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Evolution of Occupational Therapy Practice: Life History of Dr. Barbara L. Kornblau, JD,

OTR/L, FAOTA, DASPE, CCM, CDMS, CPE

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**Abstract**

This paper is a summary of an interview completed with Dr. Barbara L. Kornblau. Barbara is a licensed occupational therapist and lawyer who was interviewed by two occupational therapy students at the University of North Dakota as a part of a larger life history qualitative study that included 30 total participants. This study was done to gather an understanding of her experience in occupational therapy (OT). The interview was semi-structured and lasted approximately 90 minutes, followed by a transcription and data analysis used to organize the information into twelve codes and six emerging themes. This single interview is a part of a larger life history qualitative study to gather information in regards to the history and evolution of occupational therapy practice at the national level and beyond. The student researchers established an assertion statement from the interview with Dr. Barbara L. Kornblau. The assertion statement is as follows: Barbara L. Kornblau is a major contributor to the field of occupational therapy through her commitment to legislation and promoting occupational therapy. She has influenced changes at the state and national level to increase social and occupational justice for individuals with disabilities.

### **Introduction**

This life history is one of 30 life history interviews, which are part of a larger project, *Histories of Individuals Who Have Been Influential in Developing Occupational Therapy (OT) at the National Level and Beyond*. The purpose of the study is to provide current and future generations of occupational therapists a view of the history and how the OT practice has evolved from its inception to current practice through the life history stories of occupational therapists who have held leadership roles at the national level and beyond. Student Researchers had the opportunity to engage in a semi-structured interview through a video conference with Dr. Barbara L. Kornblau, who has been an occupational therapist for over 40 years. She has made

incredible contributions to the profession of occupational therapy both at state and national levels. It is anticipated that the life history process will be a powerful way to gather this information.

The life history interview was conducted on October 23, 2019, and lasted approximately 90 minutes. The interview was completed via video conference at 9pm (CT) with two student interviewers in a quiet environment at the University of North Dakota School of Medicine and Health Sciences, and Dr. Barbara L. Kornblau was in her home.

### **Literature Review**

Occupational therapy has been a growing profession for the past 100 years, and the literature and research about methods and techniques have been developing constantly. As research on practice methods continues to grow, there is little information written about the occupational therapists themselves who are conducting the research to promote the profession (Dillon, 2001). In order to gain a full understanding of how the profession of occupational therapy is evolving, it is important to address the evolution of the therapists involved in practice. To gain this understanding, a life history approach can be used to portray the development of one's life and understand their occupational experiences throughout personal, social, economic, and historical transitions (Wicks & Whiteford, 2006).

Occupational therapists have faced a wide variety of challenges that all revolve around the concept of having to continually advocate for the profession and the individuals who receive therapy. Barbara has been a vital advocate to the profession with her work as an occupational therapist and a lawyer. Dr. Kornblau interests in advocacy for individuals with disabilities started to evolve when she was a young girl. She observed her mother work in an occupational therapy department and this is where her passion quickly grew to serve others.

In 1977, the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) adopted its first Occupational Therapy Code of Ethics for therapists to abide by when serving their clients (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2017a). Throughout this year, the profession of occupational therapy was growing and created five special interest areas which include, developmental disabilities, mental health, gerontology, physical disabilities, and sensory integration (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2017a). This same year, Dr. Kornblau graduated from the University of Wisconsin - Madison with a Bachelor of Science in Occupational Therapy and was able to start her career in OT as the profession itself had been making great strides in history. Dr. Kornblau practiced during a time in history where individuals with disabilities were often were discriminated against and needed the help of others to advocate for them through the legislature to protect their rights. In the 1990s, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was passed into law to protect the civil rights of individuals with disabilities as well as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) to ensure all people with disabilities received free and appropriate public education (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2017b). This transition period provided new opportunities and areas of services for the profession of occupational therapy to better serve and their consumers and implement new areas of research.

### **Theoretical Model**

The theoretical model that was used to guide this research was the Kawa model. The Kawa model was used to guide this life history study as it focuses on turning points in life. The Kawa model uses the flow of a river as a metaphor for an individual's life flow (Iwama, Thompson, & Macdonald, 2009). The Kawa model includes key features that include water, river sidewall and bottom, rocks, driftwood, and space between obstruction, which help

understand the individual client's occupational performance (Iwama, Thompson, & Macdonald, 2009). The water represents the life flow (Iwama, Thompson, & Macdonald, 2009). The river sidewall and bottom represent the different contexts in the individual's life (Iwama, Thompson, & Macdonald, 2009). The rocks reflect the problems or situations that are difficult to remove (Iwama, Thompson, & Macdonald, 2009). The driftwood represents the individual's personal attributes and resources (Iwama, Thompson, & Macdonald, 2009). The space between everything where the water flows is the life flow of the individual (Iwama, Thompson, & Macdonald, 2009). The Kawa model will guide this study to identify Dr.Kornblau's life flow, contexts, and turning points in her life.

