

How Can Occupational Therapists Contribute to Climate Action? Exploring the Potential

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Abstract

Climate change can have many devastating effects on health and disrupt occupations, including activities of work, self-care, and leisure. Thus, occupational therapists (OTs) have a role to play in climate action by promoting sustainable occupational therapy practices and educating clients on the importance of employing more eco-responsible occupations. However, within the Canadian context, the OTs who support climate action may face many difficulties when advocating for it. This analytical essay will explore the multiple barriers to the implementation of sustainable practices in Canada that OTs encounter. As most Canadian citizens adopt consumerist lifestyles due to Western ideals and systems, this can affect clients' and professionals' receptibility to sustainability education and motivation. Moreover, many Canadian OTs lack education on climate action in their profession, and current resources are either overwhelming or unclear. Nonetheless, Canadian OT leadership, specifically the CAOT, has begun taking initiative, thus while work is still in progress, the outcomes have yet to appear, however there are great hopes for the future. In conclusion, while there are still many barriers to overcome, OTs have a great potential to become active change agents in the fight against climate change by collaborating with clients and colleagues alike to spread awareness and build sustainability in occupations.

Keywords: occupational therapy, rehabilitation, climate action, sustainability, consumerism, leadership

Introduction

Climate change presents a profound threat to humanity as it has multiple wide-scale consequences on the ecosystem. The consequences include the scarcity of resources, natural disasters, and forced migration, which creates a chain reaction of issues that can affect people's physical and mental health. People may experience a loss of physical and social environments, as well as material and psychological losses, which may lead to chronic stress, mental health disorders, and many other health issues (1, 2). As a result of these losses, peoples' occupations may be disrupted. This holds true especially for vulnerable populations such as those with disabilities and physical, mental, and chronic illnesses; older adults; children; and the unhoused (1, 2). According to the theoretical foundations of the occupational therapy (OT) profession, occupations are understood as all activities of self-care, work, and leisure (3). Occupations are a source of meaning, purpose, freedom of choice and control over one's life; all elements deemed critical to make one's life worth living (4, 5). Participating in meaningful occupations can enhance

quality of life as, according to Hammell (4), "the experience of quality of life is not dependent upon the quantifiable material conditions of life but upon subjective, qualitative factors: the content of life" (p.299). Having a better quality of life is associated with lower mortality (6). In other words, health and occupations both affect each other in a cyclical way, either positively or negatively. The operational definition of health used henceforth is aligned with the WHO's definition: "Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (7). As health professionals, occupational therapists (OTs) must therefore combat the impacts of climate change to protect people's right to participate in occupations so they may lead healthy and meaningful lives by pursuing sustainability in their practice and encouraging eco-friendly behaviours in clients. This essay uses the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (8) definition of pursuing sustainability: ensuring that the productive and balanced coexistence of humans and nature will remain for the present and future generations. From this definition, this paper asks: How can Canadian OT become more sustainable? What are the current barriers to

sustainability, and how can OTs overcome them?

Peoples' occupational needs are tied to their use of natural resources, and have implications on all aspects of daily living (9). A continuous, unsustainable exploitation of these limited resources may lead to their depletion. In turn, peoples' wellbeing will be impacted as they are highly dependent on these resources. It is important to consider that the massive consumption of resources has a direct impact on the environment and their availability to future generations. On the other hand, OTs are required by their practice to consider the effect of environment on their current and future clients' occupations and wellbeing. As a result, they must combine both aspects of the relationship between occupations and environment to fulfill their duty as advocates for intergenerational occupational justice. This form of justice requires securing access for both present and future generations to a wide variety of occupations (9). In order to achieve occupational justice, OTs can educate themselves as well as their clients and their colleagues on ways to make their preferred occupations both eco-friendly and adapted to their personal environment.

This essay will explore the underlying reasons why occupational therapy, as a profession, faces many challenges with implementing sustainable practices in Canada. First, as a Western country, the importance Canadians accord to consumerism poses a great barrier to sustainability in client education and OT practices. Second, peoples' personal means can greatly affect their access to eco-friendly resources and their freedom to choose such resources. Third, many Canadian OTs also lack education on sustainability, preventing them from becoming active agents of change. Finally, the involvement of the Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists (CAOT) has only just begun, and while they have taken many initiatives, the outcomes are still unknown. Yet, by leading by example, they can potentially initiate climate action in other OT leader organizations. Despite these barriers, OTs can still be an essential component of climate action by collaborating with their leaders and clients for a brighter future.

