

# Experiences of University Students during COVID-19: A Case Study using Occupational Justice Perspective

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**Abstract:**

**Background:** The Government of the Philippines has imposed different levels of community quarantine measures across the country to mitigate the spread of the COVID-19 virus. This posed some changes in various educational institutions which affected students from different universities.

**Aim:** Guided by the occupational justice perspective, this case study aims to describe the experiences of some students who are enrolled in private university during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Methodology:** Through qualitative method, selected university students (n=5) from an allied health college participated a focused group discussion (FGD) that lasted for at least an hour and a half. The Occupational Justice Health Questionnaire (OJHQ) served as a guide which facilitated the discussions. The FGD was audio-recorded, transcribed, and undergone directed content analysis.

**Results:** Students experienced varying situations of occupational deprivation, alienation, imbalance, and apartheid.

*Keywords: Occupational Justice, Pandemic, Philippines, Students*

## INTRODUCTION

Occupational justice is defined as every individual's right to have an equal opportunity to maximize their potentials by engaging in a meaningful occupation or daily activities (Wilcock & Townsend, 2009). This concept views humans as occupational beings, where engagement in occupation is an innate drive to support development, well-being, and health (Wilcock, 2007). It encompasses the experience, meaning, and enrichment in one's occupation, participation in a range of occupations for health and social inclusion, choices and

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decisions that can empower daily life, and equal privileges of diverse involvement in occupations (World Federation of Occupational Therapists [WFOT], 2019).

Perspectives on occupational justice emphasize individuals' unique sets of occupational needs and capacities within particular environments (Durocher et al., 2014) that when unachieved, may result in substantive health issues which may disrupt one's development and reduce an individual's lifespan (Nilsson and Townsend, 2010). These disruptions may be attributed to occupational injustices which may hamper people from engaging in different occupations that can provide personal and community satisfaction to them. Consequently, people may currently experience occupational injustices due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak that continue to spread worldwide.

### **The COVID-19 Context**

COVID-19 is an infectious disease that infects occupational beings resulting to upper respiratory infections (Stoppler, 2020). On December 2019, the first case of COVID-19 was reported, then, it has increased exponentially in a span of few months (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020). This resulted to WHO's declaration of COVID-19 outbreak as a pandemic last March 2020 (Stoppler, 2020). Moreover, Sun (2020) claimed that the pandemic reached the Philippines in January 2020 when the first confirmed case was noted in its capital, Manila city. The Philippines had its first local transmission in March 2020, and the virus spreads across the different regions of the country. Thus, the Philippine government implemented varying community quarantine levels across regions, including total lockdowns in most cities in the country. These community quarantines restricted all the people to stay in their own homes. It also resulted in the indefinite closure of shops, businesses, schools, and companies to reduce virus transmission (Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Disease [IATF], 2020), which caused limitation in occupational engagement. This became the source of stress, anxiety, frustration, boredom, and other adverse reactions, resulting in altered routines, financial fear, and forced social isolation and distancing (Nasser, 2020). Fear has spread due to a wide array of concerns, such as paranoia about being infected by the virus or loved ones getting sick, the uncertainty of when normalcy is going to return, how long the isolation will continue, and the loneliness caused by isolation all led to negative overthinking (Nasser, 2020). As a result of limited occupational participation, people's lives, health, and well-being are profoundly impacted (WFOT, 2020). Hence, occupational injustice might be present.

### **Impact of COVID-19 on Educational Institutions**

The COVID-19 pandemic affected everyone, including those involved in various educational institutions. Community quarantines forced educational institutions to indefinitely shut down (IATF, 2020). Closures of these establishments related to learning affect students, teachers, and families (Nasser, 2020). The impact caused interrupted learning, compromised nutrition, and consequent economic cost to families who could not work (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2020). However, education institutions try to address the disruption with the transition to remote learning that includes virtual classes that may be accomplished synchronously or asynchronously. However, students claimed that achieving competence only through an online education system is challenging, which results in a decline in their academic performance (Mahdy, 2020) and an increase in adverse effects and symptoms of anxiety and depression (Li, 2020).

