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Differentiating occupational decision-making and occupational choice

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ABSTRACT

Occupational decision-making is currently a nascent term in occupational science literature but we contend it has potential conceptual salience to the field. Occupational decision-making can be understood as a situated process through which individuals, families, or groups respond to a contextually driven cluster of opportunities and choices in order to select the occupations they will engage in. Occupational decision-making is a process that empowers people to be agentic, rather than passive, in meaningful occupational engagement over the course of a lifetime. As a phenomenon, occupational decision-making, though quotidian, remains under-investigated and poorly understood. In this paper we present the concept of occupational decision-making as illustrated through the experiences of women making career decisions after having children, which are drawn from the first author's doctoral research. We propose that occupational decision-making can extend current understandings of the concept of occupational choice. The benefit of an expanded understanding of decision-making is that it is portrayed as an active, creative process that can increase opportunities for occupational engagement better fitting individuals. We conclude that occupational decision-making is a complex phenomenon that requires further development from diverse ontological and epistemological standpoints.

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Creating an occupational repertoire, or interwoven composition of occupations that one engages in (Davis & Polatajko, 2010), is a lifetime project for people. Engagement in occupation has the potential to bring meaning to life. It has been suggested that occupational engagement contributes to identity, enables people to establish connections with others, facilitates the expression of individuality, supports interaction with the environment, and helps to sustain life (Polatajko et al., 2007). Occupations provide a way for people to structure and organise their daily lives (Kielhofner, 1992). Through engagement in meaningful

occupation, people can contribute to and influence the state of their own health, well-being, and quality of life (Hammell, 2004; Townsend, 1999; Wilcock, 1999); and may, ultimately, achieve their occupational potential (Wicks, 2005).

Decisions about which occupations to engage in occur with great frequency, often multiple times throughout the course of a day. The decision-making process, however, may not always be a conscious one. The decisions about which occupations will best meet identified needs, desires, and expectations are complex, requiring substantial reflection and deliberation.

For example, one decision that many women are faced with is whether to combine mothering *and* a career, or alternatively to assume only one major productive occupational role (mothering *or* career). This example will be developed and used as a vehicle to illustrate the concept of occupational decision-making.

In this article, we propose that the concept of occupational decision-making, rather than that of occupational choice, may more accurately reflect how people create some aspects of their occupational repertoire over the course of a lifetime. The examples used to illustrate the concept of occupational decision-making are drawn from the first author's doctoral research (Parnell, 2013). We are not suggesting that occupational choice is not an important or relevant concept; rather, that it may not adequately explain the dynamic, situated process of constructing an occupational repertoire. We propose that there is scope for further theorising occupational decision-making as a valuable construct in occupational science terminology.

Differentiating Choice and Decision-Making

The terms choice and decision are often used interchangeably and, to date, there has been little research that explores the difference. There are many decision-making theories and models in various fields; indeed, judgement and decision-making theory may be considered as a burgeoning field of study. Turpin and Marais (2004) overviewed a range of decision-making models including: the rational model, the incrementalist view, the political view, the garbage can model, the individual differences perspective, naturalistic decision-making, and the multiple perspectives approach to decision-making. Similarly, Vandevener and Menefee (2006) proposed three different decision-making models used in the corporate sector: the satisficing model, the implicit favourite model, and the maximising or rational decision-making model. In considering unhealthy risk taking in adolescence, Reyna and Farley (2006) suggested that one of two decision-making frameworks are employed: the rational, behavioural decision-making framework and the non-deliberative, reactive approach. Each of these models, frameworks,

and approaches outline a different method of decision-making; however, none explicitly delineate between making a choice and making a decision.

Scholarly enquiry about the difference between making a choice and making a decision appears to be limited. In the field of psychology, Karlsson (1988) used a phenomenological approach to study the difference between the experience of making choices and the experience of making decisions, concluding that they are not synonymous. Karlsson proposed that making a decision is about the future and "realizable possibilities" (p. 12). He asserted that decisions cannot be considered in isolation; rather, each decision is related to a person's project in life and making a decision requires responsibility, identification, ownership, and self-investment on the part of the person making the decision. Karlsson further proposed that decision-making is a complicated, laborious, and emotionally-invested experience that demands creativity, as a person takes into consideration a range of points of view and factors to generate possibilities. He also described it as a time-consuming process that requires the decision-maker to be agentic, rather than passively choosing from among a range of existing options. Karlsson concluded that "decision-making catches very profoundly the moment of *becoming* in human existence" (p. 13). Making a decision may, therefore, be considered a generative process in which a person considers different perspectives, creates contextualised options, selects or chooses a preferred option, and then negotiates an outcome.

