

OTs in Crisis: A Co-produced Toolkit for Crisis Occupational Therapy Practice Across Contexts of Siege, Occupation, Armed Violence, and Humanitarian Emergency

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ABSTRACT

Occupational therapy practice in contexts of siege, military occupation, armed violence, and humanitarian emergency, here termed 'crisis OT', is a domain simultaneously ubiquitous in its demand and marginal in its theoretical development. The knowledge base guiding crisis OT has been produced predominantly by researchers and institutions operating at a safe remove from the realities they seek to address, systematically excluding the practitioners whose experience grounds that knowledge. This submission argues that this scarcity is structural and a product of epistemic injustice, the coloniality of knowledge, and the Global South's positioning as a site of data rather than theory generation. Informed by Fricker's concept of epistemic injustice, Connell's Southern theory, Haraway's situated knowledges, Ubuntu philosophy, and occupational justice, this article proposes a theoretical and ethical framework for the co-production of crisis-related occupational therapy knowledge with, rather than about, practitioners situated in contexts of crisis. The OTs in Crisis Toolkit is introduced as a formative, co-produced resource developed with occupational therapists across multiple contexts of siege, military occupation, and humanitarian emergency, governed by principles of contributor protection, equitable attribution, and shared authorship. This perspective calls the occupational therapy profession to account for who is, and is not, in the room where knowledge is made; using crisis as the sharpest illustration of a structural problem that extends across the discipline. It proposes co-production, occupational justice, and ubuntu as the necessary ground for building differently.

Keywords: crisis occupational therapy, epistemic injustice, co-production, decolonial, humanitarian, Global South

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Opening: Situating the problem

The scarcity of crisis-generated occupational therapy knowledge is not simply a gap in the literature but a product of how knowledge systems are organised and who they recognise as legitimate knowers. The frameworks, guidelines, and resources available to occupational therapists working in contexts of siege, military occupation, armed violence, and humanitarian emergency have been authored primarily by institutions, academics, and practitioners operating at a safe remove from the realities they seek to address (Kronenberg et al., 2005). This is not only a minor methodological oversight but also a structural condition that shapes what gets known, what gets named, and ultimately what gets done, or left undone, in the most demanding environments occupational therapy is called to serve.

Throughout this piece, the term 'crisis OT' is used to denote occupational therapy practice in contexts of siege, military occupation, armed violence, and humanitarian emergency. This term is proposed deliberately as existing language such as 'humanitarian OT' carries institutional connotations that do not fully capture the range of contexts, practitioners, and realities this piece seeks to address. Crisis OT is offered as a more practitioner-facing, politically honest designation for a domain of practice that is simultaneously ubiquitous in its demand and marginal in its theoretical development.

The author is a Kenyan occupational therapist whose foundational research was conducted at Dadaab refugee camp, Kenya, one of the largest refugee settlements in the world, hosting predominantly Somali refugees forcibly displaced by decades of geopolitical conflict, drought, and political violence (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2025). That fieldwork, examining occupational disruption and the conditions under which meaning-making and daily life are sustained or severed (Andare, under review), made legible something the existing occupational therapy literature had not adequately named: that the people

most exposed to crisis are the least represented in the knowledge produced about it. Practitioners working inside these realities, in contexts of siege, military occupation, displacement, and humanitarian emergency, hold knowledge that is not supplementary to established occupational therapy frameworks but prior to them. They know things that cannot be accessed from elsewhere (Haraway, 2013).

From that recognition, the OTs in Crisis Toolkit was initiated; a co-produced resource built with occupational therapists working across contexts of siege, military occupation, armed violence, and humanitarian emergency spanning multiple continents and political realities. The toolkit is not a completed product but a process and a position: an argument, enacted in practice, that crisis occupational therapy knowledge must be built from the inside, collectively, and under governance structures that protect, credit, and fairly compensate those whose experience grounds it. This paper sets out the theoretical and ethical foundations of that argument, introduces the toolkit as a demonstration of a different way of working, and calls the occupational therapy profession to account for who is, and who is not, currently in the room where crisis knowledge is generated.

The epistemic problem: Who gets to know?

The scarcity of crisis-generated OT knowledge is not simply a gap in the literature but a product of how knowledge systems are organised and who they recognise as legitimate knowers. Two interlocking theoretical frameworks are instructive: Miranda Fricker's concept of epistemic injustice and Raewyn Connell's critique of Southern theory.

Fricker (2007) identifies two forms of epistemic injustice that are especially salient in this context. Testimonial injustice occurs when a speaker's credibility is diminished by identity-based prejudice; in other words, when what someone knows is discounted because of who they are, where they are situated, or the conditions under which they

practise. Occupational therapists working in contexts of siege, military occupation, displacement, and humanitarian emergency are rarely recognised in the international literature as authoritative producers of occupational therapy knowledge. Their accounts appear, when they appear at all, as case material or field reports; data to be interpreted by others, not theory to be built upon.

