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Perspective

Making a cup of tea 30 years on: How to analyse occupation

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ABSTRACT

Background: Thirty years ago, Creek (1996) argued that making a cup of tea is a fit subject for an honours degree: an ordinary occupation that only looks simple and that repays the occupational therapist's skills of analysis. Activity analysis remains central to practice, yet the profession has never agreed a shared language for it; and its theoretical underpinnings are seldom examined.

Aim: This paper revisits Creek's example thirty years on and asks what occupational therapists are analysing when they analyse an occupation. It sets out what activity analysis is, how it can be undertaken and how three bodies of theory deepen it.

Argument: Taking the making of a hot drink as a worked example, the paper reads occupation through three theoretical lenses: cultural-historical activity theory, practice theory and new materialism. The profession has tended to frame its knowledge as a choice between opposing pairs, a habit poorly suited to a complex occupation. These lenses are not rivals but progressively widen the circle of what is understood to take part in an occupation, from the individual mind, to social practice, to more-than-human matter.

Conclusion and implications: A full occupational analysis attends to cultural mediation, social practice and material participation. Analysis is not a procedure completed before professional reasoning begins; it is part of that reasoning. Foregrounding these theories offers occupational therapists and students contemporary, citable resources with which to understand and justify a defining professional skill.

Keywords: occupational analysis, activity analysis, new materialism, practice theory, cultural-historical activity theory

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INTRODUCTION

Thirty years ago, Creek (1996) argued that the apparent simplicity of making a cup of tea is an illusion. Using the ordinary activities of everyday life makes the occupational therapist's job look deceptively easy, when making a cup of tea is, in truth, an honours degree subject: a claim later formalised in the definition of occupational therapy as a complex intervention (Creek, 2003). This paper returns to the kitchen, thirty years on, to ask how occupational therapists honour the complexity of occupation.

We suggest that the answer is activity analysis. Despite its central importance, the profession has never agreed a shared language for this core skill and it is defined in overlapping and sometimes contradictory ways (Creek, 2006, 2010; Mackenzie & O'Toole, 2011; Walters, 2019). Students seeking contemporary sources to cite find surprisingly few. This paper uses activity analysis as the general name for the skill and distinguishes three nested levels within it: task analysis, activity analysis and occupational analysis, which are defined, with examples (Creek, 2010).

Activity analysis has two lineages. Occupational therapy's founders drew on the nineteenth-century Arts and Crafts movement, in which handcraft was held to be a form of human flourishing (Hocking, 2008). Alongside this, activity analysis was adapted from industrial time-and-motion study (Creighton, 1992). A faith in making, drawn from Romanticism, has coexisted from the outset with an engineering impulse to break occupation into measurable parts, each approach carrying assumptions about what a person is and what counts as knowledge.

The profession has tended to frame the knowledge underpinning its practice as a choice between opposing pairs: pragmatism or structuralism (Hooper & Wood, 2002). The way research is taught is also binary: quantitative or qualitative, positivist or interpretivist (Allsop, 2012). This either/or habit is poorly suited to explaining a complex occupation (Creek, 2003), shaped at once by bodies, meanings, materials and cultures.

As crafts lost status through the twentieth century, making came to be justified by what it could do for a body part rather than by what it meant to the maker (Laws, 2011). A recent review found qualitative methods dominant in occupational science research, with embodied and non-verbal methods, which might capture knowing that is hard to put into words, named only as future possibilities (Vaughn et al., 2025). The professional reasoning literature comes closest to naming such knowing (Mattingly & Fleming, 1994; Unsworth & Baker, 2016; Sánchez-Zamorano et al., 2025), yet locates it within the therapist. We contend that this knowing also lives outside the therapist: in the sequence of a task, the resistance of a material and the configuration of body, tool and space. Theorising activity analysis well means holding several theoretical resources together, rather than choosing between them.

We offer three lenses through which occupation can be analysed, taking the making of a hot drink as our worked example. Cultural-historical activity theory views tea-making as culturally mediated action. Practice theory conceptualises it as a social practice, held together by meanings, competences and materials. New materialism shows it emerging in the intra-action between a person and lively materials. Each lens reveals something the others miss and each shapes what the therapist can see, grade and adapt.

