



2018

Evolution of Occupational Therapy Practice: Life History of Jan Nelson, OTR/L, MA

Jessica Anderson

Reghan Boldt

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.und.edu/ot-oral-histories-papers>



Part of the [Occupational Therapy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Jessica Anderson and Reghan Boldt. "Evolution of Occupational Therapy Practice: Life History of Jan Nelson, OTR/L, MA" (2018). *Oral History Student Papers*. 39.
<https://commons.und.edu/ot-oral-histories-papers/39>

This Student Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Occupational Therapy Oral Histories at UND Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Oral History Student Papers by an authorized administrator of UND Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact und.common@library.und.edu.

Evolution of Occupational Therapy Practice: Life History of Jan Nelson, OTR/L, MA

Jessica Anderson, MOTS & Reghan Boldt, MOTS

University of North Dakota

Abstract

Objective. The purpose of this qualitative study was to gather information about the history and evolution of occupational therapy (OT) practice, guided by the Kawa Model. The life history of Jan Nelson was one of 31 life history interviews conducted apart of a larger project of Life Histories of Individuals Who Have Been Influential in Developing Occupational Therapy in North Dakota and Wyoming.

Method. An hour and a half semi-structured interview was completed with Jan Nelson and two OT student researchers. From the interview data, the student researchers created themes that were meaningful to Jan Nelson's life and OT career.

Results. There were 16 codes identified from the data and the codes were placed into three categories. From the categories, the themes were created, and then a final assertion was made about Jan Nelson's life and career.

Conclusion. Important aspects of Jan Nelson's career included: personal attributes, approaches to practice, and personal experiences. Jan Nelson's journey has led her to further her education and create her own practice using holistic OT approaches guided by her past experiences. Through her holistic practice, Jan Nelson has helped multiple clients succeed in reaching their goals.

Keywords: complementary medicine, approaches, non-traditional OT, Kawa Model

Introduction

The purpose of this Life History is to gather information about the history and evolution of OT practice from individuals like Jan Nelson who have been influential in developing OT in these two states. The life history of Jan Nelson was one of 31 life history interviews conducted apart of a larger project of Life Histories of Individuals Who Have Been Influential in Developing Occupational Therapy in North Dakota and Wyoming. This study is intended to provide current and future generations of occupational therapists a view of the history and how OT practice has evolved in North Dakota and Wyoming. This life history of Jan Nelson is a case study that examined her life as an OT practitioner and holistic practices. The interview took place over the phone and lasted approximately one and a half hours in length. Previous roles Jan

Nelson has held include pediatric OT and minister of health. Jan Nelson is the Founder and Executive Director of HeartSprings Regional Healing Center, which is a holistic OT clinic.

Literature Review

These are common events that occurred during Jan Nelson's OT career. The profession has changed significantly between 1986 and 2000 (Reed & Peters, 2010). During this time period, the Vietnam War came to an end, which created growth in the OT profession (Christiansen & Haertl, 2014). The Americans with Disabilities Act extended civil rights to individuals with disabilities which furthered expanded the role of occupational therapists in different settings (Christiansen & Haertl, 2014). With the growth in the profession, more jobs were created multiple settings and practice areas (Christiansen & Haertl, 2014).

There was a paradigm shift in 1990, to occupation-based practice and interventions (Bauerschmidt & Nelson, 2011). The shift to occupation-based intervention is still the focus of OT practice today (Bauerschmidt & Nelson, 2011). The paradigm shift in the 1980's recommitted OT practice to the following: a holistic view, occupational nature of humans, client-centered practice, active engagement and empowerment, systems of theoretical view, and balance of art and science (Reed & Peters, 2010).

In 1993, alternative treatment modalities were established through the office of alternative medicine (National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health [NCCIH], 2018). In 1998, National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health was established by Congress which elevated the status of the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) (NCCIH, 2018). In 2000, the NCCAM published the first plan for expansion of complementary medicine. In 2001, research was published on the comprehensive Internet data source of research-based information (NCCIH, 2008).