### **Description of participant**

Information regarding Dr.Kornblau was obtained through an internet search, semi-structured interview, and her curriculum vitae (CV). Dr.Kornblau was inspired to go into OT from her experiences growing up in school and her mother, who worked in the OT department. Both of these experiences were motivators for her desire to be an occupational therapist. Dr.Kornblau attended the University of Wisconsin in (1977) and obtained her Bachelor's degree in Occupational Therapy. During the years of 1974 and 1979, Dr.Kornblau attended graduate courses for public health. In 1984, Dr.Kornblau went to night school and obtained her Juris Doctor. She obtained fellowships from 2006 through 2007 with the American Political Science Association and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Health Policy. She is also an expert witness in the areas of OT, case management, vocational rehabilitation, workplace accommodations, special education, and much more.

Dr.Kornblau is a licensed attorney, certified case manager, certified disability management specialist, certified pain educator, and licensed occupational therapist. Dr.Kornblau

has held numerous academic and teaching positions and has held leadership roles in multiple national organizations that she has been able to participate in throughout the United States. In addition to Dr.Kornblau's active involvement, she has also been published over 200 times.

Dr.Kornblau was a past president of AOTA and is still actively involved in both AOTA and American Occupational Therapy Foundation (AOTF). Dr.Kornblau has worked in a variety of settings as an occupational therapist such as school systems, rural health, mental health, acute and rehabilitation, and a work hardening clinic. Dr.Kornblau has her own private practice since 1992 and has been able to combine her expertise in occupational therapy, law, and public health through a variety of different services. These services include assuring business and industries are complying with the ADA and providing expert witness testimonies regarding personal injury, malpractice, reasonable accommodations, and other related ADA issues. She provided special services to individuals with autism and used her skills as a case manager to keep individual's rights preserved in the community. Dr.Kornblau's ability to combine the knowledge that she has learned from each of her roles has made her a major contributor to the laws and policies that uphold the profession.

## **Methodology**

### *Study Design*

This study design was a qualitative study based on a life history approach. This study was designed to gain an understanding of the participant's experiences, views, perspectives, and turning points on the evolution of occupational therapy. This paper is specifically addressing Dr.Kornblau's experience in the evolution of occupational therapy. The data was gathered from Dr.Kornblau's CV, an internet search, and a semi-structured interview with Dr.Kornblau.

### *Participant Selection*

The participant was selected from a participant list compiled through purposive sampling by the project directors. Informed consent was obtained prior to the interview, and the project was reviewed by the UND Institutional Review Board, and because of the study design, the formal IRB process was waived.

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 as needed for each specific interview.

#### *Data Collection*

Prior to the interview, the student researchers reviewed Dr.Kornblau's curriculum vitae (CV) that she provided and an internet search to gather an understanding of who Dr.Kornblau is and her achievements. Data was collected through a 90-minute semi-structured interview with Dr.Kornblau. The interview was completed via a video conferencing program Zoom. The student researchers completed the interview in a quiet and comfortable room at the University of North Dakota School of Medicine and Health Sciences, and Barbara was in her home. The interview was audio recorded on a personal computer and telephone of the student researchers and was transcribed verbatim afterward by the student researchers.

#### *Trustworthiness*

The researchers established trustworthiness in a number of methods. The student researchers reflected and wrote in a reflexive journal on their own personal biases as a way to establish a decision trail to increase the reliability and validity of this study. There were multiple researchers for this study, which supported triangulation along with a web search to verify the



information. Member checking was also completed in this study via email to ensure trustworthiness with the visual data display and the poster board to ensure the themes and categories emerged correctly.

### **Data Analysis**

After completion of the interview, it was transcribed verbatim totaling 26 pages. After completion of the transcription, the student researchers identified common keywords and established 12 codes. The inclusion criteria for the selection of codes included concepts that related to the evolution of OT and turning points in Dr.Kornblau's life. The exclusion criteria for the process of code selection included if it did not relate to the purpose of the study or if it was not highlighted multiple times throughout the interview. After the codes were developed, the student researchers reviewed the information and developed categories for the codes. Upon completion of the categories, the student researchers identified two themes per category that was created. After reflecting on the themes, the student researchers made an assertion statement; see appendix.

The Kawa model guided the data analysis as when we analyzed the interview. The use of the Kawa model guided student researchers to identify barriers, life flow, and turning points in Dr.Kornblau's career. The interview provided valuable information on Dr.Kornblau's personal and professional life, which helped the researchers to identify valuable information for the study.

### **Findings/Results**

After the codes were developed, there were three categories that emerged: involvement, professional life flow, and justice. There was a total of two themes for each of the categories

made that were created by looking at the aspects of her life and the influence she has had on the profession.

## **Involvement**

*Theme 1: Throughout her career, Barbara was a leader and an advocate in different organizations and coalitions that were non-OT based.*

Throughout the interview with Dr.Kornblau, it was evident that she was involved as a leader and advocated for the profession in organizations that were both OT and non-OT based. Through an internet search, Dr.Kornblau's CV, and the interview that Dr.Kornblau is a leader and advocate in a number of non-OT based organizations and coalitions that include but are not limited to, Coalition for Disability Health Equity, Health Policy and Disability Policy Consultant, Member and Attorney for the Institutional Review Board/Ethics Committee Deering Hospital, and consulting for Autistic Self-Advocacy Network.

