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Hannah Arendt's vita activa: A valuable contribution to occupational science

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ABSTRACT

Occupational science is undergoing dynamic development and claims have been articulated that human occupation must be understood from multiple ontological standpoints. Hannah Arendt (1906–1975) is known for her work *The Human Condition* in which she explored human occupation from a philosophical and political standpoint. She distinguished the modalities labor, work and action, and labelled them *vita activa*. The aim of this paper is to present Arendt and her *vita activa*, in order to provide examples of its relevance for occupational science, showing how *vita activa* can assist occupational scientists to take a deeper perspective on human occupation. According to Arendt, human occupation is always conditioned. The condition for labor is necessity, which reflects human biological needs and represents the basics of life. The condition for work is utility, as something persistent and durable is produced. Action is the activity that takes place between people without the intermediary of things. Similar to occupational science, *vita activa* is concerned with human doing but their origins differ. Arendt also emphasized the public sphere as an arena for human occupation, a viewpoint that is shared with recent occupational science literature. The need to expand the scope of occupational science to encompass all aspects of human occupations, including the deleterious, has been expressed and *vita activa* can contribute to broadening this perspective. Examples of the need for sustainability in working life are also presented in this paper.

KEYWORDS: Action; Labor; Philosophy; Theory; Work

Occupational science is currently undergoing dynamic development, with claims made that human occupation must be understood from multiple ontological standpoints. Invitations for diverse and pluralistic philosophical positions have been made (Hocking, 2012; Kinsella, 2012) and a range of philosophical perspectives considered as possible foundations to inform the discipline (Kinsella, 2012; Wilcock, 2006). For example, action theories emanating from Dewey and Bourdieu, among others, have been highlighted (Cutchin, Aldrich, Bailliard, & Coppola, 2008). Foucault's critical history writing has also been recognized as a contribution to better understand and affect the development of occupational science (Laliberte Rudman, 2010; Molke, 2009). During the last decade, Dewey's thoughts regarding transactionalism, that is the intertwined relation between human occupation and its environment, have been highlighted as a contribution to occupational science (Aldrich, 2008; Cutchin, 2004, 2013; Cutchin, Aldrich, Bailliard, & Coppola, 2008; Dickie, 2010; Hansen et al., 2007; Smith & Hilton, 2008).

Another theorist of potential interest to occupational scientists is the German-Jewish political philosopher Hannah Arendt (1906–1975). Among a great range of publications, Arendt is best known for her work *The Human Condition* (Arendt, 1958). In this text, written more than 50 years ago, she explored human occupation and distinguished the fundamental modalities labor, work and action, which she labelled the *vita activa* (described in more detail later). There is

growing interest in Arendt's thoughts in a range of disciplines, such as education (Biesta, 2007; Kreber, 2015; O'Donoghue, 2015; Rømer, 2015), medicine and healthcare (Kohlen, 2015; Papadimos, 2009), as well as in communication and cultural studies (Cuceu, 2011; Fuchs, 2011; Schwarz, 2014). In occupational science,

Arendt's thoughts have not yet been described as a possible contribution, although her *vita activa* may be valuable. To our knowledge, Arendt has been quoted in only two articles related to occupational therapy and occupational science; a comment by Csikszentmihalyi (1993) in the first volume of this journal and later by Dickie and Frank (1996). Her work was briefly mentioned in a few lines in Wilcock's (2006) *An Occupational Perspective of Health* and extensively discussed in a doctoral thesis written in Spanish (Simó Algado, 2011). Taken together though, there is need for further exploration of Arendt's thoughts in occupational science. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to present Hannah Arendt and *vita activa*; to provide examples of its relevance for occupational science and how this philosophy can contribute to a broader perspective on human occupation.

