Empowering Communities: 
an Occupational Therapy model to enable cohesive, sustainable Community Development

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1. Role Emerging Practice
Community Development is a growing, role emerging area for Occupational Therapy practice. Labonté (2004) defines Community Development as: ‘a process of organising and supporting community groups in identifying their health issues and developing strategies... In the process the community becomes self-reliant, allowing them to gain decision making power as a result of developed strategies and action’.

Occupational Therapy in Community Development is a complex process, where relationships are developed between services, residents and professionals. These relationships strengthen the community to affect social change. This will promote the community’s access and ability to engage in occupations.

2. Community Development and Occupational Therapy
Three areas were identified where Occupational Therapy practice can impact on and enhance health and well-being:
- Identify existing projects developed by Community Development professionals
- Use Occupational Therapy specific activity analysis skills to deconstruct the format and delivery of the projects
- Apply core skills in working with individual residents within the community in addressing their specific health needs.

The use of conceptual models of practice enables identification in gaps of occupational participation and can aid the process of implementing new strategies, projects and interventions that address these gaps.

3. Applied Frame of Reference and Approaches
There is little research to guide Occupational Therapy practice in this area, in developed countries. Therefore, principles of Community Development served as a frame of reference and Rothman and Tropman’s (1987) three approaches enhanced understanding and directed clinical reasoning processes:
1. Social Planning: external professionals take on role of advisor to community
2. Locality Development: Community Development workers bring residents together to share ideas and experiences
3. Social Action: allows empowerment of marginalised groups through redistribution of power

By understanding Community Development way of working, the idea of shared occupations rather than individual occupational needs is fundamental. Goals are not individual and therefore need to be identified by collaboration of the community, facilitating empowerment. Interventions should include preventative measures in deterring occupational injustices alongside strategies in promoting occupational justice.

4. Applied Models and Framework
In working in this setting, traditional Occupational Therapy models of practice, e.g. Model of Human Occupation (Kielhofner 2008), do not fit because of a focus on the individual as opposed to a whole community. Therefore consideration of the KAWA model (2006), developed in a collective culture, allowed a holistic perspective of the community.

Despite a broader perspective there was still a need to adapt the model to apply to a Community Development setting. The Kawa model (Lim and Iwama 2006) was adapted by making the river circular with no beginning or end point. This process allows understanding of a community within a specific context but did not integrate Occupational Therapy skills in this setting. Alongside the Community Development frame of reference and the adapted KAWA model, the Canadian Model of Client Centred Enablement (Townsend and Polatoglu 2007) ten skills were also incorporated. These include being adaptive in communication style, advocating for residents, collaborating with service providers and residents, and designing and developing projects. This comprehensive framework can be used to guide practice and remain occupationally focused when working in this setting.

5. Occupation Focused Practice in Community Development
To conclude, there is great potential for community development workers and Occupational Therapists to work alongside each other, by enhancing a community’s ability to engage in occupations in order to develop, and maintain cohesiveness, sustainability and empowerment. This can be achieved through applying community development principles, the adapted Kawa model and the Canadian Model for Client Centred Enablement’s ten skills.


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