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An Exploration of Experiences that Influence Occupational Therapy Students' Motivations to Pursue Occupational Therapy as a Career

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**An Exploration of Experiences that Influence Occupational Therapy Students'
Motivations to Pursue Occupational Therapy as a Career**

By

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A culminating capstone project submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of
California in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in
Occupational Therapy

Dominican University of California

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Abstract

Occupational therapy (OT) is a client-centered healthcare profession that uses therapeutic activities to increase an individual's, group's, or population's participation in meaningful activities, otherwise known as occupations. The general underlying factors that motivate one's decision to choose this career path is well established within the existing literature. However, research into the experiences of students working alongside an occupational therapist (OT) prior currently faces a significant gap. The aim of this study is to identify and understand what first-hand experiences of OT brought OT students to pursue a career in occupational therapy. Through the lens of narrative inquiry, participants were given a narrative prompt to describe their first-hand experiences with occupational therapy. Following the participants' completion of a narrative prompt, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four pre-OT students from Dominican University of California and one entry level doctorate student from University of St. Augustine, Miami.

Wilcock's (1999) *Doing, Being and Becoming* was referenced as a guided theory during the thematic analysis as it reflects on "how a dynamic balance between doing and being is central to healthy living and how becoming whatever a person is best fitted to become is dependent on both" (1999, p.2). Through the utilization of these themes, the findings reveal that initial OT observation hours are highly influential towards one's decision to pursue OT as a career. Additionally, these findings suggest a need for required hours to include reflection and adequate hands-on experiences as provided by OT departments within colleges and universities.

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Introduction

Occupational therapy (OT) is a profession that helps to promote an individual's health and wellness, throughout the lifespan, through participation in meaningful activities otherwise known as occupations (Carr & Colin, 2018). The profession has been acknowledged as being one of the highest-ranked health care professions in the United States (Carr & Colin, 2018). Despite this, many people are more familiar with other healthcare professions such as physical therapy and nursing (Bithell, Greenwood, & Lim, 2005). Those who have chosen to pursue a career in OT are motivated by a variety of factors such as helping others, job salaries, and others.

The purpose of this study is to identify and understand what first-hand experiences of OT brought OT students to pursue a career in occupational therapy. The efforts of this study hope to answer the question: How do OT students' first-hand experiences with OT motivate their decision to pursue the profession? This study also anticipates expanding individuals' understanding of OT and what it has to offer as a potential career choice.

Literature Review

From a database search including *CINAHL*, *ERIC*, *Google Scholar*, *PsycInfo*, and *Iceberg*, the literature revealed common themes including a lack of understanding of OT, people's motivations in choosing specific OT specialties, and how people first learned about OT. The literature reveals a lack of research pertaining to the personal experiences of individuals who have shadowed occupational therapists whether in their hours for school or in their personal time. Specifically, how such experiences have influenced or solidified their decision to pursue a career in OT.

Lack of Understanding of What OT is as a Profession

Throughout the research, there was an overall unclear understanding and knowledge of what OT entails as a profession. Bithell, Greenwood and Lim (2005) reported people were more familiar with other health professions such as nursing and physical therapy. Specifically, with minority ethnic groups, they were likely to have "never heard" of OT, but knew a "fair amount" about physical therapy. Furthermore, limited knowledge of OT led to misconceptions about the profession. For example, one participant had thought that OTs were like psychologists (Bithell, Greenwood & Lim, 2005). Many other participants also believed that OT was less interesting and provided less job satisfaction as it did not have many opportunities to travel and meet people (Bithell, Greenwood & Lim, 2005). These misconceptions about OT also expanded to those within the medical and healthcare professions. Emechete, Mbada, Olaoye & Onigbinde (2016) found that although respondents had awareness of OT and its use of modalities in treatment, they were still unfamiliar with its roles and work settings.

Motivations and Dissuading Factors

The majority of OT programs include students who already hold a bachelor's degree (Craik & Naphine, 2001). According to Craik and Naphine (2001), psychology, education, and developmental science were the most commonly cited bachelor's degrees (p. 432). For those who already hold a first degree, it was found that job satisfaction and job flexibility are the main contributing factors with regard to motivations for pursuing a degree in OT (Dudgeon & Cunningham, 1992). Overall, individuals who are interested in pursuing a career in OT are motivated by variety and challenge, personal contact, client appreciation, and the desire to help people with disabilities (Craik & Naphine, 2001). Rozier, Gilkeson, and Hamilton (1992) add that individuals find the job salary, nationwide job availability, regular hours, and prestige that is associated with the profession to also be motivating.

The majority of the studies included in this literature review focused on positive factors influencing one's choice to pursue OT as a career, however it is essential to account for dissuading factors. Similar to the findings from Bithell, Greenwood and Lim (2005), Cooperstein & Schwartz (1991) found that a lack of understanding of OT as a profession became one of the leading reasons why individuals decided not to pursue OT. Other dissuading factors include the following, ranked highest to lowest: (1) expense of education, (2) difficulties in training, (3) fear of not being accepted, (4) length of training, (5) interest in other fields, (6) distance of nearest program, (7) salaries not high enough, (8) it is a female profession, (9) poor chance of advancement, (10) interest in physical therapy, and (11) lack of respect (Cooperstein & Schwartz, 1991).

