



OT PRACTICE DOCUMENT: EQUITY & JUSTICE

This document focuses on the role of occupational therapy in equity and justice. For more specific details on how to enact social accountability in occupational therapy, please review the *Toward Equity and Justice: Enacting an Intersectional approach to Social Accountability in Occupational Therapy*¹ Joint Position Statement.

EQUITY & JUSTICE IN OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY

Equity refers to the fair allocation of resources by considering systemic oppression and differences in an individual's needs or abilities. The profession of occupational therapy acknowledges that colonial, historical, systemic, and intertwined oppressions limit equitable access to the resources, opportunities, and supports that clients need to access occupations of their choice². To advance equity, occupational therapists should use processes that involve meaningful and inclusive participation, transparency, and accountability.

Relatedly, **occupational justice** refers to “the fulfillment of the right for all people to engage in the occupations that they need to survive, define as meaningful, and that contribute positively to their own well-being and the well-being of their communities.”⁴ Systemic oppression, which disproportionately affects marginalized groups, create occupational injustice.

Occupational justice requires occupational rights for all to⁴:

- **Participate in a range of occupations** that support survival, health, and well-being so that populations, communities, families, and individuals can flourish and realize their potential.
- **Choose occupations** without pressure, force, coercion, or threats but with acknowledgement that with choice comes responsibility for other people, lifeforms, and the planet.
- **Freely engage in necessary and chosen occupations** without risk to safety, human dignity, or equity.

THE ROLE OF OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY IN EQUITY & JUSTICE

At all levels of practice, and in all contexts, occupational therapists are called to:

- Form authentic, inclusive, and intentional collaborations with all who would benefit from occupational therapy services, including individuals receiving services and those who need/have a right to services but do not have access to them;
- Recognize and understand how different forms of oppression can intersect and compound, leading to unique challenges and experiences for individuals;
- Confront oppressions in an intersectional manner;
- Advocate for clients' occupational rights; and
- Recognize and respond to structural causes of social determinants of poor health, and consequently, occupational injustice.

Informed by an intersectional framework for social accountability, occupational therapy must assume responsibility for its actions and actively contribute to societal transformations that promote equity and justice. Participation in decision-making, transparency, and accountability are required to effectively exercise social accountability¹. To advance equity and justice, occupational therapy holds a role across micro, meso, and macro levels^{1,3,5}:

Micro Individual and therapist factors

- Engaging in critical reflexivity to bring awareness about positionality and the perspective brought into each therapeutic relationship.
- Considering how the therapist's practice can embody respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility.
- Striving to have cultural humility and culturally safer practices.
- Drawing on evidence-informed strategies to empower clients to be able to fulfill their occupational goals by, for example, educating clients on strategies to manage negative social stigma.
- Witnessing client's experiences when they report feeling unheard, discriminated against, and oppressed.



OT PRACTICE DOCUMENT: EQUITY & JUSTICE

- Recognizing that occupations hold different meanings for different people and that they are performed differently from person to person.
- Putting our normative judgements aside and recognizing that there is a dark side of occupations⁶. As occupational beings, clients will have diverse occupations, not just “positive” and “good” occupations.
- Engaging in a trauma-informed practice.

Meso Physical, socio-cultural, and community

- Working with clients to co-create community-level occupational therapy programs to address community members' occupational needs and address violations of occupational rights.
- Identifying and addressing barriers that affect a client's participation in occupations and advocating/mobilizing for community-level changes.
- Educating partners on the relationship between social determinants of health, systemic oppression, and participation in occupation.

Macro Policies and government

- Modifying organizational processes and policies so that they consider clients' circumstances and environmental barriers to accessing care.
- Collaborating with other disciplines, professions, marginalized groups, policy makers, and community organizations to effect sustainable changes that promote participation.
- Reviewing organizational policies to conform with anti-oppressive and trauma informed approaches, as well as gender-affirmative language.
- Advocating for changes to policies that create oppression at the systems level, including increasing representation and diversification within the occupational therapy profession.

REFERENCES

1. Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists, Association of Canadian Occupational Therapy Regulatory Organizations, & Association of Canadian Occupational Therapy University Programs. (2024). Joint position statement – Toward equity and justice: Enacting an intersectional approach to social accountability in occupational therapy. Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists. https://caot.ca/document/8179/Toward%20Equity%20and%20Justice_JPS_EN_V4.pdf
2. Hammell, K. (2020). Making choices from the choices we have: The contextual-embeddedness of occupational choice. *Canadian Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 87. 400-411. DOI: 10.1177/0008417420965741
3. College of Occupational Therapists of Ontario. (2022). Culture, Equity and Justice in Occupational Therapy Practice. https://www.coto.org/docs/default-source/culture-equity-justice/coto-culture-equity-and-justice-in-occupational-therapy-en.pdf?sfvrsn=4392a2c6_16
4. World Federation of Occupational Therapists. (2019). Occupational therapy and human rights. <https://wfot.org/resources/occupational-therapy-and-human-rights>
5. Billard, A., Dallman, A., Carroll, A., Lee, B., & Szendrey, S. (2020). Doing occupational justice: A central dimension of everyday occupational practice. *Canadian Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 87. DOI: 10.1177/0008417419898930
6. Twinley, R. (2021). *Illuminating the Dark Side of Occupation*. London: Routledge

All Occupational Therapy Practice Documents have been developed and reviewed in collaboration with diverse occupational therapists with lived experience and expertise in the respective areas of practice. For any feedback, contact practice@caot.ca.