

A Poo Protest Inspired Contemplation on Three Provocations to Occupational Therapists and Occupational Scientists

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My relational positionality: From i-identities to we-identities

For transparency, I will disclose upfront my relational positionality, that is, the place from where I contemplated, inspired by a poo protest, on three provocations to occupational therapists and occupational scientists. I am mindful of the intentional divisive consequences of an increasingly weaponized identity politics (Hamad, 2023). By this I mean, the instrumentalization of identity to divide and to silence debate on historical injustices, discredit individuals unfairly and to distract from substantive issues (Barwell, 2025; van Limborgh, 2022). Attempting to mitigate the risk of falling prey to this trap set by hegemony (Diep, 2020), I opt to speak from a '*we-identities*' rather than from an isolated individual '*i-identities*' perspective. '*We-identities*' resonates with the short-hand appreciation of Ubuntu, 'I am because we are'. Therefore, the thoughts expressed in this paper are grounded in my lived everyday experiences (from 2006 to date) of being a husband, a father and an occupational therapy 'partner in crime' in a 'mixed race' Venda-Dutch family which calls post 1994 apartheid Cape Town, South Africa, home (Lavalley & Johnson, 2021).

Gratefully embracing the journal's welcoming of 'Global South' epistemologies of human occupation, my shorthand operational definition appreciates it as '*that* which occupies contextually embedded and embodied resources available to humans' (Kronenberg, 2018a, p. 44), with 'wellbeing' itself being an example of '*that*'. This conceptual proposition allows me to address occupational therapists and occupational scientists as agentic beings who simultaneously occupy and are occupied by institutions that we are not in charge of. This realization had provoked me to assert that the idea of occupational therapy may be too radical and too powerful to be contained by a profession (mOTivate OTs, 2022).

I acknowledge upfront that it is impossible to do justice to addressing the complex nature of the topics presented. However, my primary intention is to contemplate and ignite critical-generative dialogue, discussion and debate around three deep issues that I think we as occupational therapists and occupational scientists, can no longer ignore or worse, remain in denial of.

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Acknowledging the significance of #RhodesMustFall

Occupational therapists and occupational scientists are to be occupied with advancing conceptual and practical understandings and values-oriented appreciations of humans as occupational beings. They also focus on how what we humans do every day impacts our health and wellbeing in context. If we can agree with this proposition, let us consider the following scenario: whenever and wherever humans are confronted with intergenerational institutionalized oppressive dehumanizing conditions that exist by man-made design (i.e., occupational apartheid), and their attempts to challenge these realities in civil, peaceful ways are 'at best' arrogantly trivialized or ignored and 'at worst', met with brutal repression and even premature death at the hands of dominant powers, what are they then left to do? What, if anything, are occupational therapists and occupational scientists to do about it?

On 9 March 2015 at the University of Cape Town (UCT), political science student Chumani Maxwele had picked up a set of full 'porta-loos' (portable mini-toilets) from the informal settlements in the low-lying Cape Flats area of Cape Town. He had also extended invitations to several media houses to come to the statue of Cecil John Rhodes, the British Arch Imperialist (1853 – 1902), which then occupied a prominent location at the university's Upper Campus with Table Mountain's 'Devil's Peak' looming large in the background. Chumani was wearing a pink construction helmet and a set of placards around his bare upper body which read "Exhibit White Arrogance @ UCT". Witnessed and recorded by journalists and some curious by-standers, he then started blowing a whistle whilst flinging human excrement from the porta-loos onto the

bronze sculpture. It is widely recognized that this 'poo protest', a single human occupation, had sparked the birth of the #RhodesMustFall students-movement (#RMF). At great cost to their own health and wellbeing, these students were effective not only in getting the statue removed but also with calling for the 'decolonization of education' in South Africa, which reverberated globally (Al Jazeera, 2015).

