

Reflection Article/Essay

# “A room of one’s own” and money in the wallet: production conditions in occupational therapy<sup>1</sup>

*“Un cuarto propio” y dinero en la billetera: condiciones de producción en terapia ocupacional*

*“Um quarto só seu” e dinheiro na carteira: condições de produção em terapia ocupacional*

Daniela Edelvis Testa<sup>a</sup> 

<sup>a</sup>Servicios de Terapia Ocupacional, Hospital José T. Borda, Ciudad de Buenos Aires, Argentina.

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## **Abstract**

The article reflects the participation of Daniela Testa in the opening panel of the X Argentine Congress, XIII Latin American Congress of Occupational Therapy, X Meeting of Careers and Schools of Occupational Therapy of Latin America, and III Meeting of the Latin American Student Network of Occupational Therapy, held between September 23 and 27, 2019 in the city of San Miguel de Tucumán, Argentina. From the metaphor of the “*room of one’s own*”, of the English writer Virginia Woolf, we reflect on the conditions of production and dissemination of Occupational Therapy knowledge in an expanding institutional and academic context. A critical reflection is proposed on the idealized vocational profiles conceived as metaphors that attribute identities, and as veils used to hide hostile working conditions, bad payments, and/or subaltern positions. We conclude on the importance of obtaining greater equity in access to resources (material and symbolic) to increase the incidence in the professional and academic fields. The construction of a collective, plural, and diverse political subject is considered a key aspect to strengthen and expand the scope of discipline in the region.

**Keywords:** Knowledge, Research Financing Systems, Occupational Therapy, Latin America.

<sup>1</sup>Text based on the speech of the opening panel of the X Argentine Congress, XIII Latin American Congress of Occupational Therapy, X Meeting of Careers and Schools of Occupational Therapy of Latin America and III Meeting of the Network of Latin American Students of Occupational Therapy, held between September 23-27, 2019, in the city of San Miguel de Tucumán, Argentina, whose motto was “*Living together in diversity: Building Occupational Justice from a Latin American perspective.*”

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### ***Resumen***

El artículo refleja la participación de Daniela Testa en el panel de apertura del X Congreso Argentino, XIII Congreso Latinoamericano de Terapia Ocupacional, X Encuentro de Carreras y Escuelas de Terapia Ocupacional de América Latina y III Encuentro de la Red de Estudiantes de América Latina de Terapia Ocupacional, realizado entre el 23 al 27 de setiembre de 2019, en la ciudad de San Miguel de Tucumán, Argentina. A partir de la metáfora del "cuarto propio", de la escritora inglesa Virginia Woolf, se reflexiona sobre las condiciones de producción y de difusión de conocimientos de Terapia Ocupacional en un contexto institucional y académico en expansión. Se propone una mirada crítica sobre los perfiles vocacionales idealizados concebidos como metáforas que atribuyen identidades y como velos que ocultan condiciones hostiles de trabajo, malos pagos y/o posiciones de subalternidad. Se concluye en la importancia de obtener mayor equidad en el acceso a los recursos (materiales y simbólicos) para aumentar la incidencia en el campo profesional y académico. Asimismo, la construcción de un sujeto político colectivo plural y diverso se considera un aspecto clave para fortalecer y expandir los alcances de la disciplina en la región.

**Palabras clave:** Conocimiento, Sistemas de Financiación de la Investigación, Terapia Ocupacional, América Latina.

### ***Resumo***

O artigo reflete a participação de Daniela Testa no painel de abertura do X Congresso Argentino, XIII Congresso Latino-Americano de Terapia Ocupacional, X Encontro de Carreiras e Escolas de Terapia Ocupacional da América Latina e III Encontro da Rede Latino-Americana de Estudantes de Terapia Ocupacional, realizado entre 23 e 27 de setembro de 2019, na cidade de San Miguel de Tucumán, Argentina. A partir da metáfora do "um quarto só seu" da escritora inglesa Virginia Woolf, reflete-se sobre as condições de produção e disseminação do conhecimento em Terapia Ocupacional em um contexto institucional e acadêmico em expansão. Propõe-se uma reflexão crítica sobre os perfis vocacionais idealizados, concebidos como metáforas que atribuem identidades e como véus que ocultam condições hostis de trabalho, má remuneração e/ou posições de subalternidade. Conclui-se sobre a importância de obter maior equidade no acesso aos recursos (materiais e simbólicos) para aumentar a incidência no campo profissional e acadêmico. Da mesma forma, a construção de um sujeito político coletivo, plural e diversificado considera-se um aspecto fundamental para fortalecer e expandir o escopo da disciplina na região.