Hannah Arendt

Arendt's work is grounded in ancient Greek philosophy, mainly Aristotelian, in addition to modern philosophers like Marx. She discussed and reflected on modern features in the light of historical philosophical understandings (Veltman, 2010), using vocabulary based upon Aristotelian and medieval concepts (Arendt, 1958). Arendt did not call herself a philosopher; she insisted on referring to herself as a political theorist, although her works have received attention from the field of philosophy (Higgins, 2010; Veltman, 2010). This stance, being a political theorist, says something about her interest in human beings and the human condition for occupation. She was less interested in the singular human being than in humans, the plurality of human existence, how humans co-exist, and collective rather than personal understandings of activities. "Politics deals with the coexistence and association of different men" (Arendt, 2005, p. 93). Arendt drew a clear distinction between private and public spheres. In the private sphere, humans live together because of their "wants and needs" (Arendt, 1958, p. 30), driven by life itself, i.e. biological survival. However, Arendt emphasized the importance of the public sphere and, according to her, it is in this sphere that humans can achieve freedom and flourish in interaction with other humans. To live and act in the public sphere means to discuss and persuade with words rather than violence and compulsion (Arendt, 1958).

As "human activity" and "activity" are the notions consistently applied in *vita activa* (Arendt, 1958), the term 'activity', rather than 'occupation' is used in this paper when referring to *vita activa*. This usage is in line with Pierce's (2001) description of activity as a general culturally shared idea of a concept, and of occupation as a personal experience of doing.

Vita Activa

The three modalities in *vita activa*, labor, work and action, should not be understood in a concrete way but rather in terms of different ways activities can unfold according to the conditions under which they are undertaken (Arendt, 1958; Lenz, 2005). The lives of humans are always conditioned, according to Arendt. Whatever is undertaken or performed, there are conditions, natural or man-made: "The impact of the world's reality upon human existence is felt and received as a conditioning force" (Arendt, 1958, p. 9). The condition for the labor modality is life itself, which implies that activities are undertaken with the purpose of satisfying biological needs for survival. The condition for the work modality is what Arendt called worldliness, that is, the unnatural, man-made world, the world created by humans. The condition for the action modality is plurality, that is, "that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world" (Arendt, 1958, p.

7). Labor and work occur between the individual and the physical environment, while action occurs between individuals (Arendt, 1958). In *vita activa*, labor implies activities undertaken by necessity and refers to the recurring, repetitive activities that constantly need to be carried out to maintain biological existence, e.g. cooking and eating. Arendt considered labor to be the most basic never-ending form of activity, and it can be both pleasant and mentally imprisoning (Arendt, 1958). Labor reflects human biological processes and represents the basics of life (Arendt, 1958; Szerszynski, 2004). It meets our biological needs, and its products are consumed as they are used (Szerszynski, 2004). The labor modality also represents activities closely connected to our physical environment. Humans are seen as part of a cyclic process that is in continual interplay with the environment that provides us with material for our basic needs. Labor follows a cyclic process; “toiling and resting, laboring and consuming, with the same happy and purposeless regularity with which day and night and life and death follow each other” (Arendt, 1958, p. 106). Arendt emphasized humans’ close connection to nature, “the human metabolism with nature” (Arendt, 1958, p. 106), an expression borrowed from Marx that she recurrently applied (Arendt, 1951/2004, 1958). In this process, material is taken from the earth but is also continuously given back in the metabolism. According to Arendt, it is in this cyclic process that humans can reach happiness. “The blessing of labor is that effort and gratification follow each other as closely as producing and consuming the means of subsistence, so that happiness is a concomitant of the process itself” (Arendt, 1958, pp. 107–108).

The work modality, on the other hand, is not undertaken by necessity but for reasons of utility. That is, it is a goal directed activity characterized by a finite end, as something persistent and durable is produced (Arendt, 1958; Walsh, 2011). That is, the products of work are used, not consumed in the way the products of labor are. Work does not solely create something material; it can also deliver abstract phenomena such as laws, lyrics etc. Still, much work is dependent on material from nature and, in the work process, humans use material from nature to produce objects. The transformation of material from nature into objects means that material is removed from its natural location, e.g. when breaking marble or felling a tree. This process, according to Arendt, includes an element of destruction or violence against nature (Arendt, 1958, 2003).

