Using Deweyan Philosophy To Rename and Reframe Adaptation-to-Environment

Malcolm P. Cutchin

John Dewey’s philosophy has been suggested as having been formative in the philosophy of occupational therapy, but the occupational therapy literature offers few analyses of Dewey’s work and its implications for the discipline. I offer an abbreviated analysis of Deweyan philosophy and then assess how adequately that philosophical corpus has been interpreted in the occupational therapy literature. My conclusion is that significant inconsistencies exist between a Deweyan perspective and selected concepts in occupational therapy. I take particular issue with the concept of adaptation-to-environment and specifically with aspects of that conceptualization that I term “environment as container,” “subjective–internalized focus,” and “mechanization of processes.” I offer an alternative concept, “place integration,” that is more consistent with Dewey’s philosophy. The advantages of the conceptual renaming and reframing are discussed.

occupational therapy literature. In doing so, I will present an analysis that both supports occupational therapy scholarship and critiques it. The critique is more important for the paper’s purpose because I want to stress the possibilities that are offered by using a reconstructed view of pragmatism in occupational therapy. To that end, I will focus further on the occupational therapy concept of adaptation—specifically adaptation-to-environment—and how it appears to be incongruent with Deweyan pragmatism. To suggest an alternative, I sketch out the concept of place integration. I conclude the paper with remarks about the potential of moving toward a deeper understanding of Deweyan philosophy in occupational therapy and the rethinking concepts such as adaptation.

A Selective Overview of John Dewey’s Philosophy

Before I launch into a synopsis of some key aspects of Dewey’s philosophy, I believe it reasonable to ask the question, Why focus on Dewey? There certainly are other important pragmatist philosophers who have been utilized inside and outside of occupational therapy. I see at least five reasons why Dewey’s work is an appropriate focus for further intellectual analysis in occupational therapy. First, the depth and range of his philosophical works far exceed that of the other pragmatists (i.e., there is a treasure trove of topical foci interwoven with philosophical innovation in the corpus that Dewey created in his 70-year career). Second, he is regarded as the foremost of the so-called pragmatists, or in other words the “culmination of the tradition of American pragmatism” (West, 1989, p. 71). Dewey synthesized the best of Emerson, Peirce, James, Mead, and other pragmatists, recast what needed refining, and expanded the meaning and purpose of philosophy (Campbell, 1995). Third, there are major components of pragmatism that were overlooked and understated in symbolic interactionists’ writings that are often used to access Dewey (Joas, 1993; Strauss, 1990/1991). We need to go to the source to understand the implications of Dewey for any science, including occupational therapy. Fourth, since Breines’ (1986) analysis of Dewey and related philosophers in the occupational therapy literature there has been a significant effort by current philosophers to reevaluate Dewey’s work. This recent scholarship on Dewey confirms his stature and presents new insights into his philosophy’s potential for many realms of inquiry and life (e.g., Boisvert, 1998; Campbell, 1995; Haskins & Seiple, 1999; Hickman, 2001). The fifth reason for taking a harder look at Dewey is the historiography of occupational therapy and what I call “Dewey’s ghost” lurking in its background. Dewey’s effect on intellectual thought in occupational therapy is never fully present in the literature although the specter of his philosophy exists because of loose ties to Meyer and other shapers of the discipline.

Although it is impossible to fully explicate Dewey’s work in such a brief paper, I will attempt to distill four central themes from his philosophy that have particular implications for my argument. Those themes are continuity, contingency, the undetermined (problematic) situation, and action.

Continuity

Dewey argued (as did James and Mead) that philosophy should derive from and focus on “experience”—what was ignored by so-called idealist and materialist philosophies of his time. For Dewey, experience is what people “…do and suffer, desire and enjoy, see, believe, imagine” (Dewey, 1929/1989, p. 10). Dewey’s concept of experience should not be viewed as subjective, however; it cuts through dualisms of object and subject, positing a constant connection, indeed relational process, between person and environment. Dewey wrote that it was the cultural and physical environment that “experience is of as well as in” (Dewey, 1929/1989, p. 4). By this Dewey means that experience is an interconnectedness of person and her or his context where each penetrates into and becomes a part of the other. Experience, in turn, is viewed as a “comprehensive activity,” which has an “inclusive integrity” (Dewey, 1929/1989, p. 19). Stated another way, experience is not based on isolated entities but on the “multifarious forms of [their] interrelationships” (Boisvert, 1998, p. 21). In Dewey’s worldview, experience does not pit us against the environment. Dewey argues at length for us to see the relations among things in the world, including persons, as the focal point for inquiry. Experience for Dewey is an active mode of existence in which evolving interactions and transactions—active relationships that are continuous—provide the ever-present background for meaning in the world.

