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Original Article

Developing an occupational perspective of community repair cafés: a qualitative inquiry

Desenvolvendo uma perspectiva ocupacional sobre cafés comunitários reparadores (repair cafés): uma investigação qualitativa

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Abstract

Introduction: Some human occupations have had detrimental effects on the environment. Sustainable community initiatives such as repair cafés are a potential mechanism through which occupational therapists could help address the ecological crisis, although limited research explores them from an occupational perspective. **Objectives:** The aim of this study was to explore engagement and participation in repair cafés to understand the potential occupational impacts they have on individuals and the community. **Methods:** Five semi-structured interviews were conducted with volunteers at a community repair café. Data was analyzed using thematic analysis and utilized an interpretivist approach. **Results:** Five main themes were identified: "A building block of community", "a step towards helping people and the environment", "connecting to occupational roles", "maintaining and developing cognitive skills" and "the social side matters too". **Conclusion:** The repair café provided cognitive and social benefits to those involved, with meaning derived from its contribution to identity, growth and belonging. The community was similarly perceived to benefit, with connections strengthened and shared issues around the environment and socio-economic disadvantage addressed on a small-scale. This study captures a practical means through which occupational therapists could support sustainable community development.

Keywords: Sustainable Development, Environment, Community Participation.

Resumo

Introdução: Algumas ocupações humanas têm causado efeitos prejudiciais ao meio ambiente. Iniciativas comunitárias sustentáveis, como os cafés comunitários reparadores (*repair cafés*), constituem um mecanismo potencial por meio do qual terapeutas ocupacionais poderiam ajudar a enfrentar a crise ecológica, embora pesquisas ainda sejam limitadas ao explorá-los sob uma perspectiva ocupacional.

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Objetivos: O objetivo deste estudo foi explorar o engajamento e a participação em cafés comunitários reparadores para compreender seus potenciais impactos ocupacionais sobre os indivíduos e a comunidade. **Métodos:** Cinco entrevistas semiestruturadas foram conduzidas com voluntários em um café comunitário reparador. Os dados foram examinados por meio de análise temática, com adoção de uma abordagem interpretativa. **Resultados:** Cinco temas principais foram identificados: Um bloco de construção da comunidade; Um passo para ajudar as pessoas e o meio ambiente; Conectar-se aos papéis ocupacionais; Manter e desenvolver habilidades cognitivas; e O lado social também importa. **Conclusão:** O café comunitário reparador proporcionou benefícios cognitivos e sociais aos envolvidos, e o sentido atribuído a essa experiência derivou de sua contribuição para a identidade, o crescimento e o pertencimento. Percebeu-se que a comunidade também se beneficiou, com fortalecimento de conexões e enfrentamento, em pequena escala, de questões compartilhadas relacionadas ao meio ambiente e à desvantagem socioeconômica. Este estudo descreve um meio prático pelo qual terapeutas ocupacionais poderiam apoiar o desenvolvimento comunitário sustentável.

Palavras-chave: Desenvolvimento Sustentável, Meio Ambiente, Participação da Comunidade.

Introduction

Some human activities are having substantial impacts on the environment, causing food and water shortages, decreased biodiversity and extreme weather conditions (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2023). Alterations to the ecological environment can also preclude engagement in occupations, creating a bidirectional relationship between human occupations and the environment. Appreciation of this bidirectional effect has given rise to a new field of occupational science; occupational ecology (Simó Algado, 2012, 2023). Occupational ecology looks to translate theory into practice by highlighting how occupational therapists can support communities to make sustainable responses, referred to as the practice of eco-social occupational therapy (Simó Algado & Townsend, 2015). Simó Algado (2023) provides examples of projects which could constitute eco-social occupational therapy. These include community gardening, conservation and circular economy projects, although there is currently a lack of research exploring these with an occupational ecology lens (Smith et al., 2020).

In conjunction with the emergence of occupational ecology, the World Federation of Occupational Therapists (WFOT) have also recognized the importance of sustainability within the profession, highlighting sustainable community development as a research priority (World Federation of Occupational Therapists, 2018). Since permitting ecological degradation is in direct conflict with the profession's focus on sustainability, it is a key prerogative for occupational therapists to develop a deeper understanding of sustainable occupations. Research into sustainable occupations could help develop an evidence base for eco-social occupational therapy and occupational therapy's role in sustainable community development.

