Embracing Diversity in Our Profession

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This is a reflective article that carries the discussion of cultural diversity from more typically considered arenas of clinical practice and education to a less-considered context: the occupational therapy community. The occupational therapy literature offers fine work that targets constructs related to diversity (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 1995, 1996; Black, 2002; Cena, McGruder, & Tomlin, 2002; Fitzgerald, Mullavey-O’Bryne, & Clemson, 1997; Grady, 1995; Hocking & Whiteford, 1995; Krefting, 1991; Pope-Davis, Prieto, Whitaker, & Pope-Davis, 1993; Whiteford, 1998; Whiteford & Wilcock, 2000). Our reflection extends this literature in its consideration of select and provocative ideas about diversity and harmony as they relate to occupational therapy.

In this article we aim to (1) discuss the construction of exclusionary views of others (otherisms) as problematic and (2) offer as a more promising alternative a valuation of uniqueness that supports diversity. Throughout this reflection, we intersperse personal experiences and professional observations that illustrate our thinking. Our central aim is to propose an appreciation of difference and an embrace of the profession’s identity, which is fundamentally linked to human occupation, as also diverse.

This article is not about prejudice, per se. A common definition of the term prejudice found in Allport’s classic work is also present in most dictionaries. It includes an element of hostility: “An avertive or hostile attitude toward a person who belongs to a group, simply because he belongs to that group, and is therefore presumed to have the objectionable qualities ascribed to the group” (Allport, 1979, p. 5). In this article, we discuss more benign overgeneralizations that could lead to hostility in the absence of vigilance. We believe that reflection about the value of diversity is a proactive move against developing prejudice.

As authors, we have each shared unique views of practice in the occupational therapy literature, and our partnering for this and prior articles illustrates a collaborative good that comes from valuing difference. Comments from each of us will explain our first step in this particular undertaking:

Beatriz (Betty): I first reflected on minority issues when the Brain Injury Association Conference (BIAC) invited me to address professionals and individuals with brain injury on the topic of diversity. I initiated contact with Suzanne because I thought her work on empathy and communication was inspiring and her strategies helpful. I had never written or presented on diversity. My specialty has been in physical and cognitive disabilities. When pressed with this task, I reflected not on my personal experience as a minority, but on my practice with many individuals who were rich, famous, smart and white, and who, in a short period of time after acquired brain injury had gained automatic and unsolicited membership in a minority group of individuals with disabilities. (Abreu & Peloquin, 2002)

Suzanne: When Beatriz asked if I might join her in a presentation on minority issues when the Brain Injury Association Conference (BIAC) invited me to address professionals and individuals with brain injury on the topic of diversity, I initiated contact with Beatriz because I thought her work on empathy and communication was inspiring and her strategies helpful. I had never written or presented on diversity. My specialty has been in physical and cognitive disabilities. When pressed with this task, I reflected not on my personal experience as a minority, but on my practice with many individuals who were rich, famous, smart and white, and who, in a short period of time after acquired brain injury had gained automatic and unsolicited membership in a minority group of individuals with disabilities. (Abreu & Peloquin, 2002)

Suzanne: When Beatriz asked if I might join her in a presentation on minority issues at the BIAC conference, I initially thought I had little to offer. I saw Betty as a perfect fit...
for the task, however, given her experiences as a Hispanic-American woman and her expertise with the population in question. I saw myself as an educator with prior and perhaps unrelated practice in mental health. Betty helped change my mind when she said that her foray into the literature recalled the work that I had done on empathy and therapeutic relationships.

The reading that we each did and the responses that we received after the conference pressed us to do more reading and to craft this article on the profession that we had promised ourselves we would “some- day” do.

**Otherisms as Problematic Constructions**

Some of the earliest messages that individuals hear about intolerance come from their parents. Whenever Suzanne’s mother caught either of her two children showing disrespect, she asked them a gentle and rhetorical question that conveyed her dismay: “Who do you think you are?” A similar question about identity drives this discussion, because the perception of self vis-à-vis other is at the heart of both intolerance and inclusion.

Within a discussion of intolerance, Myers and Speight (1994) argued that societal -isms can emerge from a perception of difference and that such -isms surface in a hierarchical way that grasps difference as lesser. Many such -isms spring to mind: favoritism, chauvinism, ethnocentrism, ageism, and racism. For the purpose of personalizing our discussion and placing -isms within the context of a professional community, we choose to call these constructions otherisms rather than use the -ism abstraction. The interpersonal message conveyed through any otherism might be this: “You are not at all like me. You are quite other than me. Your otherness separates us.”

