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Evolution of Occupational Therapy Practice: Life History of Maggie Butler, COTA

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### **Abstract**

*Objective:* This qualitative life history is part of a larger project that is aimed at gathering information about the history and evolution of occupational therapy in North Dakota and Wyoming. The purpose of this study is to gain a better insight of the influences that Maggie Butler has contributed to the occupational therapy profession.

*Method:* A semi-structured one hour interview was conducted with the participant and two researchers. The interview was transcribed and data was analyzed to produce codes, categories, themes, and a final assertion.

*Results:* The predominant categories that emerged from this process were: Path to COTA, Professional Development, and Creating a Meaningful Career.

*Conclusion:* The final assertion that was developed from the findings was that being an COTA with only one years' experience, in a rural setting has its challenges, but has also proven to be rewarding for Maggie by allowing advancement both personally and professionally. It is important that novel practitioners, like Maggie, are considered and acknowledged for their accomplishments and contributions to the OT profession.

### **Introduction**

This life history is one of 31 life history interviews which are 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 this project is to gather information about the history and evolution of occupational therapy 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 occupational therapy practice has evolved from its inception to current practice in North Dakota and Wyoming.

The individuals conducting the study are second year occupational therapy researchers attending the University of North Dakota in the Casper, Wyoming location. The researchers are enrolled in a qualitative research course and are completing this study as a course assignment. Their participant for the assignment is Maggie Butler. Maggie attended the Casper College Occupational Therapy Assistant program and graduated in December, 2017. After graduation, Maggie moved to Torrington, Wyoming where she is a Certified Occupational Therapy Assistant (COTA) at the Goshen Care Center.

### **Description of the Participant**

Information regarding the participant was obtained from the interview with Maggie and a search of her employer and college website. Maggie attended the Occupational Therapy Assistant (OTA) program at Casper College. Before pursuing occupational therapy, Maggie received an associate's degree in Health Science. While completing her Health Science degree, she competed in volleyball as a Thunderbird for Casper College. Once Maggie finished her

associate's degree, she continued her schooling after being accepted in the OTA program at Casper College. As a OTA student, Maggie received additional certifications in Gerontology and Assistive Technology. Maggie also served as the Student Occupational Therapy Association (SOTA) president. In her presidential role, Maggie organized volunteer opportunities for the OTA program, including: Backpack Awareness Month and worked with students on the Casper College campus who have disabilities. Maggie graduated from the OTA program in December, 2017. After graduation, Maggie stepped out of her comfort zone and accepted a COTA position at the Goshen Care Center in Torrington, Wyoming. Compared to her counterparts in this study, Maggie has minimal experience. Despite the one year of experience she has accomplished many achievements. Within months of her hire, she was offered the Director of Rehabilitation (DOR) position at her facility. Through her hard work and commitment to provide quality care to her clients, she continues to make remarkable contributions to the OT profession in the state of Wyoming.

### **Timeline Literature Review**

To better understand the history of the COTA profession, a literature review was conducted. The researchers found a variety of key events that contributed to the evolution of the COTA profession in occupational therapy. According to Cottrell (2000), the need for an assistant-level practitioner in the occupational therapy profession was first recognized in 1949. In October 1960, the AOTA Board of Management developed a 12-week curriculum to train COTAs for general practice, and a year later in 1961, a 3-month training program for nursing home practice was established (Cottrell, 2000). Due to the shortage of OTs in the mental health setting, the initial intent for the basis of the COTAs education at the collegiate level was to provide additional assistance in this setting (Cottrell, 2000). The first two COTA programs in

two-year colleges began in 1964 and 1965 (Cottrell, 2000). In the beginning it was difficult to determine exactly what types of services the new assistant would provide to the profession.

Since the establishment of the COTA profession, they have developed a long history of assisting occupational therapists in a variety of different areas. By 1966, it was mandated by the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) that both general practice and psychiatry training be a part of COTA educational programs so that dual certification in these practice areas could be obtained (Cottrell, 2000). These additional educational requirements helped to develop more skills and broaden the scope of practice making COTAs more versatile and valuable to the OT profession. COTAs developed the skills to aide in most areas of the OT process such as assessments, evaluations, planning care programs, and facilitating discharge (Nancarrow & Mackey, 2005). These all done under the supervision of an OT. Due to the expansive set of skills COTAs began to display, they were able to handle the wide range of complex health and social issues they were now facing in the diverse settings they were employed (Nancarrow & Mackey, 2005).

