

**Thinking about health and happiness based  
on occupations**

# **Occupational Photo Project**

**Etsuko Odawara**

# Foreword

Over 40 years ago, I was lucky enough to join a group of occupational therapists led by Dr. Elizabeth (Betty) Yerxa at the University of Southern California as they began the development of the core science for the field of occupational therapy. Occupational therapy is a health field that originated over 100 years ago with the idea that the things we do that occupy our time (our daily activities or occupations) have an impact on our health and wellness. The loss of this focus in the mid-20th century was partly related to the successful rise of scientific medicine, with its evidence-based assessments, diagnoses, and treatment. While this was extremely welcome in the case of disease, the issue of living with disease residuals, with lifelong chronic disabilities, and the necessary adaptability to the many other life crises which disrupt our health and wellness was essentially ignored my medical and paramedical allied health fields such as occupational therapy. The development of a science which could provide scientific evidence of the effect of occupational therapy upon people's health and well-being was needed and ideally it would reflect the core concepts of the original founding of the field.

A lot of reading, philosophizing, theorizing, discussing and just plain arguing began among the USC faculty group. These processes, along with researching, teaching, and testing occupational therapy practice using the valued concepts began the discipline of occupational science. It spread nationally and internationally as its development continued—more reading, philosophizing, theorizing, discussing and of course, continued arguing in many languages and cultures around the world.

How to help occupational therapists and people outside of the field to understand the complexity of their daily occupations, their value in their adaptation throughout a person's life, and their importance to obtain and maintain health and wellness is a major question asked by occupational scientists. One approach is academic—teaching the theory, research, and practice to occupational therapy students at all current levels of entry: bachelor's, masters, and doctoral degrees (Ph.D., OTD, etc.). But these approaches are limited to people involved in academia and don't reach the practicing therapist or people who aren't therapists.

Dr. Etsuko Odawara, studied occupational science for her Ph.D. degree at the University of Southern California, coming there as an experienced clinical practitioner and occupational therapy educator from Japan. The language and cultural differences caused her to deeply

explore the ideas presented in her classes and to work at cross-cultural translation of them. She then returned to occupational therapy education in Japan and worked with her students there to help them understand occupation within their own cultural experience. She began to develop methods to assist them in exploring occupation in their own lives and lives of people close to them before they began to try to apply the ideas of occupational science in their practice. One of these methods was the use of what she refers to as Occupational Photos as a stimulus for an interview and discussion about the form, function and meaning of an occupation illustrated in the photo.

She has continued working with this method of aiding people in understanding occupation after her retirement through workshops for practicing therapists and through publication of her book in Japanese, explaining the Occupational Photo Project for the layperson and clinician. This E-Book in English is her open access attempt to encourage many people to use this method to explore the depth of their daily occupations. She continues the spirit of occupational science, sharing with the world to promote health and well-being.

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# Introduction

The **Occupational Photo Project** is a practical project to gain an occupational perspective through a photo and an interview. The purpose is to help you to understand people as occupational beings and the relationship of their occupations and health.

## What is an Occupational Photo?

Maybe you are wondering what an Occupational Photo is, because the name seems unfamiliar. Occupations are the activities that we do in everyday life, and similarly, the Occupational Photo Project is a project to help us think about and document people's occupation and health using everyday photo shots.

In the Project, the Listener(interviewer) pays attention to the Speaker(interviewee), both looking at a photo of occupational engagement in everyday life brought by the speaker. They do this to understand occupation, health and well-being (well-being is wellness and is often equated to happiness, tranquility and vigor.) The purpose of this book is to introduce and discuss the Occupational Photo. The author expects that you can learn to understand and practice using Occupational Photos. Although I am going to discuss ideas based on the Occupational Photo Project and how to proceed with it in the next sections of this book, I would like you to first look at some Occupational Photo examples.

