

The Practice of Occupational Therapy in Employment and Income Generation Initiatives: contributions from the profession's fundamentals and the work category dimensions*

A prática do terapeuta ocupacional em iniciativas de geração de trabalho e renda: contribuição dos fundamentos da profissão e das dimensões da categoria trabalho

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ABSTRACT: Occupational therapists have been seeking to enhance and legitimize their profession in face of the reoccurring changes in the field of mental health, and thus have been perfecting their interventions in the scope of prevention and promotion of health, treatment, rehabilitation and social inclusion. This study is part of a Master's degree study in which the general objective was to investigate the practice of the occupational therapists working in mental health initiatives for employment and income generation in the state of São Paulo, Brazil. This is a qualitative study which included 16 occupational therapists working on initiatives to generate employment and income for users of mental health in the state of São Paulo, Brazil. We used two instruments, a semi-structured questionnaire and a semi-structured interview script. The data from the questionnaires were analyzed descriptively and the interviews were subjected to thematic analysis technique. It was possible to verify that professionals have a mature conception in the understanding of activity and work in these contexts which break from the traditional therapeutic concept, demonstrating a practice consistent with the principles of psychosocial rehabilitation and with what is being advocated by social inclusion policy for work.

KEYWORDS: Occupational therapy; Work/economy; Mental health; Rehabilitation, vocational; Income; Rehabilitation.

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RESUMO: Os terapeutas ocupacionais vêm buscando aprimorar-se e legitimar-se como profissional diante das mudanças ocorridas no campo da saúde mental e assim vêm aperfeiçoando suas intervenções no nível de prevenção e promoção de saúde, tratamento, reabilitação e inclusão social. Este estudo é um recorte da pesquisa de mestrado cujo objetivo geral foi investigar a prática dos terapeutas ocupacionais que trabalham em iniciativas de geração de trabalho e renda no âmbito da saúde mental no estado de São Paulo. Trata-se de um estudo de abordagem qualitativa do qual participaram 16 terapeutas ocupacionais que atuam em iniciativas de geração de trabalho e renda destinados a usuários da saúde mental no Estado de São Paulo. Para a coleta de dados utilizou-se 2 instrumentos, um questionário semiestruturado e um roteiro de entrevista semiestruturado. Os dados provenientes dos questionários foram analisados de maneira descritiva e as entrevistas foram submetidas à técnica de Análise Temática. Foi possível verificar a concepção amadurecida, por parte dos profissionais, acerca da compreensão da atividade e do trabalho nestes contextos que rompem com a concepção terapêutica, demonstrando uma prática condizente com os pressupostos da reabilitação psicossocial e com o que vem sendo preconizado pela política de inclusão social pelo trabalho.

DESCRIPTORES: Terapia ocupacional; Trabalho/economia; Saúde mental; Reabilitação vocacional/economia; Renda; Reabilitação.

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INTRODUCTION

The discussion of the importance of work to users of mental health services received attention in Brazil in the context of the Psychiatric Reform, process that took place during the re-democratization of the country in the late 1970s¹. Understood as a complex social and political process, the Psychiatric Reform is a “set of transformations in practices, knowledge, and cultural and social values” (p.6)².

Delgado³ argues that the Psychiatric Reform is not limited to the challenge of going beyond mental institutions and the creation of other services, but should allow for the emergence of the positive characteristics of those who experience mental suffering, and who sometime are viewed only by their negative aspects. It is from this perspective that the author considers the proposal for social inclusion via work, using income generation initiatives and cooperatives, which is a highly effective device.

According to Amarante⁴, it was in the context of the mobilizations to transform mental health services that numerous associations and cooperatives were created. Beginning in the 1990s⁵, the first initiatives for income and employment generation were created for users of the mental health system in Brazil.

One important advance in consolidating these proposals was instituted in 2005 with the Inter-ministerial Working Group which aimed to create and implement work-related social inclusion policies, expressed in the Project for Social Inclusion via Work in Mental Health, a partnership between the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Work and Employment⁶.

It is emphasized that the perspective on work proposes for users of mental health services discussed in this study is based in the proposals for psychosocial rehabilitation whose main author is Saraceno¹².

Work, understood as a right and promoter of social exchange to mental health services users must evidence the principles of social inclusion mandated by the Psychiatric Reform. Experiences in income and work generation have played an important role in psychosocial rehabilitation, because they have made it possible for people with a lower skill level and varying degrees of autonomy to perform work tasks and be paid for them⁷.

