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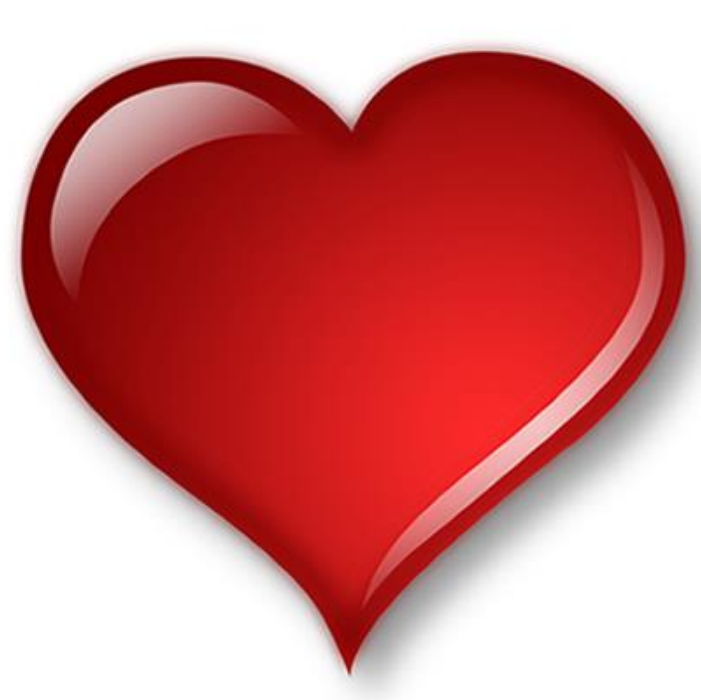
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# Dating as an Occupation: Swipe Right for OT

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## Background

If Occupational Therapy (OT) is going to promote itself as a holistic profession, we must address the sexuality of our clients and acknowledge the myriad of occupations that enable them to express their sexuality. Sexuality has an “inherently occupational dimension, which can be expressed through a variety of meaningful occupations such as dating, grooming or having sex” (Sakellariou & Algado, 2006, p.352).

Is dating an occupation? Yerxa (1993) states that occupation is “self initiated, goal directed, experiential as well as behavioral, socially valued or recognized, constituted of adaptive skills or repertoires, organized, essential to the quality of life experienced, and possesses the capacity to influence health” (p. 5). These essential characteristics of occupation are inherent in dating and warrant the attention of occupational therapists (OTs).

“Dating” can be defined as the process of finding a romantic partner(s), which might involve many occupations such as: dressing, social activities, online dating, meeting someone for coffee, etc. Dating is personally defined, unique to the individual and their values, and imbedded in a socio-cultural context.

The culture that surrounds dating in Ireland is in a state of change with increased choice, multiple avenues to pursue dating (e.g. online dating), and increasing acceptance of different lifestyles, sexual orientations, and gender roles.

As OTs we can appreciate the form, function and meaning of occupations. We can evaluate the underlying skills, strengths, and challenges our clients might have in order to perform the occupation of dating to their satisfaction. Despite research indicating the importance of addressing sexuality (White et al, 1992, Northcott & Chard, 2000), sexuality is often ignored in occupational therapy (Sakellariou & Algado, 2006, p.350).

This poster aims to address this gap in practice and detail how dating can be imbedded in the OT process.

## Person-Environment-Occupation

The PEO model details the “transactive, dynamic relationships that occur when people engage in occupations within given environments over time” (Strong & Gruhl, 2011, p. 33). Occupational performance can be seen as the result of the this dynamic interaction and “refers to the ability to choose, organise, and satisfactorily perform meaningful occupations that are culturally defined and age appropriate (CAOT, 1997, p. 30) Figure 1 details examples of how PEO can be used when working with a client on their dating occupations.

