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Jordan Mooney
University of North Dakota

Ryan Walter
University of North Dakota

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The Evolution of Occupational Therapy Practice: Life History of Charles H. Christiansen

Ryan Walter, MOTS & Jordan Mooney, MOTS

University of North Dakota

Abstract

The purpose of the project was to gather information about the history and evolution of occupational therapy (OT) practice in North Dakota and Wyoming through life histories of individuals who have been influential in developing OT in these two states. For this particular life history, a semi-structured phone interview was conducted between the student researchers and Dr. Christiansen. The interview was audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim and coded. In addition to the phone interview, a curriculum vitae (CV) and Biosketch were obtained from Dr. Christiansen to appropriately depict the professional life and contributions he has made to the field of occupational therapy. For this research project, the Kawa theoretical model was followed to understand the flow of Dr. Christian's life work and how it fits into the greater scheme of occupational therapy. Through this process, the researchers have created the assertion that Dr. Christiansen's passion and influence in occupational therapy flow from a lifetime of being shaped through experiences and personal interests in the field.

Introduction

This life history of Dr. Charles Christiansen is one of 29 life history interviews, which are a part of a larger project; *Life Histories of Individuals Who Have Been Influential in Developing Occupational Therapy (OT) in North Dakota and Wyoming*. The purpose of the project is to gather information about the history and evolution of occupational therapy practice in North Dakota and Wyoming through life histories of individuals who have been influential in developing OT in these two states.

This study is intended to provide current and future generations of occupational therapists a view of the history and how occupational therapy practice has evolved from its inception to current practice through the views of influential graduates from the University of North Dakota

in both the Grand Forks, ND and Casper, WY locations. It is anticipated that the information and the process of gathering this information will be powerful to past and present students, faculty, and practitioners in the field of occupational therapy and other professionals.

A semi-structured interview with Dr. Christiansen was guided by an interview schedule prepared by the course instructors of OT 458 - *Qualitative Research Methods for Occupational Therapy*. The questions on the interview schedule were designed to be used with all individuals interviewed as part of the larger project. The individual student researchers were allowed to modify or add interview questions as needed for each specific interview.

For the particular life history of Dr. Christiansen, a phone interview was conducted, then recorded, and transcribed verbatim. In addition to a phone interview, a curriculum vitae (CV) as well as a Biosketch was obtained from Dr. Christiansen to appropriately depict the professional life and contributions he has made to the field of occupational therapy.

Literature Review:

The field of occupational therapy underwent major changes in the 1960s and 1970s that broadened its scope and shaped the field's professional identity. In 1964 the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) went under reorganization and expansion which placed emphasis on scientific endeavors in occupational therapy (Christiansen & Haretl, 2014). As a result, the American Occupational Therapy Foundation (AOTF) was established in 1965 to advance science in the field and improve the recognition of the profession. The emphasis of science and theory development led to the emergence of models, theories, and frames of reference of practice and advancement of education to the graduate level (Christiansen & Haretl, 2014).

World events such as World War II led to a mechanistic paradigm in occupational therapy that affected practice into the 1960s (Christiansen & Haretl, 2014). Following the war, practice shifted from holistic-mind-body occupation-based philosophies to bottom-up approaches which focused on underlying dysfunction. The influence of The Vietnam War (1965-1973) coincided with major advancements in innovative hand surgery procedures and upper extremity prosthetics (Yakobina, Yakobina, & Harrison-Weaver, 2008). Advancements in surgical techniques required the need for specialization in hand rehabilitation for occupational therapy.

The needs of soldiers also caused medicine to expand its knowledge base to include both physical and mental disabilities (Reed & Peters, 2007). During this time, medicine's relationship with occupational therapy began to shift from prescription to referral, allowing occupational therapy the autonomy to develop professionally and return to its focus on occupation.

The time period was characterized by influential theorists and visionaries such as Mary Reilly, Gail Fiddler, Ann Mosey, Lorna Jean King, Claudia Allen, and Elizabeth Yerxa. These individuals were instrumental in shaping the practice of occupational therapy through applied theory and frames of reference. In addition, laws governing health care, such as Medicare and Medicaid, and educational services increased public access and led to the expansion practice settings in the field (Christiansen & Haretl, 2014).