Wilcock's (1998) book, *An Occupational Perspective of Health*, emphasized the need to focus on the occupational nature of humans (Christiansen & Haertl, 2014). Wilcock's (1998) work led further the recognition that engagement in meaningful occupations is critical for health which furthered the need to ensure opportunities for engagement in occupations (Christiansen & Haertl, 2014). Occupation as a whole was found to be a better approach to OT (Reed & Peters, 2010).

In 2000, there was an increased focus on graduate education and the importance of research-based practice (Christiansen & Haertl, 2014). Graduate education developed a theory-driven practice which created new conceptual models and provided a foundation for applied science in occupational science (Christiansen & Haertl, 2014). Also during this time, direct interventions were considered to restore function, and indirect interventions were considered to adaptive techniques (Reed & Peters, 2010).

In 2002, the World Health Organization (WHO) published documents for the role of complementary/alternative medicine (Bodeker & Kronenberg, 2002). During this time there was a need to develop complementary medicine in the United States to shift the marginal role it held in the world (Bodeker & Kronenberg, 2002). In 2007, the NCCAM established a complementary consult service within the clinical center (NCCIH, 2018). In 2014, the NCCAM changed names to the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health (NCCIH) which reflected the center's commitment to research (NCCIH, 2018). In 2016, Mayo Clinic published literature on the effectiveness of complementary health approaches for chronic pain conditions which provided options beyond drug management for chronic pain and furthered the need for more holistic interventions (NCCIH, 2018).

Theory

The Kawa Model was used to guide the foundation of the research design. The Kawa Model uses the metaphor of a river to describe an individual's life journey (Turpin & Iwama, 2011). The river represents an individual's experiences and life history (Turpin & Iwama, 2011). Throughout the participant's life history there are often obstacles and challenges encompassed by the environment (Turpin & Iwama, 2011). The elements of the Kawa Model include river banks, rocks, driftwood, and spaces (Turpin & Iwama, 2011). When the participants approached challenges, they had to adapt to keep their river flowing. The river represents the participants' life and the elements they face, which may be barriers; for this study, it represents the barriers relate to their careers as an occupational therapist (Turpin & Iwama, 2011). The Kawa model provides insight into the participant's personal and professional achievements (Turpin & Iwama, 2011).

Description of Participant

Jan Nelson is currently the Founder and Executive Director of HeartSprings Regional Healing Center, in Fargo, North Dakota. Jan Nelson graduated from the University of North Dakota (UND) in 1982 with her Bachelor's degree in OT and in 1992, received her Master's degree in Human Development from St. Mary's College in Minnesota (J, Nelson, personal communication, October 3, 2018). Her professional career extends from pediatric OT, minister of health, and holistic therapy.

Jan Nelson discovered OT when she was shadowing a physical therapist in high school. She stated she saw a group of individuals in the corner working on crafts and she became interested and wanted to know more about what the group was about (J, Nelson, personal communication, October 3, 2018). Jan Nelson believes she has been an OT at heart her whole

life. While in OT school, Jan Nelson realized there was more to OT than arts and crafts (J, Nelson, personal communication, October 3, 2018).

After graduating from UND, Jan Nelson accepted a job in Great Falls, Montana as a pediatric OT. She did not stay at the position long due to her father's illness with Parkinson's Disease. Jan Nelson moved back home to be with her family, and she became a caregiver to her father. The experience of being a caregiver provided Jan Nelson with an insider's view in a personal standpoint rather than professional (J, Nelson, personal communication, October 3, 2018). Her father had a significant impact on her, which lead her to begin practicing non-traditional OT.

