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## INVESTIGATING OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY: FROM DISABILITY STUDIES TO ABILITY STUDIES

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**O**ccupational therapy was formed in the context of historical events that created its purpose and aim, with its origins traced back to providing services to war veterans and those institutionalized in mental hospitals, tuberculosis sanatoriums, and community workshops (Friedland et al., 2000). In the 1980s, occupational therapists were challenged to advocate on behalf of people living with chronic illness and disability and to take a global interest in the social issues that affect the lives of the people they serve (Trentham, 2001). Since then, occupational therapy has added promotion of well-being, enablement, person-centred services, evidence-based practice and community-based practices with new roles in companies, greater government relations and greater access to information and communication technology to its focus (Green et al., 2001). Occupational

therapy is a profession that is seen as being crucial to the development of society and to addressing societal issues of the present and future (Freeman et al., 2014). Occupational therapy research has started to investigate societal issues such as the ecological sustainability of occupations (Wagman, 2014). In 2014, the Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists (CAOT) identified the following trends as being important to the redirection of the occupational therapy field: an ageing population, increased survival in events of accidents and injuries, increased awareness of disability, job stress, greater promotion of well-being and prevention, greater numbers of mental problems, and a more informed audience about health and health concerns (CAOT, 2014a). In 2014, CAOT also outlined the values and beliefs (Box 23-1) that should guide occupational therapists (CAOT, 2014b).

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**BOX 23-1**  
**BELIEFS OF THE CANADIAN ASSOCIATION OF OCCUPATIONAL THERAPISTS**

p0075

About occupation, we believe that:

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- Occupation gives meaning to life;

u0075

- Occupation is an important determinant of health, well-being, and justice;

u0080

- Occupation organizes behaviour;

u0085

- Occupation develops and changes over a lifetime;

u0090

- Occupation shapes and is shaped by environments;

u0095

- Occupation has therapeutic potential.

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About the person, we believe that:

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- Humans are occupational beings;

u0105

- Every person is unique;

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- Every person has intrinsic dignity and worth;

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- Every person has the right to make choices about life;

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- Every person has the right to self-determination;

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- People have some ability to participate in occupations;

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- People have some potential to change;

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- People are social and spiritual beings;

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- People have diverse abilities for participating in occupations;

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- People shape and are shaped by their environments.

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About the environment, we believe that:

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- The environment includes cultural, institutional, physical, and social components;

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- The environment influences choice, organization, performance, and satisfaction in occupations.

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About health, well-being, and justice, we believe that:

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- Health is more than the absence of disease;

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- Health is strongly influenced by having choice and control in everyday occupations;

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- Health has personal dimensions associated with spiritual meaning and satisfaction in occupations, and it has social dimensions associated with fairness and equitable opportunity in occupations;

u0175

- Well-being extends beyond health to quality of life;

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- Justice concerns are for meaningful choice and social inclusion, so that all people may participate as fully as possible in society.

Source: Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists (2014b).

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According to Service Canada statistics, the average annual growth rate for occupational therapist jobs from 2012 to 2016 is 3.2%, compared to 0.7% for all occupations (Service Canada, 2013), with the trend expected to grow sharply. As such, a foresight and broad education

of occupational therapy students becomes ever-increasingly essential. We contribute two lenses to the endeavour that will sharpen students' engagement with the social aspects of occupational therapy. One is the disability studies lens, which is an academic field that investigates the social disablement experienced by people labelled as impaired or ability deficient. The second is the lens of ability studies, which investigates ability expectation hierarchies, preferences and their impact (Wolbring, 2008, 2012). Engaging with these two lenses allows occupational therapy students to engage with an ever-changing landscape of challenges occupational therapists face in a foresight fashion and to engage with the trends, values and beliefs identified.