Years after the establishment of the COTA profession, more and more two year colleges were developing accredited OTA programs. In Wyoming, the Occupational Therapy Assistant program at Casper College began offering class in 1996 (Casper College OTA, 2018). It was a year later, in 1997, when the program graduated their first class and obtained its official accreditation (Casper College OTA, 2018). Since its initial accreditation, the program has been striving to produce competent entry-level occupational therapy assistants, who are critical thinkers, reflective practitioners, and generalists, at the associate level through integration of academic and experiential learning experiences (Casper College OTA, 2018). The program has the capacity to serve and graduate up to 24 students each year who are capable of delivering

occupational therapy assistant services for a variety of settings, and assuming leadership roles in professional associations, continuing education, and practice (Casper College OTA, 2018). Upon receiving an associate degree and passing the national certification exam many of the new practitioners remain in the rural state of Wyoming to continue practice.

Similar to many other professions, a COTA must follow certain guidelines and regulations at both the national and state levels. In the short time that Maggie has been practicing, the COTA profession has seen very minimal changes to guidelines and regulation at the state level. In regards to supervision of an OTA or COTA, as of August 15, 2018, in the state of Wyoming, any and all supervision and contact between COTA and Occupational Therapist (OTR) must be documented (Wyoming Board of Occupational Therapy, 2018). According to the Wyoming Board of Occupational Therapy (2018), a supervision log must be filled out accordingly, however if a facility requires more face-to-face supervision it must also be reported in a supervision log. In Wyoming, an entry level COTA requires “Close Supervision”, or daily, direct contact with an OTR (Wyoming Board of Occupational Therapy, 2018). A more experienced COTA requires “Routine supervision”, or direct contact with OTR at least every two weeks at the site of work, with interim supervision occurring by other methods (Wyoming Board of Occupational Therapy, 2018). Lastly, an advanced practitioner will receive “General Supervision”, or at least monthly direct contact with an OTR, and interim supervision available as needed through other methods (Wyoming Board of Occupational Therapy, 2018). Although minimal changes have occurred in the COTA profession during Maggie's time, there is no telling whether greater changes will impact her work in the future.

### **Theory**

The theory used to guide the life history on Maggie Butler was the Kawa Model. The Kawa Model uses a metaphor of a river to describe one's life in chronological order (Teoh & Iwama, 2015). This is illustrated in the five constructs: river flow, river banks, rocks, driftwood, and spaces (Teoh & Iwama, 2015). The river flow symbolizes Maggie's life flow and priorities (Teoh & Iwama, 2015). The river banks is a metaphor for the Maggie's social and physical contexts and environments (Teoh & Iwama, 2015). Maggie's rocks symbolizes challenges and obstacles she endures (Teoh & Iwama, 2015). Driftwood illustrates factors that are considered influential to Maggie's life and journey throughout her COTA career (Teoh & Iwama, 2015). Spaces are considered opportunities that enhance the river flow. According to Teoh and Iwama (2015), the Kawa Model takes into consideration the client's past, present, and future. The Kawa Model was used during the semi-structured interview to elicit responses used to fit into the life history approach. The main focus of using the Kawa Model in this study is to illustrate Maggie's life journey towards becoming a COTA, her experience thus far as a COTA, as well as her future goals.

### **Methodology**

The life history on Maggie Butler was obtained to better understand the personal impact on the history and evolution of the OT profession that Maggie experienced. 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 a part of the larger project. The researchers were allowed to modify or add interview questions as needed for each specific interview.



**Study Design**

The study design used within this research study was the life history approach. Qualitative research using a life history approach allows the focus to be on the participant's involvement in the evolution of occupational therapy practice. According to Lune and Berg (2017), life histories are useful to gain a better understanding of the subjects' perceptions of their life experiences. The life history approach was selected to guide this study in order to gain an understanding regarding Maggie's self-perceptions of her journey of becoming a COTA. The study was approved by the University of North Dakota's IRB board. Once Maggie agreed to participate in the study, informed consent was obtained.

**Participant Selection**

Maggie was one of 31 participants selected from a participant list compiled through purposive sampling by the course instructors. Initial contact was made by one of the project directors and informed consent was obtained before the semi-structured interview was conducted.