Mary Reilly developed the frame of reference known as occupational behavior while serving as the chief of the Rehabilitation Department at the Neuropsychiatric Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles (Christiansen & Haretl, 2014). The occupational behavior frame of reference took a holistic view of humans in their daily occupations. Reilly challenged the field to reclaim its roots in occupation, emphasizing occupation as being of paramount importance (Christiansen & Haretl, 2014). In 1966, Yerxa asserted the need for occupational

therapy to produce research and helped to develop the academic field of occupational science as a foundation for practice.

Theory:

The Kawa Model was used to guide the research process. The Kawa Model uses the metaphor of a river and its elements to describe one's life journey (Teoh & Iwama, 2015). The river itself is used to describe a person's life history. Cross-sections of the river can be used to describe different periods of time in a person's life. Examination of each cross-section reveals different arrangements of elements in the river, or aspects of life. Under this model, the purpose of occupational therapy is to facilitate balance in the life flow in all aspects of the river. Water is the element used to describe life energy or life flow and the elements, rocks and driftwood, provide a metaphor for life circumstances and personal attributes (Turpin & Iwama, 2011). In this study, the Kawa model was the lens used to understand the life history of Dr. Christiansen within the wider evolution of occupational therapy practice.

Description of the participant:

Dr. Charles Christiansen began his career in occupational therapy after graduating from the University of North Dakota in 1970 with a special interest in mental health practice within OT. He then went on to earn his master's degree in counseling psychology from Ball State University and a doctorate degree in educational administration from the University of Houston. In addition, he has completed a postdoctoral residency with Baylor College of Medicine.

Throughout the course of his career, Dr. Christiansen has transitioned from many roles. These transitions include direct patient care in mental health settings such as a state hospital in Michigan, doing service in the United States military, and entering the world of academics. In

academics, Dr. Christiansen was an instructor of occupational therapy at Texas Woman's University, University of Texas School of Allied Health Sciences at Galveston, The University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio, and an adjunct professor at Thomas Cook University in Queensland, Australia.

In addition to being a professor, he has also held higher leadership roles in academics. These leadership roles include: Dean, University Chief Academic Officer, and Chair of the Academic Executive Council at the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston, Texas (2004-2006); Professor and Chairman of the Department of Occupational Therapy at the University of Texas at San Antonio (1983-1988); Professor and Director of the School of Rehabilitation Sciences at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada (1988-1993); and Vice-Provost for Health Sciences at The University of Minnesota Twin Cities and Rochester (2006-2008).

Dr. Christiansen currently serves on the board of directors of *Tasks Unlimited Inc.*, a supported employment program for persons with mental illness and disability, and the National Advisory Committee for long-term services and supports for Anthem, Inc., one of the United States' largest healthcare insurers. In addition, he currently is the Principal and Founder of a consulting group called StoryCrafting, Inc., which specializes in individual and organizational transitioning.

Through the many accolades, contributions, and positions held within the field of occupational therapy; Dr. Christiansen's prowess in this field has become clear. Some of his most honorable distinctions throughout his journey include his Eleanor Clarke Slagle lecture titled *Occupation as Identity* (1999), Chief Executive Officer and Director of the American Occupational Therapy Foundation (AOTF) (2008-2015), and being a prolific theorist; including

his role of lead contributor to the Person-Environment-Occupation-Participation practice model. In addition, he has been identified as one of the 100 most influential persons in the history of the occupational therapy profession. He was the founding editor of the scientific journal *OTJR: Occupation, Participation, and Health* which is now in its 31st year of publication. Furthermore, he is a senior editor and contributor to 12 academic books, and has published over 100 articles and chapters which have been cited in publications over 2,000 times.

Methodology:

For the particular life history of Dr. Christiansen, a semi-structured phone interview lasting one hour and 36 minutes was conducted between the student researchers and Dr. Christiansen. It was audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and coded. In addition to the phone interview, a curriculum vitae as well as a Biosketch was obtained from Dr. Christiansen to appropriately depict the professional life and contributions he has made to the field of occupational therapy. This was a qualitative research study that utilized a life history approach to allow for the focus to be on Dr. Christiansen's particular involvement in the evolution of occupational therapy practice. This research study uses the Kawa theoretical model as a guide to direct the process. This model uses the metaphor of a river and its elements to describe one's life journey. Dr. Christiansen was assigned to the student researchers from a larger list developed by the course instructors which was collected via purposive sampling. IRB approval was obtained through the University of North Dakota and signed informed consent was collected from Dr. Christiansen.

