The Significance of Being Occupied: 
The Social Construction of Childhood Occupations

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• child action
• childhood experience
• ethnography

The purpose of this paper is to explore theoretical and developmental foundations for interpreting children’s engagement with activity in the typically social worlds of childhood. Drawing upon longitudinal ethnographic data, I argue for the need to reframe the study of childhood occupation to the study of “socially occupied beings” as a means of enhancing our understanding of children’s experiences. The focus is on childhood experiences that are socially constructed through adult and child co-created action sequences. The unit of analysis is constructed around a child or children, their adult partners in action, the social world of engagement, and the cultural context. The interpretive focus is on acts and actors, acting in a socially constructed world. Two microethnographic examples are provided; the first relates to an observation of a mother and her children playing in a hospital corridor and the second to an occupational therapist and child engaged in jointly constructed activity within a therapy session. These segments illustrate pragmatic and conceptual understandings of the interconnectedness of social relatedness, intersubjectivity, social action, and engagement. Further development of theoretical and research models is needed to capture the essence of children as socially occupied beings, doing something with someone else that matters.


Issues related to how children co-create, negotiate, and interpret their everyday worlds are central to understanding human development and childhood occupation. They are also tremendously important elements of occupational therapy practice with children. Despite their salience, these issues have remained quite elusive. The developmental underpinnings of pediatric occupational therapy practice are much richer and more complex than the available literature reflects. Although pediatric occupational therapy practice is grounded in theories of human development (e.g., Bigsby, 1998; Hinojosa & Kramer, 1993; Lawlor & Henderson, 1989; Llorens, 1970, 1976), the literature provides relatively few recent descriptions of the intersections of theories of human developmental and occupational therapy. Descriptions of the developmental groundings of studies of occupation have been somewhat limited, although recent publications may represent a movement toward bridging this gap (Chistiansen, 1999; Hasselkus, 2002; Humphry, 2002).

The purpose of this paper is to explore theoretical and developmental foundations for interpreting children’s engagement with activity in the typically social worlds of childhood. This exploration begins with a conversion of a unit of analysis more typically found in studies of childhood occupation from the study of discrete occupations to the study of the experiences of children as “socially occupied beings” engaged in co-created occupations. What does it mean for children to be engaged with others in their worlds? What does it mean to be occupied? How is a child experiencing life while “being occupied?” These are questions of both academic interest and pragmatic concern. Many parents have puzzled over such ques-
The term has become quite pervasive within sociology, psychology, developmental psychology, and anthropology. The term is used in this paper to describe a children as socially occupied beings generates new theoretical possibilities grounded in diverse and extensive bodies of literature. The unit of analysis for childhood experience proposed here is not bounded by the activity or the occupation, nor are individual children isolated. As I discuss in more detail below, thinking about children means thinking about human sociality. The analytic frame is constructed around the child or children, the adult partners in action, the social world of engagement, and the cultural context. The focus is on acts and actors, acting in a socially constructed world. This exploration is approached from a question of how children might be experiencing activities that are co-constructed with others and how they make sense of these experiences and appreciate their meanings in their everyday lives. Particular attention is paid to action involving adult–child interactions and co-constructed activities (e.g., therapist–child, mother–child).

Challenges inherent in conceptualizing meaningful units of analysis for child experience are both complex and compelling. The reframing of analysis of childhood occupations proposed in this paper follows the attempt in child development, sociocultural psychology, and other social sciences to study children in their complex physical and social worlds. Calls to study children in naturalistic settings (Kane & Furth, 1993), acknowledge the interdependence of the child and environment, recognize collective contributions to an individual child’s development (Meacham, 1997; Packer, 1994), and focus on developmental processes in a social context (Rogoff, Radziszewska, & Masiello, 1995) permeate recent literature.

Arguments supporting units of analyses that link cognitive and physical worlds when prodding a young child to do something (e.g., pick up toys, come to dinner) and being dismissed somewhat indignantly by the pronouncement, “I can’t, I’m busy.” Therapists often puzzle over why children become engrossed in some activities while ignoring seemingly equally compelling or even more enticing options. The interpretations of such experiences lead to many practical decisions in clinical life, particularly when therapists and children are engaged in creating jointly coordinated actions designed to promote desirable changes in a child’s developmental trajectory or behavior.