1 My wider view is that the concept of adaptation always implies activity in response to an environment. Because of space constraints, I restrict the scope of the argument here to a subset of that concept that I term adaptation-to-environment. Cases where, for example, individual developmental changes suggest a type of personal adaptation to one’s body—a situation where it appears the environment is not in play—are also a type of adaptation-to-environment and would be appropriate for renaming and reframing as well. That argument is beyond the purview of this paper, however.

2 I note here that Jim Garrison (2002) has adroitly and more extensively discussed the centrality of continuity in Dewey’s philosophy in a recent article directed to an occupational therapy audience, but that paper is about habits and occupational therapy.
Dewey also pointed to the temporally continuous aspect of experience. Any experience is integrated with the past, present, and future. Dewey’s focus on continuity means that experience is a “dynamic and temporal affair…constituted by all the modes of intercourse between a conscious being and the environment, both physical and social” (Smith, 1959, p. 99). The naturalism of Dewey should thus not be read to exclude the sociality and cultural basis of experience. Indeed, Dewey was careful to expand his view of continuity from the more rudimentary picture of organism and environment to include the cooperative, communicative, and symbolic basis of human endeavor and development—or as he often preferred to phrase it, “growth.”

Contingency

Dewey’s position on experience also suggests a world that is always dynamic. The undercurrent of human experience and pragmatism is, therefore, the novelty and contingency in daily affairs (Bernstein, 1992). For Dewey, the “precariousness” and eventual “evanescence” of any state of affairs were at the center of human problems and should therefore be at the center of a philosophy based on addressing them (Dewey, 1929/1989, pp. 37–101). The world is a mix of the stable and the precarious, but the precarious and indeterminate have a special place in experience. That the future is indeterminate, that change is so basic to nature, is the fundamental reason for human thought and action. The contingent in nature implores us to recognize the contextual situation through which problems arise, stimulating reflective thought to deal with them (Dewey, 1929/1989, p. 58). The fact that we think is the definitive evidence of the role of indeterminateness in the world.

Contingency implies change. But there are various ways of viewing what change itself is and how it comes about. It is a fact that nothing is everlasting; everything passes with time. Accordingly, Dewey beseeches us to face this fact squarely by the blunt statement that “every existence is an event” (Dewey, 1929/1989, p. 61). By this, Dewey wants to make clear that everything in the universe happens; everything has a beginning and an end. All objects are made or formed, and all of them decay and vanish at some point. “Empirically, individualized objects, unique affairs, exist. But they are evanescent, unstable. They tremble on the verge of disappearance as soon as they appear” (Dewey, 1929/1989, p. 123).

Even things we perceive as structures are structures of something; but structures are not something intrinsic, they are traits of events (Dewey, 1929/1989, p. 62). Thus, even what appears most stable, a structure, only appears stable because of its relatively slow rate of change compared to what we call a process (a more perceptibly changing event) (Dewey, 1977, pp. 102–106). That our world is fraught with such instabilities means we should always be wary of and prepared for change, or we will be forced to undergo change without a plan or the flexibility to act through evolving events.

