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Meliorism and knowledge mobilization: Strategies for occupational science research and practice

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes that 'meliorism'—a philosophical belief in people's abilities to improve lived experience through engaged problem-solving—is a useful concept to describe and orient occupational science research, given the challenges of our time. This proposal derives from an intensive period of discussion through occupational science seminars, strategic planning sessions, and other activities at the University of Southern California's Mrs. T. H. Chan Division of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy, including preparations for the 26th Occupational Science Symposium in 2019. While many disciplines and professions express a melioristic intent, we believe that occupational science and occupational therapy exemplify a particular understanding of meliorism, given the view of occupation that they share, as: 1) engaged activity that has meaning and purpose; and 2) a powerful tool that builds consciousness and practices that can promote desired change. We suggest that occupational scientists' aim to develop impactful research manifests these conceptual foundations. Further, we argue that a commitment to meliorism requires concerted efforts to mobilize knowledge by intentionally planning for stakeholder engagement and societal impact across all phases of research. We suggest that active knowledge mobilization will enhance the knowledge base of occupational science and help to realize its meliorist potential in both research and practice contexts.

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Occupational science; Knowledge mobilization; Meliorism; History of academic disciplines; Pragmatism

In the first 30 years of its existence, occupational science has achieved much of its founding vision (Clark et al., 1991; Yerxa, 2000; Yerxa et al., 1990; also see Wilcock, 1991, 2014). Key elements of that vision included: 1) developing a knowledge base about occupation, with the goal of supporting occupational therapy research and practice and enhancing the profession's status and autonomy; and 2) applying knowledge about occupation to the needs of a wider public. A vibrant literature now elucidates the nature and power of occupation, the experiences and functioning of people as occupational beings, and the processes and outcomes of occupational engagement in relation to health and well-being (cf. Glover, 2009; Hocking, 2000; Molke et al., 2004; Molineux & Whiteford, 2011; Pierce, 2014).

As anticipated, a great deal of effort has gone into creating bridges between occupational science and occupational therapy practice. Occupational therapists continue to articulate the importance of occupational science as a foundation for professional knowledge (cf. Hocking & Wright-St. Clair, 2011; Molineux, 2004; Pierce, 2014). Many have contributed to this integrative endeavor, as the productivity of scholars exemplifies in the United States

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and Canada, Sweden, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Brazil, Chile, South Africa, and elsewhere. New lines of occupational science inquiry also address omissions in the founding literature, for example, its preoccupation with the individual at the expense of the social; the relationship of power and inequality to occupational opportunities and choices; and the need for scholars to critique their own personal, cultural, professional, and disciplinary assumptions (cf. Angell, 2014; Dickie et al., 2006; Hammell, 2009; Magalhães, 2012; Townsend & Wilcock, 2004).

A PhD degree-granting discipline, occupational science provides an intellectual anchor for an expanding international community of scholars and practitioners. The proliferation of textbooks, academic societies, conference presentations, and a thriving peer-reviewed journal focused on occupation are benchmarks of the discipline's growth (Clark, 2006; Clark & Lawlor, 2009; Pierce, 2012). Together, they have helped solidify the discipline's focus on occupation as a distinctive "professional jurisdiction" in the academy (Abbott, 1988, 2004). So much has happened in occupational science's three-decade history that founder Elizabeth J. Yerxa has characterized it as "almost miraculous" (USC Chan Division of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy, 2019).

Since founding the discipline in 1989, the Mrs. T. H. Chan Division of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy at the University of Southern California has undergone tremendous expansion, led initially by former Associate Dean and Chair, Dr. Florence Clark. New faculty hires, advances in science and technology, increased research funding, interdisciplinary research collaborations, growth of the faculty practice, responsiveness to developments in the occupational science literature, and consciousness of pressing social problems and real-world events all have contributed to USC Chan's diversification of its research portfolio.

In 2018, USC Chan's current Associate Dean and Chair, Dr. Grace Baranek, initiated an intensive period of discussions among the faculty on the state of occupational science within and beyond the Division. These discussions, which began with the launch of a 5-year strategic planning process, occurred through monthly Division-wide occupational science seminars and preparations for the USC Chan Occupational Science Symposium on September 19, 2019, which celebrated the discipline's 30th anniversary.