### **Students in Batangas City during COVID-19**

Batangas City is progressive, most extensive, and classified as one of the most competitive cities today. There is a private university in Batangas City that tries to adapt to the new normal and conducts its remote learning through a Learning Management System (LMS). This LMS is an online education platform used by students and teachers to continue the access to the educational curriculum outside of a traditional classroom following the Commission on Higher Education's (CHED) memorandum of delivering flexible learning in this time of

pandemic (University of Batangas [UB], 2020). Variations in institutional learning were encouraged. For synchronous sessions, students and teachers utilize ZOOM Communications and Google Meet platforms, while during asynchronous sessions, LMS is a more used platform for the teachers and students.

Underpinned by the premise of occupational justice, students of this university are occupational beings who may be affected by the COVID-19 situation. Therefore, the authors conducted this case study to describe how the COVID-19 pandemic affects a private university's allied health students in Batangas using an occupational justice perspective.

**METHODOLOGY**

This case study utilizes a qualitative research method to describe the experiences of selected students enrolled in a university in Batangas City during the COVID-19 pandemic. The qualitative method is used to understand concepts, opinions, and experiences by gathering in-depth insights from participants via focus group discussions (Bhandari, 2020). It provides researchers with detailed set of ideas, thoughts, perceptions, feelings, experiences, and impressions of people in their own words (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990).

**Participants**

This case study focuses on a single private university, specifically with the college related to allied health sciences. There are an estimated 140 students under this college (BS Respiratory Therapy= 56; BS Occupational Therapy= 46; and BS Physical Therapy= 38). Students enrolled in an allied health course tend to experience more academic stress compared to those taking non-science courses. Science subjects are more severely graded than those related to arts and humanities and are frequently on top of the difficulty range (Cressey, 2008). Participants are randomly selected, and it was assured that that each program has a representative (Lavrakas, 2008). The authors randomly picked at least five allied health students to participate in this study. This number is suggested by Krueger (2002) as the ideal number of focus group discussion participants. Included are those enrolled in the private university of focus, affiliated to the college related to allied health science, and at least 18 years old. The background of the participants is tabulated below.

**Table 1**

*Demographics of Participants*

Participant No.	Age	Sex	Year Level	Program
P1	22	Female	4th year	BS Occupational Therapy
P2	21	Male	3rd year	BS Respiratory Therapy
P3	20	Female	3rd year	BS Respiratory Therapy
P4	20	Female	2nd year	BS Occupational Therapy
P5	19	Female	1st year	BS Physical Therapy

### **Ethical Considerations**

The case study commenced upon the Department of Occupational Therapy's approval under the College of Allied Medical Sciences, University of Batangas. The informed consent form was explained and agreed upon by the participants prior to their participation in the focus group discussion. Confidentiality and the right to withdraw of the participants in any part of the study were emphasized. All recordings and data utilized were kept private and confidential by the authors.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The last three authors of the case study facilitated the group discussion with the participants through Google Meet, an online platform for virtual meetings (Bohn, 2020). The Occupational Justice Health Questionnaire (OJHQ) is a five-part checklist with binary options (able or unable) across 27 items created by Anne Wilcock and Elizabeth Townsend (2010) to prompt attention to occupational [in]justices. Items in the OJHQ include those that discuss basic needs (Part I), overall well-being (Part II), living standards (Parts III & IV), and specific injustices that decrease occupational participation (Part V) (Sy & Ohsima, 2018). This OJHQ was already utilized in a few studies conducted in the Philippines, including those with Sy and associates (Sy & Ohsima, 2018; Sy et al., 2019). The focus group discussion was audio-recorded, and it lasted for an hour and a half. Consequently, it was transcribed and organized by the last three authors as part of the completion of complete the OJHQ documentation. Credibility was assured through member checking wherein each author reviewed the transcription of another author to assure that all data were transcribed accurately. Directed content analysis was done by the authors which framed the understanding of the experiences based on the concepts of occupational justice. This method was done by having the typologies of occupational justice as the initial code via manual coding using a word document. After familiarization and clustering of repeated words and phrases, these were assigned to the typologies (Delos Reyes, 2018). Furthermore, trustworthiness was secured through peer checking on each step of the analysis, which was done prior to proceeding to the next step.