The Undetermined, Problematic Situation

Classical pragmatists emphasized the importance of specific contexts for inquiry and understanding, both by citizens and scientists (Bernstein, 1992). While Mead (1913) translated this idea of context into the self’s social group or social other, Dewey suggested the concept of the undetermined “situation,” both familiar to us and pregnant with possibilities and uncertainty, through which we reflect and act to gain knowledge. Most simply, situations are the multifaceted, spatially and temporally dependent (contextual) events that provide the basis of active experience. Dewey (1929/1980, p. 236) wrote that situations are uncertain because they are “transitions to and possibilities of later experiences.” Yet situations provide the larger context for understanding experience (Alexander, 1987). Dewey suggests that situations provide a qualitative dimension for experience in so far as they act as both “background” and “control” for experience (Dewey, 1938, p. 70). Situations are unique in their specific character (e.g., your situation is always at least a little bit different from mine), but they also have generic traits shared by other situations (e.g., “constant relations,” contingency, and change [Gouinlock, 1972]). This aspect of situations is important because it illustrates how the universal (i.e., generalizable, structural, nomothetic) and contingent (i.e., unique, agentic, idiographic) are merged in experience.

In a Deweyan worldview, human experience is always situated and contextualized. There is no a priori, only past experience that acts as contingent principles on which we build situated knowledge that is fallible (uncertain) itself. Moreover, situations are always inclusive of us, and us of them; Dewey does not suppose that situations can be asocial, that they have any meaning outside the realm of experience (Gouinlock, 1972). As such, situations become the crux of an inquiry into experience and its meaning for individuals or groups.

Action

The social theorist Hans Joas (1993) has termed pragmatism a philosophy of action, and Dewey’s version is consistent with that theme. The Deweyan perspective places human action within the context of the qualitative, undetermined situation. Although Dewey recognizes that we are frequently involved in habitual actions—behavior that is
taken-for-granted due to relative stabilities in our situations—meaningful action is directed toward solving individual or social problems. Dewey sometimes refers to the origins of such action as “conflicts” which represent fissures in the harmony of situated experience. Instrumental action is thus set into motion by conflict.

Conflict is the gadfly of thought. It stirs us to observation and memory. It instigates invention. It shocks us out of sheep-like passivity, and sets us at noting and contriving.

Not that it always effects this result; but that conflict is a sine qua non of reflection and ingenuity. (Dewey, 1922/1957, p. 275)

Dewey argues that “the starting point [of thought–action] is actually problematic, and that the problematic phase resides in some actual and specifiable situation” (Dewey, 1929/1989, p. 58).

Dewey suggests that “intelligence” is used to direct deliberations of possible action and the meaning, value, and moral outcomes of such action. We must think, reflect, deliberate, and decide among the contingencies of our situation, the possible meanings and values to be derived from action and situational change. Intelligence, or the ability to symbolically construct possible outcomes of different courses of action, provides us with the skill to critically examine the situation and evaluate the goods and bads accordingly. The situational context, including the social and cultural dimensions, help structure our moral choices. At the same time, however, we must rely on creativity. For Dewey, intelligence is the “effort to see the actual in light of the possible and thereby to be responsive toward liberating ideals of conduct, which, in turn, give a fulfilling continuity, meaning, and coherency to action” (Alexander, 1990, p. 336). Imagination is therefore the creative part of intelligent action that allows a broader vista of possible ends and actions to be seen within the situation.

Deweyan Philosophy and Occupational Therapy Concepts

By far the most extensive and scholarly analysis of pragmatism in the occupational therapy literature is that by Breines (1986). In essence, Breines’ purpose is a positive one: to develop a “comprehensive philosophical foundation” (p. 30) for the discipline of occupational therapy, one that can serve to “broaden the body of knowledge” and “…serve as a foundation for the structure and analysis of new concepts and methods” (p. 31). I am sympathetic with and supportive of these aims. I also think Breines’ scholarly achievement is an important one because it develops an in-depth view into the philosophical writings, including Dewey’s, that seem to have affected occupational therapy so profoundly in its early years.

More specifically, Breines’ attempt to develop a comprehensive basis for some central concepts in occupational therapy is well-supported by a close reading of Dewey. Her emphasis on activity and doing certainly is present in Dewey’s work. Thus, the idea of occupation also fits well with a Deweyan perspective. Breines’ use of habits as a fundamental part of occupational therapy also seems fairly consistent with Dewey (see Clark, 2000; Cutchin, 2000; Garrison, 2002). Finally, the role of context in human action is rightfully acknowledged in Breines’ assessment of pragmatism.