Finally, the modality of action is the activity that takes place between people without the intermediary of things or matters. According to Arendt, action is inseparable from speech and is dependent on the presence of others. Thus action occurs in the public sphere; that is, plurality is the condition for action. Plurality implies that humans are both equal and distinct from each other. Equal in the sense that humans can understand each other and make common plans for our shared needs, and distinct in the sense that we need speech and action to understand each other. Through action and speech, humans can reveal themselves among others and be understood. Action means taking the initiative and starting processes in interaction with others; thus, action is unpredictable and can lead to unforeseeable and irreversible results. Action is ceaseless, like labor, since it implies an endless interaction with other humans, but it is not repetitive like labor. Action does not leave something persistent behind, as work does. It is in the action modality that humans achieve freedom, and humans’ unique specificity emerges (Arendt, 1958).

Arendt (1958) emphasized the intertwined connection of human activity and thinking, considering them dependent on each other. Not only is activity dependent on thinking – thinking is also dependent on activity. Thinking means to reflect, and reflective thought can support decisions for activity. Reflective thought brings insecurity into the activity and thus has the potential to interrupt activity. “All thinking demands a stop-and-think” (Arendt, 1978/ 1981, p. 78). Thereby the direction of an activity has the potential to change (Arendt, 1958, 1978/ 1981; Bowring, 2012; Papadimos, 2009; Walsh, 2011).

The *vita activa* i.e. labor, work and action, is described as the opposite to *vita contemplativa* (Arendt, 1978/1981). Whereas *vita activa* represents the active human life, *vita contemplativa* represents humans' need for contemplation. According to Arendt, both activity and contemplation are parts of human nature. Historically, contemplation has been regarded as a higher form of human life than activity, but Arendt argued that *vita contemplativa* was neither superior nor inferior to *vita activa* (Arendt, 1958). Yet, *vita contemplativa* is dependent on *vita activa* as no human can live a life without activity in one way or another, while a life without contemplation is possible. Contemplation is dependent on labor for satisfying biological needs. Work is needed to create what is required to provide shelter for the human body. Action is needed to organize life together with other humans to bring peace (Arendt, 1978/1981, 2003). Satisfied biological needs, shelter for the human body, as well as peace with others are all necessary for *vita contemplativa* (Arendt, 1958, 1978/1981, 2003).

Vita Activa in Relation to Occupational Science

There are several similarities, but also some differences, between Arendt's thoughts and occupational science, and in the following section we first discuss some aspects of human activity and then the public versus the private sphere. Finally, Dewey's thoughts – as another theorist who has been highlighted in occupational science – is briefly considered in relation to occupational science and *vita activa*. When we refer to occupational science without references, it is the general assumptions of the discipline that are intended and not a certain theorist. However, we are aware that there are various positions and views within occupational science.

Arendt (1958) explored human activity and both *vita activa* and occupational science are concerned with this. Arendt stated, in the introduction to *The Human Condition*, that “‘What we are doing’ is indeed the central theme for this book” (Arendt, 1958, p. 5). This declaration is very similar to how occupational science has been defined: the study of “the things people do” (Hocking, 2009, p. 141), the “culturally shared, general idea about doing” (Pierce, 2001, p. 139) and “making sense of what people do” (Wilcock, 2003, p. 4).

Similarities with both the labor and work modalities can be distinguished in occupational science. The labor modality has similarities with everyday self-care occupations, with its characteristic of repetition in satisfying biological needs for survival (Pierce, 2014; Wilcock, 2006). Wilcock (2006) emphasized the survival aspect as a motivator for human occupation, albeit providing a broader view on occupations for survival that may relate to both the labor and work modalities. The action modality, on the other hand, is less obvious in occupational science. However, there are examples that focus on the human interactive nature of occupation. For example, it has similarities with the notion of co-occupation, coined by Pierce (2003), which implies a mutual interdependence between humans. Co-occupations, like activities in the action modality, cannot occur without the existence of others.