This paper aims to explain activity analysis and describe how to do it. The paper first revisits the original example, then applies each lens in

turn, draws them together and returns, thirty years on, to the cup of tea.

Positionality statement

We write as two occupational therapists based in England, UK. Jennifer Creek wrote the original 1996 paper on making a cup of tea and her work on the terminology and core concepts of occupational therapy underpins the analyses described here. Julie Walters's contribution grew from her practice-based PhD, where the methods of fellow art and design researchers drew her attention to the form and materials of occupation. Our examples draw on British habits of tea-making, which are one form among many: across the world, making and sharing a hot drink differs in form, function and meaning (Fair & Barnitt, 1999).

Why tea-making still matters

Occupational therapists achieve a deep understanding of the physical, temporal, material, social and personal dimensions of occupation by analysing tasks, activities and occupations; identifying what is involved in performing an occupation successfully and where a client is having difficulties.

Thirty years ago, Creek (1996) highlighted the complexity of an apparently simple everyday activity, pointing out that using the activities of everyday life as therapeutic media makes 'the occupational therapist's job look deceptively simple' (p. 128). Observers, seeing therapist and client making tea together, may conclude that the goal of the intervention is a cup of tea. Skills in activity analysis enable us to select, apply and adapt activities and give us a language to explain the subtlety of what we are doing.

Creek (1996) and others (Fair & Barnitt, 1999; Hannam, 1997) chose making a cup of tea as their exemplar because it is an ordinary activity with which most people in the UK are familiar; and because it affords scope for both assessing a wide variety of skills and adaptation to meet a range of needs.

Making a hot drink, like any human occupation, is shaped by personal meanings, goals and social norms, as well as by material, temporal and cultural dimensions, and is performed differently across eras. Thirty years ago, in the UK, it largely meant tea or instant coffee, made at home with cow's milk. Tea drinking has fallen sharply since 1974, while the use of ground coffee has grown since the 2010s (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs [DEFRA], 2025). Plant-based milks are now used by around a third of British adults (Mintel, 2025), and a coffee shop sector that barely existed in 1996 now has more than 11,000 outlets (World Coffee Portal, 2025). We now have far more choice and tea is one option among many.

In the second quarter of the 21st century, making a hot drink remains a relevant occupation for occupational therapists to use with many people; activity analysis enables the therapist to unpack how and why. Drawing on the second author's definitions (Creek, 2003, 2007,

2010; Creek & Bullock, 2008), this paper considers three levels of analysis.

Task analysis identifies the sequence of steps that make up an activity. In making a cup of tea, these might be filling the kettle, switching it on, choosing a mug, adding a teabag, pouring on the boiling water, stirring, removing the teabag and adding milk.

Activity analysis identifies the demands an activity makes on the performer: the physical, cognitive, intrapersonal and social skills its performance requires. Each task may utilise different skills; a wider range of motor skills is needed to fill the kettle than to stir the tea. Occupational analysis considers historical, social, personal and environmental components of occupational performance, including cultural contexts, materiality, physical setting and meanings. Making a cup of tea for oneself differs from making tea for a customer in a café where you work.

The occupational therapist takes account of all these components when planning an intervention; a format for structuring such an analysis is given in Appendix 1. It is at the level of occupational analysis, where the occupation is situated in a person, culture and context, that the three lenses do their work, and it is there that the discussion now concentrates.

Occupational analysis through cultural-historical activity theory

Making a cup of tea is a culturally saturated process. It is precisely this complexity that cultural-historical activity theory helps us to see.

Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934) lived through immense social change in what became the Soviet Union, which invested in education and literacy to enable broad social participation. He proposed that distinctively human higher mental functions develop not from within the individual alone but through engagement with the social world (Vygotsky, 1978). Central to his account is mediation: people act on the world not directly but through tools and signs that are themselves cultural products. He distinguished technical tools (physical artefacts that extend our capacity to act) from psychological tools, or signs (which extend our capacity to think and communicate). Language is the pre-eminent psychological tool but numbers, maps, recipes and cultural scripts function similarly. For Vygotsky, every higher psychological function appears twice: first on the social level, later on the individual.