Recruitment for OT

Within the existing literature, methods of recruitment in OT vary depending on specific age groups. In Craik, Douthwaite, Gissane and Philip's study (2001), "mature" (over 21 years old) students discovered OT differently from the younger students. For instance, about 71.2% of the students had previously worked in a healthcare setting. Respondents who were under 20 used a school advisor or the College of Occupational Therapists (professional body of OT's in the United Kingdom) to discover OT. Despite the lack of knowledge of OT, students were still motivated to choose this career. Craik and Napthine (2001), shared that students often discovered OT through family members, friends, and acquaintances—either in the profession or in related professions. Similarly, Olaoye, Emechete, Onigbinde, & Mbaba (2001) discovered that undergraduate students were exposed to OT through friends, colleagues or personal contact with occupational therapy practitioners. These studies were unable to accentuate or extrapolate on the lived experiences of participants that have shadowed occupational therapy practitioners.

Summary and Conclusion of Literature Review

The research conducted in this literature review discusses the prevalence of students going into the healthcare field, but a lack of people going into occupational therapy due to several different factors including a lack of knowledge of OT. By learning the personal experiences of individuals who have shadowed OTs, one can further learn how to recruit more accurate knowledge into the field of OT.

In the literature, readers can find students identifying factors which made them pursue the field of OT. Personal experiences were stated, but the articles lacked how specific components of their experience impacted their decision. Oftentimes, participants mentioned that a friend, family member, or high school counselor referred them to OT. After assessing the existing literature, no

articles had discussed a direct connection to OT observation hours as a reason to pursue OT. Personal narratives were also not present in any of the research conducted. Thus, the research gap involves students' direct experiences volunteering or shadowing an occupational therapist—leading them towards a decision to pursue this career.

Theoretical Framework

A relevant theory for the study is the themes of Doing, Being and Becoming (Wilcock, 1999). In the article, Wilcock reflects on “how a dynamic balance between doing and being is central to health living and how becoming whatever a person is best fitted to become is dependent on both” (1999, p. 2). The construct of “doing” is best described as engagement in occupations, such as daily tasks (Wilcock, 1999). By doing, one can engage in social interaction, and thus contribute to both personal and societal development. Wilcock describes being as “being true to ourselves, to our nature, to our essence and to what is distinctive about us to bring to others as part of our relationships and to what we do” (Wilcock, 1999, p. 5). An individual’s “being” is influenced through reflection in order to discover themselves. Finally, “becoming” describes individuals as a process in which each person has the opportunity to experience potential growth and self-actualization (Wilcock, 1999). These constructs would help to formulate the themes and subthemes based on the participants’ responses. This was originally not the intended framework to be used as the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) was the original intended theory.

SDT was developed by Richard Ryan and Edward Deci, who were two psychologists from the University of Rochester. SDT looks into human motivation and personality which helps with a person’s overall experience, performance, and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Ryan and Deci believed that chosen actions and motivations can be determined by a pressure or force. Motivation can therefore be defined as something that is driven within (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Overall, three needs influence motivations within humans: need for competence, need for relatedness, and need for autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Intrinsic motivation primarily focuses on spontaneous interest and enjoyment as a driving force for motivation throughout one’s life

(Ryan & Deci, 2000). Extrinsic motivation contrasts from intrinsic motivation as it is driven from the expectations of an activity or society. Thus, it is not as autonomous as intrinsic motivation because the actions may not be done out of personal interest and enjoyment. . Overall, SDT can be useful in determining how internal and external motivations can influence behavioral regulation as well as decision making.

Within the study, the SDT lens was incorporated through narrative inquiry, which looks into the individuals' personal stories through the use of texts. Following the data analysis, the researchers concluded that themes would best resonate with Wilcock's "Doing, Being and Becoming". However, intrinsic and extrinsic influences from SDT were still considered throughout the study.

Ethical and Legal Considerations

Recruitment

Recruitment was conducted through the use of flyers, spoken communication, and emails detailing the study at both university campuses. The poster (Appendix C) which was created for both universities to reference, includes the title of the study with a brief description, the capstone contact email, inclusion criteria for participation, and compensation for participation. At Dominican University of California, students within the Pre-OT program were asked to participate in the study in person during Pre-OT courses—OT 1002 and OT 1004 in the spring of 2020. First-term OT students at St. Augustine's campuses (San Marcos, CA, Dallas, TX, and Miami, FL) were also asked to participate in the study. Specifically, at the San Marcos campus, students were recruited in person during their seminar class and at a student occupational therapy association meeting.

