



■ FEATURE ARTICLE

Exploring the Relationship between Occupational Presence, Occupational Engagement, and People's Well-being

Denise Reid

This article examines the broad concepts of occupational presence, occupational engagement, and people's well-being. Occupational presence is viewed as a mediating variable between occupational engagement and well-being. The proposal made is that occupational engagement can influence an occupational presence state in people, which in turn can influence their well-being. Occupational presence is conceptualized as a psychological state of consciousness of being aware of self, engaged in occupation in place. Conscious awareness or mindfulness, and choice are considered to be important factors that contribute to an occupational presence experience. Occupational engagement is conceptualized as being occupied with doing an occupation and is viewed as a powerful determinant of a person's well-being. Factors that enable or interfere with an occupational presence experience are discussed. Task demands, personal expectations, familiarity, anxiety, and opportunities to have control and make occupational choices all influence occupational presence. A model supported by preliminary research is proposed to guide future research. Ongoing research will contribute to the development of the theoretical concept of occupational presence, and explore the relationships between occupational presence, occupational engagement and well-being.

Key Words: Engagement, Occupational choice, Presence, Well-being

"May you be present in what you do" (O'Donohue, 1997, p. 160).

The link between occupational engagement and health and well-being has been proposed in the literature (Glass, Mendes, de Leon, Marottoli, & Berkman 1999; Jackson, Carlson, Mandel, Zemke, & Clark, 1998; Law, Steinwender, & Leclair, 1998; Wilcock, 1998, 2005; Yerxa, 1998). Hasselkus (2002) proposed that it is through the experiencing of occupation that our own well-being and development is nurtured. However, the mechanisms by which occupational engagement promotes health and well-being are not clear. Well-being itself is a complex phenomenon and has been defined in several ways. According to Ryff (1989), autonomy, personal growth, and environmental mastery are key components of well-being. From a transactional perspective, the complex construct of well-being considers people, place, and action in a system, such that different interactions result in different experiences and meanings for individuals (Altman & Rogoff, 1987; Werner, Altman, & Oxley, 1985).

Occupational presence, the psychological state of consciousness of being aware of the self engaged in occupation in place has been identified as one of the mechanisms that contributes to a person's well-being (Reid, 2005). This paper elaborates and poses theoretical questions on the nature and importance of the construct of occupational presence, distinguishes it from the psychological concept of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997), and presents a model for future research into possible relationships between occupational engagement, occupational presence and health and well-being.

Conceptualizations of Presence

Presence has been examined from various perspectives: (1) in the social psychology field, from a communications perspective (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976), (2) in the virtual reality field, from a realism point of view (Hatada, Sukata, & Kusaka, 1980), (3) in the virtual reality field, from an immersion (perceptual and psychological) "you are here" perspective (Biocca & Levy, 1995; Slater & Usoh, 1993), (4) in the technology and media fields, as a social actor perspective, (Nass, Moon, Fogg, Reeves, & Dryer, 1995; Nass & Steuer, 1993) and (5) within occupational science as conscious awareness while engaged in occupation in place (Reid, 2005; Abdel-Hafez, 2006).

The research to date has been based on only one of these five conceptualizations at a time. Therefore, presence has not been fully explored, nor has it been explored from an occupation and health perspective. To date our understanding of the physiological effects of presence comes primarily from research based in virtual reality that has identified factors such as increased heart rate, decreased skin temperatures (Meehan, Insko, Whitton, & Brooks, 2002), arousal, motion sickness, flinching, ducking, and grasping on to objects (Heeter, 2003) as being important. To date, the psychological effects of presence knowledge is limited and comes largely from computer and virtual reality and occupational science fields. Reported effects include enjoyment, increased self-efficacy (Abdel-Hafez & Reid, 2006; Heeter, 1995; Miller & Reid, 2003), hostility (Eastin & Griffiths, 2006), and empathy (Nicovich, Boller, & Cornwell, 2005).

■ Professor Denise Reid PhD, MEd, BScOT, Department of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario M5G 1V7, Canada.

■ Correspondence to:
d.reid@utoronto.ca

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Why Examine Occupational Presence?