This thinking considers the kettle, teapot, cup and teabag as technical tools, each encoding accumulated technological and cultural knowledge. But tea-making is equally mediated by psychological tools: the language that names each step, the shared understanding of what constitutes a properly made cup of tea, the social scripts governing when tea is offered, to whom and in what form. To analyse tea-making is to analyse a system of mediated action.

This framing has implications for grading. Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development (ZPD), the distance between what a person can achieve independently and with skilled guidance, is a theoretical foundation for what occupational therapists know clinically as the just-right challenge. Lyons (1984) argued that assessing a child's ZPD, identifying what becomes possible with graduated assistance, should inform treatment planning. The therapist pitches activity just beyond the person's current capacity, while providing support that enables success, then withdraws support as capacity grows. This is one example of what occupational therapists mean by grading: not simply a practical technique but a considered response to the developmental and relational nature of human activity.

Cultural transmission is equally significant. Tea-making is acquired through observation, participation and correction; the way tea is prepared (strong or weak, mug or pot, milk first or last) encodes regional, generational and class identities, so the novice does not merely learn a procedure but is inducted into a cultural practice. Vygotsky's (1978) concept of internalisation explains how what begins as a shared, social activity (child watching parent, client following therapist) becomes, through repeated participation, an individual and increasingly automatic capability. For occupational therapists working with people who have lost familiar routines, this is a reminder that what is relearned is never simply a motor sequence but a culturally embedded activity with its own meanings and history.

Vygotsky's successor, Leont'ev (1978), proposed a hierarchical structure of activities, actions and operations, relating human engagement to need, goal and habit. Cultural-historical activity theory moves beyond the individual toward the systemic conditions in which activity is embedded: community, rules and division of labour. This begins to converge with what later theorists would articulate as social practice (See the section on new materialism).

Yet cultural-historical activity theory has limits. Its primary focus is cognition: it offers a theory of how people acquire culturally mediated activities but says less about how practices persist and transform across populations. More fundamentally, its tools and objects remain instrumental: means through which human purposes are enacted. The kettle boils water; the cup receives it; the teabag releases its properties. This thinking does not readily accommodate the possibility that materials are not passive objects awaiting enlistment but might actively shape occupational performance and what it demands. Attending to the participatory role of non-human matter is what new materialist approaches bring into focus (Section 5).

Occupational analysis through practice theory

Practice theory is a collective term for a range of theories that take social practices as their main focus. A social practice can be defined most simply as 'a routinised type of behaviour' (Reckwitz 2002, p. 250); such behaviours include 'doings/sayings, tasks and projects' (Schatzki 2002, p, 74), all the human activities within the purview of occupational therapy. Practice theories can therefore be incorporated into occupational analysis, contributing to therapists' understanding of the dynamic, social, embodied nature of occupations.

Practice theory is concerned with the activities of individuals and groups, such as work or leisure practices, and with larger systems of practice, such as organisations and everyday life (Nicolini 2012; Shove et al., 2012). To be called a practice, an activity or behaviour must include three characteristics that distinguish it from the generality of human action:

1.) shared understandings of what is done
2.) rules, principles, precepts and instructions for how it should be done
3.) the reasons why it is done (Schatzki, 1996).

For example, kicking a ball becomes the practice of football when the performers know how football is played, understand its rules and believe they are playing football. Practices are thus fundamentally social: they are the site where social life takes place (Schatzki, 2002).

A fourth characteristic of social practices is their materiality: they take place in material contexts, they involve the use of things, such as tools, and they are performed by the bodies of participants.

Practices exist not only in the moment of performance but between and beyond individual

performances: there are games of football and there is the idea of football. Schatzki (1996) called these two modes practice-as-performance, the practice in the moment of doing, and practice-as-entity, its persistence over time and between performances. This is similar to Nelson's (1988) formulation of occupational performance and occupational form.