One such sustainable occupation that would benefit from further exploration are repair cafés. Repair cafés are community-based workshops where people can bring broken products and work with volunteer "fixers" to repair them (Keiller & Charter, 2016). Repair cafés fall under the scope of circular economy projects, which seek to reduce waste and create a more sustainable economy (European Parliament, 2023).

Although Simó Algado (2023) stipulated that circular economy projects such as repair cafés could be a mechanism of eco-social occupational therapy, there is currently no occupational science literature on this topic. Research into repair cafés could be a valuable contribution to help understand circular economy projects from an occupational perspective.

In order to construct an understanding of repair cafés from an occupational perspective, it is necessary to clarify how the perspective is defined within this study. Although there are numerous articulations of the occupational perspective, a critical theme across perspectives was that occupation should be understood beyond simple 'doing', to appreciate how the context, form, function and meaning of occupation ultimately contributes to health and wellbeing (Christiansen, 1999; Njelesani et al., 2014; Wilcock, 1998; Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). Wilcock's framework of doing, being, belonging and becoming (Wilcock, 1998, 2006) is particularly relevant as it highlights the future-orientated aspects of occupation, the role of occupations in social connection and doing for others, as well as their contribution to the sense of self (Hammell, 2014; Hitch et al., 2014a). This framing allows a richer understanding of repair cafés, whose community focus and goals for a sustainable future would benefit from adopting a perspective that considers both of these elements. As such, Wilcock's articulation is a suitable approach from which to examine this occupation.

Current literature on repair cafés

Presently, the body of literature exploring repair cafés from an occupational perspective is non-existent. However, some understanding of the occupational nature of repair cafés can be gleaned from other bodies of research, with findings seeming to relate to Wilcock's articulation of the occupational perspective (Wilcock, 1998, 2006).

Surveys have explored occupational doing at repair cafés, highlighting that typical repair café activities involve repairing broken items, upcycling furniture and modifying clothing (Keiller & Charter, 2016). However, "doing" often goes beyond repairing, with repair cafés also providing opportunities to learn new skills and meet people from the local community (Charter & Whitehead, 2020; Keiller & Charter, 2016). Although these surveys provided some insight into occupational aspects of repair cafés, they do not constitute rigorous academic research, having been published as reports and white-papers rather than peer-reviewed journal articles. Furthermore, surveys, although useful in capturing a breadth of experience, struggle to capture rich data and are typically less suitable for newer topics, such as repair cafés (Bowling, 2023). Indeed, Nayar & Stanley (2023) recommend more qualitative research in occupational therapy, arguing that the complexities of occupational experiences are best answered through qualitative methodology. Therefore, there is scope for a qualitative exploration of repair cafés utilizing an occupational perspective, given the newness of the topic and the need to develop richer insights.

In addition to the surveys explored above, ethnographic research has also illustrated the role of repair cafés in prompting growth and change, interlinking with Wilcock's occupational dimension of "becoming" (Wilcock, 1998). Durrani's (2018) study into garment repair workshops highlighted that menders involved in these workshops changed their shopping habits and engaged more in garment repair. While this was a rigorous piece of research, utilizing data triangulation and sampling several repair workshops to improve study credibility, the research approached the topic with a sociomaterial theoretical lens, focusing on the link between social factors and materials (Burm & MacLeod, 2020). This further supports the notion that rigorous, qualitative research adopting an occupational perspective is required to better understand repair cafés from an occupational standpoint.

Current literature exploring other environmentally sustainable occupations

Although literature exploring repair cafés from an occupational perspective is lacking, there is some research exploring other sustainable occupations, such as community gardens. As community gardens are positioned as another mechanism of eco-social occupational therapy (Simó Algado, 2023), literature pertaining to these are worth reviewing to explore potential similarities and differences.

Community gardens have been the focus of many qualitative studies, the findings of which have been frequently mapped onto Wilcock's occupational perspective. Both Ong et al. (2019) and Moore & Thew (2023) illustrated how through "doing" community gardening, a sense of "being" emerged by providing opportunities to adopt new identities such as that of "gardener". Community gardens were also seen to enable "becoming" by providing opportunities to learn new skills and "belonging" by generating a sense of connection - to others, the community and nature. Although concepts of doing, being, belonging and becoming emerged in these studies, the nature of these are invariably tied to that context (Njelesani et al., 2014). Repair cafés differ in both form and function from community gardens, focusing on waste reduction rather than food or flower production and take place indoors (Guitart et al., 2012; Spekkink et al., 2020). Therefore, the nature of meaning experienced by participants within community gardens may not be generalizable to such a different context. Further research specifically exploring repair cafés is needed to understand how people experience this occupation.

