



OT-Europe Interest Group Displaced
Persons: Call-to-Action for Occupational
Therapy Research, Practice, and Education
Work with Displaced Persons

Nadine Blankvoort, MOT MSc. GH, Temple Moore MSc. OT, Kim Roos, MSc. OT, Sandra Schiller, PhD



Occupational Therapy
Europe

Introduction

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), over 71.4 million people worldwide were suffering the consequences of displacement by the end of 2017 (UNHCR, 2018). For displaced people[1], fleeing their homes is a desperate means to escape violence or threat caused by national and international conflict; persecution due to their religious or ethnic identification; gender, sexual orientation, illness or disability; or natural and man-made factors including food insecurity, environmental degradation and economic insecurity in home countries (European Parliament, 2017; UNHCR, 2018). World conflicts (man-made and natural) combined with current international policy and trends in the global economic system, force groups of people to migrate within their current country, where they become internally displaced persons (IDPs), or across international boundaries, where they become asylum seekers or illegal immigrants (UNHCR, 2018).

The World Federation of Occupational Therapists released a position paper in 2012 where it highlighted:

Occupational therapists are positioned to play a significant role in enabling displaced people to bridge former and current contexts and meet human needs, human rights and health through participation in valued and meaningful occupations. (WFOT, 2012)

Throughout the history of occupational therapy (OT) and occupational science (OS), there has been a recognition of the value that the occupation-focused approach brings to the context of displacement, acknowledging that the initial conflict and escape, together with the subsequent process of seeking asylum and pursuing resettlement introduce significant disruptions to daily routines and roles (Huot, Kelly, & Park, 2016; Trimboli & Taylor, 2016). These disruptions in occupations occur across life areas including: work, education, life skills, social roles, identity, community engagement and well-being (Bennett, Scornaiencki, Brzozowski, Denis, & Magalhaes, 2012; Berr, Marotzki, & Schiller, 2018; Huot et al., 2016; Trimboli & Taylor, 2016). The ability to engage in meaningful occupation is restricted or supported by social resources, government policies, social stigma and the established humanitarian response, as well as internal factors such as mental health issues, trauma and cultural navigation (Crawford, Turpin, Nayar, Steel, & Durand, 2016; Morville & Erlandsson, 2017; Steindl, Winding, & Runge, 2008). Barriers have the potential to persist as long-term obstacles to re-establishing occupation are sanctioned or ignored by government and social systems. Research shows that a long-term imbalance of occupational behaviour can trigger serious health and social problems (Steindl et al., 2008; Suto, 2009).

Occupational therapists recognize the importance of meaningful occupations in promoting mental and physical well-being, and in minimizing the negative health impacts associated with occupational deprivation. Occupational therapists have skills in assessing the factors impacting engagement, and how such factors present themselves in the micro, meso and macro context. Through effective analysis, occupational therapists develop collaborative person- or community-centered interventions while advocating for those whose engagement is hindered the most.

Recognizing these skills, there is also the recognition that many theories, models, assessments and interventions in occupational therapy are shaped by Western norms and values, as this is where the majority of the popular promoted literature in occupational therapy originates (Hammell, 2011; Iwama, 2005). We as a profession must recognize this, and recognize that the displaced persons we aim to work with as a majority do not stem from these same cultural systems (Blankvoort, Arslan, Tonoyan, Damour, & Mpabanzi, 2018). Therefore, there are important steps that need to be taken in the profession to appropriately join the response towards displacements and the specific needs of displaced persons from a clinical and socio-political perspective.

Aim of This Call-to-Action

The main aim of this call-to-action is to position and further develop the work of occupational therapists, educators and researchers with displaced persons¹. Recognizing that working with this distinct group is a (re)-emerging² practice within occupational therapy, this paper aims to make clear recommendations for what is required within the occupational therapy profession in order to respond in a culturally and politically sensitive manner which promotes and supports effective interventions and education in this context.

European Context of Displaced Persons

When reviewing the context of displaced persons it is strikingly clear that this is a complex and dynamic field. Although founding European Union principles include a united policy on mobility of people and economic trade between countries (European Commission, 2018), the European countries each have different immigration policies forcing the refugee influx to be managed by

¹ The authors recognize the diversity in terminology used in this area including refugees, asylum seekers, migrants, forced migrants, economic migrants, among others. This paper uses the term *displaced persons* as a term which recognizes the important differences and differing experiences between these groups, but uses one term for the purpose of discussion.

