

Original Article

Environment in portraits: new perceptions and debates on occupational therapy and environmental issues

Meio ambiente em retratos: novas percepções e debates sobre terapia ocupacional e questão ambiental

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Abstract

The socio-environmental and climate crisis experienced in recent years has brought the environmental issue to the forefront of everyday dialogues. In occupational therapy, it is known that there is a scarcity of studies on the subject; however, as a field dedicated to working with daily life, it is urgent to address the socio-environmental dimension in its research practices. This study aimed to understand how the environment is perceived by individuals within their own territory and how the environmental issue intersects with the activities they carry out in their daily lives. To this end, an exploratory and qualitative study was conducted, inspired by the photovoice method and divided into three phases. The study involved the collaboration of three participants, aged between 17 and 46 years. The results were organized into two categories: Environment and the use of territory, and Environment, public authority, and social vulnerability. The participants' perception of the environment is directly related to the environmental problems of the territory, such as irregular waste disposal and pollution. The photographs and narratives reveal situations of injustice and environmental racism and point to the absence of public policies related to environmental issues in vulnerable territories. The field of Social Occupational Therapy is seen as a strategic area for proposing reflections and developing social technologies for working with the environment, since the occupational therapist can act as a mediator of conflicts and facilitate community processes of environmental awareness, promoting spaces for dialogue, knowledge exchange, and environmental education.

Keywords: Environment, Sociocultural Territory, Social Occupational Therapy, Social Vulnerability, Environmental Justice.

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Resumo

A crise socioambiental e climática vivida nos últimos anos têm trazido a questão ambiental à pauta dos diálogos cotidianos. Na terapia ocupacional, sabe-se que é escassa a produção de estudos acerca da temática, entretanto, como campo que se dedica ao trabalho com cotidianos, é emergente que se trate da dimensão socioambiental em suas práticas [d]e pesquisa. O presente estudo objetivou compreender como o meio ambiente é percebido pelo sujeito dentro do seu próprio território e como a questão ambiental atravessa as atividades que realiza em seu cotidiano. Para tanto, realizou-se pesquisa exploratória e qualitativa, inspirada no método *photovoice* e dividida em três fases. O estudo contou com a colaboração de três participantes, que têm entre 17 e 46 anos. Os resultados foram organizados em duas categorias: *Meio ambiente e o uso do território* e *Meio ambiente, poder público e vulnerabilidade social*. A percepção dos participantes a respeito do meio ambiente está diretamente relacionada às problemáticas ambientais do território, como descarte irregular de resíduos e poluição. Os retratos e relatos deflagram situações de injustiça e racismo ambiental e apontam para a ausência de políticas públicas relativas à questão ambiental em territórios vulnerabilizados. Aposta-se nos referenciais da Terapia Ocupacional Social como campo estratégico para proposição de reflexões e elaboração de tecnologias sociais ao trabalho com o meio ambiente, uma vez que a terapeuta ocupacional pode atuar como mediadora de conflitos e facilitar processos comunitários de conscientização ambiental, promovendo espaços de diálogo, trocas de saberes e educação ambiental.

Palavras-chave: Meio Ambiente, Território Sociocultural, Terapia Ocupacional Social, Vulnerabilidade Social, Justiça Ambiental.

Introduction

The socio-environmental and climate crisis experienced in recent years, evident in recent extreme events such as the heat waves in the Southeast or even the floods in Rio Grande do Sul in 2024, has brought the environmental issue to the forefront of everyday dialogues. The environment – or nature – composes urban settings and colors daily movements through cities; however, it is usually crisis situations that draw attention back to what automation and/or the precariousness of life prevent us from appreciating, perceiving, or worrying about. Based on this reflection, the present study aimed to answer the following question: how is the environment perceived by the subject in their own territory?

To begin, we consider it necessary to present and differentiate the terms “nature” and “environment” for greater clarity of the proposal. “Nature” is a very ancient term – Aristotle, in ancient Greece, conceived nature as something that merely happens and is present, that which surrounds us and has been close since the beginning. At the time, nature encompassed everything that originated the natural world and, in this sense, human subjects were merely its observers (Medeiros, 2002). In the Middle Ages, a new perception of the human-nature relationship began: domination. Under the influence of Christian theology, nature came to be conceived as something organic and immutable

– the result of divine work – which should be dominated, protected, and governed by humans (Castelnou, 2006).

