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Exploring the Forgotten Restorative Dimension of Occupation: Quilting and Quilt Use

Dana Howell and Doris Pierce

Abstract

Restorative, or restful, occupations serve to renew depleted energy resources and result in an improved physical and mental state, with feelings of regeneration during and after participation. Restorative occupations include sleep and quiet focus activities such as quilting. Historically, the concept of restoration has been a neglected dimension of occupation within the fields of occupational therapy and occupational science. The process of quilting is used in this article as an example of a restorative occupation. Restoration from quilting may be gained through the experiences of meaning, tradition, ritual, and rite of passage that quilting provides. Quilt use may be restorative as well, through associations with sleep, meaning, and the sensory qualities of quilts. Both quilting and quilt use have therapeutic benefits that promote restoration.

Key words

Restoration
Rest

Dana Howell, OTD, OTR/L is an assistant professor at Idaho State University in Pocatello, Idaho, USA.

Address for correspondence:
Idaho State University,
Department of Physical and Occupational Therapy
Campus Box 8045
Pocatello, ID 83209
Email: howedana@isu.edu

Doris Pierce, Ph.D., OTR/L, FAOTA,
Chair in Occupational Therapy
Eastern Kentucky University, Kentucky, USA.

Address for correspondence:
Department of Occupational Therapy
Eastern Kentucky University
103 Dizney Building
521 Lancaster Ave.,
Richmond, KY 40475-3102
USA.
Email: DPierceOTR@aol.com

Restorative, or restful, occupations serve to renew depleted energy resources, and may include sleeping, napping, and engaging in certain re-energizing occupations. Restorative occupations result in an improved physical and mental state, with feelings of renewal and regeneration during and after participation. In Western society, the restorative dimension of occupational experience has been largely neglected due to cultural norms that value work over rest¹. In this article, the restorative dimension of occupation will be explored through the examples of quilting and quilt use.

Why Was Rest Forgotten?

In Western culture, high value is placed on the productive dimension of occupation². Productivity is a central aspect of self-identity and operates as a personal measure of daily life success for many people. These views are deeply rooted in history. The Enlightenment and Reformation resulted in the Protestant work ethic, an ethos that judged human morality in terms of industriousness, craftsmanship, fairness in business, and humility^{1,3}. The Protestant work ethic maintains a strong grip on Western society today, with a continued emphasis on productivity in business, home management, and even leisure.

In 1922, Adolph Meyer named rest as one of the primary categories of occupation, along with work, leisure, and self-care⁴. However, his message was essentially ignored in Western society, in which it is generally believed that valuable time is wasted while sleeping, time that could be spent more productively. It has long been considered socially unacceptable in the United States to nap or even to be tired in the afternoon. Interestingly, at the time that Meyer wrote about the importance of rest, both work and sleep were newly freed from the age-old tempo of daylight and dark by the advent of electricity. Released from these constraints, and in keeping with Western cultural values, industrialism then took productivity to new heights, and electric lighting plunged humans into chronic and culture-wide sleep debt^{3,5}.

Shaped by the cultural values from which they emerged, the fields of occupational therapy and occupational science have largely ignored sleep and other restorative occupations. When considered in light of occupational therapy's history and general aim of therapy to "restore" individuals, this oversight of the restorative qualities of occupation is striking. Logically, Meyer's claim that balance between work, leisure, self-care, and rest is desirable in human occupations should have led to more interest in the restorative dimension.

In spite of the fact that rest was named within the traditional classifications of occupation, from Meyer to Reilly, not much more has come of it^{4,6}. The field of occupational therapy has attempted to address balance of occupations in the lives of clients using the common sense cultural classifications of work, leisure, and self-care. These simple, linear, and value-laden cultural categories have proved insufficient to the complexity of describing, much less balancing, occupations⁷. Pierce and Zemke propose that occupational scientists and occupational therapists retain the wisdom of these cultural classes, but at the same time advance to a greater accuracy of description of occupation, by examining the subjective pleasure, productivity, and restoration experienced during occupation^{8,9}. At first glance, this does not appear to be a particularly dramatic change, as it still closely echoes the traditional classes. However, the radical shift occurs in the little word “and,” which complexifies the description of occupation beyond the capacities of forced choice classes such as work or play. This shift is liberating in that it releases many of the historical values surrounding occupation that may cloud understanding such as the identification of work with pay and play with children.

