

Original Article

Meaningful and daily activities of people who are dependent on alcohol and drugs: perspectives from occupational therapy

Atividades significativas e cotidiano das pessoas que usam álcool e drogas: perspectivas da terapia ocupacional

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Abstract

Introduction: Drug consumption is an ancient practice and has currently become a public health issue. Based on the knowledge core of occupational therapy, it is believed that individuals have the need to engage in meaningful activities that give purpose to their lives. In this perspective, it is questioned whether problematic alcohol and drug use influences the performance of these meaningful activities and the daily lives of people who use drugs. **Objective:** To understand, from the perspective of people with problematic alcohol and drug use, whether substance consumption influences the performance of meaningful activities and their daily lives. **Method:** Four individuals undergoing treatment at a Psychosocial Care Center for Alcohol and Drugs (CAPS AD) participated in the study. Data were collected through the Photovoice method and analyzed using thematic content analysis techniques. **Results:** The analysis categories discuss the meanings attributed to meaningful activities and daily life, and the influence of problematic alcohol and drug use on the performance/reorganization of these activities. Overall, participants reported that meaningful activities are related to creating purpose and achieving life goals, while daily life was associated with performing everyday tasks. **Conclusion:** The perspectives of occupational therapy are focused on the performance of meaningful activities and the reorganization of daily life in order to promote social reintegration and improve the quality of life of individuals.

Keywords: Occupational Therapy, Activities of Daily Living, Substance-Related Disorders.

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Resumo

Introdução: O consumo de drogas compreende uma prática milenar e atualmente tem se caracterizado como uma questão de saúde pública. A partir da compreensão fundamentada no núcleo de conhecimento da terapia ocupacional, acredita-se que as pessoas têm a necessidade de realizarem atividades significativas que deem sentido em suas vidas. Nessa perspectiva, indaga-se se o uso problemático de álcool e outras drogas tem influência na realização dessas atividades significativas e no cotidiano das pessoas que usam drogas. **Objetivo:** Compreender, a partir da perspectiva das pessoas que fazem uso problemático de álcool e outras drogas, se o consumo de substâncias influencia na realização de atividades significativas e em seus cotidianos. **Método:** Participaram do estudo quatro pessoas que fazem tratamento em Centro de Atenção Psicossocial Álcool e Drogas (CAPS AD). Os dados foram coletados por meio do método *Photovoice* e analisados a partir da técnica de análise de conteúdo do tipo temática. **Resultados:** Nas categorias de análise discute-se os sentidos atribuídos às atividades significativas e ao cotidiano, e a influência do uso problemático de álcool e outras drogas na realização/reorganização desses. De uma forma geral, os participantes relataram que as atividades significativas estão relacionadas à produção de sentido e à realização de projetos de vida, enquanto o cotidiano foi atribuído à realização de atividades diárias. **Conclusão:** As perspectivas da terapia ocupacional direcionam-se para a realização de atividades significativas e reorganização do cotidiano a fim de promover a reintegração social e melhorar a qualidade de vida das pessoas.

Palavras-chave: Terapia Ocupacional, Atividades Cotidianas, Transtornos Relacionados ao Uso de Substâncias.

Introduction

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition (DSM-5), the term "drug" refers to any substance that, when introduced into the body, can alter one or more biological, cognitive, and/or emotional functions of the individual. The DSM-5 categorizes substance-related disorders by different drug classes, and the diagnosis of substance use disorders is made based on a problematic pattern of use that leads to clinically significant consequences, such as organic impairment or distress (American Psychological Association, 2011).

Drug consumption is an ancient and universal practice, and in the contemporary world, substance use has been characterized as a public health issue that requires the development of specific public policies for the user population. In this regard, the Ministry of Health has been working in alignment with the National Mental Health Policy to promote an institutional arrangement for implementing different services and actions coordinated with other intra and intersectoral resources that provide network care and aim to achieve interventions capable of addressing the different and complex needs in the fields of mental health, alcohol, and other drugs (Bica et al., 2019).