Confidentiality

The researchers safeguarded the privacy of participants by refraining from sharing or discussing any personal information with other participants or individuals outside of the research team. To further protect participants, all names have been kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms, provided by the participants, during and after completion of the study. Throughout the interview process, audio recordings were kept on password locked phones which are owned by the researchers conducting the interviews. Immediately following the interview, the audio recordings were uploaded to a password protected *Google Drive*, which the researchers and advisors have access to. This *Google Drive* also includes data collected from the Google Form (Appendix A), which participants were required to complete prior to their interview. The audio files on researchers' phones were permanently deleted after securely uploading the data to

Google Drive. To strengthen security, the *Google* account used by the researchers required a two-step verification process in order to access the raw and computerized data.

Consent

Prior to the study, the participants were notified on the background of the study and the step-by-step process that they were included in. Participants signed a consent form confirming their participation in the study. By signing the consent form, the participants were aware that the information they shared may be included in the study. Participants were also aware that they were able to opt out of the study at any time.

Institutional Review/Agency Permissions

This study has been approved by Dominican University of California's IRB (IRB #10807) and University of St. Augustine San Marcos' IRB (IRB #1125-019). Participants were able to opt out at any time of the study.

OT Code of Ethics

Throughout the study, the researchers abided by the AOTA Code of Ethics (2015). With nonmaleficence, the researchers ensured that they were not trying to make participants feel uncomfortable in any way during the interviews. If they did at any point feel uncomfortable, they had the option to opt out of the study. With autonomy, participants could opt out at any time, and they could withhold any information they did not feel comfortable sharing. Abiding by justice, the researchers made sure that all participants were treated equally and did not favor one story or experience over the other during the study. Regarding veracity, the researchers were truthful and stated that participation in the study would not advance the participants' experience in the program or chance of admission in the program in any way. For fidelity, the researchers

respected all experiences shared during this study. Finally, for beneficence, the researchers provided a safe environment for the participants to feel comfortable to share their stories.

Methods

Research Design

For the purposes of this qualitative study, narrative inquiry was utilized. Creswell (2007) describes narratives as texts used in qualitative research, which specifically focuses on the individuals' stories. Personal accounts can be transcribed in the form of life histories, autobiographies, interviews, journals, or other similar modalities (Creswell, 2007). As described previously, the researchers collected texts from participants' initial personal narratives and subsequent in-depth interview transcripts. Researchers can use the narratives as a method by analyzing and understanding the experiences shared through the stories. In order to implement this type of methodology, researchers must use stories from individuals, focus on the reported experiences and then find meaning within the data gathered (Creswell, 2007).

Participants

To be included in this study, students from Dominican University of California and St. Augustine campuses had to be currently enrolled in a pre-OT program or deciding to enroll in one within the next academic year. The pre-OT students at Dominican University of California are enrolled in introductory OT courses that are not yet officially in the professional portion of the program. Entry-level doctorate students at University of St. Augustine have already obtained their bachelors and masters degrees. Altogether, these students must have already made a decision to OT and have had first-hand experience seeing occupational therapy. The exclusion criteria for this study includes students enrolled full time in an occupational therapy program at Dominican, or students who have completed the OT curriculum for more than a term at St. Augustine. Also, students who are under the age of eighteen are within the exclusion criteria.

Data Collection

The design of this study is based on narrative inquiry which, for our purposes, focuses on obtaining texts that involve participant's first-hand experience. In an effort to obtain this information, the study is structured around the participants' initial journal entries derived from the given prompt via *Google Form* (Appendix A). Guided questions were also given to tailor their responses to how their experience impacted them, made them feel, and how it may or may not have influenced their decision to pursue OT. After receiving and analyzing the written narratives, the participants were asked to attend a semi-structured interview regarding their written response. The interview's purpose was to discover how students' prior exposure to OT impacted their decision to pursue the career.

Data Analysis

For data analysis, identified themes were gathered from the diary entries and interviews. The researchers sought out personal meanings derived from the participants' narratives to create codes. Codes included any mention of feelings, conversations, and moments of reflection from the participant's experience. For data production, the researchers used a data management software called *Dedoose* to assist with coding and the creation of themes from excerpts of the diary entries and interviews.

The researchers utilized Braun & Clarke's (2006) *Thematic Analysis* to analyze the data. Coding consisted of identifying any unique and related experiences amongst the participants. Initial codes were conducted by the researchers who had conducted the interview. Then, researchers altogether reviewed the data in order to ensure the accuracy of the findings. Specifically, the researchers looked for themes in which participants described their experiences

shadowing an occupational therapist. To ensure inter-rater reliability, multiple researchers analyzed texts and formulated the codes.

Findings

Demographic Information

Five students participated in the study and are presented in Table 1 below. Four participants are currently enrolled in Dominican University's Pre-OT program, while the other participant is an entry level doctorate student at University of St. Augustine in Miami, FL. Pre-OT students at Dominican are enrolled in introductory OT courses that focus on introducing and critically analyzing the *Occupational Therapy Practice Framework (Third Edition, 2014)*.

