

THE MEANING OF OCCUPATION FOR A PERSON'S LIFE AFTER SPINAL CORD INJURY

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Absrtract. *Studies show that people with spinal cord injuries can lead satisfying and fulfilling lives despite permanent disabilities, with good environmental support and they are social inclusion. Occupations brings people empowerment, health and well-being. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate the meaning and value of occupation for a person after spinal cord injury. In the case study, Mr. Ivan after spinal cord injury, five in-depth interviews were conducted. Additional data were selected using the triangulation method. Five topics emerged from the analysis: occupational identity before the injury, occupational identity after the injury, occupational competence, occupational adaptation and environment. Positive personal belives and goal-setting after trauma were key to occupational adaptation. After injury, Mr. Ivan found an occupation that forms a large part of his everyday life. The most important occupation for him is editing the website of the **Slovenian Paraplegic Association**, which represents his occupational identity. It brings him value, meaning, self-actualisation, belonging and social inclusion. Patterns performance of occupation and his routines maintain his health. Environmental adaptations and a number of aids, positive beliefs and effective functioning contribute to achieving occupational competence. In other research, occupation has also given people the opportunity to show what they are capable of. Achieving goals and strong intrinsic motivation have been shown to be important for a life satisfaction. The case study of Mr. Ivan is an inspiring confirmation of the meaning of occupation for a fullfilled life, regardless of high motor disability.*

Key words: *occupation identity, occupational adaptation, support environment, satisfaction*

Introduction

A spinal cord injury changes a person's life forever, but it doesn't mean they don't have the chance to live a good and fulfilling life. People with spinal cord injury cope with many challenges in their daily lives, including limitations in functioning, the onset of secondary outcomes, health complications and reduced quality of life [1]. Misconceptions, negative attitudes and architectural barriers, especially to mobility, exclude many people from full participation in society [2]. With the right treatment and rehabilitation, a person has the chance to go to school, get a job, build a family [3]. Spinal cord injury causes changes in a person's occupational identity [4] as it reflects their abilities and health [5] due to impairments in functioning. The conection between occupation and occupational identity is so strong that the inability to perform an occupation is damaging to one's identity, and the other way; occupation can also

be a means of re-creating occupational identity [6]. Occupations are all activities that have meaning or purpose for a person in everyday life. They represent a central meaning for the person, which affects their health, identity and sense of competence [7]. John Dewey, define occupation as a relational action through which context, along with habit and creativity are coordinated toward a particular outcome [8].

Model of Human Occupation is an occupational therapy conceptual model focused on the occupation of the individual. It includes four elements (volition, patterns of performance, capacity for performance, and environment) and explains the individual's performance of the occupation as a result of a dynamic and reciprocal interaction between the elements. The model explains how a person with a disability becomes motivated to perform occupation, how habits and roles are formed to support occupation, and how all the elements integrate in the physical and social environment [9]. Occupational identity represents a person's roles, relationships, values (what we value in life), experience of self, meaning of routine, interests (what we enjoy), desires and goals, and perceptions of one's environment (what it expects and enables) [10]. Occupational competence refers to the maintenance of patterns of participation that express a person's occupational identity, e.g. participation in occupations that provide a sense of responsibility, control, satisfaction and fulfilment [11]. Occupational adaptation is defined as a positive occupational identity and relevant occupational competence built up over time [12]. Environment is defined as the specific physical, social, occupational, economic, political and cultural components of a person's circumstances [13]. Accepting a new identity is a long and complex process. Community life and material and social support that promote human autonomy contribute to this process [4].

Spinal cord injury often affects all areas of a person's functioning, and restoring the routines and skills needed for independence in activities of daily living is often the main goal of occupational therapy [14]. Occupational therapists have many opportunities to help people re-establish, rediscover and maintain their identity [10].

The aim of this paper is to present the importance of occupation in the life of a person after spinal cord injury. We will illustrate occupational identity and competence, occupational adaptation in circumstances that obstacles or supported the person's functioning after spinal cord injury.