Consumeristic Lifestyles

In Western society, consumption-pollution is the default lifestyle. Consumerism is defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary as "the theory that an increasing consumption of goods is economically desirable" and as "a preoccupation with and an inclination toward the buying of consumer goods"(10). Unsustainable consumerism as it is done today in most peoples' occupations will inevitably lead to the depletion

of resources. Unfortunately, because this is a system-wide phenomenon, it is near impossible for individuals to lead a fully pollution-free lifestyle without systemic changes.

Authors such as Wynes and Nicholas (11) would argue that individuals can produce a great impact in climate action through the reduction of their carbon footprint. According to them, the four most applicable and impactful methods individuals can use to reduce their personal carbon emissions are: "having one fewer child, [...] living car-free, [...] avoiding airplane travel, [...] and eating a plant-based diet" (11). They admit the effects of implementing these changes will vary between countries due to the economic and political systems in place (11). For instance, changing from an internal combustion car to an electric car for the purpose of reducing carbon emissions is very effective in Norway since it would be mainly powered by clean, renewable electricity. In contrast, switching to an electric car in the United States will not be as effective, as most electric cars are powered by electricity generated from burning fossil fuels (12).

Contrarily to Wynes and Nicholas, Fisher (12) states that individual actions can be positive but are inherently insufficient, and that an over-reliance on individualism can be a dangerous distraction. The author highlights that research shows changing individual behaviors is a difficult task, and that individual action is constrained by the individualistic system put in place. They state that "anyone who says that individual consumption choices can do it alone is trying to distract from where the power is actually concentrated" (12, para. 8).

In engaging both points of view, it is unclear whether individual actions can impact climate change. While the system in place does impede on an individual's ability to live a pollution-free life, an individual reducing their personal carbon footprint is still better than nothing at all, and the higher the number of individuals doing so, the bigger the impact. As the Quebecois saying goes: "we make dollars with pennies".

OTs' role in this situation can be both at the individual, interpersonal, and structural levels, depending on their level of practice. At the individual level, they can change their own personal and professional habits for a more sustainable lifestyle. For example, they can learn to reuse or recycle everyday objects, purchase goods from eco-responsible or local companies, and become more aware of their own waste of energy and material. For more information, the Columbia Climate School lists 35 ways to reduce individual carbon footprint (13). At the interpersonal level, they can increase awareness in their colleagues and clients to spread change

beyond their individual lives. They can also advocate for modifications in the clinical environment to their higher-ups. If they possess enough power, they can directly perform the change, fund sustainability formations to their staff, and more. Finally, at the structural level, OTs involved in policymaking can advocate for changes in policies, in public systems, in governance. The possibilities for involvement are vast and OTs from all clinical settings can get involved in promoting sustainable occupations.

Such actions do not come without challenges. To bolster the sustainability of one's lifestyle, one needs the motivation, knowledge, and means to do so. Not all OTs are sensitized to eco-responsibility, and those who are sensitized may face barriers when trying to implement sustainable practices in their personal and professional lives. They may also struggle to promote sustainable behaviours depending on their clients' and their own attitudes and beliefs. According to an international study performed by IPSOS in 2022 with 30 countries, only 34% of Canadians worry greatly about climate change, compared to a worldwide average of 48% (14). This relatively low number demonstrates that there is much work to do in terms of sensitization on eco-responsibility, and although this is not a major responsibility for OTs, they remain well-positioned to contribute to the movement. Of course, at the structural level, politics are a major barrier. One OT's individual call for action may not influence the multitude of people involved. Sustainability is obviously not the only challenge these people must manage, which affects fund distribution and policymaking. Some interprofessional group work and research can help persuading people, but it is still a very sizable task. Finally, the common challenge between all three levels is the availability of eco-responsible resources, which are limited in a consumer society, as well as the means that an entity – whether it be an individual, a company, or a government – possesses to access and implement those resources.

Impact of Means and Accessibility to Eco-friendly resources

While there is an increase in environmental awareness and regulations in Canada, it remains difficult for individuals to determine the impact of products and activities on nature. Locating such information requires time, a resource that may not be readily available to many consumers, especially those with low income, low education, or working multiple jobs. A lot of the eco-friendly options are also more expensive than the non-sustainable ones. Indeed, costs rise rapidly for companies who try to follow green practices in

a market with high production costs and low demand (15). Unfortunately, not all consumers have the financial means to begin to consider choosing such products. Furthermore, many consumers may not care to investigate sustainable options. Such people prefer selecting products that are most convenient to their situation—even when possessing the necessary resources—valuing individual interests over community wellbeing. As a result, actively choosing to be more eco-responsible is a luxury for those who have the time, care, and financial resources to do so.

