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A Piece of Evolution of Occupational Therapy in North Dakota: A Life History of Rhoda

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study 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. An in-depth over the phone interview with the selected participant, Rhoda Erhardt, as well as her curriculum vitae (CV), was used to gather information. Themes created to symbolize Rhoda's life history include educational experience that began her career, accomplishments and involvement, personal motivation that drove her passion, and occupational therapy over time. These themes highlight the important aspects that led to Rhoda's contributions to the OT profession. By staying true to her personal motivations, Rhoda Erhardt was able to use her education and her life experiences to accomplish various achievements and get involved in the field of occupational therapy as it grew and developed over time.

Introduction

This life history 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 in North Dakota and Wyoming. The purpose of the project is to gather information about the history and evolution of 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. By using a life history approach, this study focused on the participant, Rhoda Erhardt's, involvement in the evolution of OT practice. This study intends to provide current and future generations of occupational therapists with a view of the history and how OT practice has evolved from its inception to current practice in North Dakota and Wyoming. Rhoda Erhardt is a well known practitioner in

the state of North Dakota and has achieved many accomplishments throughout the years. In order to gather information about her experiences as an occupational therapist, the researchers conducted an over the phone interview with Rhoda.

Description of the Participant

Rhoda Erhardt is an accomplished occupational therapist who has an extensive amount of achievements in the field of OT. Rhoda graduated from the University of Illinois in 1954 and began her career working as a commissioned officer in the women's medical specialist corps. Once Rhoda got married and started having children, she took ten years off of her practice to raise her family. When she was ready to return to work, there were not many jobs available during that time. Therefore, she took the time to continue her education at the North Dakota State University getting a degree in child development and family relations. She then began spending time volunteering around various hospitals in the OT department and then eventually started her own program called the Easter Seals Mobile Therapy Unit in Fargo, ND. Her achievements include writing books, articles, and chapters, as well as creating assessments and instructional videos, editing and publishing books, and giving presentations on various different topics. Her primary area of practice throughout her career has been in pediatrics; however, she has experience in many other areas as well. Some of the notable employment positions she has held include Chief of OT at a burn center in Texas, Chief of pediatric therapy in Colorado, owner of her own Erhardt Developmental Products, and the Director of the Easter Seals Mobile Therapy Unit in Fargo, North Dakota, a program that she created herself. In addition to having an extensive amount of experience and influence in the field of OT, she has also been involved in many other areas of the community as well. A few examples of these include her involvement in Maplewood Park and Recreation Commission, United Way of Cass-Clay Allocation Review

Panel, and the ND State Advisory Board for Preschool Handicapped (Personal curriculum vitae, received 2017, October 11).

Literature Review

Historically, the profession of OT experienced a time of change throughout the 1950s. Because there were many turning points that happened during this decade, it is important to see how these changes have affected the profession today. In 1953, the Medical Advisory Committee was formed to contribute medical input to the profession (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2017). The purpose of this committee was to provide information about medicine as a source of information that is used to guide the profession. During this time the field of OT shifted from using arts and crafts as a means for intervention to a method focused on implementing rehabilitation techniques with medicine as a guide (Christiansen & Haertl, 2014). With this rehabilitation shift in focus, AOTA published the Policy on Advanced Study in 1955, which reinforced the idea that licensed occupational therapist's should maintain their competency through continuing their education (AOTA, 2017). By maintaining their competency through expanding their education, occupational therapists could ensure that they were providing the most accurate and updated therapy techniques and interventions.

Throughout this rehabilitation period, occupational therapists were focused on helping wounded soldiers recover from WWII and the demands for health professionals increased. Due to this shift toward having a more medical based focus, and working with both mental and physically ill individuals, education requirements changed for occupational therapists at this time (Christiansen & Haertl, 2014). A push toward a master's level education evolved during this time in order to become more credible with working with critically ill individuals (AOTA, 2017).