The concept of presence has been recently discussed as being important to study in the real world as well as the mediated world (Heeter, 2003). Preliminary research suggests that individuals who engage in some occupations have a presence experience that has been described as a sense of “being in the moment” or being in a state of complete absorption with the occupation (Abdel-Hafez, 2006). Heeter (2003) described her presence experience while she was engaged in the occupation of performing astronaut functions while on a space shuttle. She found that factors such as personal expectations, familiarity with the tasks, and task difficulty influenced the level of presence she experienced. While Heeter’s account of possible cause/effect relationships accounting for a presence experience are informative, the causes and effects of a presence experience in relation to everyday engagement in occupations are not clearly understood.

A better understanding of the relationship between a presence experience and occupational engagement will help characterize types of occupational presence experiences, e.g., positive or unpleasant, and identify the factors that contribute to each type of experience. Such information will contribute to the fields of psychology and occupational science.

Occupational Presence

In 2005, Reid conceptualized occupational presence as a psychological state of consciousness of being aware of self, while engaged in occupation in place, and proposed a conceptual model of this experience. Since presence is a common construct researched primarily in the virtual reality field, Reid proposed how it could be related to the field of occupational science and the concept of occupational engagement. Hence, the term occupational presence was developed to refer to non-mediated occupational presence experiences as opposed to mediated occupational presence experiences.

Theorists and researchers in the fields of occupational therapy and theology have tried to articulate some of the features of occupational presence. Meyer (1922) held that only by doing can people experience the sacredness of the moment. Peloquin (1977) referred to the development of people’s inner spirit while engaged in an occupation. Brockelman (2002) extended those ideas and emphasized the importance of context to include the interactions between people, objects, and action. He talked about how people and the objects of their experience are related to one another and that the self is an active and bodily temporal process of becoming. Presence is dependent upon a context larger than the moment of having engaged in an occupation in order to understand the experience of feeling presence (Heeter, 2003). For example, if I were climbing a mountain, I would need time to comprehend what was going on within and around me. If individuals engage in occupations that are more complex, they may require more contextual cues to enhance the presence experience. Place, as context, is important to the concept of occupational presence (Sack, 1988), but it is only part of and not all of a presence experience.

Occupational presence is not a continuous or constant experience in real life (Heeter, 2003; Reid, 2005). Therefore, occupational presence is not experienced the same way with the same intensity, or the same frequency by everyone. As well, individuals will experience presence differently at different times. For some individuals, the experience of presence is a felt connection between the individual and the occupation they are engaged with (Abdel-

Hafez, 2006). This connection is influenced by social and cultural realities, and has the potential to foster growth and development. Occupational factors such as satisfaction with occupation, choice and control, expectations, interest, motivation, self-efficacy, and novelty influence occupational presence. These factors may fluctuate from day to day, and be more important than skill (occupational performance) for a presence experience.

Conscious awareness is necessary for occupational presence and is characterized by attention being drawn to a particular function – whether it be thought, emotion, physical sensation, or behaviour (Reid, 2005). Attention is consumed by that which is noticed: a memory, a beautiful sound, a brush in our hand, a strong emotion. The person’s attention is monopolized for a period of time, until something else attracts it. Whatever occupies attention, whether inwardly or outwardly, whether profound, or trivial is what/where we are at that moment (Helminski, 1992). This sensitive awareness of occupational presence was demonstrated in Abdel-Hafez’s (2006) interview of a woman who engaged in dancing as her chosen occupation. The woman reported that she felt an energy between herself and her audience that she consciously manipulated. She expressed being able to expand this energy force by using the attention that was given to her by the audience, which she felt she had control of:

I really feel the music, I feel my body moving...you really are present in that moment. Being in the moment or being present, is like you are thinking only thinking about the movement you are making, nothing else, you are not distracted by other thought. When you really feel the music, you actually move in a different way, you are actually part of the dance and stuff.

Theological thinkers like John O’Donoghue (1997) talked about how presence occurs during periods of time when cognition (processes such as perception, attention, learning, thought, and affect) is closely tied to current perceptual stimuli. Occupational presence can be described as the point of intersection between the world of senses and the world of the being (spirit, soul), while engaged in an occupation.

Occupational presence can be experienced when a person is engaged in structured and unstructured occupations. In structured-intense occupations such as those of a musician, a surgeon, or an air traffic controller, people have to maintain focused awareness while performing their job. For them, presence may be voluntary and learned. The conscious choice of practicing presence, referred to as presencing, has been described (Barbour, 2000). In this state a person may experience a personal interaction with what in metaphysics is sometimes called primary causation, an awareness of the creative possibilities available in any moment (Barbour). Others have described the experience of presence as being aware of phenomena as they occur, which in fact changes the phenomena (Heidegger, 1958; Kabat-Zinn, 2005; Tolle, 1999).