Co-occupations are the most highly interactive types of occupation, in which the occupational experiences of the individuals involved simply could not occur without the interactive responses of the other person or persons with whom the occupations are being experienced (Pierce, 2003, p. 199).

Activities in the labor and work modalities are possible to perform alone, while activities in the action modality require other people. The thought of various interactions with others in the performance of occupations can also be traced in occupational science. For example, Pierce expressed: “All occupations fall somewhere on a continuum of social involvement from completely interactive to solitary” (Pierce, 2003, p. 199). However, where Arendt identified

distinct modalities, Pierce identified a continuum of interaction with others (Arendt, 1958; Pierce, 2003).

The loss of interrelatedness with other humans in deprived occupational performance has been highlighted in occupational science. For example, definitions of occupational alienation, marginalization and deprivation (aspects of occupational injustice) all identify social structures as determinants for occupational injustice (Durocher, Gibson, & Rappolt, 2014). Occupational alienation has been defined as “a social condition of injustice” (Townsend & Wilcock, 2004, p. 80) and implies isolation, lack of interaction and connection with others (Durocher et al., 2014; Townsend & Wilcock, 2004). Townsend and Wilcock (2004) highlighted isolation from other humans as a core feature for occupational alienation. “We associate occupational alienation with prolonged experiences of disconnectedness” (Townsend & Wilcock, 2004, p. 80). The same disconnectedness from other people can be found in occupational marginalization, but in that case it is imposed by invisible norms and informal rules (Durocher et al., 2014). Occupational deprivation includes preclusion due to factors outside the control of the individual. “Being deprived of occupations is the ultimate punishment” (Townsend & Wilcock, 2004, p. 81). This association of deprivation with disconnectedness originating from occupational science aligns with Arendt’s statement; “to be isolated is to be deprived of the capacity to act” (Arendt, 1958, p. 188).

As explained earlier, one of the fundamental ideas in *vita activa* is that human activity is always conditioned. Everything humans come in contact with, natural or man-made, turns into conditions and humans also constantly create their own conditions; “human existence is conditioned existence” (Arendt, 1958, p. 9). The labor modality is described as humans’ metabolism with the environment. In the work modality, humans are dependent on resources from nature. The modality action requires other people to act with. This ontological approach has similarities to the acknowledgement of environmental influences on human occupation in occupational science. One of the basic postulations in occupational science is that environmental factors influence human activities and vice versa. Wilcock (2006), for example, identified environmental factors as “all aspects of the external world including the natural and human-made physical world; other people in different relationships and roles; attitudes and values; social systems and services; and policies, rules and laws” (p. 80). This conditioned nature of human activity can also be found in the concept of occupational possibilities in occupational science, which implies that occupations have a “situated nature” and thus vary for different groups and under different circumstances (Laliberte Rudman, 2010).

In her exploration of human activity, Arendt was inspired by Karl Marx. While sharing his interest in politics, she also criticized his ideas. Marx’s interest in human activity focused on productive paid work but did not recognize reproductive unpaid work, like domestic work, which is often done by women (Arendt, 1958; Veltman, 2010). From a gender perspective, Arendt’s *vita activa* – in contrast to Marx’s work – illuminates and includes a broader range of human activities. According to Arendt, the focus on gainful production (i.e. paid work) reduces other forms of human activities to invisibility. Arendt’s focus on productive as well as reproductive human activities is in accordance with occupational science (Wilcock, 2006).

Occupational science has everyday occupation as its scope. However, the attribute of being “everyday” is scarcely problematized or discussed. A scoping review revealed high use of the concept “everyday” in occupational therapy, however definitions of the concept were scarce. The review showed that reproductive occupations such as eating, cooking, and housework occur most often while productive occupations are less recognized (Milbourn, McNamara, & Buchanan, 2014). This indicates a focus on occupations within the private sphere, however that focus is not explicitly identified when discussing everyday occupations in the occupational science literature.

Focusing on and articulating everyday occupations within the private sphere may imply that they are raised into the public sphere and are shared and problematized with others. According to Arendt, modern Western life focuses more on the labor and work modalities, while the action modality is less recognized. Here occupational science has a challenge, to further explore the concept “everyday”. For example, can occupations in everyday life, to a greater extent, be “discovered” and identified as belonging to the action modality?