In 1958, the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) published the Guide for the Development of Graduate Education Leading to Higher Degrees in Occupational Therapy. This outlined the new requirements for a master's-level education for the profession (AOTA, 2017). As the education requirements increased for OTs, there became a shortage of therapists due to the time commitment of school (Christiansen & Haertl, 2014). This resulted in the certified occupational therapy assistant (COTA) program to be created to meet the demands of the profession (Christiansen & Haertl, 2014). The two year program was first accredited in the United States in 1958 (Christiansen & Haertl, 2014) leading to more job opportunities available for practitioners and an expansion for the profession of OT.

The purpose of this project is to gather information about the history and evolution of OT practice in North Dakota and Wyoming through life histories of individuals who have been influential in developing OT in these two states. In order to do so, it was important to develop an understanding of what was happening both in the world and in OT practice in general during the time when our participant, Rhoda Erhardt, began her career.

Theory

The word Kawa is a Japanese word meaning “river” (Teah & Iwama, 2015). The Kawa model was created as a metaphor for an individual's life using the elements of water, rocks, driftwood, river floor, and river walls (Turpin & Iwama, 2011). Each of the elements represent different life obstacles, events, turning points, and context of the individual (Turpin & Iwama, 2011). The researchers used each of these elements of the Kawa model to create interview questions that gained perspective and insight of the participant's life events and context that changed the course of her career. This model was appropriate to apply to a life history, as the

researchers were looking to get an understanding of how different aspects of the participant's life shaped them and the practice of OT.

Methodology

This was a qualitative study that used a life history approach, which allowed the focus to be on the participant's involvement in the evolution of OT practice. This qualitative study was completed as an assignment for an OT qualitative research class and is a small part of a larger study being completed by the instructors. The class instructors compiled a participant list through purposive sampling, of which the the participant, Rhoda Erhardt, was chosen from. Data collection was completed through an interview and from the information in Rhoda's CV, which was provided by Rhoda prior to the interview.

The interview was originally planned to be completed through a video call through a specific online program; however, there were technical difficulties so the interview was completed over the phone instead. Prior to the interview, the researchers reviewed Rhoda's CV for about a half hour to get an overall understanding of her career as an occupational therapist and her life accomplishments. The interview was semi-structured and was guided by an interview schedule prepared by the project directors; the questions on the interview schedule were designed to be used with all of 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. For this life history, the researchers added questions based off of the KAWA model to get a deeper insight into the turning points of her life that guided her career. During the interview, the researchers went off the interview schedule to ask clarifying and probing questions when needed. The phone interview lasted approximately one hour. The interview was audio recorded and then later transcribed verbatim. There were no gatekeeper issues as initial contact

was made by the project directors. Informed consent was given.

Trustworthiness was established in a variety of different ways. The data collection and analysis was completed by two researchers together, which helped to decrease researcher bias. The researchers gained information from two sources: the interview transcription and Rhoda's CV. This ensured that the data came from more than one source, which allowed the researchers to find similarities or discrepancies between the different sources. The interview transcription was done verbatim which eliminated any bias from the researchers. The transcription, as well the interview audio recording, was then given to the Rhoda for her to review and provide clarification or explanation, which was a form of member checking for the researcher's to eliminate any errors that may have been made during the transcription process. Lastly, throughout the entire research process, both researchers used a reflective journal to write down any thoughts, experiences, or biases they were experiencing during the study in order to increase the reliability and validity of the findings. This process helped in tracking the researchers' decision trail and identified any bias that the researchers may have held.

Data Analysis

The one hour interview was audio recorded, transcribed, and coded into 23 separate codes. When determining codes, the researchers followed criteria that required each code to include information on any aspect that made an impact in Rhoda's occupational therapy career. The researchers worked to ensure that all relevant information acquired from the interview was represented in the codes. From these codes, 10 different themes were created, from which four different categories emerged (See Appendix for illustration of coding process). When splitting the information into codes and themes, the researchers used the Kawa Model as guidance to identify major turning points in Rhoda's career as well as different aspects of her life including

obstacles and significant career and life events. The researchers used both the interview transcription as well as Rhoda's CV to support the information that was given in the interview.