These transformations readdressed the activities of mental health teams, including occupational therapists. At the beginning of the 1980s, many occupational therapists nationwide participated in transdisciplinary projects aimed at transforming the institutions. In general terms, they advocate for a deepening of the discussion about

mental institutions as exclusion agent; of the practices of domination that characterize these institutions, the denial of the technical as legitimizer of this practice, and the need for change in institutional relations, making it possible to restore people's citizenship⁸. In this context, occupational therapists developed practices in the new service networks⁹, in order to adhere and participate in the proposed transformations in the field of mental health. That is, they advocated for interventions coordinated with the territorial and social surroundings of the subjects, transforming the service from within.

Along the way, occupational therapists have sought to improve their status and become legitimized as professions with respect to the changes occurring in the mental health field, and have also enhanced their interventions at the level of prevention and health promotion, rehabilitation and social inclusion¹⁰. In present day, this professional needs, by the specificity of his/her area, to contribute with the amplification of this care concept, as well of the possibility of citizenship recovery in the mental health services and interventions¹¹.

Occupational therapists understand work as socially constructed and central to the lives of patients. It can make possible the expansion of personal and social relations, insertion in the world of production and consumption, independence and autonomy with respect to the family and society, as well as the exercise of citizenship⁹. In the realm of mental health, the work proposed to users has the ability to promote and organize their interests, needs and desires if understood as entry into the labor world¹² and thus it is guided by the proposals of psychosocial rehabilitation.

This points to the importance role of occupational therapy in promoting inclusion in the world of work, and highlights actions to work and income generation, which have been encouraged and promulgated by public policy as an alternative to social inclusion for mental health services user.

Given this background, this master's research project had the general objective of researching the practice of occupational therapists in work and income generation initiatives in the state of São Paulo. The specific objectives of the study were: to characterize the initiatives for work and income generation; to identify aspects of professional training that contributed to occupational therapists' actions in these initiatives, and to determine whether they are linked to the movement for a solidarity economy.

Six categories were identified in the study:

- Identify occupational therapists' activities and the need to build a new practice;

- Occupational therapy and teamwork in work and income generation;
- The practice of occupational therapy in work and income initiatives and the contribution of the principles of the profession;
- The dimensions of work as a guide to practice in the work and income generation context;
- The solidarity economy as a reference to the practice of occupational therapy in the realm of income and work generation;
- The difficulties and challenges encountered in income and work generation;

This article is excerpted from the research and will present only 2 of the 6 categories identified. They are: “the practice of occupational therapy in work and income generation initiatives and the contribution of the principles of the profession” and “The dimensions of work as a guide to practice in the work and income generation context.”

The study was submitted to the Ethics Committee for Research on Human Beings of the Federal University of São Carlos, and was approved under technical report number 137.628/CAAE: 05460812.9.0000.5504. Data was collected only after this approval was obtained.

METODOLOGY

This is a qualitative study which used two instruments for data collection, a semi-structured questionnaire and a semi-structured interview script, both created based on the literature in the area and the objectives set for the research.

The semi-structured questionnaire intended to characterize the participants and the work and income generation initiatives.

The interview script sought to investigate and deepen knowledge about occupational therapists’ practices in work and income generation activities; It contained 14 questions that investigated issues such as: activities developed by the occupational therapist; the knowledge needed to work in this context; the facilities and difficulties encountered in practice; concepts about the relationship between occupational therapy and income and work generation; concepts about the relations between work and income generation, and the solidarity economy, among others.

Participants

Study participants were 16 occupational therapists active in initiatives for income and work generation addressed to users of mental health services in the state of São Paulo gleaned from the Register of Social Inclusion via

Work Initiatives (CIST). All participants were female and their ages ranged from 27 to 50.

The length of professional experience of participants was from 4 to 27 years. All graduated in São Paulo state, 6 studied at public universities and 10 at private universities. They had worked in work and income generation initiatives from 9 months to 15 years.

Field of Study

The field of study consisted of 10 work and income generation projects distributed over five cities. Criteria for inclusion required that they be functioning initiatives registered with the CIST with an active occupational therapist.

Procedures

Data collection

Initiatives were identified by consulting the database for income generation projects available on the site of the Ministry of Health. There were 99 income and work generation initiatives distributed over 24 cities in São Paulo state.

The initiatives were contacted through phone calls and email. 14 of the 99 initiatives met the criteria for inclusion, i.e., they were active and had active occupational therapists. Written authorization was requested to do the research and after authorization, participants were invited by phone and email, advised of the objectives of the research, and reminded of their freedom to decide whether or not to join the research, and that ethical considerations would be respected.