In addition to exploring the nature of meaning of community gardening, previous literature has also illustrated physical and mental health benefits from participation, including reduced stress, improved self-efficacy, enhanced mood and physical health improvements from exercise (Birch, 2005; Koay & Dillon, 2020; McGuire et al., 2022; Moore & Thew, 2023). Across these studies, many benefits derived from gardening and conservation were affiliated with the nature-based elements of the occupations and the ability to form connections within the local community. While repair cafés similarly offer an opportunity to connect with others in the community, they typically do not offer the same access to the natural environment. Thus, research into the impacts of repair cafés on the individuals involved could be useful in better understanding what sustainable, non nature-based, community occupations could offer.

Current literature exploring community development projects

There has been an increasing call for occupational therapists to work with communities rather than just individuals, with community-level work considered the most effective way of making meaningful and sustainable change (O'Neill, 2017). Indeed, some authors express the importance of considering societal doing within the occupational perspective (Njelesani et al., 2014). Recently there has been some exploration of occupation as a tool for social change within communities; Adams et al. (2022), for example, highlighted how food-cooperatives, an occupation-focused response, could help address socio-economic disadvantage. Meanwhile Schiller et al. (2023) explored 5 case studies of social transformation through occupation, examining advocacy projects and community groups which aimed to tackle issues such as ageism, socio-economic disadvantage and isolation. Both studies highlighted the ability for occupation to enact social change through building community connections, transforming social relationships and enhancing awareness of shared issues, ultimately helping tackle occupational injustices that arose in inequitable communities. The social transformational elements of these studies intertwined with community connection could almost be connected to Wilcock's ideas of becoming through belonging, albeit at a community level.

While these studies illustrated the value of community-level occupational interventions in tackling social issues, neither explored whether occupation could be used to address environmental issues. Indeed, the scoping review by Smith et al. (2020) highlighted that there is currently a lack of empirical evidence in this domain, with most of the literature looking at the relationship between occupation and sustainability being descriptive in nature; either commentaries, calls to action or reviews. As such, there is a need for empirical research into community projects which look at tackling environmental issues to explore whether such projects could be used by occupational therapists to support sustainable community development. Research into repair cafés is well positioned to fill this gap.

In summary, there is currently an absence of empirical research exploring repair cafés from an occupational standpoint. Existing literature into other environmentally sustainable occupations and community development projects highlight how these occupations can contribute to social connection, identity and the health and wellbeing of both individuals and their communities. However, the differing form and function of these community groups and occupations means these findings may not apply to repair café. As such, there is a clear need to develop an occupational perspective of repair cafés, answering the following research question:

What are the occupational impacts of repair cafés on people and community?

Study Aims and Objectives

Aim: To explore engagement and participation in repair cafés to better understand the potential occupational impacts they have on individuals and community.

- Objective 1: Develop an occupational perspective of repair cafés to contribute to the evidence base for eco-social occupational therapy
- Objective 2: To explore the meaning and impact of repair cafés on the people involved
- Objective 3: To explore the impact repair cafés have on community

Methods

Context

The repair café at the focus of this research is a city-based establishment in the North of England. It was established by a resident's association and funded by the National Lottery Community Fund and voluntary donations. The repair café was set up with the intention of reducing landfill waste and to bring the local community together. The café is hosted monthly in the annex of a church, with each session lasting 3 h and refreshments offered throughout. All services provided by fixers are completed free of charge.

Recruitment and sampling

Taking an interpretivist approach, this study aimed to understand the subjective experiences of people who volunteer at and/or attend a repair café in the North of England (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016) and adopted a qualitative method of inquiry, utilizing semi-structured interviews. Participants were recruited via leaflets which were shared at the repair café and posted on their associated social media platform.

Volunteers expressing interest in participating were emailed a detailed information sheet and consent form with questions to confirm their eligibility. Eligibility criteria for the study stipulated that individuals must have attended the repair café in the past 6 months, were over 18 years old, English speaking, and were able to be interviewed in person or via MS Teams. Given the limited timeframe for the study (a pre-registration MSc research project) and the small-scale nature of the repair café, purposive sampling was used, targeting recent repair café volunteers. Volunteers with recent experience of the repair café were focused on as they were hypothesized to be able to provide more information-rich accounts of the repair café, making more effective use of the limited sample size possible (Patton, 2015). Overall, the sample consisted of five participants. For a small-scale study such as this, 6-10 interviews are considered sufficient (Braun & Clarke, 2013). However, the constraints highlighted above, along with the limited number of volunteers (approximately 9-10 fixers and 2-3 refreshment volunteers attending monthly), a smaller sample size was achieved.

