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Stranded in the living room: A narrative study of occupational disruption and imbalance as experienced by two Norwegian students during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown

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ABSTRACT

The everyday life experiences of undergraduate students under conditions of social isolation have been little explored. This paper explores the ways in which the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown impacted two Norwegian students' everyday lives. Data were derived from diary entries kept by the students, one with a physical impairment and the other a single parent, over a 5-week period during the first lockdown (May-June 2020). Initial data analysis was done by the students and formed part of their bachelor's degree theses. Their two supervisors subsequently carried out the secondary analysis presented in this paper, using a narrative design and methodology. The concept of social isolation is used as a lens through which to explore occupational disruption and imbalance experienced by both students during lockdown. Three themes emerged from the students' personal stories: 1) Life at home: Not being able to maintain a healthy occupational balance, 2) Finding confidence, regaining motivation and purpose, and 3) The meaning of a productive place. The findings highlight how social isolation led to a significant experience of occupational disruption that influenced the ability to maintain a healthy occupational balance for both students, despite their quite different situations. This paper contributes to occupational science literature by showing examples of occupational disruption in everyday life of students during a pandemic. Furthermore, we introduce occupational resignation related to occupational disruption and discuss the meaning of a productive place to maintain occupational balance and regain motivation after occupational disruption.

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When the Norwegian government declared a national state of emergency on March 12, 2020, in the context of the global COVID-19 pandemic, all educational activity requiring students' physical presence was discontinued and students were required to attend school from home (Hammell, 2020b; Sangster Jokić & Jokić-Begić, 2022). Common daily occupations and occupational patterns shifted; and, for students in this study, university-based occupations such as group work and

classroom-based learning that formed a central part of their pre-lockdown daily study routines were disrupted. According to Nizzero et al. (2017), there is “general agreement [in the occupational science literature] that occupational disruption affects identity and social, emotional, and occupational functioning in significantly negative ways” (p. 124). They proposed the following definition of occupational disruption, adapted from Whiteford (2000):

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Occupational disruption is a temporary state, characterized by a significant disruption of identity associated with changes in the quantity and/or quality of one's occupations after a significant life event, transition, or illness or injury. It has the potential to affect multiple areas of functioning, including social and emotional functioning. (Nizzero et al., 2017, p. 125)

Occupational disruption has been addressed in previous studies, such as for women who have experienced the onset of rheumatoid arthritis and among people who have had a brain injury (Cotton, 2012; McDonald et al., 2012). These studies revealed that occupational disruption affected occupational identity and reduced engagement in meaningful occupations.

For students, social isolation at home led to potential vulnerability and negative consequences, similarly reported for others (Sangster Jokić & Jokić-Begić, 2022). In this paper, social isolation means being disconnected from occupations that involve social interaction with, or access to, fellow students, family, friends, and other sources of support. Hammig (2019) reported that social isolation and lack of social interaction with others can lead to negative health experiences. For students with disabilities, a group already at risk of social marginalisation, social isolation has been found to result in experiences of loneliness, frustration, and disappointment, to the detriment of health and well-being (Bartolac & Sangster Jokić, 2019).

Several studies have explored the impact of lockdown on the physical and mental health of Norwegian students, with findings that suggest an increase in psychological symptoms, feelings of loneliness, and sense of loss regarding campus activities (Nasjonalt organ for kvalitet i utdanninga [NOKUT], 2021; Sivertsen, 2021). Internationally, social distancing has been associated with psychosocial indicators such as poor sleep quality, inactivity, and unhealthy eating habits (Ammar, Chtourou, et al., 2020; Ammar, Trabelsi, et al., 2020). In the case of occupational therapy students, dramatic changes have been reported in their daily lives, including the loss of routines and motivation for school and other daily occupations (VanPuymbrouck & Olson, 2022).

For the two students whose experiences form the core of this study, social isolation also had negative consequences for their occupational balance. The term 'occupational balance' is complex and evolving, and has been used in a multitude of ways (Wagman et al., 2015). Meyer (1922) proposed that achieving occupational balance involves equal engagement in the categories of work, play, rest, and sleep. More recently, Wilcock (2006) defined it as "a balance of engagement in occupation that leads to well-being. For example, the balance may be among physical, mental, and social occupations; between chosen and obligatory occupations; between strenuous and restful occupations, or between doing and being" (p. 343). An interpersonal dimension of occupational balance has also been identified; for example, the interconnected nature of a couple's occupational balance and harmony (Liu et al., 2021; Wagman & Håkansson, 2019).