Findings/Results

Rhoda shared a variety of different life experiences that shaped her as a person and as an occupational therapist. This information was used to find themes and four major categories. These four categories that emerged from the data analysis are outlined and described below, along with the corresponding themes.

Category One: Educational Experiences

Classroom education set a foundation for a successful career. Rhoda graduated in 1954 with her bachelors of OT degree at the University of Illinois. Rhoda talked about the difference between OT education now compared to when she graduated and pointed out that when she went to school, students did not have to apply to the program as they do now. Her educational experience began with the first three years consisting of a broad liberal arts education followed by OT and medical specific classes. She had small classes of about ten or eleven people and felt that she got a really good education and enjoyed all of her classes. Notable classes that Rhoda remembers from her OT education include abnormal psychology, anatomy, and child development, as well as woodworking, letter working, jewelry making, sewing, and weaving. Rhoda also pointed out other differences in OT education then versus now such as the lack of education in theories and models, as these were not yet utilized in the field of OT at the time.

Exactly twenty years later, Rhoda received her masters in child development and family relations from North Dakota State University. This degree helped her in furthering her career as a pediatric occupational therapist and expanded her breadth of knowledge in the pediatric area past

what her OT education provided.

Field experience to further education. Following her classroom education, Rhoda was put on a variety of different rotations, which is similar to today's fieldwork experience. Her rotations included time in a research and educational hospital, a state mental hospital, pediatrics, general medicine surgery, and adolescent psych. These rotations served to broaden and build upon the knowledge she had gained through her classes in a clinical and real life setting.

Category Two: Accomplishments and Involvement

An evolving work experience. During the first two years of her career, Rhoda worked at the Brooke Army Hospital in San Antonio, Texas where she eventually served as the chief of OT at the burn center and was also a commissioned officer in the women's medical specialist corps for the United States Army. She then moved to Denver, Colorado in 1956 where she served as chief of pediatric therapy at the National Jewish Hospital. She worked there for a couple months, where her primary job was caring for children with tuberculosis. Following a 10 year break in her career that she chose to take in order to raise her children, Rhoda developed and created the Easter Seal Mobile Therapy Unit in Fargo, North Dakota. This job started out as part time, but it grew and eventually she was hiring other staff members. Rhoda did this for about 11 years while also working as an adjunct instructor for the department of special education and multidisciplinary studies at Moorhead State University as well as a lecturer in anatomy at North Dakota State University. Following the closing of the Easter Seal Mobile Therapy Unit due to a decrease in caseload as a result of federal law changes, Rhoda continued her career in private practice in Fargo, North Dakota and then Maplewood, Minnesota.

When the researchers pointed out how involved she was in the field of OT, as evidenced

by her CV, Rhoda responded saying, “I try to be active because I really believe that we need everybody to do that. I really believe in that, so I did it in a small way at first...It makes us all stronger if people are involved.” Rhoda values being involved in the community and in OT. She was involved in local, national, and even international organizations. Some examples of local organizations that she was a part of was the North Dakota Occupational Therapy Association (NDOTA), the Minnesota Department of Health, the Minnesota Occupational Therapy Association (MOTA), and the continuing education committee in Minnesota. Rhoda also found that it was very important to connect without others on a multidisciplinary basis so that everyone could learn and grow from each other. Because of this, she also became active in multidisciplinary organizations such as the American Academy for Cerebral Palsy and Developmental Medicine.

Personal and professional accomplishments. Many of Rhoda’s accomplishments were driven by her personal interests, her drive to teach others, and identified areas of OT that needed more research and development. For example, she used her own interest in photography and videography to create her own images and videos to put into books, chapters, articles, etc. Rhoda also shared her knowledge with other occupational therapists and health care providers through workshops and presenting at conferences.

Because Rhoda was involved in many different organizations and was a motivated individual, her accomplishments cover a large variety of different areas. First and foremost, Rhoda has shown that she is a leader and a pioneer in the field of OT. Her leadership achievements include holding the position as vice president of NDOTA as well as holding positions in other organizations, some of which include the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA), MOTA, the Minnesota Department of Health Occupational Therapy

Practitioners, the World Federation of Occupational Therapists, the American Academy for Cerebral Palsy & Developmental Medicine, and many more.