**Data Collection**

Once the project directors supplied the researchers with Maggie's contact information, the researchers were able to communicate via phone to set up a collaborative meeting time. Since both Maggie and the researchers had rigorous schedules, an online interview was agreed upon. The semi-structured interview was conducted over an internet app called Zoom. The researchers sent an interview invitation via email where Maggie was able to access and connect with the researchers. This allowed Maggie to complete the interview in the comfort of her home, while the researchers were located in the University of North Dakota's OT conference room in Casper, WY. The Zoom app allowed the researchers and Maggie to see and hear each other throughout

the one hour interview. Following the interview, Maggie provided two picture artifacts she described as pertinent factors influencing her path of becoming a COTA. The total amount of time invested into gathering data for this study was about three hours per both researchers.

### **Trustworthiness**

Numerous techniques were used to establish trustworthiness within the study. One technique used was completing reflective journals throughout the entire life history process. They were sure to complete additional journal entries during the data analysis to control for any biases they could have experienced. This strategy was also helpful to document the researchers decision trail and increase the study's reliability. Triangulation of multiple researchers was an additional strategy of trustworthiness that was used throughout the life history. The two researchers were able to collaborate with each other to provide two different insights. There were also two project directors available to check the researchers work and provide constructive feedback. Member checking was the final technique to improve accuracy, fairness, validity and overall trustworthiness of the life history. This was accomplished by offering Maggie the opportunity to look over the findings once the interview and data analysis process was completed.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis began by the researchers transcribing the one hour interview verbatim into a 24-page document. The transcription process took the researchers around four hours to complete. From there the researchers coded the transcription and the data was organized into categories, then themes, and finally an assertion was created.

### **Findings/Results**

From the transcription, the researchers identified 22 codes, or chunks of meaning. The codes were then placed into topic areas, or categories. The categories that emerged from the codes of the transcription were based on the different components of the Kawa Model, such as Maggie's life flow, environmental factors, and the driftwood as influencing factors. The categories from the data analysis included: path to COTA, professional development, and creating a meaningful career. From the categories, various themes were highlighted to gain a better understand of Maggie's experience in the OT profession. The themes summarize the codes that were placed into the categories.

#### **Path to COTA**

The first category that was formed was Path to COTA. The codes composing the Path to COTA category include: education, COTA/OTA, AOTA/WYOTA/organizations, influence, and profession evolving. Once the category was created, the res reflected back on the codes to develop themes among the commonalities. Many of the themes from the Path to COTA category are represented by the driftwood component: Maggie's personal experiences with her grandma and nephew influenced her path to pursue COTA career, Maggie emphasis on importance of school life balance that has now carried over to her career, and due to Maggie's involvement in extracurricular opportunities offered her a more well-rounded educational experience. One quote from Maggie that stood out to the researchers was, "I think it just is reaching out to more people and giving people more of an opportunity to have an education in something they may love." This quote encompasses Maggie's experience within her COTA program and how she feels it influences others similar to her.

#### **Professional Development**

The second category created was Professional Development. Within this category, there were 8 codes. The codes that made up the Professional Development category were: professional collaboration, relationship with coworkers, continued education, director of rehab, getting started, challenges, documentation, and legislation. The codes in this category represent driftwood, rocks, and spaces from the Kawa Model. These codes and category were then used to create the themes for Professional Development. The themes for the Professional Development category contained: Maggie identified the importance of the therapeutic relationship with her coworkers and clients, Maggie experienced barriers but overcoming them has helped her to develop both personally and professionally, and the advancement Maggie has experienced early in her career has created more responsibilities and has heightened her personal awareness of the occupational therapy profession. A distinguishing quote Maggie stated during her interview that summarizes the Professional Development category was, "I think it's a great profession, and I've really been able to grow as a person in my field and learn about who I am through being passionate and caring to other people, and helping people receive the best quality of life." This stated quote summarizes Maggie's perception of occupational therapy and her development within the profession.

### **Creating a Meaningful Career**

The last category developed was Creating a Meaningful Career. There were a total of 9 codes that summarize this category, including: coaching/life outside of work, quality of care, skilled nursing facility, location/rural, Wyoming, making connections, long/short term residents, advocating/spreading the word, and school district/pediatrics. The codes listed under the category were driftwood, spaces, and the river banks. Two themes were created from the listed codes. The themes for the Creating a Meaningful Career category include: Maggie is aware of

the goals she wants to reach in her future and Maggie feels that it is highly important to provide care in rural settings. When Maggie was questioned about her current employment her response was, "I'm very thankful for my job, I love my job and it's been very rewarding, and it's been a big blessing to me." The statement made by Maggie describes her positive perception of her current and future COTA career.

