Ours can be a much more meaningful profession. Occupational therapy continues to develop into an international movement that endeavours to benefit individuals and societies by focusing on the important, many would say essential, dynamic between what people do and their states of well-being. However, it seems as though we have not fully considered whether the rest of the world shares our values about what constitutes well-being and the centrality of meaningful action to it. There is a dearth of critical reflection on the universality of these and other core tenets of our profession. The lack of critical reflection may be partially due to the fact that occupational therapy shares so many of its core values with the Western social context that emerged, developed, and nurtured it to its current prominence. In the context of Western shared experiences and value patterns, few would take issue with a profession that strives to help people achieve independence and challenges people to be and become (Wilcock, 1998) through their actions.

However, as we proceed to assist others to receive this wonderful ideology of modern health practice, we owe it to our clients both here and abroad to explore the relevance of our ideas and how culture-bound occupational therapy might actually be. Occupational therapy may not necessarily be as meaningful and effective toward human betterment as we might have emphatically believed. In fact, occupational therapy in its current construction and the ideologies that support it may be counterproductive and even, dare I suggest, oppressive to people who perceive, construct, and live their realities along different beliefs, value patterns, and worldviews. The case of Asia, and more specifically Japan, is offered for consideration to illuminate this important issue. Asia’s collective population is estimated to be over 3.3 billion people (U.S. Census Bureau, 1998) accounting for almost half of the world’s population. Asia and its varied cultures represent a pertinent testing ground for occupational therapy’s universality because as a whole it has evolved its own distinct philosophies, value patterns, moral and ethical systems, and epistemologies, separate from the Western world. Just as Asian nations have had to reconcile the sharp intrusions of modernization and Western cultural forms over the past century, they have had to deal with the systematic transplantation of occupational therapy with all of its subsumed philosophies, values, moral, and ethical systems, and epistemology.

As the social context around the modern construction of occupational therapy moves through this postmodern era of cultural relativism—the belief that humans socially construct their realities (Berger & Luckmann, 1967) and meanings in particular ways—it is an appropriate juncture to reexamine our professional raison d’etre. This includes examining what is worth knowing and doing in this profession and considering just how socially inclusive and culturally relevant our ideas really are. By examining the issues of culture and meaning as occupational therapy attempts to make its way into places farther removed from our familiar Western social contexts, we may, in turn, gain some valuable insight into the value, meaning, and effectiveness for our own diverse clients who are situated outside of our own society’s modal norms and shared experiences. On a grand scale, such understanding may compel us to extend this profession in a more useful and meaningful direction for more people. If occupational therapy is to develop into a service to universally benefit all, more culturally relevant epistemologies, theories, and practice methods may be required.

A Renaissance of Occupation

Since the late 1970s, Western occupational therapists have been experiencing a renaissance of the construct of occupation (Whiteford, Townsend, & Hocking, 2000). Though our practice is still arguably deficient in the application of this central construct (Kielhofner, 2002), occupational therapy scholars have developed a respectable array of theoretical materials, including “occupation”-centered conceptual models and assessments and a commitment toward valuing the individual by placing him or her in the center of our professional concern. In turn, innovative occupational therapists are striving to take their practice beyond its traditional medical institutional settings, into the community, the main social context where meanings in occupations in daily living are essentially believed to unfold. We are advancing a practice based on an ideology that is transcending the viewpoint that has traditionally connected the absence of disease with human well-being, with one that seeks to explore all facets of the mystery of human agency with the complexities of human well-being. So compelling has been this
renaisance of occupation that, in the past decade, various scholars have embraced a vision to formally study the phenomena, heralding the birth of a specialized body of knowledge. Occupational science promises to inform us more about the nature of humans as occupational beings (Yerxa et al., 1989) and to inform occupational therapists (Yerxa, 1993b) about the profound core concept of their profession—something that other academic disciplines singularly have purportedly been unable to specifically and satisfactorily deliver.