Rhoda also worked to develop new programs, research, and education to other occupational therapists. She started the Easter Seals Mobile Therapy Unit in Fargo, North Dakota, which served primarily children but also some adults. She used this opportunity to not only serve the people of Fargo who were in need of services, but also to help provide education for OT students. Rhoda did this by being a fieldwork educator for a pediatric fieldwork for students of the University of North Dakota, St. Catherine's University, North Dakota State College of Science, and the University of Puget Sound.

It was clear that Rhoda not only valued her own education and competency as an occupational therapist, but she also valued sharing her knowledge with others as well. Educational pieces that Rhoda developed include an exhaustive list of books, evaluation instruments, chapters, research articles, and instructional videos. The first book she ever wrote was "Developmental Hand Dysfunction," which she later came out with a second edition twelve years later. Another notable accomplishment was the development of her prehension assessment, which at the time was something no one had really ever seen but ended up being a big hit and is an assessment that people are still using today. She also created a vision assessment, which at the time did not become as popular, simply because occupational therapists did not know that the motor component of vision were in their realm of practice.

Category Three: Personal Motivation

The beginning of her career. Rhoda first pursued a career in OT after taking an aptitude test in high school; she found out what the curriculum included and decided to go for it. However, what she really wanted at the time was to start a family. After graduating from the

University of Illinois and working for a few years, she decided to take time off to have and raise her children with her husband. She ended up taking a 10 year break from her career, but when she began entering the workforce again there weren't many jobs available, so she spent her time going to continuing education and volunteering at hospitals in OT departments. This is also when she developed the Easter Seal Mobile Therapy Unit in Fargo, North Dakota. Rhoda quickly discovered that her high school aptitude test had chosen the right career for her, because she began to fall in love with the profession.

discovering her life purpose. Rhoda often felt that she found her life purpose in OT and with pediatrics. She believed that, in a way, she fell into the career: "It's amazing how that happens; you know it was almost I was pushed backwards into the profession." Mentoring is also something that became important to her because she had wonderful mentors in the past and she has now found herself mentoring others for a variety of different reasons. When talking about the purpose and benefits of mentoring, she stated "that way we pass on what we've learned from experience and people really appreciate it...that's what you're supposed to do at this age."

During the beginning stages of her career, Rhoda discovered that she had a passion for children and that the more she worked in pediatrics, the more she realized that it was what she was meant to do. She stated that she was never motivated to look for her passion, but pediatrics was something that hit her in the core and that "from there on, it's not work, it's all fun."

Personal attributes that made her a successful occupational therapist. Rhoda considers many of personal attributes to be the reason that OT was a "perfect fit" for her. She loves to learn new things, she loves reading, and she often feels creative. In fact, she often did the artwork in her own books. She feels that these skills made OT the perfect fit for her: "So it

was a perfect fit, cause when I'm writing or drawing or designing, I just get in a zone and I forget dinner and suddenly the house is fully dark and time just goes away."

She has also found that her therapeutic use of self has been the most important attribute of all and states that "I felt that to be the strongest and most powerful tool that I was able to achieve." She credits her ability to get along with family really well to the way she uses her therapeutic use of self because it lets them know that they have value. When talking about using therapeutic use of self, she commented that one has to "kind of find out what the mood is in this room and adapt to it and don't bring your own energy in, but try to match the patient's energy."

Category Four: Occupational Therapy Over Time

OT laws and legislation that have affected past and current practice. Throughout the course of her career, Rhoda has watched and experienced many changes that have occurred in the field of OT. She remembers that when she started school in 1949, there were only twelve OT programs in the country and the occupational therapy assistant (OTA) profession was not yet developed. One of the major turning points in the profession of OT was the federal law of 94142 that came out in 1978. This law required schools to provide OT services for children that needed it. Rhoda pointed out that this was a positive change for the profession as a whole; however, it lead to the closing of her Easter Seal Mobile Therapy Unit as it reduced her caseload to only infants and toddlers. As a result, Rhoda ended up with a contract with the school system and worked as a consultant for the school systems to train them in school based practice.