Once the codes were created, categories developed, and themes were summarized, a final assertion was created. The final assertion was, being an COTA with only one year of experience, in a rural setting has its challenges, but has also proven to be rewarding for Maggie by allowing advancement both personally and professionally. The final assertion is an interpretation of the data collected, as well as a synopsis of the themes.

### **Discussion/Conclusion**

Within this study the researchers set out to gain a better understanding of how the evolution of the COTA profession has impacted Maggie's own personal journey to becoming a COTA and her contributions to the profession's future in rural areas like Wyoming. A final assertion emerged from the identified themes: being a COTA with only one years' experience, in a rural setting has its challenges, but has also proven to be rewarding for Maggie by allowing advancement both personally and professionally.

It is evident that many events have led to the evolution of COTAs contribution to the OT profession. Since the beginning of the COTA profession in 1960, it has developed into an avenue for many individuals to serve under OTRs and provide exceptional care to clients in a variety of settings (Cottrell, 2000). The continued efforts to expand the profession have allowed COTAs to become more skilled and able to handle the wide range of complex health and social issues they were now facing in the diverse settings they were employed (Nancarrow & Mackey, 2005). Due

to this, practitioners like Maggie have the ability to provide skilled care to individuals throughout most areas of the OT process such as assessments, evaluations, planning care programs, and facilitating discharge. In 1997, Casper College's Occupational Therapy Assistant program received accreditation. Since its initial accreditation, the program strives to produce graduates capable of delivering services to a variety of settings, assuming leadership roles in professional associations, continuing education, and practice across the rural state of Wyoming (Casper College OTA, 2018).

Throughout the study, Maggie's life experiences and contributions to the COTA profession were represented in relation to the Kawa Model. The unique elements of this model such as river flow, river banks, rocks, driftwood, and spaces were incorporated through the interview and data analysis of the life history (Teoh & Iwama, 2015). With this collected data the researchers were able to synthesize codes, categories, themes and a final assertion that help to better understand influences that led Maggie to the OT profession, identify significant barriers or advancements as a practitioner, as well as the opportunities she envisions for the future of the OT profession in the rural state of Wyoming.

Although this Life History revealed that Maggie has minimal experience in the profession compared to other participants selected for the larger study, she has accomplished some rather profound advancements in her career. Maggie pursued the COTA profession due to a variety of influential factors, worked diligently to develop as a professional, and overall maintains a mentality of envisioning goals that will greatly influence the future of her career and the OT profession in the state of Wyoming. All of these factors have led to Maggie's success over the year and have allowed her to greatly impact the community in which she works. It is evident by the unique passion Maggie displays in every day work as a COTA that she will continue to

influence the future of the OT profession. Moving forward, it is important that novel practitioners, like Maggie, are considered and acknowledged for their accomplishments and contributions to the OT profession.

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Appendix  
 Life History of Maggie Butler, COTA/L  
 Justine Flattum, MOTS and Katie Stewart, MOTS  
 Codes

Education COTA/OTA AOTA/WYOTA/organizations Influence Profession evolving	Professional collaboration Relationship with coworkers Continued education Director of rehab Getting started Challenges Documentation Legislation	Coaching/life outside of work Quality of care Skilled Nursing Facility Location/Rural Wyoming Making connections Long/Short term residents Advocating/spreading the word School district/peds
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Categories

Path to OTA	Professional Development	Creating a Meaningful Career
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Themes/Patterns

<p>Maggie’s personal experiences with her grandma and nephew influenced her path to pursue an COTA career.</p> <p>Maggie emphasize importance of school life balance that has now carried over to her career.</p> <p>Due to Maggie’s involvement in extracurricular opportunities offered her a more well-rounded educational experience.</p>	<p>Maggie identified the importance of the therapeutic relationship with her co-workers and clients.</p> <p>Maggie experienced barriers but overcoming them has helped her to develop both personally and professionally.</p> <p>The advancement Maggie has experienced early in her career has created more responsibilities and has heightened her personal awareness of occupational therapy profession.</p>	<p>Maggie is aware of the goals she wants to reach in her future.</p> <p>Maggie feels that it is highly important to provide care in rural settings.</p>
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Assertion

Being an COTA with only one years’ experience, in a rural setting has its challenges, but has also proven to be rewarding for Maggie by allowing advancement both personally and professionally.
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