The faculty's discussions focused on questions such as: *What vision, if any, characterizes the contemporary scope of occupational science at our institution? How can we best explain and organize what we do as we plan for the future?* The faculty's inquiry reached consensus that the work being done at USC Chan shares a melioristic orientation to support people's hopeful efforts to solve problems they experience in their lives. This orientation encompasses both concerns to help 'make things better' in specific cases and to contribute knowledge and practices that also can improve the human condition in some way. The first author initially presented the related ideas of meliorism and knowledge mobilization, along with examples of USC Chan research, in a keynote address at the 2019 USC Chan Occupational Science Symposium. The second and third authors, co-chairs of a strategic planning committee tasked with assessing the state of occupational science at USC Chan, helped to develop the argument in its current version.

As explained below, we argue that occupational science and occupational therapy share a melioristic orientation that focuses on people's capacities and aspirations. It also recognizes the interdependence—that is, the 'transactions' (Dickie et al., 2006)—of people and their environments as a core consideration for improving the human condition. Building on Yerxa et al. (1990), we further argue that the meliorism rooted in occupational science and occupational therapy is hopeful, optimistic, and open to risk, experimentation, and transformative change. These roots ground our emphasis on the incremental and systematic (but not necessarily linear) processes of human problem-solving that are fundamental to occupation-focused work.

In this paper, we present examples of research at USC Chan to show how embracing meliorism puts human experience at the center of occupational science inquiry in a way that can better support the desires and aspirations of the

people whose lives we study. Rather than make claims about research developed at other institutions or locations, we focus on examples familiar to us and use them to pose ideas that can be examined for broader relevance across the discipline. Based on these examples, we describe how a stronger articulation of occupational science's melioristic core can yield benefits within a scientific landscape that increasingly prioritizes engaged research, knowledge mobilization, and societal impact (Phipps et al., 2016). The meliorism in occupational science holds that occupations as means and ends (McLaughlin Gray, 1998) can be used to mobilize learning, reflection, and action to hopefully achieve some desired change. We suggest that the combination of a melioristic framework and a commitment to knowledge mobilization reflects the kind of science that occupational science hopes to be; the levels of focus (individual, collective, and points between) that the discipline's scholarship does and can take; the relationship between occupational therapy and occupational science; and the pathway for increasing public awareness about 'the power of occupation.'

Meliorism in Occupational Science

Meliorism is the philosophical belief that "we are capable of creating better worlds and selves" (Koopman, 2006, p. 107). The concept is associated with the pragmatist philosophy of John Dewey, William James, and Charles Peirce, particularly during the Progressive Era (1890-1920), when occupational therapy was founded as a profession. Pragmatism conceives of 'truth' not as an absolute given but as a process of inquiry, a trajectory of formulating ends and trying to achieve them (Cutchin, 2013; Madsen & Josephsson, 2017). As a social philosophy, it emphasizes the practical consequences of human agency, framed by the hopeful belief that no matter how difficult the situation, positive change and new perspectives can be achieved to some degree. Pragmatism challenges positivist epistemology's claim to empirical truth in knowledge production and evidence-based practice (cf. Biesta, 2007). This controversy is not entirely new, as discussed by Hooper and Wood (2002) regarding the history of occupational therapy, which has profited from both approaches. As a taproot for occupational science, the melioristic viewpoint or disposition allows us to envision the discipline itself as an academic field that produces knowledge and as a field of practice where such knowledge can be generated and put to work in the service of people and their needs. In this sense, a meliorist orientation can also bring occupational science into closer conversation and shared practice with occupational therapy.