The dynamics of OT. Rhoda expressed that most of the changes made in OT were all for the better, including the addition of frameworks, the emphasis on more science and good research, and the emphasis on multidisciplinary healthcare teams. All of the changes that have developed throughout the lifetime of OT have made it more credible and evidence-based. She

did express her concerns with some people wanting to go with a purely medical model and stated that “I think we embrace much more than that.” However, with all of the changes that have occurred in OT, Rhoda points out that one thing will always stay the same: “Our profession is one of the few that combines science and art.”

Current changing of OT educational requirements. When discussing the education requirement changes approaching the profession of OT, specifically the OT degree moving from a master's to a doctorate and the possibility of an OTA degree moving from an associates to a bachelor's, Rhoda had mixed feelings. She expressed reservations that she had about students not being able to or not wanting to complete that much intense schooling and she fears that it may turn people away from the profession. However, on the other hand, she understands that it is important that occupational therapists be competent in what they do.

Rhoda discussed that for most, a doctorate degree is not necessary and it isn't even something that she ever pursued herself. The doctorate degree has more of an emphasis on research, and Rhoda pointed out then many individuals aren't interested in this and just want to be a clinical practitioner. However, she also pointed out the positives, in that it will make our profession more credible and practitioners will be expert at what they do.

Final Assertion

By staying true to her personal motivations, Rhoda Erhardt was able to use her education and her life experiences to accomplish various achievements and get involved in the field of occupational therapy as it grew and developed over time.

Discussion/Conclusion

The interview with Rhoda Erhardt provided a deep insight and understanding of her life throughout her OT career. Through the use of the Kawa model (Turpin & Iwama, 2011), the

researchers were able to gain a sense of the major turning points in her life and the barriers she faced that lead to her accomplishments and contributions to the profession of OT in North Dakota and nationally. As stated in the literature, there were many new laws and regulations that came about during the start of Rhoda's practice and during her career as an occupational therapist that influenced her career path. Rhoda entered the workforce during a time when OT was facing a lot of changes, but she was successful in staying true to herself and her practice, as well as adapting to the changes in OT and the healthcare system. Rhoda was able to make contributions to the profession as a whole with the creation of her medical based assessments, the books and articles she wrote, and the continuing education she has provided to many people. Her large number of accomplishments and her passion for using her job to help people makes her a role model and someone to aspire to be for both students and current occupational therapists. Rhoda is an inspiration in the profession of OT and has made a significant impact on the evolution of OT in North Dakota, as well as nationally.

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Appendix

A Piece of Evolution of Occupational Therapy in North Dakota: A Life History of Rhoda

Erhardt, MS, OTR/L, FAOTA

Researchers: Sidney Carlson, OTS & Alexis Tyce, OTS

Codes

- | | | | |
|-------------|-------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------------|
| * Education | * Leadership | * Personal attributes | * Laws and regulation |
| * Classes | * Accomplishments | * Therapeutic use of self | * Dynamics of OT |
| * Crafts | * Easter Seal | * Life purpose | * Change in education requirements |
| * Rotations | * Books | * Pediatrics | |
| | * Work experience | * Getting into OT | |
| | * Involment | * 10 year break | |

Themes

- | | | | |
|---|--|---|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Classroom Education set a Foundation for a Successful Career 2. Field Experience to Further Education | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. An Evolving Work Experience 2. Personal and Professional Accomplishments | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The Beginning of her Career 2. Discovering her Life Purpose 3. Personal Attributes that made her a successful occupational therapist | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. OT Laws and Legislation That Have Affected Past and Current Practice 2. The Dynamics of OT 3. Current Changing of OT Educational Requirements |
|---|--|---|--|

Categories

- | | | | |
|------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------------|
| Educational Experience | Accomplishments and Involvement | Personal Motivation | Occupational Therapy Over Time |
|------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------------|

Assertion

By staying true to her personal motivations, Rhoda Erhardt was able to use her education and her life experiences to accomplish various achievements and get involved in the field of occupational therapy as it grew and developed over time.