Meanings ascribed to occupation as it relates to the human condition have been captured in Ann Wilcock’s (1998) meditations on Doing, Being, and Becoming. Occupational therapists throughout the Western world have embarked on a journey of enquiry and reflection to imagine the associations between human agency and factors of being and identity. I, too, at least the part of me that has acculturated to Western social norms, find it difficult to disagree with this explanation of people’s acquisition of identity and fulfillment. Through my own acculturation into North American life, I learned to competently navigate through the cultural context of the modern West that placed primary importance on the individual and agency. By the time I reached early adulthood, I believed that I could be whatever I wanted to be and that all it would take to succeed was action impelled by mind and will (Reilly, 1962).

While the discourse on occupation resonates on a common chord among many who share the same take on reality and experience, people (both occupational therapists and their clients) situated on the outside of common Western experience are struggling to understand and navigate its unclear waters. They have taken on the unavailing task of interpreting, understanding, and applying the fundamental concepts that Western occupational therapists speak so matter-of-factly about, into a lexicon where the terms are either nonexistent or connected to profoundly differing sets of meanings. And herein lies the paramount concern. Instead of being one of the greatest ideas of 20th century medicine, as Reilly (1962) envisioned, occupational therapy in such foreign situations can take on an ethereal quality, out of touch with the day-to-day realities and concerns of ordinary people in these other social settings and contexts.

Western Epistemological Flow

For those of us who choose to view and construct the world through the cosmos of Western collective experience, the meanings and veracity of current occupational therapy are rarely questioned. Our epistemologies have arisen from familiar contexts of European and Western experience and thus present few disparate problems of validity and meaning. Hobbes, Descartes, Hume, Locke, and a steady progression of the most celebrated minds of Western civilization have left us a legacy of modern philosophy and social and scientific thought that have influenced our take on reality and truth and what is worth knowing. In this tradition, Murphy (1997) states that knowledge represents a real world that is thought of as existing separate and independent of the knower; and this knowledge should be considered true only if it correctly represents that independent world. In accordance to this construction of reality, scientists have developed strict ways or rules for validating phenomena and explaining it. In fact, we reward efforts to systematically uncover scientific truths according to the degree of rigour and consistency applied in uncovering them. To this day, science and biomedicine have increased their hold on our confidence to separate true from false, and to powerfully inform us about what is worth knowing about human health and well-being.

With such powerful explanatory guides to establish a proper way of regarding truth, we, particularly in the West, have reinforced a characteristically rational, monistic way of regarding phenomena in life, meaning, and our places within our universe. Like the logical and efficient way in which a watch or a combustion engine has been put together following a well thought-out design, phenomena are often explained in Western experience in similarly positivistic and rational ways, with distinct parts systematically and purposefully fitting together. And congruent with a common belief and expectation that everything has a reason for existing, we want to understand how and “why” objects and phenomena are put together the way they are.

In a similar way to which many monotheists believe that humans were divinely created and made stewards over nature, we, too, demonstrate a tendency and expectation to exert control over our surroundings and circumstances. The notion of balance in this way of thinking is not necessarily like that of a scale in which two entities of equal valence reach a neutral point of equilibrium. Balance in this context appears to be about effectively exploiting one’s available resources as if such acts of self-determinism were a divine right shared universally by all. Mind over matter, overcoming deficits, subjugating the physical body to the superior mind, are familiar extensions of such an ethos founded on a tacit understanding of the transcendence of Homo sapiens over nature. If we have never experienced living outside of it, this particular worldview and its particular features remain normal and therefore largely unremarkable.

Human agency in occupational therapy appears to be manufactured along individualistic lines, depicted diagrammatically in occupational therapy conceptual models and literally in our professional discourse as the central axis for all phenomena. Though the environment is clearly acknowledged, it is often conceptualized as a distinct entity separate from the individual, representing the stage on which human transformations occur. Here the Western notion of independence reaches its zenith as an individual’s status of being is decided by the extent to which one can exploit his or her environment. Occupation of this distinct, surrounding environment is necessarily a determined act, qualified by outcomes of one’s intention to act upon it.