Data collection

Data collection took place in June 2024 in-person at a local university near the repair café site or online. Interviews lasted between 25 and 45 min and were conducted by the lead researcher (SG), an occupational therapy student with eight years of experience in qualitative and quantitative research.

Interviews were semi-structured and guided by an interview schedule (Table 1), enabling flexibility to explore unexpected topics in more depth (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Jamshed, 2014).

Table 1. Interview Schedule.

How would you explain the repair café to someone who has never been to it before?
Why did you start going to the repair café?
Prompt- were you able to do that? What do you do there?
What do you enjoy most about the repair café? Why is the repair café important to you?
Has the repair café benefited you personally? How so/ Why not?
Repair cafés are a community initiative. What does community mean to you?
Has the repair café changed the way you get involved in your community?
Have you started doing any other environmentally friendly practices since joining the repair café?
Is there anything else you would like to discuss that you feel hasn't already been covered?

To enhance study credibility, the lead researcher attended two repair café sessions prior to data collection to build rapport with attendees and develop a better understanding of the context. Additionally, the study was reviewed by a member of the repair café known to the lead researcher to sense-check the interview questions and schedule. Although strategies such as data triangulation and member checking are also acknowledged to enhance credibility, the time constraints of the study did not allow for this.

Analysis

Following data collection, the lead researcher transcribed the interviews verbatim to support data immersion. The data was analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis in MS Word and Excel. The six-step reflexive thematic analysis approach as defined by Braun & Clarke (2022) is suitable for analyzing data relating to people's experiences and perceptions and thus was fitting for this study.

First the lead researcher familiarized themselves with the data set, memoing to record initial thoughts about the data; this was done to reduce bias and enhance confirmability (Johnson et al., 2020). Coding and theme generation were mostly completed inductively given the lack of prior research into this topic and intention to generate codes from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2013), although an element of deductive coding occurred due to the lead researcher adopting an occupational perspective. Coding involved the lead researcher reviewing the transcripts and generating a code book of possible codes and extracts. Transcripts were then reviewed in a different order to bring a different perspective to the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). All coded extracts were examined on a code-by-code basis to evaluate how well each extract reflected the corresponding code, while clustering similar codes. Themes were then developed, first by analyzing patterns among codes and code extracts and then in relation to the whole data set. Thematic mapping was used to explore each theme and the story as constructed by the researcher. Supervisions with the second author were utilized throughout the process to discuss and refine coding and themes, enhancing study confirmability and ensuring findings were derived from data (Johnson et al., 2020).

Reflexivity

Although the lead researcher was not involved in the repair café, they were actively involved in the university 'Living Lab' which focused on improving local sustainability. Personal values and experiences relating to sustainable community initiatives may have impacted the interpretation of the data. As such, a reflexive journal was kept by the lead researcher throughout, recording thoughts and initial assumptions around the data to challenge potential biases. This encouraged a more thoughtful and complex analysis of the data and enhanced study confirmability (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Johnson et al., 2020).

Results

In total, six people expressed an interest in participating, with five completing an interview.

Table 2 provides a description of participant characteristics. All volunteers but one (Sue) were involved in the fixing aspect of the café, with fixers focusing on physical and electrical repairs. Participants did not wish to provide ages, so this has been omitted.

Five main themes were identified which reflected the meaning and impact of the repair café on participants and their community:

- Theme 1: A building block of community
- Theme 2: A step toward helping people and the environment
- Theme 3: Connecting to occupational roles
- Theme 4: Maintaining and developing cognitive skills
- Theme 5: The social side matters too

Table 2. Sample characteristics.

