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Introduction to Occupational Therapy Practice for Caribbean Communities

Leah Berry and Blaine Robin

Macro, meso, and micro contexts

Many of our luminaries have shone a light on their contribution to the world and to us since the beginning of the age. Our clear stance is that Caribbean history and civilization did not just begin with the arrival of an Italian explorer named Christopher Columbus in 1492. Africans and First Nations were in the Caribbean long before the Europeans arrived.

Our standpoint is that you do not have to be a qualified occupational therapist to share valuable information about the occupational contexts of human life. We assert that the following luminaries as black heroes championed the occupational rights of black people long before the emergence of an anti-racist voice in the occupational therapy profession.

Here are some examples of people who have either Caribbean heritage or who have worked extensively within the Caribbean community context. Some notable exceptions have simply had a ground-moving impact on our occupational consciousness across the globe (Ramugondo, 2015).

- Mary Seacole – [23 November 1805–4 May 1881] – Jamaican/British nurse during the Crimean War [October 1853–February 1856].
- Dr. Eric Williams – [25 September 1911–29 March 1981] – The first Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago.
- Muhammad Ali – [17 January 1942–3 June 2016] – World Heavyweight Boxing Champion, poet and humanitarian.
- Jack Johnson – [31 March 1878–10 June 1946] – The first Black World Heavyweight Boxing Champion.
- Jersey Joe Walcott – [31 January 1914–25 February 1994] – World Heavyweight Boxing Champion. Birthplace US Virgin Islands.
- Shirley Chisholm – [30 November 1924–1 January 2005] – The first Black woman to run a presidential campaign in the United States of America. Barbadian parentage; schooled in Barbados.

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- Malcolm X – Malik Shabazz [19 May 1925–21 February 1965] – Civil rights leader. Caribbean mother.
- C.L.R. James – [4 January 1901–31 May 1989] – Trinidadian-born author, civil rights activist, historian, journalist and writer.
- Marcus Garvey – [17 August 1887–10 June 1940] – Jamaican political activist.
- W.E.B. Du Bois – [23 February 1868–27 August 1963] – German-trained sociologist and researcher (Du Bois, 2008).
- Claudia Jones – [21 February 1915–24 December 1964] – Founder of the Notting Hill Carnival, London.
- Sir Viv Richards – [7 March 1952–] – West Indian cricketer.
- Michael Holding – [16 February 1954–] – West Indian cricketer, author and broadcaster.
- Hope Powell – [8 December 1966–] – First Black woman to manage the England national football team.
- Emmett Till – [25 July 1941–28 August 1955] – African American youth, who was 14 years old when he was abducted and lynched in Mississippi in 1955 after being accused of offending a white woman, Carolyn Bryant, in her family's grocery store.

What do they have in common?

They all have shared a narrative of work ethic, discipline in honing one's gift and talent and dealing with the trauma and adversity of all forms of racism in a white majority society and finding strategies to overcome them. Some have paid the ultimate sacrifice of their lives prematurely. Our historicity is fundamental to the idea that formulating and re-creating and discovering knowledge *told about us by us*, is fundamental to correcting an erstwhile distorted version of the existence of Caribbean populations throughout the global diaspora.

Occupational Gift tradition

In contemporary UK society, every ethnic group and subculture organize gifts for friends and relatives, particularly to mark special occasions, but for Caribbean people gifts are provided whenever you visit a friend or family. Showing up at a friend's home with 'both hands empty' truly is a contradiction to the culture. The gifts could include recycled clothing, food and money. Sometimes at the end of each year families would secure the services of a logistics firm and post large barrels filled with food and clothing for those in the 'old country'. The build-up to completing the packing of these items would entail weeks and weeks of

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preparation by visiting charity shops in the UK or flea markets in the USA as well as grocery shops where tinned foods would be purchased. This ritual of caring and providing gifts was not only carried out for friends and relatives abroad but also for the wider community, particularly after climate disasters such as hurricanes and major floods. Unconditional sharing of gifts was and is an active part of their support to one another.