Table 1 Demographic Information of Participants

Pseudonym	University	Year/Class	Where participant had seen OT
Laura Jean	Dominican University of CA	Sophomore Pre-OT	SNF
Moss Ball	Dominican University of CA	Freshman Pre-OT	Inpatient
Erin	Dominican University of CA	Freshman Pre-OT	Home Health: OT worked with her sibling
Bex	Dominican University of CA	Freshman Pre-OT	Inpatient Outpatient Mental Health
M.	University of St. Augustine, Miami	Entry Level MOT/OTD	Pediatrics: OT worked with child that she nannied

Doing

“Doing” pertains to the participant’s direct involvement as part of their OT observation hours. These experiences include observing and working alongside the OT and interacting with the clients. The involvement of participants throughout their observation hours solidified their decision to pursue OT as a career. Participants came to understand that their values and beliefs align with the “doing” aspect of OT services. By communicating with clients and OT practitioners, they were able to gain insight into their abilities and potential to be a satisfactory occupational therapist. For instance, participants identified that positive emotional responses from clients which arose in response to their service delivery was influential towards their decision to pursue OT as a career.

Involvement/Hands-On

Most participants were involved within the sessions, therefore having an active experience. Erin, for example, directly participated in their sister’s OT session by helping their sister with completing puzzles and playing with chalk. This was a key motivating factor leading towards their decision-making early on to choose OT over the other disciplines. Erin shared, “I don't really think even if I was home that I would have been swayed to do speech therapy or anything else just because of how involved I was in my sister's OT sessions.”

In contrast, Laura Jean did not have hands-on experience, and they shared: “If I got hands on, I could've solidified even more that this is the profession I want by knowing the language of how to help people.” Although they did not have hands-on experience like Erin, Laura Jean acknowledged the impact that the experience could have provided them. These findings suggest that having hands-on experiences is an important factor in the participants’ choice of OT.

Objective OT Observations

The objective OT observations pertain to what the participant saw during the OT sessions. Observations included treatment implementation and any client therapist interactions. For instance, one participant observed client education on mobility and balance in the skilled nursing facility to facilitate improved engagement in activities of daily living. From the continued education and training provided by the OT, participants noted that they had observed progress among the clients, which they found to be rewarding.

Client-Participant Interaction

Client-participant interaction includes any conversations participants had with the clients in addition to direct involvement in OT sessions with the client. These interactions were meaningful for both the participants' and the clients they interacted with.

Emotional Impact of Client. Throughout their observation hours, participants interacted with various clients. The overwhelmingly positive interactions often had a profound impact on the participants' decisions to pursue OT as a career. Affirmations from clients in response to the quality care provided was one of the key contributing factors towards this decision. For instance, Moss Ball reflected on the positive impact of OT services stating, "A lot of the patients were really grateful and [pause] I feel like that is really what pushed me more to choose OT over any other major when deciding." Another noticeable aspect of these interactions were the perceived benefits of OT services. Specifically, both the participants and the clients believed that the services offered were beneficial in meeting targeted outcomes. In support of this finding, Erin stated:

If I didn't have the experience my family had with my sister, I feel like I'd be in a completely different place. I may not even really know what I want to do. And so I feel

like the whole experience with my sister and then her having OT, that is definitely a huge part as to why I picked OT.

Erin's experience was different from other participants in that the OT services they observed were directed towards their sister. Witnessing the positive outcomes as a result of OT services influenced their decision to pursue OT as a career.

Meaningful Interactions

This includes any interaction between the client, participant, or therapist. Participants were able to recall these interactions while completing observation hours and explained how they played a key role in their decision to choose OT. Their interactions guided them in their overall reflection process, and it further strengthened their interest in OT.

Client centeredness. Participants noted how client-centered the OT's were during the sessions by referencing that they considered activities important to the client, as well as considering the client's best interests. They also observed a collaborative relationship between the OT and their clients. This was a contributing factor towards their decision to pursue OT as a career. Moss Ball shares, "I feel like we really incorporate all aspects. All of our client factors, [pause] not just the client, we don't isolate one event, we put it all together and that's how we perform treatment." Moss Ball also included:

I really appreciated how the therapists would include the client's favorable occupations while pushing them to improve/get better. It made me realize how broad occupational therapy can actually be and how therapy sessions can shift depending on the patients' needs or desires.

From Moss Ball's experience, they expressed their appreciation in the client-centered aspect of the profession and acknowledged that flexibility is important to being client-centered. Overall,

participants noted that OT practitioners incorporate meaningful activities within sessions to improve their clients' well-being and quality of life.

Participant-Therapist Interactions. These include conversations between the participant and the OT that they shadowed. For some participants, the OT took the time to explain why they were implementing intervention strategies, in addition to answering any of the participants' questions about the session. Bex, for example, had an overall beneficial experience working with the OT's at the site stating:

Being able to work in inpatient and psych and especially working with the OTs that I was working with. They're really great people and they taught me so much, they didn't have to at all, but they were like, "We want her to learn everything because we just feel like she needs to know.

For Bex, knowing that the OTs were willing to answer their questions increased their confidence to engage throughout their observation hours. This allowed them to gain more insight into the profession and feel valued during their time at the site.

Real World Application. A common observation was how applicable the OT interventions were to real life scenarios. Moss Ball observed sessions incorporating instrumental activities of daily living (IADLs) in the therapy gym and shares,

I had this kitchen in the therapy gym and where they basically had stoves, ovens for literally everything you would need for, like a kitchen where they had PTs and OTs, like a PT and OT working together with usually four patients to cook a meal.