As this is not the place to elaborate on the 'poo protest' and #RMF, I recommend the 2024 doctoral study by our colleague Dr. Mapheyeledi Motimele Sibindlana, titled *Understanding Violence within Protest: A Case Study Investigation of the Rhodes Must Fall Movement at the University of Cape Town 2015–2016* (Motimele, 2024). Not only does it offer what may to date be the first deep dive into #RMF as informed by first-hand accounts of student leaders, also called 'fallists', the phenomenon, violence within protest, is uniquely studied through an occupational lens of health and wellbeing.

I acknowledge #RMF, which happened to coincide with the data analysis stage of my doctoral study (Kronenberg, 2018a), as it has significantly shaped my own lived experiences, including invited contributions to, and up and close witnessing of the history-making events of that time.

Ground-breaking anecdote: "The soil was soiless"

During the #RMF period, the Faculty of Health Sciences at UCT had hosted a series of lunch-talks to engage interested faculty and students with the protest movement's call to 'decolonise education'. One of the talks focused on Indigenous Knowledge Systems and was led by now Emeritus Professor Gubela Mji. She opened her talk

with a personal anecdote, sharing that she was born and had grown up in the rural Eastern Cape Province in South Africa. She had learned and appreciated early on, the existential importance of humans' symbiotic relationship with the land and nature. Prof Mji then recalled a trip to Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo. A Belgian colleague, Prof Patrick Devlieger, had invited her to explore a research collaboration that would involve people who are living with disabilities in the 'slums' of Kinshasa. She then told us that whenever she visits a new place, she has a habit, on arrival, of touching the soil of the land upon which the people, who she is to engage with, live. Upon reflection on having carried out her 'ritual' in the 'slums' of Kinshasa, she had this to say to us:

"When I touched the soil, it was just, to me it was soilless, and that really concerned me heavily, the soil of that area. And then I said to Patrick, I do need to see the rural area, because I do need to compare this soil [in the 'slums'] with the rural soil." (Emeritus Professor Mji)

The concern captured by this anecdote is inescapably clear. It served as a generative moment for me, a catalyst for thinking differently about who we are, what we know and do as societies, made up of a diversity of occupational beings, and as occupational therapists and occupational scientists. I remember wondering whether Prof Mji's appreciation and knowledge capacity to determine the quality of soil by merely touching it was to be credited to formal education or rather to informal homegrown learning.

In considering occupying 'soil' as a metaphor for 'society', what may we learn? Just as soil

is a complex ecosystem of minerals, organic matter, water, and air, society is composed of individuals, communities, and institutions that interact and depend on each other for collective health and wellbeing (Taddei & Fallot, 2022). Prof Mji's finding "the soil was soilless" can be explained as 'a soilless state', caused by soil degradation, erosion or contamination (Dragović & Vulević, 2020), which may lead to desertification, putting food security, ecosystem health, and sustainable development at risk (Pozza & Field, 2020). Verifiably, one of the constitutive qualities of a society, and of being human and a community, is humanity or humanness, or in Prof's Mji's mother tongue isiXhosa, Ubuntu. The assessment 'the soil was soilless' may then translate into a 'society eroded of Ubuntu', plausibly caused by intersectional dehumanizing 'isms' (e.g. capitalism, colonialism, racism, neoliberalism, individualism) which are violently produced and sustain global and local inequalities, poverty and wars.

Now, do we as occupational therapists and occupational scientists have the knowledge capacity to assess and address the humanity or Ubuntu status of the society we occupy and are occupied by?

Three provocations to occupational therapists and occupational scientists

As an exercise in occupational consciousness (Ramugondo, 2015; 2024) and in line with a generative understanding of protest as a collective occupation (Ramugondo & Kronenberg, 2013; Motimele, 2024), three provocations will now be advanced as a discursive technique to prompt a deeper critical (political historicised) appraisal of our institutions (Kronenberg, 2024a). It is intended to understand and overcome the held in check

potential of occupational therapists and occupational scientists to assess and address the 'soil' or the 'humanity or Ubuntu' status of our society: i) being (regarded) human is not a given but a to be enacted political potentiality; ii) the end to which we ought to be occupied is poorly understood and appreciated; iii) English as the lingua franca holds our untapped potential and mandate in check.