### WHAT IS DISABILITY STUDIES?

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Disability studies is an academic field that investigates the social disablement experienced by people labelled as impaired or ability deficient. Its scholars question the narrative that claims that the disablism (the problems faced by people labelled as physical, mental, neuro or cognitive ability impaired) originates from a body that does not fulfil species-typical physical, mental, neuro, and cognitive abilities (medical model of disablement). Instead, disability studies scholars posit that the problems originate from the societal environment that expects certain physical, mental, neuro or cognitive abilities (social model of disablement). Disability studies scholars question the labelling of someone as impaired if one does not have species-typical abilities. Deaf culture and the discourse around neurodiversity question the species-typical normatization of body-linked abilities. Indeed, 'many disabled people perceive themselves in a cultural identity war with the so called non-disabled people where their self-identity understanding of being ability diverse and ability variant, as being a culture and not being ability deviant and ability deficient is rejected by many' (Wolbring, 2013a, p. 189).

### DISABILITY STUDIES AND OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY

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Engaging with disability studies allows occupational therapists to critically engage with the characterization and identifications of disablements, the characterization of the body of their client and the characterization

of the assistive devices used by their clients, to name just three areas. The following CAOT statements can be found in Box 23-1: every person is unique, every person has intrinsic dignity and worth, every person has the right to make choices about their life; and every person has the right to self-determination. If occupational therapy, as a field, truly believes in the right to self-determination, this would have to include the right to self-identification. This means that occupational therapy and its students, researchers, and practitioners have to use factual language, thus leaving it up to the person to self-identify. For example, to say that person X cannot walk is a factual statement but to say person X is 'walking impaired' assumes that one has to walk and reproduces the cultural construction of the normativity of walking. To give another example, based on the genetic make-up of the human species, humans do not have the ability to fly and must rely on planes or other assistive devices to achieve this ability; however, humans do not refer to this lack of ability as a 'flying impairment'. However, if one looks at the section 'Practice Settings' on the CAOT web page <<https://www.caot.ca/default.asp?pageid=3824>>. (CAOT, 2014c), the use of medical and not factual language is evident, denying people their right to self-determination of their identity.

p0225 The characterization of an assistive device is another example of self-determination. A hierarchy of worthiness of assistive devices is evident in the general literature. The term *wheelchair bound* is used to sell bionic legs as the liberator from such confinement (Panesar and Wolbring, 2014) and ignores that the wheelchair is for many a tool of liberation and that humans are more confined to their legs than most wheelchair users are confined to their wheelchair (Wolbring, 2003). On 9 October, 2014, a search of the CAOT website for the term *wheelchair bound* resulted in 23 hits, indicating a rather biased approach to at least one assistive device.

p0230 As to the overall medical labelling of the person, this is a long-standing criticism of occupational therapy (Townsend, 1993). Chacala et al. (2014) state:

p0235 *Occupational therapy's view of disability has traditionally drawn on a medical model, in which disability means impairment, limitation, inferiority, deviance from the norm, warranting discomfort,*

*pity, charity, or concern. Despite theoretical attention to environment and social inclusion in occupational therapy, disability still tends to be seen as an individual deficit requiring remediation. The emphasis remains on disability as undesirable, while rehabilitation reinscribes notions of normal and abnormal ways of doing things. (p. 108)*

At the same time, the dominance of biased, judgemental language around ability-diverse people seems to be puzzling given the claim that 'occupational therapy's language, ideas and practice are similar to civil rights, feminist, ethnic, gay and lesbian, disability and other social justice movements' (Townsend, 1993, p. 176).

It has been proposed that occupational therapists p0245 should increase their engagement with disability studies and disability theory, which is so far seen as lacking, because it would 'raise important questions about many of occupational therapy's central issues, and critique professional power and privilege and the systemic oppression of disabled people with which rehabilitation professionals are perceived to collude' (Hammell, 2007, p. 366). Engaging with disability studies is seen as a way for occupational therapists to 'become more aware and reflexive practitioners with respect to the disability experience and their roles as advocates' (Phelan, 2011, p. 170). Hamilton (2013) states:

*Occupational therapists are natural helpers, but our p0250 helping can contribute to oppression of people with disabilities rather than enablement of participation by them. We believe that introducing occupational therapy students to disability studies specifically and to critical thinking generally may decrease the frequency with which occupational therapy is oppressive. (p. 80)*

The 2005 September/October open access issue of p0255 the *American Journal of Occupational Therapy* has various articles highlighting the utility of disability studies for occupational therapy (e.g., Kielhofner, 2005).