In 2008, Jan Nelson opened a nonprofit organization focused on holistic approaches. The practice was founded in Fargo, North Dakota within a church. Since opening the doors of the HeartSprings Regional Healing Center, Jan Nelson has had success with multiple clients using the holistic therapy methods (J, Nelson, personal communication, October 3, 2018). Jan has continued working through her business which has transitioned to a for-profit and has been successful. Jan Nelson has completed various unpublished research studies on Integrated listening systems for individuals with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Parkinson's Disease which were reviewed on her website for HeartSprings Regional Healing Center (HeartSprings Community Healing Center, n.d.). After reviewing her resume, throughout the years, Jan Nelson gained multiple certifications. Jan Nelson's certifications include: Massage Therapy, Emotion Code, Integrated Listening Systems, PWR! Moves, Dance of Parkinson's disease, Mind-Body Medicine, Laughter Yoga, HeartMath, Bereavement certifications, and Stress Management certification (J, Nelson, personal communication, October 3, 2018). Jan Nelson's certifications have provided her with the education and skills to carry out her holistic therapeutic approaches.

Methodology

This was a qualitative research study using a life history approach which allowed the focus to be on the participant's involvement in the evolution of OT practice. The purpose of a life history approach is to identify patterns and themes in the life of an individual or group (Hagemaster, 1992). The researcher collects the data and focuses on the information the interviewee described as the important and influential during his or her life. The data collected is presented in a meaningful way that brings together the attitudes and experiences of the individual (Hagemaster, 1992). The participant was assigned from a list developed by the project directors through purposive sampling; therefore there was no specific gatekeeper issues since the initial contact was made by project directors. The study was approved by the University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board, and because of the research study design, the IRB process was waived. Informed consent obtained prior to the interview. Data for the research study was conducted via a phone interview that was audio recorded. The interviewers were at their apartment during the interview. The one-time interview lasted approximately one and a half hours in length.

Prior to the interview, the student researchers spent approximately two hours researching the interviewee and background information to create a timeline. The data collected consisted of a google name search and the participant's resume. 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 student researchers were allowed to modify or add interview questions to the interview schedule. After the interview, the student researchers transcribed the transcription verbatim. The transcription was coded, and from this categories, themes, and a final assertion were formed.

Trustworthiness was obtained with two audio recordings, two transcribers, two data analyses, and a reflexive journal. Member checking with the final transcription was completed. The student researchers completed the process of memoing the transcription and debriefed on the findings with one another. The process and findings were reviewed with the project directors. The procedures stated contributed to the reliability and validity of the research study because the student researchers were able to identify biases and track the thoughts on the audit trail. The research procedures were done to ensure the results were objective and were true to the experience of the interviewee. The data collection procedure was comprehensive and provided the student researchers with an in-depth understanding of the interviewee and the interview data due to the analysis and reflection that occurred.

Data Analysis

Once the transcription was completed from the interview, the student researchers interpreted the information. The Kawa Model guided the foundation for the research study, to understand the life history of Jan Nelson. The Kawa Model uses the metaphor of a river flow to describe the participant's journey and challenges faced in life (Turpin & Iwama, 2011). The student researchers analyzed the interview transcription to identify the critical aspects of the participant's life and her OT career. Each of the student researchers independently analyzed the interview transcription and debriefed to share thoughts and ideas. Information on common topics and potential themes emerged from the interview transcription.

From the analysis process, 16 codes were identified. See appendix for codes. The inclusion criteria for codes were determined based on quotes provided in the interview that were related to similar topics and meaning. The exclusion criteria for codes was limited quotes in the

interview to support the codes. The criteria was established, to determine codes that were the most relevant to understanding the experiences of the interviewee.

The categories formed from the codes of the transcription were: personal attribute, approaches to practice, and personal experiences. The categories were determined based on the connections between the codes. The codes for personal attribute were education, learning through experiences, and teaching and empowerment. The codes for approaches to practice included: lifestyle changes, holistic therapy, crafts, spiritual mind body connection, OT models, and research. The codes for the category personal experiences were OT at heart, father's caregiver, HeartSprings career, non-traditional OT, healthcare team, political climate, and outsider viewpoints. The categories were a reflection of the interview transcription and the meaning the interviewee depicted on her life in the interview. The categories were used to determine the themes in the life history of Jan Nelson.