A social practice can be conceptualised as comprising three elements: meanings, materials and competences (Shove et al., 2012). Meaning is 'the social and symbolic significance of participation [in a practice] at any one moment' (Shove et al., 2012, p, 23) and is both social and personal (Creek & Allen, 2023). The social meaning is part of practice-as-entity, deriving from the purpose and value the practice has within a culture; the personal meaning is linked to the performer's goals and identity. When analysing an occupation, the therapist seeks to understand both its social meanings within the culture and its personal meanings for a particular client. The meaning of occupation is itself culturally situated: practitioners interviewed in seven Sub-Saharan African countries described occupation as collective and contextual, challenging individualistic Western definitions (Akrofi, 2025).

Materials include things, organic and inorganic, that exist in the objective external world rather than the subjective inner worlds of individuals: 'the physical components of a person's life that are essential to the performance of all activities' (Creek & Allen 2023, p19). The therapist analyses an occupation to identify the demands it makes on the performing body, the environmental requirements for its performance and the tools, equipment and infrastructure it requires.

Competence is the skills and knowledge people need to perform activities recognised as social practices (Creek & Allen, 2023, p19), including 'multiple forms of understanding and practical knowledgeability' (Shove et al., 2012, p, 23). To play football, people need to understand the rules, know how to play and have the necessary physical, cognitive and interpersonal skills. To match an activity to a client's level of competence, the therapist identifies the physical, cognitive, intrapersonal and interpersonal skills its performance requires.

Practices emerge when connections are made between the three types of elements and when people are recruited to perform the practice. For example, tea drinking spread in the UK as the leaf became more affordable and people learned to brew it into a palatable drink and, in the nineteenth century, the temperance movement promoted tea as a sober alternative to alcohol (Rappaport, 2013; UK Tea & Infusions Association, n.d.).

Practices persist through repeated performances by individuals and communities, and change over time as their elements reconfigure across performances by different people; more people in the UK now make tea with teabags rather than loose-leaf tea. Practices can also persist as entities even when no longer performed: we can think and talk about practices we have never seen.

The contribution practice theory makes to occupational analysis has limits. While occupational therapists are concerned with individual performance (the sequence of steps, the skills required, the personal and social components of the occupation), practice theory focuses on the practice itself. It has little to say about how a person learns to perform or about the influence of materiality on performance. This latter point is addressed by our third lens.

Occupational analysis through new materialism

When Creek (1996) argued that making a cup of tea is a fit subject for an honours degree, her

case was that it takes the skills of analysis and reflection to convert an ordinary activity into an effective treatment medium. Yet both theories above hold the materials at arm's length: for cultural-historical activity theory the kettle is a technical tool through which a human purpose is enacted; for practice theory it is a material element recruited by a competent performer. In both, matter waits to be used.

New materialism begins with a different premise: the kettle, the water, the heat, the cup and the leaf are not passive elements of human doing but active participants. New materialism offers a language for the material dimension of occupation that occupational therapists have always attended to but find difficult to articulate.

New materialism is a family of positions developed across feminist theory, philosophy and physics from the late 1990s, refusing the separation of the human from the more-than-human world (Braidotti, 2013; Bennett, 2010). Its most rigorous statement is agential realism (Barad, 2007), which argues that knowing and being are inseparable (onto-epistemology) and that entities do not pre-exist their relations but become what they are through them. What we treat as separate things are outcomes of intra-action; the boundary between one body and another is enacted in the encounter, in what Barad (2007) calls the agential cut. Jane Bennett (2010) names the corollary thing-power: the capacity of materials to act, enable and obstruct independently of human intention, so that doing becomes the work of a distributed agency spread across an assemblage of bodies and stuff. The anthropologist, Tim Ingold (2013), brings this to the woodwork bench: to make is not to impose a finished idea onto inert matter but to join forces with a material that has its own tendencies, following its grain and correcting as it answers back (Ingold, 2013; Gauntlett, 2018).