The evidence base reflects this problem. Smith et al. (2015), in a systematic review of rehabilitation interventions in humanitarian crises, found that only two of the 46 papers meeting the inclusion criteria were judged to be of high quality. Nearly a decade later, this concern remains unresolved: a 2024 scoping review reported that occupational therapy literature on forcibly displaced populations continues to inadequately address the specific contexts and occupational injustices of the Global South (Hassan et al., 2024). Hermeneutical injustice is especially useful for understanding the conceptual limits at stake here. For Fricker (2007), it occurs when gaps in shared interpretive resources place individuals or groups at an unfair disadvantage in understanding and articulating their own experiences. In occupational therapy, this injustice is evident in the limits of a dominant conceptual vocabulary developed largely within Northern academic institutions, which remains insufficient for naming the occupational realities of siege, displacement under military occupation, and protracted humanitarian emergencies associated with state collapse. Practitioners working within these realities are consequently left to adapt frameworks that were not designed to hold the scale, politics, or complexity of their experience.

Connell (2007) Southern theory deepens this critique. The global knowledge economy is structured such that the Global South functions primarily as a site of data collection rather than theory generation. Metropole institutions set the frameworks while peripheral contexts supply the evidence. This dynamic is acutely visible in crisis occupational therapy. Existing studies do not adequately

consider the specific context of low-to-middle income countries, nor the occupational injustices faced by forcibly displaced individuals in the Global South, which may differ significantly from Global North experiences (Hassan et al., 2024). Practitioners in crisis contexts are acknowledged in footnotes, not in author lists, while their knowledge is extracted from them, not co-created with them (Connell, 2020; Smith, 2021). The problem is not only who is missing from the knowledge base but also what that absence costs the people occupational therapy is meant to serve (Hammell, 2011; Kronenberg et al., 2005).

A different epistemological ground: Global South voices and situated knowledge

If the problem is structural, the response must be epistemological before it is methodological. It is not sufficient to include more voices from crisis contexts in existing frameworks. The frameworks themselves must be interrogated, and the ground on which crisis OT knowledge is built must shift.

Donna Haraway's (2013) concept of situated knowledge offers a foundational reorientation. All knowledge is produced from a particular location; there is no view from nowhere. What presents itself as objective, universal knowledge is always knowledge from somewhere, carrying the assumptions, blind spots, and priorities of its place of production. Applied to crisis OT, frameworks developed in Northern academic institutions are not universal baselines, they are situated knowledge from one location, no more or less partial than knowledge produced from inside a displacement camp or a besieged city. The difference is that one location has been granted the authority to generalise, while the other has not. Crucially, Haraway (2013) argues that situated knowledge from marginalised positions is not epistemically inferior; it is, for many purposes, epistemically superior. The practitioner who has navigated clinical decision-making under bombardment, adapted therapeutic relationships across repeated displacement, and

improvised practice with no institutional backup, knows things about crisis OT that cannot be replicated through detached observation from a distance (Haraway, 2013; Hill Collins, 2000). This is precisely what Abu Mostafa et al. (2025) demonstrate in their experience report on occupational therapy practice in Gaza; practitioner knowledge generated from inside genocide, documenting barriers to occupational therapy education, research, and services that no external observer could have named with equivalent precision. Similarly, El-Hallaq and colleagues narrate the establishment of the Tent of Hope, a rehabilitation service built inside a makeshift camp in Rafah, as an act of both practice and knowledge production, generated entirely from within siege (Babish et al., 2024).

Connell's (2020) Southern theory extends this argument institutionally. The structures of academic publishing, professional credentialing, and institutional funding actively reproduce the undervaluation of Global South knowledge. Occupational therapy journals are predominantly edited and peer-reviewed from the Global North; the citation economy marginalises scholarship that centres Southern epistemologies. Decolonial scholars name this condition as coloniality of knowledge; the ongoing organisation of the global knowledge system along colonial lines (Mignolo, 2009; Quijano, 2007). In occupational therapy, this manifests in the assumed universality of concepts developed in Western contexts, independence, productivity, time use, that do not travel intact across cultural, political, and crisis contexts (Hammell, 2009; Iwama, 2006); in the absence of adequate theoretical language for siege, statelessness, or protracted displacement; and in the systematic non-recognition of crisis-context practitioners as legitimate contributors to the field's knowledge base. The alternative is not to invert the hierarchy but to dismantle the conditions that produce it; to build knowledge structures in which practitioners from contexts of crises are not only consulted but constitutive, not merely acknowledged as

contributors, but credited as authors (Smith, 2021).