### **Miyuki's cooking in the early morning.**



Miyuki wakes up at 4:30, enjoys drinking tea and makes breakfast and lunch for the family members. She values supporting them to stay healthy and do well in their school or work. Her morning routines and cooking also influences her and her family's life rhythm.

### **Yumiko's running.**



Yumiko is in her late twenties. On weekdays, after working in the hospital building with air-conditioning all day, she likes to spend time outdoors. After work, Yumiko enjoys running 4-5 km to get sweaty and renewed. On the weekend, she enjoys running longer and participates in marathons. When she was a student, she valued making records as an athlete. Now however, for Yumiko, running means making an effort step by step and it makes her feel confident and refreshed.

### **Taichi's mountain walk.**



Taichi is a retiree in his sixties who lives with his wife. He engages in volunteer work and takes care of his grandkids and his old mother. Since he was a high school student, Taichi has enjoyed climbing mountains. When he was young, he had a tight schedule. So, on weekends, he used to ride a night train to reach a mountain site and climb the next day. After climbing, he took the night train back to his hometown so that he could go to work the next

day. Taichi liked challenging high mountains with a heavy pack on his back, and concentrating on attacking steep slopes with his utmost efforts. Now, in retirement, he has slowed down his schedule in consideration of his changed stamina and climbing safety. Taichi's climbing has changed in that he takes time to enjoy the flowers, birds and scenery in the mountains and relaxing in the hot springs with his wife before and/after climbing.

### **Sachiko's Pilates.**



Sachiko has suffered from low back pain caused by her job as a nursery school teacher for many years. She joined a weekly Pilates class with her friend. She is relieved and satisfied that her low back pain is much better. Now, she also practices Pilates at home. It refreshes her and she has developed a new habit of paying attention to her body posture. Sachiko's mom is happy that she is in good condition and looks

forward to the class once a week. She values being able to keep working, thus connecting her past to her future.

### **Ryota's car washing.**



Ryota is a teacher in his forties who lives with his wife and three children. He is busy with his work from dawn to dusk. Even on weekends, he has little time to spend with his children. Five summers ago, the eldest child tried to help Ryota washing their cars, but she

got scared of the splashing water from the hose and went back into the house. Later, his children gradually became able to help him. Watching them washing the cars using water and car wash sponges, Ryota feels his children are dependable. This summer, he watched his children work together and raise their spirits enough to splash him with water from the hose. Ryota feels happy with their growth, and the fact that his children are not scared of the hose water anymore.

### **Yoshimi's caring for a fragile elder.**



Yoshimi takes care of an old man with chronic conditions. With his assistance, Yoshimi works most carefully to prepare his food, considering his chronic conditions, his abilities to swallow, digest and absorb different foods, and his likes and dislikes. She arranges his recipes to serve diverse dishes with nutritious balance and seasonal tastes. If the old man enjoys eating her food, Yoshimi feels happy

and finds taking care of him worthwhile.

## **How the Occupational Photo Project started**

Perhaps you are now asking “How did it start? Is it even necessary?” If you share the same curious questions, allow me to shed some light on how it started.

The Occupational Photo Project was developed during my clinical experience, education and research. An event in my private life piqued my interest in occupational therapy and gave me an opportunity to start a career in occupational therapy, but I was unfamiliar with occupation and it had little role in my professional life at the time. However, as I started to explore the concept and principles of occupational science and became more familiar with it, it triggered a shift in my perspective on occupation. My eagerness to share my realization led to the birth of the Occupational Photo Project, a tool so simple, yet so practical and powerful to extend this new perspective on occupation and start a constructive discourse with my students and my colleagues.

## **A big opportunity for occupational therapy**

At the age of 22, I was a liberal arts student preparing to be independent from my parents. Before I got hired for a job, my younger brother met a vehicular accident from which he sustained severe injuries, causing him to lose his ability to carry out his previous everyday life. He had repeated surgeries and became a frequent hospital guest, but at that time, I didn't have enough knowledge to understand his prognosis. I simply wished for his speedy recovery and went off to start my professional life. However, a thought came to my mind while I was building my career, “Isn't it weird that I am working for a company which is linked to my brother's life and to my life?” After this realization, I decided to quit the job, and I returned to my parent's house. From then on, I regularly visited my brother in the hospital. Unfortunately, he didn't recover well.