The *denaturalization* of the human subject, that is, the perception that humans were something outside and alien to nature, occurred in the 16th century with the development of Modern Science. Cartesian thinking proposed that nature did not behave as a living organism, but as a machine composed of matter and movement, which should be studied, quantified, and fragmented by humans as the focus of reason and study. With Cartesian thinking, nature came to be seen as a resource, and the opposition between subject and nature became even more evident (Santos & Imbernon, 2015).

The term “environment”, in turn, emerged and gained popularity in the 20th century, with discussions about environmental problems that arose with and from the Industrial Revolution. This is a relatively recent term, with an etymological root tied to the recognition and identification of environmental problems. It is no surprise, therefore, that the term correlates with the urban context and events related to the impacts of human action on nature (Santos & Imbernon, 2015).

In summary, the use of the term “nature” is emphasized in the sense of biodiversity preservation and conservation; while the term “environment” is generally used to identify anthropized settings, that is, areas whose original characteristics have been altered and that express human action upon nature (Santos & Imbernon, 2015).

In contemporary times, human action, marked by the capitalist mode of production and its logic centered on capital accumulation, predatory extractivism, and consumerism, has triggered climate emergency situations whose effects are felt by society itself. However, it is important to highlight that the impacts on daily life cannot be measured in a generalized or equal manner. Extractivism, for example, has historically concentrated in vulnerable regions rich in natural resources, such as Latin America and the African continent, reflecting the colonial logic that hierarchizes and subjugates regions and populations on a global scale (Ferdinand, 2022; Louback & Lima, 2023). Thus, climate change is experienced differently depending on location, race, class, or gender of the subjects, and the resulting problems are unequally distributed among regions, countries, populations, and ethnic groups, highlighting situations of vulnerability and socio-environmental injustice (Porto & Pivetta, 2009; Ferdinand, 2022).

The environmental and climate crisis, therefore, has direct expressions on ways of life and the relationships established between subjects and the environment in their living spaces, making it essential to build regulatory mechanisms for these relationships at both global and local levels (Louback & Lima, 2023).

In this sense, it is worth highlighting the fundamental role of public authorities and governments in formulating policies that mitigate the impacts of the environmental crisis, as the real effects of this crisis impose on the population the need to create strategies to deal with various issues in their territories and daily lives, such as river and sea contamination, temperature increases, floods caused by intense rains and solid waste accumulation, air contamination and atmospheric pollution caused by large industries, the emergence of diseases due to exposure to contaminated agents, among others (Porto & Pivetta, 2009).

Thus, the environmental issue must also be considered within the social context and territory in which subjects, groups, and communities are inserted, since territory, as a

determining factor in the construction process of socio-spatial inequalities (Santos, 2007), also constitutes a strategic locus for intervention and reflection on environmental issues in the population's daily life.

Territory is materialized through a collection of historical, social, and environmental situations. Talking about it is to reflect on the ways of constituting ways of life and ways of appropriating material, social, cultural, and relational resources in a given place (Bianchi & Malfitano, 2020), or also about how the appropriation of natural resources takes place and how the relationship between the community, territory, and environment is manifested.

For occupational therapy, a profession active in territorial facilities, weaving a territorial and community action plan that presumes understanding the relationship between space and those who live and carry out their activities there (Bianchi & Malfitano, 2020) is indispensable for addressing demands arising from the environmental issue in an integrated and critical manner.

In occupational therapy, Simó Algado (2012) coined the term “occupational ecology” to build bridges between the field and environmental discussions. For the author, occupational ecology consists of awareness of the ecological crisis, faced on a global scale, and the development of action strategies, through human activity, to restore balance with the environment. Occupational ecology also serves as a facilitator for establishing an intervention field that explores the controversies of separating ecological, social, and health problems.

The topic, however, is little addressed in Brazilian occupational therapy studies and projects, which makes it an emerging subject in the field in the country. A quick search for the terms “environment” and “nature” in *Cadernos Brasileiros de Terapia Ocupacional*, the most widely circulated journal in the field in the country, reveals only four recent publications: two were produced by colleagues from Chile and Spain (Valderrama Núñez et al., 2023; Mansilla et al., 2023), countries that have stood out in this discussion on the global stage; the other two, by Brazilian colleagues, discuss research reports about a quilombola community whose history was submerged with the construction of a dam (Silva, 2016) and about changes in environmental care habits as a result of participation in educational projects (Silva e Dutra et al., 2018).