(I) Being (regarded) human is not a given but a to be enacted political potentiality

"Man, through the use of his hands, as they are energized by mind and will, can influence the state of his own health" (Reilly, 1962)

This opening statement is one of the most frequently cited quotes in the over a century old discourse of occupational therapy. With a touch of hyperbole, Florence Clark claimed Mary Reilly, "alongside Elizabeth Yerxa", to be "universally regarded as a godmother of the philosophical base of occupational therapy that eventually became the academic discipline of occupational science" (Clark, 2012). Whilst I can appreciate that Reilly's adage remains widely celebrated for succinctly capturing the basic idea of our profession, I want to trouble the seemingly un-reflected or taken for granted use of the foregrounded notion 'Man'. I regret that Mary Reilly is no longer with us otherwise I would have liked to personally engage her with two questions: 'Who did you have in mind when you invoked the notion 'Man'?' and 'Did you mean 'Man' to refer to individual humans or mankind as a whole?' I reckon that it is still assumed to be a given that Reilly meant 'Man' to literally refer to all human beings individually, and by no means an exclusive grouping of people that reflects our profession's dominant demographic profile (WFOT, 2024). This belief may also be

defended by the fact that our profession and discipline are rooted in humanism, a philosophy that emphasizes the value of a human being's individual rights and freedoms and agency.

The assumption that Reilly's 'Man' implies 'being human' to constitute a given, may very well hold up if we appreciate it a-historically and a-politically. However, a critical appraisal exposes this premise to be blatantly false. Drawing from an Aristotelian explanation of 'being political' to be about 'being concerned with what is good and bad for Man(kind)', a long-term review of human history reveals a consistent and persistent divisive pattern of dehumanizing superiority-inferiority power dynamics, which Ramugondo and Kronenberg argued, can either be sustained or disrupted through what we do every day (Ramugondo & Kronenberg, 2013; Ramugondo, 2025). In other words, the question who is regarded human and who is less or not so, is historically politically determined (Kronenberg, 2018a).

I cannot help but wonder whether Mary Reilly back in 1961 had been critically aware, and by extension occupational therapists and occupational scientists today, of the geo-historical origins of the philosophy of humanism. It emerged in Europe during the Renaissance period of the 15th and 16th centuries, at the same time of the birth of colonialism and the transatlantic trade of enslaved peoples. Humanism originally constructed a narrative of Western civilization where "Man" was defined by European ideals and positioned as the standard, which served to legitimize the wholesale dehumanization of the (to be) colonized peoples. Frantz Fanon, in his book 'Wretched of the Earth' demonstrated how the colonizers' discourse of 'Man' was a tool of oppression (Fanon, 1968). What has really

changed today, considering the cognitive dissonance generating fact that we meticulously keep track of how many humans occupy planet earth at any moment in time, currently >8,2 billion (World-o-meter, n.d.), yet not every-body who gets non-discriminatively counted as a human being gets treated as one? (Kronenberg & Dlamini, 2024).

Frantz Fanon theorized this still deeply troubling reality in terms of people born into non-negotiable 'Zones of Being and Zones of Non-Being, divided along the line of the human', that is, peoples with and without ontological humanity density (Fanon, 1952). In our professional and disciplinary discourse, the concept 'occupational apartheid' arguably most closely resonates with Fanon's powerful historical humanity diagnosis and critique of colonial humanism (Kronenberg, 2021; Ramugondo, 2025). Occupational apartheid built on the acknowledgment and problematization that being regarded human is not a given but a political potentiality that is to be enacted. This premise has been empirically verified by observing what humans do every day, individually and collectively, manifesting on a continuum of enacted harmful negotiations which underlie oppressive conditions and practices, and wellbeing promoting affirmations of our humanity which underlie emancipatory conditions and practices (Kronenberg, 2018a). The #RMF movement can be appreciated as an example of collectively self-enacted humanity affirmations, which confronted the intersecting social oppressions of racism, patriarchy, classism, sexism, misogyny, trans and homophobia (Kronenberg, 2018a; 2021; Lavalley & Johnson, 2021; Motimele, 2024).