Explanations of human agency as an interplay of systems (Parsons, 1937; Parsons & Shils, 1951; von Bertalanffy, 1950), mirroring the social scientific epistemology of the mid to late 20th century, is also strongly represented in our current explanations of human occupation. Constructed this way, the work ethic is also celebrated as individuals are admonished to actively raise self-efficacy (Kielhofner, 1995), often through a process of “graded mastery,” and
become competent in or ultimately achieve control over their circumstances. Taken further away from the discourse around illness, we also see occupation as a means to self-actualization, enabling a sense of being and becoming what “I” desire to be. As the core concept continues to emerge, a new constellation of concepts has recently become associated with occupation, ascribing wider dimensions of its meaning as it anchors more firmly to the celebration of “self” in the individualist sense. Added to function and purposeful activity, which gained affirmation during an era of occupational therapy’s affinity with rehabilitation and medicine, are psychological, social, symbolic, spiritual, temporal, and performance (Christiansen, Clark, Kielhofner, Rogers, & Nelson, 1995).

Spurred by a clearer set of meanings about our core concept and a need to know, some of the profession’s foremost minds have articulated the need for a specialized body of knowledge around the core construct of occupational therapy. In doing so, they may have unwittingly moved to entrench the discourse around occupation further into culturally narrow lanes; melding the emerging discourse around the meanings of human actions with science, complete with all of its positivistic, rational, and empirical structure. Yerxa (1993a) attempted to delineate the nature of knowledge in occupational therapy from the physical sciences but the persistent context of modern science with its insistence on universalism remains. Despite German philosopher Immanuel Kant’s (trans. 1929) denial of the possibility of arriving at a precise grasp of knowledge, or the postmodernists’ (Derrida, 1982; Lyotard, 1984; Rosenau, 1992) rejection of idealized view of ultimate truth inherited from the ancients for a dynamic changing truth bounded by time, space, and perspective, we proceed nevertheless to insist that all humans are occupational beings (Yerxa et al., 1989). Our common discourse around the construction of occupation proceeds virtually uncontested with all of its contextual meanings having emerged from the Western experience. We have taken things a step further by imbuing occupation with a universal quality, able to transcend cultural boundaries of meaning.

Eastern Ontology and Epistemology

As an Asian person of color acculturated into Western modes of thought, I have wondered on many occasions how different our epistemologies might have evolved if the Eastern Cosmological Myth (Bellah, 1957) had emerged as the dominant explanation of the universe and truth. What if truth was viewed to be internal, situational, and variable, according to place and time, and if our environment and circumstances were not seen as something to be subjugated to the self, along the dualism seen in such popular metaphorical proverbs of “mind over matter,” or divine head subjugating its beastly body? How would occupation and its context-enriched meanings differ when viewed from the East Asian perspective of the cosmos? It is an intriguing question and one that is particularly important for occupational therapists and Asian health professionals to ask.

Groups of people situated outside of modal Western and European experience may find occupation to be problematically ethnocentric. Japan, arguably representing the largest and fastest growing occupational therapy concern in the world, has yet to reconcile the meaning of occupation to its own standard lexicon, resigning to the use of sagyou, a word that might approximate laborious work in Western spheres of meaning. There is no such concept in the Japanese language to capture the contextual meaning Westerners ascribe to occupation and its link to well-being, essentially because the Japanese social may not necessarily construct “doing” with the same intrinsic meaning as it does in the West. Japanese occupational therapists may be able to produce rote-memorized Western definitions of the concept of occupation, to lead Western observers to presume that occupation transfers seamlessly into the Japanese world of meanings, but in reality, this is not the case. The social contexts manufactured and sustained by people’s differing collective experiences ensure that social concepts like occupation do not necessarily transfer universally across cultural boundaries of meaning (Iwama, 2001).

