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Evolution of Occupational Therapy Practice: Life History of

Lela Llorens, Ph.D., OTR/Ret, FAOTA.

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### **Abstract**

*Objective:* The objective of the overall study was to gain insight into Dr. Lela Llorens's life experiences and leadership throughout her time of work in the profession of occupational therapy.

*Method:* This was a qualitative study done using a life history approach. The participant was selected from a list compiled through purposive sampling by the project directors. Data was gathered through a two-hour, semi-structured interview with Dr. Llorens via Zoom, and through her curriculum vitae. The two-hour interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Member checking was not used for the triangulation of the data. The data collapsed into three categories with three to four themes in each.

*Results:* Data analysis was conducted, and the information was first coded, then placed into categories, themes, and an assertion. The categories that emerged were: Overcoming Challenges, Personal Factors, and Occupational Therapy. The themes that emerged through data analysis were: a strong belief in a positive mindset to help overcome any challenges, the value of serving others is apparent in all aspects of life, and occupational therapy being more than just a career, but a way of life.

*Conclusion:* Dr. Llorens served as a pioneer for the occupational therapy profession. She was able to maintain success and optimism during a time that was discriminatory for her. Her family and desire to serve others was instrumental in her professional and personal life as they gave her actions meaning.

### **Introduction**

This life history is one of 30 life history interviews, which are part of a larger project, *Histories of Individuals Who Have Been Influential in Developing Occupational Therapy*

*(OT) at the National Level and Beyond.* The purpose of the study is 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 through the life history stories of occupational therapists who have held leadership roles at the national level and beyond. It is anticipated that the life history process will be a powerful way to gather this information.

### **Timeline Literature Review**

Many influential changes occurred in the United States that impacted the sociopolitical culture surrounding Dr. Llorens' clinical and educational practice since she graduated from Western Michigan University in occupational therapy in 1953. American social values had changed from conservative in the 50s to progressive in the 60s, with the practice of medicine changing drastically after World War II (Reed & Peters, 2007). The U.S. Supreme Court ruled unanimously in the *Brown v. Board of Education* that racial segregation in public schools violated the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment's mandate of equal protection ("Black History Milestones," 2019). One large change to the occupational therapy profession occurred in 1958 when AOTA adopted educational standards for certified occupational therapy assistants (COTAs) and published the "Guide for the Development of Graduate Education Leading to Higher Degrees in Occupational Therapy" which outlined the requirements for a Masters-level degree in occupational therapy (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2019).

In 1965, the Voting Rights Act was passed by Congress, which allowed African Americans the right to vote ("Black History Milestones," 2019). Also in 1965, the Social Security Amendment Act of 1965 created Medicare and Medicaid and presented occupational therapy under extended care services and home health while also chartering the American Occupational Therapy Foundation (AOTF) "to advance the science of occupational therapy and

to increase the public knowledge and understanding of occupational therapy” (AOTA, 2019). Surprisingly, it was not until 1969 that AOTA adopted a formal definition of occupational therapy (Reed & Peters, 2007).

Within the early 70s, Black Power was formed among many African Americans in the US who saw clearly that equality was not present for them (“Black History Milestones,” 2019). Black Power called on the institutions of white America and demanded full employment, decent housing, and control over their communities (“Black History Milestones,” 2019). By the early to mid-70s, many universities were seeking to increase the presence of minority and female faculty and students on campuses (“Black History Milestones,” 2019). By 1974, AOTA approved a position in favor of state licensure and the first Model Practice Act was created which provided regulation of the practice of occupational therapy throughout the country (AOTA, 2019).

In 1977, AOTA adopted the first stand-alone *Occupational Therapy Code of Ethics* that provided instructions all occupational therapists must abide by while practicing (AOTA, 2019). In 1981, AOTF began publishing the *Occupational Therapy Journal of Research* that included peer-reviewed journals focusing on research, practice, and health care issues in the field of occupational therapy (AOTA, 2019). In March of 1991, Rodney King (an African American man) was shot with a taser gun and severely beat after he resisted arrest from Los Angeles police officers (“Black History Milestones,” 2019). The scene was caught on videotape by a bystander and broadcasted around the city. Rage over the police officers being acquitted of the case provoked a riot of African American people that ended with 55 people dead, more than 2,300 injured, and over 1,000 buildings burned (“Black History Milestones,” 2019). 2 years later (1993), the AOTA Standards and Ethics Commission published the “Core Values of

Occupational Therapy” which states the core values and attitudes organized around seven basic concepts for occupational therapy (AOTA, 2019).

### **Theory**

The theory chosen to guide this life history study was the Kawa Model. The Kawa Model focuses on major turning points and milestones in one’s life to understand social, personal, and cultural contexts (Teoh & Iwama, 2015). The key features of the Kawa Model include water, river sidewall and bottom, rocks, driftwood, and the space between obstructions (Teoh & Iwama, 2015). Kawa is the Japanese word for “river” and uses the metaphor of a river to illustrate an individual’s flow through life (Teoh & Iwama, 2015). Like rivers, individuals experience different environments, events, and obstacles. The river may be shallow or deep at different points, as well as converge and diverge with other rivers, as people interact with others at different levels and at different times (Teoh & Iwama, 2015). The river begins at the high-lands (birth) and ends at the ocean (death). The water represents one’s life energy or life flow, the river sidewall, and bottom is the physical and social environment one is immersed in, the rocks are life circumstances, the driftwood is one’s assets and liabilities and they all come together to make up the shape and flow of one’s life (Teoh & Iwama, 2015). This model attempts to explain occupational therapy’s overall purpose: to understand a client’s circumstances and clarify the rationale of occupational therapy (Teoh & Iwama, 2015).