Nevertheless, Breines seems to stray from some important aspects of pragmatism. One wayward maneuver appears to be the discussion of pragmatism as a unified philosophy. In actuality, pragmatism may best be seen as a loose confederation of philosophers, not a well-unified philosophy. In addition, as Ruth Anna Putnam (1998) and other scholars have noted, the term “pragmatism” is in many ways a confusing and misleading name for Dewey’s and related philosophers’ work. Other terms include instrumentalism, functionalism, and Dewey’s own “empirical naturalism” (Dewey, 1929/1989, p. 1). None of these terms is necessarily better than “pragmatism” in my opinion, but it is important to discuss Dewey’s work as an important and unique contribution since it does not always agree with the work of those so-called pragmatists that came before or after him.

A more important divergence from Dewey, however, is the manner in which Breines’ (1986, p. 67) appears to rely on dualisms when suggesting that there are “egocentric” (subjective), “exocentric” (objective), and “consensual” (intersubjective) issues that structure experience. I do not believe that this position would hold favor with Dewey who argued strenuously against dualisms of subject and object, material and ideal, etc. In the same manner, I think Dewey would disavow the statement that “The crux of their [the pragmatists’] position is a subjectively interpreted reality which derives from experience within situations” (Breines, p. 56). As has been explained, the role of situations is central to Deweyan philosophy, and to cast experience as subjective—as centered on individuals and accessed only through their interpretation—seems highly problematic. Indeed, Dewey might suggest that in the context of occupational therapy, the social nature of therapy is the crux of the situation with the therapist playing a fundamental cooperative role in person–situation transactions. There is a web of relations in which every individual is embedded that works to socially construct the self and the experience of a situation.
These points lead us to a larger problem with the concept of adaptation-to-environment. What might appear as minor inconsistencies between the occupational therapy literature and Dewey's philosophy are in actuality indicative of a larger problem throughout the occupational therapy literature in the case of a fundamental concept, adaptation-to-environment.

Adaptation-to-Environment Renamed and Reframed

In an article published over a decade ago, Parham (1987) presented a strong argument for the necessity of theory in research and practice. Basing her case in large part on Schön's idea of "naming and framing," Parham is eloquent when she writes:

Theory is kingpin, indispensable for systematic research and for the development of high-quality programs that apply basic principles of occupation in creative and productive ways. It allows us to present ourselves as professionals with a unique contribution and a unique way of viewing human problems and finding solutions for them. (Parham, 1987, p. 555)

I would like to accept Parham's challenge and take it another step by suggesting that we consider "re-naming and re-framing" as an additional goal. Those in occupational therapy have been doing this for decades now, challenging the discipline to further deepen and expand its bases. My particular rationale is that although Deweyan pragmatism has been a part of occupational therapy's history, it has not been examined thoroughly enough to understand how it might constitute a sound philosophical and theoretical basis for the discipline and for practice.

Adaptation-to-Environment Challenged

Although the usage and meaning of the adaptation concept is varied (Wood, 1996; Schultz & Schkade, 1997), adaptation has been suggested explicitly as a central concept in occupational therapy by those of a pragmatist or other orientation (Breines, 1986; Frank, 1996; Schkade & Schultz, 1992; Schultz & Schkade). Yet it is the concept of adaptation, explicitly tied to Dewey by some (e.g., Breines) and developed from different sources by others, that I suggest is in need of renaming and reframing. Of course, the argument I am to offer is premised on the fact that Deweyan pragmatism has been a part of occupational therapy's history, it has not been examined thoroughly enough to understand how it might constitute a sound philosophical and theoretical basis for the discipline and for practice.

adaptation is untenable, but I am suggesting that if the deeper ethos of therapy and research for human occupation can be found in pragmatism, the concept of adaptation as it is often used in the occupational therapy literature—"adaptation-to-environment"—starts to look inadequate (i.e., a Deweyan perspective can help us look beyond adaptation-to-environment and to a more holistic and dynamic understanding of change and activity in the relationship that connects person and context).