The proposed shift in analysis of occupation in childhood from a focus on childhood occupations to a focus on children as socially occupied beings generates new theoretical possibilities grounded in diverse and extensive bodies of literature. The unit of analysis for childhood experience proposed here is not bounded by the activity or the occupation, nor are individual children isolated. As I discuss in more detail below, thinking about children means thinking about human sociality. The analytic frame is constructed around the child or children, the adult partners in action, the social world of engagement, and the cultural context. The focus is on acts and actors, acting in a socially constructed world. This exploration is approached from a question of how children might be experiencing activities that are co-constructed with others and how they make sense of these experiences and appreciate their meanings in their everyday lives. Particular attention is paid to action involving adult–child interactions and co-constructed activities (e.g., therapist–child, mother–child).

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The analytic frame suggested in this paper foregrounds experience and brings social actors, action, and the physical world into a dynamic interplay. Environment or context is seen as an integral part of the action scene and not as a static or fixed condition for action. Creating a unit of analysis that incorporates experience rather than isolating activity from its social surround is consistent with sociocultural analytic units of people engaged in sociohistorical and cultural activities (Rogoff et al., 1995). The proposed analytic unit is also compatible with Yerxa et al.’s (1990) assertion of the need to “comprehend the experience of engagement” (p. 9) in occupation. Hassellkus (2002) has recently argued that “It is the experience—the dance—of the occupation that is important, not the occupation itself or the outcome” (p. 132). This analytic unit shares features with Rogoff’s (1993) proposal for studying dynamic events through guided participation, “... a process and system of involvement of individuals with other individuals, as they communicate and collaborate in carrying out culturally valued activity” (p. 132). It also relates to Packer’s (1994) term “situated accomplishment” used to describe how development unfolds as “the product of adults’ and children’s interactions in everyday settings” (p. 260).

The move away from discrete units of observable behavior towards experience is not unproblematic. As anthropologist Edward Bruner (1986) argued, “We can never know completely another’s experiences, even though we have many clues and make inferences all the time” (p. 5). Bruner further asserted, experience, and how people express their experiences, provide the material for interpretation and understanding drawing on intersubjectivity and one’s own experiences and cultural understandings. By placing people’s expressions of their experiences in the center of an analytic lens, the researcher enhances the possibility of capturing the sense-making processes and personal perspectives of people under study. Experience also captures culture and one’s perspective on selfhood. “An experience is more personal, as it refers to an active self, to a human being who not only engages in but shapes an action” (Bruner, 1986, p. 5).

The Social Nature of Childhood

Many of the recent advances in developmental theory have focused on the profoundly social nature of infant and child development (e.g., Gauvin, 2001; Ramey & Ramey, 1998; Stern, 1994; Wozniak, 1993), the centrality of relationships and need for connectedness (e.g., Connell, 1990; Emde, 1989; Tronick, 1998), and the importance of situating discussions of human development within the relevant sociocultural contexts (e.g., Valsiner & Lawrence, 1997). Arguments supporting units of analyses that link cognitive

Since Berger and Luckmann (1967) talked about the social construction of reality and the social construction of knowledge in their classic text entitled The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge, the term has become quite pervasive within sociology, psychology, and anthropology. The term is used in this paper to describe how occupations emerge within social contexts, how they are co-constructed, and how they are situated in sociocultural worlds.
and social processes have been particularly prevalent in psychology where conceptual arguments are often traced to Vygotsky (Cole, 1985; Cole & Wertsch, 1996). These insights into developmental processes have had perhaps immeasurable influence on how children and their needs are viewed on many levels, from the most intimate dyadic level of mother–child experience to the broad national level of federal policy initiatives.

Sociality and action are intrinsically interrelated. As Carrithers (1992), an anthropologist, reminded us, our character and human experience only exist through our interrelatedness with one another. Tronick (1998) argued that the actions of infants and children are often directed toward establishing emotional connectedness and intersubjectivity. He asks, “What is it about connectedness that makes it so critical to human experience and to development?” (p. 296). As Carrithers (1992) stated:

The broadest circle, the most general way of talking about human sociality, is as intersubjectivity, an innate human propensity for mutual engagement and mutual responsiveness. Some of this propensity is cognitive, or intellectual, some of it emotional, but in any case human character and human experience exist only in and through people's relations with each other. (p. 55)

According to Jerome Bruner (1996), intersubjectivity is the “human ability to understand the minds of others whether through language, gesture, or other means” (p. 20). Cole (1996) asked, “Under what conditions can we say that two individual minds have intersected in such a way that one mind can be said to 'have met' the other?” (p. 65). Intersubjectivity enables the production of collaborative actions and shared learning endeavors. Crepeau (1991) provides an argument about the centrality of intersubjectivity in occupational therapy practice drawing upon fine grained analysis of a videotaped sequence of treatment with a man who had a spinal cord injury. The extent to which an active partner can ‘read’ the mind of another affects the coordination, fluidity, and execution of joint action sequences from the seemingly routine (e.g., feeding) to more improvisational or playful joint action sequences such as the ethnographic examples provided below.