In contrast, Karlsson (1988) suggested that making a choice requires consideration of "at least two thematic alternatives" (p. 10), where a person is not required to create new possibilities. Thus, making a choice assumes that there are at least two pre-existing options available. When making a choice, Karlsson proposed there is not the degree of emotional investment and self-identification that is required when making a decision. He further suggested that making a choice may, in many ways, be a less complex experience. In considering occupational engagement and the creation of an occupational repertoire over the course of life, the concept of choice seems inadequate to fully capture the complexity of the process. Thus, we propose that the term

occupational decision-making may provide a way to more completely understand the occupational nature of humans.

Occupational choice

Early understandings of occupational choice appear to have predominantly focussed on an individualistic perspective of the concept, with restricted emphasis on the impact of contextual influences on the occupational choices and engagement of people. Kielhofner (2008), for example, suggested that when selecting occupations to engage in, a person is significantly influenced by personal motivation and a desire to achieve a sense of control.

Other scholars have explored the influence of contextual factors, suggesting that a range of factors, including resources, other people, and social norms and expectations, can influence the choices people make about the occupations they engage in (Christiansen & Townsend, 2010). Various cultural influences have also been considered, the impact of which might change over time (Asaba, Ramukumba, Lesunyane, & Kam Man Wong, 2010). These explorations have broadened understandings of occupational choice theoretically and conceptually; highlighting that people's choices may be affected by internal, motivating factors, and by a range of contextual factors that change over the life course.

A contrasting approach to theoretically oriented development in this arena was taken by Galvaan (2012). In a ground breaking ethnographic study that investigated the factors shaping the occupational choices of marginalised adolescents in a South African community, she consolidated understandings of occupational choice as a highly situated, transactional phenomenon. Defining occupational choice as “the application of choice to participation in occupation” (Galvaan, 2012, p. 153), Galvaan (2015) found that there is a significant relationship between person, environment, and occupational choice, and concluded that occupational choice has a “contextually situated nature” (p. 51). Because occupational choice is a contextually bound, rather than individual, construct, Galvaan (2012, 2015) contended that people's occupational choices can be constrained

by their environment and a manifestation of occupational injustices and social inequalities. In explaining occupational engagement, Galvaan (2012) stated, “when explicitly seeking to engage in occupations the participants weighed up options and scanned the environment for opportunities” (p. 156). The weighing up of options and scanning for opportunities may be likened to Karlsson's (1988) description of making a decision. So, although Galvaan (2012) did not appear to differentiate between the concepts of choice and decision-making—and indeed may have inferred that the terms are interchangeable: “choices include making decisions about and between occupations” (p. 152)—upon deeper investigation of the meaning of these concepts, they can potentially be differentiated.

These descriptions of occupational choice highlight that although individual personal motivations, personality, and environmental factors influence choice, they still do not describe a situation in which choice-making is a creative process. Rather, previous explanations of occupational choice describe a process of weighing up available or pre-existing options. We contend that applying Karlsson's (1988) work about decision-making might provide a more nuanced and accurate understanding of the process of crafting an occupational repertoire and of creating and exploring a range of alternative occupational possibilities (Laliberte Rudman, 2010).

Developing an understanding of occupational decision-making

In a phenomenological study of women's career decision-making after childbirth, Parnell (2013) found that many of the women who participated did not simply make career choices after the birth of children. Rather, they engaged in a complex process of creating career possibilities prior to deciding which of those options best met the needs of their families, their workplaces, and themselves. Mary's story provides one example of career decision-making. At the time of her interview, Mary was in her early 30s. She lived with her husband and their three children aged 9, 5 and 3 years. Mary qualified as an occupational therapist 10 years earlier and had worked in a variety of jobs since graduation.