Figure 1 provides an overview of the shift from concept of adaptation-to-environment to "place integration." As I suggested, the concept of adaptation in occupational therapy is typically conceived as in relationship to an environment. On the surface it looks like a good start, especially because Dewey does discuss relations to an environment. Moreover, I would suggest that occupational therapy is ahead of other fields interested in human action in that it pays explicit attention to the role of the ever-present environment. In the figure, I have included what I see as three problematic dimensions of the adaptation-to-environment concept as it is used in the occupational therapy literature: environment as container, a subjective or internalized focus, and a mechanization of processes of experience. Of course, not all occupational therapists and scientists use adaptation-to-environment in this way. But what the diagram is intending to map out, so to speak, are the dimensions of the adaptation concept that are collectively common enough to cause concern for a Deweyan. The right side of the figure is an alternative that I will discuss in turn.

The first problematic dimension, what I have termed "environment as container," refers to the separation of environment from person—the idea that an environment is a thing in which but largely separate from occupation and adaptation occur. Examples of this view in the literature include:

- Occupational therapy is concerned with the person and his or her occupation which takes place in an environment. (Yerxa, 1992, p. 79)
- Occupational environments are contexts in which occupations occur. (Schkade & Schultz, 1992, p. 831)
- Context [environment] refers to a variety of interrelated conditions with and surrounding the client that influence performance....Some contexts are external to the client (e.g., physical context, social context, virtual context) (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2002)

In these views, the environment is deemed to have some value, but its function appears to me to be little more than that of container for the more important elements of occupation. As a container, environment is relegated to a distant, secondary role in the story of how occupation is experienced. From a Deweyan perspective, the danger here is the creation...
of separation between person and context, a separation that Dewey argued we should conceptually transcend. According to Dewey, people are more a part of their environments, and environments more a part of people, than this aspect of adaptation-to-environment would suggest.

A second issue arising from a Deweyan analysis of adaptation-to-environment is that this concept is suggested in the occupational therapy literature as a process internal to the individual. One component of that conceptualization is that persons have an independent motivation to adapt to or affect their environments (King, 1978; Reilly, 1962; Schultz & Schkade, 1997). Extension of this view puts the weight of the adaptation process inside the individual:

Adaptation requires the system to satisfy its own internal urge to explore and master, as well as fulfill the demands of the environment. (Kielhofner, 1980, pp. 732–733)

The term occupational adaptation refers specifically to how occupation and adaptation become integrated into a single internal phenomenon within the patient. (Schkade & Schultz, 1992, p. 836)

I do not want to suggest that part of experience could not be characterized as self-motivated or self-relevant, but this can only be the case if one agrees to temporarily abstract the process of adaptation-to-environment out of its holistic, transactional nature. In Deweyan philosophy, motivations and processes are never fully independent from the physical, social, and cultural realms that shape the self and desires.3

Others, such as Frank (1996), have started to shift the perspective on the adaptation-to-environment process. In my view, she rightly broadens adaptation by connecting it to “orchestrated activity” and to morality. Frank encourages a look beyond internalization of the process to extra-individual factors. Yet even Frank’s more activity-based and ecological portrayal of adaptation is in the end too subjective in orientation for the Deweyan. Although Frank admits that what she calls the “person-centered adaptive system” is perhaps too “solipsistic,” she does not offer a more balanced option.

A third problematic of the occupational therapy use of adaptation-to-environment is that so-called adaptive processes become mechanized. I use this metaphor to denote the sense one gets of adaptation as it appears in systems theory approaches. Systems theory is, on one hand, a useful way to encompass complexity and the interplay of entities in a situation. In that respect, systems theory approaches are useful in that they are more encompassing of experience than more one-sided, behavioristic, or structuralist views of human-environment processes. Yet what is troubling about a systems approach for a Deweyan is that dualisms such as input and output are drawn out, and the continuity of experience is mechanized as subsystems and behavioral assemblies (e.g., Kielhofner 1995; Schkade & Schultz, 1992). Use of dynamic systems theory in occupational therapy (e.g., Gray, Kennedy, & Zemke, 1996; Humphry, 2002) appears to move away somewhat from these mechanized aspects. In particular, a dynamic systems theory

3 See Garrison (2002, p. 16S) for a radical Deweyan critique of motivation.
approach emphasizes emergence and a heterarchy of systems (rather than a hierarchy). These modifications and Kielhofner’s (1995) effort to diminish the role of structure and emphasize flexibility and “soft assembly” in his systems model of human occupation notwithstanding, the human systems approach retained a significant leitmotif of mechanism.