Japanese and East Asian social contexts appear to differ markedly from modal European and Western contexts, especially in regard to ontology and epistemology. The East Asian counterparts have not been informed by monistic, Judeo-Christian ideals and rational explanations of reality and the cosmos, but rather by philosophies and ethics such as Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, which comparatively take on more naturalistic, particular interpretations of phenomena, truth, and reality.

Salient Representations of Japanese Knowing

From the vantage of my own acculturation into both Japanese and Western life, I have chosen three particular views of Japanese ontology and epistemology. Some implications for considering the construction of human agency in another social and cultural context are offered. All three views are interwoven and difficult, almost impossible, to separate. They are tied to yet numerous other factors that cannot be satisfactorily expounded on in these limited pages.

Naturalistic View of the World

When regarding ideas of the origins of our worldviews and the social contexts shaping or influencing meaning ascribed to phenomena, the subject of cosmological myths, or imaginations and constructions of the cosmos, often come to mind. One familiar cosmological myth that is often tied to “primitive” or ancient societies’ interpretation of the cosmos is the one that depicts the universe as a single inseparable entity made up of a constellation of living matter (including human beings, animals, and flora), inanimate matter and deities arranged more or less in a tightly packed unity. We have often seen such constructions of the world illustrated metaphorically in Asian aesthetics in the form of man-dalas, and religiously inspired mosaics often bounded in circles. Bellah (1991) offered a description of the Western variation of the cosmological myth as an arrangement of unilaterally ranked entities along a continuum. A singular almighty God or Truth (rather than numerous deities) inhabits the top of the hierarchical continuum of separated, defined, and ranked lesser entities: namely humans, society, and then nature, which humans were given dominion over
by an omnipotent God to subjugate to their needs. Bellah (1991) suggests that the first evidence of the separation of the ancient cosmological myth could be read about in the biblical account of Moses' ascent to the top of a mountain to converse with God and then descend with a universal moral code or laws for God's people. The separation of humans and nature along a rational, hierarchical structure supports the belief that humans or agents in a world created by a singular God and bound by a singular truth are free to exercise choice in their actions and occupy or move to intentionally manage their circumstances (Gustafson, 1993).

Many who have not been exposed to such rational explanations of the universe consistent with Western constructions of the cosmos, may have grown up with a worldview similar to the one described in the typical ancient cosmological myth. In the East Asian variation, which arranges deities, nature, and humans as inseparable parts of a singular entity, one's existence is no more important or meaningful than the next entity—be it a tree, a stone, a bird, or another person. The gap between self and environment need not be traversed or occupied, as one's identity or place in the universe may not necessarily be contingent on one's doing or particular achievement. The world does not revolve around “me.” Results cannot be explained by some linear, rational, act of self-determination or individual action but more likely by a circular dynamic in which numerous factors coalesce at a common focal point in time and space. Some Asians have described such events as "karma" or "unmeh," the latter often roughly translated from Japanese into English as "fate."

According to this holistic construction of the universe, self is inseparable from and no higher in status than parts of the physical environment. Thus a fundamental assumption or common belief in the East is that one is already there and an inextricable part of the environment, having already arrived and in no particular need to occupy it, nor to control it. There is no notion of needing to “occupy” anything through individual agency. Matters of being are not necessarily contingent on doing, negating any particular need to assert and affirm one's incumbency in the environment through occupation. The notion of independence of individuals standing separate to their physical, temporal, and social environs is replaced by the sensation of interdependence or an inseparable union, with all other elements sharing a common space. Instead of striving to exert control over circumstances, there is a notion of adapting and adjusting self to attain harmony with them.

If we insist that context determines meaning in our experiences, how does context affect Japanese constructions of and meanings of acts in that world? Though difficult to imagine, when the notion of self-determinism and action, functioning as a bridge between self and environment, is incomprehensible, and independence of the individual is rendered moot, the structure and meaning of human agency are experienced in ways profoundly different from the Western construction. Yes, Japanese people may be observed to do and perform, but to assume that they do so as occupational beings would be presumptuous.

