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Finding purpose through altruism: the potential of 'doing for others' during asylum

Helen Smith

Teesside University, Middlesbrough, UK

Introduction: Refugees are increasingly acknowledged as facing significant occupational injustice, and they experience multiple barriers to finding meaningful occupational opportunities. Occupation has enormous potential for enhancing the post migratory experience, but choice of occupation is important. People strive to move beyond simply 'keeping busy' to find occupations of real meaning. Altruism is the principle or practice of doing for others, and can be expressed through, or be a motivation for, a range of occupations.

Objectives: This presentation asserts that 'doing of others' may provide opportunities for wide ranging personal, social and cultural rewards. It explores the concept of altruism and how it links with occupational choice and identity to be provided particularly meaningful opportunities.

Method: The findings presented arose as part of a study exploring the occupational experiences of people seeking asylum in the United Kingdom. This phenomenological study gathered data from ten participants through a series of ethically approved in depth interviews.

Results and implications: The study found that participants held a preference for altruistic occupations, prompted by kinship, empathy, learned behaviour and moral principles. The occupations appeared to promote connectivity, positive sense of self and a connection between past and present occupations. This work helps develop the understanding of underpinning values on occupational choice and in shaping occupational identity.

Conclusion: Altruism provides an impetus for occupations which are rich in meaning and purpose, providing individuals with opportunities to live well in the here and now, and rise above the hardship and marginalisation of asylum.