

# OTC REFLECTION DAY 2022: TOWARDS EQUITY AND JUSTICE IN OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY

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The 2022 Occupational Therapy Canada (OTC) Reflection Day, *Focusing OTC towards Equity and Accountability*, was held virtually over two half days in June. This title was chosen with the purpose of exploring a collective response from leaders in the occupational therapy profession to the following question: “If we can’t enable equity within the profession, how are we going to enable equity for the people we serve?” (Tsang & Haque, 2022, p. 11). The intent of the Reflection Day followed from both the Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists’ (CAOT) statement “No silence in the face of inequality and injustice” (CAOT, 2020) and work completed by the Joint Position Statement (JPS) on Equity and Justice Working Group, a collaborative composed of occupational therapy representatives from our national organizations and diverse members of the occupational therapy community in Canada that identify as belonging to historically under-represented groups with diverse experiences rooted in equity and justice.

The reflection days were organized and facilitated by the JPS working group and representatives were in attendance from the Association of Canadian Occupational Therapy University Programs (ACOTUP), the Association of Canadian Occupational Therapy Regulatory Organizations (ACOTRO), the Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists (CAOT), the Alliance of Canadian Occupational Therapy Professional Associations (ACOTPA), and the Canadian Occupational Therapy Foundation (COTF). Over two days, the working group introduced the framework of social accountability and engaged representatives of our five national occupational therapy organizations in work towards commitment statements. These commitment statements will support accountability efforts within occupational therapy and are intended to accompany the final version of the JPS on Equity and Justice. This article provides an overview of the structure and content of the reflection days, outlines a synopsis of the JPS and social accountability, highlights participant reflections, and describes initial steps towards commitment statements.

## 2022 REFLECTION DAYS: STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

The first day of the workshop began by centering the voices of under-represented occupational therapists and those we collaborate with, including clients. The concept, rationale, and aim of an intersectional approach to social accountability was described, offering a frame for system-level and rights-based transformation to address inequities. Principles of social accountability were illustrated and presenters provided definitions and examples.

As part of the first day, a house was used as an analogy for occupational therapy in Canada. The initial construction of our “OT house” included moral treatment, and responding to veteran’s needs (OSOT, 2022), but embedded in the foundation are patriarchy, ableism, colonialism, and other elements of white supremacy (Hammell, 2019). As such, we have built a house that is not welcoming to all occupational therapists in Canada (Beagan et al., 2022; Valavaara, 2012; Zafran & Hazlett, 2022). Dr. Susan Mahipaul, working group co-chair, critical disability scholar, and occupational therapist shared that, “before we invite more of us in, we need to clean up our own house”. Within this analogy, rearranging the furniture, changing the curtains, or adding a fresh coat of paint, will not be enough to move towards equity and justice in our profession. Instead, restructuring requires “a multi-level reconfiguration of governance structures and mechanisms, with attendant resource redistribution, to be a home that is inclusive of, centered on, guided by, and accountable to the voices, capacities, and rights of underserved communities” (Zafran & Hazlett, 2022, p. 6).

The purpose of the second day was to encourage each organizations’ participants to engage with the principles of social accountability. Time was given to large group discussion and reflection before each occupational therapy organization met in breakout groups to consider the content and work towards commitment statements. Reflective questions provided to begin small group discussion were as follows:

**1** In your organization breakout rooms, discuss which principles of social accountability your organization applies, which ones it does not, and what could be done differently.

**2** Identify one priority of social accountability that is either a strength to build on, or a significant gap in your organization, and begin to craft a commitment statement/series of actions specific to your context.

## FOCUSING THE JPS ON EQUITY AND JUSTICE

The purpose of the upcoming JPS is “to name and redress the systemic and intertwined oppressions that lead to inequities across health, social, and economic systems, as they relate to, and can be actioned by the occupational therapy community” (CAOT, 2022, para. 2). Rooted in intersectionality and social accountability, this JPS will serve as a framework “to foster conditions that shift normative and dominant cultures, dismantle systemic barriers, repair harm, support healing, eradicate discrimination, and aspire to co-create space that allow us to promote occupational justice more equitably within the scope of occupational therapy practice” (CAOT, 2022, para. 4). With these aims in mind, the working group described social accountability and shared a draft (March 2022 version) of the JPS with the caution that modifications are expected following efforts to gather feedback from members of our professional community, particularly individuals from historically and currently under-represented groups, then from the national occupational therapy organizations, and later from the broader occupational therapy community.

## SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Social accountability was chosen by the working group as an approach that would help the profession center equity and justice. Social accountability is a concept used to promote health with a focus on priorities of under-represented citizens and the creation of more equitable systems. The World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) have been instrumental in promoting its use in medicine and international development (WHO, 2022; UNDP, 2013). The WHO describes social accountability as “an approach to governance that involves citizens, communities and civil society organizations in exacting accountability.” (WHO, 2022, para. 3). Social accountability aligns with other concepts including social determinants of health and structural competency by naming the causal link between social “upstream” factors and what happens “downstream” to the health of individuals, families, and communities (Metz & Hansen, 2014). Central to social accountability initiatives are the concepts of participation, transparency, and accountability (Grandvionnet et al., 2015). In an accountable approach, organizations are answerable to citizens and citizens have capacity to enforce promised actions (Grandvionnet et al., 2015).

## LIVING SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY

The working group introduced reflexive questions to promote the integration of social accountability approaches. These questions were developed by Dr. Hiba Zafran and relate to guiding principles for social accountability. For example, one of the principles

guiding the strategies for social accountability included in the JPS upholds a commitment to ethical principles and practices. This element illustrates how advancing health equity through social accountability supports our moral obligation to prioritize the health, well-being, and human rights of underserved and under-represented people and communities. For each principle, including this one, an example from everyday practice was provided by a working group member. The occupational therapy representatives were asked to reflect on the following questions: What are the explicit vs implicit ethical priorities of your organization? Which policies, resources and processes currently exist in your organization to identify and act on the priorities of underserved groups? Additional reflexive questions can be found in Table 1. These questions align with social accountability priorities of participation, transparency, and accountability.

**Table 1:**  
*Reflexive questions supporting the development of social accountability*

- **What are the explicit vs implicit ethical priorities of your organization?**
- **Which policies, resources, and processes currently exist in your organization to identify and act on the priorities of underserved groups?**
- **Do your expectations of time and performance conform to oppressive and ableist or empowering and trauma-informed strategies?**
- **Are there third-party mechanisms in place to evaluate alleged harms?**
- **What fiscal and resource redistribution is required to formally include under-represented groups within your governance structures and equity initiatives in safe, reciprocal, compensated, and valued ways?**

(Zafran, 2022)

## REFLECTIONS

Opportunities for reflections and comments were provided during both days and participants took time to share concerns and listen to responses provided both by occupational therapy representatives and the JPS working group. A few participants shared that they experienced fear or anxiety about having the right words and/or wondering if they should volunteer opinions if they identify as white and privileged within Canadian society. Some participants also voiced concerns about how this work is going to connect with front line occupational therapists, and how to support occupational therapists with the challenges of trying to advance equity within large health systems. Participants highlighted the importance of cultural humility and confirmed that potential resources such as tool kits and a JPS companion guide would support knowledge translation.

Revisiting the analogy of an OT house was helpful during reflections. One participant shared that she was “fixated” on the kind of house that occupational therapy has built. The group discussed the “bricks” or “gems” that we need to keep in our house as we restructure. She shared that “we’re going to break things down but that doesn’t mean we are going to throw everything away, we want to keep the good things, we want to keep the best of what we do and build on that” (occupational therapy representative, personal communication, June 20, 2022) and another added that “we need to keep those gems and find them and use them and actually decorate our house with them again because they are very important” (occupational therapy representative, personal communication, June 20, 2022). Hiba, as a member of the working group, encouraged participants to identify aspects of their organization that fit with an ethical commitment to equity, rights, and social accountability. She suggests that when organizations are looking for “gems” they should ask the question: “does this align with the ethical commitment? If so, we’re keeping it, we’re loving it, we’re putting it up front” (Zafran, personal communication, June 20, 2022).

## REFLECTION AND ACTION: COMMITMENT STATEMENTS

The reflection days provided occupational therapy representatives with an opportunity to begin to develop commitment statements that are meant to accompany the JPS. Participants shared ideas they are already considering to advance equity within their organizations such as focusing on increased representation and inclusion. The days also provided time for participants to reflect on the presented content and their own organizations. As one group discussed, there are multiple concepts held within social accountability and the group wishes to question: “do we understand them and if so, how are we operationalizing them and what information is missing that we need to find out” (occupational therapy representative, personal communication, June 20, 2022). Groups considered areas within their organizations that could be addressed by commitment statements and how to incorporate both short-term and long-term change while seeking, as is encouraged within social accountability, to “deepen and extend the existing good practices” (UNDP, 2013, p. 8).

## CONCLUSION

OTC Day 2022 centered social accountability in efforts towards equity and justice for occupational therapy in Canada and provided opportunities to consider how social accountability can be enacted within our national occupational therapy organizations. The commitment statements that will emerge and subsequent work by each of the organizations will support our OT house becoming a home. These efforts provide momentum towards equity for the profession and equity for all people we encounter, interact with, and serve during collaborative relationship-focused practices.

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