The 23 therapists who opted to participate were asked to sign an informed consent form. Those who signed received the semi-structured questionnaire in Word format via email and were asked to record their responses on the document and return it by email.

By the deadline, 18 of 23 questionnaires were returned. However, after detailed analysis, two were excluded because their initiatives were therapeutic groups and not income and work generation projects.

Thus the final list of participants was 16 professionals who were working in 10 income and work generation initiatives in five cities of São Paulo state.

The second stage of data collection consisted of interviews. 12 of the 16 questionnaire respondents were selected and invited to answer the interview. The inclusion criteria were the highest number and greatest depth of responses to the questionnaires, longer time of involvement

in the initiatives which were most consolidated and had been in operation longer.

The 12 selected occupational therapists accepted. 11 were interviewed at their workplaces and one via Skype.

Data Analysis

The questionnaire data was analyzed descriptively, based on the order of receipt by the researcher; they were organized sequentially based on responses to the questions.

The interviews were transcribed in their entirety, organized by order of application and their content was submitted to Thematic Technique Analysis¹³, resulting in 6 thematic categories.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the main results from the categories “The practice of occupational therapy in work and income generation initiatives and the contribution of the principles of the profession” and “The dimensions of work as a guide to practice in the work and income generation context.”, i.e., two of the six categories identified.

These two categories were selected in order to explore more deeply some aspects essential to the knowledge of practices developed by occupational therapist in income and work generation initiatives, since they deal with an emerging area of activity and are still little explored within the field of occupational therapy.

Occupational Therapy Practice in Income and Employment Generation Practices and the Contribution of the Principles of the Profession

The interviews revealed that professionals recognize a characteristic practice of occupational therapy in the proposals for income and work generation, and this is due to the profile of occupational therapy training, as well as the principles that guide the practice and contribute to putting it into action. The following statement is evidence of this consideration:

“I believe that occupational therapy and income generation are related because occupational therapy [...] already has this experience in its training [...] it has this learning on work, on activities, and occupation itself[...].” (T2).

Among the attributes that explain the affinity of occupational therapists with income and work generation initiatives, professionals point to this activity as an occupational therapy resource present in this context, and

with which they know how to deal. Emphasis was also placed on issues related to activity, such as the practice, human action, work as a human activity, the ability of occupational therapists to deal with different type of activity and with how people do things.

With respect to activity, this is characterized as a resource and domain of occupational therapy since its rise as a profession. Nowadays, the conceptual perspective and practice in applying it refer to the process of conceptual transformation by occupational therapists throughout the development of the profession.

In this sense, Castro et al.¹⁴, in tracing the history of occupational therapists employing activity in Brazil, highlight the main historical event that influenced the way it has been viewed and proposed for professional practice. The authors point to the time between 1970 and 1980 when strong questioning of the role of workers in the transformation of mental health institutions and their own activities with patient populations led to the reformulation of the role of occupational therapists. They challenged the kind of assistance offered to institutionalized patients and their own ambiguous role which oscillated between providing therapy and the function of social control¹⁴.

Two other health care situations contributed to strengthening interdisciplinary activities and to occupational therapy practices taking on new meaning: disabled people organizing to struggle for rights to the same opportunities as other citizens, and for improved living conditions; and the proposal to deinstitutionalize psychiatric patients in order to defend their citizen rights and concretely transform people's lives¹⁴.

A new concept of rehabilitation was developed in this context. It favors the creation of subject rights and transformation in various life scenarios of those considered excluded. This new context of health and proposals for psychosocial rehabilitation made it possible to carryout activities that are important tools in the process of transforming both the rationale for exclusion and alienated practices¹⁴.

The interviews showed that one of the pillars supporting occupational therapy practices in work and income generation initiatives are the profession's own knowledge, such as activities, human action, and daily life. Such aspects are recognized by participants as the differential of occupation therapy at work, and are sometimes pointed out as facilitators of action.

The following illustrates aspects that the interviewees recognize as belonging to the profession in the context of its daily practice.

"Because we learn that activity is intrinsic to people, we develop activities for survival, being happy, to do things, personal care, these activities are very extensive in the lives of human beings [...] this work of generating income and social inclusion is already part of the training of occupational therapists, they learn to do this, to promote human beings through activities, to give people value through tasks...". (T2).

Interviews also revealed how occupational therapists deal with user demands and how occupational therapists' are able to conduct activities and make the needed adaptations. This is expressed in the following:

"I think we have this practice [...] of working together, sitting down and working things out together; thinking together how to make things better; I think this is a tool that occupational therapist already have [...]". (T5).