Pseudonym	Gender	Role at the Repair Café	Employment Status	Length of Time Volunteering at the Repair Café
Lesley	Male	Volunteer (Fixer)	Retired	Not available
Marcel	Male	Volunteer (Fixer)	Employed	Not available
Sue	Female	Volunteer (Refreshments)	Retired	3 months
Pete	Male	Volunteer (Fixer)	Retired	3 months
Paul	Male	Volunteer (Fixer)	Retired	3-4 months

A building block of community

Among participants, 'community' was felt to provide opportunities for connection and belonging to both people and the space they occupy, from close family and friends to more distant connections. Community was additionally synonymous with sharing lives with others, providing opportunities to share both problems and solutions:

> *For me it is about connections. It's just supporting each other, feeling like you belong to something or somewhere (Sue).*

> *Another key element is pooling expertise for the benefit of the community…some people have legal expertise, some people have got, you know, in the repair workshops, the repair café, they're good at making cakes (Lesley).*

The repair café was originally positioned by the organizers as a way of bringing together the local community. Indeed, participants seem to feel that the repair café has helped foster a sense of belonging through connecting them to people and services:

> *I mean, when I'm out, I feel a little bit more part of the community in the sense that… I can bump into people (Marcel).*

> *You know, if you belong to one [community group], like the [name of repair café], they'll often tell you about the other ones (Lesley).*

However, participants spoke about how the local community in which the repair café sits already has several ongoing initiatives and projects:

> *[…] there's no end of good initiatives from what I can gather (Sue).*

These projects were seen to work together to create a sense of belonging:

> *[…] the [Local Community] are quite active and vibrant and this adds to the sense of belonging in the community (Lesley).*

A step toward helping people and the environment

This theme explores how the repair café is positioned as a service for helping people and the environment, split into corresponding subthemes:

Helping people

This first sub-theme explores the repair café's affiliation with helping people. For some participants, one of their main motivations for volunteering at the repair café was to help others:

> *I like the idea of helping people and it just gives a bit of my time to help people (Marcel).*

In particular, the repair café was seen to help people who lacked repair skills themselves or who could not afford to pay for professional repairs or new items:

> *[…] he had stood on the cable…pulled the wires out. So, I mean, he was… yeah, zero electrical knowledge, so for him it was a complete disaster (Paul).*

> *I think there's potential sort of socially. I mean the sections of society who can't afford to buy stuff, can't afford to get it repaired (Pete).*

Helping people through fixing at the repair café imbued the experience with value, making participants feel like they were making a useful contribution:

> *When you can fix it…you genuinely feel good…you feel you've done something, which is useful (Marcel).*

Helping the environment

This second sub-theme explores the repair café's perceived contributions to the environment. All participants expressed concerns about the current environmental crisis and recognized more needed to be done to address it:

> *I want to do more because, you know I really genuinely think we fucked up the planet for all generations (Marcel).*

The work done at the repair café was seen to contribute to the environment, directly by reducing the number of items going to landfill, but also indirectly by raising awareness of environmental issues and the ability to repair:

> *[…] the idea is that people can bring along items that are broken, that they'd like to get fixed rather than throwing away, so that promotes reusability (Lesley).*

> *[…] it does feel like it's probably heightened that thinking because we know that actually things can get fixed (Sue).*

Across both subthemes, participants highlighted that the repair café helped tackle wider issues such as social inequality and environmental degradation:

> *Definitely it could be doing so much more, but even just with what? Even the café that we're involved in, it does feel like it is having an impact and helping the environment and it's just raising awareness (Sue).*

However, as Sue alludes to in her comment, participants recognized that while the repair café was starting to address bigger issues, the overall impact was small due to the scale of the project. Marcel clarifies this further, saying: "[…] *we are very small scale … but that's a step in the right direction*".

Connecting to occupational roles

This next theme explores how the repair café fits in with past and present occupational roles. All participants recognized the different "fixer" roles within the repair café, defined by the way fixing was done:

> *There must have been maybe 15, 20 fixers as I will call them, divided into groups. There was a sewing group. There's a lot of electrical focus and there was some kind of odds and sods miscellaneous and I would put myself in the miscellaneous category (Paul).*

For all fixers, the role they held in the repair café linked back to past occupational roles and a history of fixing, through which they had developed their skills:

> *I'm an engineer by training, so, I've always been very happy to disassemble stuff (Marcel).*

As some of the fixers had retired, the repair café offered them a new space to fix and continue using their skills:

> *I've retired and I was looking for something to do. I've always repaired things, I was a former DT teacher (Pete).*

Maintaining and developing cognitive skills

Some of the participants remarked on how repairing helped them keep mentally stimulated. The repair café was seen to provide opportunities for problem solving; often fixers were brought unique items to fix which they had not encountered before:

> *I got brought in a few weeks ago an Action Man to repair, to put the head on- I thought how the hell am I gonna do this? (Pete).*

The novelty of the repairs encouraged fixers to try something new to solve the problem, helping them develop new skills and keep them mentally stimulated:

> *Learning something about how something works. Because often I'm taking it apart, I've no idea how to get into it or take it apart… so it keeps my brain active (Lesley).*

Fixers were also able to further their skills by watching and working with others:

> *I'm sure I've learned stuff here…it's kind of a training, coaching thing where you see what people are doing (Marcel).*

Fixers not only developed their own skills but also contributed to the cognitive development of others, sharing their own expertise:

> *I was sitting next to somebody else, so I guided somebody else to just check it using my meter (Lesley).*

The social side matters too

Participants reflected that the repair café has two elements: the repair aspect and a social element. For many, the social side of the café is considered a byproduct of the repair work, a way to pass the time while waiting for repairs:

> *You can't sit and watch somebody solder something, repair something for an hour. So you might as well go and have a chat and a cup of tea (Pete).*

Despite being an aside, participants felt that the social side was incredibly important. Participants acknowledged that some customers came to the café to socialize:

> *I do get a sense that it's becoming somewhere where people call in to catch up with people locally (Sue).*

For some, a meaningful and enjoyable part of volunteering at the repair café was the opportunity to socialize:

> *You talk with people who come…it's quite also lovely to exchange a little bit about their life (Marcel).*

Pete expands on this point, highlighting how being able to socialize at the café can dictate the meaning and fulfilment derived from volunteering:

> *Socially… I'm not getting a great deal out of it whereas Sue seems to be having a whale of a time having a chat … where I'm sat at a desk for three hours trying to repair stuff... So I don't really talk to anybody (Pete).*

Discussion

This study explored occupational engagement in repair cafés to develop an understanding of the meaning and impacts they have on people and the community. Until now, there has been no literature exploring repair cafés from an occupational perspective. Five main themes were identified; "a building block of community", "a step towards helping people and the environment", "connecting to occupational roles", "maintaining and developing cognitive skills" and "the social side matters too" (Figure 1) . These intertwined with participants' conceptualization of community, illustrating the ways in which the repair café contributed to the community. Additionally, the themes clearly map on to Wilcock's articulation of the occupational perspective (Wilcock, 1998, 2006), explored below.

Theme schematic

One prominent theme in this study was connecting to occupational roles. Within this theme, connection to ideas of "being" through "doing" (Hitch et al., 2014b) are prevalent; participants identified the different types of doing within the café and used these different roles to construct a sense of identity for themselves, as illustrated in Paul's comment where he identifies himself as a "miscellaneous fixer".

Although constructing a new identity through doing has been observed in studies exploring community gardening (Moore & Thew, 2023), a unique finding of this study was the interconnection between the participant's new "fixer" identity with previously

held roles; many participants spoke about their previous careers in engineering and technology in relation to their new fixing role. This finding may reflect the important difference between self-selected repair café participation and socially prescribed activities. Participants in this study selected an activity that aligned with their occupational history, while those in Moore & Thew's (2023) research were prescribed to a community gardening program. Beyond the demographic differences, with participants in this study being older and with a richer occupational history, the prescribed nature of the community gardening program in Moore & Thew's (2023) study may have ultimately limited its resonance with occupational history.

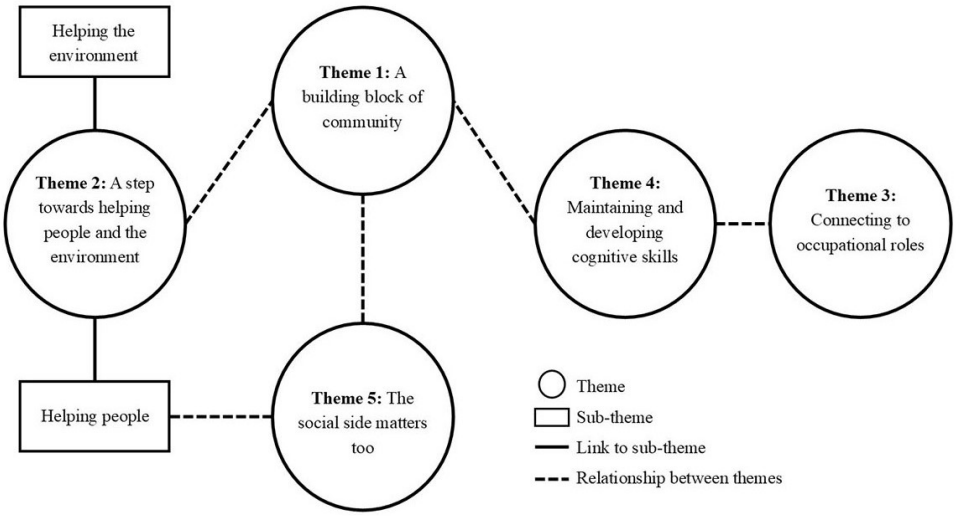

Figure 1. Main themes.