Language that promotes images of “we-ness” permeates recent developmental literature. Such terms as attunement, mutuality, synchrony, and rhythmicity are often invoked to capture the essence of we-ness (Tronick, 1998). Mishler (1996), citing Abbott, noted that social worlds are created through participation in events, a theme that surfaces in many of the developmental literature including studies of infancy and early childhood (e.g., Bruner, 1990; Goodwin, 1990; Nelson, 1997). For example, Stern (1994) argued that a baby's world is constituted from subjective experiences based on participation in interpersonal events. The self-organizing abilities of children to select and structure their own experiences described by Sroufe (1990) and others are often directed toward establishing emotional connectedness and intersubjectivity (Wozniak, 1993). Stern (1994), building upon the infancy work of Trevarthen and Hubley, talked about intersubjectivity as a deliberately sought sharing of experiences. Stern et al. (1998) have spoken of “moments of meeting” in the stream of human experience in which there is a heightened consciousness about the shared nature of human experience.

Socially Occupied Beings and Being Occupied

There is some evidence that theories of occupation are taking a social turn. Zemke and Clark (1996) described the co-occupations of social beings, which by definition are occupations that involve at least two active participants. Humphry (2002), drawing upon dynamic systems theory, proposed a model for studying children as “occupational beings” that incorporates an awareness of the social and cultural dimensions of child development. Llorens (1991) described engagement in “activities, tasks, and interpersonal interactions ... valued by the ‘task performer’” (p. 46). Segal (1999) reported that families who had a child with a disability described occupations constructed to enhance pleasurable social experiences within the family, which she named as occupations of “being together.” The importance of social connectedness to engagement in occupations has been described by Hassellkus (1998) in her study of staff who provided day care services for persons with Alzheimer’s disease as involving a meeting of minds, a ground for connection leading to increased engagement in activity. The use of the phrase meeting of minds seems consistent with the developmental and anthropological literature cited above related to the connections between intersubjectivity and human action.

Arguments related to connecting occupation to the social world are not restricted to dyadic or interactional domains and can extend into public policy arenas. For example, Law et al. (1999) examined environmental influences, such as physical barriers, on occupations of children with disabilities and Townsend (1997) proposed the need to consider the social organization factors that contribute to occupation. Arguments for the need to study social structures and related political and economic factors are also evident (Dyck, 1992; Frank, 1996).

The choice of the term “socially occupied being” reflects a turn not only from a focus on doing to doing with, but also toward a foregrounding of selfhood, identity, and
location in social worlds. Within the literature on occupation, terms such as occupational creature (Burke, 1996) are probably also indicative of a turn in our fields toward acknowledging the integration of doing, personhood, and meaning. A similar refocusing has occurred in child development and play studies. For example, Packer (1994) argued, “The kind of involvement on the child’s part is not simply to play a role, but to adopt a motivated way of being, with new concerns to be played out. The project, then, is not just to drive a car but to be a certain type of person with particular characteristics…” (p. 266). Christiansen (1999) in his discussion of the identity shaping features of occupation also described this sense of becoming a particular person. This somewhat diverse body of literature drawn from fields such as sociocultural psychology, anthropology, occupational science, and occupational therapy collectively provide considerable support for the conceptual linkage of doing, identity, and meaning.

Ethnographic Perspectives on Socially Occupied Beings

In the following sections, I provide interpretations of two sequences of childhood action that were co-constructed with adults to illustrate the conceptual issues presented in this paper. These examples are drawn from an urban ethnographic project conducted in Los Angeles. This interdisciplinary federally funded longitudinal ethnographic project (1996–2004) involves studying a cohort of African American children with illnesses, disabilities, or special health care needs, and their primary caregivers, family members, and practitioners who work with these children and families. Primary points of focus include meanings of illness and disability, cross-cultural communication, family life, developmental trajectories, caregiving practices, health care practices, health disparities, and cultural identities. Methods draw upon both interpretive and phenomenological traditions and include participant observations in multiple contexts, narrative interviews, genograms, videotapes, and document reviews. The interpretation process involves multiple strategies including narrative analysis (Mattingly, 1998; Reisman, 1993), thematic analysis, microethnographic analysis of interactions, and triangulation of both data sources and researcher interpretations.2 The conversion of action scenes into written text involves both interpretation and representation (e.g., Davies, 1999; Geertz, 1973; Van Maanen, 1988). Data are presented here not as a summative report of findings, but rather as interpretative examples related to the analytic stream described in this paper. Pseudonyms are provided for the key social actors. Minor changes in details are used to protect anonymity.

