

Commentary on Articulating the form, function, and meaning of drug using in the Philippines from the lens of morality and work ethics (Sy, Bontje, Ohshima, & Kiepek, 2020)

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ABSTRACT

In this invited commentary we respond to Sy, Bontje, Ohshima, and Kiepek's (2020) article that sought to articulate how drug use, as a 'non-sanctioned' occupation, should be understood in relation to the context within which it occurs; specifically, they consider the distinct historical, cultural, and socially situated values within which drug using in the Philippines occurs. We advocate for a collaborative approach that draws on the interdisciplinary value that occupational science can afford, in order to support the establishment of a comprehensive occupational perspective. Further, we consider this work in relation to Twinley's concept 'the dark side of occupation', upholding that an occupational perspective of drug use is crucial.

Keywords:

Drug using, Philippines, Occupational perspective, Occupational justice, War on drugs

Our starting point in responding to Sy, Bontje, Ohshima, and Kiepek's (2020) article is to assert our stance, which is that occupational scientists should target their exploration of human occupation, in all its forms, functions, meanings, and complexities. We also note the increasing number of publications regarding occupations that challenge the pervasive belief

in the link between health and occupation, which marks the growth of occupational science and therapy research and scholarly activity, especially over the past decade (e.g. Clarke, 2019; Kay & Brewis, 2016; Nhunzvi, Galvaan, & Peters, 2017). The enthusiasm for doing so, to us, can be easily explained: The reality, as Sy and colleagues illustrate, is that people do things that are not always healthy, or that may be perceived to be somewhat dull, uninteresting, complex, risky, damaging, deviant, and even just downright “messy” (Kantartzis, 2019; Twinley, 2017) or “dirty” (Ralph, 2019).

The opportunities an occupational science perspective can provide (on any given occupation) includes affording the capacity to explore these occupations from a truly occupationally based, centred, and focused theoretical perspective, and to embrace prospects of conducting research that furthers knowledge and understanding. In this, we acknowledge that disciplines such as criminal/health/forensic psychology, criminology, sociology, and social/cultural anthropology have been exploring the human lived experience in a more encompassing and wide-ranging way for years. For instance, anthropology, which is concerned with the study of human differences, arose in the late 19th century when the philosopher, Karl Marx [1818-1883], and the neurologist, Sigmund Freud [1856-1939], were questioning which cultures were ‘civilised’ and which were ‘primitive’ within their respective work, as the following quote illustrates:

In their search for a comprehensive understanding of humankind, anthropologists emphasize the need to look at the full range of human variety, to study people in all parts of the world, at all times, and at all levels of society. Anthropology's hallmark has been gathering data on nonliterate societies, peasants, common people, and others who seldom have been objects of scientific study. (Hiebert, 1983, p. 21)

Of course, occupational science is and needs to remain a “conceptually distinct field of inquiry” (Clark et al., 1991, p. 304). However, when starting to pursue knowledge of occupations such as drug use, neighbouring disciplines can assist occupational scientists to report on their substrates, form, function, and meaning, and to do so in consideration of contextual and cultural factors (such as the personal, immediate, sociocultural, historical, political, legal, economic, institutional and environmental context and associated traditions, morals, beliefs, values, customs, rituals, and laws). Certainly, something shared by all is the

agreement that “human action can be rendered meaningful only by relating it to the contexts in which it takes place. The meaning and consequences of a behaviour pattern will vary with the contexts in which it occurs” (Gouldner, 1955, p. 12).

The moralisation of drug use

Sy, Bontje, Ohshima, and Kiepek (2020) highlight that drug use is not conceptualised as a unified construct within the occupational science literature. Beyond this, there is a need for empirical evidence, rather than a construct based upon subjective ideas or theories. Sy et al. have provided relevant scholarship that can help to establish a coherent body of scientific knowledge upon which to build. This undoubtedly comes with its challenges, because the moralisation of drug use means people who transgress moral norms are stigmatised and marginalised (Room, 2005). Much like many other transgressive occupations that are not, and cannot, be included in the traditional understanding of what constitutes occupation, drug use is conceptualised by individuals and in groups in various ways. Examples of this are provided by Drápela, Huidobro, Núñez, and Palacios’s (2008) investigation of burglary (in Chile) and Pereira, Bardí, and Serrata Malfitano’s (2014) report of drug use (in Brazil), which outline complex understandings of the identified occupations from the perspective of those engaging in it. While increased vulnerability and risk are clearly perceived, there is also a sense of self-efficacy, social role, and an opportunity for social inclusion (Drápela et al., 2008; Pereira et al., 2014).