Read this way, making a cup of tea is not a sequence of actions performed upon objects but an event that emerges between person and objects. The full kettle has a weight that pulls on the wrist and shoulder, setting the height at which a counter is usable; full or half-full are not details but different occupations. The water is not neutral: its hardness furs the kettle with limescale and shapes what counts as a good cup of tea. Heat is the most insistent participant: it releases tannin and caffeine from the leaf, cold water will not make tea, and because it can scald it shapes the whole choreography of tea-making. The milk, whether from a cow or from oats, behaves differently in the cup and the mug's heft and familiarity press back on the hand. The resulting brew is not what the maker planned but what the maker and these lively materials settle together. This is what occupational scientists mean in describing occupation as an assemblage (Barlott & Turpin, 2022), a craft as an 'intimate companionship of body, mind and materials' whose maker and made thing are ontologically inseparable (von Kürthy et al., 2023, p. 647), or human occupation and environment as impossible to prise apart (Núñez et al., 2022).

The cultural life of tea looks different through this lens because culture appears as agency distributed through matter. In Bennett's (2010) political ecology of things, a single cup enrols the tea plant, the grower, the soil and a global supply chain. Occupational therapy already has language for elements that shape one another: the person–environment–occupation relationship is transactive (Law et al., 1996). Intra-action claims more. In an interaction, ready-made things meet and influence each other; in intra-action, the things themselves are formed in the meeting: 'distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action' (Barad, 2007, p. 33). So, the palate that learns to accept tannin and caffeine is a body

remade by repeated encounters, and learning to make and like tea is a body entering the assemblage. An unfamiliar kitchen, where the kettle is in the wrong place and the mugs are someone else's, makes the point: change the materials and you change the occupation because competence is not in the person alone but in a configuration of person, tools and place. The variations Fair and Barnitt (1999) observed between cultures and generations (milk first or last, bag or pot, strong or weak) read here not as surface preference but as different configurations settling differently. Hannam's (1997) tea drinkers invite the same rereading: the meanings they attached to thin china, heirloom services and the balance of hot tea and cold milk were not laid over those materials but made with them.

The new materialist lens has limits. Dissolving the boundary between person and world can blur questions of intention, responsibility and the distinctively human meaning the previous two lenses reveal. It has least to say about aspects of tea-making that are most symbolic: the identity that codes tea as an older person's drink and sends younger drinkers to the coffee shop; the rite of passage of being trusted to make a hot drink; the rituals through which such meanings travel. New materialism can name the material face of these shifts (new machines, vessels and gestures) but not the meanings they carry; for those we need the cultural and practice-based lenses. Its refusal of clean separations also sits awkwardly with the outcome-focused ethos of healthcare: distributed agency is a powerful corrective to the assumption that competence sits in the person alone, but a therapist still needs to say what this person can safely do. These are reasons not to set the lens aside but to hold it alongside the others. It is to this synthesis that the paper now turns.

Towards a richer theory of occupational analysis

The three lenses presented in this paper each address a different facet of occupational analysis and each widens the circle of our understanding. Cultural-historical activity theory widens it beyond the individual mind: even a solitary tea-maker acts with culturally transmitted tools, words and scripts, so we see how a person comes to inhabit an occupation and find a basis for grading and the just-right challenge (Vygotsky, 1978). Practice theory widens the circle beyond the individual: tea-making exists as a practice, made of meanings, competences and materials (Shove et al., 2012), into which each of us is recruited, and we see how an occupation lives, persists and changes in a culture. New materialism widens the circle past the boundary of the human, to the kettle, the water and the heat as participants, and gives us a language for the tools, adaptations and environments we have always worked with but never effectively theorised.

The three lenses address the issue with which we began: the dissonance that arises when a profession fails to acknowledge the two ways of knowing, measuring and interpreting that underpin its practice. Occupational therapists struggle to say where a third kind of knowing belongs: the knowing held in hands, tools and places. Occupational analysis includes task and activity analysis and also exceeds them: a full occupational analysis attends to cultural mediation, to social practice and to material participation.

This is not an abstract prescription. Culturally sensitive tea-making assessment demands attention not only to the individual but to the social, cultural and material aspects of the occupation (Fair & Barnitt, 1999). Assessment reveals how this person learned to make tea and from whom (cultural mediation); what tea-making means for their community and generation

(social practice); and how utensils, ingredients and methods shape this performance (material participation). These insights cannot be reached by self-report alone; they require the therapist to observe the performance. Where assessment drifts towards self-report, the material dimensions of occupation slip from view. The lens we choose determines what we see, and so what we assess, grade and adapt.