Themes from Personal Attributes:

The themes that emerged from this category include: Jan Nelson's educational background laid the pathway for her holistic therapy career, Jan Nelson has passion for non-traditional approaches, her life experiences gave her confidence in the profession, and therapeutic use of self is critical for empowering individuals. Because of Jan Nelson's background, she has seen first hand the importance of non-traditional approaches and their benefits. Her education background in OT provided her with the knowledge of therapeutic use of self; however, her life experiences furthered her understanding of the need for holistic therapy. *"And I remember the prayer to the Lord was, teach me to heal. And that has been a theme for my entire life since my late 20s."*

Jan Nelson has been an OT at heart since her early twenties. She has been guided by the theme to heal others which is backed by her spiritual beliefs. Jan Nelson currently practices non-traditional OT in which she believes that her work is an alternative way to heal people. Her prayer to the Lord relived her strong connection to her spiritual faith which guides her practice. The pray had a significant impact on Jan Nelson, as she is still able to recall the pray in the present day.

“So it was life experiences like that [personal life experience]. That gave me the confidence in studying and look at this more and more and more and knowing that it works.”

Personal life experiences have guided her confidence and desire to learn more to ultimately heal those she works with. In Jan Nelson’s area of practice it is importance to have confidence to show her clients that what she is doing is beneficial. Her confidence has grown as she has progressed in her career. She is confident in her alternative approach to OT. Jan Nelson’s confidence has enabled her to continue to research her approaches in which she ahs found success.

“Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day, teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.”

Jan Nelson believes that if you teach an individual the skills and tools, the skills will be more beneficial in the long run rather than filling the temporary need. Teaching individuals skills gives them the ability to be more independent in their functioning. Teaching her clients life-long skills is what Jan Nelson finds meaningful in her practice.

Themes from Approaches to Practice:

The themes that emerged from this category include: Jan Nelson believes healthy lifestyles have an impact on an individual’s function, holistic therapy views the whole person

without a label, Jan Nelson believes crafts are a meaningful therapeutic modality, and the spiritual mind body connection speaks to the person as a whole, supported by the Kawa Model. The spiritual mind-body connection guides Jan Nelson's practice which supports her values and beliefs. The mind-body connection is supported through the use of the arts in therapeutic interventions.

"Lifestyle is huge, we need to expand the understanding of lifestyle."

Lifestyle should be looked at as a whole instead of focusing on a specific area. When an individual works on themselves as a whole they are more likely to live a healthier life. Jan Nelson is an advocator for having a healthy lifestyle and has a strong belief in the benefits of an overall health. Jan Nelson has seen a need to expand the understanding of lifestyle and its direct impact on a person.

"I really came to appreciate the art and how they affect the brain neurologically."

Jan Nelson found a connection in the arts and the positive impact it can have on a person which gives them meaning in their life. Incorporating arts in Jan Nelson's practice has provided her clients with meaningful occupations which had a positive impact on their lifestyle. Prior to Jan Nelson's education in OT, she discovered the benefits of the use of arts and crafts to heal individuals. To this day, Jan Nelson is a believer in the power behind arts and crafts.

"People need to understand that the body affects the mind. And the mind affects the body, it goes both ways."

Jan Nelson believes that the mind and body are connected, when one is impaired the other will also have impairments. Jan Nelson advocates for her clients and the general public to know the importance of the mind-body connection. Jan Nelson has seen first hand the impairment of the body and its impact on the mind. In her practice, she uses approaches to

connect the mind and the body. When the mind-body connection is strong, Jan Nelson has seen overall improvement in her clients.

Themes from Personal Experiences:

The themes that emerged from this category include: upon self-reflection she realized she had been a holistic occupational therapist her whole life, her father's life touched her to embrace a new outlook on OT, the creation of HeartSprings Community Healing Center allowed Jan Nelson to use holistic therapy, reach out to other healthcare professionals and have a positive working relationship, and the biggest challenge Jan Nelson faced was traditional viewpoints not supporting holistic therapy. Jan Nelson has been able to set and reach many of her life goals which reflects on her beliefs and values. The use of holistic therapy is meaningful to Jan Nelson and supports her beliefs of empowering people through giving them knowledge and skills. Her passion backed by life experiences has driven Jan Nelson to be successful in providing non-traditional therapy to her clients.