In the most recent recasting of the model of human occupation, Kielhofner (2002) endeavors to further reduce the role of mechanistic thinking in his systems approach. Kielhofner drops the soft assembly metaphor, presents a stronger critique of mechanistic thinking, and suggests an important role for the “principle of interactive solutions” (pp. 32–33). While this most recent revision of a systems approach (if one can now call it a systems approach since the term is all but banished in the new text) appears more dynamic and less mechanistic than previous versions, I contend that there are remnants of mechanized conceptualization remaining. For example, Kielhofner uses the example of robotic design and behavior—both a literal and conceptual mechanization of activity and adaptation—to illustrate the principle of interactive solutions. Moreover, in spite of a more dynamic, fluid orientation to occupation and adaptation than in previous versions of his systems approach, Kielhofner’s (2002) current model of human occupation describes the environment as a container: “the environment can be defined as the particular physical and social features of the specific context in which one does something that impacts upon what one does, and how it is done” (p. 99). Furthermore, the key subprocesses of volition, habituation, and performance capacity are depicted as internal to a person; they are conceptualized as separate from the environment. Even though this version of a systems approach is more nuanced and less mechanized than before, it falls short of Dewey’s holistic sense of the situation as a qualitative whole through and with that action occurs and meanings are generated, including social, moral, and aesthetic meanings that influence future actions and situations.

**Moving Beyond Adaptation-to-Environment To Place Integration**

Whereas Breines (1986, p. 61) argues that pragmatism considers adaptation a fundamental premise, I can find no good indication in Dewey that this is the case. Indeed, the mature Dewey uses the term within the larger discussion of humans as part of nature, as organisms transacting with the environment. When he develops the fuller picture of human experience, he rarely emphasizes adaptation in any central, important sense; Dewey writes about reconstructing situations, not adapting to them. Perhaps closer to the idea of adaptation is Dewey’s use of “coordination” of elements and actions in the situation (Garrison, 2002). This coordination and reconstruction of the situation is used to bring the situation together as a new whole with new meaning for the person or group. This process of action to address the problematic aspect of the situation, and thereby remake the situation and bring harmony to our ongoing transactions with it, is what I have termed place integration (Cutchin, 1997, 1999, 2001).

Place is not a new concept in the occupational therapy literature. Rowles (1991, 2000), Seamon (2002), and Hasselkus (1998) have contributed to the occupational therapy understanding of this important geographic concept. Writing from a phenomenological perspective, these scholars correctly suggest that being and living, and thus self and meaning, are closely connected to, indeed stem from, places such as rooms, homes, neighborhoods, and towns. Place becomes much more than a location in space in this perspective. It becomes a center of lived meaning, where social, cultural, and physical elements of a person’s environment become one’s place by being woven into being and selfhood. As Rowles has written, person and place become one through time. The phenomenological perspective on place establishes that deep meaning arises for individuals through the experience of place, a concept and reality that goes well beyond the impact of its more stale counterpart, environment.

While many Deweyans would probably have no problem with the phenomenological interpretation in and of itself, I suggest that the phenomenological perspective on place does not go far enough and thus does not allow us to move beyond adaptation-to-environment. In the end, the phenomenological view of place seems too static in that it does not incorporate change in a fundamental way—it is more about being in the world than becoming in the world through action and growth. Moreover, a phenomenological view does not position activity at its center as does a Deweyan view. So how does place become Deweyan? If we take the concept of place as the social, cultural, and physical manifestation of the Deweyan situation, and emphasize the undetermined nature of place as something that will have to be reintegrated through time, the concept of place integration begins to make sense.