### ***Experiences of Students during COVID-19***

The experiences of the five participants are discussed through the lens of occupational justice. Using OJHQ as a guide during the discussion, the authors gathered narratives from the participants regarding their access to basic needs, aspects of well-being, rights on health, and cultural beliefs and customs. To further understand these experiences, the authors decided to use the four typologies discussed in occupational justice discourse namely occupational deprivation, occupational alienation, occupational imbalance, and occupational apartheid.

#### ***Occupational Deprivation***

Occupational deprivation is the state of being hampered from opportunities to participate in meaningful occupations due to uncontrollable factors (Whiteford, 2000). When strategies against COVID-19 affected an individual's access to meaningful activities, deprivation of occupation results in anxiety, depression, and hopelessness (Scott, 2020). This was proven as participants' peace of mind is heavily affected due to political and economic unrest. Issues about the government and the increasing number of COVID-19 cases in the country bothered the participants. Moreover, learning is also noted to be limited despite efforts considering that participants have different learning styles which may not be easily applied in an online learning setup. The participants mentioned that some subjects seemed unfit to be delivered through the online medium. One participant shared: *"Because of today's situation, I cannot study well unlike in the school setting. Now, I don't have the willingness to self-study."* [P2]

Also, the national protocol that individuals aged below 21 years old and beyond 60 years old should always stay in their residences (IATF, 2020) limit the participant's outdoor leisure activities. This rule deprive the participants of going out of their houses which prevent them from going to school, church, mall, gatherings,

and other places or events, and participating to outdoor leisure activities and other occupations. The participants are also deprived of their access to participating in their leisure activities due to lack of time and opportunities. One of the participants stated: *“I cannot do my leisure activities because of my schoolwork. Instead of spending my extra time on my leisure activities, I just finished sleeping... resting.”* [P4]

However, in terms of holiday celebrations, all participants can still engage but with minimal interaction opportunities because of the health precautionary measures that need to be observed. Additionally, the participants experienced deprivation of their daily activities such as sleeping and eating. Unhealthy lifestyles emerged and are used as coping mechanisms by three participants since irregular sleeping patterns and limited consumptions of meals on time became a habit for them. This is due to their attendance to online classes or duties to complete offline school requirements. The participant said: *“Sometimes, there are so many things to do that I have to sleep late or not eat just to finish my schoolwork.”* [P1]

### **Occupational Alienation**

Occupational alienation refers to the deep feelings of incompatibility with different occupations to the extent that basic needs and wants appeared impossible to attain or maintain (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). In times of the COVID-19 pandemic, social media is an excellent medium for individuals and communities to stay connected while being physically separated. Ironically, it is also a source of stress, anxiety, and fear that the students are experiencing. Moreover, panic and other mental health issues during the pandemic are associated with social media exposure (Singh et al., 2020). Social media engagement has become toxic for the participants as news circulating on the internet about the government and the increasing number of COVID-19 cases became overwhelming. One participant claimed: *“There are so many issues in social media that bothers me. Politics makes me worry about what will happen to the community.”* [P3]

Moreover, the participants experienced losing their sense of self due to studying at home and facing too many distractions. This resulted in a lack of volition in participating in education, which eventually led to disappointment and disruption in the participants' daily life. The participant shared: *“My life pattern became negative... I feel negative about myself. In everything that I do, I feel disappointed with myself.”* [P1]

### **Occupational Imbalance**

Occupational imbalance refers to the lack of proportion in an occupation that resulted to decreased well-being. It is caused by having too little to do or excessively burdened to do things regularly (Wilcock, 1998). It is experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic by the participants since classes are being held remotely. Due to the changes in the learning medium, university students juggle work, finances, and family responsibilities along with academic roles (Zentari et al., 2020). Thus, education at home created pressure among the participants as they partake multiple roles, as a student, a family member, which resulted to role confusion. One of the participants has the responsibility of taking care of her niece while completing her class requirements. The participant disclosed: *“Studying at home is different from studying in school. In school, I am only a student. I have so many responsibilities at home that I cannot focus on my studies, so I do not learn that much.”* [P4]