In this regard, considering the human-nature relationship, the effects of the environmental crisis on territories, especially those that are vulnerable, and the urgency of addressing the topic in the field of occupational therapy, this study aimed to understand how the environment is perceived by the subject within their territory and how the environmental issue intersects with the activities they carry out in their daily lives, in order to build reflections on the demands and/or contributions of occupational therapy to the latent environmental issue in urban settings.

Method

This study follows the framework of an exploratory and qualitative research. As a data production strategy, we used the photovoice method as inspiration. Based on the assumption that images are powerful tools to provoke estrangement from what is familiar, in this research, the main resource was photography. The method is a research strategy that employs photographs taken by the research participants, based on guiding

questions and/or themes, and uses them as a tool to encourage and facilitate dialogue and reflection on the study's topic (Meirinho, 2017).

In this way, we used visual resources such as photography, in addition to dialogue with the participants, to understand, from their perspectives, how the environment is perceived by them in the territories where they live. The guiding question for the photographic records was: "How do you visualize the environment in your territory?" The research was carried out in three subsequent phases, which were:

Phase 1: Approach

The initial phase of the research consisted of approaching the participants and appropriating theoretical studies on the environment and occupational therapy.

The approach was carried out through interactions with the university extension project "Territory dynamics: different ways of occupying and belonging to public space in the Largo do Mercado region in Santos/SP". The extension activities are carried out in the central region of the municipality of Santos, on the coast of São Paulo, and consist of two fronts: i) creating meeting spaces, dialogue, and territorial and individual follow-up with people experiencing homelessness; and ii) proposing activity workshops aimed at strengthening socio-community bonds and ensuring access to play as a right for children and adolescents.

To identify potential participants, conversations were held with the extension team and coordinators. In the discussions, six names were suggested, with whom the team already had an established rapport. In addition to these suggestions, the coordinator of a partner organization of the extension project recommended two more potential participants.

The studied territory is located in the central region of the municipality of Santos. In its physical-spatial dimensions, the area is characterized by wide streets and narrow sidewalks, heavy car traffic with an expressway running along one side, 19th-century mansions, houses and small businesses, few public squares, an open-air canal for rainwater drainage, and public services for health, education, and social assistance.

According to the Socioterritorial Diagnosis of the Social Assistance Policy (Santos, 2021), the central region of Santos is one of the areas with the highest proportion of low-income families living in precarious housing conditions. The same report states that most people experiencing homelessness in the municipality choose the central region as their place of residence and for commercial exchanges. Thus, although it is located in the central region, the territory is considered socio-historically marginalized, especially in its forms of occupation: shared housing by individuals and families in old mansions deteriorated over time, resembling tenements, as well as temporary occupations for various purposes, such as shelters for people experiencing homelessness or for drug sale and use, for example (Diniz & Souza, 2022).

Phase 2: Contact with the environment

The second phase of the research consisted of initial contact with the selected individuals. The participants were chosen based on the following criteria: being a resident or regularly circulating within the observed territory; having access to a device capable of capturing photographs, such as tablets, cell phones, or digital cameras; having

internet access to communicate with the researchers in case of remote contact; being recommended by the extension project team and/or its partners; and agreeing to participate in the study by signing the Free and Informed Consent Form (FICF).

Of the eight names suggested, three potential participants were contacted based on their availability and adherence to the criteria. These three accepted the invitation to participate in the study after the proposal was presented.

It is important to note that one of the participants was only 17 years old at the time of data collection. His participation was authorized by a responsible adult. His inclusion aimed to capture a youth perspective on the study's theme, allowing for an intergenerational analysis as well.

Data production took place individually and followed the same procedure for contact and follow-up: the first meeting was for inviting participation in the study; the second meeting was for signing the FICF and presenting the guiding question; and the third meeting was for discussing the photographic records. In the second meeting, each participant was encouraged to reflect and respond through images to the following question: "How do you visualize the environment in your territory? That is, in the streets and spaces where you live and circulate, what do you identify as the environment?" There were no restrictions on the data production process, and participants were free to take the photos alone, during their daily routines, or, if preferred, accompanied by the researcher. Participants 1 and 3 preferred to take the photographs in the company of the researcher, who walked with them through the territory.