This is especially true for people with disabilities, a prevalent OT client population that includes 6.2 million Canadians (16). Most of them have difficulties keeping a job; in 2022, only 65.1% of Canadians with disabilities are employed, compared to 80.1% of people without disabilities (17). For those with a more severe disability, the employment rate drops to 26.8% (17). These people may also be required to spend a lot of money on therapy and therapeutic adaptations, further affecting their financial resources. A Global News article (18) cited Canadian federal data from 2022 to highlight that “working-aged Canadians with disabilities are twice as likely to live in poverty in comparison to able-bodied Canadians” (Statistics section, para. 2). These financial difficulties become a great barrier to the use of eco-responsible options for individual consumers. Most of the time, the products needed for clients' rehabilitation have no sustainable alternative, or clients lack the money to afford those options. This is intensified in an individualistic society like Canada, where “self-responsibility and self-reliance imply that personal misfortunes reflect poor choices on behalf of the individual, despite contextual influences” (19). As a result, these people may have a very hard time obtaining external financial assistance, and while governmental help exists, it remains insufficient. Global News (18) compared the average Canadian cost of living to the average government grants of the Canada Pension Plan for people with disabilities in 2022 and found there was an approximate deficit of \$2,271 per person per month. This deficit is further increased with the addition of expenses such as medications, treatments, and home and mobility adaptations. OTs can act to reduce some of the burden of these expenses by developing sustainable and low-cost therapeutic techniques and adaptations for their clients. For example, they can partner with organizations like the STRIDE-Wheelchair Plus Recycling Depot (20), an organization that recycles and refurbishes used wheelchairs and other healthcare equipment that are then sold at a lower price. OTs can also encourage the adoption of cost-free or cost-effective sustainable behaviours in clients' daily lives. These may include learning new skills like composting or

repairing torn garments, when possible, instead of buying new ones. By directly providing resources to their clients, and their caretakers if applicable, OTs can also help the clients who may have been too limited in time to conduct their own independent research.

Moreover, still at the interpersonal level, OTs can further encourage participation in individual and group activities organized by community centers. For instance, the Friendship Circle based in Montreal offers the Delamie Culinary Arts program (21), where people with mild intellectual and learning difficulties learn to cook in a group setting, free of charge. Cooking is a cost-effective skill that builds autonomy and confidence. Participants also learn how to communicate effectively and work as a group. The food is then either kept by the cooks or sold back to the community, reducing waste. There exist many similar programs that are accessible, sustainable, and favour the development of skills through meaningful occupations. Referring clients to such community initiatives could have a multitude of benefits for both the client and their social and physical environments.

Furthermore, at the structural level, OTs can promote participation in sustainable occupations through activism and advocating for concrete action on policies. Within the scope of practice, OTs have a role as agents of change to advocate for peoples' occupational needs in relation to determinants of health (3). Some policies may affect peoples' health, access to healthcare services, and occupational rights. OTs who wish to advocate beyond their clinical setting can use their influence and knowledge to include sustainability in their discussions of policy development or policy change at the municipal, provincial, or national levels. OTs can advocate for governmental investments in organizations like STRIDE-Wheelchair Plus Recycling Depot. This would benefit both clients and organizations, as the organizations would be able to expand their reach and help more people in need of affordable options, and it would help reduce the deficit between governmental help and client financial needs. This would slow down depletion of natural resources while investing in a local organization and stimulating the economy.

Additionally, OTs can create environments which favour sustainable occupations as part of their role. Indeed, some OTs are tasked with evaluating infrastructure accessibility and ergonomics. In this capacity, OTs can suggest sustainable choices such as ensuring that water fountains be sufficiently available and accessible in buildings, as it respects the right to drink clean water and it is a way to reduce the use of plastic water bottles. OTs can also advocate for accessibility to public transport. Note that the *Minister of Justice Canada* (22)

defines barriers in the *Accessible Canada Act* as:

Including anything physical, architectural, technological or attitudinal, anything that is based on information or communications or anything that is the result of a policy or a practice – that hinders the full and equal participation in society of persons with an impairment, including physical, mental, intellectual, cognitive, learning, communication or sensory impairment or a functional limitation. (p. 2)

Some of the main barriers to accessibility in public transit include physical barriers, cost barriers, and “availability when needed” barriers. For example, physical barriers may include the absence of elevators or ramps in transit terminals. Cost barriers may be an insufficient amount of funding to build infrastructures or expensive ticket prices. The most important barrier, however, is the availability of the transit when and where it is needed. Public transport is largely well established in urban centers. However, in suburbs and rural areas, public transit becomes much less accessible. Transit options are more distanced in time and in between stops or are absent altogether. This can impede access to a multitude of essential services, as well as the participation of people in meaningful occupations, and people may find it necessary to use cars, even if they wish for sustainable transportation. Consequently, OTs can advocate for the development of accessible public transit, as it pertains in their scope of practice.