Participants are also struggling since they have to study on their own compared to the way they study with their classmates prior to the pandemic. This shows occupational imbalances in peace and education which are highly influenced by health, political, and social factors. Initially, home is a place for the students to rest, but due to the transitions of online learning brought by the pandemic, three of the participants are disrupted due to schoolwork demands that need to be done at home. Furthermore, allied health students highlighted that being in a physical classroom is tremendously different from online learning platform. One participant argued: *“During face-to-face classes, even if it is hard, your classmates are there with you. But now, you are all by yourself. It is so hard to have the willingness to self-study.”* [P3]

### ***Occupational Apartheid***

Occupational apartheid refers to the state of restricting or depriving the groups of people to have access to dignified and meaningful participation in occupations of daily life. This is based on race, color, disability, national origin, age, gender, sexual preference, religion, political beliefs, and status in society (Kronenberg et al., 2005). The online learning of the students posed a challenge as they still pursue laboratory subjects. This might be due to students' emotions and feelings which may include fear, stress, and worry with the probability of graduating without adequate laboratory skills and practice (Gamage et al., 2020). One participant believes it is unfair for university students to have their classes online. Online classes may be more applicable to unlike high school or lower-level students since their lessons are less complicated which make them more fit in an online setup. The participant shared: *“Some subjects can be well-delivered through online classes, but some are not. No matter how hard you try, these subjects cannot be self-studied.”* [P4]

Due to the pandemic, several events were cancelled and postponed. With this, the community's cultural life is not possible due to the students' susceptibility towards the virus. Traditions and customs of students were also dramatically affected. The participants experience difficulties engaging with their religious practices due to the risks of going in public places. Although, two participants who are underaged mentioned that they could physically go to church as long as they observe the health protocols. One participant mentioned: *“I don't usually go to church unlike before when there was no pandemic but I can still attend sometimes even if I am underage.”* [P4]

Apart from the areas where the participants experienced occupational injustices, other parts of the OJHQ were recorded as achievable. The participants can access food, and has the ability to realize their aspirations, satisfy specific needs, and validate personal uniqueness. Areas such as well-being at work, employment, and scientific advancement are not applicable due to the participants' profile.

Moving forward, the difficulty of abiding with the heavy demands of online classes and the inability to go out of their houses led the participants to limited access to their usual occupations. This resulted to frustration, lack of volition, and occupational among the participants during the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout the focus group discussion, the participants reiterated how indifferent they feel about their occupation during this pandemic compared to before it started.

## **CONCLUSION**

The experiences of university students reflect the reality of how COVID-19 pandemic influences Filipino students' access to occupational justice. This study shows how occupational deprivation, alienation, imbalance, and apartheid are experienced by the students. Moreover, this can limit the students' engagement to in meaningful occupations which greatly affects their health and well-being. In addition, this study employed OJHC as a discussion guide in understanding students' life situations from an occupational justice perspective. The study reveals that due to the pandemic, students experienced political and economic unrest, unfit subjects to an online medium, limitation of outdoor activities, engagement to unhealthy lifestyle, social media toxicity, lack of volition, role confusion, and missed participation in customs and traditions. Moreover, this case study illustrates the efficacy of OJHQ as a tool in identifying occupational and social injustices experienced by students in difficult situations.

### **Implication to Practice**

- Occupational justice holds a promise in the discourse of occupational interruptions with different stakeholders' lives to emphasize the innate need of everyone to engage in occupations needed for development and health. This is important across health and social professions.

- OJHQ is a tool usually administered individually. However, with this case study, it is argued that utilizing it in group discussions can also be useful in facilitating a group to emancipate experiences of occupational [in]justice.
- Educational institutions are highly encouraged to have continuous monitoring of their programs and learning model to ensure that all students can develop their maximum potentials.

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