The Birthday Party

Parent and child interactions are a primary unit of interest in studies of adult and child coordinated action and provide valuable material for exploring the experimental dimensions of children’s lives (e.g., Ochs & Capps, 2001; Pontecorvo, Fasulo, & Sterponi, 2001; Turnbull & Carependale, 1999). Co-created action scenes also illuminate ways in which engaged children become socially occupied beings. The following example is taken from a videotape of a child in the study (Tanya), her mother (Deanna), and a toddler sibling (Monika). The mother and toddler were visiting with Tanya in a hospital hallway while Tanya was an inpatient. The scene described below lasted approximately 9 minutes and is extracted from a videotape that lasted approximately 35 minutes. The text below is a condensed version of the action and reflects my interpretation of the events. As in many sequences of child and adult co-constructed action, themes weave through the action and early themes are often revisited in subsequent action sequences. On this day, birthday celebrations and grown-up issues (e.g., going to work, having children) dominate the dialogue. Tanya has just celebrated her fourth birthday and has been hospitalized for a combination of ongoing management of her chronic neurological and orthopedic problems and acute medical problems. Her sister Monika has just had her second birthday while Tanya has been hospitalized; Tanya repeatedly disputes Deanna’s statements that Monika’s birthday has passed by proclaiming, “Her birthday coming up.”

Tanya is sitting in a small pediatric transport wagon with a leg in a heavy cast and her arm attached to an IV board and rolling monitoring machine. Deanna is seated perpendicularly to her daughter in a plastic chair. Monika moves between her mother and sister and another young child who is also playing in the corridor. Monika has been attempting to remove her sister’s necklace that she has been apparently coveting. After Tanya asserts her ownership of the necklace, Monika backs away from her sister and starts singing “Happy Birthday to Ya.” Tanya quickly starts singing and bouncing in her cart. Despite her restricted

2 The reader is referred to Lawlor and Mattingly (2001), Mattingly and Lawlor (2000), and Mattingly, Lawlor, and Jacobs-Huey (2002) for additional descriptions of methodology and data interpretation strategies.

3 In analysis and writing, ethnographers move between their interpretations of others’ constructions of reality, their own creation of new constructions, and their expression of these evolving understandings in yet another, usually written, form (Davies, 1999, p. 214).
mobility, including a hip to toes cast and an IV board on her right arm, Tanya “dances” with grace and fervor. Her physical animation is striking given her own mobility restrictions and the constraints on the action provided by the sides of the cart, the wall, and the IV monitoring machine. Deanna also accompanies Tanya in her song and indicates that today is Monika’s birthday, an apparent concession to the earlier pronouncement that her birthday has passed. Monika’s name is inserted into the song and all clap enthusiastically when the song is over.

Tanya then says, “Let’s blow out the candles. Let’s blow out the candles.” This statement maintains the new plot line that today is Monika’s birthday. Deanna counts to three and Tanya and Deanna puff their cheeks and blow out the candles. In her role as plot elaborator, Tanya announces, “And cut it.” She vigorously does an exaggerated sawing motion. Deanna, as capable co-narrator, tells Monika to cut the cake. Tanya then initiates a sequence of passing cake around. She announces there is a plate and passes spoons. Deanna says thank you when she receives the “cake” as well as the “spoon.” Tanya tells Deanna to eat her cake and Deanna obliges by performing hand to mouth motions and simulates taking food from the spoon. Deanna interrupts the action by saying, “She hasn’t cut the cake yet . . .” apparently referring to Monika. She tells Tanya to cut it and then asks for a piece. Monika then puts a piece of cake on her mother’s plate, seemingly having no difficulty with the acts of pretense involved. Deanna asks if it is chocolate cake, which Tanya affirms and Deanna happily says, “Wow.” In the next sentence, Tanya announces it is a cupcake. During the next exchanges, these interactants eat either a cake, or a cupcake, or at times eat both. These two options elicit slightly nuanced actions such as adopting the appropriate grasp for a cupcake or a spoon, depending upon the scenario being enacted.