As presented by Sy and colleagues (2020), in the particular case of the Philippines, the punishments and deaths associated with the War on Drugs can be seen as an oppressive governmental response to drug use. Across many societies, there is a view that ‘the criminal’ is socially constructed by selective decisions about which crimes to prosecute and which criminals to punish (Western, 2006). Drug user activists argue that the purpose of criminalising drug use is to stigmatise drug users; constructed this way, drug use is seen as harmful, antisocial, socially unacceptable, shameful, and immoral (International Network of People *who* Use Drugs [INPUD], 2015). Conceivably, these are not characteristics that facilitate discussion of drug use as an important, useful, prioritised, or necessary occupation in a person’s life. For instance, shame is said to feed into addiction as it induces unconscious beliefs in the person using drugs, such as that they are not important, a bad person, or a failure (Lancer, 2018).

Terminological debate: The dark side of occupations or unsanctioned occupation

Twinley (2013, 2017) and Twinley and Addidle (2012) used the metaphor of the dark side of the moon to point to occupations that remain unexplored, both those simply left in the shadows and those considered out of the realms of occupational science analyses; all these occupations remain beyond existing knowledge. Conceptualised this way, many aspects of people's subjective experience of occupation warrant illumination through, for instance, being examined in research and addressed in practice. Twinley and Addidle sought to trigger consideration of hidden, less known, understood, or under-explored occupations that are important, or hold meaning or purpose, or are necessary for some reason; this ranges from those which are perceived to be very mundane, customary, or ordinary, to the atypical, unique, and extraordinary. Whatever their form, the aim is that more occupations must be revealed and explored—immune from value or moral judgements and free from simplistic categorisation—in order to enhance understanding of human occupation and gain a richer and authentic understanding of people's experience. In drawing attention to neglected and rejected occupations, Twinley's intention was not to express contempt or disapproval regarding people's subjective experience/s of occupation – indeed, it was quite the opposite of this misunderstanding and misinterpretation.

Sy et al. (2020), drawing from the work of Kiepek, Beagan, Laliberte Rudman, and Phelan (2018), employed the alternate term 'non-sanctioned' occupations. In the United Kingdom, where the first author of this commentary is based, the word 'sanction' is predominantly understood in the formal sense, to relate to "an official order... taken against a country in order to make it obey international law [or] a strong action taken in order to make people obey a law or rule, or a punishment given when they do not obey" (Sanction, 2019). Further, increasingly, benefits (or social welfare) sanctions are discussed, which are penalties imposed on people who are seen not to meet requirements for being a claimant of benefits from the government. And of course, sanction is an auto-antonym as it has opposite meanings—it can be an approval or a punishment. For the second author of this commentary, as a Latin American and double immigrant, the idea of sanction appears closely related to the legal system (which is certainly contextualised). In the case of many occupations identified as 'non-sanctioned,' it is actually the social system, through the unwritten rules of what creates the form and meaning of the occupation, that does the sanctioning.

Engaging in drug use has intricate and complex meanings, which Sy et al. (2020) characterise as “positive and less positive” (p. 4). Additionally, whilst drug use might be sanctioned by law (and therefore made illegal), it might be sanctioned (as in approved of) or even promoted in the social group/s in which each individual person moves. For these reasons, it is not possible to position an occupation along a sanctioned/non-sanctioned continuum because this language has normative limits by examining occupations through an arbitrary positive/negative binary; sanctioned and non-sanctioned denotes that occupations either comply, or not, with social norms and formal or informal forces of control. By their very nature, occupations defy categorisation and are idiosyncratic; they cannot, therefore, be subject to binary interpretations. Understanding occupations within context is crucial— influencing this consideration by introducing language that places restrictions on understanding is limiting. If a term is desired, we suggest the need for an alternative and more neutral term by which the meaning and purpose of occupations can be considered, addressing the complexity, contexts, and uniqueness of occupations.

Concluding remarks

Occupational science has illuminated using drugs as an occupation that has varied meanings to individuals and groups. Within the context of the Philippines, its impact is both upon the individual’s subsequent experience of occupations as well as upon the wider economic and social agenda. We conclude by rebelling against Berterö’s (2016) advice that in a commentary you “do not include general praise for the focal article”. We do appreciate that colleagues within the field are navigating no doubt difficult paths to pursue such complex and distinctive work. And by doing this, we keep in mind the advice from Paul Freund, a jurist who indicated that “the Court should never be influenced by the weather of the day but inevitably they will be influenced by the climate of the era” (Weinberger, 2013, p.). Occupational scientists’ understanding of drug use will be affected by the climate of the era. In this era of complexity, occupational science must continuously refine its skills to identify, address, and respond to challenging and evolving climate conditions.

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