In a book store in my town, I found a book “The Mechanism of Medical Rehabilitation” by Dr Satoshi Ueda (1971), which inspired me very much. It was the enlightening experience that I was waiting for. It painted a picture of people with disabilities living an active and enjoyable life in various societies. It offered an amazing sight wherein patients got out of their beds and moved on with their lives. It also introduced the professionals responsible for such: physiotherapists and occupational therapists. It provided a clear depiction of an occupational therapist's role in aiding people with disabilities to be able to live actively in their society again. Perhaps it was my interest in making crafts which attracted me to occupational therapy. I had thought walking exercise could guide my brother back to his student life. I wondered, “Could he live actively again with the help of the rehabilitation world?” And it was these ruminations that ushered me to rehabilitation school far away from my hometown.

My education in the rehabilitation school was largely based on a medical model. Students sketched bone specimens, memorize names of bones and muscles, and studied OT knowledges and techniques based on disease and disabilities.

I was interested in OT and worked hard to absorb the professional knowledge and was motivated to participate in classes and practice. My most memorable experience during my professional education was studying muscle testing, range of motion and activities of daily living. Nonetheless, I was nowhere near to figuring out how OT could help my brother, and I still did not understand occupational therapy well. At a party after my commencement, I said “I appreciate everything the school gave me, but I still have yet to answer the core question: ‘What is occupational therapy?’” In search of answers, I started working as an occupational therapist to serve clients, helping them to live life comfortably and fully.

### **What is occupational therapy?**

After I gained experience with adult and older patients in hospitals, I got a faculty position in the OT department of a university. It was a difficult but exciting job for me. Thinking about how to teach best OT practice while also helping my patients to be able to do their daily activities and things they need or want to do brought me joy. However, while I was busy working with my patients, lecturing my students and feeling a sense of purpose, I still had not come to any conclusion as to “what is occupational therapy?” I think many OT students and occupational therapists share this feeling. However, as I couldn’t explain my occupational therapy, I was feeling less confident about my job. I was troubled with the questions: What is occupational therapy? How different is it from physiotherapy, which is our so-called sibling? Am I helping my patients? Am I useful to society? Is it just self-satisfaction? I wondered what I should do to be confident with my OT job.

My brother moved to a couple of other hospitals and I visited him. He didn’t work well with a rehabilitation exercise program. He looked bored in a corner of the hospital gym. When his home life restarted, he needed assistance with most all daily tasks except eating. My family tried to enjoy time with him, taking care of him using another’s help.

I got the idea that what he enjoyed doing was important and valuable. I wanted to call it meaningful occupation. His favorite activities included watching Iqusan, the TV program (on full volume), and playing card games with the family. He also loved playing Beatles’ songs with his keyboard and eating meals. When my family ordered eel dishes, served with individual sauce containers for each place setting, after the meal, he liked challenging himself to pile up sauce containers and often asked me to take pictures of his work. In such photos he was wearing a big smile and looking proud. He liked going to a park in our neighborhood, talking to familiar old people there and watching the cherry blossoms develop, bloom and die off. After my brother settled in back home, I returned to my hometown to live with my family getting a

job at a university there. I taught OT knowledges and techniques by diseases and disabilities as I had learned them in school and in my job experience. But I was unable to share with my students the enjoyment and satisfaction I experienced while I was doing OT practice with my patients. My desperation and frustration led to an irate question which resulted in an awkward silence in the class-- "If Katsuo (a popular Japanese cartoon character) gets a spinal injury at level C6, what happens to his life?" Perhaps my students viewed me as an energetic but odd teacher. It was not long after that my brother needed more care and had to move back into a hospital where he passed on. After his passing, I felt empty, depressed and I wanted to sleep in almost every day.