Frameworks for building differently

Having established the epistemological problem, this section sets out the normative and methodological commitments that guide the OTs in Crisis Toolkit and proposes the necessary conditions for building crisis occupational therapy knowledge differently.

Ubuntu, rendered most commonly as 'I am because we are', is an African philosophical tradition that foregrounds relationality, mutual recognition, and collective humanity as the ground of both knowledge and ethics (Metz, 2011; Takaendisa, 2025; Tutu, 2000). It stands in direct contrast to the individualist epistemology underpinning much Western academic knowledge production. Ubuntu insists that knowledge worth having is built in encounter; that what one knows is always shaped by and indebted to those who one knows with. Applied to crisis occupational therapy knowledge production, ubuntu demands that we ask not only what we know about crisis practice, but who we know it with, under what conditions of relationship, and whose humanity is honoured or erased in the process.

Occupational justice, the right of every person to engage in meaningful occupations that contribute to flourishing and participation in community life (Townsend & Wilcock, 2004), names what is at stake in contexts of crisis. Siege, military occupation, displacement, and humanitarian emergency are, among other things, occupational catastrophes: they sever people from the daily activities through which they sustain identity, belonging, and wellbeing, imposing occupational deprivation, marginalisation, and apartheid at scale (Kronenberg & Pollard, 2005; Whiteford, 2000). If occupational justice is the frame, crisis OT is not a peripheral specialisation but a core expression of the profession's foundational commitments, and the adequacy of its knowledge base is a matter of professional ethics.

Co-production ethics provides the methodological ground. Co-production in health and social research positions those with lived experience not only as participants but also as genuine partners in the design, conduct, dissemination and use of knowledge (Beresford, 2002; Coldham, 2018). In crisis OT, this means practitioners in contexts of siege, military occupation, and humanitarian emergency are co-theorists and co-authors, not just informants whose accounts are theorised by others. This demands governance arrangements that distribute decision-making power equitably, attribution practices that credit contributors fairly, compensation mechanisms that acknowledge the labour of knowledge production regardless of institutional affiliation, and protection protocols that take seriously the risks crisis-context contributors bear when they put their names and their knowledge into public domain.

The OTs in Crisis Toolkit: As a demonstration, not a solution

The OTs in Crisis Toolkit is a co-produced resource initiated by an occupational therapist working at the intersection of humanitarian practice, decolonial scholarship, and occupational justice advocacy. It brings together occupational therapy practitioners with direct experience of working across contexts of siege, military occupation, armed violence, and humanitarian emergency spanning multiple regions and political realities. The toolkit is in its formative stages, presented here not as a completed product but as a demonstration of a different way of working: an argument made visible in practice.

The foundational premise is straightforward: crisis occupational therapy knowledge should be built by those who practise in crisis. Contributors to this toolkit are not consultants or case studies but practitioners who have continued to work and to theorise, adapt, and innovate under conditions of extreme adversity. Their knowledge is the product of sustained, reflective practice in conditions that no external framework has adequately mapped.

The toolkit currently brings together occupational therapy practitioners from contexts including Palestine/Gaza, Ukraine, Haiti, Ethiopia, Lebanon, and the Syrian Diaspora, representing a breadth of crisis typologies from military siege and occupation to humanitarian emergency and protracted displacement. Co-production has taken the form of structured dialogues, collaborative content development, and iterative governance consultations. Contributors have participated in shaping both the substantive content of the toolkit and the governance structures under which it is being built. Decision-making is distributed across the contributor group rather than concentrated in the initiating author; no single institution holds authority over the project's direction. As a co-production initiative rather than a formal research study, institutional ethics review was not required. However, the process is governed by three core ethical principles: informed consent from all contributors prior to participation and any publication of their contributions; attribution control, allowing contributors to determine the form and extent of their public visibility; and ongoing consent, recognising that the risks associated with speaking publicly may shift as conflict contexts evolve.

The co-production process has been shaped from the outset by the commitments outlined previously. Governance structures are being developed to ensure decision-making power is distributed across contributors rather than concentrated in the initiating institution or individual. Attribution protocols are being designed to credit contributors as authors and co-creators. Compensation approaches are under active development, recognising that the labour of knowledge production is not suspended by crisis. Contributor protection is among the most serious ongoing concerns: some contributors work in contexts of active conflict and military occupation where visibility carries risks that practitioners in stable institutional settings do not face. The governance framework is being designed with these risks at its centre, including attribution options that allow contributors to control the form and extent of their visibility, and ongoing

consent processes that recognise risks may evolve as conflict contexts change.