Furthermore, the distinction between the private and public sphere in *vita activa* is relevant to occupational scientists in the ongoing discussion of a need to change/supplement the predominantly individualistic focus to a pluralistic, participatory view of humans (Fransen, Pollard, Kantartzis, & Viana-Moldes, 2015; Kinsella, 2012; Laliberte Rudman, 2013). Arendt was a defender of participatory politics. Political activity was, for Arendt, something more important and beyond political institutions. Arendt even argued that political institutions could obscure real political action (Cuceu, 2011). Her emphasis on the public sphere as an arena for human activity is shared with recent opinions in occupational science (Pollard & Sakellariou, 2012; Whiteford & Hocking, 2012). Arendt had a political point of departure in her exploration of human activity, and the way she used the concept of politics has similarities to Kronenberg and Pollard’s definition of politics as referring “to an aspect of human occupation and human relationships that can be found everywhere” (Kronenberg & Pollard, 2006, p. 618). The private and public spheres can be related to views of humans as single units, individuals (private) or as participants in a community (public). According to Arendt, the common etymological origin in the words private (from Latin *privatus* i.e. set apart, belonging to oneself) and deprived (from Latin *de-* i.e. entirely and *privatus*) are not recognised. To be private is no longer associated with deprivation. Rather, modern individualism has enriched the private sphere and turned it into a social sphere on behalf of the public sphere. The social sphere is characterized by behavior in contrast to action in the public sphere. Behavior is taken to be a form of normalized, and socially adapted behavior, in contrast to action which is unpredictable (Arendt, 1958).

Arendt did not reject human individuality and the private sphere, but made a clear distinction between individuality and plurality. In this stance, Arendt had similarities with voices in occupational science who have argued for various views, an individualistic view as well as a pluralistic participatory view of humans (Kinsella, 2012). Plurality refers to sharing a common world and involves respecting multiple perspectives and values. The sharing of a common world is the prerequisite for freedom (Arendt, 1958). However, Arendt contrasted participatory politics with the rigid demands characterizing totalitarianism (Arendt, 1951/2004; Bowring, 2012); “the only form of government with which coexistence is not possible” (pp. xxvii-xxviii) and not with the individualistic view as in occupational science (Fransen et al., 2015; Kinsella, 2012; Laliberte Rudman, 2013). Arendt’s concern was about what it means to be a human, how human freedom can be achieved and how humans can co-exist (Arendt, 1951/2004, 1958; Veltman, 2010).

Arendt was deeply concerned with humans’ practical life and in that sense she had a phenomenological approach, irrespective of her resistance towards all individualistic approaches. Arendt was one of Heidegger’s students, which meant that her scholarly roots were influenced from both phenomenology as well as existentialism and hermeneutics. These philosophical approaches all have the individual experience in common (Sigwart, 2013). Arendt, however, made conscious attempts to liberate herself from philosophical thinking that was related to and grounded in the individual’s experience, moving instead towards the plurality of humans (Arendt, 2005). This questioning of individualistic philosophical standpoints has also been raised in occupational science. Dickie, Cutchin and Humphry (2006) declared that “an understanding of individual experience is a necessary but insufficient condition for understanding occupation that occurs through complex contexts” (p. 83).

However, Park Lala and Kinsella (2011) defended the phenomenological approach in occupational science, claiming its usefulness in detecting overlooked human experiences. Barber (2006) also claimed the importance for occupational science of taking a first person (individual) perspective into account. Other scholars outside the occupational science domain have reached the same conclusion. Higgins (2010) interpreted Arendt's *vita activa* as a phenomenological contribution, building on individual experience but with the purpose of understanding humans (men not man). "Though her [Arendt's] project bears on individual flourishing, it is certainly not individualistic" (Higgins, 2010, p. 280). Similarly, Szerszynski (2004) labelled Arendt's concern with human activity as "profoundly anthropocentric" (p. 203). So, a tentative conclusion may be that human phenomena have to be illuminated and articulated by individual humans but they may be interpreted in a collective way.

