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Maddi Buscho  
University of North Dakota

Emma Lee  
University of North Dakota

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Evolution of Occupational Therapy Practice: Life History of Nancy Rentfrow

Maddi Buscho, MOTS & Emma Lee, MOTS

University of North Dakota
Abstract

A life history approach to qualitative research allows for an in-depth review of a participant's career and life turning points. The authors of the following study sought to examine the life and career of Nancy Rentfrow, a retired occupational therapist who practiced in North Dakota. A semi-structured interview was conducted and transcribed, and codes, categories, and themes were created, which led to a final assertion. The researchers found that social supports and her practice in industry rehabilitation shaped Nancy’s professional identity and led to the creation of her private practice, which was the hallmark of her career.

Introduction

This life history is one of 29 life history interviews which are 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 this project is 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. It is anticipated that the life history process will be a powerful way to gather this information. The study took place at the University of North Dakota Medicine and Health Sciences building and the interview was conducted using video conferencing. Participants were 29 current or former occupational therapists who at one time practiced in North Dakota or Wyoming and who are considered influential in developing the practice in those states. Overall, this study is intended to provide current and future generations of occupational therapists a view of history and how occupational therapy practice has evolved from its inception to current practice in North Dakota and Wyoming.

Literature Review
Based on the participant’s time in practice, a literature review was completed comparing the shifts in practice with her personal turning points. The first decade of Nancy’s career was marked by a shift in professional identity as occupational therapy moved from depending on other professions for visibility to becoming a stand-alone practice in certain areas (Reed & Peters, 2008). In 1983, North Dakota finalized the requirement for state licensure (UND Special Collections – State Agencies – Board of Occupational Therapy Practice), beginning to change the structure of the profession as well as the requirements for therapists. Despite initial concerns, this move to state licensure enhanced occupational therapy’s visibility, by allowing for recognition by private payers, improving recognition by public programs, and ultimately creating an official legal definition of occupational therapy (Reed & Peters, 2008).

As the occupational therapy profession was determining its identity, several specialty areas began to emerge, including industrial, or work, rehabilitation. At this time, the definition of work as it related to occupational therapy was lacking and needed to be focused more on occupation or competency in human performance to help solidify the profession’s role in work (Harvey-Krefting, 1985). Job analysis became an important part of work rehabilitation. During the 1990s, job analysis within occupational therapy was primarily focused on assisting individuals with disabilities in obtaining or fitting better into a job, but more evidence was needed at that time to support the use of job analysis in other arenas, as well as other approaches to complete job analysis (Lysaght, 1997). For industry rehabilitation, on-site job analysis and therapy seems to currently be used less than clients visiting clinics to receive services, due to increased costs. As therapists become more familiar with a particular industry’s job requirements and environment, they complete fewer on-site visits and analyses (Lysaght, 2004). These
changes in practice over time create a timeline for understanding our participant’s significant career turning points.

**Theory**

The research process was guided by the Kawa model, which allowed for an in-depth look at turning points throughout the participant’s career as well as factors that impacted her success. The Kawa model is based on the metaphor of a river and its elements, with the river water representing the life source or energy of life and can refer to an individual person or group (Turpin & Iwama, 2011). As context shapes a person’s life, the context of the river influences its shape and flow. The river walls and floor represent the social and physical environments that surround a person. The rocks found in a river represent life circumstances that may be challenges and can impede life flow based on their shape and size, just as rocks of various shapes and sizes have different impacts on the flow of water. Driftwood represents personal attributes and resources that can positively or negatively affect a person’s circumstances. The final element of the model is the space between obstructions, where the water or life energy can flow. This element represents the ability to participate in life and holds the idea that spaces can be made larger by moving or decreasing the sizes of the other river elements to improve participation and engagement in life occupations (Turpin & Iwama, 2011).

The idea of the river and its elements from the Kawa model guided the interview process by focusing on how the participant’s personal attributes, context, and challenges impacted her practice and personal and professional growth over the course of her career. It also impacted the data analysis process by allowing for the creation of themes and assertions that focused on significant turning points that impacted her career and changed how her life flowed. The Kawa
model ultimately allowed the researchers to tell the participant’s rich story of her occupational therapy career.

**Description of Participant**

Through a semi-structured interview and reviewing Nancy’s detailed curriculum vitae (CV), the researchers were able to discover the major turning points, achievements, and opportunities she has had throughout her life. Nancy strengthened her passion and knowledge in the field of occupational therapy as she began her schooling at the University of North Dakota. Following her years of schooling, Nancy began her career as an occupational therapist working in Chicago, IL where she worked at Lutheran General Hospital on the adult psychiatric unit. Continuing her career in Chicago, she moved to work for a Low Back and Pain Program where she was able to develop new skills and gain more knowledge in the area of chronic pain.

While Nancy was exploring multiple work areas to find her niche, she took a job for a private practice performing on-site job analysis in the city of Chicago, which is where her love for job analysis and employer-worker relations began. Following her time in Chicago, Nancy moved back to North Dakota where she later became an instructor and guest lecturer in the Occupational and Physical Therapy curriculum at the University of North Dakota for thirteen years. Her passion towards worker-employer relations shined through as she incorporated a focus on industry rehabilitation into her teaching curriculum during her time as a professor.