What the toolkit is producing, even in its formative stage, is still itself a form of evidence. The process of gathering practitioners from diverse crisis contexts around a shared project of knowledge creation demonstrates that crisis OT knowledge exists, is generative, and can be built collectively across language, geography, and political difference. The Tent of Hope, established by Palestinian OT practitioners inside a makeshift camp in Rafah, exemplifies the kind of practice knowledge the toolkit seeks to document and theorise; practice born entirely from inside crisis, generating insights that the existing literature does not contain (Babish et al., 2024). Abu Mostafa et al.'s (2025) experience report from Gaza produces the very kind of practitioner-generated crisis OT knowledge this toolkit is designed to facilitate and amplify. The toolkit does not claim to resolve the structural problem of epistemic injustice in crisis occupational therapy; no single resource can dismantle the institutional conditions through which such injustice is produced and sustained. Its value lies instead in demonstrating that a different way of working is both possible and necessary, and in offering a replicable model that others can adapt, critique, and extend.

Implications for the field

If crisis OT knowledge has been produced under conditions of epistemic injustice, the field has an obligation to respond structurally. For occupational therapy education, this means a fundamental reconsideration of whose knowledge is taught to prepare practitioners for crisis contexts. Curricula that cite Northern frameworks and Northern case studies for Global South humanitarian deployments are not only epistemologically incomplete but are also potentially harmful, equipping practitioners with tools that do not fit the realities they will encounter. Reimagining occupational therapy curricula towards epistemic justice and cultural inclusion is a professional imperative concern (Thomas, 2025).

For professional bodies, including the World Federation of Occupational Therapists, the implication is a reckoning with whose voices are centred in developing international standards and guidelines on humanitarian and crisis practice. The composition of the bodies that produce these documents, the citation practices that inform them, and the consultation processes that shape them all require scrutiny through the lens of epistemic justice. For the research community, the implication is a reorientation of how crisis OT research is designed, funded, and credited. Research that positions crisis-context practitioners as participants rather than investigators, that extracts data from humanitarian settings without returning value to those who generated it, reproduces the very epistemic injustice it may claim to address. Co-production is not just a methodological add-on but a structural commitment that reshapes the entire research process (Beresford, 2002; Coldham, 2018). Empirical investigation of these structural dynamics: who produces crisis OT knowledge, under what conditions, and whose practice it reflects, is a necessary next step; the OTs in Crisis Toolkit is designed in part to generate precisely that evidence through its co-production process.

More broadly, the field must grapple with what it means to claim occupational justice as a foundational value while tolerating epistemic injustice in its own knowledge production practices. The practitioners building rehabilitation services inside makeshift camps, sustaining therapeutic relationships across siege and displacement, innovating practice with no resources and no institutional support are not at the margins of occupational therapy but its moral centre. The question is whether the profession is willing to reorganise its knowledge structures accordingly.

This question has become impossible to avoid in the context of the ongoing genocide in Gaza. The World Federation of Occupational Therapists (WFOT) (2024) has established a position statement on occupational therapy and disaster management, claiming a role for the profession in crisis response, yet WFOT (2023) chose to respond to the

genocide of Palestinian people with a communication that promised a 'continue to advocate for the promotion and value of occupational therapy globally' refusing to name the political reality unfolding in real time. The AnonymOT Collective (2024) makes this critique explicit, arguing that it is ethically incoherent for a profession to claim responsibility in the aftermath of disasters while maintaining institutional silence during the disasters themselves. From this perspective, such silence cannot be understood as mere neutrality, but must also be recognised as a form of complicity. The OTs in Crisis Toolkit is, in part, a response to exactly this condition: it builds knowledge with practitioners who are living inside the crises that professional bodies will not name. In doing so, it insists that their situated knowledge carries epistemic and practical value that institutions have too often failed to recognise.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the OTs in Crisis Toolkit is not finished. This Perspectives piece is not a report on a completed project; it is itself an act of co-production in progress and a contribution to a conversation that this piece invites the occupational therapy community to join. Practitioners in contexts of siege, military occupation, armed violence, and humanitarian emergency have been generating crisis occupational therapy knowledge for as long as those crises have existed. What has been absent is not the knowledge but the structures that would allow it to be recognised, shared, and built upon collectively. The toolkit is one attempt to create those structures; imperfect, formative, and accountable to the contributors whose experience grounds it.

The Ubuntu philosophy teaches that knowledge, like humanity, is constituted in relation. What we know about crisis occupational therapy is only as complete as the relationships through which we have come to know it. This paper is an invitation to widen

the circle: to gather more practitioners into the conversation, to recognise the authority of what they know, and to build knowledge structures worthy of their experience. Occupational therapy has the frameworks, the values, and the stated commitments required to do this work well. The unresolved question is whether the profession has the courage, humility, and the will to act on them.

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