Tanya, as primary narrator of the action, announces, “Let’s get some presents.” She then pretends to hand something over to her mother by reaching over to her with her left hand. Deanna thanks her and Tanya says “Lots of presents.” Following a brief cut in the tape, Deanna is seen holding a disposable diaper. Diapers had been on the seat of her chair behind her. She then thanks both her daughters for the “present” and hugs Monika, who is in her lap, and reaches over to hug Tanya in her cart. The next several minutes are consumed with exchanging “presents” (i.e., diapers). Each of the recipients reacts with seeming pleasure when receiving the “Pampers™.” Tanya is prompted by her mother to describe the presents by asking her, “What’s that present?” Tanya seems to have trouble naming the presents and at first repeats, “It’s ours.” Tanya then announces that the present is “two dollars,” followed by Deanna’s expression of dismay. Present exchanges and naming (i.e., what each present is) continue. Deanna then notes that all the presents are gone. Tanya, not ready to relinquish this lovely exchanges between this child, her mother, and her sister, and in terms of the jarring juxtaposition of the various hospital paraphernalia and this sick child with the staging of a fun “birthday celebration.” This brief but captivating sequence of interaction illustrates the artful work of children and adults engaged in seemingly playful interaction. Unfortunately, it is difficult in written text to convey the dramatic embellishments, demonstrative body movements, facial expressiveness, and remarkable social attunement of these children and this mother. This scene is not merely one of passing time or assuming the indifference to time often generated during long hospital stays. This is active engagement in co-constructed activities that captivate the attention of each of the actors as well as the audience. There is a “temporal feeling shape” to this “lived moment,” to borrow again from Stern (1994). Something is happening here. Something significant. As Stern (1994) might argue, there is clearly a temporal structure to this scene, a sense of a before and after, a beginning and end with various twists and turning points. There is also an affective tone to this interactive scene. Descriptors such as playful, engaging, fanciful, happy, or silly might come to mind.

Harris (2000) argued that coordinated action involving pretense, a form of joint pretense, requires that each individual comprehend the other and accept various designations of props and contextual features. Jointly constructed action scenes require this fine-tuned intersubjectivity and shared willingness to accept seemingly nonsensical solutions to practical problems. When children enact roles they adopt moods, tones of voice, and behaviors that are appropriate to the role. These joint pretense sequences often contain causal phrases that propel a narrative structure forward and depend upon a kind of suspension of an “objective truth” to allow the pretense to prevail (Harris, 2000). How do these children and this mother have a birthday party in this busy hospital corridor without the usual contextual supports (e.g., party hats, presents, real cake)? Each actor makes adjustments based on her interactive partner. As Tanya passes the cake, her mother and young sister both reach out and
graciously “accept” the food. If it is “cake,” then Deanna reaches for a plate. If it is a “cupcake,” she presents her hand with a motion indicative of anticipating grasping a sphere-shaped object. With these presentations, the actors begin “eating” and obviously enjoying the “food.”

Packer (1994) in his analysis of peer play in kindergarten playgrounds argues that play involves the creation of a “ground” for action that involves a shared understanding of the characters and the meanings of their actions. These interactants create a sense of reality of this created world that is agreed upon and maintained. Initiating another chorus of “Happy Birthday to Ya,” exaggerated cutting motions to slice the cake, and gleeful receipt of “presents” in the form of Pampers are just a few examples of the ways in which this scene is maintained. Lapses or breaches of this “ground” for action, to use Packer’s (1994) term, are repaired through actions designed to reassert the frame, ground, scene, or event representation, a script-like schema based on experience in social worlds (Nelson, Plesa, & Henseler, 1998), in this case a birthday party. “Grounds” for action and “script-like schemas” represent kinds of sociocultural mediating devices that promote and enable the joint coordination of adult–child action. These family members are able to enact a co-narrated, co-created scene somewhat fluidly. They are able to “read” each other, through intersubjective processes, and to anticipate options for what’s next based on a kind of cultural knowledge about birthday parties. However, it is more than just reproducing a specific cultural script. This kind of playful interaction in this hospital corridor draws on creativity, innovation (e.g., Pampers as presents), and flexibility (e.g., interruptions for medications). These kinds of enactments involve more than pure imitation of known scripts for action (Harris, 2000; Sawyer, 1997). Children often seem to bring experiences, and sense making challenges, to the foreground in these jointly constructed action sequences. “Children, like novelists, are inspired by actual events. Their everyday routines of going to sleep, getting dressed, having a bath, and so forth all provide material for their imagination” (Harris, 2000, p. 25).