Occupational presence can also be felt when one is engaged in unstructured mundane occupations such as cleaning an oven, yet this occupation is not very challenging or contextually complex for many people.

Then I scrub every square inch of the stove surface, favoring a circular motion at times, at others, a back and forth. I get into the round and round or the back and forth, feeling the motion in my whole body, no longer trying to clean the stove so it will look nice, only moving, moving, watching, watching as things change slowly before my eyes.... Music adds to the experience.... Sounds, and rhythms and the movements of my body merging, blending together, sounds unfolding with motion, sensations in my arm, modulations

in finger pressure on the scrubber as required... all rising and falling in awareness with the music. One big dance of presence, a celebration of now. And at the end, a clean stove. (Kabat-Zinn, 2005, pp. 204-205)

Occupational Presence and Well-Being

To date there is little evidence that presence leads to a person's well-being. Tolle (1999) claimed it is the awareness in the present moment that promotes well-being through conscious awareness. In a recent television news broadcast (CTV, 2007) of an interview with well known actor Alan Alda, the concept of being present related to well-being was discussed. Alda told audiences how he developed a level of awareness for the present moment and how this awareness influenced his perception of well-being. He said:

I've developed this ability to be more aware of what's happening right now...our awareness of now, only lasts for about 5 seconds and then it moves on... And I find myself much more able to have a lighter touch, and to work harder at the same time, because I'm aware of everything that's happening... I'm hearing you better. I'm taking you in... Now is all we have. And yet we, we keep forgetting about it. You know planning for the future instead of being here.

This quote highlights the importance of being consciously aware of oneself and how this awareness affects a person's perception of being ("hearing you better", "able to have a lighter touch", "work harder"). Testimonial evidence such as this is useful to the development of a theory of occupational presence. Many people live their lives as though they are pre-programmed and don't recall experiencing what they do and how they feel. Their occupational experiences are most likely devoid of feelings of motivation, interest, and control. Many people have routines and habits in life (Gallimore & Lopez, 2002), but it is when these habits lead an individual to not notice what they are experiencing as well as the impact of the surrounding contexts that presence experiences are interfered with.

Occupational Presence and Flow

Presence is not synonymous with flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). Flow involves intense concentration to the exclusion of worry or attention to irrelevant thoughts. A very strong sense of presence, however, is likely to occur during flow experiences. Consistent with flow, novelty matters for a stronger experience of presence to develop. As familiarity develops, both flow and presence experiences will be less. Challenge is important for flow, but for presence it may be that interest and motivation play a greater role. Unlike flow, presence is not always an optimal experience. A person may be in a great state of occupational presence but that experience may not always be desirable, for example when caring for a crying and colicky baby, or when driving during a major traffic jam (Heeter, 2003). Further research needs to be done exploring the similarities and differences between flow and presence as it relates to occupational engagement.

Factors that Interfere with Occupational Presence

A demanding and frustrating occupation dampens the sense of presence in individuals. If the occupation, thoughts and emotions are stressfully focused on the end product (e.g. completing it correctly and on time) there is a risk of not attending to many perceptual stimuli because the individual was too goal oriented (Heeter, 2002). Time pressured tasks pull attention away from other sensory stimuli thereby reducing presence. Similarly, a sense of frustration increases negative feelings instead of an awareness onto the occupation and its contextual cues.

A person's expectations, cognitive schemas and familiarity of the occupation may influence the sense of presence as well. For example, the occupational therapy loom kit or assembly station may trigger a mental model of the full weaving or engineering experience. Limited expectations, cognitive schemas and familiarity will dampen the level of presence felt. Additionally, if people worry about how they did something yesterday or how they will engage in the occupation in the future, then they really are not there or in a presence moment (Tolle, 1999).

If a person has limited opportunity to exercise choice and control over an occupation, the unfolding of the self, which is experienced during presence does not occur (Eberle, 2003). The ability to make conscious choices is a unique characteristic of being an occupational human. Choice is central to a person's well-being (Aristotle, 1980), and having choices while engaging in occupations helps people realize and mark new identities (Lebarron, 2003). Therefore, individual choice cannot be divorced from contexts, in that people pursue their interests within the bounds of their social and cultural realities (Allingham, 1999).