Pragmatism—with its hopeful, experimental, and meliorist orientation—exercised a crucial influence on the founding of occupational therapy through the Hull House milieu and related associations among John Dewey, Jane Addams, Adolf Meyer, Eleanor Clarke Slagle, and others (Breines, 1986, 1990, 1995; Frank & Zemke, 2009; Ikiugu & Schultz, 2006; Morrison, 2016; Reed, 2017). John Dewey joined the faculty of the University of Chicago as Chair of Philosophy, Psychology and Education in 1894 and became a trustee of Hull House the following year. Dewey and Jane Addams, Hull House's founder and a social philosopher in her own right, exchanged and developed pragmatist theory through observing and reflecting on actual experience and practice (Schneiderhan, 2011).

Dewey and psychiatrist Adolf Meyer met one another at Hull House where they began a lasting exchange about the ameliorating effects of environment on mental illness, juvenile delinquency, and other conditions believed to be inevitable and incurable because of heredity or lesions (Christiansen, 2007; cf. Lidz, 1966; Lief, 1948). In 1912, at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Meyer hired Hull House social worker Eleanor Clarke Slagle to develop a clinical psychiatry program based on environmental modification or 'habit training' as a means of social recovery (cf. Clark et al., 2007). Slagle returned to Chicago to direct the country's first school of occupational therapy; became state-wide director of occupational services in Illinois; and, in 1917, cofounded and became president of the National Society for the Promotion of Occupational Therapy (later, the American Occupational Therapy Association).

In the period of founding the University of Chicago's laboratory school and developing the arguments for his book *Democracy and Education* (1916), Dewey's interest in transformation

focused on 'growth' (Aldrich, 2018a, 2018b), a concept whose articulation anticipated his later treatment of 'meliorism'. According to Stitzlein (2018), Dewey's idea of growth "describes how reconstructions of our experiences through inquiry develops physical, intellectual, and moral capacities, actualizing them and helping them inform one another so that they continue in a chain that enables one to live satisfactorily" (p. 233). Hildebrand (2013) suggested that most, if not all, of Dewey's work can be understood as guided by a 'meliorist motive' grounded in empirical observation and reflection:

> Meliorism is the view that it is both a logical and moral error to declare that life – presently or ultimately – is either perfectly good or bad; life should be understood as improvable, primarily through intelligent, human effort. As applied to philosophy, meliorism suggests that no philosophical questions (even regarding truth and knowledge) can ever be fully isolated from endeavours to preserve and create value; more generally, it means that philosophy's raison d'être is to make life better. (p. 59)

Dewey's philosophy of experience envisions a problem-solving trajectory that continues through life, consisting of three essential phases: "(1) the starting point in everyday experience of all of our attempts to enhance the meaning of our lives, (2) the process of the experiential transformation of such experience, and (3) the experience of consummatory achievement" (Hildebrand, 2013, p. 59, quoting Browning, 1999, p. 2). Given the emergent, in-process nature of experience, meliorism requires a realistic hopefulness about improving situations without the need to completely pre-define the outcome (Feinstein, 2017). Meliorism supports the view of humans as agents, or "active participants in the making of an unfinished world" (Pappas, 2008, p. 153). For occupational science, meliorism means putting human experience and social action at the center of inquiry and utilizing the resulting knowledge as "tools of amelioration in the midst of our everyday life" (Pappas, 2017, p. 17).

Occupational science aims to produce knowledge that people can use with a high degree of confidence to take action to resolve problems in their lives, individually and as members of society. Yet, claiming this meliorist foundation should not be confused with a simplistic optimism (Fesmire, 2015; Koopman, 2006; Kundacki, 2018; Santos, 2003). As Hildebrand (2013) wrote, "meliorism is no sentimental faith, but a working hypothesis whose plausibility rests upon observation and experience" (p. 59). Consequently, a commitment to meliorism does not require ignoring the less explored and less socially acceptable facets of occupations (Kiepek et al., 2019; Twinley, 2013), or ones that support oppression (Angell, 2014; Ramugondo, 2015). Nor does it mean overlooking discourses and practices that shrink occupational possibilities (Laliberte Rudman, 2013). Meliorism relies on purposeful occupations to achieve desired ends (Clark et al., 1991), although not all occupations are purposefully dedicated to problem-solving. Considering these facets is key to improving the adequacy of ameliorative efforts, as they sharpen the realism and relevance of the knowledge that we offer to improve lives and worlds. In light of this, we suggest that meliorism already underlies a great deal, if not most, of occupational science scholarship to date, and helps to explain founder Elizabeth J. Yerxa's (2020) characterization of the discipline as a "science of hope" (Yerxa, 2020, p. 22; cf. Rorty, 1999; Stitzlein, 2018; Voparil, 2014; Westbrook, 2005).

