An exploration of the meaning of occupation to people who seek asylum in the United Kingdom

Key findings

Asylum – a challenging context: all participants spoke about the hardships of the asylum process which shape their experience of so much of their daily life. The occupational issues they identified acknowledged:

Doing - the value of doing was very clear, particularly in relation to work, knowledge development and engagement in altruistic occupations. The restrictions faced were of major concern.

Being – occupation was synonymous with well-being and personal value.

Belonging – individuals identified their belonging to both place and people and they explored the location of home and community, the value of relationships, family, friendships and love and the value of collectivism.

Becoming – was difficult to identify with the future uncertain and the challenge of keeping going.

- The capacity to engage was clearly evident and keenly felt by participants.
- Participants benefitted from supported engagement, particularly on first arrival and for those here alone.
- Maintaining stamina over lengthy periods proves challenging
- Any occupation was better than no occupation, but well-matched occupations gave direction and purpose and kept them feeling valued and healthy.
- Participants had a desire not only to ‘keep busy’ but also to ‘keep busy with a purpose’ and prized helping others above all other occupations.
- Each participant identified altruistic drives as the most meaningful aspects of their ‘doing’, the positive elements of their ‘being’, in the connections through ‘belonging’ and in what little they could identify to help them ‘become’.

Project aims

This study aims to add a rich and detailed personal voice to reflect the impact of asylum on everyday occupations. The study explored:

- The individual’s experience of occupation before leaving their home country, during the asylum process and (where relevant) after seeking asylum.
- The meaning given to occupation (including self-care, productivity and leisure activities) by the individual.
- What supported the individual in undertaking their chosen occupations during the asylum process, and which things acted as barriers.
- The perceived impact of experiences of occupation during asylum.

Background

Refugees are acknowledged as experiencing occupational issues – from temporary occupational disruption to prolonged exile from necessary occupational engagement (World Federation of Occupational Therapists 2012).

The transitions refugees face create a discontinuity which halts the chosen or anticipated path of their occupational life, impacting in a number of ways before, during and after their flight from their country of origin. For many individuals, occupations have been shaped by the challenges of life in their country of origin, lost in their flight to the host country and denied by the policies and process of seeking asylum (de Mojed 2010, Lee 2006, Whiteford 2005, 2000).

There is a significant link between occupation and the adjustment, integration and reconstruction necessary to manage migration, without which mastery and competency are undermined (Gupta 2013, Mondaca and Josephsson 2013, Nayar and Sterling 2013). Individuals’ capacity to access and make use of new opportunities may be an important feature of success in transition, allowing them to renegotiate ways of doing, being and belonging in their new context (Bennett et al 2012, Gupta 2013).
Methodology
This study is informed by traditional phenomenological principles and approached the data using heuristic inquiry. This involves holding a close connectedness with the research question, having openness to one’s own experience and tacit knowledge and the explicit use of intuition (Moustakas 1994). Semi-structured interviews undertaken with participants, offered the opportunity to talk and/or engage in a range of art and craft activities to facilitate discussion through informal conversational interviewing.

Ten participants were recruited purposively via local non-statutory refugee support agencies. The participants were four women and six men, ages between 25 and 45 years, from a range of African and Middle Eastern nations. Their period of stay within the United Kingdom varied from just over one year to eight years (with an average of 5 years 4 months). Their asylum status varied, from having full refugee status to being destitute and unsupported.

Recommendations and Conclusion
Occupation has enormous potential for enhancing post migratory experiences, but the choice of occupation is particularly important. People strive to move beyond simply ‘keeping busy’ to find occupations of real meaning which foster connections and purpose, and in particular feed their need to feel valued.

Occupation can encourage the necessary life skills required to grow, adapt and successfully negotiate major transition (Kerwin 2013, Whiteford and Suleman 2013). Occupations provide a route to integration and participation within the host community (Bennett et al 2012, Nayar and Sterling 2013) and allow the individual to renegotiate their cultural and personal identity in their new environment (Bennett et al 2012, Farias 2013, Nayar and Sterling 2013).

During asylum, when access to occupation is significantly restricted, people require enormous drive, resourcefulness and energy to engage, so, directing energies effectively may make better use of the scant opportunities available. If, of all options available, people gain most from altruistic occupations due to their ability to promote a sense of worth, purpose and connectedness to others, this can be harnessed to do more to promote ‘doing, being, belonging’ and even the illusive ‘becoming’.

Publications

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