This shift into a more three-dimensional description of occupational experience as simultaneously pleasurable, productive, and restorative opens the door to a potential examination of balance in occupations in a way that has not been possible before. Early data has begun to show relationships in how these three characteristics occur within an occupational experience and over time for a single individual⁸. Time researchers, for example, have identified sleep, rest, and relaxation as important components of a healthy, balanced lifestyle. Zuzanek found that perceived pressures on time use lead to decreases in leisure activity as well as decreases in life satisfaction¹⁰. Singleton and Harvey studied how different stages of the life cycle affect time use and found that certain groups had less time to spend in leisure activities¹¹. McKinnon surveyed elderly Canadians to determine their time use and found that leisure was a significant part of their daily lives¹². These valuable studies allude to the dynamic that exists between the importance of restorative occupations in daily life, and the prevalent Western cultural norm of more highly valuing the productive use of time.

Restorative Occupations in Everyday Life

Sleep, the most obvious restorative occupation, is required for human survival, occupational functioning, and renewal. Sleep regenerates physical and cognitive processes⁵. Inadequate sleep may result in decreased cognitive and physical abilities, dangerous mistakes, irritability, depression, decreased immune function, and stress-related illnesses^{5,13,14}. It is one of the few occupations for which it can be stated that its absence will result in death. Sleep medicine is a new specialty dedicated to the study of sleep, its typical physiologic patterns, its tie to health, and the variety of disorders commonly seen when this essential occupation is disrupted¹⁵. Despite the current research in

sleep medicine, sleep has received relatively little attention from occupational science. This is remarkable when considering how much individuals enjoy the occupation of sleep, invest meaning in sharing sleep with others, and are intrigued with the content of their dreams.

In addition to sleeping, physical, cognitive, and mental restoration can also be gained through participating in restful occupations while awake. For example, walking in the woods, reading a good book, eating a fine meal, playing music, viewing art, praying, or even exercising can result in feelings of restoration¹⁶. Every individual has unique preferences for highly restorative occupations. Needlework, woodworking, or writing in a journal are occupations that some people will find to be calming and re-energizing, while others will not. Frequently, highly restorative occupations have strong routines of simple, even repetitive, actions and often appear to be high in pleasure, as well as restoration. Other characteristics associated with restoration in occupation include personal meaning for the individual, in the form of ritual and tradition, as well as historical or personal connections to the occupation. Quilting and quilt use will now be discussed to illustrate the multifaceted dimensions of restoration in occupation.

The Restorative Qualities of Quilting

Quilting as a Quiet Focus Occupation

Many quiet focus occupations, often labeled hobbies, provide a sense of restoration. Activities such as wood working, model building, cake decorating, and crochet all require concentrated attention to a specified sequence of actions that, once mastered, also free the mind for reflection^{17,18}. Becoming totally engrossed in a task, so that time seems to pass by very rapidly, is a hallmark of flow¹⁹. Flow is a state of concentration so focused that it results in total absorption in the activity. This meditative quality is common in quilting. Quilters describe the actual process of constructing a quilt as restful and satisfying, in part from the concentration necessary to successfully complete the task²⁰. Quilting consists of a plethora of distinct tasks, each of which requires a different skill to perform. For example, cutting the fabric entails precise measurement, eye hand coordination, and spatial abilities to lay out the material. Each aspect of quilting is unique and novel and requires efficient attention and other cognitive abilities. This challenge of performing each unique aspect of the project is characterized by focus, intention, and precision, and is praised as restorative by some quilters²⁰.

Quilting as Meaning, Tradition, Ritual, and Rite of Passage

The restorative benefits offered by quilting are due in part to the unique historical meaning of quilts in Western culture. Quilting has existed for centuries, in various forms, all over the world. It began out of practicality, and has evolved into a beautiful art form, enveloped by tradition and ritual.