In this context, the Psychosocial Care Network is responsible for organizing a set of different services and actions aimed at assisting in addressing the demands and needs of individuals in psychological distress. In this scenario, the actions based on Psychosocial

Care, along with individuals who have problematic alcohol and drug use, aim to encompass intersectoral practices, mainly through the Alcohol and Drug Psychosocial Care Centers (CAPS AD) (Brasil, 2021).

Ballarin & Carvalho (2007) emphasize that it is important to consider that the strategies of Psychosocial Care developed with individuals who use alcohol and other drugs, although it is known that the path to stabilization is long and characterized by the need for multiple recoveries, should promote their reintegration into culture and the community beyond achieving abstinence from psychoactive substances.

In the field of mental health and psychosocial care, occupational therapy has developed its practice with the aim of intervening to help individuals with problematic alcohol and drug use to fully participate in their social lives, exercise their citizenship, and promote their health, considering the performance of their activities within the context in which they live (Ballarin & Carvalho, 2007; Rojo-Mota et al., 2017). Wasmuth et al. (2016) add that individuals with problematic alcohol and drug use experience impacts on their occupational life and the performance of meaningful activities, and in these circumstances, occupational therapy can contribute to helping individuals carry out their activities in a way that allows them to organize their time and routines, thereby attributing new meanings to their lives.

According to Castro et al. (2001) and Elmesany & Barros (2015), meaningful activities represent the way a person lives, that is, having a real commitment to their existence, promoting social exchanges and breaking with the isolation and invalidation of the subject, in addition to shaping and producing the meanings of their daily lives. In this sense, occupational therapy seeks to improve the well-being, health and participation of people who use drugs, through the realization of their occupations¹ that are important to them. This path redefines social roles that were harmed due to substance use and benefits people by improving their self-esteem, well-being and sense of identity/belonging to the contexts in which they live (Dogu & Ozkan, 2023).

Based on the understanding grounded in the core knowledge of occupational therapy, it is believed that individuals have the need to engage in meaningful activities that give purpose to their lives. From this perspective, occupational therapy can assist in promoting the health of individuals with problematic alcohol and drug use, helping them to engage in meaningful activities, reinterpreting the events of their daily lives, and allowing for an expansion of their living experience. In this sense, it is questioned whether problematic alcohol and drug use influences the performance of meaningful activities and the daily lives of individuals. Therefore, the objective of this study was to understand, from the perspective of individuals with problematic alcohol and drug use, whether substance consumption influences the performance of meaningful activities and their daily lives.

Methodological Approach

This study is part of a larger doctoral research project developed within the Graduate Program in Occupational Therapy (PPGTO) at the Federal University of São Carlos

¹ According to Costa & Almeida (2004), the terms “activity” and “occupation” can be used interchangeably, since both are capable of representing the multiplicity of occupational therapy. Thus, we chose to use the two terms as synonyms.

(UFSCar), approved by the UFSCar Research Ethics Committee under opinion number 5.370.679.

It is a qualitative research, exploratory and descriptive in nature, using a cross-sectional model. The qualitative approach has been used to discover and/or refine research questions, based on data collection methods that do not involve numerical measurements, such as descriptions and observations (Sampieri et al., 2006).

Individuals who have problematic alcohol and drug use and are assisted by the CAPS AD (Psychosocial Care Center for Alcohol and Drugs) in a municipality in the interior of the State of São Paulo were invited to participate in the study. Prior to this, the researchers contacted the Municipal Health Secretariat to invite participants, explain the study's objectives, and obtain authorization to conduct the research.

The inclusion criteria for the study were: 1) the individual must be assisted by the CAPS AD of the municipality in question; 2) the individual must have a mobile phone with a camera; 3) the individual must voluntarily agree to participate in the study by signing the Informed Consent Form (ICF).