Socially occupied beings are engaged beings. Engagement, as used here, refers to both the social connectedness and interrelatedness, that are aspects of human sociality, as well as the quality of investment and the commitment to the activity. Connell (1990) speaks of engagement as both an outcome of human action and a process of action and considers engagement to be a means of enacting a commitment to goals of learning. Connell’s linking of engagement to learning is particularly helpful in appreciating the richness of this hospital scene. In this imagination-rich scene, there are many ways in which the engagement drives learning through these seemingly playful adaptations of everyday activities and events. The learning is embedded in both the action and dialogue. In the full version of the birthday scene, politeness routines, counting, money exchanges, and elaborate discussions about parenting and family relations punctuate the action. Although this mother is particularly skillful at promoting her child’s learning, the child is not the only actor who is learning. Deanna is also learning through her engagement in this scene. For example, at times during the “party,” she probes her daughter about her understanding of her illness including asking her details about why she is in the hospital and what is wrong.

These periods of engagement also create opportunities for meanings to be negotiated and for children’s expressions to open windows to understand their experiences (Bruner, 1986). Tanya’s persistence in arguing that her young sister’s birthday hasn’t passed is taken up by Deanna as a potential plot line rather than judged to be an error in Tanya’s thinking that needs to be corrected. Deanna seemingly considered Tanya’s insistence that Monika’s birthday hadn’t passed as an opportunity to enact the birthday party. Tanya is not unlike other children in this ethnographic study who actively work to create connections between experiences in the hospital and experiences at home. Tanya’s work in creating these connections seems to be quite sophisticated. Not only is she bringing home life into the hospital, she also seems to be bringing aspects of hospital life into family experience. Tanya begins to distribute gifts to her surgeon, whom she readily names, and her teacher, neither of whom is present. This act may simply be interpreted as a vehicle she uses to keep the action going. More possible recipients of gifts means the party continues. Perhaps this is also a window into her sense making of her illness experiences. These two clinicians become not only her doctor and teacher, but also people who should get presents.

This birthday party scene transcends the institutional cultural context of the hospital. Momentarily, all the actors seem to be transported to a birthday party, perhaps even the party that was missed while Tanya was in the hospital. As Kane and Furth (1993) argue “… reality is something to be playfully created. Such creation has from the beginning a social character in that the child attempts to share an understanding with others” (p. 200). There is a quality of absorption, to borrow a phrase from Harris (2000), that characterizes this interlude in the hospital day.

A Safe Place

This second example is drawn from the case of a young boy who was followed by the author and other members of the
Social referencing is a process that builds on joint attention and as used observed or videotaped, or both, multiple therapy sessions over a 2-year period and interviewed this therapist on several occasions. The child in this example was just shy of his fifth birthday when observations began. He and this therapist had worked together for over 2 years and had developed a close relationship and a special bond. As the therapist remarked in one interview, “We have a lot of fun together.” The following description and dialogue are extracted from a brief segment of therapy within the first few minutes of one occupational therapy session.

Mariah (the therapist) and Keith (the child) move away from the glider swing towards a corner of the clinic dominated by mats, massive pillows, bean bags, and innertubes. Keith lands in a rubber tire on the floor and announces, “Hey, this is a comfy chair.” Mariah laughs and says, “It’s a comfy chair.” Keith looks under the pillows for something or someone he calls “Kilo.” The therapist responds by asking, “Where’s Kilo?” Keith disappears under a pile of mats and shortly pops up again with the announcement, “I’m standing.” A playful dialogue follows that involves some pillow play as well as seemingly intimate phrases and sound effects such as giggles and raspberries. She directs him to a “hole” now available in this pile of stuff. Keith corrects her that this is “my hiding place.” Mariah acknowledges this statement by the declaration, “You’ve got a hiding place.” Keith invites Mariah into the hole and she apparently willingly climbs into this confined space. Private, occasionally audible, dialogue proceeds for a few seconds. Mariah then directs Keith to look into a small plastic box of toys she has prepared for him. Keith attempts to involve another child in looking into the box and Mariah directs him that he can show him later. Keith responds, “Ah cool. That’s a privacy time.” The therapist again acknowledges his statement by repeating the phrase “privacy time” as she continues to try and involve him in exploring the box of toys. Mariah takes out a piece of stretch material and talks about and demonstrates how to pull it and then blow into it. At first Keith smiles and then as he picks up the swatch says, “That’souchie.” Mariah responds, “No, it tickles your face. Ready?” Keith, seemingly without hesitation, blows and makes a noise. Mariah laughs and then says, “Okay, right like this” and they both blow into their stretchy squares. Over the next several minutes they continue to explore the “box of goodies for you to take home.” The therapist periodically comments to Keith’s mother about her selections, how to use the toys, or offers other pieces of information like “I tried to give you more little toys that weren’t too noisy.” She skillfully and fluidly moves her attention between this child and his mother. Keith seems somewhat vigilant about Mariah’s attention and when he seems to feel the need gives directives like “Look at this” or “Watch this, watch this!”

