



# Navigating occupational justice in early career practice: Insights from Singapore

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# Introduction

- **Occupational Justice**

All people have the **right** to participate in meaningful occupations, which contribute to their health, well-being, and quality of life.<sup>6</sup>

- Opportunities for participation are a fundamental human right and should be accessible to all people **regardless of their background or circumstances**.<sup>1</sup>
- Advocating for occupational justice is considered the **professional responsibility of ALL occupational therapists**.<sup>12</sup>



# Occupational justice education in Singapore

- Included as a final year module in the 4-year occupational therapy honours degree programme
- Focus is on **occupational rights** of individuals and populations, including disability studies perspectives
- Introduction of relevant **justice-oriented frameworks** <sup>8</sup>
- Main learning activity is the application of concepts in a service-learning project



## Early career occupational therapists face challenges translating justice theories to real world practice after graduation

- Struggle with feelings of **anxiety, ambiguity, reduced self-confidence** during transition period from student to practitioner. <sup>9</sup>
- See it as part of **broader political situations**, and a '**Western idea**' rather than being relevant to their own practice. <sup>4, 7</sup>
- **Complex cultural, institutional and systemic factors** creates barriers to the application of occupational justice theories. <sup>1, 5</sup>



## Aim

Investigate the experiences of early career occupational therapists in Singapore **integrating occupational justice concepts and perspectives into their practice.**



# Methods

## Participants

- 10 female participants: 6 from acute, 4 from community
- Length of experience: 6 months - 2 years and 1 month

## Recruitment method

- Snowball sampling through a recruitment poster sent through email messages and Whatsapp groups. <sup>11</sup>

## Data collection method

- 3 focus groups and 3 individual semi-structured interviews, lasting between 45 minutes to one hour.
- Explore participants' perspectives and experience of applying occupational justice concepts at work. <sup>11</sup>

## Data analysis

- Thematic analysis of verbatim transcriptions. <sup>2</sup>

## Ethics approval

- Approved by the Singapore Institute of Technology's Institutional Review Board (2022046)



# 1. Feeling uncertain about occupational justice

P6: “This concept [occupational justice], even though we don’t use the term... But, whether we are fighting for it in the right way that we are taught or whether we are doing it in a good enough way. . .[however] **I’m acting based on what I think is right.**”

P1 “It [occupational justice concepts] was more relevant, for me, . . .because after I graduated I was working with the migrant worker support coalition at the peak of Covid, so it really was a **good time to be able to apply [the ideas]**. . . like it was right after my graduation so **you could really see how it could apply to this community.**”

P10: “I think our idea of occupational justice is very similar to how we see. . .occupational engagement, participation and identity... We do try our best to facilitate meaningful occupations, **but I don’t know whether or not it fits into the type of occupational justice and injustice in the literature.**”



1. Feeling uncertain about occupational justice



2. Perceived relevance in the Singaporean context



3. Early career challenges



4. Aspiration to be agents of change

## 2. Perceived relevance in the Singaporean context

P9: “After the [occupational justice] module I was actually quite inspired. The [professor] also went through a lot of concepts like how we can make change despite. . . **having a very small role** [as a student or new graduate], **but we can still make changes** [to people’s lives].”

P10: “I think for a lot of family members, even when [the patient] is not injured, they don’t see the point of us trying to encourage patient to participate [in occupations]. They will just say “Oh, never mind lah, the helper can help.” But deep down when we speak to the patients, we know that they. . . really don’t like to be helped or assisted.”

P2: “The framework [of occupational justice] **guides us in trying to identify what are the issues**. So, you start to see how many issues there are. . . I think that’s the eye-opening part.”



1. Feeling uncertain about occupational justice



2. Perceived relevance in the Singaporean context



3. Early career challenges



4. Aspiration to be agents of change

### 3. Early career challenges

P4: “But OJ [occupational justice] in itself is **very idealistic**. It’s something you want to work towards. But in reality, it is something that you can never achieve.”

P2: “What I can see [is you have to] kind of **wiggle your way through the existing infrastructure** and **work with what we can** at the moment. I think once [I have] a better idea about what’s going on, both within the profession, as well as the structural setup of the hospitals and Singapore’s health care, then maybe we can start looking towards trying to change it from the inside out.”

P4: “What do you want me to say? Like to my boss? I mean I haven’t gotten my confirmation yet you know. I’m scared that you know I won’t get my confirmation. . . , then I cannot even become a therapist! So, I **don’t want to push the boundaries**.”



1. Feeling uncertain about occupational justice



2. Perceived relevance in the Singaporean context



3. Early career challenges



4. Aspiration to be agents of change

## 4. Aspirations to be agents of change

P6: “Someone said to me “It starts with you.” Maybe the organization cannot bring about occupational justice to the patient, but it always starts with you. . . **I feel I can help to integrate the occupational justice concepts into the workplace.** So **don’t lose faith** that you cannot bring occupational justice to your patients, because we are the best candidate to bring it to them, occupational therapists.”

P1: “There needs to be some **regular education and discussion** of how these concepts are very prevalent in our daily life. If not, these are things that we will gradually forget as we grow in our work.