Methods

The case study involved a 78-year-old man, 35 years after a spinal cord injury which left him tetraplegia. He was called Mr. Ivan. He lives with his wife in a house with an atrium in an urban environment. He is a father, a grandfather, one of the co-founders of the **Slovenian Paraplegic Association**, for which he still manages the website.

Data Collection and Instruments

Data were collected through in-depth interviews. We used the Occupational Performance History Interview, second version - OPHI-II, [15]. We also used triangulation to obtain additional information. Researchers use as many different sources of data as possible to study a research problem [16]. For triangulation, we also created interview guides based on the analysis of the interviews, with questions for Mr. Ivan's son, his wife and his colleague. All interviews were conducted between April and September 2022, interviews were transcribed and analysed. Significant events were presented in a Narrative Slope, which the person himself values as positive or negative [17]. The text in the interviews was deductively analysed [16]. Related concepts were grouped into categories, which were prepared in advance based on a Model of Human Occupations a person's occupation. Ethical considerations were considered and informed consent was obtained from the participants.

Results

The life story in Narrative Slope shows that Mr. Ivan had many positive events. These are mainly related to his family and his work at the Slovenian Paraplegics Association. Critical event was the spinal cord injury, in figure 1 we see a big curve pointing downwards. Mr. Ivan has had physical health problems for the last 20 years. He says he is slower than he used to be when editing and writing for the website. Mr. Ivan's life story can be characterised as regressive, as the curve of events is downward [17]. A growing number of health problems occasionally limit his ability to carry out occupations that are important to him.

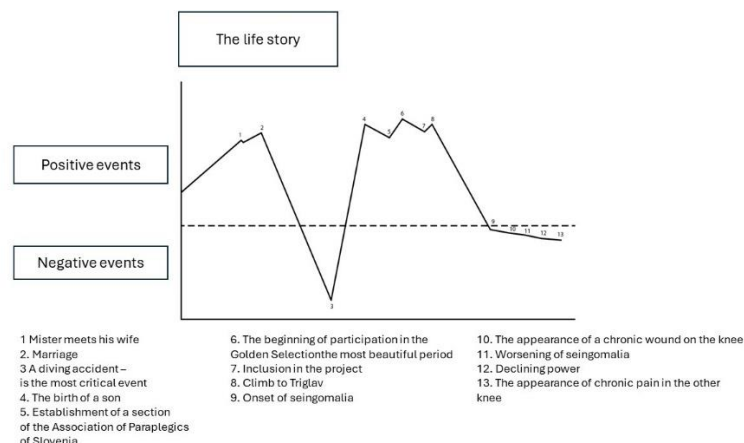


Figure 1: Ivan's Narrative Slope

The deductive analysis included the following categories: occupational identity before the injury, occupational competence before the injury, occupational adaptation, occupational identity after the injury, occupational competence after the injury and environment. Figure 2 shows the results of the deductive analysis with categories and subcategories.