While this therapist and this child are searching through the box, they remain squished into this small space surrounded by hills of mats and pillows. This space that is a hole or hiding place later becomes the “sea” as Keith is directed by Mariah to “hold your nose and dive in!” Mariah narrates further, “There he goes, he’s diving in the water to find the ball and find the missing fish.” Throughout the brief exchange described here Keith is at varying times hidden from the researcher’s view and any other audience, or at times resurfacing, popping up to show others his toys or accomplishments in a kind of brief performance, or remaining partially tucked in and engaged with the therapist who is still wedged in the space with him.

This written description, however brief, conveys the complex but finely attuned social connectedness or engagement of these two social actors. Their sense of connectedness is evident in my field notes, expressed by the therapist in interviews, and consistently identified through coding and interpretations of videotaped sessions. This therapist and this child were not just doing therapy. They were also being with each other. Their doing was intimately interrelated to their “being with.” Moment to moment instances of facial animation, joint attention, social referencing, and smoothy coordinated action revealed qualities of interrelatedness that could be called attunement, synchrony, co-regulation, mutuality, or reciprocity. As Tronick (1998) argued, we have developed many such descriptive terms to try to capture elusive, but significant ways of interrelating. Like Tronick, I choose not to try to operationalize or arbitrarily differentiate these terms. Rather, each of these relational concepts captures elements of adult–child interaction and co-constructed action sequences demonstrated in this brief scene.

Although Daniel Stern (1994) used the term “schema–of being with” to describe qualities of mother–infant interactions, the therapist–child dyadic interactions described briefly above often had these attributes. These wonderful

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4 The research team was composed of anthropologists and occupational therapy researchers, doctoral students in both fields, and occupational therapists.

5 Joint attention has been defined as “the tendency for social partners to focus on a common reference, which may be a object, person, or event, and to monitor one another’s attention to this outside entity” (Gauvain, 2001, p. 86).

6 Social referencing is a process that builds on joint attention and as used here refers to how one looks for cues from their interactive partner, or refers to their behavior, to make judgments about experiences (Gauvain, 2001).
affective aspects of this relationship were not merely a pleasurable backdrop to enable therapeutic activities to be completed. This is not merely an example of building therapeutic rapport so that the real work of therapy can proceed smoothly. The ways of being together and doing are enmeshed, coupled in such a way that dissecting them results in a kind of dissolution of the therapy session. In this dyad, the child often uses made up words or phrases that the therapist seems to appreciate. It could be said that not only do this therapist and child have ways of being with each other that relate to their doing with each other, they also have their own language.

In the brief exchange summarized above, Mariah rapidly converts Keith’s hesitancy to blow into the stretchy square and his concern about the impending tactile experience (i.e., “It’s an ouchie.”) by declaring a kind of correction to his perception of the anticipated experience (i.e., “No, it tickles your face. Ready?”). The assurance of this therapist to this child is apparently sufficient for the child to quickly bring the swath to his face and perform the hoped for action. It is really quite a remarkable scene in a seamless flow of clinical action and Keith’s exploration is quite a powerful achievement for this child and therapist. This therapist’s belief about creating “safe places,” coupled with her expressed deep affection and sense of connection with this child, have contributed to a quality of engagement that enables this child to have experiences that otherwise might be avoided or perceived as dangerous. They are not only doing therapy and playing together, they are “being with” each other in such a way that new experiences are possible. Such moments underscore the significance of being occupied as engaged social beings. This conversion of an “ouchie” to something that tickles signals that the child’s connectedness with this therapist allows him to override his own judgment of an anticipated experience, accept a therapist’s idea of what the real experience will be, and step in to a new arena of possibilities. Such scenes in therapy worlds are reminiscent of John Bowlby’s (1988) arguments, building on the work of Mary Ainsworth, that when children are secure in their attachments they are free to explore the world.