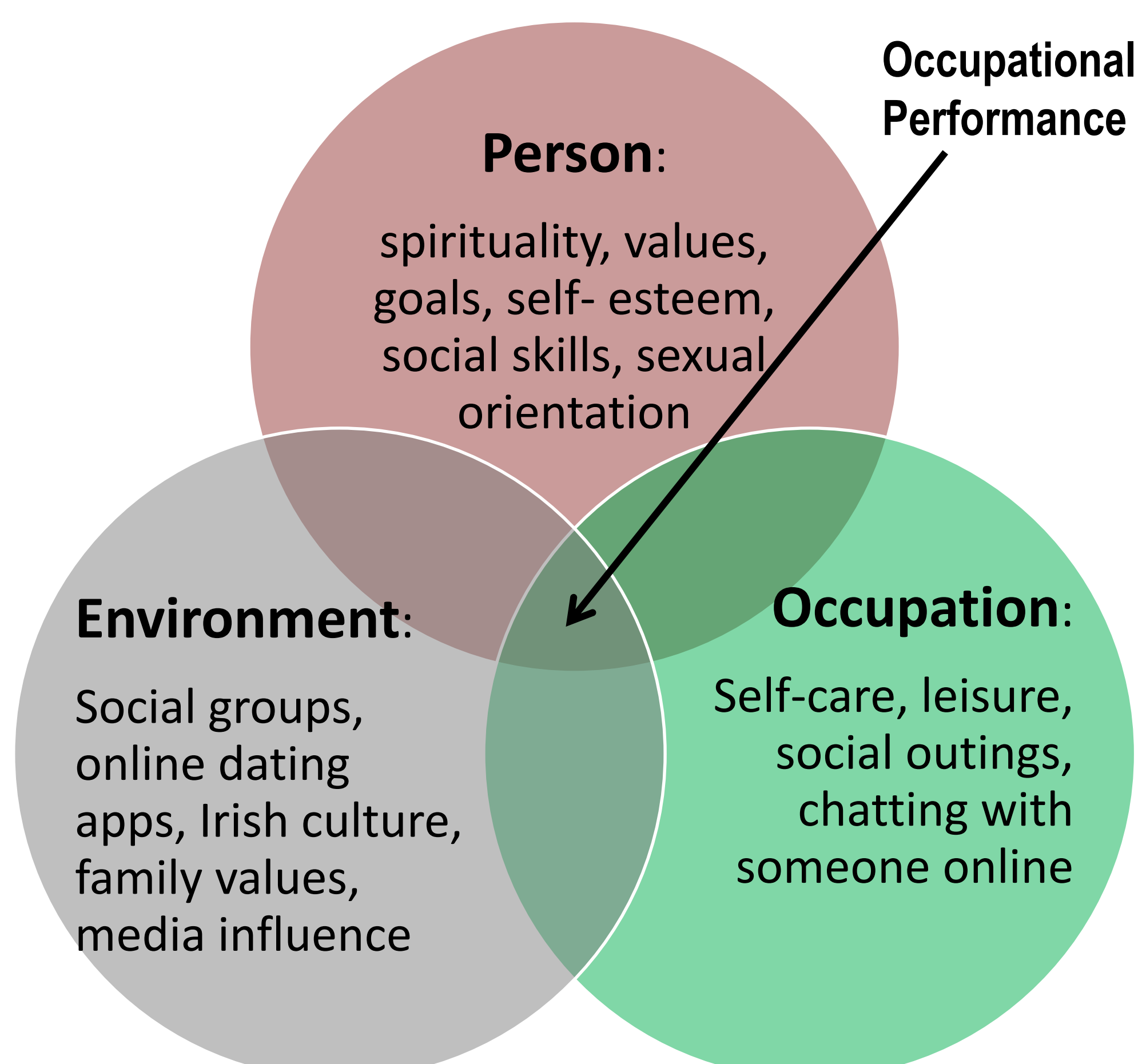