Data were collected using an adaptation of the *Photovoice* method, which allows individuals to represent and share their daily experiences through a specific photography technique. This technique has been used in various fields, including public health, education, community development, and human rights, enabling individuals to become co-researchers by capturing images that represent their experiences, perspectives, and challenges, and sharing these images as indicators of how they choose to live their stories (Barry & Higgins, 2020). Considering the adaptations made for this study, the stages of using Photovoice followed this order:

- Selection of participants: Participants were invited to take part in the study;
- Training session: Participants were instructed to use their own smartphones to take photographs;
- Identification of recorded photos: Participants were instructed to take a photograph following these guidelines: a photograph representing what a meaningful activity is; a photograph of an activity they would like to do but do not engage in; a photograph exemplifying what their daily life consists of; a photograph they would like to represent their daily life.
- Discussion about the recorded photos and creation of narratives: We conducted an individual conversation about the photos taken by the participants in order to understand the meaning and importance of each image, as well as the development of a narrative to accompany the images, explaining the context and impact of the issues addressed. The conversation was recorded, and the information was transcribed and stored for later data analysis.
- Data analysis: The data were analyzed using the thematic content analysis technique, based on analysis categories as proposed by Bardin (2011).

Results

Four CAPS AD users (3 women and 1 man) participated in the study, and these individuals were referred to by the acronyms P1, P2, P3 and P4. After exhaustive reading

of the material, identification of core meanings and grouping of these into themes, two categories of analysis emerged:

Category 1: The meanings of significant activities and the daily lives of people who have problematic use of alcohol and other drugs

This category discusses the meanings that people who have problematic use of alcohol and other drugs attributed to significant activities and their daily lives. All participants in the study defined significant activities as those that they perform with some relevant purpose and that are capable of providing them with “meaning production”, that is, based on the performance of certain activities and considering individual perspectives and their life experiences, people attribute special meanings to each of these activities. These meanings are related to the development of feelings of happiness and motivation; to the improvement of feelings of self-confidence, self-efficacy and self-esteem; to personal satisfaction and to the improvement of well-being (figure 1).

Meaningful activity is what has the greatest meaning for me. When I do the activities I like, it makes me happy, it seems to improve my life, and I can organize it in a different way. People who are addicted don't always get to do what they like, and that's very sad (P4).

Meaningful activity... I think it would be something that motivates you, that makes sense. I feel motivated to live when I do what I like to do (P1).

Most of the people who participated in the study also highlighted that meaningful activities are related to the development of life projects, that is, by carrying out these activities, they are able to plan and define personal goals, objectives and aspirations that will guide them throughout their lives. In this sense, the participants highlighted that the activities they carry out as a possibility for developing life projects are those related to improving their family relationships and relationships with other people they live with, maintaining good emotional relationships and those that give them the opportunity to aim for better things in their lives (figure 2).

There are so many things that are significant in our lives, right? But sometimes, for example, the fact that I have my father and we can go out, he has patience with me, with all the things I've been through in life... (P2).

I dream of getting married, having a family, getting pregnant. So, it's significant that I'm in this relationship with my boyfriend, doing things, making an effort to improve this relationship that I have (P4).

So, a significant activity for me is having my family by my side, supporting me, being able to go out, being able to go back to school, to work... (P1).

Regarding the meaning of everyday life, all participants in the study highlighted that it is related to the activities they perform in a daily routine, in a systematic and periodic manner, which organize their time, establish habits, help manage their responsibilities and obligations, improve their productivity and enable them to achieve their goals in

the community. In this context, the meaning of everyday life as routine was directed towards the performance of significant activities and activities that are not necessarily considered significant by the study participants, such as those related to “obligatory tasks” (working, doing household chores, performing self-care activities, etc.). Thus, we identified that the study participants, although they associated the term everyday life with a daily routine, did not distinguish between the meanings of significant activities and everyday life, since they only reported that their daily lives are characterized by the simple performance of activities (figures 3 and 4).