Research suggests that achieving and maintaining a balance between occupations can be predictive of better health and well-being (Wilson & Wilcock, 2005). For example, musicians who have had to take a break from playing their instruments have been found to report various negative consequences, including being cut off from the group from which they both learn and draw support (McCready & Reid, 2007). In the case of students with disabilities, research suggests that if they are to successfully pursue their studies, it is important for them to establish and maintain daily routines and to participate in meaningful occupations (Bartolac & Sangster Jokić, 2019). They may find it challenging to balance demands, placing them at greater risk of dropping out (Ekelman et al., 2013; Korhonen & Rautopuro, 2019; Lund et al., 2020).

For students who were single parents, the arrival of COVID-19 intensified the challenge of balancing childcare with academic work (Crook, 2020). While lone mothers often tended to cope quite well, they were vulnerable to lack of provision of social support and in many cases were reliant on close relationships with, for example, mothers or sisters to support their childcare needs and occupational balance (Keim, 2018). Single parents also tended to experience intense exhaustion, together with a sense of ineffectiveness in their parental role

(Mikolajczak et al., 2018). As Sethi (2020) suggested, parenting is not a single role; the relational role as a mother is intertwined with a woman's role in general, which encompasses multiple occupations and daily decision-making relating to occupations, role-taking, and parenting.

Diaries kept by individuals at risk of social isolation, disruption, and lack of occupational balance can provide insights into their experiences. Applying a narrative approach, this study analysed the contents of diaries kept by two Norwegian occupational therapy students to answer the research question: how do students' descriptions of their daily occupations during lockdown reflect experiences of occupational disruption and/or occupational imbalance?

Participants

Simon was a 26-year-old who, following a serious accident in 2009, became a wheelchair user. He described having many good things in his life: he lived with an 'amazing' girlfriend in a nice apartment and had an active social life, great friends, and hobbies. However, he also described being susceptible to depression and inactivity, resulting in him not always making use of available opportunities and resources. Védis was a 37-year-old single mother, based in Oslo, who immigrated to Norway from Iceland. Her life was centred on caring for her son, an active 5-year-old. As an immigrant and a single parent with a limited support network, she was reliant on kindergarten to maintain a healthy occupational balance in her everyday life. Both participants were third year bachelor students in occupational therapy when they experienced university lockdown.

Design and Methods

This study was part of a broader research project titled 'Everyday life – youth and young adults' approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) (project number 608823). Within the overarching project, the current study formed part of research investigating everyday life among university students, both in Norway and overseas, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Approval for this research included

the use of diaries as empirical material, alongside interviews.

Data collection

Writing diaries has been defined as "the recording of activities and experiences, usually in written format, within specific episodes of time. The diary is created specifically for the purpose of research and focuses on a particular topic of interest to the researcher" (Bloor & Wood, 2006, p. 50). In this case, the 'topic of interest' was the students' everyday life experiences, including the meaning of daily occupations, during lockdown.

The two participants followed a structured diary. They recorded everyday life events, described what had happened each day, and reflected on the meaning of daily occupations. The diary notes describing everyday events and occupations were amplified by adding details through students' personal reflections notes on their situation. Working to a thesis submission deadline of June 1, 2020, both students decided to write their diaries for a minimum of 5-days within a 5-week period (April 4–May 6). On this basis, Simon ended up with 12 diary entries, while Védis produced 8, the length varied from one third of a page to three pages per entry, in total 19 pages of diary notes. The two students then exchanged their material and started the analytic process.

Analysis

To explore the ways in which the participants' everyday occupations were impacted by lockdown, the students analysed each other's personal diaries. This was a solitary process, with each student working alone and with limited discussion with the other. Both students used thematic analysis to identify significant events and reflections relevant to the research problem; thereby gaining insight into a student's experiences of everyday life under lockdown. The students selected quotes ($n = 32$) they deemed relevant to identifying common notions or themes. Such extracts were also used to highlight specific events and reflections during the selected period. Examples included: 'Fine, we will stay inside today' or 'Now I will start to

perform' (i.e., begin writing the thesis). In total they identified 9 themes.