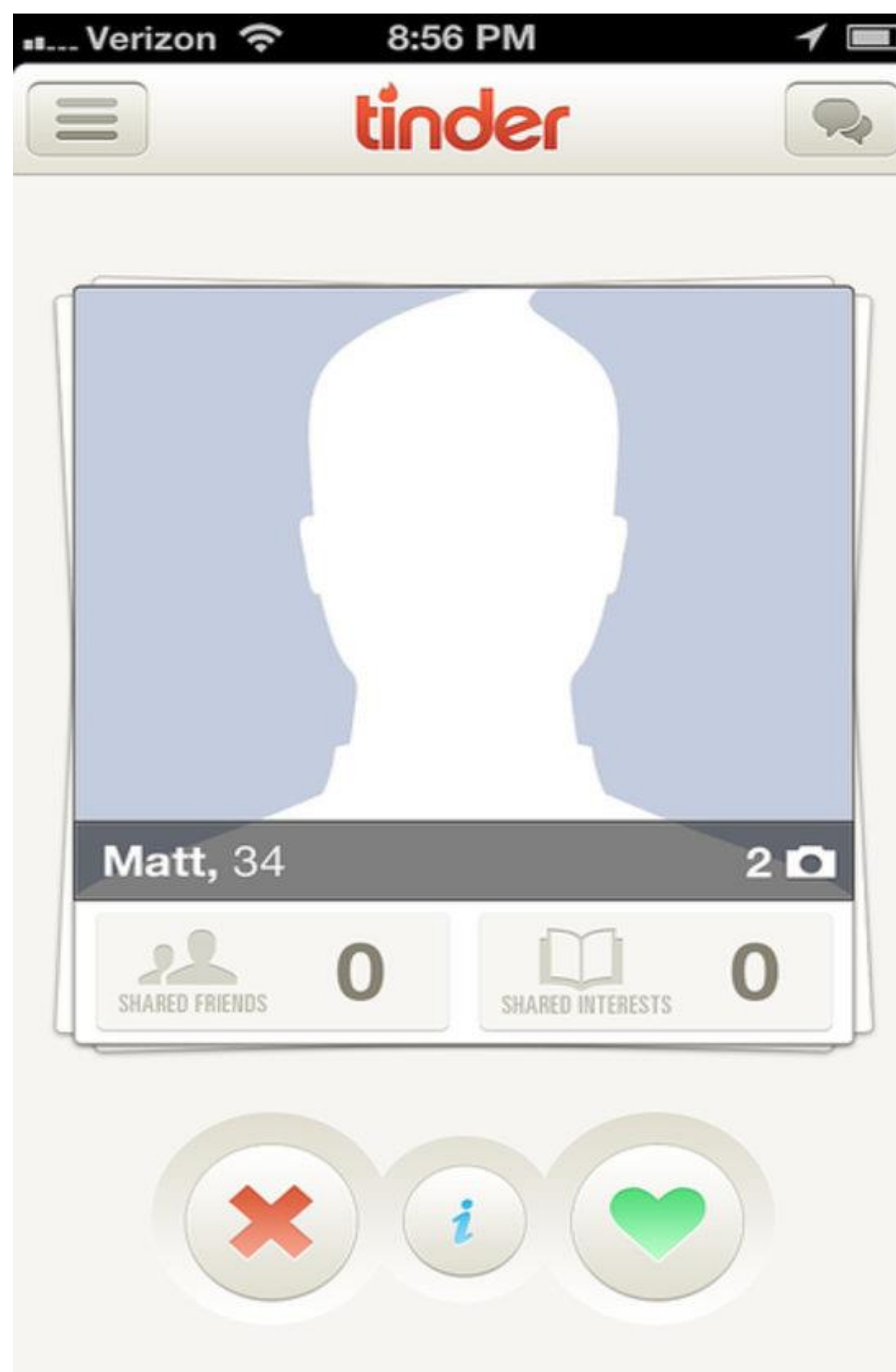