### **Meeting a new perspective of occupation**

When I recovered from depression, an idea came to me. "It's time to explore and solve the riddle. Let me figure out what OT is." I had an image of myself searching around in different places with a red backpack on my back. I had this desire to put an end to this vagueness I had, which had troubled me when I tried to extend OT's excellence (wonderfulness). Because I didn't find the perfect place to study in Japan, I decided to study abroad and prepared for graduate study.

I went to the University of Southern California (USC) in 1996, where I was introduced to occupational science. In USC, occupational science was a distinct academic discipline, a social science, which was born from occupational therapy's foundation in the United States in 1917. Occupational science focuses on studying humans as occupational beings, putting occupation at the center of research to promote human health. Its purpose is also to support occupational therapy in helping people to promote health and well-being. Although I didn't understand these ideas well, occupational science made me hopeful and excited.

The more I studied, the clearer it became. Gradually, I came to think that the perspective of occupational therapy in which I had been educated only looked at people in a constricted view, highly medical in nature. I also came to realize that I have had a limited perspective of looking at people due to my training, and found out that it is a dilemma shared by many professions. This realization led to a deep attraction to occupational science, which had been studying human health with a wider perspective.

One of precious things I acquired from occupational science is the ability to understand humans as occupational beings, which provides useful hints to support people having difficulties in reestablishing their lives. I came to realize that we humans do not only have measurable motor power and function, but we have our daily lives, our own values, and life course; and we live in a society where we exercise our own wills, but can also be influenced by others. I came to have an image that, through occupation, people live life through their own agency to step forward interacting with the environment. Occupation is how we live our lives.

In our own way, we unconsciously understand occupation and choose an approach that leads to a positive direction enabling us to support ourselves. Such a perspective is important, and viewing humans as occupational beings makes it possible to create a story leading to a future where we can be more cheerful as we recover.

After studying in the US, I returned to Japan to teach at a university and had classes, study groups, and workshops to spread my new occupational perspective to my students and colleagues. My trials and errors made me realize that one must listen to people (yourself, your family members or someone around you) and observe real life experiences. This is the way to accumulate practical knowledge to help you understand every day occupation and various occupational perspectives. I used the familiar power of simple photography to facilitate the exchange of occupational stories between the speaker and the listener. The photo of my brother, which I took when he was piling up the sauce containers of the eel dish showed real occupational power, and it became the starting point for further developing the Occupational Photo Project.

### **Contents of this book**

The book consists of four chapters. Chapter 1 discusses the purpose of the book, and, for better understanding, provides an overview of occupation and health through some Occupational Photos illustrating every day occupation. From these examples, we consider the characteristics of occupation, its role in everyday life and how it affects human health.

Chapter 2 discusses the theoretical basis of this book. Occupational Photo Project helps readers to understand and define their own occupational perspective. It also discusses occupational science, which largely influence this book's framework. Though the content may seem to be a little difficult, I recommend reading it because it provides the foundation of the Occupational Photo and the root of my thinking about it.

Chapter 3 provides step by step instructions on how to proceed with the Occupational Photo Project.

And finally, Chapter 4 presents many Occupational Photos and stories—precious photos and stories which were graciously shared by people around me. I collected 6 examples of different types of everyday occupations, and I hope you enjoy the colorfulness and richness of these occupations fully. I am sure real photos and interviews will help you understand how occupations emerge in everyday life, including how they relate to the environment and/or situations, how they change, and how they are linked to health. You will see the various relationships of everyday occupations, health and well-being. I provide interpretations and descriptions of the forms, functions and meanings of occupations for several examples (See Chapter 3 and 4). Though the interpretation is subjective and may differ from what another might interpret, I have included my own to help you to start and develop your own Project. I

hope that you can try your own Project using Occupational Photos, or use the book as a reference to have a deeper understanding of human being through the concepts of occupation, health and occupation and occupational being.