Re-invoking the 'touching the soil' anecdote, for us occupational therapists and occupational scientists, to generate knowledge capacity to assess and address our societies' humanity status, may call for a DNA-like change of the prevalent apolitical and ahistorical ontological premise of humans as occupational beings (Kronenberg, 2018b). I propose that we treat Reilly's 'Man' not as 'human being', but as 'being human'. This category 'being human' can then be appreciated both as a human occupation in its own right, perhaps even as the 'mother of all human occupations', and as an essential marker of health and wellbeing (Kronenberg, 2018b).

(II) The end to which we ought to be occupied is poorly understood and appreciated

"If a man knows not to which port he sails, no wind is favourable." – Seneca

What is the ultimate 'why' of occupational therapy, or in occupational speak, to what end is occupational therapy to be occupied? Whilst the following line seems to capture a most reasonable response, 'promoting health and wellbeing through enabling people to participate in meaningful occupations of daily life', I want to argue that it insufficiently reflects the depth and complexity of our profession's ultimate purpose and mandate, with resultant consequences for the impact we have in the world.

Interestingly, we can again meaningfully draw from Reilly's 1961 Eleanor Clarke Slagle Lecture to help unpack this second provocation. In that landmark address, titled 'Occupational Therapy Can Be One of the Great Ideas of 20th Century Medicine', Reilly contextualized what legitimizes the existence

of professions broadly, namely, contributing to meeting vital needs of society, proposing that occupational therapy was to do exactly this through its unique understanding of the potential health promoting power of human occupation (Reilly, 1962). Reilly's 1961 proposition was still rather literally applied in the American Occupational Therapy Association's 2017 Centennial Vision, which framed our profession's value proposition as 'meeting society's occupational needs' (AOTA, 2007). The two notions that feature prominently in the 1961 and 2017 visions are 'occupation' and 'society'. However, a review of both occupational therapy and occupational science literature reveals an abundance of definitions and tireless theorizations of 'occupation', whilst the idea of 'society', epistemologically speaking, appears to remain virtually untouched, with not even a single working definition to show. Arguably, the closest attempt to date to understand the notions of community and society from an occupational perspective, drawing from Ubuntu, was the theorization of collective occupations (Ramugondo & Kronenberg, 2013). Ramugondo and Kronenberg (2013) explain human occupation as a vehicle to building and sustaining relationships that work, emphasizing that who we are as human beings, is constantly being shaped by what we are able or unable to do within groups, communities, and society. This 'value of intentional relationships' orientation highlights the moral obligation for individuals and collectives to regularly ask of themselves, 'How well are we doing together?', prompting occupational therapists and occupational scientists to make collective occupational wellbeing i.e., 'doing well together' – a principal focus of practice (Kronenberg, 2013). To further illustrate why the lacking understanding of

'society' is problematic, let us take to heart Jiddu Krishnamurti's provocation "*It is no measure of health to be well adjusted to a profoundly sick society*" (The Foundation Staff, n.d.). Do we dare ask who or what we are really serving when we focus on enabling people who are 'functionally challenged' to participate in a society that may itself be 'dysfunctional'? Taking a cue from Seneca's quote (Cakir, 2024) at the beginning of this provocation, if the end to which we ought to be occupied is to be of service to 'society', without a solid conceptual and practical understanding and values-oriented appreciation of this core idea, we cannot know to what extent we are living up to the moral duty and responsibility that legitimizes our existence as a profession.

Urged by a troubling diagnosis of post 1994 apartheid South Africa's dehumanized/ing societal condition (Kronenberg, 2018a), an international innovative research and education initiative has been conceived, named "The sOcieTy Project", and framed by the question "To What End Are Health Professions Occupied?" (Kronenberg, 2025). It intends to address the troubling lack of conceptual and practical clarity and values-oriented appreciation of the idea of 'society'. Although this initiative departs from the moral duty and responsibilities of *all* professions to serve society in terms of responding to 'both private and public needs and the common good' (Jennings, Callahan & Wolf, 1987), a sample of health professions, including occupational therapy, will be used as an instrumental collective case. Firstly, to verify the problematic absence of clarity regarding serving 'society' and secondly, to generate understandings to help bridge the apparent knowledge gap and its resultant consequences (Kronenberg, 2025).