However, the utility for occupational therapists p0260 to engage with disability studies is not only about obtaining a different view on people labelled as impaired. Engaging with disability studies will expose

occupational therapy educators, students, researchers and practitioners to the cultural dynamic of ability expectations (want stage) and ableism (need stage). The disabled people rights movement coined the term *ableism* in the 1970s to highlight the negative societal consequences people can experience if they perform below species-typical physical, mental, neuro or cognitive ability expectations (Wolbring, 2012). However, the cultural reality of ability expectations and ableism goes far beyond how it is used in disability studies and is of importance to engage with by the occupational therapy field, as we will show in the remaining sections of this chapter.

### s0020 ABILITY EXPECTATIONS AND ABLEISM BEYOND DISABILITY STUDIES

p0265 Every individual, household, community, group, sector, region and country cherishes and promotes some abilities and finds others nonessential; for example, some individuals see the ability to buy a given product as essential, while others do not; some perceive living in an equitable society as important, others do not. Countries make comparisons between themselves and others based on whether they have certain abilities (e.g., provision of good education or high employment, or being competitive) (Wolbring, 2008, 2012). Although ability expectations can be applied in positive ways, they are often used to justify negative treatments of others whereby one powerful group decides that a certain ability is essential and that another group lacks this 'essential' ability (Wolbring, 2008). To provide one example not covered by the disability studies field, the power structure controlled by men has constructed a narrative that values rationality as an essential cognitive ability and men ultimately had (in many places still have) the power to control the narrative around who were, and who were not, deemed rational beings. In the UK in the last century, the issue of irrationality played itself out around the suffragette's fight for women's right to vote, whereby the dominant narrative was that women were irrational beings and therefore could not vote (Buechler, 1990; Van Helmond, 1992). The claim that women are irrational beings is still used (Daily, 2014).

p0270 Ability expectations constantly change. Changes in ability expectations are often triggered by scientific

research and technological developments. At the same time, ability expectations also influence the direction of scientific research and technological developments. The *Deus Ex: Invisible War* computer game dialogue between Alex D and Paul Denton, the two main protagonists in the game from 2003, captures many ability expectation and ableism dynamics:

#### Conversation between Alex D and Paul Denton u0185

**Paul Denton:** If you want to even out the social order, you have to change the nature of power itself. Right? And what creates power? Wealth, physical strength, legislation – maybe – but none of those is the root principle of power. u0190

**Alex D:** I'm listening. u0195

**Paul Denton:** Ability is the ideal that drives the modern state. It's a synonym for one's worth, one's social reach, one's 'election', in the Biblical sense, and it's the ideal that needs to be changed if people are to begin living as equals. u0200

**Alex D:** And you think you can equalize humanity with biomodification? u0205

**Paul Denton:** The commodification of ability – tuition, of course, but, increasingly, genetic treatments, cybernetic protocols, now biomods – has had the side effect of creating a self-perpetuating aristocracy in all advanced societies. When ability becomes a public resource, what will distinguish people will be what they do with it. Intention. Dedication. Integrity. The qualities we would choose as the bedrock of the social order. (Wikiquote) u0210

Ability expectations do not only influence how humans relate to each other; the ways humans interact with nature are also characterized by ability expectations with, for example, anthropocentrism and bio/eco-centrism exhibiting different ability expectations of what nature provides to humans (Wolbring, 2011a, 2013b, 2014). p0305