**Palavras-chave:** Conhecimento, Sistemas de Financiamento da Pesquisa, Terapia Ocupacional, América Latina.

Good morning, at first I want to thank for the opportunity to participate, together with my very dear colleagues, in the opening table of this congress that, as we qualify as Argentine and Latin American, it proposes to us at least give some indication of the locations and brands that they go through us.

A congress is much more than a collective effort that finishes with a week of meetings, reunions, and connections. A congress activates a process that challenges our ways of production of knowledge from several intersections and realities and, in such circumstances, I like to think that something that brings us together today has to do with our ability to feel affected; to recognize that what moves us is not a desire to strengthen and expand a handful of certainties, but rather a desire to imagine new ways that account for transformations. And, as we resign harmonicist positions –which (in my opinion) would be desirable for an expanding discipline– take the opportunity to also reflect on the tensions, omissions, and disputes that marked and mark our experiences.

I am aware that it may be unkind to begin this presentation using the words *disputes*, *tensions*, and *omissions* but every time I am faced with a situation like this one, I worry about thinking about the meaning that my words could have and what it implies assume the privilege of enunciation in a public space. For this reason, on this opportunity, I decided to reflect on the conditions that created the enunciation and the production and reproduction (of knowledge and actions), a theme that, for obvious reasons, does not allow us to avoid these words.

As many therapists of my generation, I was educated in the spirit of vocation, in the power of intervention, and a certain mandate as “conquerors” of instituting practices. However, although my conscience has guided many of my actions and choices during much of my professional life, my opinions have recently undergone a revolution in several ways. I believe that, after sixty years of disciplinary development in Latin America, we have received enough prescriptions, we have conquered vast territories and that the uncritical and enduring belief that the vocation and love of the profession are always virtues has caused more harm than good in what makes the historical process of our profession.

Thinking about the production conditions led me to Woolf (2019) and her thoughts when writing about women and the novel, about the importance of having a room of your own and having money to keep in your wallet. According to this author, both are essential conditions to deploy creation and intellectual freedoms. Some of you may well wonder, on the other hand, what the precious essay by an English writer, published in 1929, has to do with occupational therapy and with this congress –which is being held in Tucumán, ninety years later–, but let me abandon myself to my drift and so I will try to reach that destination. Therefore, I do not come with statements that pretend to be true or bring profound reflections of national or Latin American scope, but rather I am going to share some ideas that at the risk of being diffuse as a counterpart, will be sincere.

I am going to organize this presentation based on some frayed comments and an open ending. The first is justification for the comment. The second refers to the difficulty when trying to write about a “we”. In the third, I will go fully to the material conditions of the production of knowledge. The last one is a reflection on the possibilities of poetic language and concept-metaphors, from the ideas proposed by Spivak (1985).

## 1 About the Comment

Regarding the comment as a communication tool, Foucault (who worked with this idea in “The Order of Discourse” [1987]) related this type of communication mainly with the literary genre and with the scientific essay. He highlighted his ambivalent traits as he willingly submits to the written letter and predominantly oral modalities (Foucault, 1987).

Boria (2010), a feminist author, says that the comment, for its lively and dynamic nature, in some sense is similar to the gossip. Gossip is understood as an insidious or malicious communication mode generally attributed to women since the supposed masculine nature demands depth, rationality, and truth. The author proposes to reverse its negative content to place it in the order of semi-public gender communications and to think about the intersections between textual genres and gender (as a conceptual, analytical, and political category). Thus, the author highlights an order of enunciative legitimacy that assigns hierarchies. All of this invites us to reflect on the conditions and modes of enunciation - attributed, resisted, and/or practiced- and on the unequal possibilities of exercising them in the multiple spheres of life.