We consider otherisms and the cognitive-affective dynamic that shapes them problematic in any group that strives to create a fellowship empowered by diversity. To construct otherisms, one perceives difference, recognizes it as an obstacle or threat, and acts on the basis of that construction.

Two comments on perhaps one of the most pernicious of otherisms, racism, yield an upshot of this process, which can be a highly damaging prejudice: Macpherson (1999) named racism a collective failure, while Karlsen and Nazroo (2002) noted the effects of this failure as disadvantage, discrimination, and interpersonal violence. From these descriptions we understand racism and even more benign otherisms as failures in fellowship.

**Cognitive-Affective Influences on the Construction of Otherisms**

The construction of otherisms has a benign origin in the human intellect that categorizes on its way to understanding. Individuals distinguish key features and group things according to commonalities; such ordering gives meaning to the world. Children apprehend differences through books that distinguish colors, animals, and shapes. Adults explain the world using comparative similes and contrasting opposites, teaching vital skills of generalization and discrimination. Role delineations and diagnostic differentials within professional circles are but advanced versions of the same process.

Stereotyping, however, is said to be a less benign crafting of oversimplified and rigid mental pictures (Mish et al., 2001). In stereotyping, one or two distinguishing traits are seen as dominant and largely positive or negative. For example, individuals who wear glasses can be stereotyped as either bright or nerd-like. Scapegoating actions can accompany negative stereotyping, subjecting those seen as other to unreasoned hostility and thus prejudice (Mish et al.). A child wearing thick glasses may be targeted early for ridicule. Any dichotomizing situation in which individuals see oppositional relationships that pit an us against a them reflects the presence of otherisms and the potential for scapegoating. If one recalls the thinking-feeling-acting natures of persons, it is easy, if not pleasant, to understand how a perception of difference as threatening can lead to the hostile behaviors of prejudice and discrimination.

Personality differences and social influences further shape the construction of otherisms, with some individuals more apt to engage in stereotyping and scapegoating than others. Some have a negative cognitive bias, seeing the proverbial life-glass as mostly half empty. Schweizer, Beck-Seyffer, and Schneider (1999) described this bias as a style of information processing. Tobena, Marks, and Dar (1999) thought that this style emanates from “inherited regularities of cognitive development that predispose some to the making of judgments without a full examination of the facts” (p. 1056).

Such a negative disposition can then be fostered or suppressed within various social contexts.

**Personal Examples of the Experience of Otherisms**

As individuals, most of us have experienced some of our differences reframed as otherisms. We two thus share snippets of our stories and invite readers to consider their own:

Beatriz: I have experienced being “a minority” in many instances in practice and educational arenas. My being “brown” has invited both tolerance and intolerance. Although I have heard comments about my being a nurturing “mama” with Latina charm, my Hispanic accent has caused some to expect a lesser intellect. As a professional committed to clinical practice, research, and education, I have found that others in the clinic often see my difference as that of being too theoretical or scientific. In educational arenas, some see my difference as that of being too practical and applied when I attempt to demystify theory and research. As a practitioner of cognitive and hand rehabilitation, I have been seen as having only reductionistic concerns.

Suzanne: My differences are less visible, although I draw comments from others about being small, quick, and bespectacled. I remember hurtful instances of grammar-school ridicule with taunts for being “brainy,” “four-eyed,” “brown-nosed,” or “showing off.” In high school I developed impish
Social Influences on the Construction of Otherisms

The social nature of human beings certainly contributes to the construction of otherisms such as those described above. The social norm that fosters such constructions has been called the norm of homogeneity (Kelly, Azelton, Burzette, & Mock, 1994). This norm spawns a collective and group-centered perception of goodness, rightness, and regard. Within a dominant culture, the phenomenon is named ethnocentrism. Any ethnocentric valuation of dominant traits, behaviors, and values presses those who seem different to conform while reducing the inclusion of those who do not (Kelly et al.). The norm also spawns behaviors that preserve homogeneity, including those that are competitive, intolerant, or marginalizing. Individuals striving for inclusion can construct counteractive responses, creating new –isms seen by the dominant culture as acceptable, reactionary, or falling somewhere in between. If a coherent plea for integration in abstract terms is acceptable to most, atheism may anger individuals with fundamentalist views, and feminism may chafe against chauvinism.