Education on Climate Change in the OT Profession

In addition to the barriers to the sustainability initiatives set in place by individualism, some Canadian OTs may also struggle to make their practice more sustainable due to lack of education and lack of clarity in professional guidelines. They often understand the main concepts of sustainability, but lack the knowledge to apply them in practice (24). While some adopt sustainable behaviours in their personal lives, these cannot be transposed into their professional activities. This disconnect justifies the need for adapted professional guidelines for sustainable practice. As for the new generations of OTs, many Canadian universities now teach their students about environmental awareness (26). Thus, long-term change is on the way, but as of now, that change has yet to occur.

To respond to the urgent need of sustainable practices, multiple guidelines have been created. However, Chan et al. (24) show that these “preset organisational structures, institutional policies, and evidence-based practice guidelines contain extensive information that can be overwhelming”

(p. 57). In practice, people were most likely to follow pre-established workplace structures in anchored institutions, even if they did not respect the employee's personal values, because they felt overwhelmed and helpless (24). Most participants also further exclaimed that the instructions could not be adapted to all situations (24). Occupational therapy occurs in a great variety of settings, from schools to clinics to at-home services. It is obvious that no single set of guidelines will be applicable in all contexts and locations. Thus, adaptable guidelines which allow OTs to provide tailored care are necessary to truly have an impact.

When creating sustainability literature, another problem that arises is the method of generating knowledge. According to Lieb (19, p.3), "Western science has been described as reductionist, rationalist, and positivist." It is based on unmovable facts and rarely accepts other epistemologies. This is blatantly demonstrated in instances where Western medical professionals refuse to acknowledge alternative medicine commonly used in other cultures. Keeping this narrow view of medicine may prevent OT researchers and practitioners from considering other forms of practice that may be more sustainable or appropriate. On the contrary: opening up to the ways of other non-Western populations may just be what Western societies need to make their healthcare system more holistic (19). Such populations include Indigenous, African, and East Asian cultures and communities, which are known to value community over individuality. Lieb (19) particularly favors the two-eye seeing method utilized by Indigenous cultures. It asks the practitioner to consider all viewpoints' strengths and weaknesses before making a decision, including non-Western viewpoints. This can help reduce bias and provide a better understanding of a situation. Unfortunately, asking OTs to know all potential solutions is unrealistic with the little time they have. OTs could also use the Kawa model, an Eastern-focused model developed by Japanese and Canadian rehabilitation professionals, which sees one's life as a river ("kawa" in Japanese) whose flow is affected by its environment. OTs then serve into improving that flow through enhanced harmony between environmental components (27). If OTs were to integrate either method in their practice and their educational techniques, the result would be much more inclusive and favor community aid over individuality. The key element is to promote inclusion of diverse perspectives and viewpoints and to be aware of one's own biases. To make this more feasible, courses on bias awareness and on other cultures' medicine could be offered. As well, creating and regularly updating research tools like OTSeeker or performing literature reviews that include both Western and non-Western epistemologies can help people

make informed decisions more quickly.

To resolve these issues, concrete action plans are needed. OT climate change activists should collaborate with or join and take active leadership roles in organizations like the CAOT or Justice-Centered Rehab (28) to build a plan to educate OTs from multiple backgrounds more effectively. Social psychology suggests to use methods beyond scientific facts that would tap into people's emotions to make them more aware and connected to the issue (29). Organizations and activists should keep that in mind in their knowledge translation plan. They can use social media, knowledge bases, forums, or awareness campaigns organized in clinics to educate OTs on sustainable and holistic practices. This would help them understand and apply the guidelines that are otherwise overwhelming. It could also encourage them to explore non-Western practices so that they may integrate community values to their profession. In summary, a barrier to sustainable occupational therapy is OTs' lack of education on the subject – and because existing guidelines and research tools are neither adapted nor efficient, creating challenges for the profession to integrate non-Western viewpoints that could enhance sustainability.

