

A phenomenological inquiry into the embodied nature of occupation at end-of-life

Anna Park Lala, Anne Kinsella

University of Western Ontario, London, ON, Canada

Introduction: The Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists has adopted a position that every Canadian is entitled the right to a quality end-of-life experience. While end-of-life care is within the scope of occupational therapy, limited literature is available that examines how occupation may contribute to end-of-life experiences. Traditional rehabilitative goals that attend to enabling independence may conflict with the needs of people at end-of-life. In the occupational therapy literature, meaningful engagement is often tied to active participation. Such an approach may overlook sources of meaning that can emerge through simply being, where reflection and small moments may elicit feelings of deep appreciation and joy. In line with the World Health Organization, which acknowledges that successful end-of-life interventions can be implemented within contexts with limited resources, this study examines how everyday occupation may contribute to end-of-life experiences. **Objective:** The study purpose is to examine the lived experience of occupation at end-of-life from the perspectives of older Canadians diagnosed with terminal illnesses. **Methods:** The methodology of the study is phenomenological inquiry, which examines the lived experience of human phenomena (Heidegger, 1927/2008; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2006). Two theoretical frameworks inform the researcher's interpretive lens: an occupational framework that attends to doing, being, becoming and belonging (Whalley Hammell, 2004; Wilcock, 2006), and a phenomenological framework that draws on four existentials of lived time, lived space, lived relations, and the lived body (van Manen, 1997). The study methods involve semi-structured, in-depth interviews with ten Canadians over the age of 60 living with terminal illnesses. **Results:** The results illuminate experiences of occupation throughout the dying process, point to the embodied nature of end-of-life occupations, and highlight existential meanings that persons discern in such occupations. **Conclusion:** This study is based in a Canadian context and may inform the organization and delivery of end-of-life services in Canada. The findings also have potential to inform a wide-range of international and interdisciplinary audiences about the significance of occupation at end-of-life. **Contribution to practice:** This study may offer insight into how to better prepare occupational therapists to work in end-of-life practice contexts, and to promote the vital importance of occupation in palliative healthcare environments.