### ECO-ABILITY EXPECTATIONS AND ECO-ABLEISM s0025

Ecology is about the interrelationship of organisms and their environment. According to Aoyama et al. (2012), Wilcock was the first to make explicit links between occupation and ecological sustainability. They p0310

acknowledge that research in this area is still sparse (Aoyama et al., 2012). Wagman investigated in 2014 ‘what has recently been written about how occupational therapy/therapists/science can contribute to ecological sustainability and the prevention of more severe climate change’ (p. 161). Aoyama et al. (2012) state:

p0315 *With a concern for the ecosystem and sustainable resources, occupational therapists could become advocates for, and advisers of, the occupations suited to individuals to meet their needs yet to sustain resources and the ecology. The way forward is to be part of the economic and ecological debate, with the occupation for health needs at the forefront of the agenda. It is a different role, but it is the practice of occupational therapy at the global level. (p. 217)*

p0320 They further state that ‘occupations can certainly support human well-being, but many human occupations are now impacting the planet to such an extent that they are reducing the ability of ecosystem services to support well-being’ (Aoyama et al., 2012, p. 220).

p0325 The abilities one favours impact human–human, human–animal, and human–nature relationships. Players involved in the shaping of ecological discourses exhibit ability expectations that influence how they define ecological problems and solutions to the problem, and whom they invite to the table as stakeholders and knowledge producers (Wolbring, 2011b, 2013b, 2014). Naess (1973), for example, described the central objective of the ‘shallow ecology movement’ as the increase of the ability to enhance the health and affluence of people in developed countries. By contrast, Naess characterized the ‘deep ecology movement’ to focus on building the ability to promote ‘biospherical egalitarianism’ (Naess, 1973, p. 95). Ecofeminism is seen to reject the ability expectation of ‘dominance, competition, materialism, and technoscientific exploitation inherent in modernist, competition-based social systems’ (Besthorn and McMillen, 2002, p. 226) and nourishes the ability expectation of ‘caring and compassion and the creation and nurturing of life’ (Besthorn and McMillen, 2002, p. 226). It would be interesting for occupational therapy students to investigate where their field stands in relation to human–nature relationships.

## ABILITY EXPECTATIONS AND OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY: SOME CHALLENGES

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The dynamics around ability expectations pose numerous challenges to the field of occupational therapy. p0330

### Language

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One challenge is the use of language. Language is an important concern, as the sections engaging with disability studies have already shown. Even if one focuses on abilities, one can use terms, such as *ability defective*, that present the individual as the problem. Terms such as *ability expectation oppressed* or *ability expectation oppression* put a focus on societal framing as the problem. It is up to the occupational therapy field to decide whether to focus on the individual defective or societal framing language. We posit that language that focuses on the societal framing, such as *ability expectation oppressed* and *ability expectation oppression*, fits well with concepts such as occupational justice, occupational rights and enablement. p0335

### Self-identity Security

s0040

Self-identity security means that one has the self-determination of one’s identity. Having occupational therapists engage with self-identity security is not only important for people covered within the disability studies discourse but for all kind of social groups that occupational therapy engages with that are defined by others. Engaging with the broad area of self-identity security helps occupational therapists to rectify some of the negative connotations around occupational therapy, specifically that occupational therapy is situated within a biomedical paradigm (Donnelly et al., 2014), and to engage with indicators such as quality of life and the ability to engage in the community. p0340

### Power and Privilege

s0045

Having certain abilities such as being competitive is a source of power over others and having power allows one to influence which abilities are seen as essential and, in effect, set the tone for how people are treated and who is labelled as ability deficient and of which abilities. Power often allows for privileges. Having certain abilities is the portal to access privileges such p0345

as income, political influence and employment (Wolbring, 2014). Hammell (2013) states, '[T]he occupational therapy profession has not engaged in sustained critical reflection about the vulnerability of many clients and the asymmetrical power relations that make meaningful partnerships with professionals inordinately difficult' (p. 145). To reflect on all facets of power related to abilities and ability expectations and the privileges they are linked to will further the ability of occupational therapists to engage with the trends, values and beliefs of their profession, including the advancement of social and occupational justice.

s0050 **Ability Inequity and Inequality**

p0350 Inequities and inequalities based on abilities one has access to or exhibits are a global problem (Wolbring, 2010). For both, ability inequity (unjust or unfair distribution) and ability inequality (uneven distribution), two subgroups exist. One group is linked to intrinsic bodily abilities and the other group is linked to external abilities – abilities generated by human interventions that impact humans. These two subgroups of internal and external ability inequities and inequalities are quite distinct in their effects and discourse dynamics, involved stakeholders and goals. Both subgroups pose challenges for the occupational therapy field.