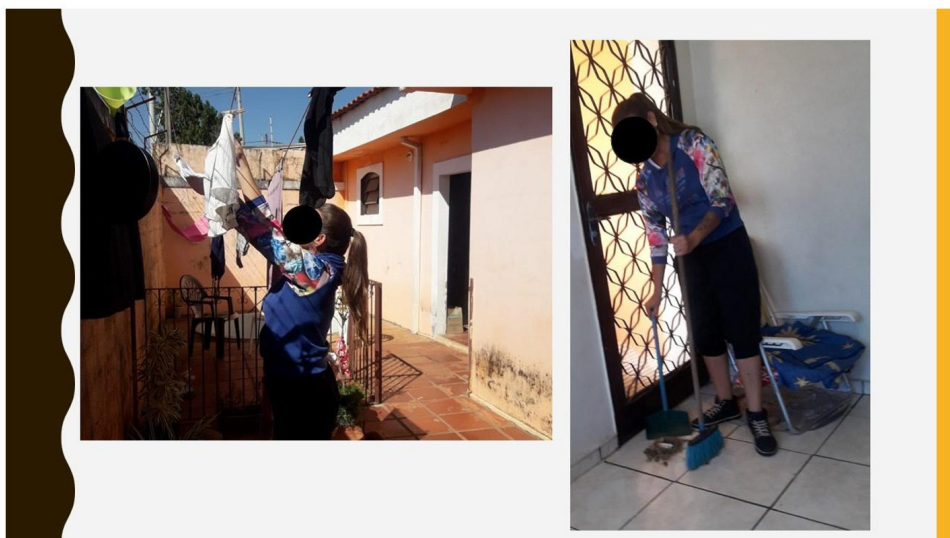


Figure 1. Participant records photographs of significant activities they perform. In the photo, we have instrumental activities of daily living related to domestic care.

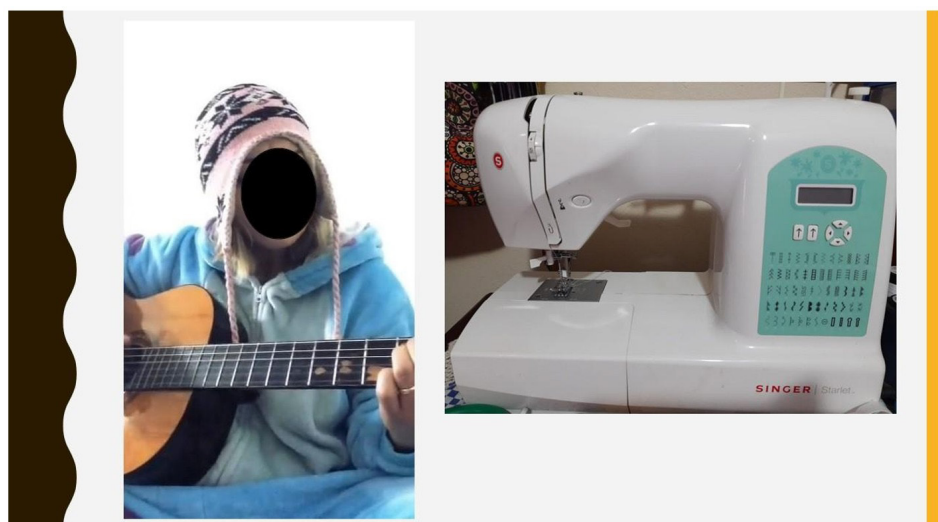


Figure 2. Participants take photographs of meaningful activities they perform. In the photo, we have leisure activities represented by listening to music and sewing.

Everyday life is everyday life, isn't it? So, "ah, it's part of my everyday life" means that it's part of a person's everyday life. It's what we always do every day (P2).

Is everyday life every day? Is it? I think so, a routine. For me, it's a routine (P4).