This paper also presents a secondary narrative analysis of the students' diary entries as carried out by the supervisors and teachers of Védis and Simon following their graduation. Narrative analysis has been described as a tool to access unfolding meanings in a specific context (Josephsson & Alsaker, 2015). In thematic narrative analysis, content is the exclusive focus (Riessman, 2008). Secondary analysis began by addressing the research problem. The diaries of both students were compared and discussed. Ultimately, the original stories were structured around a chronological narrative comprising a confident start, a middle portion telling of the diarists' struggles with everyday life, and an ending featuring a return to normality, together with an exploration of the context of the university.

Analysis sought to add possible meanings to specific situations or language by building on the quotes selected by Védis and Simon. We developed new overarching themes across the two previous analyses. This process happened in parallel with reading the original diary entries with reflections and the themes derived in the bachelor theses. In other words, we attempted to interpret possible meanings related to their reported situation (Josephsson & Alsaker, 2015). We then reconstructed the thematic meanings that emerged from the students' stories around the analytic concepts of occupational disruption and occupational balance. Storylines and plots were reconstructed around three main themes.

Ethical concerns

Unequal power relations between the two former bachelor's degree students and their teachers/supervisors, who guided them in writing their theses, was a central concern (albeit less so following the graduation of both students). Furthermore, since the personal writing and reflections revealed in the diaries of Védis and Simon have become the explicit focus of research, their confidentiality cannot be protected (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Discussions regarding the use of this material have been complex and prolonged.

Early in the process, when Védis and Simon began writing their bachelor theses, all four authors recognised the importance and value of the content in the diary notes. After the students completed their occupational therapy education, discussions continued. Together, we decided on thematic plots that were relevant to address in a research paper and determined which quotes were both relevant and ethically appropriate for further exploration. During this process, the paper passed back and forth so that Simon and Védis could approve the changes made. Much of the content of the original diary notes has, therefore, been omitted from this article.

Trustworthiness

Throughout the process, methodological issues were explored, including different possibilities for analysis (Josephsson & Alsaker, 2015; Riessman, 2008). At the start, the supervisors discussed with Védis and Simon the idea of writing diaries and then analysing each other's entries. Our starting point was that personal diary notes constitute authentic and trustworthy data in research involving people's personal experiences (Spiers, 2021). As the students engaged in writing up their respective theses, the validity of their analytical process was strengthened by their discussions with each other and their supervisors (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Theoretical validation was strengthened by discussion of relevant philosophy (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Further, all primary data material were available to the supervisors and the secondary analysis was presented to Simon and Védis who approved all changes.

Findings

Three main themes representing the stories were generated from the material: 1) Life at home: Not being able to maintain a healthy occupational balance; 2) Finding confidence, regaining motivation and purpose; and 3) The meaning of a productive place. In presenting the themes, and to enable the students' personal voices to be heard, verbatim extracts from the diary notes are included.

Life at home: Not being able to maintain a healthy occupational balance

Following lockdown, both students became more socially isolated in their respective apartments, engaging in fewer ‘normal’ everyday occupations when they were not studying. At the start, both seemed confident about being able to keep up with most of their usual everyday occupations. But, more and more, their days seemed to revolve around less stimulating things to do. Both experienced feeling tired and concerned about their own state of mind.

Even before lockdown, Simon’s ‘normal’ life had already involved spending a lot of time in his apartment, given the obstacles confronting a wheelchair user (especially so during winter). Even so, he had managed to get out and about.

Normally I get a lot of ‘free’ exercise from other activities, such as going to the university or social events, where, for example, I might walk up or down stairs or at least get some fresh air. I don’t really leave the apartment much unless I have a specific reason to.

Following lockdown, Védis initially felt confident about maintaining a healthy occupational balance in her everyday routine.

Three weeks ago, I felt confident that I could make the best of this situation. Between nice sessions of quality time with my son and regular work on my thesis, I would also eat healthily and keep in shape.

Despite their initial confidence, both Simon and Védis commented very early in their diary notes on the consequences of spending too much time inside in their apartments. Simon wrote about changes in his circadian rhythm, resulting in him sleeping a lot. He described days when he was generally inactive and did not find opportunities to go outside.

I haven’t exercised as often as I used to, and I spend most days almost completely stationary, seated in front of the computer.

‘Fine, we’ll just stay inside today’

For Védis the main impact of social isolation was on her parenting responsibilities. With

kindergarten now closed, the role of caring for her son took up most of her time. Possibilities for rest, sleep, and study were reduced to a minimum. Lack of help and social support interfered with her ability to feel and act like ‘good mother’.