u0215 Definition: '*Ability inequality* is a descriptive term denoting any uneven distribution of access to and protection from abilities generated through human interventions, right or wrong'. (Wolbring, 2010, p. 97)

u0220 Definition: '*Ability inequality* is a descriptive term denoting any uneven judgment of abilities intrinsic to biological structures such as the human body, right or wrong'. (Wolbring, 2010, p. 97)

u0225 Definition: '*Ability inequity* is a normative term denoting an unjust or unfair distribution of access to and protection from abilities generated through human interventions'. (Wolbring, 2010, p. 97)

u0230 Definition: '*Ability inequity* is a normative term denoting an unjust or unfair judgment of abilities intrinsic to biological structures such as the human body'. (Wolbring, 2010, p. 97)

If occupational therapists are to advance social and occupational justice, they have to analyse ability-related inequalities and inequities and what role they can play in decreasing such inequities and inequalities. At the same time, occupational therapists have to understand how their actions impact ability inequalities and inequities, and whether their actions might, in fact, increase ability inequalities and inequities.

**Ability Security**

s0055

p0375 Ability security (Wolbring, 2010) could be seen as part of the World Health Organization (WHO) framework of human security (Commission on Human Security, 2003) which has seven dimensions: economic security (assured basic income), food security (physical, economic and social access to food), health security (relative freedom from disease and infection), environmental security (access to sanitary water supply, clean air and a nondegraded land system), personal security (security from physical violence and threats), community security (security of cultural integrity), and political security (protection of basic human rights) (United Nations Development Programme, 1994). Ability security means that one can experience all aspects of human security independent of the abilities one has. An occupational therapy field that thinks purely in medical ways and about adding body-linked abilities to the person is ill equipped to ensure ability security. To ensure ability security means in many cases to ensure that the client can experience human security with the abilities they have; adding abilities is often not an option.

**ABILITY STUDIES AND OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY**

s0060

p0380 Ability studies allows for the study of multiple subject formations, social relationships and lived experiences based on diverse ability expectations and the actions linked to such expectations. As such, ability studies is useful to investigate many facets of ability expectation factors that impact the beliefs mentioned in Box 23-1, such as the belief that people are social beings. Ability expectations are linked to value, labelling, conflict, choice, identity, motivation, achievement, self-determination, body theories and social constructivism. Ableism is one possible consequence of

ability expectations. Ableism is a term developed by the disabled people rights movement and the academic field of disability studies to question the favouritism for species-typical body abilities and the disablement of people labelled as not having these 'essential' abilities (Campbell Kumari, 2001; Carlson, 2001; Overboe, 2007).

p0385 This form of ableism adds to the labelling theory discourse which focuses on the linguistic tendency of majorities to negatively label minorities or those seen as deviant from the social norm. We have highlighted the labelling preference in occupational therapy related to people perceived to be impaired. It would be a useful exercise to map the labelling of people with below species-typical abilities within occupational therapy over an extended time frame to observe for any differences. Beyond the impaired labelled group it would be a useful exercise to map out how the field of occupational therapy labels different groups of clients and to outline the biases found.

p0390 Although ableism was developed to make visible the active disablement of people with disabilities (Miller et al., 2004), the cultural reality of ability expectations and the disablism experienced by entities not fulfilling ability expectations is a much broader phenomenon. Value theory records what people do value and attempts to understand why they value certain things. Ability expectation is about valuing certain abilities. It would be interesting to map out ability values of occupational therapists and their clients covering the broad scope of occupational therapy involvement outlined in this chapter.

p0395 Expectancy-value theory of achievement motivation (the ability desired) is used to analyse dynamics of various discourses. Ability desires are evident within occupational therapy. Cooper states, '[W]e need to show payers, who are increasingly concerned about their own economic viability and who expect return on investment, that occupational therapy services make economic sense' (Cooper, 2012, p. 206). Aoyama et al. (2012) believe:

p0400 *[W]ith a concern for the ecosystem and sustainable resources, occupational therapists could become advocates for and advisers of the occupations suited to individuals to meet their needs yet to sustain resources and the ecology. The way forward is to be*