“And the way you empower people is you give them knowledge and give them skills. And um it's it's only recently that I actually reclaimed the OT piece again, even though at heart, I've always worked as an OT”

Throughout her practice, Jan Nelson has learned how to empower individuals, and this by giving them knowledge and skills. Jan Nelson teaches the individuals the skills to feel confident in their abilities and function independently. Jan Nelson has reclaimed the OT piece through learning the importance of empowering her clients. Jan Nelson incorporates empowerment through the use of meaningful occupational interventions.

“It influenced me more than I thought, but it's only been in reflection that I really saw that I've actually been an OT all my life.”

Jan Nelson believes her own personal experiences have benefited her and made her into the OT she is today. Jan Nelson experienced first hand her father's chronic condition which influenced her practice. While serving as her father's caregiver, Jan Nelson learned the importance of looking a person in the eye and making a personal connection to your clients.

"I think OTs need to understand the importance of collaboration."

Jan Nelson has found it beneficial to collaborate with other professions and incorporate teamwork in everyday practice for the best outcomes. She currently works with several other professionals. Jan Nelson has seen the impact of music therapy which was a turning point for her understanding of the importance of other professions. Jan Nelson accepts and acknowledges the impact of other professions to the well-being of her clients. In order to provide the best care for the clients, the team needs to work together to see the client from a holistic perspective.

"Complementary medicine means effort, that does not mean you swallow a pill, but the effort pays off in the long run in terms of being able to understand yourself better."

Jan Nelson saw the value of her practice and the impact she was able to make on her clients. Jan Nelson believes there are more interventions to provide an individual rather than the traditional western medicine interventions which include giving medication. Jan Nelson has explored non-traditional ways of therapy to best fit her client's needs and she has found success with her non-traditional approaches.

"People, I have to say today still in our church look at it with a raised eyebrow. Some people do."

Through the challenges and outsider viewpoints, Jan Nelson has stayed true to her values and beliefs. When first beginning her practice, the people of the church were unsure of her approaches. Jan Nelson had to stand up for her beliefs and approaches in practice to combat the

outsider viewpoints. It is apparent that Jan Nelson, was able to over come the outsider viewpoints as she still practices within the church.

After reviewing the themes that emerged from the interview, an assertion was created. The final assertion was Jan Nelson's journey has led her to further her education and create her own practice using holistic occupational therapy approaches guided by her past experiences. Through her holistic practice, Jan Nelson has helped multiple clients succeed in reaching their goals. Her non-traditional approach to OT, has enabled Jan Nelson to serve various clients. Within the hour and a half interview, the student researchers were able to discover value and passion of Jan Nelson's work and the positive impact her practice has had on her clients and the profession of OT.

Discussion/Conclusion

Events throughout time have impacted the profession of OT. Overall, the findings in this research study indicate that occupational therapy practitioners' life histories have been impacted by events in history. The Kawa Model enabled the student researchers to view the life of the participant in a different manner. The life was viewed as a river and the different barriers or challenges that took place across the lifespan. Based on the findings in this study Jan Nelson's passion for incorporating holistic approaches within OT has driven her to further advance the profession through non-traditional therapy providing flow within her river. This is evident through the creation of HeartSprings Regional Healing Center, which encompassed her passion for holistic approaches, in order to advance the therapeutic process to help clients succeed.

Another aspect of Jan Nelson's life that has allowed her river to flow is keeping occupation at the center of her heart and practice. It is evident that Jan Nelson is driven to help clients succeed by viewing each client holistically. Driftwood within Jan Nelson's life included

the need to define her life work without giving in to the outsider viewpoints. She has kept her passion for non-traditional OT regardless of the barriers she faced along the way. Jan Nelson practices through the means of decreasing the dependence on western medicine and increasing the professional collaboration shaped by the mind-body connection. Even though Jan Nelson faced barriers throughout her career, she had the strength and drive to overcome the obstacles. Her altruistic spirit has left a mark on the profession of OT and will not be forgotten. Jan Nelson's career has enabled her to have a steady flow in her river as evidenced by staying true to her values.