Phase 3: Giving voice through photography

The third phase of the study consisted of presenting and explaining the photographic records made by the participants and developing reflections prompted by the photographs.

The dialogue with the three participants was guided by a semi-structured script, which included questions for identifying the participant (name, age, occupation, length of time living in the territory, etc.), as well as to deepen the discussion about the meanings of their photographs and to encourage reflective thinking, such as: "Tell me a bit about the photographed place: what are its characteristics?"; "Tell me about the photographic process: what was your idea when taking this photo?"; "How does this photo represent the environment in your territory?" and "Did the process of creating the photo help you perceive the environment in your territory?"

All participants agreed to participate, as mentioned, by signing the Free and Informed Consent Form (FICF). In the case of the adolescent participant, the research process was presented to him and his guardian, who understood and consented to his participation in the study. The FICF was then signed by the adolescent's legal guardian. The research was reviewed and approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Federal University of São Paulo, protocol number CAAE 51594721.3.0000.5505.

All three conversations were recorded, with participants' consent, and transcribed for analysis. To interpret the collected information, Content Analysis was used, according to the thematic analysis technique. Meaning units were identified based on the presence and frequency of topics (Minayo, 2014) in both the oral narratives and the visual records from the

Photovoice method. Thus, the information was analyzed in light of the theoretical references incorporated throughout the research process, especially in the initial phase, the *Approach*, during which the theoretical framework regarding the topic was expanded.

Results

The results were constructed based on the photographic records of the participants and the subsequent individual conversations held with each of the three participants. In order to protect their identities, the designations “*participant 1*”, “*participant 2*”, and “*participant 3*” will be used to refer to them, following the chronological order of data production.

Participant 1 is a 31-year-old Black woman who has lived in the neighborhood for about 23 years. Her daily life in the territory is shaped by her social relationships, such as friendships and family, as well as by her daily routines, like commuting to work. At the time, she was an employee of a security company that provides services to a local university near her residence.

Participant 2 is a 46-year-old mixed-race man, a foreigner, who has been using the territory in constructing his daily life since 2014. For a certain period, he experienced homelessness and relied on the region's spaces and services to meet his basic needs, such as sleeping, eating, and personal hygiene. Currently, he lives near the Largo do Mercado Municipal and moves through this territory to carry out his work activities and maintain his social connections.

Participant 3 is a black young 17-year-old who has lived in the area for eight years. When talking about his daily life, he indicates that this is the region where he has formed most of his relationships, especially those related to leisure activities, as he uses public spaces such as streets and squares for this purpose.

The results were analyzed and organized into two categories corresponding to the main themes brought up by the participants: *Environment and the use of the territory*, and *Environment, public power, and social vulnerability*.

Environment and the use of the territory

The photographs and the dialogue with the participants highlighted the absence of natural elements in the region and the relationship established between the population living in the territory and the environment. One of the most emphasized points, especially by participant 2, who defines the environment as a “clean city”, was the improper disposal of waste in the public spaces of the territory, such as sidewalks, streets, and squares, something that “gets in the way of city life”, as he himself states:

When I had the stand, I put a trash can here... but people leave the bar with their snacks, eat it and throw the paper on the floor, and the trash can is there. To start with, is there a solution? (Report from participant 2).

He does not exempt himself from this portion of the population that disposes of waste inappropriately, but he emphasizes the lack of trash cans in common areas of the territory, which, according to him, makes proper disposal difficult:

And even I make mistakes, because when I smoke a cigarette, I throw [the butt] on the street, because there is no trash can (Report from participant 2).

Illustrating his perspective, the contributor brings examples of this practice in his photographs, adding to his reflections the “disrespect” of the population towards the natural elements that make up the neighborhood’s landscape. In the photo below, he highlights a scene of irregular disposal of debris from a public construction project that was thrown at the roots of a fig tree, which is known to have been in the region even before its urbanization process (Figure 1):



Figure 1. Debris under the Fig Tree.

Source: Record of participant 2.

When talking about photography, the man relates the irregular disposal of waste with the most visible environmental problems in urban centers:

People throw trash on the side... no one respects nature. That's why there are mosquitoes, midges, floods... (Report from participant 2).

