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## Research note

## The role of occupational therapy in accessible tourism

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## Introduction

Interdisciplinary research is critical in addressing societal concerns, yet tourism struggles to employ such research methods, despite claims to the contrary (Oviedo-García, 2016). Accessible tourism is one such area with disability an increasing concern for all areas of citizenship (WHO, 2011). The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006) recognises the rights of people with disabilities to access services from all areas of citizenship (Michopoulou et al., 2015). Vacations and business travel, meanwhile, are recognised as essential features of modern life and are linked to disability legislation, providing opportunities for people with disabilities to pursue quality of life, improving wellbeing, and preventing social exclusion (Kastenholz et al., 2015). Indeed, accessible tourism has become a popular topic among tourism scholars (McKercher & Darcy, 2018). However, access issues are common with scholars and practitioners alike failing to comprehend the needs of the wider disability spectrum (Bauer, 2018). Academically, the lack of interdisciplinary research explains this paucity of progress. For example, occupational therapists play a critical role in enabling people with disabilities to participate in activities of daily life (WFOT, 2020). The tourism literature has, however, noticeably neglected their role in delivering accessible tourism (aside see Darcy, 2004, 2006; Gallagher & Hull, 1996).

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## Accessible tourism and occupational therapy

The primary focus of occupational therapy is to enhance wellbeing and inclusion through occupational participation and the promotion of greater participation in society for people with disabilities (Rogers, 2005). Occupations are key “to everyday living as people of all ages plan, structure and use their time doing the things they need and want to do” (Brown, 2008, p. 67), with the understanding that limiting opportunities to take part in occupations will negatively affect wellbeing (Durocher et al., 2014). Occupational therapy has a mandate to create opportunities for engagement in meaningful occupation and to enhance the environment to support capability development (Whiteford et al., 2020). Occupational therapists further provide expertise in understanding the capacities of individuals with a wide range of disabilities and how environments might be adapted to increase inclusivity (WFOT, 2020). This unique expertise contributes to accessibility considerations and innovations, whilst also moving the outcomes toward full inclusion for people living with hearing, vision, intellectual, mental health, learning and neurological impairments, as opposed to simply those with mobility impairments (WFOT, 2020).

Accessible tourism promotes accessible services to people with disabilities (Darcy, 2006) and is a growing phenomenon within academia and industry that also underpins the UN Convention (Rickly, 2018). Like occupational therapy, accessible tourism takes direction from the social model of disability, whereby it is the environment that is considered disabling, as opposed to it being the “fault” of the individual (Gillovic et al., 2018). However, barriers to travel and participation remain and discourage people with disabilities from engaging in tourism (Connell & Page, 2019). It is believed that accessibility is contingent on the nexus between legislation and built environment, with the inclusive social attitudes of service providers also playing a critical role (Bohdanowicz-Godfrey et al., 2019; McKercher & Darcy, 2018). Service providers have a legal responsibility to comply with disability legislation, such as the Equality Act (2010) in the UK, the Americans with Disability Act (1990) in the US and the Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Protection of the Disabled (1990) (Nyanjom et al., 2018; Qi et al., 2020). However, legislation is outdated, typically only covering the major disabilities and thereby disregarding the wider and growing disability spectrum, particularly hidden disabilities (Mesquita & Carneiro, 2016).

The tourism and occupational therapy literature share many similarities. Occupational justice, for example, is a derivative of social justice (Hocking, 2017), and promotes a society with adequate occupational opportunities for everyone (Braveman & Suarez-Balcazar, 2009). Occupational therapists work to improve the motivation and participation in activities of daily living, which include leisure activities (Kielhofner, 2008). Indeed, the occupational therapy and tourism literatures both recognise that barriers to participation also lead to a decreased motivation to participate (Christiansen, 1999; McKercher & Darcy, 2018). Participating in occupations is considered a human right, in the same sense that tourism scholars consider participating in leisure activities a human right (Hocking, 2017; McCabe & Diekmann, 2015). Further, occupational justice has an inclusive agenda, arguing for appropriate support to participate in occupations (Townsend & Wilcock, 2004), ideas which feature prominently within the accessible tourism literature (Buhalis & Darcy, 2011). Likewise, both sets of literature are engaged with deprivation, social exclusion and how to increase quality of life through leisure activities (McCabe, 2009; Whiteford et al., 2020). As such, occupational therapy and accessible tourism appear to complement each other. However, occupational therapy has yet to be applied within the tourism literature.

Tourism stakeholders fail to provide accessible services to people with disabilities through an apparent lack of education and awareness (Connell & Page, 2019). Seemingly, by being wheelchair accessible, destinations assume they are accessible to all disabilities, when in fact this is a particularly complex demographic (Richards et al., 2010). However, this issue runs deeper in society with architects, designers and planners tending to reduce disability to medical and stereotypical notions, thereby disregarding the diversity and complexity of disability (Rebernik et al., 2020). Stakeholder collaboration between access and inclusion experts and tourist destinations is required to deliver the infrastructure for accessible tourism (Nyanjom et al., 2018). Occupational therapists have a role to play in delivering accessible tourism through educating destinations, such as through the design and planning of visitor attractions, hospitality facilities and the development of accessible destination experiences. Indeed, occupational therapists provide an expertise that tourism does not possess, through a holistic approach to the needs of people with disabilities, including physical, psychological, social and environmental (RCOT, 2020).

A need exists for further interdisciplinary research in this field within and outside of the tourism domain (Bauer, 2018; Okumus et al., 2018). Interdisciplinary research promotes innovation and creative thinking by pulling together multi-disciplinary expertise to solve multifaceted complex societal issues (Oviedo-García, 2016), such as accessible tourism. Likewise, a need exists for tourism scholars to publish outside of tourism journals, given its complementary nature shared with many disciplines (Bauer, 2015), such as occupational therapy.

## Conclusion

The role of occupational therapy in the successful delivery of accessible tourism experiences clearly warrants further investigation, with occupational therapists bringing a novel skillset and expertise currently missing. Existing research has already highlighted the vacuum of expertise among destinations with regards to what constitutes accessible tourism (Darcy, 2010). A starting point to address the role that the body of knowledge from occupational therapy could use to inform accessible tourism and accessible tourism research would be a systematic review of the two areas of study as a way of setting a research agenda for the domain. A need exists for an interdisciplinary approach to accessible tourism, involving the consultation of occupational therapy. However, this in itself presents likely challenges. Okumus et al. (2018) for example alluded to challenges of attachment to primary discipline, unfamiliarity with methodologies, and a lack of shared vocabulary, which might lead to communication

overhead. Nevertheless, given the barriers, constraints and service attitudes evident among tourism practitioners, such collaboration should take place with some level of urgency to create better tourism experiences for people with disabilities.

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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