In Western societies, the social construct of carers often portrays them as warm, supportive individuals, predominantly female (Graham, 1983; Twigg and Atkin, 1994; Wilson, 1982). Twigg and Atkin (1994) define caring as 'doing things for people that they cannot do for themselves', with personal care tasks such as lifting, toileting, and washing serving as primary examples (p. 8). We witness family members doing these support roles on a voluntary basis. Drawing on Marcel Mauss's (2000) anthropological theory of the gift, caregiving can be understood as a reciprocal act embedded in social and moral obligations, where the exchange of care strengthens kinship bonds and fosters mutual dependence. Unlike material gifts, caregiving involves an emotional and physical investment, creating a cycle of giving and receiving that shapes relationships within families and communities.

Gendered perceptions of caring are deeply rooted in socialization, where women are frequently positioned as unpaid carers within familial structures (Clarke, 2001; Gabe et al., 2007; Graham, 1991). Early experiences of care often come from maternal figures, such as mothers or grandmothers, within kinship networks (Finch, 1989). During times of key events such as childbirth, illness and dying, these maternal carers transform into lay midwives or nurses, offering not only physical support but also guidance and emotional care to maintain the dignity and independence of the patient (Clarke, 2001). In Mauss's framework, this caregiving reflects a gift exchange, where the act of giving care carries an implicit expectation of reciprocity, whether through gratitude, emotional bonds, or future acts of care. In contrast, the male 'father figure' in Western societies is often depicted as distant, primarily serving as the economic 'breadwinner' whose role engages with the external world of work, while women focus on the affective, inward-looking aspects of family life (Clarke, 2001, p. 200). Many of these male breadwinner traits in the Caribbean context have been fused through a combination of predominantly western colonialism values (including Christianization), multiethnic values (e.g. Chinese, South Asian) and African remnants.

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Mauss's concept of gifting highlights that male carers, too, participate in this reciprocal exchange, offering care as a counter-gift to the support they have received within the family, disrupting the notion that caregiving is inherently feminine.

The demands of caregiving can lead to significant fatigue, described as the 'daily grind of caregiving' (Twigg and Atkin, 1994, p. 4). Carers often exhibit near-selfless commitment, driven by a moral obligation to reciprocate the care and affection they received from their relatives and friendship networks in non-Caribbean countries such as Britain, the USA, Canada and elsewhere (Mauss, 2000).

However, this relentless giving can result in 'caregiver burden', encompassing the physical, emotional, social and financial challenges faced by family carer. In some cases, this burden may lead to isolation if caregiving relationships break down, or dependency, when carers must rely on friends, relatives or local council social services for support. Mauss's theory suggests that such shared caregiving, whether by kin or paid professionals, extends the gift economy into broader social networks, where care is both given and received across community ties.

In UK legislation, the Carers Act (2014) reflects an important recognition of carers' needs, enabling them to request 'a carers assessment' for respite care to alleviate forms of occupational imbalance. These policies align with Mauss's idea of societal reciprocity, where the state, as part of the social fabric, offers support to carers in exchange for their contributions to community well-being. This dynamic can undermine the reciprocal nature of caregiving, as unpaid carers' contributions may be undervalued within the professionalized gift economy of care. Therefore, the concept of the Occupational Gift, as conceptualized in the Caribbean perspective of occupational therapy, emphasizes caring, love and social support which has endured through the ages from Africa to the Caribbean and the UK

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Occupational Gift

Cocoa butter: a Caribbean remedy for dry winter skin

In Caribbean culture, cocoa butter holds special significance as both a cultural tradition and a practical remedy. Derived from the same cacao beans that produce chocolate, cocoa butter has been used for generations across the Caribbean islands as a natural moisturizer. When

Caribbean people migrated to the UK's colder climate, they brought this tradition with them. The dry winter air in Britain posed challenges for skin health, particularly for those with darker skin tones that show 'ashiness' (white, dry patches) more visibly. Cocoa butter became essential for maintaining skin health in the new environment.

Caribbean elders often apply cocoa butter daily as part of their morning ritual – warming it between their palms before application to allow it to melt and penetrate deeply into the skin. This practice serves not only as skincare but as a connection to homeland traditions and identity.

Occupational therapists should recognize the importance of this self-care routine when working with Caribbean clients. The distinctive sweet scent and the ritual application may provide comfort and cultural continuity, particularly for elderly clients experiencing sensory changes or cognitive decline.

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Jack Johnson

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