I rely on social support from my friends and family to make sense of things, like being a mum. My parents were supposed to fly down ... to visit, which would help me to take care of my son so that I could focus on writing, but the travel restrictions made that impossible.

Everyday life without help and social support is a central theme in Védis’s story. At one point in her diary, she wrote ‘*My whole life is collapsing*’. She felt herself to be tired and useless, someone who had failed at motherhood. Small tasks like dressing her son were a struggle.

I try to get him dressed so that we can go outside, but he refuses and runs off. At this point, I pretty much give up for today and think, ‘Fine, we’ll just stay inside today’.

In addition, her days seemed filled with tedium, lack of stimulation and, at times, ‘chaos’.

Days revolve around trying to come up with creative ways to pass the time and just have some fun, but we end up watching a lot of TV. I try to initiate more stimulating activities like painting or baking, which, contrary to how I envisioned it beforehand, descend into chaos every time, and leave me having to clean paint off the walls.

Previous daily routines became disrupted; occupations that used to be meaningful appeared to be in collapse.

We eat breakfast in front of the TV. Well, to be honest, we eat lunch and dinner in front of it, too. Usually pasta with ketchup. It’s convenient of course, but it pains me to ‘take the easy way out’. I’m ashamed of not being the kind of mum I want to be, with regular routines and clear boundaries. Still, these days I have no choice but to pick my battles.

'Falling into familiar patterns'

For Simon, lockdown evoked echoes of his earlier history of isolation and passivity. He experienced a perceived loss of agency, similar to the occupational resignation he had experienced during rehabilitation. It reminded him of his need for external structure if he was to cope.

It's Monday, and I get up at the same time as Maria, around 7 a.m., but I probably wouldn't have done so if Maria had not practically pulled me out of bed. I wanted to sleep but I'd agreed on a 'writing day' with a friend, starting at 11 a.m., and was afraid that I wouldn't wake up before that. I eat some nachos from yesterday for breakfast. I'm extremely tired and sit half-asleep watching YouTube videos I'm not particularly interested in, while I drink coffee to no avail until he arrives. I'm quiet and uneasy the whole day, and don't really get any work done, but we did watch a good film and that was very nice.

The situation seemed to cause Simon to 'slip back' into a less active way of being, feeding bad habits and interfering with his ability to initiate productive occupations. Even daily routines became exhausting, leading him to neglect basic self-care and personal hygiene.

Most days I only brush my teeth in the evening, and even then, it feels like a bit of a hassle. I know it sounds ominous that I have so little going on in my life that even basic self-care is neglected. I've also become increasingly indifferent to things that used to bring me joy, like cooking, hanging out with my girlfriend, creative projects, friends, jokes. It's noticeable from the outside, too. People have pointed out that I seem down, and kind of flat. I spend a lot of time alone, declining social calls and using writing as an excuse. If my friends could see how I spent the time I didn't spend with them, they'd see that I didn't seem to be writing at all. In fact, I spent the entire evening watching YouTube videos and ate three ice cream sandwiches.

During the social isolation imposed by lockdown, the lack of vitality and occupational

resignation Simon experienced had a certain familiarity: he recognised them from his previous history of rehabilitation following his serious accident. He described this as a time when he lacked 'meaningful occupations' and became thoroughly dissatisfied.

Four years ago, just prior to beginning my OT studies, I was in a similar situation. For extended periods of my first year in Oslo I engaged in little or no meaningful occupations, so while Maria was having productive days at college, I lacked the vitality even to play videogames. My workdays mostly revolved around passive consumption of YouTube videos or some other form of entertainment ... I grew increasingly bored, frustrated, and contemptuous of myself. I felt unfulfilled and spiritually starved.

For Simon, rehabilitation was also a period when he experienced negative feelings of frustration, boredom, anger, and lack of spirituality.

I spent a lot of energy being angry at myself for not living in accordance with my values. All because I didn't get into shape or read as many books or make as much art as I wanted to. After I started studying again, my everyday life obviously became more eventful. Since then, my circadian rhythms have normalised somewhat, and I've generally been healthier, happier, and more patient with myself.

Both Védis and Simon described not being able to maintain a healthy occupational balance. Simon described feeling disappointed at the end of each wasted day. Feeling overwhelmed, discouraged, and alone, both students wrote of doubting whether they would ever finish their degree. Even so, there were days when both could summon greater confidence and optimism.