“I work with a lot of coalitions that are made up of people of different racial and ethnic groups and LGTBQ folks... It is important to be involved in various organizations.”

*Theme 2: Barbara believed in collaboration with other disciplines to promote the profession of occupational therapy.*

Dr.Kornblau continually works to find ways for diverse disciplines to collaborate.

“You know my first position as head of a work program special intersection because I had my own work hardening clinic and I wanted to share what I was doing, I really felt it was important that more people could be doing it. I was also doing Workman's comp law at one point and they needed OT's so I kinda wanted to bring that expertise into that.”

“I started a free clinic for the deaf... I had OT students who were doing intake projects to help them and I had law students who were working there to screen for legal issues. It was a great combination, and to me, that was the kind of thing that was really helpful because it made an impact on the community.”

Dr.Kornblau values what the profession of OT has to offer and actively works with other disciplines to promote and advocate for the profession of occupational therapy.

### **Professional Life Flow**

*Theme 1: Regardless of obstacles in her career, Barbara persevered and stayed committed to all she served.*

Dr.Kornblau has had multiple different obstacles that she has overcome in her life. She overcame these obstacles and continued to persevere.

“When I moved to Miami I worked as an occupational therapist and went to law school and on my last day I was in a car accident. I was unable to attend law school during the day anymore so I went to night school because I was getting therapy during the day. To be honest, I didn't think I was going to practice anymore.”

*Theme 2: As contexts shifted in Barbara's professional life, she has been continually influenced and motivated by others around her.*

Dr.Kornblau has had many motivators and influences in her life that have shaped her into the professional that she is today.

“My mom worked in the occupational therapy department when I was growing up. My mom was a big influence on me because she was an advocate.”

Dr.Kornblau is motivated by looking at the big picture and making a plan to reach the end goal. She is willing to take the problem into her own hands and ensures that each necessary step is done to address the problem efficiently and effectively. Here she describes her mentality:

“When I see something that needs to be done and thought to myself that it was not being done, I would take it into my own hands to make sure it would be accomplished.”

**Justice**

*Theme 1: As a lawyer and an OT, Barbara has the ability to influence laws at the state and national level for people with disabilities.*

Dr. Kornblau advocates for the protection of the rights of those with disabilities.

“To me, it was a desire to give them access [individuals with disabilities] because it should be their legal right, and it should be their therapy right to be integrated into society.”

*Theme 2: Barbara advocates for the profession of occupational therapy and promotes the value of OT to other disciplines.*

Dr. Kornblau is a strong advocate for advancing the profession of occupational therapy. She values that the profession has diverse opportunities that allow the therapists the ability to influence many individuals' daily lives.

I like to use the theme of giving people their lives back. I think that, to me, is overarching. It [OT] is a powerful thing you hold in your hand to be able to give people their lives back...

After analyzing the categories and themes, an assertion developed: Dr. Barbara L. Kornblau is a major contributor to the field of occupational therapy through her commitment to legislation and promoting occupational therapy. She has influenced changes at the state and national level to increase social and occupational justice for individuals with disabilities.

**Discussion/Conclusion**

Using the Kawa model as a theoretical basis to gather the life history of Barbara helped the researchers to gain insight into her experiences (Iwama, Thompson, & MacDonald, 2009). Dr. Kornblau's life flow is impacted by different contexts, barriers, and assets that influence each

turning point in her professional life. Dr. Kornblau described her professional life roles as an occupational therapist and lawyer; Dr. Kornblau uses her knowledge and expertise from both roles to provide holistic care to her consumers.

Dr. Kornblau started her occupational therapy career during a time in history when the consumers she served had limited resources, and there were few laws to protect their rights. In the 1990s, Dr. Kornblau advocated during the transition period of ADA and IDEA, through her knowledge as an occupational therapist and lawyer. Barbara continued to work to push the profession of occupational therapy forward.

Dr. Kornblau has served many roles throughout her career: President of the American Occupational Therapy Association in the early 2000s, serving for multiple foundations and coalitions at the national level, and being an expert witness and lawyer. Not only was Dr. Kornblau involved in multiple roles, but she also advanced the profession by being published over 200 times in various occupational therapy texts and peer-reviewed publications. It was clear throughout the study that Dr. Kornblau is a strong advocate for the profession of occupational therapy.

It is evident that Dr. Kornblau's work has aligned with the American Occupational Therapy Association Centennial Vision. This vision works to ensure that occupational therapy is a powerful, widely recognized, science-driven and evidence-based profession with a diverse workforce meeting society's occupational needs (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2017c). Dr. Kornblau's passion and dedication to the profession of OT will continue to influence others for many years.

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**Appendix**

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**By: Kelsey Sherry, OTS & Gabrielle Wavra, OTS**

