify, then, where the injustices are occurring, and we can tackle them in two ways. One is an 'ameliorist approach', and I think we've done a lot of that in occupational therapy where we, our actions with people, are to ameliorate the effects of the structural inequalities. So, for example, a person with a disability, we might do a particular skills training program for them. But that's ameliorist. We can take a second approach which is 'structural reform'. We can actually agitate to change those calcified structures that exclude people from forms of participation in the labour market as a whole. Now, I would say in the last decade, we've moved to actually combining those two approaches—ameliorist and structural reform.*

How do you realize the possibility of a dialogue on the conceptualisations of occupational justice created between the perspectives of where it originated (Global North) and how it is being understood or applied in the Global South?

**GW:** *[...] I would say actually, now, really we're in a time of 'ontological revisionism'. That sounds really academic, but the point here is that now, we're understanding [that] there are many different ways of understanding key concepts [and] constructs. But what's important is that we all remain critically reflexive...that we're all [in this] collaborative project [where] we need to keep...firmly fixed on to as we move forward into the future. I would like to add—we don't have room to go into it—but I, similar to Lilian, would like to see us focusing on citizenship. I think in citizenship...citizenship framework, we equalize ourselves with the people we work with. We're people, they're people, we share our knowledge and skills on a continuum. [...] [that] in Chile, as well as in Bolivia, occupational therapists work with people in the community with long-standing mental illness. Their work focuses...[on] supporting them to make a contribution to the new Chilean Constitution because they saw themselves as citizens of the country and that was their responsibility. I thought that was a very cool, very appropriate framing of what it is that we're to do, they're to do! So that's my final word—citizenship is our way forward out of this—them, us, client, patient, whatever. We're all people. We're citizens. Let's work together for social transformation.*

**LM:** *I have been avoiding the expression 'international dialogue' because international dialogue means a dialogue among nations. The point is, I have been in global dialogues because within these nations, even the very rich ones, you do have social injustice as well. I have been writing for a while about a global dialogue. We just wrote a commentary in the [Journal of Occupational Science] special cover against racism—that I really like (Magalhães et al., 2021). I have been working [on] how we manage to disguise language, how we manage to build some bridges, manage to do what Boaventura de Sousa Santos calls 'intercultural translation', how we talk to each other, how we manage to build a dialogue that is able to appraise what is going on in a very complex and diverse country such as Australia, Brazil, countries in Asia. How can we actually establish that*

conversation? And in this commentary that we just published, we have a list of recommendations. The dialogue is improving, but we still have a long way to go to actually build a global discussion, a global dialogue. The good thing is that we have started already. We have been improving it, and I think I am quite proud of the way this is shaping up.

## Some Reflection Points

The interview with Gail Whiteford and Lilian Magalhães brings light and opens many opportunities to reflect on the implications of occupational justice for our practice. Through this editorial, we would like to invite the readers to continue on their exploration of the idea and application of occupational justice and social justice in the profession. The interview discussion confirmed that ‘occupational justice’ is a concept in full and situated development, and in some cases might be neglected within and outside the occupational therapy space. *As a reader, consider how is ‘occupational justice’ and/or ‘social justice’ as a concept taken up by occupational therapists in your country or local practice setting?*

The interview also articulated the concept of citizenship in this discussion. The understanding of the citizenship concept transcends its understanding into occupational therapy, closely align with emerging practices. When the idea of citizenship is embedded in policy making, developing practices, and setting outcomes, bridging the potential tensions between occupational/social justice and occupational therapy could be more possible. *As a reader, consider how ‘citizenship’ is being defined in your country? And, how do you apply that definition in your own practice in health and social care? Or in your daily life? Expand this reflection to the lives of your clients.*

This editorial does not intend to provide a final response to the use and understanding of the concept of justice (social and occupational) within occupational therapy (the discipline). Instead, it offers a rich opportunity for reflection and consideration of various issues which are currently creating some of the (des)connections within our profession. Considering theory and practice carefully, and keep reflecting as an individual, a citizen, and an occupational therapist would be the pathway to follow.

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#### **Authors' Contributions**

Daniela Castro de Jong, Michael Palapal Sy, and Patricia Leme de Oliveira Borba were responsible for the conceptualization, literature review, data collection and analyses, and writing of the manuscript. Rebecca Twinley and Kee Hean Lim provided written input towards the final revision of the manuscript. All authors approved the final version of the text.

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