*part of the economic and ecological debate, with the occupation for health needs at the forefront of the agenda. It is a different role, but it is the practice of occupational therapy at the global level. (p. 217)*

Conflict theory emphasizes possible conflict p0405 between social groups. Groups of people with different ability expectations are often in conflict with each other. Indeed, it might be interesting for occupational therapy students to map out ability expectation conflicts evident between different groups involved in the various facets of occupational therapy. Ability expectations influence, and are shaped by, the pillars and carriers of institutions and mechanisms and processes by which institutions persist or change (Scott, 2008). Ability expectations are a factor in many of the components of the discourse-institutionalist framework developed by Genus (2014). It would be interesting to investigate how institutional ability expectations impact occupational therapy to fulfil and support the beliefs listed in Box 23-1. Finally, one chooses between different abilities which can be classified as a 'social choice' problem (Sen, 2013, p. 10). Here, it would be interesting to investigate which social choices impact occupational therapy in which way.

## CONCLUSION

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According to Hammell and Iwama (2012):

p0410

*[C]ritical occupational therapy is a committed form of practice that recognizes the impact of inequities such as class, gender, race, ethnicity, economics, age, ability, and sexuality, acknowledges that well-being cannot be achieved by focusing solely on enhancing individuals' abilities, and thus endeavours to facilitate change at both individual and environmental levels. (p. 386)*

p0415

The field of disability studies investigates ability p0420 inequities, inequalities, privileges and disablements, as well as the lack of ability security and self-identity security focusing on body-linked abilities and people labelled as impaired. As such, it has a premise that fits with the beliefs stated in Box 23-1, such as that every person has the right to make choices about life, and every person has the right to self-determination.

Engaging with disability studies allows occupational therapy students and practitioners to engage with the beliefs about the person, occupation and health, and improve the situation of people labelled as impaired.

p0425 Ability studies allows the linkage of ability inequities, inequalities, privileges and disablements and the lack of ability security and self-identity security to class, sex, race, ethnicity, economics, age, sexuality, species and nature. Ability studies allows for the investigation of occupational satisfaction, occupational justice, the impact of occupation on behaviour, the impact of ability expectations on occupations, and the impact of ability expectations linked to scientific advancement and technological development on the landscape of occupations. Ability studies also investigates the linkage of humans to nature. As such, it allows the investigation of all aspects of the environment (cultural, institutional, physical and social components) covered in Box 23-1 and the investigation of how the environment influences choice, organization, performance and satisfaction in occupations. Aoyama et al. (2012) state:

p0430 *A near sacred assumption of both occupational science and occupational therapy has been that occupations support well-being, but we might extend Hammell's (2009) recent critique of this assumption by asking if this is still the case when many contemporary occupations in the industrialized world overexploit ecosystem services and thus weaken the very capability of ecosystems to support our well-being? (p. 220)*

p0435 Indeed, students and practitioners engaging with the ability expectation framework can ask questions like which occupations are sustainable, and which meanings and frameworks of occupation will still be sustainable?

p0440 It is important to seek answers to the question of which occupations still allow one to feel well and have ability security? Will, for example, a system where livelihood is linked to payments for the performance of occupations still be viable? Given the beliefs voiced in Box 23-1, one would expect occupational therapy education to give students the tools to investigate new areas of practice, going beyond the restoration of function. If the trend is indeed holding that occupational therapists should become self-employed and have to find their niche within the field, then the disability

studies and ability studies lens allows for an investigation into the reality of the world that could unearth new fields of engagement. It allows one to also look at the economic viability of one's goal which is seen as increasingly important (Cooper, 2012). Disability studies and ability studies facilitate the ability to act as a change agent, regarded as an important ability of occupational therapists (Hodgetts et al., 2007; Klinger and Bossers, 2009).

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