

# A Life History: Sarah Nielsen, PhD, OTR/L

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### Introduction

- 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 is intended 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.

### Literature Review

- OT was created from an existing base of knowledge from various professions, providing established values, beliefs, and information; thus creating an identity dilemma from the beginning (Reed, 2006).
- In 2003, the Representative Assembly set forward a motion to establish and define the values and beliefs of OT due to current occupational therapist's lack of knowledge of values and beliefs of the profession (Reed, 2006)
- In 2006, AOTA adopted the *Centennial Vision*, "We envision that occupational therapy is a powerful, widely recognized, science-driven, and evidence-based profession with a globally connected and diverse workforce meeting society's occupational needs" (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2017a)
- Following lobbying and advocacy, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act requires certain insurance plans to cover habilitation and rehabilitation in 2010 (AOTA, 2017b)
- Reed and Peters (2010) state occupational therapists have increased their knowledge and understanding of the role of OT over the years, but there remains a need to correct problems faced with labor force numbers and distribution.

### Methods

- 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. The researchers were allowed to modify or add interview questions as needed for each specific interview.
- This study used a qualitative life history approach.
- The participant was assigned from a list developed by the course instructors through purposive sampling.
- Initial contact was made by course instructors with no specific gatekeeper issues.
- The researchers obtained informed consent from the participant.
- The interview was conducted and recorded in the home of the participant and lasted approximately 90 minutes
- Data was collected through the use of an electronic recording system.
- The interview was transcribed verbatim and organized into codes, categories, themes, and an assertion by the two researchers

### Description of Participant

- Dr. Sarah Nielsen is currently an associate professor in the Department of OT at the University of North Dakota (UND)
- She practiced for 10 years at Trinity Child Adolescent Partial Hospitalization at Trinity Health in Minot
- She graduated from the Department of OT at UND in 2000
- She has been recognized for her many efforts in the profession of OT, most notably for her work as an advocate, teacher, clinical therapist, researcher and coworker
- She has been committed to OT as she served various positions in AOTA, NDOTA, and a member of PTE and WYOTA
- She has been described as passionate, hardworking, and wise by many of her students
- She serves on a variety of committees at UND, including, but not limited to: Department Entry-level Doctorate Committee, Department Curriculum Committee, Admissions Committee, Grievance Committee, Catholic Medical Association, and Faculty Handbook Committee
- Through her commitment, work, and passion, Dr. Nielsen has positively impacted the profession of OT as it is today

### Data Analysis & Findings

- The data analysis was guided by the Kawa model, focusing on the flow of Dr. Nielsen's life and prominent turning points
- The transcription was analyzed, first unitizing the information into codes, the codes were grouped into 3 main categories and patterns/themes were identified.
- The researchers established trustworthiness as they identified biases and journaled throughout the study in order to increase reliability and validity
- **The role of OT** was developed based on the ability of occupational therapists to be generalists, the versatility of OT, the advancement of OT, and changes of the profession
  - There is a need for occupational therapists to become and remain generalists
  - The versatility of OT allows for a placement in a variety of settings
  - OT should be similar across all settings with a consistent basis in occupation
  - OT is advancing and expanding alongside healthcare reform
- Sarah served various roles in the versatile profession of OT, enhancing her understanding of the role of OT across settings.
- **Decision making in clinical practice** emerged from Sarah's experiences with ethical dilemmas and the decisions she made based upon her personal values.
  - Personal characteristics and experiences affect decision making in practice
  - Ethical dilemmas in practice call for advocacy
  - It is important to know when to step up and make a change, and when to leave
  - Advocacy can be done in many ways
- **Character development** was prominent throughout the interview as Sarah grew from her experiences, support, and influences throughout her life, which made her who she is today
  - Tough experiences led to improved confidence in self and competency in practice
  - Different roles in OT allowed Sarah to understand a variety of other perspectives
  - Her experience in unethical and undeveloped OT roles enabled her to define herself and the OT profession
  - Support and influences impacted her ability to thrive in work and life



### Discussion

- Dr. Sarah Nielsen is an influential individual in the OT profession due to her past experiences and influences, which has enabled her to advocate and define the versatile and significant role of OT across various settings.
- She stressed the importance of defining the role of OT across settings, stating, "We are OTs and our practice should look similar in every setting. So that is why we should have occupation as our focus because we may go about it in different ways in different settings, but to make sure we have a common, ya know what is OT".
- Sarah contributed to the profession of OT for her passionate, driven work in various settings. She has been an advocate, professor, clinical OT, and mentee for future OT practitioners.

### References

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