1. Feeling uncertain about occupational justice



2. Perceived relevance in the Singaporean context

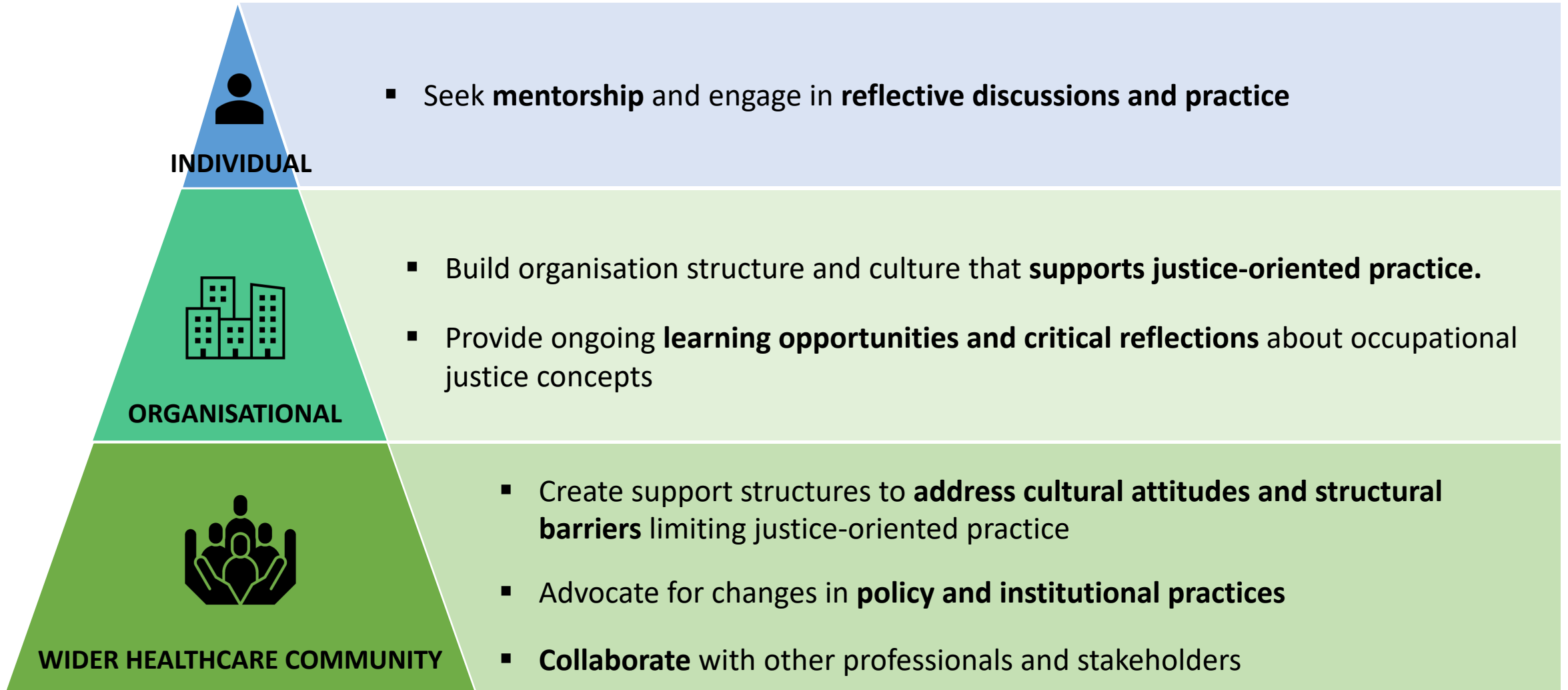


3. Early career challenges



4. Aspiration to be agents of change

## Implication for practice



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# Thank You

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## Research Article

### Early career occupational therapists' perceptions of occupational justice in practice in Singapore

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#### Abstract

**Introduction:** Occupational justice addresses social, political and economic factors influencing occupational participation as a human right. Implementing occupational justice is challenging due to institutional, personal, environmental and cultural barriers, and may be further complicated in non-Western contexts. Early career occupational therapists often struggle to apply these principles while transitioning from education to practice, despite their desire to advocate for justice-focused practices.

**Methods:** This qualitative descriptive study, grounded in social constructivism, explored the experiences of early career occupational therapists applying occupational justice in Singapore. Using snowball sampling of 2020 and 2021 graduates, participants engaged in one-time semi-structured interviews, which were transcribed verbatim and thematically analysed.

**Findings:** Of 140 potential participants, 10 responded and completed the study. Four themes were developed: (1) Feeling uncertain about occupational justice, (2) Perceived relevance in the Singaporean context, (3) Early career challenges and (4) Aspiration to be agents of change.

**Conclusion:** Early career occupational therapists expressed uncertainty in applying occupational justice concepts, often confusing them with occupation-centred practice. Despite recognising individual influences, they felt ill-prepared to tackle systemic barriers and advocate for broader social change. However, participants were aware and willing to support occupational justice ideals, suggesting a need for more guidance to integrate individual therapeutic goals with societal advocacy.

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