On this opportunity, I would like to take the comment as a tool because it contains an idea that gives greater freedom for the commenter to sharing some insights, something on the order of a certain knowledge that is not closed. Another reason that made me lean towards this format - instead of opting for a dissertation in more classic or structured terms - is that comment is destined to come and go or stay floating, available to anyone who wants to do something with it. According to feminist epistemologies, this means giving importance to a saying above all anchored to experiences, conditioned by tasks and circumstances in their broadest sense. It is about exercising the possibility of *thinking in conversation*, as Segato (2016) says *moving from fact to saying*, as Paganizzi (1991) has taught us; It also goes in the direction of recognizing the enormous relevance of oral and listening tradition in shaping our disciplinary field and in the transmission of knowledge.

With all this, I move on to the next comment, which deals with the difficulties I found while trying to write about “we”.

## 2 What Can a Pronoun?

For some time, we have begun to name ourselves in the plural; We do not only talk about occupational therapies, but we also emphasize localization in and from the South. It is good to think about our ways of naming ourselves, but what is the point of stating ourselves in this way? What is at stake when we begin to place our names and, from that, question our history and imagine futures? This is not a merely self-contemplative question about who we are or where we are, but rather a tension stressed under a more uncertain question that leads us to question who we were and who we want to become. This question, more open and contingent leads me to the problem of conjugating the pronoun in the first person of the plural and its endings - those small variable endings that are added to the root of words and indicate number, gender or time, and that in this case establish the difference between “we” as male or “we” as female. At the moment of choosing, I find that -based on our history- if I use a male ending it would be in some way arrogant and denial; and if I use the female ending it would be exclusive. So how can we exercise the affirmative power of naming ourselves in the plural without destabilizing our gendered language, without renouncing the ontological security that it offers us, without committing a small act of linguistic disobedience? Thinking plural should be “we” after all, we are a feminized and pluralistic collective, historically concerned with inclusion/exclusion processes and interested (to a large extent) in questioning binarisms. “If you love me, love me with e”, I thought, as Florencia Alcaraz said in a note in *Anfibia* magazine. I define myself, then, by using the “e” for the plural pronoun. I will say, then, “we” (Alcaraz, 2019).

But which of “we”? I am not referring to a group of people assigned a sufficiently encompassing professional identity because thinking about “we”, rather than referring to a symbolic place to which one belongs, constitutes a space that is entered to build it (Flores, 2010); a fact that leads us to reflect on our spaces for participation as a professional group and on the possibilities of political influence that we can achieve. Therefore, I believe that one of the opportunities that this congress offers us is to think of a “we” who is not merely identity but rather a political “we” who runs the contours towards greater diversity.

Having defined the subject of the enunciation, we can finally think about the conditions of production.

### **3 Produce Without Your Room and Money in Your Wallet**

Since Occupational Therapy has never been indifferent to the fundamental debates that have permeated the health sciences and the humanities and the development of knowledge has always been important. Despite our subject is of frontiers, relish for the knowledge that emerged from the mixes and mergers, it has not escaped the rigor of the gaze of those who issue prescriptions and guidelines on what and how it is important to know. Precisely, the concern for a scientific approach that could account for a certain specificity, even admitting the difficulties that have been experienced, has generated several positions and debates within the area. Although these debates have evolved in quality and quantity over the years, (in Argentina there are sixty), their dissemination suffers from certain limitations due to the working conditions of our professional and academic groups since the tradition of publishing in the media impact is not fully established yet. As Lorente & Luxardo (2018) have pointed out, these situations can result in the scarce use (if the term is worth it) of vast experiences and contributions, both within the area of the subject and by others, simply because they are little known. However, this ignorance does not seem to avoid a certain pigeonhole that assigns to certain subjects an epistemological status, as in layman's terms, of “short-range” (Lorente & Luxardo, 2018, p. 98). As you can imagine, the problem of epistemological status, of course, is not exclusive to Occupational Therapy but constitutes an identifiable fact in other cases because *knowing* has a social recognition linked to the learned subjects, which does not enjoy *doing*, related to the professions of intervention. These problems come from a fallacious dichotomous position between theory and practice that still permeates our representations, as if they really could exist in separate spheres or, rather, as if there were no historical exchanges between them and as if we did not transit them in our everyday searches.

