HISTORY OF OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY

Exploring the professional experiences of occupational therapists who started working in the Republic of Ireland in the 1970s.

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Why study the history of Occupational Therapy?

“Study the past if you would define the future.”
Confucius

- Professional understanding and critical reflection
- Professional identity
- Group cohesiveness
- Pride, inspiration and celebration of accomplishments
- Gain perspective on current dilemmas
- Contribution to society

(Hocking 2012; Canadian Nurses Association 2007; Black and MacRaid 2000).
History of Occupational Therapy in Ireland

- Little published material is available about the development of occupational therapy in Ireland (for some exceptions, see Patterson, 2004; Butler & Ryan, 2004; Cremin, 2004).
- The term ‘occupational therapy’ was used in Ireland from 1930 onwards.
- Prior to the second World War, occupational therapy was mainly considered (with some exceptions) to be craft work undertaken by patients in TB sanatoria and psychiatric hospitals. Those who worked in occupational therapy were mainly nurses, artists, craft workers and former patients of tuberculosis sanatoria.
- Professionally qualified occupational therapists began to practice in Ireland post World War two.
- 1963 - Ireland’s first occupational therapy programme (at St. Joseph’s College of Occupational Therapy, Dun Laoghaire) accepted its first students.

Researching the history of Occupational Therapy at the University of Limerick

- Formal project on the history of occupational therapy in Ireland began at UL in 2012.
- Current focus:
  - Oral history interviews with pioneering occupational therapists
  - The study of the therapeutic use of activity at the Central Mental Hospital, Dundrum (and in other psychiatric hospitals) in the late 19th and early 20th century
  - The development of the occupational therapy programmes at St. Finan’s Psychiatric Hospital, Killarney and St Patrick’s Hospital, Dublin
  - The development of the History of Occupational Therapy in Ireland archive
Study aims:

1. To explore and record the professional experiences of occupational therapists who started working in Ireland in the 1970s.

2. To identify the key challenges and benefits of their experiences.

3. To contribute to the University of Limerick research on the history of occupational therapy in Ireland and to international efforts to preserve and promote the history of the profession.

Literature Review

History of nursing, medicine and other health professions is well documented, both in Ireland and abroad (Oakley 2005; O’Brien 1984; Scanlan 1991; Fealy 2005; D’Antonio 2010; Porter 1996.)

Associations for the history of nursing and medicine in Canada, Australia, UK and America.

UCD Centre for the history of nursing, midwifery and medicine.

International literature on the history of occupational therapy (Duncan 2011; Roberts et al 2008; Stein and Cutler 2002; Wilcock 2001; McKay 2008)
Methodology

- Qualitative oral history (Thompson 2000, Trentham 2011)
- Semi structured interviews

- ‘Why did you decide to become an occupational therapist? What are the key professional developments that you have witnessed or experienced? How would you rate your satisfaction with your working life? What was your biggest professional challenge? What are your hopes for the future of the profession?’

Data collection and analysis

- Convenience sampling and snowballing
- Seven participants
- Thematic analysis
Developing Services

‘There was no sort of set programmes that this is what needs to be done, it was very much just get on and do it which looking back I mean it was ridiculous for somebody straight out of college with no experience to go to a place where no one had a clue what you were going to do.’ (Frances)

‘I don’t believe that at that stage the health board had any conception of what occupational therapists actually did, which gave you great freedom but at the same time really left you out there very isolated and it was quite intimidating.’ (Myra)

Professional Recognition

‘I suppose the challenge initially was trying to develop the vision and I suppose share with other professionals and what occupational therapy actually was, explain its role, and have it valued and that was extremely challenging in the first few years when it wasn’t there and it was achieved mainly by your own success’. (Noirin)

‘I suppose I would think that occupational therapy is still considered a new profession. You still have to fight all the time to get OTs jobs, working. We’re up against it all the time, against larger professions’. (Kathleen)
When you see what people are going through... I just felt so lucky that I had three kids who didn’t have any disabilities. God I checked them out from top to toe for months making sure their reflexes were working properly. Ya it would give you a huge appreciation of just health and well-being.’ (Frances)

‘I think it’s a wonderful profession. I think the opportunity to help people make changes in their lives is huge.’ (Myra)

‘I enjoyed having a career, I don’t think I’d enjoy being at home and the fact that I trained as an occupational therapist, that I got to use it all over the years.’ (Kathleen)
Conclusion

- Challenges and rewards - complexity
- Recorded history
- Contribution to international literature
- Insights for the present e.g. support in transitioning, active promotion of profession
- Highlights areas of concern
- Celebrates achievement; provoke discussion on future direction.

Thank you