From her perspective, her career was impacted by several factors including an unexpected pregnancy during the final year of her university studies, the birth of her two other children, and the nature of her husband's work, which required the family to move regularly. Mary's family had recently moved to enable her husband to take up a new position and so they could be closer to extended family. Mary engaged in a convoluted process of decision-making as she weighed up potential career opportunities and juxtaposed these with fulfilling her perceived duties as a parent and a wife.

I didn't have a job to go back to after my third child. My eldest started school so I wanted to be home to settle her into school. I had three children and it was not easy to juggle work and kids. We needed some extra money to buy a house, so that was why I went back to work then. The hospital had a position they offered me but they wanted me to work four days a week. I couldn't do that, and I didn't want to do that, it was just too busy at home. Another position came up that I was excited about. It meant a lot of studying as well as getting back to work. I was doing about an hour or two of study every night when the kids went to bed. But I really enjoyed it; it was something that I could take ownership of, something that I wanted to do and the time was right. It was nice to have a challenge, and to feel successful because I didn't feel that I had really achieved anything in my career. I wanted to set a goal for my career. But I know that my husband is always going to be the fulltime worker, the breadwinner. My career comes second. (Mary)

Rather than choosing from readily available career options, Mary developed a new range of career possibilities that she believed would support herself and her family at that point in time. Mary's creation of options included actively searching for the right employment opportunity, being prepared to consider additional effort (in this case, studying) in order to pursue a suitably challenging and meaningful career, managing her "free time" to achieve career goals, and seeking employment

options that were satisfying; yet, that did not compromise her commitment to her husband's career and the care of her family. The complexity and multi-faceted nature of this process is evidenced by the numerous contextual factors that Mary took into account as she made her decision.

Similar to Mary's experience, Karen did not select one alternative from an array of readily available career options; rather, she actively engaged in the development of a new career alternative for herself. Karen had pursued post-graduate studies following the birth of her first child, in the hope of founding a new career. She subsequently realised that working in a new profession would likely mean taking an entry level position and a significant reduction in pay. As a result, Karen decided to remain in the field of occupational therapy in order to earn the money she and her family required.

If I wanted to pursue the publishing avenue that I have done some study in and move into a publishing firm or something, then I would be at the entry level and that would mean losing dollars or working more hours, and at the moment I just can't do that. So that has stifled that avenue for me for the moment... A choice would be nice but now is just not the right time and I can probably be a lot more flexible in OT [occupational therapy] at the moment. And so although I chose not to change directions and pursue something else, that is very frustrating for me but it is very important not to be working fulltime. And I want to be there more for my children. I do also want to have a career but perhaps not just at this point in time. (Karen)

Like some of the other participants in the study, Karen had career opportunities readily available to her, some of which were more appealing than her pre-children career in occupational therapy. However, in many instances, these options were not practicable. It was in situations such as these, that the women created new career options from which they then made a selection; that is, they engaged in a decision-making process. Karen's decision-making included juggling and shifting

competing priorities to ensure the best fit for the needs of her family, the financial implications of changing professions, the availability of employment in a new industry, and the flexibility afforded to her by a return to her previous career.

The emotional investment in, and complexity of, the decision-making process was evident in the women's stories, which highlighted the need to craft new career possibilities from which to make a selection, and the diverse range of factors they considered in creating and then selecting between options. For example, Natalie's decision-making experience was one of focusing and re-focusing her attention on different perspectives and factors over the course of time and, when necessary, creating new career options to choose from. Natalie constantly re-evaluated her career decisions and the impact of these on her family, her workplace, and herself. Natalie's experience highlights both the decision-making process and how this process is ongoing, rather than a one-off experience.