While being an instructor was important to Nancy as she was able to teach in about an area in occupational therapy that she loved, a major turning point in Nancy’s life was the development of a private practice where she provided rehabilitation to individuals in the work force. Through this, she was able to strengthen her knowledge and fulfill her passion as she continued to serve workers and employers by providing them medical case management and
vocational rehabilitation. During her time in her private practice, Nancy was awarded North Dakota Occupational Therapist of the Year as her skills and passion were evident to those around her. In her last years as a practicing OT, Nancy worked as a medical care manager for the railroad industry, finishing her career in the work environment where she found her niche as an OT.

**Methodology**

The study completed was qualitative and researchers used a life history approach to elicit turning points within the participant’s career. This design allowed for the focus to be on how the participant was involved in the evolution of occupational therapy practice in North Dakota. The participant was assigned from a list developed by the Project Directors through a purposive sampling method. There were no specific gatekeeper issues as initial contact was made by Project Directors. Informed consent was provided to and completed by the participant.

The semi-structured interview was guided by an interview schedule prepared by the Project Directors; the questions on the interview schedule were designed to be used with all the individuals interviewed as part of the larger project. The researchers were allowed to modify or add interview questions as needed for each specific interview.

Access to the participant was gained through the Project Directors, as they had previously been in contact with the participant who agreed to be the subject of research. The data collection process involved requesting the participant’s CV over email and reviewing it prior to the interview. Collection and review of background data took approximately 30 minutes. The interview itself was completed using a semi-structured interview schedule and allowed for gathering qualitative data about the participant’s life history related to her OT career. The
interview was completed in 90 minutes and took place over video conference between the researchers in Grand Forks, ND and the participant in her home in Erie, CO.

Trustworthiness was established using verbatim transcription while memoing subjective insights and thoughts of the researchers regarding the interview. Two researchers completed the coding process, allowing for elimination of bias in coding and data analysis. Peer reviews of the transcription and coding process were used to eliminate errors and bias. Cross-checking data with the participant’s CV provided a form of member-checking. Keeping a reflexive journal throughout the process tracked the researcher's’ thoughts and insights and allowed for exploration and elimination of biases.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process involved the interview being audiotaped and transcribed verbatim, after which codes were created and collapsed into categories and themes. Through the coding process, the researchers developed 19 unique codes that were further developed into themes to gain a clearer understanding of Nancy’s turning points and accomplishments. During the transcription process, the researchers included subjective notes regarding personal thoughts, feelings, and assumptions. Data saturation was not reached due to only one interview and one participant. Trustworthiness was established using verbatim transcription, peer reviews, two researchers coding, cross-checking data with the participant’s CV and keeping a reflexive journal throughout the research process. Instructors at the University of North Dakota that aided the researchers throughout the process also helped to complete the data analysis.

As mentioned above, 19 unique codes emerged and are included in the visual data display (see appendix). The codes were grouped based on similarity in topic and relation to Nancy’s life which were further developed into themes. Exclusion criteria included information that was not
relevant to the completion of the project and information that was only brought up briefly. Inclusion criteria included information that contributed to the development of the life history and was emphasized multiple times throughout the interview.

The interview and data analysis process was guided by the Kawa model, allowing for an in-depth look at the participant’s career and life turning points, and factors that promoted and impeded progress. The data analysis process and presentation of findings looked at Nancy’s life both personally and professionally to gain a deeper, more rich understanding of her life, which is an emphasis of the Kawa model.

**Findings**

Throughout Nancy’s career, she had numerous opportunities leading to skill development and professional accomplishments that guided her to be a successful occupational therapist. Her passion for the profession and expertise in detailed job analysis aided her in launching her own private practice where she was able to thrive by serving the employer/worker population. The themes outlined below give a brief look into the three major ideas that emerged throughout the interview and detailed data analysis.

*Category One: Time in Practice*

The first category that emerged was Nancy’s time in practice which encompassed codes such as tools of practice, the meaning of occupational therapy, changes in practice, occupational therapy skills, personal priorities, work history, accomplishments, private practice, and the importance of Certified Occupational Therapy Assistants (COTAs). The first theme that emerged in this category was her time in practice. Through this, Nancy gathered meaning and skills that led to many of her personal accomplishments as an occupational therapist. It also highlights the second theme, one of the major turning points in her career; her private practice in job
rehabilitation. Nancy humbly emphasized, “I think I steadily improved my skills and developed myself to the point where my private practice was, for me it was the crowning point of my career.” Nancy’s passion for the worker-employer population was apparent throughout her time in her private practice, which also carried over to her educational experiences as an instructor.