Although descriptions of racism set the tone for launching our discussion of otherisms, select descriptions of culture may extend the discussion. Duffy (2001) argued that culture is an elusive and changing concept that has superficial and deep manifestations. She further argued that presentations and celebrations in the name of cultural awareness might target superficial features. Regrettably, learning about superficial characteristics may not foster the inclusion that comes from real understanding.

In fact, superficial distinctions are most apt to elicit a perception of difference. A presentation of the culture of one ethnic group appeared in the movie My Big Fat Greek Wedding within which wedding guests good-naturedly spat on the bride’s veil as she walked down the aisle. Highlighting the comedic and tasteless aspects of this custom, the movie did not share its deeper origins or meaning. Select societal showcasing of such differences can prompt otherisms.

In addition to the threats to real inclusion posed by superficial considerations, the norm of homogeneity can compromise inclusion when applied to any one culture. When individuals assume, for example, that all women of Hispanic origin are nurturing or that all ex-runs are devout, individual variations from those homogenized views may be seen as different and targeted as other and thus lesser.

It is not surprising that, given individual differences and the many kinds of societal influences that further shape them, social responses to those seeking inclusion can be quite varied. Trying to make sense of such variety, Williams (2001) identified 10 cognitive frameworks or lenses through which he believed individuals see and respond to difference: assimilationist, colorblind, cultural centrist, elitist, integrationist, meritocritist, multiculturalist, seclusionist, transcendent, and victim or caretaker. Table 1 highlights the dominant view seen through each lens with the motto that Williams ascribed to each. Williams said that insight and helpful strategies for interaction could come from a deeper exploration of values central to each of the lenses. He argued that if each lens has its “shadows,” each also illustrates one way in which individuals make sense of a diverse world (Williams). Although the mottoes are but quick renderings, readers might find points of personal resonance with one or more of them.

Examples of Otherisms Within the Profession

Within the occupational therapy profession, examples of otherisms might include these situations:

A clinical practitioner says of educators, “They live in an ivory tower; they need to try practicing in the real world.”


An educator criticizes clinical practitioners, “They’re holding the profession back by engaging in practices not grounded in theory or evidence.”

A qualitative researcher says of quantitative researchers, “Those number crunchers are so out of touch with the lives of individuals.”

A quantitative researcher says of philosophical work, “That airy-fairy stuff has no basis for recognition or inclusion in our literature.”

A researcher complains about another who is trying to demystify

Table 1. The 10 Lenses Through Which Individuals Perceive Diversity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lens</th>
<th>Motto</th>
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<tr>
<td>Assimilationist</td>
<td>“When in Rome, do as the Romans” (p. 13).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colorblind</td>
<td>“When I see you, I see a person, not your color” (p. 15).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cultural centrist</td>
<td>“My culture is central to my personal and public identity” (p. 17).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Elitist</td>
<td>“Membership has its privileges” (p. 19).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Integrationist</td>
<td>“Ebony and ivory live together on my piano keys…shouldn’t we?” (p. 21).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meritocritist</td>
<td>“Cream rises to the top” (p. 23).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiculturalist</td>
<td>“The more cultural diversity, the better” (p. 25).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seclusionist</td>
<td>“Birds of a feather flock together” (p. 27).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transcendent</td>
<td>“There’s really only one race—the human race” (p. 29).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim/Caretaker</td>
<td>“We shall overcome” (p. 31).</td>
</tr>
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research, “Why he’s just dummying down this rich material.”

An older practitioner accuses younger ones of abandoning the profession’s roots as younger practitioners counter that outdated principles will fail to move us forward in a changing and accountable world.

A young therapist complains that a veteran assistant tries to undermine his authority by invoking her extensive experience.

Each of these situations has occurred to one or another of our mutual acquaintances within the profession. In each instance, the person targeted as other reported pain in the wake of an event that highlighted a difference and intimated a lesser valuation. Although it is tempting to consider such situations trivial when standing “outside” of them, it seems that the damage caused by otherisms is best assessed by those who feel the pain.

Embracing Diversity as an Alternative

In the previous section, we briefly considered select individual and social influences on the construction of problematic otherisms. Within this article, the most we can do is launch a discussion of alternatives. We begin by proposing a thoughtful review of the cognitive-affective and social processes just described as influential in shaping otherisms. We encourage practitioners to use their capacities to generalize and to see, as we have, that similar influences can affect us professionally. Habitual reflections such as this might prevent the occurrence of otherisms that could, without vigilance, breed prejudice and discrimination within the profession.