In order to ensure trustworthiness throughout this study, multiple courses of action were taken. First, the recording of the interview was transcribed verbatim. When coding the interview, the researchers immersed themselves into the data by reading the transcription multiple times in

order to memo subjective thoughts to inspire a thorough literature review. The coding and memoing process was done independently between the two researchers before collaboration to ensure strong investigator triangulation. In addition, reflexive journaling was done by each researcher to incorporate principles of debriefing throughout the steps of the research project.

Data Analysis

Codes were identified as key-words and phrases present throughout the interview. Initial analysis involved student researchers individually examining the transcription line-by-line in order to identify codes. Each researcher took reflective memos on the data. To be included, codes had to be reoccurring and evident in both researchers' analysis. Codes were eliminated if they were not present in both sets of the initial analysis or were not recurring in the transcription. Triangulation involved researchers comparing memos and codes gathered to determine if inclusion criteria had been met. Initial analysis resulted in 58 codes, however, after the researchers compared their coding, 27 codes were identified. Comparison between data sources improved credibility and ensured pertinence to Dr. Christiansen's life.

Reflective notes and discussion between researchers resulted in the organization of codes into categories reflecting potential themes. Categorization was guided by grouping recurring codes that seemed to influence flow in Dr. Christiansen's journey. The coalescence of codes resulted in the emergence of three categories: *lifelong development*, *following interests*, and *perspectives and values*. Findings were substantiated by consensus between researchers regarding the categorization of codes. The names of categories we also agreed upon in reflecting on the nature and influence of codes identified in the life history of Dr. Christiansen.

Through the categories, themes emerged which were consistent with the codes, life history transcription, and researcher memos. Themes were stated as follows: for lifelong development: *Personal and professional experiences have allowed Dr. Christiansen to continually develop and grow throughout in his career and understanding occupational therapy as a lifelong development process has been instrumental to professional development of Dr. Christiansen*; following interests: *Taking calculated risks has allowed Dr. Christiansen to advance his career and occupational therapy has provided Dr. Christiansen with opportunities to follow his interests*; and lastly, perspectives and Values: *Occupational therapy has shaped the way Dr. Christiansen views the world and Occupational therapy is a professional calling where therapists are custodians of meaning*, (see appendix).

Results

The Kawa model was used as a guide for directing data analysis. Themes emerging from the research reflect the influences (elements) that have shaped Dr. Christiansen's path from the past to his present roles in occupational therapy. These themes intersect with cross-sections within the wider banks of occupational therapy practice. Dr. Christiansen's experiences and shifts within in practice culminate to reveal the evolution of the field.

Theme one: Taking calculated risks has allowed Dr. Christiansen to advance his career

Dr. Christensen highlighted several examples in his personal journey where he was presented with the opportunity to take risks. One of the most important turning points he identified was running for class vice president in high school. Dr. Christiansen identified it the most courageous thing he had done up to that point in his life and credits the experience for giving him the confidence to attend graduate school.

It was a major turning point [...] nothing ever happens to you unless you take risks, calculated risks, not some foolish things. Line your ducks up and give it your best shot. [...] You've got to show up. You've got to take a chance. If you do your homework, then maybe it will work out.

Dr. Christiansen would go on to take many calculated risks in his career.

Theme two: Personal and professional experiences have allowed Dr. Christiansen to continually develop and grow throughout in his career

Throughout his life and career, Dr. Christensen has approached changes in his path as opportunities. He maintains the positive perspective that these opportunities, both successes and challenges, have allowed him to grow and progress as a human being.

Then there were lots of forks in the road that came along, opportunities. I guess you'd call them opportunities where you can say continue to have the tranquility and the assurance and whatever, the piece of mind of just continuing to do what you're doing or whatever and take the safe route or you can say, "Well, maybe I'll learn something and maybe I'll grow. What's the downside if I'm not successful? I still have what I have. As long as I'm not risking what I have, go ahead and take a chance on stuff."

Theme three: Understanding occupational therapy as a lifelong development process has been instrumental to professional development of Dr. Christiansen

After working as a therapist for a couple years, Dr. Christiansen read Dr. Llorens' Slagle Lecture on human development in AJOT. He identifies her contribution as what sparked him to start thinking about occupational therapy in a much broader conceptual and theoretical way.

Dr. Llorens basically provided a conceptual roadmap for understanding occupational therapy as a lifelong developmental process. [...] I began myself thinking, daring to think a little bit conceptually about occupational therapy and how road maps can be created. That was what led to in a roundabout way a collaboration that I had with Carolyn Baum and then later, Julie Bass, in formulating what has come to be known as the Person-Environment Occupation Performance Model.