The final assertion of the research study proposed by the student researchers encompassed the life of Jan Nelson and her passion for holistic therapy approaches. Jan Nelson's journey has led her to further her education and create her practice using holistic occupational therapy approaches guided by her past experiences. Through her holistic practice, Jan Nelson has helped multiple clients succeed in reaching their goals guided by her beliefs in the mind-body connection. In summary, Jan Nelson's passion and vision is exemplified through the words she spoke during the interview: "Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day, teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime."

References

- American Journal of Occupational Therapy, May 1992, Vol. 46, 397-408.
doi:10.5014/ajot.46.5.397
- Bauerschmidt, B., & Nelson, D. L. (2011). The terms occupation and activity over the history of official occupational therapy publications. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 65(3), 338-345. doi: 10.5014/ajot.2011.000869
- Christiansen, C. H., & Haertl, K. (2014). A contextual history of occupational therapy. In B. Schell, G. Gillen, & M. Scaffa (Eds.), *Willard & Spackman's Occupational Therapy*, (12th ed., pp 9-34). Philadelphia, PA: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins.
- Hagemaster, J. N. (1992). Life history: A qualitative method of research. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 17(9), 1122–1128. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2648.1992.tb02047.x>
- HeartSprings Community Healing Center. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.heartspringscenter.org/>
- J. Nelson (personal communication, October 3, 2018)
- Reed, K. L. & Peters, C. (April 5, 2010). Occupational therapy values and beliefs, Part V: A time of professional identity, 1985-2000: Is this really occupational therapy? Would the real therapist please stand up? *OT Practice*, 15-18.
- Turpin, M. & Iwama, M. K. (2011). Using occupational therapy models in practice: A field guide. New York, NY: Elsevier, Inc.

Appendix

Visual Data Display

Evolution of Occupational Therapy Practice: Life History of Jan Nelson, OTR/L, MA
 Jessica Anderson, MOTS & Reghan Boldt, MOTS

Categories and Codes

<p><u>1) Personal Attributes</u> -Education -Learning Through Experiences -Teaching & Empowerment</p>	<p><u>2) Approaches to Practice</u> -Lifestyle Changes -holistic Therapy -Crafts -Spiritual Mind Body Connection -OT Models -Research</p>	<p><u>3) Personal Experiences</u> -OT at Heart -Father’s Caregiver -HeartSprings Career -Non-Traditional OT -Healthcare Team -Political Climate -Outsider Viewpoints</p>
--	---	---

Themes

Personal Attributes

Jan Nelson’s educational background laid the pathway for her holistic therapy career.
 Jan Nelson has passion for non-traditional approaches.
 Her life experiences gave her confidence in the profession.
 Therapeutic use of self is critical for empowering individuals.

Approaches to Practice

Jan Nelson believes healthy lifestyles have an impact on an individual’s function.
 Holistic therapy views the whole person without a label.
 Jan Nelson believes crafts are a meaningful therapeutic modality.
 Spiritual mind body connection speaks to the person as a whole, supported by the Kawa Model.

Personal Experiences

Upon self-reflection she realized she had been a holistic occupational therapist her whole life.
 Her father’s life touched her to embrace a new outlook on OT.
 The creation of HeartSprings Community Healing Center allowed Jan Nelson to use holistic therapy.
 Reach out to other healthcare professionals and have a positive working relationship.
 The biggest challenge Jan Nelson faced was traditional viewpoints not supporting holistic therapy.

Assertion

Jan Nelson’s journey has led her to further her education and create her own practice using holistic occupational therapy approaches guided by her past experiences. Through her holistic practice, Jan Nelson has helped multiple clients succeed in reaching their goals.