In addition to proposing a sensitivity to and vigilance against the factors that may shape otherisms, we suggest the consideration of select constructs that may promote inclusion. We thus turn to a discussion of how negative bias might be changed and appreciation of difference fostered. We invite readers to imagine how each of the constructs and approaches discussed in this next section might transform professional otherisms that may be in place.

Constructs That Promote Inclusion

An ideal world of inclusion, according to Williams (2001), will emerge from a vision of harmony seen through an eleventh lens, not-yet named, that opens pathways to inclusion. He said, “Perhaps the central task of this century will be to create a world where we neither deny the richness of our cultural differences nor allow them to divide us” (p. 3). Williams said that the eleventh lens requires that individuals develop the capacities to engage in paradoxical thinking and to dialogue with one another. We share here possible ways of opening such pathways. First we discuss constructs from the literature. Then we offer examples of how to convey respect in relationships and create fellowship in the profession.

If otherisms come from a cognitive view infused with negative affect, actions that affirm diversity come from confluent constructions of another kind (Peloquin, 2002). What if the perception of difference as lesser were replaced by that of difference as unique? Differing features of any reality, seen with this positive cognitive bias, might be appreciated as valuable distinctions. Recognition of uniqueness as a treasure, resource, or gift might prompt inclusion. Such a deliberate and confluent reframing of difference is an act of looking once again at another, this time more fully. This act of taking a second look is well conveyed in its essence by the term used to name it, respect.

Discussing a cognitive scheme named Optimal Theory, Myers and Speight (1994) described an optimally constructed culture within which individuals see beyond apparent differences to the unity of all life (Myers & Speight). Drawing from ancient traditions of African culture, the theory promotes a vision of individuals who establish interrelationships instead of engaging in dichotomized conflicts. In Optimal Theory, difference is not seen as lesser. Instead, “identity is seen as an individuated expression of a unified consciousness” and interrelationships the vehicles that promote understanding of a global human identity (Myers & Speight, p. 103). Diversity, in this scheme, is a myriad manifestation of one human energy.

Jones (1994) described another construct of value to this discussion, the synthetic possibility. He argued that any celebration of diversity always carries the risk of showcasing difference and can thus “diminish the common ground we share” (p. 27). He said that we must celebrate difference and similarity simultaneously. The challenge is to create a dynamic balance between individual uniqueness and communal belonging. He named this challenge that of the synthetic possibility. Accepting this challenge, one might understand the intriguing view that our similarities are different (Jones). As Hasselkuss (2002) noted, “We are, all of us, the ‘other’ at certain times and in certain ways in our lives. Our ‘otherness’ can be a source of rejoicing, as can our ‘belongingness’ within the familiar” (p. 48).

Shaping Respect in Individual Relationships

Remember that in matters of respect Suzanne’s mother asked a question about identity that prompted it. Beatriz’s Gramma exemplified respect through her finesse in inclusive behaviors. Not a Pollyanna who was oblivious to negative traits in others, she encouraged a deeper look to another side of persons, a side that might be suffering or unaware of hurtful behaviors. Without using the terms eleventh lens, Optimal Theory, or synthetic possibility, Gramma enacted these processes quite well. Similar Gramma-like engagements seem essential within the profession. How these might occur is worth considering.

Within occupational therapy, the attitude thought essential to respect is that of empathy. Although more commonly included within discussions of the therapeutic use of self, empathy seems fundamental to an embrace of diversity. Allport (1999) identified empathy as a process that can mitigate prejudice. Rogers (1975) described the empathic process in a way that resembles a deeper consideration of cultural difference: “temporarily living in the life of the other, moving about in it delicately and sensitively without making judgments” (p. 3). Empathy is a thinking-feeling capacity through which one apprehends likeness in another while also respecting uniqueness. When engaged in empathy,
Imagine, now, any of the occupational therapy practitioners who appear as characters enacting otherisms on our list included in this paper’s section on examples of otherisms. Note how they dichotomize and marginalize others. Place them imaginatively, instead, within an empathic and respectful dialogue that explores differences and similarities of the envisioned other, deeply and nonjudgmentally. Now see these same individuals emerging from that dialogue appreciating their differences and acting on that appreciation. The image is that of inclusion.