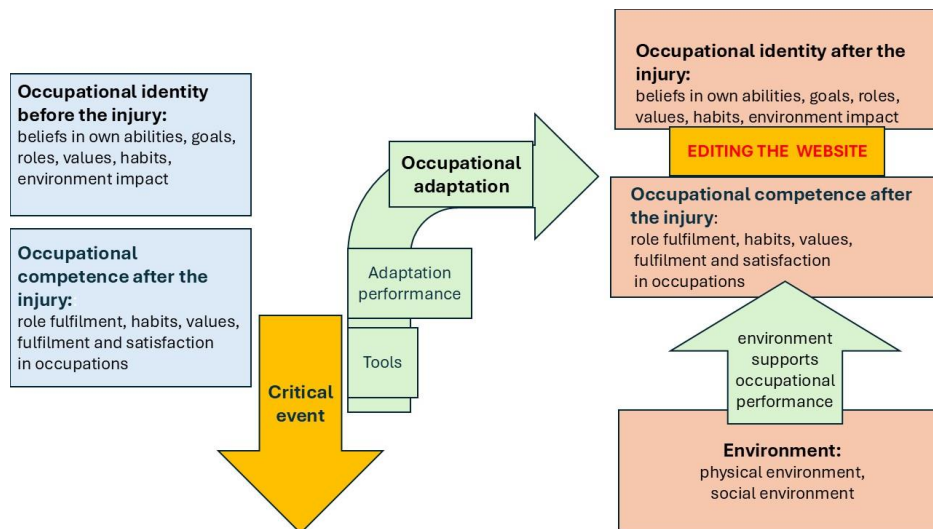


Figure 2: Results of the deductive analysis

The occupational identity before the injury shows that Mr. Ivan believed in his abilities. Work, education and family meant a lot to him. His routine was determined by work. Occupational competence before the injury is shown in successful schooling, he states: "But I was excellent throughout". He had good relations with his friends and wife, a positive attitude and volution to work, and achieved job satisfaction.

Editing the website is his most important occupation and occupational identity, as he says: "I am so busy editing the website. I am constantly active; I am very happy to work". His wife says about the importance of editing the website for him: "It brought him a lot, really. He just came to life, really".

Mr. Ivan carried out occupations that gave him a sense of responsibility, control, satisfaction and fulfilment. He achieved his goals and fulfilled his role expectations. He states, "In these given opportunities, I actually took advantage of everything that was given. I have been everywhere and achieved a lot."

Mr. Ivan has various adaptations and many devices that allow him to perform occupations. He uses one finger to type on the computer, and places the typing attachment on his hand with the help of his mouth. He also has computer equipment,

such as a trackball computer mouse, for editing web pages. When he is unable to perform an activity, he contributes by giving oral instructions.

He lives in an adapted house, his neighbourhood and the **Slovenian Paraplegic Association** are accessible and adapted for mobility, allowing him to be socially included. His social environment, family, friends and colleagues are very supportive of his occupations, he says: "They come and help.

Discussion

To understand the significance of occupation in the lives of humans and the relationship of occupation to health and wellbeing, it is useful to describe occupation as a meaningful synthesis of doing, being and belonging [18, 19, 20]. Figure 3 represents the significance of the occupation of editing a website for the life of Mr. Ivan.

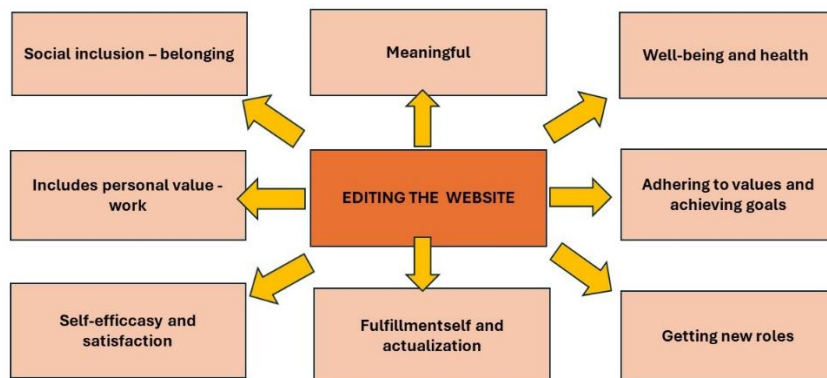


Figure 3: The significance of the occupation of editing a website for the life of Mr. Ivan