Finding confidence, regaining motivation and purpose

Both Simon and Védis wrote of turning points that rekindled their motivation to study. For

Simon, the turning point was triggered by a television documentary about Michael Jordan.

Maria and I just finished watching a documentary series about Michael Jordan, who was known for the catchphrase 'Be like Mike'. Even though I have never had any interest in basketball, his intense work ethic and purposefulness inspired me a bit. I continue to struggle with my productivity, though I am reassured by the fact that I have gotten this far. I don't know how, but I think somehow, I'll manage this too. I just have to get my shit together and be more like Mike.

While Simon was inspired by work ethics and purpose, Védis described how the re-opening of her son's kindergarten enabled her to re-establish daily routines and restore some degree of occupational balance.

The reopening of the kindergartens marked an important change of pace for both my son and me. He was so excited to be back. While he was away, I sat in solitude and just relaxed. I can't describe the joy I felt when I picked him up again after just a few hours of missing him. It's amazing what a little bit of absence can do. Even though the kindergarten is still only partially open, it feels great to re-establish some routines. We take a walk afterwards, have an ice cream, and just enjoy each other's company. I notice I'm beginning to feel better about myself and motherhood again.

While both Simon and Védis felt renewed hope and motivation, both reported that the process of regaining a normal everyday life took time. This suggests that the transitional process following an episode of social isolation is influenced by the latter experience. The reopening of kindergarten gave Védis more time to work, but it took time to return to her pre-lockdown occupational patterns.

Eventually things begin to resemble normality, but I still cannot get anything done. The increased stability gives me some energy and motivation, but my days still lack content and I feel like I'm wasting my time just staying at home.

The meaning of a productive place

Both students described how they felt they were wasting time by staying at home, away from the university environment. Védis wrote:

Usually, the more active I am, the more productive I am. I really miss having somewhere to go where I can be productive. Deep inside, though, I still have faith. I know I have the power to make this happen.

Simon, too, wrote about finding it difficult to get motivated to study when alone at home.

I have always found it difficult to be productive on my own at home, and these days I'm filled with horror at the prospect of a whole 'workday' alone.

Simon described how being stranded in the living room created a different, negative mindset when it came to studies. Being at home involved a situation bereft of the expectations, both internal and external, that he required if he was to finish his thesis. For Simon, his apartment was a physical space that encouraged his tendency to procrastinate—to watch videos—rather than get on with his academic work. To be productive, he needed a different type of physical space, one which required him to show up and do what he was supposed to do: “It's difficult for me not having a physical space where I must show up to work”.

For both students, being physically present at university seemed important to their sense of being productive. For Védis, the re-opening of the kindergarten also re-opened an opportunity to be more productive in her apartment. Concurrently, her sense of exhaustion persisted, so that her living room still did not represent a productive space; rather, it was a place to rest and recover. However, she took a fresh step in the direction of normality—and restored productivity—when meeting Simon to do ‘some serious work’. She described feeling motivated but in need of someone to push her.

Discussion

The findings shed light on the experiences of occupational disruption and/or occupational

imbalance for two Norwegian students from marginalised groups. Indeed, for Védís (a single mother) and Simon (a young man with a physical impairment), normal everyday life occupations were thoroughly disrupted and both students found it difficult to maintain a healthy occupational balance during lockdown.

As noted earlier, occupational balance involves being equally engaged in work, play, rest, and sleep (Meyer, 1922; Wilcock, 2006). In line with the findings of Van Puymbrouck and Olson (2022), both Simon and Védís described loss of occupational routines and reduced levels of motivation regarding their academic work. For Simon, occupational imbalance manifested in spending too many hours watching videos on his computer and through his inability to get to grips with his academic work. For Védís, being socially isolated while still having to maintain her role as a mother resulted in her failing to get enough sleep and, consequently, feeling exhausted.

The occupational disruption of everyday occupations and lack of balance between occupations experienced by both participants gave rise to feelings of disappointment and exhaustion: both felt their days were being wasted. This is consistent with the experience of the general population of students, where social isolation has been found to result in psychosocial stress, negative sleep patterns, and physical and social inactivity (Ammar, Chtourou, et al., 2020; Ammar, Trabelsi, et al., 2020; NOKUT, 2021; Sivertsen, 2021). Research by Bartolac and Sangster Jokić (2019) revealed that being stuck at home meant people could no longer fill recognised roles that provided a sense of normality and independence. For both Védís and Simon, their role as students was important to their sense of normality and independence. Socially isolated, they lacked the flexibility to modify their previous occupations or adopt new ones, described by Nizzero et al. (2017) as management strategies, when experiencing occupational disruption. Even simple occupations, such as going to the park or doing exercise, became difficult.