Figure 1 illustrates some of the most important aspects of the place integration concept and sets it in juxtaposition to adaptation-to-environment. As change in the person–place whole occurs and place (the situation) becomes problematic, the challenge is to reintegrate person and place through activity. Place integration assumes the continuity of person and place—that one is not without the other. The concept does not dismiss the fact that persons have histories that may be connected to other places in
other locations or at different scales (geographic sizes). The concept also adheres to the contingency and emergence of place—that stability is only a temporary aspect of place. Such instability will necessitate coordinated action in the form of commitments, plans, and actions by individuals and groups to establish a socially constructed “end-in-view” or goal of what the new person–place whole should be. In this view, innate motivation is replaced by creativity, and personal desires are reflections of social and community-influenced values and morals. Such social, moral, and aesthetic bases of action are always in play, in thought and action. It is the continual transaction of the person–place whole, in times of stability, but particularly in times of change, that provide meaning through actions to re-integrate the whole. Some of those meanings are what phenomenological perspectives call place attachment and place identity. Other meanings and values are generated from the ongoing transaction that promotes growth or development of the person. Overall, place integration is about establishing the best harmony possible in the situation through intelligent action that has a social, moral and aesthetic basis. It is an ongoing process that is never complete. The place integration process is a distinct counterpart to adaptation-to-environment as it has been discussed in the occupational therapy literature.

Conclusions

My goals in this paper were to offer an overview of primary components of Deweyan philosophy and then assess how that interpretation compares to several uses of pragmatism in occupational therapy. I have questioned the occupational therapy use of pragmatism specifically to suggest individual adaptation. In response, my goal has been to suggest how the concept of adaptation-to-environment could be reconstrued (renamed and reframed) as place integration. If the argument, rendered in broad strokes, is provocative enough to stimulate further dialogue among colleagues, then it has been successful. The critique is one of an ally who seeks to enhance the understanding of Dewey in his new discipline and suggest conceptual development consistent with that understanding.

I realize that I have challenged a foundational concept in occupational therapy. I would like to reiterate that adaptation itself is not a useless concept. But when one brings a full-fledged Deweyan perspective to the table, adaptation-to-environment becomes an incomplete concept, one that does not go far enough in addressing what it is to be human and engaged in activity with place. Hooper and Wood (2002, p. 42) suggest that, in his influential article on the philosophy of occupational therapy, Meyer (1922) presents “one of the field’s cleanest examples of pragmatic discourse.” I believe that my argument supports a different conclusion, however. When Meyer posited the centrality of adaptation-to-environment for occupational therapy, he did not bring a Deweyan interpretation, the most developed form of pragmatism, to the task. It seems that the concept was nonetheless readily accepted without critical assessment even by those who later applied Dewey in their analysis of occupational therapy (e.g., Breines, 1986).

All academic disciplines need to reevaluate core concepts in an ongoing way. As the philosophical underpinnings to occupational therapy continue to develop, this will certainly be the case. A constant part of that effort is the struggle against the limits of language—limits that often leave us ill-equipped to express the richness of a concept that we need to share. Dewey himself was partially constrained by this challenge even though he had an extensive English vocabulary at his command to help him in his attempt to move beyond obstacles in the western philosophic tradition. Regardless of language constraints, I suspect that other concepts might also benefit from a Deweyan analysis and a renaming and reframing. One example of such an analysis is the recent reevaluation of the concept of habit (Clark, 2000; Garrison, 2002).

My argument is not intended to serve purely intellectual purposes, that is, to argue solely for a more consistent set of occupational therapy concepts. If an expanded view of adaptation as place integration is used, a clearer connection to place in occupation occurs. The human response to the emergent situation of place is to draw upon place, as it exists outside and inside the self, to act, and to derive meaning in life. Rather than a generic environment apart from the person, we can begin to think about deep-seated meanings of particular places that clients know through their experiences and that we more abstractly call home, work, school, park, and hospital. We can enrich the meaning of occupation by infusing it with the landscape of human meanings made through experience in the world. In addition, the Deweyan view asks that we see the client and practitioner as reflexive social selves. The implications for practice could be profound if the therapeutic moment becomes one in which client and therapist are united by place and social ties and by the collaborative effort to coordinate occupation so that person and place become once again integrated and whole.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Elicia Dunn Cruz, Suzanne Peloquin, Loree Primeau, and Wendy Wood for their direction to, and sharing of, specific examples in the literature. Dr.
Peloquin and Dr. Wood generously shared extensive comments on a previous draft of this paper. I also note Florence Clark as one who encouraged both my turn toward occupational therapy and my use of Dewey to explore theoretical issues of relevance to the discipline.

References