We pause here to mention that if we two have encountered otherisms, we have also experienced inclusion. One specific instance was the publication in the American Journal of Occupational Therapy of an article on competence for scientific inquiry (Abreu, Peloquin, & Ottenbacher, 1998). Both the process of writing the article and its content model an appreciation of differences. Each author has a different background and scholarly agenda; one is a master clinician–clinical researcher–educator, another a scholar–educator, and the third a master researcher and grants man. The thesis of the article constitutes a new perspective on research that supports a diversity of excellences on the research team. The conclusion of the article includes this: “The proposed reconceptualization acknowledges the multiple ways in which research capacities emerge and conveys our belief that requisite competence in research can be fostered by diverse professional roles, educational levels, or practice settings” (p. 757). We imagine that experiences of success based on a group’s diversity foster a sustained commitment to such efforts.

Shaping Fellowship on a Communal Scale

On a more communal and professional scale, the creation of fellowship through dialogue will warrant a new social norm of heterogeneity to replace that of homogeneity (Kelly et al., 1994). Such a norm invites open discussion and valuation of diversity: Creating a social setting where the participants value diversity allows them to initiate standards for their behavior that permit interdependence between individuals while also valuing the uniqueness of each individual. Here, participants have opportunities to create settings whose very purpose is to acknowledge and even celebrate variety and differences. (Kelly et al., 1994, p. 427)

Such multicultural exchanges could occur within the profession of occupational therapy, with culture broadly understood to include the mini-cultures born of the practice settings, theoretical perspectives, and educational backgrounds seen on our otherism list. These group exchanges could move past obvious differences to an exploration of deeper values. Some of these values ground and unite mini-cultures, making them more interdependent than a first-look might suggest. Other values may reflect real differences around which meaningful dialogue can and must occur.

Suggested exchanges might include various activities and discussions that: (1) foster understanding, interdependence, and cohesion, (2) enhance perception of the resources inherent in diversity, (3) consciously establish communication channels to establish a norm of appreciation, and (4) foster reflection about and integration of the exchanges. (Kelly et al., 1994). Individuals who seem by nature or by virtue of personal development possessed of positive bias, insight, and good communication skills could facilitate such exchanges, noting otherisms, encouraging the deeper view of cultures, and fostering dialogue. Although Bonder, Martin, and Miracle (2002) call such an individual a cultural broker, we prefer the image of bridge maker. Exchanges facilitated by bridge makers could become celebrations of unity in diversity, safe venues within which all participants could be unique selves while feeling quite secure in their belonging.

Momentarily return to the otherisms we listed in our examples section. Imagine, now, these same individuals gathered with colleagues in their dichotomized groups. Imagine now an intermingling across groups to deliberately consider the resources that respective differences offer the profession. Local, state, and national associations that now hold conferences featuring parallel presentations with ethnocentric aims could become venues for multicultural discussions. Additional activities might include creating a forum for occupational therapy practitioners who appear as characters enacting otherisms on our list included in this paper’s section on examples of otherisms.
al discourse and in so doing promote interrelationships and affirm diversity.

Conclusion
When Loretta Peloquin saw disrespect and intolerance, she asked, “Who do you think you are?” Hers was a question about identity that we believe occupational therapy practitioners must answer today. Hopefully, the question will trigger awareness, prompt appreciation, and invite inclusive actions like those of Betty’s Gramma.

Williams (2001), who hoped for an ideal world of inclusion, said that the metaphor of the eleventh lens is “One song, many voices” (p. 173). He explained:

The eleventh lens envisions the earth and its inhabitants as inextricably blended in a chorus of universal harmony that is both diverse and self-sustaining. The harmony depends on every voice and the quality of its contribution; it is threatened only by the exclusion or destruction of any of its parts. (p. 172)

Many of us liken occupational therapy practice to a dance. As diverse as we may seem, each of us sings in the chorus that leads the occupational dance. The dance, integrated in its expression but myriad in its movements, is that which unites us. Our unique voices must therefore make one harmonic song that will guide the dance and keep it alive.

The joy and animation within Williams’ (2001) metaphor of a song are important to us because we propose more than a begrudging acceptance of diversity as part of the profession’s identity. We call for more than a tolerance of differences. As the title of this article suggests, we propose an open-armed embrace of the diversity that has characterized our profession since its founding. Such an embrace will emerge only from an appreciation of uniqueness as resource, treasure, and gift. We hope that a vision of this embrace will inspire acts of respect and fellowship that are at the heart of inclusion.

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References


Correction
To the Listing of Educational Programs in Occupational Therapy in the November/December 2003 issue [57(6):682–702]

Private nonprofit institutions (not Private profit):
Arizona School of Health Sciences,
A.T. Still University of Health Sciences,
Mesa, Arizona
Howard University, Washington, DC

Public institution (not Private nonprofit):
State University of New York Downstate Medical Center, Brooklyn, New York