Life History of Sonia Zimmerman, Ph.D., OTR/L, FAOTA

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Introduction

The purpose of this study is to gather information about the history and evolution of occupational therapy (OT) practice through the life history of an individual who has been influential in developing OT.

This life history is a part of a larger study consisting of 29 occupational therapists.

The larger study is named Life Histories of Individuals Who Have Been Influential in Developing Occupational Therapy (OT) in North Dakota (ND) and Wyoming (WY).

This study will provide occupational therapists with knowledge of how OT practice has evolved since its inception, specifically focusing on ND and WY.

A qualitative research design using a life history approach was used.

The participant, Dr. Sonia Zimmerman, was interviewed at the University of North Dakota (UND).

Sonia Zimmerman is currently a professor at UND, she has practiced in ND as well as a number of other states.

The Kawa Model was used to guide this research study in developing interview questions and analyzing data.

Description of Participant

Sonia Zimmerman is currently a professor at UND in Grand Forks, ND.

She has taught at UND since 1983 and graduated from the program herself in 1977 with a Bachelor’s degree.

She went on to further her education by obtaining her Master’s in Sociology and her Ph. D. in Occupational and Adult Education.

She has held jobs as an occupational therapist in mental health facilities in many states.

Beyond practicing with clients, Sonia has been involved on the state and national levels. She also currently volunteers as a consultant for local mental health facilities.

Methods

This is a qualitative study that uses a life history approach.

Purposeful sampling was used to gather a total of 29 participants.

One participant was assigned to a pair of OT students from a list developed by the instructors of this course.

IRB approval was obtained through the University of North Dakota’s Institutional Review Board.

The researchers obtained a copy of Dr. Zimmerman’s CV before the interview and conducted research on the details of her various involvements.

A face-to-face interview was completed at the School of Medicine and Health Sciences. It lasted about one hour.

The semi-structured interview was guided by an interview schedule created by the course instructors. The researchers modified interview questions as needed.

Informed consent was obtained before the interview began.

The interview was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researchers.

The data was coded and analyzed, grouped into categories, and patterns were identified. An assertion was developed to summarize the overall meaning and combine categories.

This study’s components of trustworthiness include:

- Credibility: The data was obtained directly from Sonia Zimmerman, therefore the data is assumed to be true and credible.
- Data Triangulation: The authors obtained data from multiple sources including journal articles, historical documents and the participant herself to ensure data was valid.
- Researcher Triangulation: Two researchers were involved in the analysis of the data to decrease bias.

Literature Review

The deinstitutionalization movement occurred in the 1960s after the Community Mental Health Centers Act was passed, which led to a large number of individuals being released from state hospitals into unprepared communities, which did not have the resources to support these individuals (Exley, Thompson, & Hays, 2011).

There was a major call for occupational therapy services to help integrate these individuals into the community.

In the early 2000s, the University of North Dakota’s School of Medicine and Health Sciences began to emphasize interprofessional and rural care.

Project CRISTAL was a byproduct of this movement.

The goal of this project was to increase interdisciplinary care, education about rural healthcare and cultural competency regarding the Native American population (Amundson, Moulton, Zimmerman & Johnson, 2008).

These events affected occupational therapy on a national and a state level.

Data Analysis

The researchers coded the data to determine common themes from the data.

From the codes, three categories emerged, and themes were created based on these categories.

One final assertion was made regarding the data taking codes, categories and themes into account.

Findings

The major themes found in this study indicate that Sonia experienced changes in educational requirements and treatment settings in mental health but she was able to get involved in the profession in other ways by staying current in her knowledge of OT and the changes occurring within it.

The deinstitutionalization movement affected her mental health practice by pushing them to being more community-based.

“The community and the emphasis on community practice ideas have always been a big part of who I consider myself to be. I’m really invested in that.”

The transitions from a Bachelor’s requirement to a Master’s requirement, and the future transition to a Doctoral requirement largely affect the field of occupational therapy.

“There is a lot of renewed energy around curriculum, developing curriculum and building a new curriculum...it’s giving us an opportunity to make some pretty significant changes to the curriculum structure now and to what it’s going to be.”

Conclusions

This life history was conducted as a part of a larger project titled Life Histories of Individuals Who Have Been Influential in Developing Occupational Therapy (OT) in North Dakota and Wyoming.

The purpose of this project was to gather information about the history and evolution of OT practice through the life history of a individual who has been influential in developing OT.

The deinstitutionalization movement and Project CRISTAL heavily influenced Sonia’s practice as well as the field of occupational therapy on a national and state level.

The Kawa model was used to guide this study focusing on aspects that facilitated and inhibited the participant’s experience of the evolution of the field.

Sonia Zimmerman was interviewed about her experiences over the course of her career by two student researchers.

Data was transcribed and coded to determine the main themes and categories.

The major assertion from this interview was: Sonia Zimmerman is a major contributor to the field of occupational therapy through her commitment to student learning and passion for the need for mental health across various practice settings. She has seen changes in educational requirements and the profession as a whole and strives to continue to grow with the profession as it evolves.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Sonia Zimmerman for her time and commitment to this project. Also for her approachability and willingness to help in whatever way possible with this project.

References