Everyday life is the things we do every day. It's what's part of my routine. For me, everyday life is my routine (P3).



Figure 3. Participants take photographs that represent their daily lives. In the photo, we have a participant at CAPS AD, a group of people who attend Narcotics Anonymous and a participant at a bus terminal with the aim of using public transportation to look for a job in the city (the job was highlighted as a representation of his daily life).

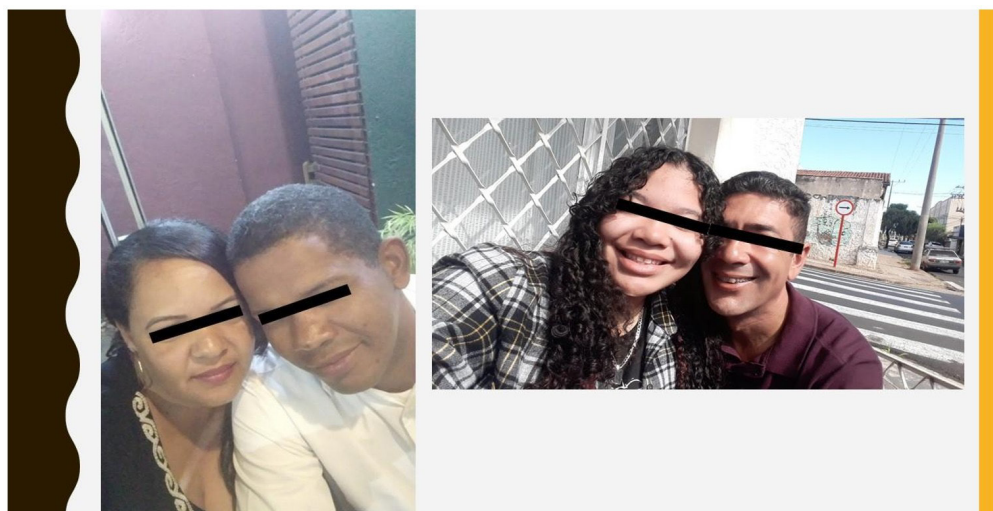


Figure 4. Participants take photographs that represent and would like to represent their daily lives.

In the photo, they report that interpersonal relationships with their girlfriend and daughter represent significant activities.

Category 2: The centrality of problematic use of alcohol and other drugs in the performance of meaningful activities and daily life

Considering the meaningful activities and daily life of the study participants, we noticed that the problematic use of alcohol and other drugs negatively influences their performance and continuity. All study participants highlighted that the problematic use of alcohol and other drugs culminated, at some point in their lives, in feelings of lack of motivation, disinterest, sadness and low self-esteem to perform meaningful and daily activities. Most people also highlighted that drug use harmed, in some way, their relationships with family, friends and their romantic relationships (figure 5).

So, because when I use the substance, I can't concentrate, I get sad, depressed. Not at the time, but later. And then it takes me a while to process all of this, and I can't do anything I like anymore (P2).

Especially the day after [using the drug] I wake up feeling tired, grumpy, I can't do any activities around the house to help out and I would like to do. This makes me feel like the worst person in the world, I get really sad because I don't have the strength to do anything (P3).

Most study participants also highlighted that problematic use of alcohol and other drugs hindered the maintenance and continuity of activities that constitute their work and study routines and their interpersonal relationships. In this sense, participants reported situations in which drug use resulted in situations of social isolation, increased family conflicts, and job loss due to behaviors considered inappropriate and irresponsible, in addition to triggering feelings of depression and increased anxiety:

I lost a lot of good jobs and that really affected my daily life. There's no going back. And it was because of alcohol use. The time was coming for me to go to work drunk, you know? Because I know I'm a real alcoholic (P1).

Because I distanced myself a lot from people because of alcohol and drug use. I used to have a lot of friends and then I started using and pushed everyone away. Everyone started to distance themselves, today even my children have distanced themselves (P2).