During colonial times in the United States, women made quilts out of pure necessity, to provide warmth for their families²¹. It seems logical that they would try to make the

quilts quickly, and to be as functional as possible. Surprisingly, however, early American quilters created quilts with beautiful designs and careful hand stitching²². Women took pride in their handwork and strove to make their quilts beautiful. Even after blankets became readily available in stores, women continued to quilt. Today, quilting remains a popular hobby. Many quilters join local guilds or collect antique quilts²³. Looking carefully at individual quilts can be like looking back into history. Quilt patterns have been passed down through the generations and often have personal and cultural significance. They may also be composed of fabric that is significant to the quilter, such as childhood clothing²².

Quilting bees are a classic example of how deeply the experience of quilting draws on historical meaning, tradition, and ritual for its restorative quality. Rituals are inherently restorative activities that are repetitive and result in change into a new or intensified state²⁴. The ritual preparations for a traditional Western quilting bee begin with collecting fabric with which to piece the quilt top. These pieces are then sewn together in designs that are meaningful for the maker or the recipient. A good example of a traditional quilt pattern is the double wedding ring, which is given to women when they marry. The pieced quilt top is then basted over a layer of batting and a fabric backing and the three layers are stretched over a large frame. Following these preparations, a group of women gathers to do the intricate hand quilted designs that permanently connect the layers. Participation in quilting bees in the past was a time of socialization and community building for women, often in the midst of lives of hard work and poverty. Today, quilting bees remain a staple of quilt enthusiasts²³.

In an ethnographic study on the culture of quiltmaking and a modern quilt guild, researchers found that quilters reported comradery, sharing, and understanding between members as some of the reasons they participated²³. The quilt guild is the equivalent of the quilting bees of the past, and their purpose has remained the same over time. Women gather together for a time of socializing, laughter, and creativity, set apart from their regular daily activities. This can be extremely restorative.

Creating a quilt as a special gift for someone is a rite of passage, often for both the quilter and the recipient. Rites of passage are a unique form of ritual and include three phases in time: separation, transition, and reincorporation²⁴. For example, a grandmother to be may create a baby quilt for an expected first grandchild. First, she creates the quilt while reflecting on her child and the coming baby. This is the separation phase, where she deconstructs her current relationship with her own child in anticipation of a new conceptualization of their relationship that includes the baby. In the transition phase, she gives the quilt to her daughter, thereby acknowledging the changes in the family. When the baby begins to use the quilt, showing up at family gatherings swaddled in grandmother's quilt, this marks the reincorporation phase of the rite of passage. The reconstruction of the family's relationships is ritually eased and marked through the creation of the quilt and its use.

The Restorative Qualities of Quilt Use

Restoration by Associations with Sleep

Quilts are often associated with sleep, and may be used in creating a personal sleep space and bedtime rituals. In this way, quilt use is unique in its restorative dimension. For example, decorating a room with family quilts can transform an ordinary space into a private sanctuary, conducive to restoration. Whether watching television or talking on the phone, doing that while curled up in a quilt means comfort, rest and safety, because it is something associated with sleep. "Something happens when you put a quilt on your bed. And wow, when you sleep under it, it's like you are sheltered, like nothing can happen to you"²⁵.

Quilters often take great care when creating quilts for bedding, to ensure that the quilt has the best size, texture, weight, and warmth to support a good night's sleep. For example, the geographic and seasonal use of the quilt is considered when designing for warmth, as is the correct size: for babies, smaller quilts, and for couples, larger. When designing a sleep quilt the quality of the rest is uppermost in the quilter's mind. One woman stated that if she feels depressed when she goes to bed, she covers herself with a quilt made with a lot of satin. "I just feel real snazzy, and I can't be depressed but so long [sic], lying under that"²⁶. Creating a comfortable environment to sleep in is vital to obtaining adequate rest, and the use of a quilt may be an effective way to enhance a sleep environment.

Sensation as Restorative

Texture is extremely important in quilting. Most quilts are made of soft cottons. But even within cotton, the emotional response to different fabrics will vary. For example, a flannel quilt will elicit an entirely different feeling than will one made of denims. At quilt shows, cotton gloves are often handed out to viewers so they may freely touch as well as view the quilts on display. This is because the three-dimensional feel created by the quilting adds an important component to the enjoyment of quilts. It is desirable to feel the thickness and texture of the quilts in order to appreciate them completely.