In the data production process for this research, the word “nature” was mentioned only in this dialogue; no other participant correlated the word “environment”, which we mentioned, with the word “nature”. Furthermore, representations of the environment associated with natural elements, such as areas with grass, bushes, trees, and water, were brought up only by participant 3, the youngest in the study.

As presented in the introduction, the use of the term “environment” is recent and has an etymological root linked to environmental issues (Santos & Imbernon, 2015). It is therefore no surprise that the term is correlated with the urban setting and events related to impacts, as well as with the destruction of nature and its direct correlation with human life.

When asked about the disrespect that he insinuates is persistent in society towards the environment, participant 2 says in his response that the way individuals deal with the environment directly reflects on the quality of life they have:

[It is disrespectful] to themselves, to the person themselves, they are against it [the environment]. They don't want to help themselves if they don't help the environment (Report from participant 2).

The reflection of participant 2 is similar to the way participant 3 sees the benefits of keeping the common areas of the territory clean. The young man, who mentions the green areas of the neighborhood, such as squares, identifies these as places for social interaction and the promotion of well-being:

Here in the square [Figure 2] is where a lot of people live, it's practically the heart of the market. [...] It's a place where I live well, right? [...] Like, if people kept these parts clean, it would be good. Like here where the children live, if it was kept clean, it would be possible to have a football match (Report from participant 3).



Figure 2. Territory square.
Source: Record of participant 3.

Therefore, for participant 3, “environment” corresponds to a space that promotes well-being, directly related to a place where natural elements are found:

[The environment] is a place of well-being, you know? Where you are... you feel good there, that's it for me (Report from participant 3).

It is from this understanding of the environment that he problematizes the issue of irregular waste disposal, especially in these locations, classifying this habit of the neighborhood's population as one of the causes of the region's prevailing condition of social vulnerability. With the urbanization movement and greater investment by the government in the city's waterfront, the central region of the city - which encompasses the territory studied - began to be inhabited by low-income families, with one of the characteristics of the region's housing being the slums.

Keeping it clean like this would be nice, but, like, everyone lives in the favelas, right, so it's up to the people, if the people helped... [...] like the square, it's a really cool place, really nice, but keeping it dirty like this, like, with all this trash on the floor... (Report from participant 3).

In turn, participant 1 also brings up in her report the issue of the presence of waste in the public spaces of that territory, however, she relates this presence to another manifestation of social vulnerability in the region: the large number of homeless people. This perspective will be explored in more depth in the next category, in order to highlight the relationship that the government establishes with the territory.

Environment, government and social vulnerability

As already mentioned, the Largo do Mercado Municipal is a socially precarious region. When participant 2 was asked how the photographs he took represent the environment, he expressed his dissatisfaction, reporting that the city is “abandoned”, highlighting the absence of public policies or programs aimed at caring for the environment in that region. Participant 1 also addresses the lack of assistance for the territory:

Because they [the government] look where the good people are, they don't look where the poor people are (Report from participant 2).

They are all nearby places, which in my opinion are places that are very forgotten [by the public authorities] (Report from participant 1).

In one of her photographs (Figure 3), participant 1 shows a building belonging to the city hall that, according to her, could be used to build some service aimed at the homeless population, which was highlighted by her throughout the research process:

I wish there were changes, right? Because there are so many places here, it's... how do you say... closed off, right? And abandoned at the same time, that could be used for some social fund, shelter... something to get these people off the streets (Report from participant 1).



Figure 3. Abandoned building belonging to the city government.

Source: Record of participant 1.

When asked about how her photographs represented the environment in her territory, participant 1 correlated the term with pollution and homeless people, emphasizing the socio-environmental issues of the territory where she lives:

Well, for me... I don't know, it's like pollution... I don't know. I see it as pollution, because they [homeless people] don't do anything useful on the streets, they just use drugs, rob people around here, that's all they do, right? [...] Not to put people down, right? Because I'm not better than anyone else, but... in the situation I see them living in, for me I see it as that [pollution. Figure 4] (Report from participant 1).



Figure 4. Street with homeless people.

Source: Record of participant 1.

The issue of the lack of assistance from the public authorities for people who survive on the streets of the territory was also addressed by participant 2, who has already been in this situation:

No one takes anyone off the streets, but they have to have opportunities, work, a signed employment contract, benefits, decent housing (Report from participant 2).