Discussion

Relevant authors in occupational therapy in Brazil discuss meaningful activities. Beatriz Nascimento (1990), for example, points out that the true meaning of a meaningful activity for a person is related to its social purposes implicit in the act of doing something important. Rui Chamone Jorge (1995) highlights that meaningful activities can be seen as something that enables a person to intervene in their world, being actively engaged with themselves and with others, allowing for their transformation and self-awareness. For Jô Benetton (2005), meaningful activities are not tied to the occupational history that occurred in asylums and psychiatric hospitals, but rather to the fact that the individual attributes meaning to what they do and what is important to them. It is also possible to understand the performance of meaningful

activities as the construction of daily life through the healthy and participatory inclusion of the person in their sociocultural environment (Benetton et al., 2003).

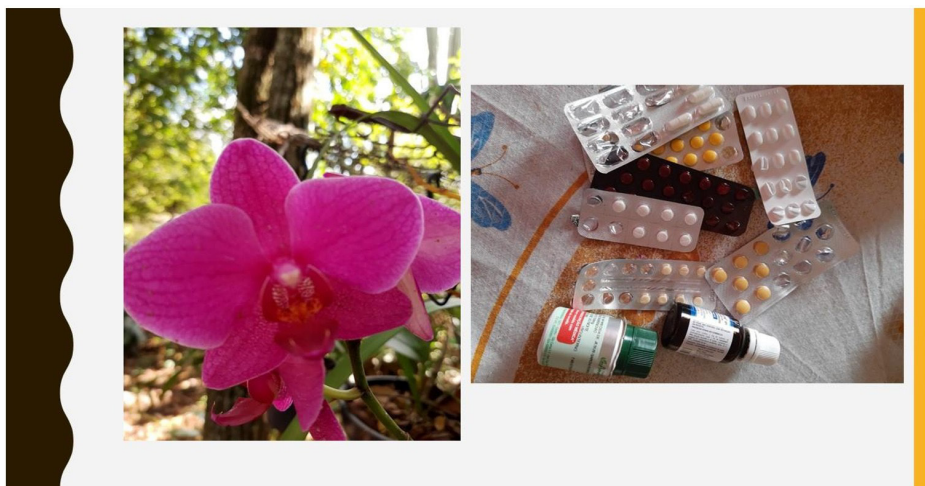


Figure 5. Participants take photographs that symbolize the meaningful activities they would like to do. The photo represents the desire to go back to taking care of their plants, especially orchids. Another participant expresses the desire to get well with the help of the medications she takes, thus resuming the performance of meaningful activities.

Galheigo (2020) emphasizes that the perspective of the concept of daily life in occupational therapy has changed over time, in the sense of no longer considering it as merely habitual activities characterized by repeated and mechanized actions, but rather as a space and time in which the person, individually or collectively, immediately and not always consciously, accesses opportunities and resources, faces adversities and limits, makes decisions, and invents ways of being, existing, doing, and living as daily life unfolds in various contexts.

In general, occupational therapists have focused on theories of daily life to understand how illness changes the daily life of individuals, as well as those individuals who are part of their interpersonal relationships. Psychological suffering, for example, can trigger changes in daily life, transforming what individuals do, how they relate, and their life projects. In this sense, individuals may sometimes need to find new ways to reinterpret their experiences, finding new paths to construct their subjectivity and their social production modes. In this context, the daily life of individuals in psychological distress is marked by various types of ruptures that manifest in relationships (social, family, and work), in the performance of meaningful activities, and in other areas that make up daily life (Leão & Salles, 2016).

According to Constantinidis & Andrade (2016), occupational therapists, supported by the ideals of the Psychiatric Reform, work to intervene in the practically nonexistent citizenship experienced by individuals with problematic alcohol and drug use, assisting them in making sense of their lives in the pursuit of fully exercising their rights. According to Gallassi & Santos (2014), occupational therapy works by considering the daily life and context of individuals as an inherent part of the scenario of alcohol and

drug use, and therefore, the approach should include this use as an integral part of the care and intervention process.