Witnessing just how transferable the interventions were to the client's daily occupations made the OT sessions seem more meaningful and useful. In all, the participants valued a more realistic

and holistic approach to intervention implementation. This type of approach is unique to the field of OT and was identified as a motivating factor.

Being

For the participants, “being” is connected to their own personal values and beliefs, and how they aligned with the principles of OT. “Being” can be seen as one’s way of knowing themselves and how their past experiences have shaped them to who they are now. Seeing how OT relates to their values, interests and beliefs became an important contributing factor to pursuing OT.

Participant Factors

This construct includes any preferences, values, and beliefs of the participants. These factors are intrinsic motivators that could potentially change in response to the participant’s observations and experiences. For many of the participants, their intention was to align their personal factors with what the OT practitioners or other healthcare professionals do on a daily basis.

Preferences. Prior to beginning their observation hours, each participant had an initial interest in the field of OT, and some had a specific demographic they wanted to work with. They came to find OT through various outlets such as school, friends, and family members. Laura Jean stated, “It’s again, like unique and diverse. So that’s what attracted me because the meaning of [OT] and purpose could be different for many people.” For Laura Jean, they discovered that OT could provide them with a plethora of unique opportunities to work with different populations.

Values. Each participant stated what they held valuable through their interactions with the therapists. Values are defined as what the participants had found personally meaningful to them. Bex values being able to do something that they are passionate about as they state:

I'd rather be doing something that I love than something that just pays me a lot. [pause]

Then having the experience of the 40 hours, I feel a lot more confident and I'm like, this is something that I would be proud of myself for doing for even the rest of my life.

For Bex, their decision was driven by intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivations. Their interest in OT was not because of the salary but rather because it was something that they were passionate about, and most importantly something that they could see themselves doing.

Miley, on the other hand, had stated their value of independence and the incorporation of family-centered care:

I really liked how they incorporated the family, which is something that I feel like I really want to do as an OT...So I feel like having that sense of independence is obviously something I value and then also incorporating family as well.

In contrast to Bex, Miley's decision is driven by extrinsic factors. Specifically, they are motivated by the progress clients make in response to therapy. They value the independence that is associated with OT practice, in addition to the involvement of relevant individuals in sessions.

Beliefs. Alongside their values, the participants also stated what they held to be true. These "truths" could stem from their past experiences or acquired during their observation hours. Bex believed in the importance of patient involved care as they stated:

I really liked OT a lot more because it is, like you said, it is so much more patient involved and very creative. Finding different ways to help them gain back their independence instead of having to follow a guideline of getting them back to mobility.

Bex holds the "truth" that other healthcare disciplines are less creative compared to OT. They appreciate the flexibility of intervention techniques and tailoring sessions to the client.

Erin spoke on their own personal qualities and how their experience with their sister receiving OT impacted their perspective of others, “I feel like one of my strongest qualities just as a person is how understanding I am because of the whole ordeal that my family went through with them. And so, you never know what somebody's going through.” Erin’s experience had developed their empathy for others, which is an essential quality of an OT.

Becoming

“Becoming” relates to the reflective narrative aspect of this study, as participants recalled their experiences, and what they were able to gain from their observation hours. Participants reflected on how their observations made them feel, and if those feelings persuaded or dissuaded them in any way from the field of OT. However, it is important to note that “becoming” is an ongoing process, and therefore will continue beyond their initial experience. Becoming is not just the reflection of their initial experience, but how the participants will be able to apply what they have learned into their future as students and clinicians.

Participant Initial Interest

Alongside their firsthand experiences with OT, many participants discussed their initial interest prior to discovering this career path. They mentioned their interest in going into the medical field in particular. For example, Miley’s initial interest was always OT, and they stated:

I feel like it kind of just dictated where I wanted to go. Like I've known since sixth grade that I want to be an OT. I mean, I saw that it made such an impact in this child's life and it made an impact in the family's life as well.

Each participant had their own unique experience of discovering OT and they therefore may have had different established times in which they had an interest in OT.

Subjective OT Observations

The researchers prompted the participants to discuss any observations that they remember from their interactions with the occupational therapists. Following their interactions, they continued to reflect on their experiences and make ties to their future career choice. Miley stated:

I think it's cool because you go to a doctor and I feel like, if you have your general checkup up, then they will talk to you, but then they'll focus mainly on the parent. And so it was kind of cool how holistically it was that they were involving everyone.

Understanding OT

Throughout their journeys, and firsthand experiences many participants stated that they gained a deeper understanding of what OT is and what it means to be an OT. For example, Laura Jean came to conclude:

I recognize that OTs, um, are constantly trying to be resourceful, resourceful for their clients. And that just means like being flexible with the condition of the client and considering other organizations and maybe even other areas of profession that I can contribute or help out with the client's wellbeing.

Another participant Erin stated:

You're not just helping somebody with one thing, like you're not doing the same thing over and over again every day with different people. Each session is something completely different and even each session with one person could be different and it's like what they need help with and what you can help them accomplish.