Figure 1: Based on diagram by Law et al

## Case Study: Matt



### Client Occupational Profile:

- Matt is a 34 year old financial analyst living in a suburb of Dublin and would like to have a girlfriend
- Little history of relationships- one significant relationship lasting six months when he was 19.
- Spends a majority of his time working and states that he is often too tired to “go out” or make social plans on the weekends.
- Enjoys golfing but does not golf often and his other occupations are quite solitary: playing video games, watching movies, reading.
- States he can be a “bit shy” and nervous to “approach” women when he is out.
- Many of Matt’s friends have started to get married and have families, leaving him with less friends to go out with socially to meet women.
- Started online dating in the past 4 months, with 3 dates thus far.
- Would like to improve on his communication skills while chatting online and would like help on how to go from online to offline and actually ask them out on a date.
- Matt shared that when he does meet someone from an online site, she doesn’t know where to take them or which places/ activities might make a good date.

### OT Process:

- Matt completed an initial interview questionnaire over email and sent to the OT in advance of their meeting.
- During the first session in a hotel lobby over coffee, Matt and the OT discussed his responses to the questionnaire and clarified Matt’s goals and priorities.
- The OT observed that he was friendly with great sense of humour and positive social skills.

### Long Term Goals:

1. Matt will identify and practice online and offline conversation skills to improve communication, with minimal assistance from OT.
2. Matt will research and visit new venues/ activities for dating to improve social occupations, w/ moderate assistance from OT.
3. Matt will identify one new leisure occupation to engage in to improve lifestyle balance, independently.

### Intervention:

- 1<sup>st</sup> Session: Matt researched online about places he could take a potential date. The OT prompted Matt to look for activities or environments that provided unique interactions. Matt discovered a wine bar that had an interactive wine tasting machine that would be a fun activity, as well as a coffee shop with a good atmosphere, a reasonably priced dinner venue, and a bowling ally (Goal 2)
- 2<sup>nd</sup> session: Matt and the OT visited the different venues as part of the session (Goal 2). While at the venues, Matt and the OT discussed strategies to improve conversations on and offline (Goal 1). Matt identified powerful questions that he could ask that related more to the client’s values and traits he wanted in a potential partner. As a take home goal to work on lifestyle balance, Matt decided to look into Meetup.com for social activities happening in the community. He hoped this might spark an interest in a new leisure pursuit (Goal 3).

## OT Process

How to address dating in OT practice:

### Referral:

- Highlight dating as an area on the referral form to OT.
- Communicate the role and scope of an OT to referral partners and multi-disciplinary team so that the most appropriate referral can be made.

### Evaluation:

- Include questions about dating and sexuality in the initial interview or assessment of daily activities.
- If dating is an important issue to the client, the OT could follow up with more questions to gain a more extensive occupational history (e.g. dating history, current social/ leisure occupations, values, environments where the client engages in dating occupations, communication/ social skills, personal dating goals)

### Goal setting:

- Goals surrounding dating must be collaboratively set, client centered, and occupation based.
- Set both short term and long term goals with the client using a COAST and/or SMART format.
- Tools such as the Canadian Occupational Performance Measure (COPM) or Goal Attainment Scale (GAS) might be helpful to set goals with the client.
- Focus goals on client action and activities not on an outcome that might be outside of their control, such as where the focus is on getting a date or relationship (e.g. Instead of: *Client will go on one date a month, independently, to improve engagement in dating occupations*, try to focus on what the client will actually do to achieve this goal. Try: *Client will participate in one new social activity a month, starting conversations with group members, with minimal assistance from OT on communication skills training, to improve social engagement.*

### Intervention:

- The intervention with the client will be dependent on the client’s goal and aims of the sessions.
- Possible interventions might include:
  - Signing up for online dating and creating a profile
  - Practicing initiating conversations (role play or practice talking with new people in a social place)
  - Researching social activities in the community and completing a timetable with social events
  - Addressing self-care and dressing
  - Working on self-esteem and confidence building activities
- The interventions should be client led and use the expertise of the client in the sessions.
- Wherever possible, it is helpful to engage the client in occupations in social environments or where dating might occur (e.g. meeting in a coffee shop or going to a community dance).

### Outcome:

- The focus should be on occupational engagement and/ or improving underlying skills (e.g. social skills).
- Using tools such as the COPM and GAS to re-assess the client’s goals can be helpful to have standardised outcomes.

## Implications for OT Practice

Dating is an occupation that when identified as important to a client, cannot be ignored in OT practice. OT’s in traditional areas can address issues related to dating and sexuality as part of their existing practice. OT’s may also choose to specialise in the occupation of dating, as dating coaches. Dating coaching is a possible role emerging area of practice for OTs and an opportunity to extend practice into a wellness and preventative approach. When someone is struggling with dating and wanting help- they might just “swipe right” (say yes) to OT.

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