(III) English as lingua franca holds our untapped potential and mandate in check

"I am thinking, perhaps we could have a theorization from our mother languages about humans, human doing [and health], and then leave it to whoever wants to translate that into English. But trying to translate English into isiXhosa, for us that has not worked." – Siwe Toto (Kronenberg, 2024b)

Whilst an incredibly rich diversity of mother-tongues is spoken by the people we are to serve, English continues to occupy the virtually undisputed lingua franca of our profession and discipline. It appears to be taken as a given that English is best suited for expressing how we imagine and think about our occupational therapy identities, epistemologies, and practices (Kronenberg & Dlamini, 2024). However, acknowledging the everyday complexities of navigating and negotiating the historically unequal power relations that shape health and wellbeing of mankind and planet, can we really afford to leave the intended and unintended consequences of accepting English as Lingua Franca uninterrogated? Whilst acknowledging that ELF facilitates global communication across linguistic barriers, its dominance may be contributing to linguicide -the extermination of languages (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 1996) and epistemicide -the destruction of existing knowledge systems and the erasure of traditional and indigenous sources of knowledge (Santos, 2016).

Arguably, the full potential of the idea of occupational therapy, and by extension the profession and discipline of occupational science it gave birth to, continues to not be tapped into. One of the ways to unlock its

held back potential might be to make English 'a learner' of languages that have to date been silenced which then effectively would become its 'teachers'. To illustrate what may spring from such a transposed epistemic power relation, I will share a recent eye-opening teaching and learning experience at the Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Cape Town in South Africa. As part of a course called 'Becoming a Professional', I engaged a group of some 450 first year health sciences students (medicine, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, audiology, and speech language pathology) with the question 'to what end are health professions occupied?' We appeared to reach consensus regarding acknowledging our post 1994 South African society's entrenched woundedness and stalled or held in check need for healing. However, the question whether the students' decision to become a health professional was also informed by wanting to understand this 'woundedness' and how it may be 'treated', left everyone speechless. I then shared a diagram which reflected South Africa's 11 official languages and their distribution in terms of mother tongues. Although English barely ranks fourth, after isiZulu, isiXhosa and Afrikaans, it is the lingua franca of instruction at universities. After establishing that language and epistemology are deeply intertwined in terms of how we express, understand, and even construct knowledge, I posed the following consideration: might we as post 1994 South African society not be depriving ourselves by only drawing from English instead of from the wealth of languages and thus epistemologies available to us? Taking a hint from Siwe Toto's proposal to theorize humans, human doing and health from African mother tongues, let us briefly consider three Nguni concepts: Ubuntu, isintu and impilo. Prof

Mogobe Ramose regards '*Ubuntu*' to be 'the root of African philosophy' and describes it as 'the wellspring flowing with African ontology and epistemology' (Ramose, 1999, p. 35). Actually, ubuntu is two words in one: the prefix 'ubu-' and the stem 'ntu'. 'Ubu-' means embodying that which is human or 'humanness', and 'ntu', which means human or person. In other words, 'ntu' can be understood to refer to 'a human being', whereas 'ubu-ntu' refers to 'being human', in occupational speak, a human being occupied by humanity or humanness. As Siwe Toto explains it, "Ubuntu, being human, cannot be understood in terms of one person, it is relational. So, I know that I am you, when I look at you, we are no different and because we are no different, we are therefore human beings because when we look at other people, they resemble us in every way" (Kronenberg, 2024b).

The second concept relevant to understanding and theorizing human occupation is '*isintu*'. In his master's dissertation, Toto (2021) describes '*isintu*' as 'the lesser-known twin of Ubuntu' and 'doing that is informed by Ubuntu' (p. 64), and as 'an occupational repository for African knowledge' (p. 46). Borrowing from Ramose's (2002) semantic analysis approach, 'isi-' denotes language or custom, and '-ntu', means 'human'. Therefore, '*isintu*' can be understood as a 'language of and for human doing' (Toto, 2021, p. 64). In his own words, Siwe further unpacked '*isintu*' as: 'What humans do, ought to do and have been doing', adding we normally invoke this when Modernity, or for the lack of a better word, 'Civilization', tells us to do things that don't fit our cultural logic and reasoning, and then, when things are just falling apart, then normally the elders will say, 'let's do it the '*isintu*' way, how humans have been doing things (Kronenberg, 2024b).