In his own Slagle Lecture, Dr. Christensen shared his appreciation for how people create their lives and identities in and through occupation (Christiansen, 1999)..

Theme four: Occupational therapy has provided Dr. Christiansen with opportunities to follow his interests

When asked about how he had chosen his career path, Dr. Christiansen shared that it was in following opportunities that matched his interests.

It was just opportunity and following my nose and just thinking what would make sense, what would build on what I had already learned and my previous experience and give me some degrees of freedom in terms of options downstream. Those were really the primary considerations I think at the time. I guess I was a bit of a risk taker but sometimes you follow your instincts. I know I was fortunate because some things worked out. They don't always work out, and they haven't always worked out in my life, but those early choices and decisions worked out pretty well, overall.

Theme five: Occupational therapy has shaped the way Dr. Christiansen views the world

When Dr. Christiansen began to consider career options, it was the alignment his values and interests that led him to study occupational therapy. The field has significantly impacted and shaped his view of the world since that time.

What has being an OT meant to me? It's been my life's work. It frames the way I look at my life and the way I think about the world, so it's really hard for me to imagine what life would be like had I not stumbled onto occupational therapy pretty early in my life.

Theme six: Occupational therapy is a professional calling where therapists are custodians of meaning

Dr. Christiansen believes strongly that occupational therapy as a profession has its first obligation to the person being served in the delivery of services. He views occupational therapy as a calling that allow people to create meaning in their lives.

[...] the most important thing we [occupational therapists] do is that we are custodians of meaning because we have the capacity of enabling people to do the things that allow them to create meaning in their lives. To be a custodian, a safe-keeper of meaning, is to me such an important and awe-inspiring responsibility that anybody who takes that seriously can't come to any other conclusion but by golly, this better be a calling because I have tremendous responsibility.

By researching the contributions Dr. Charles Christiansen has made to the field of occupational therapy via direct interview and information provided through his curriculum vitae and Biosketch; the student researchers have formulated the assertion that Dr. Christiansen's passion and influence in occupational therapy flow from a lifetime of being shaped through experiences and interests in the field.

Discussion/ Conclusions:

As Charles Christiansen began his schooling in 1965, there was reshaping occurring in the profession on the national level. The AOTF was organized to emphasize evidence-based practice and further improve recognition of the profession as a whole (Christiansen & Haretl, 2014). Dr. Christiansen has always placed value in research. He decided to apply to the University of North Dakota's school of occupational therapy sight unseen because he was most impressed with the credentials held by the department's chair. The occupational therapy's chairperson held a PhD and was one of the few who possessed these credentials working on research in OT during this time period. In addition to the calling for evidenced-based medicine in the field of OT, there were many happenings outside the realm of OT that had direct effects on the profession.

The Vietnam War from 1965 to 1973 created a shift in what types of occupational therapy services were needed. Because Dr. Christiansen was in the service, he was able to experience the shifting need first hand. He worked in a medical center at Scott Air Force Base outside of St. Louis, MI where he was assigned to work in the pulmonary disease department. During this time, he worked with many individuals who had contracted tuberculosis (TB) while in Vietnam. As TB was nearly eradicated in the United States at this time, how to treat TB was not taught in schools. In addition to working with individuals with TB at Scott Air Force Base, he was exposed to OT's role in orthopedics, general medicine, surgery, problem pregnancies, and children with learning disabilities and behavioral problems while he was stationed in Lakenheath, England. Because of the array of experiences he had within the Air Force; he saw OT through a wider lens, and began seeing the big-picture, distinct value of occupational therapy.

After fulfilling his duty in the Air Force, Dr. Christiansen began further exploring his passion for psychiatry and mental health. He continued his education and earned a master's in counseling psychology and a doctorate in higher education and administration. After completing his schooling he took on a prominent and expanding role in academia, where he is still today

As previously mentioned, the Kawa theoretical model was used to guide the process of this qualitative, life history study. More specifically, the life of Dr. Christiansen represents the metaphorical river in this model. Additional structures of this model include the water, river banks, rocks, and driftwood (Turpin & Iwama, 2011). For Dr. Christiansen, the water is represented by his specific priorities throughout his life which are represented by categories in this study. These emerging categories in the life of Dr. Christiansen are lifelong development, following interests, and personal perspectives and values. Additionally, his early choices, positive outlook, and experience in the Air Force are considered driftwood or influencing factors throughout his life. Dr. Christiansen's many successes in his career were not because of his lack of struggles, but how he has overcome those struggles. Dr. Christiansen described not getting accepted for the position of presidency at the University of North Dakota as a challenge. However, he did everything in his power to find out what he could have done to become a better, and more competitive candidate. His attitude during a time of failure, highlights his overall character, strong leadership characteristics, and resilience throughout his career.

