

# The Role of Occupational Science in Public Health and Wellbeing Practice

How does occupational science link with public health and wellbeing practice?

**Global environmental sustainability is a mutual challenge for public health and wellbeing and occupational science.**

Human occupations are activities that have meaning and purpose for those undertaking them (Aoyama et al 2012).

Human occupations do not necessarily enable wellbeing and in terms of sustainability:

*“Humanity faces the growing irony that ‘human activities’ are both the cause and solution to our current crisis”*  
(Aoyama et al 2012, p. 214).

Pratarelli (2012) has proposed that the term ‘environmental issues’ should be replaced by ‘human activity issues’.

Occupational science has embraced this and Wicks and Jamieson (2014) have offered that new ways of thinking and transdisciplinary research may be part of the solution.

The scope of contemporary public health is broad and it encompasses the health and wellbeing of populations, communities and individuals. It includes a range of issues from those on a global scale to those involving individuals.



Public health is interdisciplinary in nature as reflected in public health and wellbeing practice.

The characteristics of public health (above) are mirrored in occupational science.

Occupational science can inform public health and wellbeing practice with its insights; it is about studying the things people do - why they do as they do, their experiences of occupation and investigation of the relationship of ‘doing’ with wellbeing (Hocking and Wright St-Clair 2011).

**The significance of understanding the meanings of human occupation for public health and wellbeing practice**

Public health interventions are based on epidemiology and risk reduction however public health prevention work is unlikely to succeed if the meanings of occupation are not accounted for. In skin cancer prevention for example, the occupation of sun tanning appears irrational and risky as overexposure to the sun can be harmful. However having a suntanned appearance can help young women to feel a sense of belonging in their social contexts (Norton et al 2014). Experiencing such ‘togetherness’ is an important part of psychosocial wellbeing hence interventions that account for such occupational meanings are required (Norton 2014). Peoples’ experiences of life need to inform public health practitioners (Public Health England 2014).

#### References

- Aoyama, M., Hudson, M. and Hoover, K., 2012. Occupation mediates ecosystem services with human well-being. *Journal of Occupational Science* [online], 19 (3), 213-224.
- Hocking, C. and Wright-St. Clair, V., 2011. Occupational science: adding value to occupational therapy. *New Zealand Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 58 (1), 29-35.
- Norton, E., Holloway, I. and Galvin, K. 2014. Comfort vs risk: a grounded theory about female adolescent behaviour in the sun. *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, 23 (13-14), 1889-99.
- Norton, E., 2014. The application of humanization theory to health-promoting practice. *Perspectives in Public Health*, 135 (3), 133-137.
- Pratarelli, M., 2012. When human nature confronts the need for global environmental ethics. *Journal of Social, Evolutionary and Cultural Psychology*, 6 (3), 394-403.
- Public Health England, 2014. Local conversations on health inequalities. Summary of findings of research undertaken by TNS BMRB. London: PHE.
- Wicks, A. and Jamieson, M. 2014. New ways for occupational scientists to tackle “wicked problems” impacting population health. *Journal of Occupational Science*, 12 (1), 81-85.

Dr. Liz Norton, Senior Lecturer, Course Lead MSc Public Health  
Faculty of Health and Social Sciences, Bournemouth University  
United Kingdom  
Tel: 44 (0)1202) 967264 e mail: lnorton@bournemouth.ac.uk