Occupational Presence Requires Context

Contexts are important for how life is experienced occupationally, and places establish a socio-cultural perspective (Relph, 1976; Rowles, 2003). Places as contexts for living and engaging in occupations are no longer conceptualized purely in terms of physical boundaries, but also as psychosocial environments constructed through the activities conducted within them (Bowlby, Gregory, & Mckie, 1997). For example, Morin, Dansereau and Nadeau (1990) found that the home is a place that enables elderly people to have control of everyday life or conversely prevents them from having it. The role of everyday activity and routine practices in places influence people to delineate the physical, social and symbolic dimensions of 'healthy spaces', thereby influencing their health and well-being (Dyck & Parin, 2007).

Occupational presence is greatly influenced by place, and factors such as control and choice a person has for what, where, and how he or she engages with an occupation. Moreover, places influence people's level of presence while engaged in an occupation. Illustrating this point, a research participant in Abdel-Hafez's (2006) study revealed that for his occupation of running, the gym created too many distractions and resulted in low presence, while running outside facilitated a greater awareness and understanding of the contextual cues that impacted on him:

I run this path, all the trees. You kind of get lost in that, the environment plays a factor too... If I was running down Yonge street, I would be able to gauge by the streets and surroundings where I am, as opposed to there is no landmarks, I am just running.

Another participant in Abdel-Hafez's (2006) study indicated that his home was the place where he felt he had most control over the amount of stimulation, which impacted on how he cared for his dog:

The apartment has minimal distractions. There really isn't a lot of distractions. If the windows are closed, which they are there really are no distractions. Time is just lost. I don't have a lot of clocks in the house. We [my dog and I] are in the hallway, it is an apartment building, we just run up and down the hall... He [dog] can't run away anymore, although he wants to.

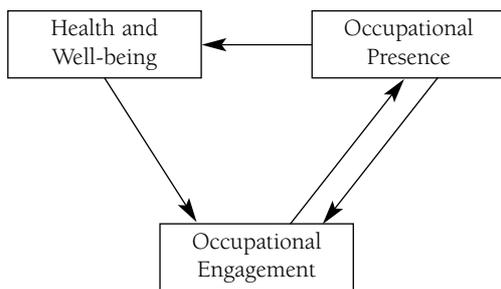
Both of these examples point out the physical characteristics of places with unique psychosocial environments constructed by being a marathon runner and a pet trainer. A greater understanding of how place influences how people interact with occupations is

required in order to understand how and why places influence occupational engagement.

A Model for Occupational Presence Research

The development of a preliminary model and potential research questions concerning occupational presence and its relationship to occupational engagement and well-being is proposed. Figure 1 presents a model that can serve as a heuristic for occupational scientists for thinking about ways these global concepts may interact. Potential research questions are presented according to three areas.

Figure 1: A Model for Research in Occupational Presence



1. Questions related to exploring the construct of occupational presence
 - How much occupational presence is enough?
 - How often and for how long do we feel present on a typical day engaged in occupations?
 - How frequent and strong a sense of occupational presence is desirable for each of us to experience throughout the typical day engaged in occupations?
 - How different is the duration, frequency, and intensity of occupational presence while being engaged in different occupations?

Is feeling occupational presence involuntary or can it be learned?
Is it better to have one or two peak moments of occupational presence or numerous moments of occupational presence?

2. Questions related to exploring the relationship between the construct of occupational presence and the construct of well-being
 - Does occupational presence contribute to a person's well-being?
 - How much occupational presence is related to a person's well-being?
 - What aspects of well-being are related to occupational presence?
3. Questions related to exploring the relationship between the construct of occupational engagement and the construct of occupational presence
 - How does the context (place) where occupations are engaged in influence occupational presence?
 - How does a person's choice in relation to occupational engagement influence occupational presence?
 - How does occupational presence influence occupational engagement?

Conclusion

This article presents evolving theoretical ideas concerning the novel concept of occupational presence. Occupational presence is a felt experience that people can have as a result of occupational engagement. This experience is not necessarily an optimal experience. Occupational presence experiences can vary from low presence states to high presence states, and from pleasant experiences to unpleasant experiences across individuals. Occupational presence varies from individual to individual and from time to time. Factors such as place and choice exert influences over the level of presence felt. Further research is needed to understand the factors that lead to occupational presence. Research is also needed to validate the assumptions that occupational presence is linked to occupational engagement and well-being.

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