"I think that this [...] that I ended up saying [...] of being able to think about the activity being done and how it can be done by different people [...] those who can be more anxious, those who have more mental suffering [...] I've always dealt a lot with daily activities [...], I've never abandoned this idea [...]". (T12).

The reports show the particular manner in which occupational therapists deal with activity, with subjects in action, and in assessing how this can be done by different people, the adaptations that are needed to carry out activities, as well performing tasks using their professional skills. This feature was also demonstrated in the study by Lopes and Leão ¹⁵, which looked at the practices developed by occupational therapists at the CeCCos (Cooperative and Culture Centers) in São Paulo from 1989 to 2000. The distinctions of occupational therapists from other technicians can be seen – the use of activities, the manner of analysis and adapting activities while they are being carried out; taking into consideration the needs and demands of the subject, while always attentive to the way this subject relates to others, their work and activity.

Despite their proximity and affinity with income and work generation project, participating occupational therapists pointed out that this is not an exclusive knowledge of occupational therapy and they can and should rely on action and coordination with other professionals. Nevertheless they stress that occupational therapists have more affinity and ease as a result of their training, knowledge, and skills. This is evident in the following statements:

But the work in generating income is not specific [to occupational therapy], other mental health professionals also have this view, this care [...]. But I do think that occupational therapists have more skill, more facility, due to their training". (T2).

Two respondents clarified why this area of action is not the exclusive knowledge of occupational therapy, as follows:

"[...] I think this is not exclusively of OT[...] I am speaking of human action and that this is intrinsic to people [...], it is the daily life of people, and we do it all the time, we produce all the time, so this does not happen just in OT. Doing is in the world, in things, in people, but of course [...] occupational therapist are professionals who have a more careful look on this.". (T11).

"[...] when [...] I didn't know the tools [...] for income and work generation I understood that this was a kind of work specific to occupational therapist because we were dealing with activity, with how to do things, and then I understood that this was much closer to OT [...] with the daily experience of workshops you understand that this goes much further; that human learning by doing is not how we learn categorically in the university, that it goes beyond the occupational therapist and the frontiers of OT [...] it is not strictly a province of occupational therapy". (T9).

The reports show that some elements and principles that are considered the domain of occupational therapy take on another dimension and thus justify, from the participants' point of view, the action of other professionals. This situation suggests that professionals differentiate the actions of occupational therapy in the income and work generation context from their clinical, treatment and rehabilitation activities. This occurs because in both contexts professionals deal with the action, the activities, with the human actions and more, but in different approaches.

In this sense, the professionals showed their understanding of the activity and of the situation in the context of work and income generation that fulfills the proposal to have work as a means of social and material exchange.

One participant considered occupational therapy in the context of income and work generation as a challenge precisely because she recognizes that her practice went beyond the clinic and therapeutic interventions.

"[...] it's a challenge [...] to be in income generation because you go outside the clinic [...] leave the therapeutic, leave the group of OT [...] you go to bigger things [...] to the market". (T5).

This report leads to reflection about the place that occupational therapists hold in the relations with users in this context of work. That is, there should be a reinvention of this relationship which, in transcending the therapeutic is constructed on the horizontal plane and thus makes the emancipation of people regarding work possible. Thus, it is essential that the relationship established with users characterizes as a partnership, one of collective creation,

but especially, it should be one of being proactive and autonomous. That people can take on activities and responsibilities in the initiatives with greater appropriation and autonomy is essential. However, the proposal to reinvent the relationship means taking another place within this, i.e., by positioning oneself as supporter and facilitator for the work processes of the users. They ask themselves: has this perspective been possible and has this change of position been created?

The Dimensions of Work as a Guideline for Practice in the Context of Work and Income Generation

The work theme permeates the statements of the participants and is approached in several ways: from the perspective of knowledge that the therapists have gained since graduation and with which they have affinity and comprehension – which makes acting in the context of work and income generation possible – and to ponder about the work from a reflective perspective. They say they develop their practice founded on the concepts of the importance of work in people's lives, in the contradictions that work carries, and in the role it plays in people's lives.

They also point to their expectations with respect to promoting life and transformations that users can experience through work developed in these initiatives. This finding suggests that occupational therapists are involved with different dimensions of work when acting within the context of employment and income generation, and that this has been put in practice in their daily dealings with users.

In this sense, it was learned that have worked with a view to legitimizing the work issue with all that it implies and this denotes a practice committed to the principles of psychosocial rehabilitation.