Participant 2 also criticizes the way in which the city government has occupied a square in the area with construction materials from a public project aimed at revitalizing the city center (Figure 5). In fact, the materials are being used as a survival strategy by homeless people in the region:

Those pipes there, do you see that there are people sleeping? It's because they don't have a roof over their heads, they have to sleep there. Now they've occupied the space, the city hall, right, and they haven't given anyone a place to live [...]. For them [the city hall], the land is theirs, so the next person has to take advantage of it. If it were me, I'd sleep in there too (Report from participant 2).



Figure 5. Homeless people lying inside construction pipes. Source: Record of participant 2.

When pointing out that the square has been used as a warehouse, he adds:

It's not right, no. The square is a place for people to go for a walk on the weekend, to take their children to play. [...] They [the city hall] can use it, we can't... (Report from participant 2).

This point is also addressed by Participant 3, who mentions that the construction materials have been “getting in everyone’s way” for almost a year, since the square used to be frequented by the local population for being a large and accessible area.

The data produced through the collaboration of the three participants bring important points for understanding how the environment is interpreted within the territory under study. In the following section, the discussions that stood out in the analysis of the results will be presented.

Discussion

As pointed out, the term “environment” began to be used in the context of industrialization, in urban settings, and from a perspective in which vegetation resists

and coexists with concrete, asphalt, and metal structures (Santos & Imbernon, 2015). When incorporating power, class, and political relations regarding the environment, the human being becomes a part of the environment, taking on the role of a participatory and transformative agent (Carvalho, 2005), or also of a destroyer, especially in their everyday life and experiences.

Therefore, the meaning of the environment for each individual is shaped by their life repertoire, built from their experiences, relationships, and also their territory. In this sense, the data collected show that the perspective of the environment assumed by the study participants aligns with the notion of the environment as a socio-environmental issue. That is, it is not related to a naturalist aspect or a connection between human beings and nature, but rather to the ways in which humans use and destroy natural aspects, be it through irregular waste disposal, pollution, or the occupation of public spaces. The latter, in particular, demonstrates how the participants' perspective is closely linked to how they perceive and recognize their own territory, as a place “abandoned by public authorities.”

Assuming that “[...] the quality of the environment is a determining factor for achieving a better quality of life” (Gomes & Soares, 2004, p. 3), and that green spaces in urban areas, beyond their ecological relevance, benefit the physical and emotional well-being of individuals (Palomo, 2003), it is necessary to question where these spaces are, what condition they are in, and who has access to them. What is commonly seen is vegetation reaffirming territorial inequalities, as the most wooded areas in cities, not coincidentally, are located where people with greater purchasing power live. The municipality of Santos, for example, has the largest beachfront garden in the world (Turismo Santos, 2024), but, clearly, it is located in the region known to be the city's most economically developed area.

In this study, only one participant dedicated their photographs to the green areas of the territory, linking them to a critical reflection on the lack of care and maintenance of these spaces, both by the population, which does not see them as collective property, and by the public authorities, who fail to maintain the squares and also occupy them irregularly with construction materials.

The images presented by the participants expose examples of environmental injustices. According to Herculano (2008, p. 2), environmental injustice refers to “[...] the mechanism through which unequal societies allocate the greatest share of environmental damage from development to social groups such as workers, low-income populations, discriminated racial groups, marginalized and more vulnerable populations”. Environmental damage includes everything from exposure to and poisoning by chemical waste or pesticides, as seen in rural and forest populations, to the lack of access for peripheral urban residents to basic sanitation and green spaces that enable a full sense of well-being within their territory (Herculano, 2008), as observed in this study.

In connection with this, the concept of environmental racism is also highlighted, which allows us to understand the environmental injustices that disproportionately affect certain vulnerable ethnic groups, through a construction imbued with racist intentions, as well as “[...] through actions that have racial impact” (Herculano, 2008, p. 16). It is important to emphasize that the neglect by public authorities towards Black

and Indigenous populations is intentional, being synonymous with institutional racism itself (Jesus, 2020).

Much of the collected images and narratives demonstrate situations of environmental injustice and racism, whether experienced directly by the study participants – black individuals – in their daily lives in a vulnerable territory; or by the deliberate choice of the municipal government not to provide care and maintenance for the environment and to keep populations exposed to socio-environmental risks, such as waste accumulation in the streets.

