

**What is the role of occupational  
therapy's theorists in resisting ableism,  
inspiring change and innovating  
futures?**

**Learning from Edward Said**

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The role of intellectuals in every discipline is to interrogate the unquestioned assumptions that underpin their profession's practices, resist the uncritical acceptance of authoritative statements, confront dogma, contest conventional ideas, and stand in opposition to injustice and oppression.

Edward Said (1996)

# Aims

To sketch the relevance of Said's ideas to the work of occupational therapists:

- his challenge to resist and contest the status quo of disciplinary dogma
- his challenge to resist and contest the ableist, colonial practice of classifying people

# Colonialism's constructed hierarchies

- “superiority” of whiteness
- “superiority” of one religion (“ours”)
- socio-economic classes
- white > black
- male > female
- gender conforming > gender non-conforming
- straight > queer
- neurotypical > neuro atypical
- enabled > disabled.

# Ableism

An ideology that views typical (usual) bodies, minds and abilities as superior, portrays impairments as inherently negative, portrays those with impairments as inferior, flawed, and in need of remediation

(Hammell, 2023)

# Critical consciousness

- striving to understand how social, political and economic forces shape systems of oppression and injustice

Friere P. (1970) *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.

“WFOT, its Member Organizations, occupational therapists, assistants, and students are ***obligated*** to support occupational justice and human rights”

World Federation of Occupational Therapists (2020, p.2)

***Statement on systemic racism.***

<https://wfot.org/resources/wfot-statement-on-systemic-racism>

Some academics and practitioners are “maintainers” – working to preserve the status quo of power and practice.

Some are “intellectuals” – seeking out knowledge that challenges orthodoxy, provoking change, contesting the proclamations of those wielding power within their discipline.

Edward Said (1996)

**“Human rights advocacy” is a “core purpose” of occupational therapy education.**

World Federation of Occupational Therapists (2016) *Minimum standards for the Education of Occupational Therapists*. <https://wfot.org>

**“Since its inception in 1952, WFOT has advocated for human rights. *It always will*”**

World Federation of Occupational Therapists (2020) *Statement on systemic racism*. <https://wfot.org>

# Occupational therapists advocating for human rights

- AnonymOT Collective. (2024). Occupational therapists speaking for justice and human rights: From complicit silencing to collective resistance. *Aporia*, 16(2), 15-26.
- Jago, C., Skuce, A., Hourihane, M., Daly, E., Abbes, K., O'Dea, A., ... & Twohig, A. (2024). Irish Healthcare Workers for Palestine: A collective re-imagining of the professional association. *Journal of Critical Study of Communication and Disability*, 2(2), 49-63.
- Zafran, H., Beagan, B.L., Shephard, D., Lauckner, H., Hammell, K.W., Lee Bunting, K., Grenier, M.L., Turcotte, P.L., Abdo, S., Jarus, T., (2025). Shattering Silence, Inviting Dialogue: Anti-Oppressive Occupational Therapy During the Genocide of Palestinians. *Canadian Journal of Occupational Therapy*, early online.
- Zafran, H., Hammell, K.W., Abumostafa, M., Turcotte, P-L., Jarus, T. (2026). Health-care professions' silent complicity in Palestine's health crisis. *The Lancet*, 407(10525) 225.

To “**decolonize**” is to break free from the ideas and practices shaped and derived from colonialism, and to interrogate and dismantle its continuing impact on the way we think and act

Jackson, M. (2019). In the end “The hope of decolonisation”. In: E.A. McKinley & L.T. Smith (Eds.), *Handbook of Indigenous education*. (pp. 1-11). Singapore: Springer.

Said's work provides inspiration for occupational therapists committed to achieving an anti-ableist, ethically-consistent, socially-accountable and decolonised profession;

a profession committed to resisting injustice and oppression:

a profession ***always*** advocating for human rights.

## Further reading

- Said, E.W. (1979) *Orientalism*. London: Routledge.
- Said, E.W. (1996) *Representations of the intellectual*. New York: Random House.
- Hammell, K.W. (2020). *Engagement in living: Critical perspectives on occupation, rights and wellbeing*. Ottawa: CAOT Publications ACE.
- Hammell, K.W. (2023) A call to resist occupational therapy's promotion of ableism. *Scandinavian Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 30(6):745-757.
- Ashcroft, B., Ahluwalia, P. (2008). *Edward Said*. London; Routledge.