Mobilizing Knowledge for Making Better Worlds

Discussions about occupational science would be incomplete without considering how occupational science knowledge is generated, circulated, and used. Today's scientific landscape increasingly prioritizes engaged research with societal impact (Abma et al., 2017; Phipps et al., 2016). Yet, the daily rewards of academic careers and institutional prestige depend on disseminating knowledge in scientific journals and professional presentations. Peer-reviewed publications in high-impact journals drive hiring and promotion, grant acquisition, tenure, and

other forms of academic recognition, influence, and power. As a result, occupational science knowledge is shared mainly through scholarly publications with aims that include: 1) knowledge dissemination among occupational scientists; 2) knowledge exchange between occupational scientists and occupational therapists; and 3) knowledge translation from researchers to professional experts.

Knowledge mobilization, as an alternative framework, consists of more than simply information dissemination, exchange, and translation. Instead, it uses a non-linear (or flexible) process of knowledge generation, uptake, and impact through active engagement of all stakeholders throughout the process. The main goal of knowledge mobilization is to put research into action for the benefit of 'end users,' whether they be consumers, clinicians, educators, policy makers, advocates, or other stakeholders. Phipps and colleagues at Research Impact Canada (Knowledge Mobilization, n.d.) thus defined knowledge mobilization as "engaged scholarship from inception to impact." Knowledge mobilization thrives within communities of practice and social learning systems (Hart et al., 2013; Wenger, 2000) where people intentionally identify with and commit to mutual engagement for a common good. Together, they solve problems beyond the expertise of any of the participants acting solely within their own area of experience and competence. Knowledge mobilization moves available knowledge into active societal use through ongoing transactions among stakeholders who co-produce knowledge and work together to assess impact (Phipps et al., 2016).

While some occupational scientists are already engaging in knowledge mobilization, this framework is relatively unknown in the United States, in line with the observation by Peter, Kothari, and Masood (2017) that broader assessments of research impact are rare within the discipline. To illustrate the fit between knowledge mobilization and occupational science's broader melioristic orientation, we present an expanded discussion of a set of research examples that Baranek featured in her 2019 USC Chan Occupational Science Symposium keynote address.

"Smart desks" for customized worker environments

Associate Professor Shawn Roll is collaborating with Dean's Professor Burcin Becerik-Gerber, Research Assistant Professor Gale Lucas, and other computer scientists, engineers, and office workers on the innovative design of "smart desks" (Aryal et al., 2019; Wetherbe, 2019) that function through human-computer transactions. In this project, Dr. Roll is applying his expert clinical understanding of body structures and functions in concert with his occupational perspective, recognizing that occupational patterns and habits shape and are shaped by the contexts through which they occur. Dr. Roll and his collaborators are applying this knowledge to develop advanced technologies that can learn individualized habits, routines, and behaviors, and leverage workers' problem-solving strategies to improve health and occupational performance. In a current pilot study of these smart desks, workers are providing real-time feedback about their constantly changing actual working conditions, habits, and preferences. While engaged in work occupations, their feedback teaches the system, and iteratively themselves, to generate solutions to everyday challenges experienced while working in particular environments. If successful, this smart desk will soon help workers tailor their environmental conditions (e.g., climate, lighting, etc.) and individual behaviors (e.g., posture, performance, etc.) to match their occupational preferences and needs. We see Dr. Roll's work as embracing a melioristic intent to help people resolve problems in their own lives; as an example of knowledge mobilization that moves occupational science's intentions for change into action by engaging stakeholders from inception through implementation; and as a means to raise public awareness of the tangible impacts of occupational science inquiry.