Considering the meanings attributed by participants to meaningful activities and daily life, as well as the influence of drug use on the performance/organization of these elements, we will discuss some perspectives of occupational therapy in understanding the concepts and how occupational therapy can assist individuals with problematic alcohol and drug use in performing meaningful activities and improving their daily life.

Perspectives of occupational therapy on meaningful activities and daily life

Occupational therapy began to focus on the concept of meaningful activities in the 1990s, a period in which there was an effort to establish greater theoretical consistency for this expression in the profession. In this context, engaging in meaningful activities has been considered essential to reflect the way people express their own lives and build their existence (Lima et al., 2018).

In the field of occupational therapy, activities can be seen as resources, instruments, tools, or objects of study, and are directly related to the conceptions of life, health, and humanity that sustain professional practice (Lima, 2020). Almeida & Costa (2019) highlight that occupational therapy understands the performance of meaningful activities not as a means to treat or minimize sequelae, but as a fundamental, constitutive, and essential part of people's lives, providing them with existential meaning. In this scenario, for occupational therapy, meaningful activities are seen as a guiding element in the encounter and dialogue between the person, their social group, their historical time, their cultural tradition, and their daily life (Pierce, 2001; Salles & Matsukura, 2016). In promoting the possibility of performing meaningful activities, Lima (2020) emphasizes that there are various activities and many meanings, and occupational therapy practice is situated in the field of possibilities, resources, and social exchanges.

For occupational therapy, meaningful activities are seen as a guiding element in the encounter and dialogue between the person, their social group, their historical time, their cultural tradition, and their daily life. Meaningful activities can also be understood as actions and practices that constitute individuals as they, through their performance, create and recreate the relationships established between themselves, the world they live in, and a multitude of ways of life (Figueiredo et al., 2020). Lima (2020) emphasizes that meaningful activities can be understood as both a product and a means of constructing the human being, in that, through these activities, the person tends to develop a positive relationship with their life and health condition.

It is from this new perspective that occupational therapy begins to propose that performing activities goes beyond the therapeutic process, and that, by engaging in meaningful activities, people can connect with the community they live in; build rights (affective, relational, material, housing, productive, cultural) essential for a fulfilling life; utilize their creative, artistic, and intellectual potential; develop skills and have opportunities to access social and cultural events and services (Castro et al., 2001).

According to Leão & Salles (2016), the use of the concept of daily life in occupational therapy is relatively recent and has been drawing on other philosophical and/or sociological studies that incorporate aspects such as the person's subjectivity, their history,

and their social power to face adversities. The authors highlight that occupational therapy has sought to understand how illness changes the daily life of people, who often need to reinterpret their experiences, search for new meanings, and find paths for the development of their subjectivity, who they are, and what they like to do.

The study by Salles & Matsukura (2016) revealed that the concept of daily life in occupational therapy lies between the singular aspects of the individual and the collective and social, emphasizing the subjectivity of the person in their meaningful activities as a potential enhancer of their social inclusion. In this context, the profession seeks to understand the relationship between daily life and what people do (meaningful activities), how they use their time, where they go, what their desires are, and how the social context facilitates or hinders the performance of different activities.

Figueiredo et al. (2020) add that, through daily life, a person can have access to various experiences, the real, the imaginary, memory, dreams, feelings, individual and collective needs, and affections. In this context, understanding the meaningful activities and daily life of people with problematic alcohol and drug use makes it possible to comprehend how their involvement with substances has caused transformations in their lives and in the lives of those around them, and what direction their daily life has taken. Therefore, it is possible to think that the situations experienced by people with problematic alcohol and drug use require interventions aimed at delineating mechanisms that favor the reconstruction and expansion of citizenship rights, the performance of meaningful activities, and the reinterpretation of their daily lives.