The differences between the exchange of knowledge and the existing power relationships within the normative, academic, and professional world are well known when the survival of an interdisciplinary asymmetric model crosses concrete practices. In some cases, the knowledge generated by occupational therapists is little diffused and recognized and naturalizes subordination, helping to maintain forms of intellectual authority that help to understand the continuity of the subordinate component of some disciplines concerning others, (I do not want to say that it happens always that way, but to highlight the conditions and positions in the area). Undoubtedly, the shortage of doctorates in Occupational Therapy represents a weakness in terms of generating innovative research and it would be convenient to expand possibilities in these aspects.

However, the difficulties in profitably accessing research and the academic structures that hardly assign exclusive dedications - and rarely award the profile of teacher-researcher (in the Argentine institutional context) -, make our authors - taking up Virginia Woolf - write without a room of your own and money in your wallet, but with a lot of vocation and commitment. This leads me to think of a vocation as a form of domination that has a double face: on the one hand, it calls from somewhere to work and always be productive and creative; but on the other hand - in the same operation - it creates conditions so that it becomes difficult or almost impossible. This causes discouragement and the feeling that certain achievements are only for a few when in reality they are more than anything material in life and not broken wills or desires.

My concern with the material is not an interest in commercializing knowledge, far from it, but rather for better and greater possibilities of enjoying favorable conditions for its production and dissemination. Money in the wallet means greater equity in access to resources, both to produce and to access spaces for debate and exchange, such as this one that brings us together today. A room of our own symbolizes embracing our desires and freedoms more strongly. We have previously warned that idealized vocational profiles function as metaphors that attribute identities and that, furthermore, they are veils used to hide hostile working conditions and/or poor pay. And we have also noticed that the uncritical and depoliticized appeal about the love of the profession conceals positions of subordination and inequity. Therefore, we have plenty of reasons to build new scenarios and meanings.

Working conditions, words that veil realities, and asymmetrical relationships make me think about the importance of looking for other ways of narrating what happens to us. Thus, we come to the last comment, which deals with poetics and complexity.

#### **4 The Poetics of Complexity and Metaphors**

I read in a post on August 1 of our Argentine colleague, Magalí Risiga, about walking the streets of the city of Buenos Aires.

There is a mattress on the sidewalk. In the small entrance that forms a stained-glass window; like a bay where a castaway rest. Callao Avenue almost Bartolomé Miter. Yes. I already know. These days the city is full of mattresses on the streets. But this is different. So different that it amazes me that the crowd pouring out in all directions does not stop their racing clock for a moment to observe it. Or they do not see it, since they do not see me either, and that is why some pushes destabilize me when I stay stamped in space, almost a holographic image (Risiga, 2019, s/p.)

I am a fan of Maga because I love her look and her poetic language always reaches me. I am thinking of the dialectical relationship that links social phenomena with certain theoretical categories to which we appeal, and that in these processes concrete subjects and various contingencies intervene that translate into seeing or not seeing that due to being obvious and painful, it becomes invisible. I read Magalí and situations of users I work with every day reappear in my mind, life in transit homes, those who wander long hours on the streets because they have nowhere to go:

I wondered about its occupant... I looked around the people to no avail. I bet on a woman for the characteristics of that bedspread, for the love that the belongings had been covered with her privacy. Although it could well be a man, a distracted man who left everything in its place to find it later. It makes me want to stop by tomorrow and find them. Or find me. Just to tell them that I saw them even though they weren't there (Risiga, 2019, s/p.)

I lift my eyes from the words and I am left with a feeling of strangeness in daily life. I know it is about the *literature effect*, which shows an aspect of the city in which I live. Then, I think of a notion of poetics outside its traditional meaning. It is not strictly poetry. I am not referring to the norm of metrics, but rather to the notion of metaphor and the idea of relationship and synthesis. These new relationships constitute concept-metaphors (Spivak, 1985) and can be powerful in colliding with the crystallized senses that we need to move.

Finally, I want to show you an intimate conviction: reading complex realities between margins and borders requires the expression of the subjective and the emotional, the transitory, and the ephemeral; it requires clinging to that elusive and unique thing that makes us human. Therefore, to become beings capable of imagining and producing a world worth living. That is my proposal.

I hope this congress finds us imagining better worlds, happy to celebrate what we were, what we are, and what we dream of being. Thank you very much.

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**Corresponding author**

Daniela Edelvis Testa

e-mail: [danitestu@yahoo.com.ar](mailto:danitestu@yahoo.com.ar)