² Occupational therapy as a professional has historical roots in the Settlement Movement with the profession emerging out of work in Hull House in Chicago with newly arrived migrants, and other marginalized groups.

independent national governments (Bordignon & Moriconi, 2017; Eurostat, 2018). Political deals such as the Dublin Agreement and the Turkey-EU one-to-one deal have resulted in the southern and eastern European countries shouldering the burden of the most asylum applications (Bordignon & Moriconi, 2017) and a situation which presents difficulties in ensuring the human rights of asylum applicants are being maintained (Bordignon & Moriconi, 2017; European Council, 2016). This complexity is an important characteristic of the climate in which professionals must attempt to navigate if they aim to work in this field. In addition to the importance of understanding the global and EU level trends in policy, special attention must be made to comprehend the local context and how it impacts on the lives of displaced persons.

For a full analysis of the current approaches in occupational therapy with displaced persons in Europe, please see the report document entitled: OT-Europe Interest Group Displaced Persons: Report Occupational Therapy with Displaced Persons (Blankvoort, Moore, Roos & Schiller, 2018).

Call-to-Action:

The following aims to position the practice, education and research within OT to professionally and appropriately join the response to arrivals and settlement of displaced persons in Europe. These statements were created following a thorough analysis of literature and practice examples, as well as interviews with OT's working in this field. The statements are directed towards key stakeholders in occupational therapy practice, education and resources. If we as occupational therapists, occupational scientists, educators, researchers and students aim to continue to join the response to human displacement in Europe, then important actions must be taken. It is the position of OT-Europe Interest Group on Displaced Persons that:

Occupational therapists and occupational scientists are experts in the (re)enablement of participation, facilitating clients to overcome barriers present in their experienced environments. This unique perspective, with an aim of meaningful occupational engagement, can be critical throughout the refugee process, from first arrival to the period of waiting for asylum decisions, and onward through the process of integration and social cohesion. The OT-Europe Interest Group recognizes the detrimental impact on health due to past traumatic experiences, institutionalized refugee accommodation, restriction of movement, lack of perspective for future roles and occupations, and challenges in building new lives in a new environment. Occupational therapists use empowerment, participatory and client-centred approaches to work with marginalized populations, and evidence supports the profession's ability to give beneficial services to refugees in the realms of health, well-being and integration.

Furthermore, it is the position of OT-Europe that there are important steps which need to be taken which will add to the process of professionalization of OT.

1. Education

1.1 Education curriculums are currently insufficient in preparing students to work in this field. To respond to different fundamentally transformative developments in society, we must educate future occupational therapists to critically analyze and understand the issues that drive migration and that impact the lives of individuals once they have arrived in a new country, especially when discussing forced displacement.

1.2 Curriculums must embrace the complexity of human displacement by providing a specific focus on political awareness and political reasoning, understanding of socio-economic, political and cultural systems and their influence on occupational engagement, a depth of understanding of occupational deprivation, introduction to legislation and laws specific to the host country setting, inter-professional cooperation with social care professions, diversity awareness and communication skills, and critical analysis of tools in the profession and problem-based learning approaches.

1.3 Recognizing that the majority of OT projects are currently stemming from academia and student fieldwork (see full report), it is imperative that educators have access to support and training in order to initiate projects with displaced persons and to adequately support students in the field.

1.4 Recognizing the lack of diversity within the OT profession, educational institutions have an obligation to make efforts to diversify their student and teacher body. Actively seeking partnership and recruitment opportunities for displaced persons to study OT provides a new foundation for diverse perspectives within the profession.

2. Research

2.1 Research on occupational therapy assessments, interventions and approaches with displaced persons are lacking, especially specific to the European context. A detailed and theoretically-based research agenda must be established to begin to fill these gaps. Interdisciplinary research cooperation outside of health care research will ensure comprehensive exploration of the occupational means to alleviate ailments in this population.

2.2 Researchers must think critically about what outcome measures will be included in research and where western conceptions of normality of functioning are being imposed upon displaced persons. Creative and participatory research methodologies allow for the refugee story to remain central throughout the research process, using interpreters to enable exploration in native language.

2.3 Research within OT and OS needs to adopt participatory-based critical research methodologies which allow for links between global trends and the local occupational

experiences, while supporting a transformative/emancipatory social agenda based on a critical understanding of entitlement to (paid) occupations and a new evaluation of the value of diverse occupations in society.

3. Professional Practice

3.1 Many professional OT organizations in Europe are not yet actively exploring or advocating for the role of OT with displaced persons. OTs are currently forging ahead of their professional organizations by starting the work on the ground (see practice map on website). Professional organizations have a role to recognize, support and publicly advocate for displaced persons and the potential role of OT within this population group.

3.2 Platforms need to be created to provide knowledge and resource sharing between professional working in this field.

3.3 OTs working in practice need to be critical of the assessment and interventions they are using and the culture-specific barriers they may hold. Assessments which embrace non-western views of normality and function are needed as an addition to the portfolio of OT to allow for more diversity, and therefore effectiveness, in approaches.