These quotes provide insight into the participants' personal growth and understanding of OT.

The role of OT practitioners pertains to being flexible and accommodating to the client's needs.

Both participants understand through their experience that OT is individualized for each client and therefore each treatment is different to promote the well-being of their clients.

Outside Influences

Some participants have explained that they witnessed OT prior to their initial observation hours. They claim to have saw OT with a family member or knew an OT practitioner directly. Erin stated:

If I didn't have the experience my family had with my sister, I feel like I'd be in a completely (emphasis) different place. Like I may not even really know what I want to do. And so, I feel like the whole experience with my sister and then her having OT, that is definitely a huge part as to why I picked OT.

For Erin, this outside influence was their family. Intrinsic motivation plays a key role in the decision-making process, however for Erin, extrinsic factors including her sister can be equally as motivating.

Discussion

From previous research, there was a lack of understanding of OT as a profession (Bithell, Greenwood & Lim, 2005), however, individuals who did have an interest in OT chose the profession for various reasons. Such included a desire to help others with disabilities, client appreciation, job salary and prestige (Craik & Naphine, 2001; Rozier, Gilkeson, & Hamilton, 1992). Through looking into their first-hand experiences, participants had reflected upon experiences from their observation hours and personal encounters. Therefore, they had a better understanding of OT as a profession as it has been described as client-centered. The previous participants came from various backgrounds as some had already obtained a degree and worked in a healthcare setting while others were still in high school (Craik, Douthwaite, Gissanearicle, & Philip, 2001). Despite these findings, there was still a lack of qualitative research in determining why participants chose OT. Furthermore, the participants in these past studies did not discuss any experiences they had working alongside an OT and how that had impacted their decision to pursue the career. In an effort to expand upon the existing literature, our study aimed to uncover the motivations leading to one's decision to choose OT as a career. In accordance with the studies included in our literature review, the researchers found that meaningful interactions with client's and a desire to help others are intrinsic motivators. By uncovering the importance of first-hand experiences and the reflective process within OT observation process, it is clear that these factors are highly influential and necessary.

From the findings, the researchers had discovered a pattern in the reflective process the participants went through in telling their first-hand experiences. Although the study had focused solely on the participants' first-hand experiences with OT, the participants had touched upon multiple incidents that also contributed to their pursuit of OT. They discussed their first-hand

experiences, interdisciplinary interactions, conversations and thought provoking moments from class, stories from the OT practitioners they observed, and personal interactions with clients. Reflection does not recede in one instance, it is continuous and occurs at different points in time with new and developing trains of thought. With each new experience, their reflections can deepen and become more meaningful.

Figure 1 is a visual representation of the participants' reflective process. "Being" and "doing" were a part of the initial process of understanding their own values and beliefs aligning with the principles of OT, and through that the participants were reflecting on their "becoming", which is a reflective process. The timeline shows that the researchers had only asked the participants at one moment in time of their journey to OT. They have shown that their journey and reflection of OT is an ongoing process and can occur throughout their journey.