Saraceno¹² considers that it is not possible to conceive of rehabilitation projects by means of work without first reflecting on the meanings that work involves.

The manner in which participants present their conceptions of work, contextualized in the initiatives is in consonance with this proposal to the extent that, in expressing the importance of the many dimensions of work, they demonstrate their commitment to its meaning for users.

Although it is clear in participants' reports that they perceive the proximity of occupational therapy to the work theme, it was possible to identify in two statements that they recognize that the profession already uses work from the perspective of "therapeutic occupations" but this has been transforming in the context of work and income generation. Occupational therapists made a distinction in the use that they already done in their work and what they

are doing now, as evidenced in the changed profile of these professionals in these contexts.

This notion is also discussed in the study by Almeida and Trevisan¹⁶ for whom, in the present context of transforming the concepts and intervention devices in mental health, occupational therapists were able to identify and value human activity and work in the area of mental health, and for the social inclusion of subjects and thus transposed the concept of activity as a therapeutic resource or the way that occupying idle time has been disseminated in traditional practices.

In this sense, it is possible to admit that occupational therapy assumes another concept about work, understood as a right and means of social inclusion and for the conquest of autonomy and citizenship. This confers a new status on the professional with respect to understanding social inclusion and how this can happen by including people in context of productive work that allow social and material exchanges, and thus distance themselves from the concept of therapeutic work.

The following reports illustrate how professionals conceive work:

"[...] I think that work is what orients everyone's life; we organize our lives around work. Thus, how many hours per day do you work? What is your job? [...] are questions everyone hears. When you meet someone or when someone wants to get to know you, the first thing they ask is: what do you do? Thus I think that work has this function of organizing one's life/". (T4).

(T7) "Personally I think that work is the central pivot for living life, not that I think everyone has to work and those who don't manage to do anything pretend they work [...] But I think that, for most people, work is the axis of integration, of living together, and of self-worth [...]". (T7).

The earlier reports pointed to work as a central category in people's lives, as one of the pillars that sustain daily life. In this sense, Lussi et al.¹⁷ consider that the value of work as a practice for integrating and legitimizing people in society is recognized in different communities, groups and social classes. For the authors, then, to be able to be part of the work world, or even to begin this entry process increases opportunities for social inclusion, for better health status, and quality of life.

Despite the positive approach presented by interviewees about the importance and function of work, the recognition of the contradictions contained in work were evident in the statements of some, as was the need for occupational therapists to appropriated these aspects related to the world of work, as they have expressed:

"[...] I believe that we need to study and discuss a lot

what rehabilitation means to people, because work carries this contradiction, to put it this way, that it enslaves, and is alienating or oppressive, as well as having another aspect that is liberating, which is the opportunity for a number of things in the field of socialization, as well as concretely earning money and supporting oneself, this also provokes more symbolic gains. So I think that we need to study this a lot, the issue of work, the work world, the world of work in this capitalistic formation [...]". (T7).

This report points to the importance of reflecting on the nature of capitalistic work. It is indispensable to assess deeply how work has been configured in present-day society and especially, in what ways it is accessible to absorb the sectors excluded by society, among them, users of mental health services. Pitta's¹⁸ study contributed to this reflection and points out that "Modern man, uncritically, pursues forms of social inclusion through work, not considering the fact that this work is neither so available, nor flexible enough to respond to the different individual and collective demands that modern society imposes" (p.24).

Perhaps the perspective presented by the author could be a good trigger for critical discussion about work in the context of mental health, and especially for thinking about under which modality and referential this work will be proposed. It is based on discussions about the meaning of work and its configuration that we can have effective dialogue with the solidarity economy as a viable model,

suitable from the mental health perspective. Nevertheless, it is anticipated here that from the point of view of the solidarity economy, the construction of work, its function and meaning for subject departs from various aspects of the capitalist production mode, which requires a theoretical and practical deepening about what solidarity work and which transformations in work relations are necessary.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The results presented show the potential for occupational therapy practice in initiatives for employment and income generation within the area of mental health; they reveal important contributions to be made to the development of these proposals, as well as to the field of occupational therapy.

It was possible to verify the maturity of the professionals' conception of understanding activity and work in these context that diverges from the therapeutic conception, demonstrating practices suited to psychosocial rehabilitation and how they have been advocating for a policy of social inclusion via work.

It points to the importance and need for new studies that show how aspects of occupational therapy practice in this context have contributed to the field with both theoretical and practical tools.

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