

Exploring the Occupational Performance Needs of Women in a Homeless Shelter

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Introduction: Women who are homeless have unique needs and experience significant barriers to occupational performance. The profession of occupational therapy is developing a professional role with this population and creating a body of empirical literature to guide interaction with individuals who are homeless.

Objectives: The purpose of this study was to explore the occupational performance needs of women in a homeless shelter and contribute to the body of literature that validates professional involvement in this setting. This study responded to the question: What are the occupational performance needs of women in a shelter?

Methods: Ten women from an emergency homeless shelter were interviewed using the Assessment of Occupational Functioning-Collaborative Version (AOF-CV), a screening tool based on the Model of Human Occupation (MOHO). Additionally, audio journaling was piloted with three women as a method of data triangulation. Researchers established credibility by engaging in the shelter environment beyond the interview process and by establishing inter-rater reliability.

Results: The MOHO subsystem components most frequently identified by the AOF-CV as areas of need were interests, roles, and habits. Audio journaling revealed occupational performance barriers and supports, both intrinsic and extrinsic, that varied among women. The audio journals illustrated both deficits and strengths that did not parallel those identified during the interview process.

Conclusion: MOHO is a useful frame of reference to guide interaction with this population. Several disparities were identified between the results of the AOF-CV, audio journal entries, and observations of the researchers. As a screening instrument, the AOF-CV provided limited insight regarding occupational performance and the influence of the shelter environment. Audio journaling has potential to further the understanding of the daily challenges of women in a homeless shelter. Women who are homeless have urgent needs. Further research should identify a more effective means to address the occupational performance needs of women in a homeless shelter.

Contribution to practice: The results of this study add to the professional knowledge base regarding women who are homeless, provide insight into the dynamics of an emergency shelter, and evaluate the effectiveness of one assessment tool and frame of reference for use with this population.