A brief illustration shows how the three lenses might work together. Imagine a woman in her seventies, returning home after a stroke that has weakened her right arm, who makes a mug of tea for herself each morning and a pot of tea for her family every Sunday afternoon. Activity analysis shows that the morning mug, made with a teabag and a half-filled kettle, asks less of her grip, strength and two-handed co-ordination than lifting and pouring a full teapot. Cultural-historical activity theory directs the therapist to how she learned to make tea, and from whom, so that familiar words and routines can support her while physical help is given and then withdrawn. Practice theory shows Sunday tea as a family practice through which she holds her place as host, even as her grandchildren turn to coffee. New materialism shows that a lighter pot, a kettle tipper and a trolley change the occupation itself, as does moving the sessions from the hospital kitchen to her own. The goal of therapy is not a cup of tea but her return to hosting her family, perhaps with a grandchild filling the kettle while she pours.

CONCLUSION

Occupation is both the purpose of our profession and the means by which we help our clients to develop their capabilities. As Creek pointed out, in 1996, 'People are complex, illness is complex and the process of occupational therapy is complex. That is why making a cup of tea is an honours degree subject' (p. 130). Thirty years on, making a hot drink remains a common occupation in British culture, although its meaning and performance have changed.

In this paper, we argue that making a cup of tea (or coffee, or matcha) remains a useful and appropriate tool for occupational therapists. However, we need to better understand not only the skills required for its performance, and how that performance is structured, but also the personal and cultural meanings of the occupation and the active role of materials. A cup of tea emerges as the outcome of an intra-action between an agentive person and agential materials.

We suggest that the occupational therapy knowledge base could usefully expand to incorporate ideas from cultural-historical activity theory, social practice theory and new materialism. In particular, these theories strengthen our capacity to analyse and utilise occupations. Analysis is not a procedure that we complete before professional reasoning begins; it is an integral part of reasoning.

A proposed occupational analysis format is presented in Appendix 1 on the next page.

Appendix 1: An occupational analysis format

The following format sets out the components of a full occupational analysis. It may be used to structure the analysis of any occupation, including making a hot drink. It is adapted from Creek and Bullock (2008).

The occupation

- Name of occupation
- Timing: length of time and number of sessions
- Special features of the environment (space and setting)
- Brief description
- Sequence of main tasks
- Preparation (tools, equipment, materials, environment, participants, therapist)
- Security (e.g., physical environment, social ambiance, predictability of activity)

Performance requirements

- Physical demands (e.g., sensation, co-ordination, fine motor skills, mobility)
- Cognitive demands (e.g., attention, concentration, temporal awareness, abstract thinking, planning, knowledge)
- Intrapersonal demands (e.g., frustration tolerance, trust, creativity, risk taking, autonomy)
- Interpersonal demands (e.g., co-operation, compromise, sharing, competition)
- Appropriateness (e.g., gender, age, generation differences, culture, religion, education)

Factors influencing motivation

- Extrinsic (what are the rewards and sanctions?)
- Intrinsic (e.g., curiosity, competence, achievement)

Effect on identity

- Personal identity
- Social identity

Meaning of the occupation

- Actual and symbolic meaning in the components
- Actual and symbolic meaning in the process
- Actual and symbolic meaning in the outcome
- Social and cultural purpose and value (which may be negative)

Opportunities provided by the occupation

- To have an effect (e.g., on the self, on others, on the environment, on non-human objects)
- To develop (e.g., social identity, self-confidence, body image, emotional control, empathy, construction of meaning)
- To gratify needs (e.g., creating personal meaning, expressing feelings, exercising capacities, satisfying curiosity, identifying with others, exercising choice, achieving)
- To learn (e.g., knowledge, skills, attitudes)
- To learn about the self (e.g., interests, abilities, limits, strengths)

Barriers to engagement

- Personal, environmental, financial and social barriers

Facilitators of engagement

- Personal, environmental, financial and social facilitators

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