During the last decade, Dewey's work has been highlighted as contributing to occupational science (Aldrich, 2008; Cutchin, 2004, 2013; Cutchin et al., 2008; Dickie, 2010; Hansen et al., 2007; Smith & Hilton, 2008). Dewey (1992/2002) was concerned with human occupation from a predominantly pedagogical perspective. Occupation, according to Dewey, denotes activity that is performed to enable growth that comes from the continuous interplay of ideas and how they are expressed in action (DeFalco, 2010; Dewey, 1922/2002). Dewey differentiated occupation from work, that is, activity with the purpose of trade, which corresponds to paid work. Work, according to Dewey, is not an activity for development (Dewey, 1922/2002). His emphasis on the developmental aspects of occupation are close to the therapeutic aspects of occupation in occupational therapy.

Dewey's transactional perspective has appeared in occupational science as a reaction to overly mechanistic theoretical views on human occupation (Aldrich, 2008; Cutchin & Dickie, 2012). Transactionalism is characterized by an ever continuing interaction and co-action with all forms of environmental and contextual features. It serves as a lucid and fluent description of the relational, co-defining and co-constitutive nature of humans and their environment through occupational performance. Transactionalism has been described as "an ever-present and always changing interpenetration of humans and their world" (Dickie et al., 2006, p. 88). Framing and categorizing things is important both for developing theoretical constructs that can guide our thinking and also has practical implications. Conceptualizations that are too broad and fluid lead to difficulties with operationalizing their practical implications. In contrast to the fluid character of transactionalism, the *vita activa* can serve as a theoretical frame with distinct but broad and untimely modalities for identifying and understanding aspects of human occupation that are less evident (Higgins, 2010).

The ontological origins of human activity differ between occupational science, Arendt's *vita activa*, and Dewey. Arendt's *vita activa* had its origin in political philosophy, Dewey mainly in pedagogics, while occupational science has its origin in public health. In this respect, Arendt, as well as Dewey, can, in various ways, contribute to the development of multiple ontological standpoints and philosophical positions in occupational science.

Vita Activa's Contribution to Occupational Science

A multifaceted view of human activities

In occupational science, the close connection to health-related issues has almost led to a neglect of other issues. For example, several authors have noted that deleterious activities are a less acknowledged area in occupational science (Hitch, Pépin, & Stagnitti, 2014; Pierce, 2014; Twinley, 2012), with exceptions such as tagging (a form of graffiti; Russell, 2008), high risk drinking (Maloney, 2011) and violence (Twinley & Addidle, 2012). A more multifaceted view

of human occupation is needed for a better and deeper understanding of its impact on humans (Twinley, 2012). Thereby, occupational science's relevance to social issues could increase (Pollard & Sakellariou, 2012; Whiteford & Hocking, 2012). The mechanism for all human occupation, pro-social, healthy and productive as well as their opposites, is important to illuminate.

For example, exploring the “darker sides” of human occupation (Twinley, 2012; Twinley & Addidle, 2012) is of great importance for understanding humans' occupational choices. Questions to be asked include: What is the appeal? What motives are there for engaging in occupations, healthy as well as deleterious? Under what circumstances are occupations undertaken? Can the value of occupations i.e. healthy or deleterious, pro-social or anti-social, vary according to the conditions under which they are undertaken? These questions are in line with Arendt, who argued that human activities are always conditioned, implying that they are always conditioned by their circumstances (Arendt, 1958). Arendt's concern was to develop the public sphere and to improve humans' opportunities to take part in the action modality. However, in these efforts her point of departure was one of the most deleterious human activities, the Holocaust. In her exploration of Nazism and Stalinism, Arendt claimed that indifference and lack of common engagement between people, i.e. lack of action, are some of the elements that can facilitate the development of totalitarianism (Arendt, 1951/2004).