And lastly, the complex phenomenon of 'impilo', which extends well beyond the scope of its English equivalent, 'health'. 'Impilo' encompasses 'all at once', life, living, living with others, livelihood, health, healing and quality of life. Impilo allows health and wellbeing to be understood beyond dominant pathogenic ways, appreciating salutogenic markers such as wholeness and humanness. Thus, impilo, signals the negotiated relationship among and between individuals, families, and communities, as well as the complex relationships that result from the interplay between social, cultural, historical, environmental, economic, political and spiritual factors (Toto, 2025).

Ubuntu, occupation and wellbeing?

"U nyela tshisimani" ... 'Pooping in the water source' – Tshivenda proverb

Departing from a call for an institutional introspection whether we as occupational therapists and occupational scientists have the knowledge capacity to assess and address the humanity or ubuntu status of the society we occupy, and are occupied by, some implications of this paper for occupational therapy and occupational science will now be briefly highlighted.

Exercising occupational consciousness allows for appreciating the necessarily disruptive and potentially wellbeing generating power of protest as a collective occupation. Acknowledging ontologically, that 'Man' as 'being (regarded) human' is not a given but a to be enacted political potentiality, calls for 'being human' to be understood and valued both as a human occupation in its own right, and as an essential marker of health and wellbeing. Mary Reilly's 20th century occupational therapy adage may then be upgraded to

'being human, through joining hands, as they are energized by ubuntu and political will, can influence the state of humanity health.' The mindboggling troubling absence of conceptual and practical clarity and a values-oriented appreciation regarding 'serving society'-- the end to which we are to be occupied-- must be effectively addressed as a matter of urgency. An Ubuntu grounded intentional relationships-orientation of 'society' may offer a starting point for defining and theorizing this key concept. And lastly, one of the ways to unlock our profession's untapped and held in check potential and mandate might be to make English 'a learner' of languages that have to date been silenced and which then effectively would become its 'teachers'. Three examples of Nguni concepts, *ubuntu*, *isintu* and *impilo*, offered a glimpse of to date suppressed epistemologies that may significantly expand our imaginaries for being, thinking and doing occupational therapy in and with the world.

The Tshivenda proverb "*U nyela tshisimani*", is invoked to capture the gravity of what is at stake for our world, and by implication, for our profession and discipline. I want to employ and expand the widely used 'upstream-downstream' parable (National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health, 2014) to include the actual 'source' of the river. This may allow us to really take to heart that 'the mother of all causes' of downstream lived consequences may not primarily reside in upstream structural conditions but factually at the origin of the river, the well from where life, and hence 'health-and-wellbeing-as-impilo', springs. The act of 'pooping in the water source' as a collective occupation, can serve as a metaphor for the 'introduction of dehumanizing superiority-inferiority power dynamics', contaminating the very source

that we depend on for 'doing well together as humanity and planet'. The consequences are crystal clear and omnipresent, instead of societal well-being, societal misery (ill-being) will spring from it. Until we dare acknowledge, confront and clean up this original 'anti-life act', its intended and unintended harmful consequences will continue to plague our societies.

To conclude, let us appreciate that *language* who we are, what we know and do as occupational therapists and occupational scientists, in and beyond English, matters. The Human Occupation & Wellbeing Journal's ultimate intention is spelled out as "driving positive change for humanity (Unhu/Ubuntu)."^{*} Therefore, I cannot help but wonder if the journal's founders at any point may have contemplated to let not 'Human', but 'Humanity' or 'Ubuntu' occupy the first spot in the journal's name, given that this may have presented an extra impetus for building knowledge capacity to assess and address the humanity or ubuntu status of our global and local societies in turmoil.

* Human Occupation & Wellbeing Journal. Ethos Statement.
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