

Evolution of Occupational Therapy Practice: Life History of

Lela Llorens, Ph.D., OTR/Ret, FAOTA

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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 occupational therapy 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. It is anticipated that the life history process will be a powerful way to gather this information.



Participant Description

Dr. Lela Llorens has contributed immensely to the profession of occupational therapy through her multiple roles of being a clinician, researcher, teacher, administrator, editor, and writer. Since the beginning of her career in 1953, Dr. Llorens has won every award presented within occupational therapy with a noted award of the Eleanor Clarke Slagle Lectureship in 1969.

Dr. Llorens's roles and experiences as a practitioner includes being a consultant to the federally funded project, Comprehensive Child Care Project, at Mount Zion Hospital in San Francisco, head of the occupational therapy department at Lafayette Clinic in Detroit, MI, and a therapist at Wayne County General Hospital and Northville State Hospital in Michigan. She has also held many presentations, consultations, workshops, and lectures throughout her career.

In relations to education, Dr. Llorens has had roles as a professor, chair, and graduate coordinator at San Jose State, the University of Florida, and the University of Southern California in the occupational therapy department. She has served on 8 doctoral and 125 master's degree committees for students of occupational therapy and other health disciplines. Although Dr. Llorens is retired now, she still serves as mentor for many students in San Marcos, CA.

Literature Review

- 1958: AOTA adopts educational standards for Certified Occupational Therapy Assistants (COTAs)
- 1965: The Social Security Amendment Act of 1965 created Medicare and Medicaid and presented occupational therapy under extended care services and home health
- 1974: AOTA approves in favor of state licensure and the first Model Practice Act is created
- 1981: AOTF began publishing the Occupational Therapy Journal of Research
- 1993: AOTA Standards and Ethics Commission published the "Core Values of Occupational Therapy"

Methodology

This was a qualitative study done using a life history approach. 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 approved by the UND Institutional Review Board and because of the study design the formal IRB process was waived. There were no gatekeeper issues as the course instructors made the initial contact. 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 could modify or add interview questions as needed for each specific interview.

Data Analysis

- A two-hour interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data were collapsed into 3 categories with 3-4 themes in each.
 - The categories produced were Overcoming Challenges, Personal Factors, and Occupational Therapy
- When combining the codes into categories and themes, the Kawa Model was used to guide the researchers. The researchers focused on major turning points and milestones in her career, as well as different aspects of her life including challenges and particularly meaningful experiences.
- The researchers used multiple sources for data gathering.
- Member checking was not used for the triangulation of the data. Reflection and clarification of responses occurred throughout the interview process to ensure the researchers' understanding of information was accurate.
- Through the data analysis process, the researchers established trustworthiness by memoing their experience and acknowledging any biases to improve the reliability and validity of the study.

Findings & Discussion

Overcoming Challenges

Dr. Llorens believes strongly in the power of a positive mindset to productively overcome any challenge that may present itself. She described herself as a "glass-half-full" person and credits overcoming obstacles in her life to always looking at the positive side of things. Additionally, she described herself as very observant and making "pretty good judgments" when successfully navigating positions that she was put in because it was assumed, she would fail. "If they would have known I could do it, they never would have appointed me to it".

Personal Factors

Since family is something that is very important to Dr. Llorens and aided in the development of her own sense of well being, she included them in all activities in her career. Through that, she was able to follow whatever career opportunities she felt called to pursue. Dr. Llorens also placed great value in serving others. Her career positions, volunteer work, and leadership style demonstrated that value. "I really think that anything that I can do that makes other peoples' lives better is what gives me the best joy".

Finding & Discussion (Cont.)

Occupational Therapy

Having entered the field of occupational therapy before it was considered a true "standalone profession", Dr. Llorens stated that much of her identity developed along with the professional identity of occupational therapy. In fact, she feels that being an occupational therapist is not just a career, but "it is a way of life" as it changes the way that she sees the world and the people around her.

Having seen the changes that have been made in the field over the years, she perceives that some changes made have been for the better, and others for the worse. For example, the shift from the entry-level of education being raised to a doctoral degree is something that Dr. Llorens believes is being based on the profession being "seduced" by other rehab professions doing it first, rather than making the change based on actual evidence of benefits to patients. "The profession needs to have a very stringent criteria for what constitutes a doctoral education in occupational therapy. I am not aware that they're as clearly defined as they will be".

Conclusion

Assertion: Dr. Llorens served as a pioneer for the occupational therapy profession. She was able to maintain success and optimism during a time that was discriminatory for her. Her family and desire to serve others was instrumental in her professional and personal life as they gave her actions meaning.

Through this interview, the researchers were able to gather great understanding of the life of Dr. Lela Llorens, her perspective of occupational therapy, and other significant events that occurred throughout her lifetime. With the number of accomplishments she has achieved in the profession, she will be known as one of the major influences that made occupational therapy into what it is today.

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