Promoting occupational engagement, health and social participation among Latinx stakeholders

Associate Professor Beth Pyatak, with Associate Professor of Research Jesus Diaz, Associate Professor of Research Stacey Schepens Niemiec,

Project Manager Jeanine Blanchard, and others, collaborates with a large team of interdisciplinary scientists (e.g., gerontologists, applications engineers, quantitative psychologists, epidemiologists), primary health care providers (e.g., physicians, nurses), and community members to understand the myriad situational and socio-cultural factors that promote or inhibit occupational engagement, health, and social participation in Latinx communities who are at risk for chronic health conditions (Pyatak et al., 2019). Their scholarly approaches integrate theoretical principles of Lifestyle Redesign® (Clark et al., 2015), which have roots in the pioneering "well-elderly" studies of Dr. Clark and colleagues (1997) at USC two decades ago. Leveraging recent technological advances, members of this team are currently developing web-based applications for monitoring occupational patterns and their impact on health and participation, as well as large data repositories that can support future occupational science inquiries. We see all of these scholarly activities as reflecting the melioristic hope to produce knowledge that is useful to end-users (e.g., clients with chronic conditions in underserved populations) and putting this intent into action through pragmatic knowledge mobilization processes that engage stakeholders from conceptualization to implementation to resulting advocacy efforts. These research efforts are mobilizing inquiries rooted in occupational science with the goal of promoting people's capacities to make decisions as they navigate their daily lives, routines, and habits.

Engaging families to identify and mitigate the risks of neurodevelopmental disorders

Professor Grace Baranek's current research aims to understand caregiver-infant engagement in the context of daily occupations and routines. This line of inquiry focuses on applying knowledge from psychometric studies of instrument development (together with Professor of Research John Sideris), occupational science perspectives on occupational development (e.g., Humphry, 2002; Wiseman et al., 2005) and co-occupation of parents and infants (e.g., Pierce, 2009), and preventative intervention models that apply parent coaching strategies to support dyadic occupational engagement (together with Professor of Speech and Hearing Sciences Linda Watson at the University of North Carolina) (Baranek et al., 2015). Dr. Baranek employs her occupational perspective both in designing home-based interventions that occur in the context of daily occupations and routines, and in testing behavioural and neurophysiological mechanisms supporting dyadic engagement. The melioristic intent of this work is to help families mitigate the development of neurodevelopmental disorders by identifying infants who are at risk for the cascading effects of engagement difficulties over time. Specifically, this line of inquiry focuses on deepening parents' understandings of their child's sensory experiences and intentional communications in the context of daily activities, facilitating reflections on parents' own responsive strategies, and scaffolding parents' strategies to problem-solve for optimal occupational engagement or address challenging situations. Knowledge mobilization for this line of inquiry began with soliciting and incorporating parent feedback on intervention approaches (Freuler et al., 2014) and measures that are being developed, such as the First Years Inventory (FYI, Version 3.1; Baranek et al., 2013). Knowledge mobilization efforts will move next to scaling up the interventions with larger and more culturally diverse families, integrating stakeholder input into manuals, tutorials, and practice guidelines, and informing policies on early intervention (e.g., Weitlauf et al., 2014).

Mobilizing occupational science knowledge for social transformation

Professor Gelya Frank studies the role of occupations in social transformation, developing a pragmatist theory of social action for occupational science research and practice. Drawing on John Dewey's work on democracy and social reconstruction (Westbrook, 2005), Frank (2020; Frank & Dos Santos, 2020) referred to collective efforts to improve a shared problematic situation as 'occupational reconstructions'. This work engages with theories of collective occupation and occupational consciousness

