Measurement of Function: Actions for the Future

Winifred Dunn

Winifred Dunn, OTR, FAOTA, is Professor and Chair, Department of Occupational Therapy, School of Allied Health, University of Kansas Medical Center, 3901 Rainbow, Kansas City, Kansas 66160-7602.

This article was accepted for publication November 23, 1992.

We need to embrace the approaches of promotion, prevention-intervention, and compensation as rigorously as we have embraced remediation in service provision. This consideration sets the tone for what is acceptable to assess. A remedial approach (i.e., identify what is wrong and create a plan to fix it) implies that the person has the problem, and therefore the person is always what needs to be fixed. Other approaches include (a) promotion: create a plan that facilitates the typical evolution of skills, (b) prevention-intervention: identify risk factors and create a plan that precludes the problem from occurring, and (c) compensation: identify what is wrong and find a way to work around it. These approaches focus on the context of the performance and acknowledge that there are other resources to solving the performance dilemma that the person faces. If we adopt these broader approaches to service provision, we must identify and assess the effect of environmental variables on performance.

We need to develop a new perspective about the meaning and usefulness of independence. Rather than asking whether a person is independent in tasks, perhaps we need to ask what conditions are necessary to enable the person to accomplish the task. In this perspective, we assume that the person is capable and consider what factors in the environment might be needed to support task performance. We do not consider a person who needs to wear glasses to perform tasks semi-independent, although this person would have a difficult time without glasses. Is a person who knows she needs to use notes to remind her of important information (and who uses them effectively) less than fully independent? Should a short person who needs a step stool in the kitchen be rat-

General Considerations

Several general considerations will enable occupational therapy to address functional assessment in an effective and viable manner. We need to select what to evaluate based on the view of the person who would benefit from occupational therapy services.

We need to consider the fact that a contextual approach to assessment provides an opportunity to identify what the person needs or wants to do. It is essential for occupational therapy to begin assessment at this level and to create goals for services from this list of expressed needs. This strategy has the advantage of engaging the person's motivational system, providing another mechanism to facilitate a successful outcome.

A contextual approach does not preclude assessment of other aspects of performance; rather, it creates a frame of reference for the other data that might be collected about the person. If a person expressed a desire to care for personal hygiene, the therapist would investigate what is keeping the person from completing these tasks successfully. This investigation would include observation of performance within an appropriate context, such as the person's own bathroom, and the therapist would record notes on the performance components that contribute to, or create barriers for, performance of personal hygiene tasks.

How do we capture the essence of life as a human being, the meaningful nature of the person's choices, and the functional integrity of performance? It is much like trying to explain the difference between seeing a picture of the Grand Canyon and being there yourself, or watching a videotape of Phantom of the Opera rather than sitting in the audience at a performance. There is an essential, qualitative difference in these experiences, and therefore in how we must proceed in our evaluation of performance. We have the additional, simultaneous challenge to assess performance in a way that is convincing to others, and therefore must be systematic and relevant to the systems within which occupational therapists work. If this endeavor succeeds, several positive outcomes will occur. Persons' lives will be enhanced from our successful efforts on their behalf; occupational therapy will be validated as a viable discipline; the discipline of occupational therapy will be further developed and defined; payers will seek out our services; federal agencies will fund our work. I propose several strategies that will facilitate the use of contextually relevant ways to measure function.

The Issue Is
ed only moderately independent? Should it be considered a liability to one's independence rating if the person uses a laundry service to get clothes clean? With typical persons, adaptations are considered transparent aspects of their performance; with persons who have disabilities, these same adaptations are considered deterrents to the rating of the person's independence.

If an occupational therapist described the supports necessary to perform a desired or necessary task, the message about the seriousness of the problem would still be clear. A detailed description would indicate that the person required a lot of support, whereas a brief one would indicate a lower need for support. Persons who are skilled at identifying and using environmental resources ought to be considered resourceful in supporting their independence, rather than dependent.

We need to consider the possibility that more complex and contextual tasks may provide cues and reinforcers for functional performance that are not available in contrived and isolated tasks. In occupational therapy, we often create simpler versions of real life tasks, believing that they will be more attainable for the person. Real life tasks provide cues and reinforcers for ongoing performance that are removed when we break a task down or simulate task performance. When a person is carrying out a morning hygiene routine, the familiar objects on the sink (e.g., hairbrush, toothpaste, makeup) are reminders about what needs to be done. These environmental variables may not always provide a barrier to performance, but may help the person construct a plan of operations to complete the series of personal hygiene tasks. Therapists can capture these features of performance through documentation of the nature of the environmental variables and the task routines that the person selects.

We need to consider the possibility that there are salient variables for functional performance that have not yet been identified. In our attempts to be systematic in the assessment process, we could err by restricting our evaluation to the variables that we have already figured out how to capture in some way. This could lead to a serious omission; it is likely that there are important factors in the environment that affect performance. Occupational therapy must support exploratory research that identifies these salient variables.

**Specific Considerations**

Two key ways to organize strategic plans are (a) to consider the level of professional involvement that is necessary to effect changes (i.e., the person, the profession, the culture, and society), and (b) to consider the time needed to enact the strategy successfully.

**Immediate Strategies**

The therapist can have an immediate effect on the assessment of performance and function by incorporating a contextual approach. Therapists can begin to ask the persons and families they serve what they need and want to do in their lives. They can investigate what is important, desirable, or pleasurable for the person, and then accept and use this information when planning interventions.