**Truth As Context Determined, Relevant to Place and Social Relation**

In the context of reality depicted in the East Asian cosmological myth, the viewpoint that truth exists universally is virtually untenable. In collectively oriented societies, the social, as opposed to the individual or a single deity, often wields greater power in influencing perceptions of what is right and proper, and aligning one's structure of morality (Triandis, 1988). Who is present in a given situation, and one's status in the group, which is bestowed on the individual by the greater collective, can exert profound influence on what is true, worth knowing, and worth doing.

In such a naturalistic and collectivistic social context, self is oriented toward adjusting and adapting to the external (social) environment, rather than controlling and altering the environs to suit one's self.

One feature of the transcendence of human beings as depicted in the Western variation of the cosmological myth is that separation from the universal milieu affords the individual a stronger sense of individualism and an external vantage from which to view, compare, and make sense of his or her surrounding world. A particularly rational perspective in which self and environment are treated as distinct separate entities supports our current musings about occupation. In a cosmos void of such transcendence, as seen in the East Asian mythology, the structure and nature of truth become blurred and impermanent. The references used to judge phenomena become other elements within the shared milieu. In common Japanese experiences, the social, rather than self or a singular omnipotent God serves the purpose of moral reference. Takie Lebra (1976) refers to this as “social relativism.” There is no external or superior perch, nor singular moral code, from which to universally view and judge phenomena or individual agency. The current discourse on occupation in occupational therapy might lead one to regard the ethos of the individualist Western person as doing. Persisting even to this present era, belonging is still regarded by many (Lebra) to be the ethos of collectivist Japanese person. The value of human agency, observed in the social-collective oriented Japanese, is almost invariably regarded to be determined and modified through the social.

From an East Asian vantage, occupational therapy conceptual models appear to be limited unilateral and overly simplistic representations or explanations of phenomena, and are thus reduced to manual-like, “how-to” recipes when imported for use in Japanese settings. The concepts, their interrelations, and depictions of the meanings of human agency are so out of touch with indigenous constructions of self and structure of human agency, that imported occupational therapy theories are treated as esoteric musings. They are virtually impossible to relate to meaningfully, and to implement effectively with Japanese clients who hold different but no less valid constructions of truth and reality.

**Primacy of Experience and Human Relations Over Individual Ability**

When people subscribe to a more naturalistic East Asian worldview and value truth as context determined, relevant to place and social relation, the assumptions and rules concerning individual agency are profoundly altered. How and why certain phenomena occur, be it good fortune or disas-
ter resulting in a personal sense of poor well-being, are conceived to be beyond the domain of individual control. As imagined, an entirely different set of conditions is attached to the meanings of achievement and self-actualization in this context. A different perspective on the nature of human agency as well as its relation to matters of social role, identity, and status acquisition is evident.

Westerners may find it intriguing to compare the content of interviews given by high-performance Western and Eastern athletes to television reporters following a major competition. Japanese athletes will, almost certainly, begin their interview with expressions of sincere gratitude to the fans, teammates, support staff, coaches, and practically everyone else, for the successful outcome. This is not only because of social convention in a collectivist society, but also because the athlete himself or herself believes that the success attained was the result of many factors that coincided at the right time. Victory was not necessarily achieved because the self was able to produce a supreme effort or that God had willed it to be. In Japanese language, the word most frequently used to represent self is “jibun,” which literally means “self part,” or “one’s share (of the whole).” Self is constructed as one (small) inseparable portion of the greater whole. Experienced this way, the surrounding social takes primacy over self and sets a powerful context in which meaning of personal agency and all phenomena for that matter, are ascribed and profoundly shaped. By contrast, individuals describing their accomplishments reflected to one’s self appear self-aggrandizing, egocentric, and particularly selfish and immaterial to the well-socialized, collective-conscious Japanese adult. Success is rarely attributed to one’s own doing.