(Ramugondo, 2015; Ramugondo & Kronenberg, 2015), transactionalism (Cutchin & Dickie, 2013), occupational justice (Townsend & Wilcock, 2004), critical occupational science and occupational therapy (Farias et al., 2019; Laliberte Rudman, 2013), and the social paradigm in occupational therapy (Morrison, 2016; Malfitano et al., 2014). It also draws on theories of narrative and social action (Mattingly, 1998), social movements (Della Porta & Diani, 2015), and socially engaged and participatory art (Finkelpearl, 2013; Thompson, 2012). Examples of social reconstruction include NGO activities in Guatemala following the country's 30-year civil war (Frank, 2013); non-violent grassroots strategies in the civil rights and anti-apartheid movements (Frank & Muriithi, 2015); and the resistive actions and narratives of Brazil's *candangos*, workers marginalized socially and economically after building the city of Brasilia in the 1950s (Dos Santos et al., 2020). Occupational reconstruction theory builds on a series of occupation-based, knowledge-mobilizing projects with community stakeholders, which provided youth with critical tools and creative activities challenging passive media consumption (Frank et al., 2001), engaged Indigenous elders to record their tribal history (Frank et al., 2008), and developed a field school for transdisciplinary human rights practice including occupational therapy, anthropology and public health (www.napaotguatemala.org) (Hall-Clifford & Frank, 2013).

Reframing job-seeking trajectories for long-term unemployed populations

Associate Professor of Clinical Occupational Therapy Rebecca Aldrich, in collaboration with Professor Debbie Laliberte Rudman at the University of Western Ontario, is studying how people negotiate long-term unemployment in post-recession North America. This line of inquiry aims to illuminate the contradictions, tensions, and problematic situations that result from narrow, non-occupational framings of unemployment in social policies and service provision processes. One of the key findings of this research was that the socio-political construction of long-term unemployment can lead people to be 'activated'—or, to shape their daily occupations to conform with policy recommendations for quick re-entry into the formal workforce—and yet 'stuck', that is, unable to move forward in their careers, relationships, and broader lives (Laliberte Rudman & Aldrich, 2016). This line of inquiry further developed Dr. Aldrich's understandings about the resource seeking occupations (Aldrich et al., 2017) that are integral yet often invisible aspects of everyday life. The melioristic intent underlying this research is reflected in its emphasis on illuminating how people without work develop strategies to survive the problematic situation of unemployment (Aldrich et al., 2017), identifying possibilities for change when people come into contact with service providers whose discretion enacts and remakes public policy (Aldrich & Laliberte Rudman, 2020). Drs. Aldrich and Laliberte Rudman planned knowledge mobilization activities, including webinars and policy briefs, for a variety of stakeholders within this line of scholarship, aiming to deepen the impact of knowledge about the ways in which people encounter and resolve problematic situations during long-term unemployment.

Discussion

As they develop over time, disciplines face a challenge to balance the 'push' for knowledge integration and coherence with the 'pull' of differentiation and innovation (Krishnan, 2009). USC Chan's strategy to meet this challenge turns to the roots of occupational science in pragmatist philosophy and its emphasis on meliorism. We suggest that this emphasis, along with a focus on knowledge mobilization, allows for continued development of the science of occupation 1) in keeping with core elements of the founders' vision; 2) with greater conceptual coherence across diverse topics, populations, problems, and levels of analysis; and 3) in line with concerted efforts to move occupational science research into public arenas for the common good.

In presenting meliorism and knowledge mobilization as useful for occupational science, we do not aim to assert a dogma or impose particular practices. We can see potential questions, constraints, and exceptions to our argument.

We have space here only to begin this conversation, anticipating that readers may find themselves asking:

1. What are the limitations of meliorism and knowledge mobilization?
2. How do the authors reconcile meliorism and knowledge mobilization with critiques of Western cultural dominance?
3. How can researchers avoid imposing their own values when focusing on improving people's lives?
4. Does meliorism have a particular political agenda? Does it offer more than a 'band-aid' for society's most pressing problems?
5. How do the authors envision developing meliorism and knowledge mobilization beyond the current examples at USC Chan?
6. How can scholars work these concepts into their research proposals and grant applications, if pragmatism is an alternative to accepted positivist standards?
7. How does the link of meliorism to social action relate to research that focuses on discrete components of occupation, such as hand function or brain function?
8. Should we reject traditional knowledge transfer and dissemination approaches in occupational science and occupational therapy?
9. How does the idea of 'stakeholder' engagement become fully realized in evidence-based practice?