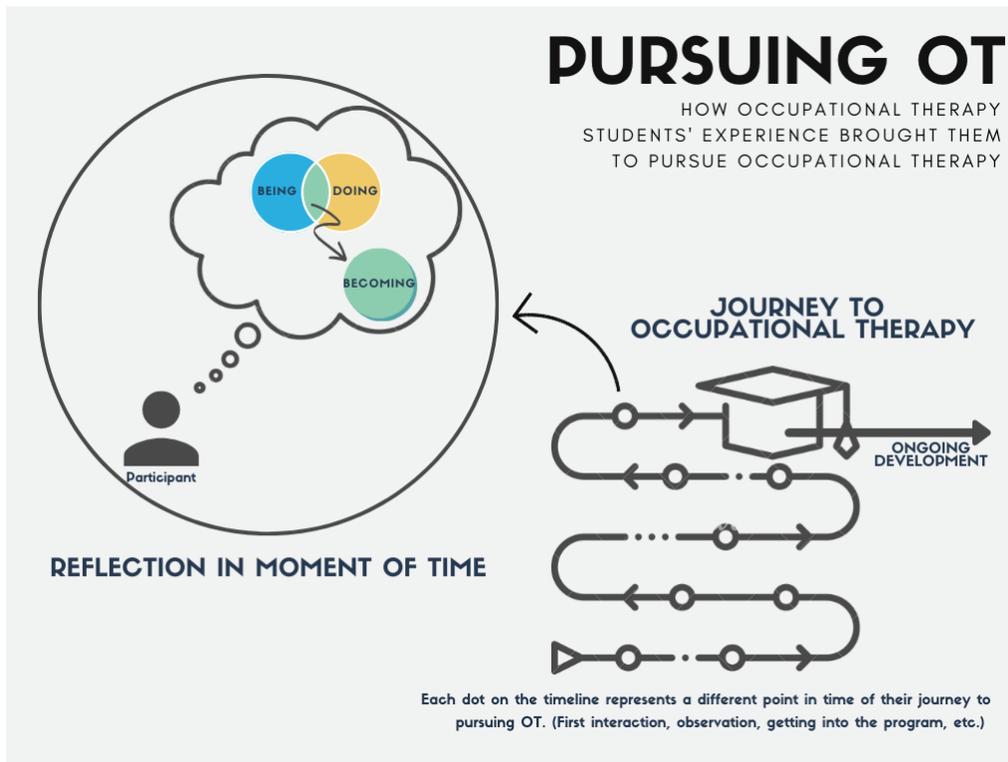


Figure 1 Visual Representation of Participants' Reflection Process

Limitations

A relatively small sample size of four participants from Dominican University of California and one participant from the University of St. Augustine, Miami was included in the study. As a result, the participants are identified as entry level OT students who have chosen to pursue a career in OT. The results obtained from this study therefore may not be generalizable to students outside of this specific demographic. Recruitment for this study was limited due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This pandemic limited physical access to recruitment, by shifting recruitment to online. It also might have caused added time and writing on top of the students already hefty workload, leaving many students too stressed to partake in the study. In addition, students from University of St. Augustine were still transitioning into their first trimester of the program and thus might have prioritized the transition over the study.

Being that the participants were already enrolled in introductory occupational therapy courses and seminars, the experiences of participants during their occupational therapy observation hours may have been more influenced by their pre-OT coursework. For instance, some participants used occupational therapy professional jargon during the interviews that they did not know at the time of their occupational therapy observation experience.

Implications for Occupational Therapy

This study aims to assist occupational therapists in gaining a deeper understanding of how they directly or indirectly influence future students. For some volunteers completing observation hours, there may be a lack of hands-on involvement. When a student moves into fieldwork, they are then given more hands-on opportunities. It may be beneficial to allow more hands-on experiences as early as their observation hours to allow students to apply these experiences to their future learning in an upcoming course. Having more hands-on experiences

may facilitate retention of information and increased student engagement. Furthermore, students can have more time to reflect on their experience thus retaining what they are watching the OT do.

From the study, the reflective process was a component which helped participants to pursue OT as a career. Therefore, in regard to emphasizing a more hands-on experience, admissions or fieldwork coordinators can prompt students to reflect more in depth on their involvement. This can be done through the completion of journal entries to submit along with the hours completed. OT supervisors may also find it advantageous to plan learning opportunities for their students. Despite the policies and regulations within specific sites, OT students can still be provided with hands-on experiences that do not involve direct client care. This may include prompting the student to suggest intervention techniques, having them create their own documentation following the sessions they observe, and developing their version of the client's occupational profile.

Due to the COVID pandemic, some occupational therapy programs, including University of St. Augustine, no longer required their applicants to complete 40 hours of observation. Additionally, other universities, such as the University of Tennessee Health Science OT program in Memphis, have found an alternative format for admissions' observations hours through the use of a free online module. Moreover, Dominican University of California revised this requirement to 20 hours in person, and 20 hours in an alternative format. This has raised a debate on the use of observation hours, and if it is beneficial for students to complete the required hours upon admission to their prospective OT programs. It is important to be mindful of the impact that observation hours can provide for a student: meaningful interactions with clients, direct conversations with an OT, and alignment with one's values and beliefs. While (keeping in mind),

access to the sites, hours, and experiences. Our study aims to give therapists key areas to be mindful of in aiding in the process of a student becoming an OT including hands-on experiences and self-reflection. Moreover, it may be advantageous for admissions departments to encourage more hands-on involvement for students to gain more retention of the information. Admissions should consider offering various forms of observation hours to ensure every student has the opportunity to be admitted into their desired OT program. This may include continued online observation hours through a virtual simulation followed with self-reflection via a journal.

For future research, it may be beneficial to choose participants who had not yet been enrolled in introductory occupational therapy courses but had still completed observation hours. This prevents any bias or influence from occupational therapy coursework. It may also be beneficial to students who completed hours with OT but did not choose OT to learn of any dissuading factors into OT to further help admissions.

Recommendations

For future research, it may be beneficial to choose participants who had not yet been enrolled in introductory occupational therapy courses but had still completed observation hours. This may limit the amount of OT jargon used in the interviews and prevent any bias. For the field of OT, it may be advantageous for admissions departments to implement less required observation hours and encourage more hands-on involvement. Having more hands-on experiences will facilitate retention of information and increased student engagement. Furthermore, students can have more time to reflect on their experience thus retaining what they are watching the OT do.

In order to gain a larger range of experiences, additional cohorts can be included to compare any similar experiences or outlooks on OT. For Dominican University of California

specifically this would include looking at the BS/MS cohort along with the ELM cohort. Also further extending this study to high school students who have an interest in pursuing OT as a major. This can look into how they first discovered OT, and what they were able to learn more about after their first-hand experience with an OT.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to further understand how first-hand experiences of occupational therapy have influenced students' desires to pursue a career in OT. The efforts of this study hope to expand individuals' understanding of OT and what it has to offer as a potential career choice. The nature of this study allowed participants to reflect on their own journey to OT and how it has affected them. Through *Doing, Being* and *Becoming*, the method of reflection solidified the participants' decision to pursue OT as a career. It is essential to recognize that reflection is an ongoing process that extends to one's professional career.