Arendt also explored the thinking and acting of Eichmann, one of the organizers of the Holocaust (Arendt, 1963). Her reports of the Eichmann trials (Arendt, 1963) caused an enormous debate in depicting Eichmann as an ordinary person who obeyed orders, albeit lacking imagination and ability to reflect, rather than a monstrous evil person (Arendt, 1963; Szerszynski, 2004). Considering Arendt's experience of the Holocaust and her exploration of the mechanisms characterizing totalitarianism, one can hypothesize that the *vita activa* was more likely created from an intention to prevent similar events than from a health perspective. The action modality, in particular, can be seen as a message about how humans can learn to live together, handle different viewpoints and various opinions, and still co-exist (Kreber, 2015). For Arendt, not only the activities but also the consequences of human activity were of importance, which is more relevant than ever in today's society. For example, her thoughts are relevant regarding the need for sustainability in working life, which will be described below.

Work as a source for welfare and wellbeing? The need for a sustainable working life

Technological advancement has partly reduced the demand for human labor and work, and both are less time-consuming in modern society (Higgins, 2010). This situation potentially allows a transition from a society centered on the labor and work modalities to a society centered on all forms of occupations, especially on the action modality where humans have the potential to flourish and develop (Arendt, 1958; Lenz, 2005). Nevertheless, modern society is still dominated by labor at the expense of the other modalities. There is a glorification of the labor modality which, according to Arendt (1958), is manifested in the construction of paid work, which can be viewed as a social construct with the purpose of ensuring the material livelihood of individuals and satisfying their need for consumption (Arendt, 1958; Lenz, 2005; Wilcock, 2006).

There are also many jobs in current day working life that are still structured according to principles of Taylorism and constructed following elaborated routines for minimizing unpredictable outcomes, thus following the work modality (Jansson, Björklund, Perseus, & Gunnarsson, 2015; Kohlen, 2015). Mechanization and fragmentation of work have reduced skilled tasks to the endless repetition characterizing the labor modality (Arendt, 1958; Szerszynski, 2004; Walsh, 2011). Furthermore, mechanization and division of work not only

occur in industry but also in jobs characterized by interaction between humans, in areas such as social work, teaching, and health care (Kohlen, 2015). In what has been labelled “contact jobs” in the Swedish labor market context, professionals interact with and support patients, clients, students and others, and as such can be viewed as engaging in occupations that naturally belong to the action modality. However, the expectations of employers, and society, are that these professionals will efficiently and cost effectively produce predictable results, e.g. to teach students a predetermined amount of knowledge (Kohlen, 2015). For employers, results in line with what is predicted are important and therefore they are anxious to shape and form employees’ work performance to achieve the expected results (Jansson et al., 2015). This implies that paid work, as organized in Western societies today, cannot often be regarded as part of the action modality, since action is unpredictable and can lead to unforeseeable results (Arendt, 1958).

In many parts of the world, a paid job is the only way to ensure biological survival (Wilcock, 2006). Ensuring pure livelihood is in accordance with the labor modality (Arendt, 1958). The ongoing fight for survival in the labor modality, which some people are forced into, implies restricted access to the action modality. Not having access to action leads to exclusion from full participation in the public sphere (Bowring, 2012).

In higher income countries, participation in the work force is stressed as being important both for the individual and for society. With a longer educational period among the younger population and increasing age among the older, the number of working and tax paying years is relatively reduced. Together with what is regarded to be a generous social welfare system, the economic burden has been considered too high for society. The so-called jobs strategy has a long tradition in several Western countries (McBride & Williams, 2001) and is often referred to as an important part of promoting participation in working life, referring both to the individual’s and the society’s need to maintain welfare. Therefore, the jobs strategy aims to include as many people as possible in working life, in order to maintain welfare in society. However, having high numbers of people on sick leave is a seemingly endless and ongoing problem, not only in Sweden but in many other OECD countries (FORTE, 2015; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development OECD, 2010). A paradox is apparent here, in that striving for increased welfare may cause decreased well-being. For some people who work in order to maintain welfare, as advocated by society, their work conditions have led to diminished well-being. This, in turn, has led to extended health care and rehabilitation efforts to support people in getting back to work, which leads to increased costs for society.