Overall, the life history project of Dr. Charles Christensen has expanded the professional body of knowledge that is both useful and relevant in understanding the history of the practice of occupational therapy. By researching the contributions Dr. Charles Christiansen has made to the field of occupational therapy via direct interview and information provided through his curriculum vitae and Biosketch; the student researchers have formulated the assertion that Dr.

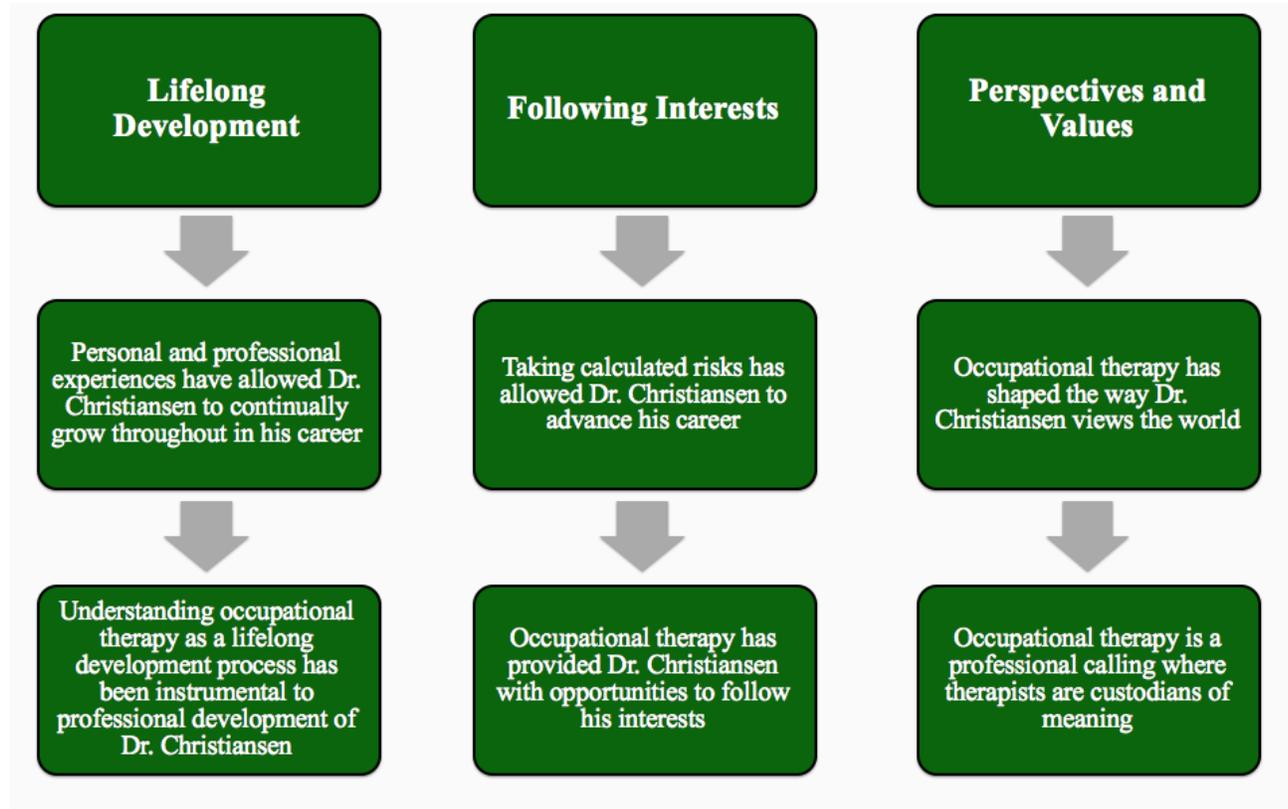
Christiansen's passion and influence in occupational therapy flow from a lifetime of being shaped through experiences and interests in the field.

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Life History Dr. Charles H. Christiansen
Jordan Mooney, MOTS and Ryan Walter, MOTS



Assertion: Dr. Charles Christiansen’s passion and influence in occupational therapy flow from a lifetime of being shaped through experiences and interests throughout the profession.