In America and other areas of the Western world, there is a popular belief that one can achieve whatever one desires through persistence and hard work (Gans, 1988). Being clever also helps. I believe that this understanding was also germane to the societal and intellectual nature of the era in which Reilly, Kielhofner, and their contemporaries offered their imaginations about the nature of human occupation and well-being. It was a rich intellectual period where, in the midst of turbulent societal change in the West spanning the 1960s and 1980s, breakthroughs in social scientific thought would have a bearing on our current understandings of human behaviour and action. Theories of: Motivation (Abraham Maslow), Personality (Carl Rogers), Cognitive Development (Jean Piaget), Social Modeling, Learning and Self Efficacy (Albert Bandura), Symbolic Interactionism (Mead, through Herbert Blumer) and many others that emerged during this era coincided and formed part of the context around occupational therapy’s movement toward an epistemology on occupation.

In the Japanese experience doing may not necessarily be rationally tied to being, nor is it necessarily a prerequisite to becoming. The social plays a profoundly powerful modifying factor in determining individual place and meaning. In Japanese experience roles in life are not necessarily social positions that one achieves or attains through doing energized by mind and will, but rather social stations that are bestowed by or received from one’s social group. An examination of most formal institutions or organizations in Japanese society will show that many charged with important leadership roles happen to be elderly people who have gained their positions on the merit of seniority. Their skills may have eroded but they possess two necessary assets highly valued in Confucian ethics: experience (wisdom) and a broad network of social relations. Becoming, being, and then doing may be a more understandable progression to the Japanese experience than the reverse as stated in Wilcock’s (1998) often celebrated quote.

There are parallels then to how theoretical materials in occupational therapy are regarded and what is deemed to be worth knowing in the Japanese occupational therapy experience. The acceptance of imported occupational therapy ideas may be contingent on who (the social) and which institution (situated place) raised the particular model rather than the model’s veracity and potential to appropriately explain, describe, and predict phenomena within the Japanese social context.

In Asia, people are seen to “do” as any other living entity. However the meanings attached and the motivations to “do” may be explained by a very different set of concepts and factors than those germane to Western intellectual thought.

These are but three examples that give us a limited view into another culture’s construction of ontology and epistemology. In such differing social contexts, how do we reconcile the dominant philosophies and ideologies of Western occupational therapy? The epistemologies are not always relevant, meaningful, and ethically appropriate to explain occupation and occupational therapy in social contexts that vary markedly from those of the Western world.

Japanese Consequences

Japanese occupational therapy has maintained a strong affinity to modern biomedicine and a skills-oriented practice, even in recent years. As our profession develops its discourse further into matters pertaining to Western social constructions of human occupation, groups that do not share similar ontologies and epistemologies with the West will find it increasingly difficult to develop occupational therapy in line with their own cultures without radically departing from or finding some way to reconcile the ideas of the profession to their fundamental cultural values. By keeping its professional ideals and practice within the culture of modern medicine, Japanese occupational therapists have successfully managed to maintain their identity, status, and purpose within their health care system.

Occupational therapy leaders who have endeavoured to bring their profession in line with the Western state of the art have been saddled with the impossible task of reconciling theory and knowledge as emerged in the past 20 years from Western people’s experiences and meanings into a vastly different social context. The results have been troubling. We have witnessed theoretical models, assessment instruments, specialized treatment approaches, and philosophies copied directly en masse without much critical reflection or alteration to adequately reflect Japanese people’s lived experiences. Conceptual models such as the Model of Human Occupation (Kielhofner, 1995), the Canadian Model of Occupational Performance (CAOT, 1997), and the...
assessments tied to them are being reduced to “how-to,” recipe-type approaches, as if bestowed from heaven, but robbed of their profound meanings and potencies to inform a better practice of occupational therapy. As you ponder this, someone receiving occupational therapy, who yearns to interdepend and socially belong again and restore harmony with their circumstances, is being stymied. He or she is being coerced into an ideology of individualism, independence, self-determinism, and actualization, all of which may render him or her unable to be and experience an improved state of well-being in a collective-oriented society.

