

A Piece of the Evolution of Occupational Therapy in North Dakota: A Life History of Rhoda Erhardt

Sidney Carlson, OTS and Alexis Tyce, OTS

Introduction

Purpose

This life history is one of 29 life history interviews which are a part of a larger project, Life Histories of Individuals Who Have Been Influential in Developing Occupational Therapy (OT) in North Dakota and Wyoming. The purpose of the project is to gather information about the history and evolution of OT practice in North Dakota and Wyoming through life histories of individuals who have been influential in developing OT in these two states. It is anticipated that the life history process will be a powerful way to gather this information. This study intends to provide current and future generations of occupational therapists a view of the history and how OT practice has evolved from its inception to current practice in North Dakota and Wyoming.

Description of Participant

Rhoda Erhardt is an accomplished occupational therapist who has an extensive number of achievements in the field of OT. Her primary area of practice throughout her career has been in pediatrics; however, she has experience in many other areas as well. These achievements include writing books, articles, and chapters as well as creating assessments and instructional videos, editing and publishing books, and giving presentations on various different topics. Some of the notable employment positions she has held include Chief of OT at a burn center in Texas, Chief of pediatric therapy in Colorado, owner of her own Erhardt Developmental Products, and the Director of the Easter Seals Mobile Therapy Unit in Fargo, ND, a program she created herself. In addition to having an extensive amount of experience and influence in OT, she has also been involved in many other areas of the community as well. A few examples of these include her involvement in Maplewood Park and Recreation Commission, United Way of Cass-Clay Allocation Review Panel, and the ND State Advisory Board for Preschool Handicapped.



Literature Review

- In 1953 the Medical Advisory Committee was established to provide medical input to the Association (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2017).
- In 1955 AOTA published the "Policy on Advanced Study," reinforcing the idea that OTs should maintain their competence by continuing their education (AOTA, 2017).
- In 1958 AOTA published the "Guide for the Development of Graduate Education Leading to Higher Degrees in Occupational Therapy," outlining the requirements for a master's-level curriculum for the profession (AOTA, 2017).
- In 1958 AOTA assumed responsibility for and adopts educational standards for Certified Occupational Therapy Assistants (COTAs) and approves the first OTA educational program for psychiatric COTAs (AOTA, 2017).

Methodology

- This was a qualitative study done using a life history approach.
- Participants were assigned from a list developed by the course instructors through purposive sampling.
- There were no gatekeeper issues as initial contact was made by course instructors. Informed consent was given.
- The semi-structured interview was guided by an interview schedule prepared by the course instructors; the questions on the interview schedule were designed to be used with all the individuals interviewed as part of the larger project.
- Questions were then added using the Kawa model as a guide in order to get information that added to the understanding of different aspects of the participant's life that shaped them and the practice of OT (Turpin & Iwama, 2017).
- Data was gathered through a phone interview that lasted one hour.
- The interview was audio recorded and later transcribed.
- Data was also collected through the participants Curriculum Vitae that was provided before the start of the interview.

Data Analysis

- A one hour interview was audio recorded, transcribed and coded with 23 codes
- From the 23 codes, four categories with themes emerged.
- When splitting the information into codes and themes, the researchers used the Kawa Model as guidance. The researchers looked for major turning points in the participant's career as well as different aspects of her life including obstacles and major events that stuck out (Teah & Iwama, 2017).
- The researchers used multiple data collection sources.
- Triangulation involved the use of member checking to clarify and confirm the information included in the transcription was an accurate reflection of her career history.
- Though the data analysis process, the researchers established trustworthiness by reflecting on their experiences as researchers and documented their biases to the study in order to increase the reliability and validity.

Findings and Discussion

Educational Experience

Rhoda earned her bachelors of OT degree at the University of Illinois; as well as her masters in child development and family relations at North Dakota State University. She had small classes of about ten or eleven people and felt that she got a really good education and enjoyed all of her classes. Classes that she took included woodworking, letter working, jewelry making, and weaving. She participated in a variety of different rotations (comparable to nowadays fieldwork) before working on her own in order to gain experience.

Accomplishments and Involvement

Many of Rhoda's accomplishments were driven by her personal interests as well as identified areas of OT that needed more research and development. For example, she used her own interest in photography and videography to create her own images and videos to put into books, chapters, articles, etc. The first book she ever wrote was "Developmental Hand Dysfunction," which she later came out with a second edition twelve years later. Another notable

Findings and Discussion Cont.

accomplishment was the development of a prehension assessment, which at the time was something no one had really ever seen and is something that people are still using today. Rhoda also values being involved in the community and OT. She expressed, "I try to be active because I really believe that we need everybody to do that. I really believe in that." followed by "It makes us all stronger if people are involved." Rhoda was involved in local, national, and even international organizations. She found that it was very important to connect without others on a multidisciplinary basis to all learn and grow from each other.

Personal Motivation

Rhoda considers many of personal attributes to be the reason that OT was a "perfect fit" for her. She loves to learn new things, she loves reading, and she often feels creative. However, she finds that her therapeutic use of self has been the most important attribute of all and states that "I felt that to be the strongest and most powerful tool that I was able to achieve." In addition, she discovered that she had a passion for children and that the more she worked in pediatrics, the more she realized that it was what she was meant to do. She stated that she was never motivated to look for her passion, but pediatrics was something that hit her in the core and that "from there on, it's not work, it's all fun."

Occupational Therapy Over Time

Throughout the course of her career, Rhoda has watched and experienced many changes that have occurred in the field of OT. Some of these changes included changes to laws and legislation, one of which she pointed as a big turning point OT was the federal law 94142 that occurred in 1978. Rhoda expressed that most of the changes made in OT were all for the better, including the addition of frameworks, the emphasis on more science and good research, and the emphasis on multidisciplinary healthcare teams. However, with all of the changes that have occurred in OT, Rhoda points out that one thing will always stay the same: "Our profession is one of the few that combines science and art."

Conclusions

Final Assertion

By staying true to her personal motivations, Rhoda Erhardt was able to use her education and her life experiences to accomplish various achievements and get involved in the field of occupational therapy as it grew and developed over time.

Conclusion

The interview with Rhoda Erhardt provided a deep insight and understanding of her life throughout her OT career. The researchers were able to gain a sense of the major turning points in her life and the barriers she faced that lead to her accomplishments and contributions to the profession of OT in North Dakota and nationally. Rhoda entered the workforce during a time when OT was facing a lot of changes and was successful in staying true to herself and her practice, as well as adapting to the changes in OT and the healthcare system.

References

- American Occupational Therapy Association. (2017). *Events from 1950-1959*. American Occupational Therapy Association Inc. Retrieved from <http://www.otcentennial.org/events/1950>
- Teah, J. Y. & Iwama, M. K. (2015). *The Kawa model made easy: A guide to applying the Kawa model in occupational therapy practice* (2nd ed.). Retrieved from www.kawamodel.com
- Turpin, M. & Iwama, M. K. (2011). *Using occupational therapy models in practice: A field guide*. New York, NY: Elsevier, Inc.