The central concept that determines the functioning of a gentleman Ivan is "doing". Even before the injury, the occupational identity included a strong volition, he believed in himself, work and relationships were an important value. This is reflected in occupational competence through occupations that bring control, achievement, satisfaction and success: schooling. After the critical event, these values and his volition guide the occupation's adaptation. Mr. Ivan is aware of his reduced capacity and therefore successfully copes with his limitations. He is looking for opportunities for his "doing, being and belonging". He decides to build an atrium house that allows him to occupational function independently, without architectural barriers, as an occupier and to be involved. He took advantage of the opportunity to act in the establishment of the association if recognized the opportunity to work. Alve et al. investigated the occupational adaptation of people after spinal cord injury in Bangladesh [21]. They state that the process of occupational adaptation is explained

as the creation of possibilities for everyday occupations and for occupational participation, or as participation in already existing occupations in an adapted way. The creation of new opportunities for occupational adaptation was achieved by the participants through problem solving, which is also a characteristic of our participants: if you have a problem, you try to solve it, if you don't find a solution, you move forward and don't give up. With the co-founders, through occupations on the association, he develops belonging and, through the editing of the website with the help of tools, he self-actualizes and achieves fulfilment. The social environment: his wife, friends, neighbours, colleagues as well as social attitudes represent his support in the rehabilitation process and a significant influence on his commitment to recovery [22]. The social environment: his wife, friends, neighbours, colleagues as well as social attitudes represent his support in the rehabilitation process and a significant influence on his commitment to recovery [22].

Editing a website creates routine and patterns for him the most. It brings him well-being, health, preserves his skills and new role. The re-establishment of roles or the acquisition of new roles allowed people to assume responsibility again and gave them the feeling that they are valued members of the family and community [21]. Satisfaction or joy requires strong intrinsic motivation and goals [23], which Mr. Ivan demonstrates through his goals (I had a family, a child) and functioning. Hence his sentence: I have achieved everything.

Conclusion

A case study of a person's functioning after a spinal cord injury is an inspiration for occupational therapy treatment and for life. It shows the meaning of occupation and the value of enabling occupation. Occupation is power. Occupational therapists are encouraged to use occupation-focused occupational therapy treatment.

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ZNAČAJ OKUPACIJA ZA ŽIVOT OSOBE NAKON POVREDE KIČMENE MOŽDINE

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Sažetak. Istraživanja pokazuju da osobe sa povredama kičmene moždine mogu voditi zadovoljavajuće i ispunjene živote uprkos trajnom invaliditetu, uz dobru podršku okruženja i socijalnu inkluziju. Okupacije omogućavaju ljudima osnaživanje, zdravlje i blagostanje. Cilj ovog rada je pokazati značaj i vrijednost okupacija za osobu nakon povrede kičmene moždine. U studiji slučaja, gospodina Ivana nakon povrede kičmene moždine, provedeno je pet dubinskih intervjua. Dodatni podaci odabrani su metodom triangulacije. Analizom je proizašlo pet kategorija: okupacioni identitet prije povrede, okupacioni identitet nakon povrede, okupaciona kompetencija, okupaciona adaptacija i okruženje. Pozitivna lična uvjerenja i postavljanje ciljeva nakon traume bili su ključni za okupacionu adaptaciju. Nakon povrede, gospodin Ivan je pronašao okupaciju koje čini veliki dio njegovog svakodnevnog života. Najvažnija okupacija za njega je uređivanje web stranice Udruženja za povrede kičmene moždine, koja predstavlja njegov okupacioni identitet. To mu donosi vrijednost, značenje, samoaktualizaciju, pripadnost i socijalnu inkluziju. Obrasci izvođenja okupacija i njegove rutine održavaju njegovo zdravlje. Prilagođavanje okruženja i brojna pomagala, pozitivna uvjerenja i efikasno funkcionisanje doprinose postizanju okupacionih kompetencija. U drugim istraživanjima, okupacije su ljudima dale priliku da pokažu za šta su sposobni. Pokazalo se da su postizanje ciljeva i snažna intrinzična motivacija važni za životno zadovoljstvo. Studija slučaja gospodina Ivana inspirativna je potvrda važnosti okupacija za ispunjen život, bez obzira na visoku motoričku onesposobljenost.

Ključne riječi: okupacioni identitet, okupaciona adaptacija, podrška okruženja, zadovoljstvo