We expect, encourage, and invite further study and critique of meliorist efforts within occupational science, in line with these and other questions. Hopeful efforts to make a positive difference through engaged problem solving can be studied, understood, guided, developed, and critiqued using a range of research methods. Scientific studies incorporating melioristic orientations and knowledge mobilization processes across a range of contexts will help to develop their contribution to the occupational science knowledge base. Given the evidence we find of a melioristic orientation and potential for knowledge mobilization across seemingly disparate research projects at USC Chan, we expect that other occupational scientists may find similar evidence in examples familiar to them.

We end our discussion by addressing a common critique of pragmatist ideas, such as meliorism and transactionalism, that their target or purpose is difficult to define (Bunting, 2016; Robinson, 1924). The 'ends-in-view' of pragmatist action are unique to each situation and can be expected to change in the course of inquiry. There is no guarantee that active participation in problem-solving will have the desired effects or even "nudge matters toward the better" (Fesmire, 2015, p. 161). Meliorism is characterized by "faith in future possibilities" (Campbell, 1995, p. 259) and, as a form of social action, reflects a shared commitment to "the worthwhileness of [human] efforts to try to advance the common good" (p. 261).

We see this understanding of the uncertainty and unpredictability of human action as realistic and one of pragmatism's strengths, as recognized in many other fields. As sociologist Erik Schneiderhan (2011) wrote, a "pragmatist revival [is] occurring in the social sciences" (p. 589). Interest in pragmatism can be seen in relation to fields as diverse as anthropology (Leaf, 2009; Lefebvre, 2017; Torres Colon & Hobbes 2015), political theory and governance (Ansell & Geyer, 2017; Green, 2008), critical race theory and history (Glaude, 2009; Taylor, 1981); and cognitive neuroscience (Madzia & Jung, 2016; Solymosi & Shook, 2014). Such literature shows interest in "the potential of pragmatism as an alternative theory of social action" (Schneiderhan, 2011, p. 589).

Pragmatists today, as in the past, are asking consequential questions about the world's problems. The scope and persistence of these problems threaten not only human health and well-being, but even our hope and capacity to engage in solutions (Frank & Dos Santos, 2020). In an article, *Hoping and Democracy*, Stitzlein (2018) argued for a realistic meliorism:

> Structural violence and inequality, common amongst poor and racial minority communities in America, has wreaked havoc on hope. In some cases, it has eroded hope. In others it has rendered hope exhausting, with marginalized citizens told that they must never give up

> hope and that they must keep trying to earn a better life for themselves, in part through improving their own character regardless of the stagnant harmful practices of others. Many of those citizens are left either nihilistically without hope or perpetually chasing a vision of justice that is (perhaps sometimes intentionally kept) out of reach … [meliorism is] a form of hope that is more sustainable and more attuned to the real conditions of life that we can control and others where we have limited control. (p. 231)

In this vein, Rodolfo Morrison (2016), a philosopher and occupational therapist, has written:

> Today, almost 100 years after the founding of the National Society for the Promotion of Occupational Therapy, pragmatism is still relevant to the profession. Specifically, its pertinence is related to the current scenario of the profession, and its powerful development in working scopes related to socio-community fields. This helps identify how we are on the verge of another paradigm, known as Social Paradigm of the Occupation. This new social understanding of the discipline allows us to understand the relevance of professional work in community or social contexts. (p. 295)

We can only underscore Morrison's (2016) remarks about the importance today for developing the pragmatist approach, working occupationally in social contexts, to address the problems facing individuals in their communities.

Conclusion

This article presented the argument that meliorism and knowledge mobilization can help realize a vision shared by occupational science and occupational therapy. This vision seeks to contribute knowledge and practices that help people to improve their capacities to live healthy, satisfying lives through trajectories of solving problems for themselves and through participation with others. Discussions within the wider occupational science community will help to clarify how a focus on meliorism and knowledge mobilization may work to advance the science, add coherence to our rapidly growing and diversifying discipline, and contribute to health, justice, and other societal goods. The 'end-in-view' for USC Chan is to make occupational science knowledge increasingly useful as people engage in hopeful efforts to solve human problems in their daily lives and the world today.

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