This distinction carries important implications for social prescribing services in the UK, particularly in the absence of occupational therapy leadership. Although the Royal College of Occupational Therapists (RCOT) have advocated for the involvement of occupational therapy in social prescribing (Royal College of Occupational Therapists, 2019), occupational therapists are not consistently embedded within these services. When they are included, cost and organizational barriers often result in delegation of prescribing activities to link workers without an occupational therapy background (Bradley et al., 2025; Drinkwater et al., 2019). The absence of the relationship between occupational history and identity within the Moore & Thew (2023) research underscores what may be missing when occupational therapists are excluded from social prescribing. The occupational perspective enables occupational therapists to develop a richer understanding of people as occupational beings, allowing them to identify activities that will be truly meaningful. Indeed, concerns have been raised that link workers may have a more limited understanding of meaningful occupation, leading to the reduced relevance and benefit of the activities prescribed (Bradley et al., 2025). This strengthens the case for occupational therapy leadership within social prescribing services to support their effectiveness through embedding an occupational perspective throughout .

Working toward helping others and the environment was another key theme. Through the repair café, participants were able to achieve their goals of helping people and the environment (albeit it on a limited scale); this ties in with Wilcock's notion of

"becoming" through goal attainment (Wilcock, 1998). Additionally, the steps toward addressing wider issues the repair café has taken, such as reducing landfill waste links in with the notions of group problem solving and social transformation articulated in the theme "a building block of community"; the repair café is depicted as a mechanism by which the community can come together and begin to address common issues.

The ability for community projects to generate change through social transformation were highlighted in other pieces of research. Adams et al. (2022) and Schiller et al. (2023) illustrated how projects were beginning to address socio-economic disadvantage and raise awareness of shared issues, mirroring the findings of the present study. However, the present study expands on this literature by illustrating the capacity for community projects to make steps toward tackling environmental issues as well as social issues. Fundamentally, the ideas of social transformation captured across current and previous research allude to a sense of becoming on a community level (Hitch et al., 2014a). This thus illustrates how community projects like repair cafés could contribute to development on an individual and community level, although with the caveat that the scale of the project may dictate the level of social transformation.

Although "becoming" can be identified within the context of the repair café, less obvious in this research was the nature of becoming through repair as articulated by Durrani (2018). Where Durrani (2018) highlighted changes in shopping habits and repairing among menders, this was less apparent in this study. This may be because of the nature of repairs undertaken; Durrani's (2018) research focused on garment repair, whereas fixers in the current study focused on electrical and physical repairs, which, as participants highlighted, often involved unique items. As such, the skills learnt by fixers in the current study may have been less transferable outside the repair café, thus limiting their ability to shape and change the fixer's behavior.

Additionally observed in the data was the importance of the social aspect of the café. Although considered a byproduct, the social aspect was seen to enable connection to others, infused volunteering with meaning and ultimately underpinned the vital construct of community; belonging and connection. Wilcock's notion of belonging can clearly be observed within this (Wilcock, 2006). Consequently, this illustrates the importance of the social connection aspect of repair cafés in contributing to community belonging.

Previous studies have also connected community-based initiatives with a sense of belonging. Adams et al. (2022) similarly highlighted belonging as an essential component of community and illustrated how food-cooperatives contributed to this through creating opportunities for connection. Likewise, Ong et al. (2019) and Moore & Thew (2023) also attributed belonging in community projects to opportunities to connect with others. However, the current study went beyond simply attributing belonging to connections through community projects, illustrating how the wider context interplays with this; indeed, participants highlighted that the sense of belonging felt was not solely attributable to the repair café but that all the community projects in the local area worked together to heighten belonging. Njelesani et al. (2014) emphasized the importance of context in developing a comprehensive occupational perspective and thus this study contributes to this by illustrating the relationship between community initiatives.