Quilts are also an example of how restoration can emanate from the visual aesthetic of an occupation. Quilts can be restorative just by looking at them. Quilt designs and colors are often specifically selected and placed to be soothing to the eye. Much of what humans consider pleasurable comes from sensory input, such as vision and touch². The brain seems drawn to gazing over a pleasing visual pattern. The quilter creates a personal visual statement with intricate patterns, creative stitching, and the use of color and texture to produce imaginative designs. Different visual styles of quilts appeal to different individuals. For example, Amish quilts typically feature vivid, contrasting colors in simple shapes with multiple borders, producing a stark beauty that is relaxing to view²². Conversely, quilts composed of more intricate designs seem to actually generate visual movement within the quilt. Thus the aesthetic quality of quilts may offer an additional restorative component.

Restoration through the Meaning in Quilt Use

Myths or legends that are historically or personally meaningful to the user often accompany quilts. An excellent example is the story of the healing quilt, described by Freeman in his book *A Communion of the Spirits*, which is a collection of stories about African-American quilters²⁷. Freeman remembers when he became very ill as a child in 1946. Instead of taking him to the hospital, his grandmother insisted on treating him at home, by wrapping him in a healing quilt, reading to him from the Bible, and giving him special teas. When he asked her about the quilt's healing powers, she recounted the story of how it had been made in the middle 1800s by her relative. His grandmother went on to say that some of the material used in it came from an ancestor in the early 1800s who was a slave her entire life. The woman was part Native American and had the gift of healing. She had treated both blacks and whites and was well respected in both communities, in spite of being a slave. The quilt was used in several ways, including healing of the sick. Additionally, newborns were sometimes placed on the quilt to nap in order to get in touch with the old ones and receive their blessing and protection. The healing quilt had survived over time, accompanied by this legend to explain the healing powers it contained, as well as the rituals that went along with the quilt.

Both quilting and quilt use are uniquely restorative occupations. In the frequent case of the quilter who creates a quilt for a loved one at the time of an important life event, these two aspects are unusually joined. The quilter is restored by her quilting, carefully considering how the quilt will facilitate healthy, soothing rest for the recipient of the quilt. The quilt user may draw increased restorative effects from the quilt because of who made it. The gift of rest is passed along, and a new tradition is created.

Therapeutic Applications

For occupational therapists, who look to occupational science for an enhanced insight of their primary modality, the therapeutic value of the restorative dimension of occupation need hardly be argued. Therapists are familiar with patients depleted by a lack of this quality of occupation in their lives, such as those with disturbed sleep patterns and those whose complete lack of occupational balance has led to coronary and stress-related injuries. Occupational therapists are uniquely qualified to bring this understanding of the important restorative dimension to the attention of patients and other health care providers.

Quilting and other needlecrafts are already being used as therapeutic occupations in some settings. One American Midwest nursing home began a quilting club for its residents and reported enthusiasm from the participants²⁸. Other nursing facilities and hospitals use different activities that may be restful, such as knitting or painting. One qualitative study explored the use of needlecraft by people with chronic illnesses²⁹. Several participants in the study reported feelings of relaxation among the many pleasurable benefits of needlecraft. Restorative occupations must be recognized for these positive qualities, and implemented into treatment programs.

Conclusion

In occupational science and occupational therapy, the restorative dimension of occupation has received little theoretical or empirical attention. Western valuing of productivity above other aspects of human experience has led to a dangerous neglect of inquiry into the ways in which restorative occupations renew health and the capacity for occupation. The restorative dimension of occupation offers occupational science rich realms of insight awaiting discovery. Until restoration is considered a critical characteristic in the understanding of occupational experience, there will continue to be serious limitations in the ability to examine such questions as occupational balance, life quality, the therapeutic nature of occupation, or the tie between occupation and health.

In this article, the restorative dimension of occupation was explored through the familiar activities of quilting and quilt use. Quilting offers insights into how the historical meanings, traditions, and rituals of quiet focus occupations can bring restoration to someone engaged in these activities. Similarly, quilt use is an excellent avenue along which to examine how sensation, aesthetics, personal meaning, and the basic biological need for rest and sleep all contribute to restoration. The forgotten restorative dimension of occupation must be reclaimed and researched. Occupational science must separate itself from the values of its Western heritage as best it can to examine, not only productivity, but also restoration.

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