I've got a diary ... there's all this stuff in there: my shifts, my husband's shifts ... who's babysitting who. Each month I get my roster and I sit down and I work out what days I'm working, when my husband is working, who can do what and when. ... I need to be mindful of what everyone has going on ... Just that whole balance thing. While I spend so much time working and looking after the girls, the other parts of my life have gone on the backburner. Things like being able to look after myself and exercising and that sort of stuff, which I enjoy doing but for me to be able to do that I, it is just that next level of organisation and then my relationship with my husband ... we don't spend a lot of time together ... we are okay with that at the moment ... it's just the way things are with work and our routine. So although things are kind of working now, it will have to change, particularly once the girls start school. (Natalie)

Anthea's narrative also demonstrates the emotional investment required for effective decision-making. It highlights the difference between choosing from available alternatives as

opposed to first creating a range of alternatives to then choose between, and shows the multifactorial nature of the decision-making experience. Anthea's story also highlights the individual nature of decision-making and the possibility that the decisions made do not always satisfy all aspects of a person's life.

I think people talk about working mothers wanting to have everything. I don't think you have everything. I think you have a compromised version of something. Somewhere along the line, something is compromised. And I don't mean that in a negative way, I think it is just in terms of juggling. You have to prioritise yourself, your partner, your kids, your career, and different people choose to prioritise things differently. It's their life. (Anthea)

The decision-making process inherently involves personal and emotional investment, commitment, responsibility, ownership, and identification on the part of the person making the decision. It also requires simultaneous consideration of multiple perspectives over the course of time. The concept of occupational decision-making highlights the multiple influences on people as they make decisions about the occupations and occupational roles they engage in. Occupational decision-making is a process attenuated by the sociocultural, socioeconomic, and political milieu in which the person making the decision(s) is situated. Pereira (2017), similarly, suggested that the capabilities, opportunities, and resources available within socioeconomic and sociocultural contexts will impact the decisions individuals make about occupations. As demonstrated in the examples provided, crafting an occupational repertoire can be a challenging, creative, and complex process. We propose that, in many instances, the concept of decision-making rather than choice-making more accurately exemplifies the complexity of shaping an occupational repertoire.

Implications for Occupational Science

An important aspect of the ongoing development of occupational science is the generation and description of terminology that supports

better understanding of occupation and the occupational nature of humans. We contend that the concept of occupational decision-making has potential value to the scholarly community of occupational scientists. In essence, this is because advancing the theoretical development of this idea may assist in deepening understandings of the complex nexus of processes that underpin occupational engagement. Indeed, examining, describing, and illuminating otherwise taken for granted, quotidian “doings” of people in their social world, remains one of the most significant projects in the field now and into the foreseeable future. We believe that developing understandings of occupational decision-making will contribute to advancing this agenda.

The concept of occupational decision-making, as demonstrated in this paper using the example of mothers’ career decision-making, illustrates that multiple factors may influence people as they make decisions. Further exploration of the concept of occupational decision-making as a way of framing how and why people make the decisions they do about the occupations they engage in, may enhance understandings of how people create their occupational repertoire over the course of a lifetime. A greater understanding of the experience of occupational decision-making may assist occupational scientists to better understand the nature of occupation, the ways in which people make decisions about the occupations they will (or will not) engage in, and the link between occupational decision-making and the achievement of occupational potential as defined by Wicks (2005).

A limitation of the study that informed this paper was that it explored the occupational decision-making experiences of one, specific group in relation to two occupational roles. Although it is beyond the scope of this article, the tacit influence of culturally bound gender expectations with respect to child rearing cannot be dismissed. It is possible that decision-making processes and motivators for men are different to those of women; thus, we suggest that the gendered nature of occupational decision-making is worthy of further investigation. In this article we have highlighted that socioeconomic and sociocultural contexts shape aspects of occupational-

decision making for individuals; we suggest that the ways in which families, groups, and communities engage in collective occupational decision-making also warrants exploration. We believe that the findings presented in this article are salient in providing potentially useful insights into the concept of occupational decision-making, and provide a starting point for further discussion and exploration of this concept.

Conclusion

In this article, we have illuminated the contextual and invested nature of occupational decision-making, using examples from the first author’s doctoral research to present the concept of occupational decision-making as illustrated through the experiences of women making career decisions after having children. We propose that occupational decision-making can extend current understandings of the concept of occupational choice and have presented it as a process that empowers people to be agentic rather than passive in meaningful occupational engagement over the course of a lifetime. We conclude that occupational decision-making is a complex phenomenon that requires further development from diverse ontological and epistemological standpoints using diverse methodological approaches.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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