Viewed through the lens of *vita activa*, part of this problem may be the lack of experience of the action modality. This lack is a problem concerning both people who struggle for biological survival as well as people in wealthier parts of the world who are mentally and/or physically drained by work conditions organized according to the labor modality. Demands to perform never-ending labor may, in the long run, drain people and thus lead to ill-health and sick leave. This scenario might be interpreted as an example of the concern Arendt expressed about imposing segmented and technical procedures in areas where people interact, which transforms the interaction from its natural place in the action modality into the labor modality (Arendt, 1958). This concern, expressed more than 50 years ago, appears foresighted and is highly relevant in working life today. In Sweden, for instance, sick leave among people employed in contact jobs doubled between 2009 and 2014. The increase in sick leave is a distinguishing feature of contact jobs and has not occurred to the same extent in other types of employment (AFA Försäkring [AFA Insurance], 2015).

Furthermore, not everyone can take participation in working life for granted. Among people who are excluded from working life, marginalized groups are overrepresented, e.g. disabled persons and immigrants (Morissens & Sainsbury, 2005; Wilcock, 2006). It is not only the lack of

participation in working life that can lead to alienation but also the conditions in which participation is undertaken. Arendt (1958) recognized that poverty and marginalization exclude people from being acknowledged as fellow humans, and deny them participation in the public sphere, which has also been emphasized lately (Bowring, 2012; Lenz, 2005). For example, Lenz (2005) highlighted the current situation where there is a gap emerging between people who are overworked and people who are unemployed. Lenz (2005) related this situation to Arendt's critique of a labor society and saw an opportunity to question whether this traditional organization of work is the only available model for humans. "A meaningful organization of the coexistence of our various activities requires a public, political process of negotiation" (Lenz, 2005, p. 152). Arendt's critique of a labor society, with its negative consequences on humans, has ideological similarities with the concepts occupational alienation, deprivation and imbalance in occupational science (Wilcock, 2006).

In summary, participation in working life can be perceived as draining, as well as longed for (Fransen et al., 2015). How occupations unfold and the conditions in which they are performed may be of importance for experiencing participation. According to *vita activa*, the action modality is essential for humans; however, less frequently experienced. For some people, working in order to achieve welfare implies diminished well-being. This indicates a need to develop sustainable work situations to enhance participation in working life. Participation in working life, organized on the principles of the labor modality, can scarcely be expected to be perceived in the same way as participation in working life organized according to the action modality. According to Arendt (1958), the ultimate participation occurs in the action modality. In this modality humans are part of the web of other humans and have power – power to have influence and to make a change.

The example described above is only one of many possible illustrations of how Arendt's thoughts may enrich occupational science. In this introductory discussion of her *vita activa* in relation to occupational science, only a brief overview has been provided. *Vita activa* is only one part of Arendt's voluminous output with its numerous possible contributions to occupational science. For example, the current situation with refugees all over the world with limited access to all modalities may be better understood in the light of Arendt's thoughts. Her ideas are also very relevant in light of the recognition now given to humans' impact on the climate and sustainable development goals. Further studies in the area are also needed, for example how Arendt's modalities can be experienced by people of today. How can the extension of the private sphere into the social sphere be understood? Are there distinct boundaries between the modalities as well as between the spheres, or can the impact from more than one modality/sphere be identified and perceived in occupational performance?

Conclusion

Arendt's *vita activa* can, from a political philosophy perspective, contribute to a better understanding of human occupation. The discrimination of occupations in the different conditioned modalities of labor, work and action can serve as theoretical conceptualizations for a deeper and more profound description and analysis of human occupation and occupational patterns. How human occupation is manifested, how it can unfold, and its consequences (positive as well as negative) are important issues for occupational science. Arendt's *vita activa* can contribute to a better understanding of these phenomena and her idea of human occupation as something that is always conditioned can serve to better understand these mechanisms.

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