Our results highlight the importance of social support and access to some form of social life (Hammig, 2019; Sangster Jokić & Jokić-Begić, 2022), as well as an interpersonal perspective

of occupational balance (Wagman & Håkansson, 2014). For example, Védís described how she relied on social relations to ‘*make sense of things, like being a mum*’. This aspect has also been highlighted in research on college students in China during lockdown (Ye et al., 2020). Jons-son and Asaba (2017), too, highlighted the connection between meaningful occupation and interaction with significant others. Although Simon lived with his girlfriend and kept a little contact with some friends during lockdown, the lack of meaningful occupations and disruption of university routines influenced his social participation. Research by Brooks et al. (2020) revealed how lack of freedom, being separated from one’s closest contacts, general uncertainty, and lack of meaningful occupations increase the risk of developing anxiety, stress, depression, and insomnia.

Sethi (2020) described the way in which mothering interconnects with roles and expectations associated with being a woman, noting there is generally an expectation that mothering will prove ‘natural’ and simple, even in hard times. Yet, even under ‘normal’ circumstances, an individual’s high expectations of what it means to be a perfect mother can lead to burn-out; single parenthood increases this vulnerability (Mikolajczak et al., 2018). For Védís, the closure of childcare facilities entailed a significant loss of social support as a main consequence of social isolation: something highlighted by previous research as an important factor in single parents’ ability to maintain occupational balance (Keim, 2018; Wagman & Håkansson, 2019). This shift in occupational balance towards full-time childcare, leaving little room for self-care, recreation, or social life, has been highlighted in other studies of single migrant mothers (Kielsgaard et al., 2018). Védís tried to initiate occupations to maintain some daily rhythm; for example, going to the park or eating meals at the dining table. Such strategies are evident among other parents striving to balance work with child care during the pandemic (Crook, 2020), and have been shown to mitigate the extent of occupational disruption (Nizzero et al., 2017).

Both stories showed that occupational disruption, including what is perceived as lower quality of occupations, can also lead to feelings

of shame. Védis found it shameful to be eating meals while also watching television; Simon was dismayed at his new habit of passing his days completely stationary at the computer. This points to a close relationship between identity and occupation (Cotton, 2012; McDonald et al., 2012; Nizzero et al., 2017; Whiteford, 2000). When Simon wrote of *'falling into familiar patterns'*, he invoked earlier events in his life and his previous history of disability. Asaba and Jackson (2011) argued that the shaping of identities is impacted by what people do, what they have done in the past, and foresee doing in the future. Chronic illness or disability may lead to loss of identity (Whiteford, 2000) and change perceptions of being capable and healthy (McDonald et al., 2012). When a daily routine, such as brushing one's teeth, is neglected, this may underline how an individual is cut-off from roles that are important sources of well-being (Bartolac & Sangster Jokić, 2019). Preserving routines has also been reported in pandemic research to be an important strategy to maintain health during lockdown (Sangster Jokić & Jokić-Begić, 2022).

Maintaining routines has been shown to be an important factor in social and occupational participation among students with a disability (Bartolac & Sangster Jokić, 2019). Under lockdown conditions, Simon reported lacking the vitality even to play video games, growing bored and frustrated. Martin et al. (2012) argued that boredom is an unpleasant state of not being attentive to what one does, combined with not being satisfied with the situation (Martin et al., 2012). People's sense of frustration and boredom during the COVID-19 pandemic has also been highlighted in research by Brooks et al. (2020).

Being deprived of activity can lead to occupational resignation, a term closely linked to what Nizzero et al. (2017) suggested is a maladaptive response to occupational disruption: forfeiting an occupation. For individuals like Simon, however, forfeiting an occupation also meant accepting defeat in relation to an occupation they idealised or deeply wished to perform. The term 'occupational resignation', therefore, incorporates the meanings they ascribed to this non-execution of the occupations they had planned to perform.