The sessions with Mariah and Keith often were memorable for the incorporation of dramatic or fantasy play that was engaging for all involved, including the researcher. Like many pediatric occupational therapy sessions I have observed, themes were often drawn from the child’s stories or conversations about recent experiences elicited by the therapist, or from popular culture such as sports figures and movie or cartoon characters. Incorporating these “social actors” in therapy adds to the narrative organization of therapy sessions and helps therapists create experiences that rise to the level of significance such that something that matters is happening (Mattingly, 1998). The qualities of interrelatedness that permeate therapy sessions like the one described above support the creation of narratively organized therapy experiences. Significant moments, events, and experiences also may be deeply consequential to lives beyond the time in therapy or the walls of the clinic. They matter not just because they enable the work of therapy to get done. They enable children, and perhaps therapists, to do things with one another that could not be done alone.

The following excerpt from a transcribed interview with this therapist illustrates the ways in which affective and relational components affect participation in childhood occupations:

Mariah: ... in here he feels safe enough that he would even, like in riding his bicycle, there is nothing different about (the) outside sidewalk as it at his house. But at home he doesn’t ride his bicycle at all. The last time he went on the bike, you know the first couple of times he did like he was so proud, but the last time I took him out he really looked scared.... But for him I think it’s nice that he has this safe place that he can try things out. Mom commented once, “Oh he only does that here.” You know, she said that a couple times and if he never transferred it out I would feel uncomfortable. But even just from a view of the world and feeling that there are safe places and that kind of behavior thing, you know, it would be worthwhile you know to have, to know that such a place exists.

As Mariah notes, Keith will ride the bicycle with her outside the clinic, but not at home. The difference is not explainable in a physical context sort of way; both places have sidewalks. Bicycle riding, the doing, is more than that. It is doing with Mariah, based on their cultivation of a schema of being with that reflects their shared experiences and history. Embedded in this sense of being with another is a shared appreciation that they are with each other in a safe place, a kind of world that is infused with imagination and activity that transcends the physical realities of the clinic. In the words of Holland, Lachiotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998), they are in a “figured world,” a “... socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others” (p. 52). Of particular relevance to therapy worlds is the “as if” quality of these socially constructed figured worlds which enable possibilities to be nurtured, happenings to be interpreted in imaginative ways, and narrative structuring of experiences to flourish. Perhaps Keith approaches the ”ouchie,” as if it could tickle. He is willing to keep riding and work hard because of the possible future of being like “Shaq” or “Magic,” two popular sports figures who were often invoked during therapy sessions.
Conclusions

In each of these ethnographic examples of child and adult co-constructed action, the nature of the action and the interrelatedness of the social actors are inextricably intertwined. Keith and Tanya aren’t just doing something, they are engaged in doing something with others with whom they have significant relationships. Engagement isn’t just with the doing, nor is it completely explainable as a matter of doing with someone else. To borrow from Gopnik’s (1990) essay of tribute to the scholarship of Jerome Bruner, it is a matter of doing something with someone else. The actions (e.g., riding bikes, singing “Happy Birthday to Ya”), the mattering of the acts (e.g., to strengthen legs to be like Shaq; to enact a missed birthday party), and these deeply connected sets of actors are transactional, mutually influencing and shaping each other. These actors are socially occupied beings engaged in co-creating experiences. I have argued that study of childhood occupation should be approached as the study of the experiences of children engaged in activity in their social worlds. Exploring experience expands the focus from the doing of activity to an integrated view of action, interrelatedness, identity, and meaning. Agency, sociality, culture, and learning are dimensions of adult–child action that become more visible when the unit of analysis is designed to capture child experience.

The challenges inherent in attempting to understand child experience and what it means for children to be occupied are daunting. The preliminary arguments presented in this paper really only begin to address the components that contribute to childhood experiences of being socially occupied. My decision to limit discussion to child and adult co-created action excludes discussion related to how children are socially occupied with peers and how children in solitude might be occupied. Many issues raised in this paper such as cultural influences on socially constructed occupations and ways in which embodiment, experience, and sociality are linked, require more extensive rendering and theoretical grounding. The lack of discussion of the temporal aspects of both social action and developmental processes reflects the need to condense the analysis and manage the complexity of these co-created experiences for purposes of this paper. Further development of these concepts is being pursued.

This proposed linking of social connectedness, engagement, action, and occupation reflects ongoing attempts to understand therapist and child action in therapy worlds.

Our history of difficulty articulating the richness and complexity of pediatric occupational therapy may be partially understood as a problem of conceptualizing the interrelatedness of the doing, being, and mattering that drives therapeutic action. Therapists often talk about when everything “clicks,” or it all “comes together,” or “just happens,” or similar expressions of this sense of an integrated and efficacious experience. These descriptions illustrate pragmatic and conceptual understandings of the interconnectedness of these aspects of child experience. Theoretical and research models are needed to capture the essence of socially occupied beings, doing something with someone else that matters.

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