Such a recipe-oriented construction of occupational therapy based on ideas out of cultural context has Japanese occupational therapy on the verge of a professional crisis. One would hardly notice such a profound problem lying underneath what is perhaps the fastest and largest growing occupational therapy profession in the world. In order to meet the anticipated health needs of a rapidly aging population, government ministries have, since the early 1990s, taken off the brakes to the growth of health professions. There are now over 130 schools of occupational therapy in Japan that will soon be graduating approximately 5,000 new occupational therapists each year.

An epistemological crisis is emerging as both academics and clinicians (exceeding 20,000) are involved in a movement in which its core constructs, such as “occupation,” are problematically left unreconciled to the Japanese experience of the social. Social theories that reflect such foreign ideals, such as individualism, monotheism, future temporal orientation, independence, and self-determinism, are studied rote, stripped of meaning and the power to explain.

Subsequently, there is an identity crisis among younger occupational therapists as they struggle to relate their imported knowledge to every day realities. Without a specialized body of knowledge that holds meaning and value in the local context, there are legitimate fears that the demise of occupational therapy in Japan will begin as soon as Japanese citizens and residents are required to pay for occupational therapy services.

Conclusion

Much of one’s view of the universality of occupation and occupational therapy may hinge on whether one views ontology (the nature of being and existence) and truth–knowledge (epistemology) as existing separate from the knower, corresponding to a knowable external reality, or whether one sees them as part of the knower and relative to the individual’s experiences within his or her environment. The perspective that this bicultural Japanese-Westerner has taken in this short essay is that groups of people sharing similar experiences socially construct their own meanings and interpretations of human action. Taken this way, occupation and conventional Western beliefs regarding this social concept cannot be universal. In its current construction, evidenced by its theories, models, and philosophical leanings, the idea of occupation, and therefore occupational therapy, appear to be ethnocentric constructs that particularly favour Western and European sociocultural contexts and modes of experience. Systematically implementing an occupational therapy out of sync with local value patterns and needs may actually prove to be a disservice to our clients in the long run. At worst, occupational therapy could be morally and ethically wrong as occupational therapists end up being unwitting agents of oppression, colonizing cultures with ideologies that have dubious meaning and run counter to a given culture’s core values.

For the reader who recognizes that the issue is important but sees it merely as a challenge for people in the other geographical hemisphere, I implore you to bring it into the context of your own clinical practice. To what extent are you prepared to adapt occupational therapy for recent immigrants and other culturally diverse clients who do not share or have not yet adapted or acculturated to your particular construction of reality and interpretations of well-being? Can we maintain a stance of universalism and pressure our clients to comply to our mainstream popular notions of occupation? No we cannot; not unless we are willing to forfeit the requirement of meaning in occupation and occupational therapy.

Occupational therapy can mean so much more, to more people, if it can carry through Yerxa’s (1993b) directive—to make the knowledge base meaningful to our client’s real world of home and community. Hence, for occupational therapy to be truly meaningful to all of its recipients, culturally relevant conceptual models, theories, and epistemologies about occupation or rather—“doing” are required, as are culturally appropriate methods for its delivery. In order to realize this, we may need to allow, and even encourage other cultural groups to reinvent occupational therapy along culturally meaningful and relevant lines. In turn, the other needs to step forward and express its uniqueness and boldly chart its requirements for this profession. Failure to allow culturally relevant development of occupational therapy will further entrench non-Western occupational therapy in a form lacking the power to facilitate meaningful processes in people’s lives.

As occupational therapy continues on its course toward embracing occupation and its subsumed meanings, the issue of its cultural relevance and the veracity of its supporting body of knowledge may well be among the most important confronting this growing profession. As we continue to grow in occupational therapy, may we reconcile and adopt culturally relevant practices informed by epistemologies that are truly inclusive, sensitively particular, and meaningful to our clients, in their homes, communities, and societies. ▲

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References


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