The last theme, 'The meaning of a productive place', showed how the participants were able to rebuild their work ethic and regain the motivation to complete their theses. In one diary entry, Védis wrote of how she was missing a 'place to be productive'; being a single mother limited the possibility of her making progress in her studies. Research suggests that engagement in studying has the potential to make students feel connected to others (Ekelman et al., 2013). People relate to others through shared occupations; they find meaning and possibilities to communicate and experience both involvement and pleasure in their efforts to attain goals that are important to them (Bartolac & Sangster Jokić, 2019; Hammell, 2020a; Hocking, 2009; Law, 2002). Going to the university campus and seeing friends contributed meaning, expression, and pleasure. Such occupations establish what Simon called a normal 'circadian rhythm'. Spending one's days studying in this environment can help one feel happier, healthier and more patient. In contrast, being cut off from this environment made study difficult. Indeed, studying became somewhat counterproductive: an obstacle to an individual's ability to adapt to the new situation.

The physical dimension (in this case, the ability to be physically present at one's place of study) also forms part of the equation when exploring the problem of occupational balance. Both Simon and Védis missed having a place to go to, indicating that occupational balance can also be connected to physical space. Their inability to be physically present at university diminished their productivity and the sense of meaning derived from everyday life. Hindrances to achieving occupational balance have previously been linked to psychological and emotional pressures, rather than physical factors (Wilson & Wilcock, 2005). That said, lack of access to physical environments and public places is included in Hammell's (2020a, 2020b) descriptions of occupational disruption. Our study suggests that the meaning individuals attach to the concept of a productive place (in this case the university) can contribute to rhythms of occupations and recreating occupational balance, and thus to better health (Liu et al., 2021; Meyer, 1922; Wagman et al., 2015). For students with disabilities or single parents,

the meaning of a productive place can be particularly important since they can be more vulnerable in a situation of isolation.

Strengths and Limitations

Given the reliance on the personal stories of just two individuals, this study can be criticised for having too narrow a focus. That the participants continued to be involved in a secondary process of analysis also raises problems: to contribute to the writing of a paper that is already based on one's own stories is both an advantage and a possible threat to validity. We argue that this was a necessary collaboration and contend that the students' ability to confirm the co-authors' interpretation of their narratives reinforces the trustworthiness of this study. However, it can be a challenge to distance oneself and discuss one's own narratives. Using concepts from occupational science and drawing on previous research, we have sought to lift the discussion beyond the experiences of Simon and Védís. Further, the use of a secondary narrative analysis of the diary entries helped create greater analytical distance and added a stronger focus on the theoretical validation that was a feature of the process. The unequal power relations between former students and their supervisors were not found to be a significant problem, given the ability of all four authors to discuss and adapt the emerging secondary analysis.

Study Contribution and Further Research

This study makes a unique contribution to occupational science by exploring the personal stories of everyday occupation as described by two students from marginalised groups during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. Their descriptions and experiences are explored through a specific theoretical lens: that of disruption and occupational balance under conditions of social isolation. As such, the study sheds light on key concepts in the literature of occupational science as experienced by a single mother and a person with a disability. In addition to findings regarding the consequences of home confinement, the importance of presence in the physical university environment is underlined. For both

students in this study, their academic work was disrupted when they were forced to stay at home.

This study is the only one involving occupational therapy students from marginalised student populations. Further research within the field of occupational science might continue to explore everyday life and daily occupations of students 'at risk' of social isolation from close relations; for example, refugees or university students who have moved far away from close families and friends. It might also prove valuable to explore on a broader basis students' experiences and perceptions of the links between life at home and at the university; ideally, such research would cover different countries. In this paper, we introduce a concept we called occupational resignation which is closely linked to forfeiting an occupation described as a maladaptive response to occupational disruption; this term should be further explored.

Conclusion

The complexity of occupational balance in a period of occupational disruption following society-wide lockdown has been illustrated through two students' narratives. With regards to some fundamental elements of everyday life, the two students' stories were in complete contrast to each other, only to converge again in some other way. For instance, Simon spent days alone during lockdown, while Védís took care of her son full-time. At the same time, their experiences met through situations of occupational imbalance and disruption; for example, their lack of ability to write their thesis and maintain daily routines and a healthy lifestyle showed that an occupational balance in a period of lockdown can pose major challenges. For occupational therapy students from marginalised populations, the implications of social isolation can be particularly far-reaching, leaving such students feeling vulnerable, isolated, and lonely in their tense and pressured study situation. At the same time, resilient individuals also manifest feelings of optimism, resignation, hope, purpose, and confidence. For such individuals, the physical and social context of the university embodies the meaning of a productive place; as such, it acts as a beacon,

encouraging students' hopes of regaining occupational balance in their post-lockdown lives.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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