Perspectives of occupational therapy on meaningful activities and daily life of people with problematic alcohol and drug use

The practice of the occupational therapist, in terms of promoting opportunities for exchanges for people in psychological distress, allows for the extension of their relationships and social exchanges, reflection on the provision of care in real-life spaces, and engagement in activities that reflect their everyday needs. Through the relationship between the subject-therapist-activity, it is reflected that "doing meaningful activities" is an important way to overcome social exclusion and the alienation of individuals in psychological distress, thus promoting their connection with the community and facilitating encounters and exchanges that provide meaningful insertion experiences. In this sense, occupational therapists can offer important reflections related to human activity, such as the production of meaning and life projects (Morato & Lussi, 2018).

Being in the condition of a drug user, it is common for the person to experience fragility and rupture of social bonds, social isolation, and distancing from their intersectoral network. In this context, occupational therapy develops actions of contractuality, exchanges, and support through the practice of daily life with the performance of meaningful activities as a social existence project (Silva et al., 2015).

Lima (2020) emphasizes that occupational therapy operates in the realm of active life, focusing on maintaining this life through the restoration of broken human relationships, reducing alienation from the world, combating isolation, and expanding the life horizon of individuals through their capacity to create and act. The author adds that the occupational therapy process seeks to establish spaces of common life that

respect the diversity of factors and strengthen human relationships in a qualified and individualized manner.

In a study conducted with women who had problematic alcohol and drug use, Fejes et al. (2016) discovered that the use of psychoactive substances influenced various types of meaningful activities, both in promoting their performance and hindering it. The authors discuss that not using the drug helped maintain activities that were beneficial to the participants, such as activities done with family members and friends, which allowed them to establish healthy relationships; activities that gave them pleasure, such as singing, playing with animals, cleaning and taking care of the house and their belongings, self-care, working with what they enjoy, and other activities that provided good feelings like "feeling alive without the use of drugs."

In this context, the intervention process in occupational therapy promotes life processes, recognizing the subject's uniqueness, helping them build their autonomy and sense of social belonging through performing meaningful activities with a beneficial impact on their daily life. Performing meaningful activities has the potential to organize the person's daily life, acknowledge their suffering, and promote recognition of their ability to act in the world (Ricci et al., 2018).

In this scenario, occupational therapy aims to understand daily life as the everyday performance of activities that promote human life, composed of a network of exchanges and relationships, characterized by events that define the time and existence of each individual in their uniqueness. Psychosocial Care can be a foundation in the quest to overcome the alienation of daily life for individuals in psychological distress, since its guiding principles serve as a way to materialize the exercise of social rights. Thus, understanding daily life can influence the proposition of practices developed in the territory that facilitate achieving important objectives such as social inclusion and the attainment of autonomy. The occupational therapy procedures related to the daily life of individuals in psychological distress align with the understanding of their needs, considering a psychosocial paradigm that includes the concept of territory and its use, daily life as a guide for actions, and the principles of Psychosocial Care as a strategy for social inclusion (Leão & Salles, 2016).

Final Considerations

Considering the perspectives of occupational therapy on meaningful activities and daily life for people with problematic alcohol and drug use, we believe that understanding the meaning of these concepts from the user's perspective is crucial for guiding the assistance provided. In this sense, when the problematic use of alcohol and other drugs negatively influences the performance of meaningful activities and daily life, we reflect on the need for a health care approach from occupational therapy that considers the uniqueness of each individual and their relationship with the substance, in order to propose effective practices for promoting health, reinterpreting experiences, and enabling the reconstruction of citizenship.

Occupational therapy plays an important role in the lives of people who use drugs, focusing on meaningful activities and the reorganization/restructuring of daily life to promote social reintegration, recover lost skills, develop new competencies, rediscover a sense of purpose, improve overall quality of life, strengthen self-efficacy and self-esteem, etc.

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Author's Contributions

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