Like surveys conducted around repair cafés, the café was viewed as a site to learn new skills, problem-solve and keep one's brain active (Charter & Whitehead, 2020;

Keiller & Charter, 2016). This not only reflects Wilcock's ideas of becoming through growth and development (Hitch et al., 2014a; Wilcock, 1998) but also articulates the cognitive benefits repair cafés might have for those involved, reinforcing the connection between occupation and health (Christiansen, 1999; Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). Interestingly, previous studies exploring community gardening and conservation did not find cognitive benefits, instead highlighting stress reduction and physical health benefits of these projects (Birch, 2005; McGuire et al., 2022; Moore & Thew, 2023). Likely the difference in findings here is due to the different nature of the occupations; both community gardening and conservation require more physical exertion through manual labor and take place outdoors. As the stress-reducing, physical benefits have previously been attributed to these characteristics (Birch, 2005; McGuire et al., 2022; Moore & Thew, 2023), the absence of these characteristics in repair cafés might explain the differing benefits. As such, this illustrates the unique benefits repair cafés might have on the health of those involved.

Implications

The findings of the current study are noteworthy and have implications for occupational therapy practice in supporting sustainable community initiatives such as repair cafés. Occupational therapists could draw upon this research to advocate for direct involvement in sustainable community groups and social prescribing, utilizing their understanding of the occupational perspective to maximize their effectiveness and benefit. This may include matching individuals to activities based on occupational history, promoting 'belonging' and 'becoming' by facilitating socialization and goal attainment within groups and considering the impact of the wider context. Occupational therapists could additionally utilize the science of occupational ecology and affiliated models, such as the Eco-social Entrepreneurship Process Model (Simó Algado, 2012; Mansilla et al., 2023) to help guide the implementation and evaluation of new eco-social occupational therapy projects within their communities. Where direct involvement is not possible, occupational therapists could provide similar insights through consultation and training. More broadly, occupational therapists within public health or community settings could utilize this evidence to advocate for funding and support of repair cafés as sustainable, occupation-centered community interventions.

The meaning, health and wellbeing benefits derived from repair café engagement ultimately illustrate the value of this initiative both at an individual and community level. Such findings could be used to evidence community interventions that work toward a more sustainable future and enrich WFOTs guiding principles for sustainability (World Federation of Occupational Therapists, 2018).

Limitations and future research

As with all studies, the current research has limitations. Although memoing and reflexive journaling were used to enhance the confirmability of the study, the limited timeframe of this research negated the possibility of member checking, thus reducing rigor (Johnson et al., 2020). Furthermore, the limited sample size restricted to just one repair café may limit the credibility of the research. Future research studies with more resources could utilize surveys in conjunction with interviews across a range of repair cafés to collate the views of a wider range of repair café volunteers; such data triangulation techniques would enhance the rigor of the research (Johnson et al., 2020).

The present study focused exclusively on volunteers within the café. While this provided rich insights into the occupational experiences of this homogenous group, the transferability of the findings may be limited when considering the experiences of the customers attending the café. Future research could therefore focus on customers to develop a better understanding as to the meaning and impact of repair cafés upon them.

While this study illustrates the impacts the repair café has on the environment as perceived by volunteers, it was beyond the scope of this research to quantify the impact of the café on the environment. This highlights a need for further, multi-disciplinary research, exploring the measurable impacts repair cafés and other sustainable community initiatives have on the environment.

Conclusion

This study articulates an occupational perspective of repair cafés, capturing the depth of meaning and its entanglement with the wider context. Meaning was found in repair cafés through their contribution to identity and connection to past roles, through providing a sense of belonging to the community and providing opportunities for growth through learning. Emerging through the meaningful nature of repair were tangible impacts. On an individual level, volunteers reaped the benefits of cognitive stimulation and social interaction, achieved goals and maintained important identities. Meanwhile communities were seen to have their connections strengthened and underwent a degree of transformation through the solving of shared issues around the environment and socio-economic disadvantage. While repair cafés may just be part of a wider picture and are taking only small steps in addressing wider issues, they clearly have a role to play in enriching the lives of people, their communities and the environment.

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Author's Contributions
Sharon Lindsey Greyling was responsible for problem identification and conceptualization, data collection, analysis and writing. Alison Wadey actively participated in the discussion of results and manuscript revision. All authors approved the final version of the text.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, upon reasonable request.

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