THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN OCCUPATION AND HEALTH:
IMPLICATIONS FOR
OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY AND PUBLIC HEALTH

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Abstract

This thesis proposes an occupational theory of human nature based on the observation that all humans engage in occupation to survive, be safe, and meet their needs for social approval and self actualisation. The core idea under investigation is that engagement in occupation is, in evolutionary terms, a central mechanism for health. In order to test the theory, the thesis scrutinises ideas held about human biological capacities, occupational history, and health.

The scrutiny supports the notion that health and engagement in occupation are inextricably linked; however occupation is so much a part of everyday life that this relationship is hardly acknowledged. In addition, it is difficult to consider the purpose and meaning of occupation, or its relationship to health, in an holistic way because occupation has been arbitrarily divided into work, play, leisure and rest, particularly within post-industrial societies. The exploration, using a history of ideas approach, reveals that health outcomes, either good or bad, can be traced to occupational determinants such as the type of economy, governmental policies, and societal values such as the ‘work ethic’.

Following an exploration of health and illness from an occupational perspective, the position of occupational therapists as agents for promoting health according to their view of occupation is considered. An account of the profession’s genesis makes it clear that its basic philosophical stance is congruent with World Health Organisation and ‘New Public Health’ ideologies. Despite pressures throughout its development to conform with the medical model, occupational therapy has emerged with a strong commitment to research and practice based on its distinctive view of occupation and its centrality to health and well-being.
An occupational therapy approach to public health is postulated based on action-research. Five models of health promotion, 'wellness', 'preventive medicine', 'social justice', 'community development' and 'ecological sustainability', are discussed to illustrate the breadth of an occupational approach to 'public health'. Strong recommendations are made for occupational therapists to implement an occupational approach within public health.