As a profession, we can rekindle the concept that context represents a critical difference in occupational therapy's approach to the assessment of performance (i.e., person-environment fit). We can write and talk about context in professional arenas within and outside of occupational therapy and support investigations about how to be more systematic at capturing the salient features of the performance context.

As a society, we can become more familiar with reimbursement and eligibility criteria set by payers and other agencies for various disabilities. This information will provide a base on which to introduce necessary changes so that the person does not bear the responsibility for needing to be fixed; rather, society can identify what it needs to do to support functional performance of persons within its natural contexts.

We need to consider the possibility that there are salient variables for functional performance that have not yet been identified. In our attempts to be systematic in the assessment process, we could err by restricting our evaluation to the variables that we have already figured out how to capture in some way. This could lead to a serious omission; it is likely that there are important factors in the environment that affect performance. Occupational therapy must support exploratory research that identifies these salient variables.

**Specific Considerations**

Two key ways to organize strategic plans are (a) to consider the level of professional involvement that is necessary to effect changes (i.e., the person, the profession, the culture, and society), and (b) to consider the time needed to enact the strategy successfully.

**Immediate Strategies**

The therapist can have an immediate effect on the assessment of performance and function by incorporating a contextual approach. Therapists can begin to ask the persons and families they serve what they need and want to do in their lives. They can investigate what is important, desirable, or pleasurable for the person, and then accept and use this information when planning interventions.

As a profession, we can rekindle the concept that context represents a critical difference in occupational therapy's approach to the assessment of performance (i.e., person-environment fit). We can write and talk about context in professional arenas within and outside of occupational therapy and support investigations about how to be more systematic at capturing the salient features of the performance context.

As a society, we can become more familiar with reimbursement and eligibility criteria set by payers and other agencies for various disabilities. This information will provide a base on which to introduce necessary changes so that the person does not bear the responsibility for needing to be fixed; rather, society can identify what it needs to do to support functional performance of persons within its natural contexts.

We need to consider the possibility that there are salient variables for functional performance that have not yet been identified. In our attempts to be systematic in the assessment process, we could err by restricting our evaluation to the variables that we have already figured out how to capture in some way. This could lead to a serious omission; it is likely that there are important factors in the environment that affect performance. Occupational therapy must support exploratory research that identifies these salient variables.

**Specific Considerations**

Two key ways to organize strategic plans are (a) to consider the level of professional involvement that is necessary to effect changes (i.e., the person, the profession, the culture, and society), and (b) to consider the time needed to enact the strategy successfully.

**Immediate Strategies**

The therapist can have an immediate effect on the assessment of performance and function by incorporating a contextual approach. Therapists can begin to ask the persons and families they serve what they need and want to do in their lives. They can investigate what is important, desirable, or pleasurable for the person, and then accept and use this information when planning interventions.

As a profession, we can rekindle the concept that context represents a critical difference in occupational therapy's approach to the assessment of performance (i.e., person-environment fit). We can write and talk about context in professional arenas within and outside of occupational therapy and support investigations about how to be more systematic at capturing the salient features of the performance context.

As a society, we can become more familiar with reimbursement and eligibility criteria set by payers and other agencies for various disabilities. This information will provide a base on which to introduce necessary changes so that the person does not bear the responsibility for needing to be fixed; rather, society can identify what it needs to do to support functional performance of persons within its natural contexts.
strategies, observational techniques, and specific scales of functional performance in context.

As a profession, occupational therapy will be prepared to imbue specific scaling techniques into appropriate measurement questions. We will routinely apply occupational therapy data collection strategies to eligibility and reimbursement decisions and disability ratings and will promote the concept of functional performance over that of independence.

At the cultural level, professionals will ensure that environmental adaptations are considered typical parts of environments, not limitations to the person with the disability. We will base new assessments on supports necessary to accomplish tasks. We will help persons share responsibility for what they wish to accomplish, and have logical consequences for those decisions. Due to prior efforts, occupational therapy will be widely known and typical people in the culture will seek occupational therapists for advice about their daily lives. For example, a middle-aged couple will know to seek professional support from an occupational therapist as they decide what kind of living routine their mother needs (e.g., whether she should still be driving, whether she needs someone to stop by each day, how her home can be rearranged to make it more accessible to her).

### Summary

Occupational therapy is built on solid principles that strongly support a functional approach to measurement and intervention. We must realign our thinking to ensure that our routine actions in practice and research demonstrate our strong commitment to contextually relevant performance.

### Acknowledgments

This manuscript is based on a paper presented at the Symposium on Measurement and Assessment: Directions for Future Research in Occupational Therapy at the University of Illinois at Chicago, October 16-18, 1991. The symposium was jointly sponsored by the American Occupational Therapy Association, the American Occupational Therapy Foundation, and the Occupational Therapy Center for Research and Measurement at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

**THE ISSUE IS provides a forum for debate and discussion of occupational therapy issues and related topics. The Contributing Editor of this section, Julia Van Deusen, strives to have both sides of an issue addressed. Readers are encouraged to submit manuscripts discussing opposite points of view or new topics. All manuscripts are subject to peer review. Submit three copies to Elaine Visellear, Editor. Published articles reflect the opinion of the authors and are selected on the basis of interest to the profession and quality of the discussion.**