In all, the researchers hope these findings bring more awareness to the field of OT and aid in the creation of more meaningful real-life opportunities for students deciding to join the field of OT. The participants' first-hand experiences did play a role in helping them to pursue OT, but it was also through reflection that they were able to solidify their decision.

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Appendix A: Google Form for Narrative Prompt

Participant Narrative Prompt Form via Google Form

Shortened Link to Google Form: <https://forms.gle/TtEdXEXWmpFYRZN57>

We thank you for taking part in our study! With this Google form, you are eligible for this study and submitted your written consent form to participate in this study. The purpose of this study is to identify and understand how an occupational therapy student's life events or experiences shaped and motivated their decision to enter the field of occupational therapy. In efforts to do so, we ask you, our participant, to respond to a narrative prompt in this Google Form. After completing this form, we will follow-up to schedule an interview regarding your prompt response. You are allowed to withdraw from the study at any time. If you have any further questions or concerns, feel free to email pursuingot@gmail.com at any time.

This study is a collaboration between occupational therapy (OT) students at Dominican University of California in San Rafael, CA and University of St. Augustine in San Marcos, CA.

Narrative Prompt and Response

Estimated time to complete this prompt: 30 minutes

We ask you to write as much as you are comfortable sharing and be thorough with your experience. The responses that you give will prompt the questions for the follow-up interview.

If you need to look back on your response in preparation of the interview, please contact us at pursuingot@gmail.com and we will be happy to email your response to you.

Please feel free to use these series of questions as a guide for your prompt:

- Describe your experience. What did you see and hear during this experience? What type of setting was it? Did it occur at more than one place? Were you there for a long period of time?

- What events impacted you? How did those around you, such as occupational therapists, clients, or yourself, take action? What stood out to you? What questions did you have about the experience?
- How would you define occupation? How did you see occupation in what you experienced?
- What did you feel during this experience? What did you like, dislike or feel indifferent to during your experience?
- How do you feel this experience influenced your decision to become an occupational therapist or continue to become an occupational therapist? How would you define occupational therapy?

Prompt: Tell me a story about a time when you saw occupational therapy in action. (This can include volunteering with an OT or a personal experience with an OT.)

Follow-Up Interview

Thank you for your narrative response. We hope it was moment of reflection on your journey of OT. Now, onto the next portion of the study. The majority of the follow-up interview will focus on your responses to the previous prompts. The interview will be approximately an hour in length. Below, please indicate what would be the best way to proceed with the interview.

You will be receiving a confirmation email from pursuingot@gmail.com to schedule your follow-up interview.

Questions:

1. In effort to keep your identity confidential, please provide a pseudonym you would like to be addressed as. (Pseudonym Examples: Sweet Cakes, KG, John Doe)

2. Please provide an email for us to contact regarding follow-up interview. (Your email will only be shared among the members of this capstone team and their advisors. It is only as a means of scheduling the follow-up interview. (ex. sweetcakes@hotmail.com)
3. How would you like to proceed with your follow-up interview? (Reminder: Follow-up interview will approximately take an hour and will be audio recorded.)
 - a. Google Meet (Phone Call/Video Chat)
 - b. Zoom Video Chat

Thank you again for participating in our study!

You will be receiving a confirmation email from pursuingot@gmail.com in the next 48 hours to confirm your eligibility to participate in the study and schedule your follow-up interview.

If you have any further questions or concerns about anything regarding your response or our study, feel free to email pursuingot@gmail.com

Appendix B: Questions for Follow-Up Interview

Follow-Up Interview

Follow-up interviews will be regarding the participants' responses to the narrative prompts.

Therefore, the interviews were semi-structured, and questions will vary depending on the responses of the participants. However, the investigators have come up with essential questions that must be answered, whether it be in the participants' responses or their follow-up interviews.

Those questions are listed below:

1. Describe the setting you were in while you observed an OT. Were you in a setting of your choice?
2. What was the OT doing which may or may not have aligned with your values and beliefs?
3. Once you started to have a better understanding of OT, how did you feel when you started to explain to others that you have chosen to pursue this profession?
4. How did you feel when you came to realize that OT was a profession that you wanted to pursue?
5. Did your views of OT change at all after your experience in OT? How did it change?
6. Were there any defining moments or experiences that influenced your understanding of OT?
7. Was discovering OT a defining moment in your life as you decide to pursue it as a desired career?

Appendix C: Recruitment Flyer

WHY DID YOU PURSUE OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY?

LOOKING FOR BS/MS PRE-OT STUDENTS

Participate in a qualitative study in efforts to understand how first-hand experiences with an occupational therapist influenced students' decision to pursue occupational therapy.



This study is a collaboration between occupational therapy students of Dominican University of California in San Rafael, CA and University of St. Augustine in San Marcos, CA.

IF INTERESTED OR HAVE ANY FURTHER
QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY,
PLEASE CONTACT PURSURINGOT@GMAIL.COM