Category Two: Educational Experiences

The second emerging category is her education, which incorporated codes including the OT program, her teaching career, her switch from physical therapy (PT) to OT, and the importance of occupational and physical therapy collaboration. During the interview, Nancy stated that OT and PT collaboration “is probably one of the most important things that can happen in a rehab setting...the most important thing of all.” While Nancy viewed OT and PT collaboration as extremely important, she also highlighted the importance of work environments and rehabilitation in her teaching career. During her time as an instructor at the University of North Dakota, Nancy stated, “the curriculum I taught was very reflective of my career. It was you know the role of occupational therapists in, in the work environment. So I basically developed a curriculum based on my career up to that point.”

Category Three: The Importance of Environment

The importance of Nancy’s environment was a final category that emerged throughout the coding process, which included codes such as physical environment, value systems, support systems, opportunities for OT, and cultural context. As Nancy moved from North Dakota to Chicago and then back to North Dakota, she realized the impact that both her physical and social contexts had on her personal and professional self. She supports this by stating, “my circle of professional friends I had in Grand Forks in the OT community, at the University of North
Dakota, just kept supporting me as a support group” which in turn, helped her to grow both personally and professionally.

While social supports played a major role, Nancy also emphasized the impact of the differing value systems in Chicago versus North Dakota. She noted “there was more commonality in the values in Grand Forks. Whereas in Chicago, we're dealing with different ethnic groups, and the values, of course, are going to be different with each one of those groups.”

As there were differing value systems in Chicago, Nancy noted that her professional self was challenged by having to be more open-minded with the clients that she worked with to provide them with best practice.

The created categories and themes have led to a final assertion that for Nancy, personal and professional social supports, and work in industry rehabilitation shaped her professional identity and led to her success in creating her private practice, which was the hallmark of her career.

**Discussion**

Nancy’s personal and professional social supports, and work in industry rehabilitation shaped her professional identity and led to her success in creating her private practice, which was the hallmark of her career. Serving as an occupational therapist for many years working with varying populations and in multiple settings, Nancy was able to see the major turning points in occupational therapy as a profession. In 1983, as North Dakota finalized the requirement for state licensure (UND Special Collections–State Agencies–Board of Occupational Therapy Practice), Nancy moved from Chicago, IL to begin her practice in North Dakota as an assistant director of occupational therapy at the Medical Center Rehabilitation Hospital in Grand Forks. The Kawa Model (Turpin & Iwama, 2011) would suggest, as her physical context changed from Chicago to
Grand Forks, her professional identity was challenged and eventually strengthened (Turpin & Iwama, 2011). Her professional identity was enhanced as she became a licensed practitioner. Though requirements changed for Nancy as a licensed practitioner, the licensing led to a greater visibility for OT and allowed for private payers, which impacted Nancy’s future career when she began her private practice.

As a shift in professional identity occurred at the start of her career (Reed & Peters, 2008), the ability for occupational therapy to be a stand-alone practice enabled Nancy to later start her own private practice. Through the lens of the Kawa model, support from her social context during her time as a practitioner and educator in North Dakota also enhanced Nancy’s life flow, ultimately leading to her own private practice providing rehabilitation to individuals in the work force.

Another turning point in Nancy’s career involved the use of on-site job analysis within the work environment. Although on-site job analysis seems to be used less due to increased costs and practitioner familiarity (Lysaght, 2004), Nancy stressed the importance of using the client’s natural environment to provide the best services to get them back to work. This passion for rehabilitation within the work environment carried over into her teaching career, as it was reflected in the courses she taught. Nancy’s personal attributes, as emphasized in the Kawa model, included her passion for and knowledge of industry rehabilitation. These attributes shaped the later part of her career and helped also to shape the lives of future therapists. Overall, Nancy’s time as an occupational therapist saw several shifts in the profession, which challenged her career but ultimately enhanced her professional identity. Ultimately, Nancy’s personal and professional social supports, and work in industry rehabilitation shaped her professional identity and led to her success in creating her private practice, which was the hallmark of her career.
The life history of Nancy Rentfrow gives insight into the personal and professional developments of occupational therapists who influenced the profession in North Dakota. This product will contribute to the body of literature regarding how occupational therapy has changed over time and gives awareness of possible future directions for the profession.
References


Life History of Nancy Rentfrow
Emma Lee, OTS & Maddi Buscho, OTS

**Education:**
- OT program
- Teaching
- Unaware of change
- Switch to OT
- OT/PT collaboration

**Time in Practice:**
- Tools of practice
- Meaning of OT
- OT skills
- Change in Practice
- Priorities
- Work history
- Importance of COTAs
- Accomplishments
- Private practice

**Environments:**
- Physical environment
- Value systems
- Support Systems
- Opportunities for OT
- Cultural context

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**Themes**

**Education:**
- Importance of OT/PT collaboration
- Emphasized work environments in teaching career

**Time in Practice:**
- Private practice in job rehabilitation was a hallmark of career
- Gathered meaning and skills throughout career that led to many accomplishments

**Environments:**
- Support systems influenced her practice's success
- Context influenced both her personal and professional identity

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**Assertion:**
For Nancy, personal and professional social supports, and work in industry rehabilitation shaped her professional identity and led to her success in creating her private practice, which was the hallmark of her career.