Leadership Contributions

OTs in the field struggle to find ways to make their practice more sustainable. In recent years, climate change awareness has risen, and organizations in all sectors have started acting. Canadian OT leaders have been somewhat behind schedule, as the CAOT only began discussing climate change seriously in 2022 (30). For the scope of this article, OT leaders include any OT in position of power in their workplace, including especially the provincial regulatory bodies of OT, with the CAOT being the main visible hub for all OTs in Canada. As such, to induce change at the structural level, the CAOT should lead the charge in climate action, and OT leaders on the field should follow suit. Note that while the CAOT possesses major strategic influence on Canadian OT, the provincial regulatory bodies are the ones with the power to impose regulations. This article focuses on Canadian-wide changes rather than province-specific changes. Despite the CAOT's late start, they have attempted to make up for lost time through multiple actions in 2023 and they remain accountable as their website provides details of its actions in fighting climate change to date. Thus far, the CAOT have been engaging with Health Canada representatives and other planetary health professionals to build a durable plan of action for OTs in the future. While it is too early to say how effective those measures will be, such dedication shows

promise. Critics may say that there are barriers to participating in the CAOT's activities. For example, the webinars they have been offering may not be accessible to all, as the CAOT's webinars' admission fees are often prohibitively expensive. Nonetheless, the CAOT has also created a Practice Resource Hub (25) where people can submit free practice resources and existing studies to help build up a multimedia, hybrid knowledge base for the use of the OT community. A notable article they provide access to is the Green Office Toolkit for Clinicians and Office Managers from the Canadian Coalition for Green Health Care (31), a highly useful resource for all healthcare professionals. It has very detailed instructions on how to make aspects like clinical environment, material use, and transportation more environment friendly, as well as how to educate patients and the community on eco-responsibility. Admittedly, it lacks specificity to occupational therapy, and some of the solutions provided may be restricted by financial and physical barriers. Similarly, other articles that include guidelines to sustainable practice can be overwhelming, unclear, and lack specificity. Some improvements to address these issues are needed in order to then pursue efficient changes. In addition to the Practice Resource Hub, the CAOT also has two podcast episodes on planetary health and sustainability in OT (32, 33). Finally, the CAOT's official website (30) provides a Strategic Plan 2023-2026 (34) centered around environmental sustainability. However, the strategic plan is only two pages long, includes a nonspecific goal to improve sustainability, and very few details on the implementation process. While this plan may simply be an overview, more transparency is needed in order to have accountability.

While the CAOT can be applauded for its recent educational actions, there is uncertainty in the application of this information by the OT community. For actions to have a widespread impact, leaders would have to execute awareness campaigns or possibly offer free virtual classes to the practitioners regarding sustainability awareness and practice. In order for the classes to be effective, they would ideally be subdivided by OT setting – due to the diversity of work environments – as to not overwhelm therapists or diminish the clarity of instructions. Moreover, some OTs may not have the means necessary to apply the changes proposed in the free classes. They may also face other issues, such as a need to advocate for government support. For instance, municipalities are responsible for public schools in Québec. An occupational therapist could want to advocate for the addition of water fountains in a school where they work which, as said previously, could reduce plastic water bottle consumption and make drinkable water accessible

for everyone. However, the occupational therapist may be limited in their action if the city refuses to fund the project. It is also possible that some OTs share their workspace with other OTs or other healthcare professionals who may not share the same interest in climate action. OTs may then not have the power necessary to perform changes. As such, the CAOT would first have to survey OTs on their barriers and needs. Then, they could plan resources in accordance with those needs and provide a strategic consultation service to help OTs manage the barriers they are facing regarding adoption sustainable practices or educating themselves on sustainable solutions and recommendations. They could also raise funds dedicated to this cause and distribute them where necessary.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Canadian occupational therapy is currently moving towards environmentally sustainable practices, especially with recent leadership initiatives, however, many changes at the individual, interpersonal, and structural levels must be integrated in the future. Increasing awareness on key issues is necessary as Canadians are less concerned for the environment, relative to other nations. OTs will face difficulties in changing their own practice as well as educating their peers and clients due to consumerist lifestyles and other social, political, and financial barriers. As such, it is important that the CAOT and OT leaders provide the necessary support for their practitioners. OTs must also collaborate with colleagues to induce change not only in occupational therapy, but possibly with other healthcare professions as well. OTs have the power to educate people on how to make their occupations more sustainable. Why not seize that opportunity?

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