3.4 Collaborations must be made on a professional organization level to other professions working in this field, recognizing the inter-disciplinary approaches which are required to address the complex issues associated with forced displacement.

3.5 Practitioners must have access to profession-specific and inter-professional training programs to help them to work professionally, appropriately and adequately within this field.

3.6 OTs have a valuable contribution to make in this field because of their understanding of the refugee's context and its impact on participation. This understanding of context must be broad in order to correctly understand the political, historical and policy aspects impacting the functioning of the groups and individuals with which we work.

Template Position Paper for Professional Organizations

Recognizing the importance of having a position statement to use as a tool for advocacy and communication *outside* the OT profession while also wanting to allow for specific attention for the complexity of the situations within and between European countries, the authors of this paper have provided an accompanying document which is a template document for a further position paper. This template document can be used by national organizations in order to adopt and draft their own position paper on OT with displaced persons.

References:

- Bennett, K. M., Scornaiencki, J. M., Brzozowski, J., Denis, S., & Magalhaes, L. (2012). Immigration and its impact on daily occupations: A scoping review. *Occupational Therapy International*, 19(4), 185–203. <https://doi.org/10.1002/oti.1336>
- Berr, K., Marotzki, U., & Schiller, S. (2018). Broadening the understanding of employment and identity of Syrian women living in Germany: A biographical study. *Journal of Occupational Science*, 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2018.1540356>
- Blankvoort, N., Arslan, M., Tonoyan, A., Damour, A. Q., & Mpabanzi, L. (2018). A new you: A collaborative exploration of occupational therapy's role with refugees. *World Federation of Occupational Therapists Bulletin*, 74(2), 92–98. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14473828.2018.1526560>
- Bordignon, M., & Moriconi, S. (2017). *The case for a common European refugee policy*. (Policy Contribution No. 8). Bruegel: Catholic University of Milan. Retrieved from <http://bruegel.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/PC-08-2017.pdf>
- Crawford, E., Turpin, M., Nayar, S., Steel, E., & Durand, J.-L. (2016). The structural-personal interaction: Occupational deprivation and asylum seekers in Australia. *Journal of Occupational Science*, 23(3), 321–338. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2016.1153510>
- European Commission. (2018). Common European Asylum System [Text]. Retrieved 27 September 2018, from https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/asylum_en

European Council. (2016). EU-Turkey statement, 18 March 2016 [Press release]. Retrieved 22 September 2018, from <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/18/eu-turkey-statement/>

European Parliament. (2017, June 30). Europe's migration crisis | News | European Parliament. Retrieved 27 September 2018, from <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/society/20170629STO78631/europe-s-migration-crisis>

Eurostat. (2018). Asylum statistics - Statistics Explained. Retrieved 27 September 2018, from https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Asylum_statistics

Hammell, K. W. (2011). Resisting theoretical imperialism in the disciplines of occupational science and occupational therapy. *British Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 74(1), 27–33. <https://doi.org/10.4276/030802211X12947686093602>

Huot, S., Kelly, E., & Park, S. J. (2016). Occupational experiences of forced migrants: A scoping review. *Australian Occupational Therapy Journal*, 63(3), 186–205. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1440-1630.12261>

Iwama, M. K. (2005). Occupation as a Cross-Cultural Construct. In *Occupation & Practice in Context* (pp. 242–253). Sydney, Edinburgh, London, New York, Philadelphia, St Louis, Toronto: Elsevier Churchill Livingstone.

Morville, A. L., & Erlandsson, L. K. (2017). Morville, A & Erlandsson, L. (2017) Occupational deprivation of asylum seekers. In N. Pollard & D. Sakellariou (Eds.), *Occupational therapies without borders* (pp. 433-440). New York:Elsevier. Published, 01/2017. In N.

Pollard & D. Sakellariou (Eds.), *Occupational Therapies Without Borders* (pp. 433–440).
Elsevier.

Steindl, C., Winding, K., & Runge, U. (2008). Occupation and participation in everyday life:
Women's experiences of an Austrian refugee camp. *Journal of Occupational Science*,
15(1), 36–42. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2008.9686605>

Suto, M. (2009). Compromised careers: The occupational transition of immigration and
resettlement. *Work*, *32*(4), 417–429. <https://doi.org/10.3233/WOR-2009-0853>

Trimboli, C., & Taylor, J. (2016). Addressing the occupational needs of refugees and asylum
seekers. *Australian Occupational Therapy Journal*, *63*(6), 434–437.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/1440-1630.12349>

UNHCR. (2018). *Global report 2017*. Retrieved from Retrieved from
http://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/gr2017/pdf/GR2017_English_Full_lowres.pdf

WFOT. (2012). World Federation of Occupational Therapists Position Paper Human
Displacement.