The records of the territory also highlight the homeless population. In addition to being exposed to conditions of extreme social and environmental vulnerability, people who use the streets to survive suffer from the stigmatization of their representation, as seen in the images from participant 1. The fact that they are viewed as a homogeneous group, characterized by poverty and by their use of public spaces to sleep, eat, and consume alcoholic beverages and other drugs, sustains a wide social distance between those considered “homeless” and those with homes (Pimenta, 2019), marked by bodily signs of filth, the abject body that frightens and alienates, as Frangella (2005) points out. This dehumanizing perspective also positions homeless individuals not only as a social issue but as an environmental problem, that is, other victims of the system are portrayed as responsible for the lack of care for urban spaces.

In light of this, we consider it necessary that the theme of environmental justice be addressed through actions that aim not only at preservation but also at access to or creation of environmental public policies, from the perspective of “[...] bringing together popular struggles for social and human rights and for quality of life and environmental sustainability” (Herculano, 2008, p. 13).

Along with the perspective that environmental issues should be considered within a social dimension, showing themselves as “inseparable pairs” (Silva, 2012, p. 85), territory can be identified as a determining factor in the construction of socio-spatial inequalities (Santos, 2007), as previously stated, since it is within people's life territories that the impacts of socio-environmental problems and the ways in which spaces are used and maintained are manifested (Goulart, 2005).

It is essential that individuals recognize the environment as something inherent to their territories, so that reflection on the impacts of environmental problems, as well as the struggle and defense of the environment, become present in the daily lives and work of the general population.

This debate, therefore, belongs to the field of occupational therapy, which directs its interventions toward territory, daily life, and the ways of living of the individuals and groups it serves. It aims to establish dialogue and mediation between the microstructural sphere (daily life and territory) and the macrostructural (public policies) (Malfitano, 2005). We consider it necessary for occupational therapy to integrate a critical view of socio-environmental issues into its practices, since this sphere is directly related to how territory is used, accessed, and appropriated, as well as how social relations are structured.

Moreover, considering how environmental issues manifest in urban centers, such as the examples of environmental and racial injustice demonstrated in the study, we propose social occupational therapy as a strategic field for fostering reflections and developing social technologies aimed at addressing socio-environmental inequalities,

mediating conflicts, facilitating negotiations, promoting emancipation, and fighting for the guarantee of social rights (Costa et al., 2023). Social occupational therapy has the potential to foster community-based spaces for reflecting on how the society-nature-environment relationship is constituted and also to support collective struggles for access to public policies that ensure the right to environmental protection and conservation, and the reduction of environmental injustices.

As Costa et al. (2023) emphasize, the creative overcoming of situations of conflict and inequality occurs both through mobilizations to achieve public policies and through the creation of unique and collective tools and strategies. In this sense, already existing social technologies, such as territorial-community action (Bianchi & Malfitano, 2022), activity workshops, dynamics and projects, individual and territorial follow-ups, resource coordination in the social field, and the strengthening of care networks (Lopes et al., 2014), can support the strengthening of community processes of environmental awareness, political engagement, and environmental education, and the building of collective projects to address issues common to communities and territories.

Conclusion

It can be concluded, based on the participants' contributions and the topics raised, that when discussing the environment, it is essential to consider the nature of the relationship between individuals and the spaces in which they live and/or circulate. From a socio-environmental perspective, it is accurate to say that this interaction will vary according to the social markers that shape the individual's daily life, and thus, the interpretation they have of the environment will be directly influenced by the construction of this interaction.

The study showed that the participants have a perspective on the environment, especially in the urban setting and in a vulnerable territory, aligned with socio-environmental issues. There was no evidence of care, concern, and/or shared responsibility for the environment, suggesting a process of denaturalization and distancing between individuals and nature. The photographs depicted situations of environmental and racial injustice and highlighted the need to incorporate the debate on environmental justice into territories and everyday conversations.

In this regard, social occupational therapy is considered a field capable of developing social technologies and proposals for action aligned with environmental issues and aimed at constructing strategies for accessing the rights that enable environmental justice. Therefore, the development of actions and research that include environmental issues in their practices and projects is considered relevant.

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