### **Description of the Participant**

This information was obtained through multiple web searches and participant statements throughout the interview. Dr. Lela Llorens has contributed immensely to the profession of occupational therapy through her multiple roles of being a clinician, researcher, teacher, administrator, editor, and writer. Since the beginning of her career in 1953, Dr. Llorens has won

every award presented within occupational therapy with a noted award of the Eleanor Clarke Slagle Lectureship in 1969. The Eleanor Clarke Slagle Lectureship is awarded to practicing therapists who have made or are making a significant contribution to the profession (Reed & Peters, 2007). She was the first African American woman to win this award, and it is worth noting additionally that she delivered this presentation to a segregated crowd.

Dr. Llorens's roles and experiences as a practitioner includes being a consultant to the federally funded project, Comprehensive Child Care Project, at Mount Zion Hospital in San Francisco, California, head of the occupational therapy department at Lafayette Clinic in Detroit, MI, and a therapist at Wayne County General Hospital and Northville State Hospital in Michigan. She has also held many presentations, consultations, workshops, and lectures throughout her career.

Concerning education, Dr. Llorens has held positions as a professor, chair, and graduate coordinator at San Jose State, the University of Florida, and the University of Southern California colleges in the occupational therapy department. She has served on eight doctoral and 125 master's degree committees for students of occupational therapy and other health disciplines. Although Dr. Llorens is retired now, she still serves as a mentor for many students in San Marcos, CA.

### **Methodology**

This research design is a qualitative study using a life history approach. Qualitative research refers to the meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols, and descriptions of things (Berg & Lune, 2012). A life history approach allows researchers to explore a person's micro-historical (individual) experiences within a macro-historical (history of the time) framework ("What is Life History Research?" n.d.). Life-history information challenges

the researcher to understand an individual's current attitudes and behaviors and how those may have been influenced by initial decisions made at another time and in another place ("What is Life History Research?" n.d.). For this study, using qualitative research with a life-history approach allowed the focus to be on the participant's involvement in the evolution of occupational therapy practice.

### **Participant Selection**

The participant was selected from a participant list compiled through purposive sampling by the project directors. Informed consent was obtained before the interview and the UND Institutional Review Board reviewed the project and because of the study design, the formal IRB process was waived.

### **Data Collection**

A semi-structured interview was conducted and guided by an interview schedule developed by the researchers and researcher directors. The interview was completed through the software app called 'Zoom,' which allowed for the interview to be recorded as it proceeded. The interview schedule was developed based on a broad literature review of the events that occurred in the occupational therapy profession within the last 100 years and a general search of Dr. Llorens, her accomplishments, and the events surrounding her life and work found online. After the interview was completed, all data obtained through the interview was transcribed verbatim by the researchers.

### **Trustworthiness**

The researchers used multiple sources for data gathering, such as web searches, online videos, and statements from Dr. Lela Llorens during the interview. Member checking was not used for the triangulation of the data but reflection and clarification of responses by the



participant occurred throughout the interview process to ensure the researchers' understanding of information was accurate. Through the data analysis process, the researchers established some trustworthiness by memoing their experience, partaking in reflexive journaling, and acknowledging any biases to improve the reliability and validity of the study,

### **Data Analysis**

A two-hour interview with Dr. Lela Llorens was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The researchers created 46 codes from the interview transcription; however, only 29 codes were collapsed into categories. Some of the excess codes were combined to create more appropriate and relevant codes, while the rest were discarded. Three categories were produced with three to four themes in each. The Kawa Model was used to guide the researchers while creating their codes, categories, themes, and finally, an assertion. The researchers focused on major turning points and milestones in Dr. Lela Llorens's career, as well as different aspects of her life including challenges and particularly meaningful experiences. These turning points served as the inclusion criteria for the codes.

### **Findings & Discussion**

In all of her time serving as an educator and working in clinical practice, Dr. Llorens expressed a couple of common factors crediting her success and the lasting value within her experiences. Based on the results of the interview, coding, and categorizing process, three specific categories emerged: Overcoming Challenges, Personal Factors, and Occupational Therapy. The following categories are the synthesized information from the codes and the beginning outline of the themes.

#### **Overcoming Challenges**

Dr. Llorens believes strongly in the power of a positive mindset to productively overcome any challenge that may present itself. She described herself as a "glass-half-full" person and credits overcoming obstacles in her life to always look at the positive side of things. When asked what, if any, drawbacks she encountered during her career, she responded that she would "always figure out a way to solve a problem." Dr. Llorens's approach to any challenge in life was seeing it as a learning and growth opportunity which allowed for constant improvement in herself and her work. Allowing herself to take the time to make decisions and use her best judgment was another way of overcoming challenges.

Regarding this, she described herself as very observant and made "pretty good judgments" when successfully navigating positions that she was put in. She described herself as that because others assumed that she would fail. "If they would have known I could do it, they never would have appointed me to it." Being assertive enough to say no and allow herself the time to figure out exactly what she was getting into was crucial for her success in navigating different positions that she has been appointed to over her career. That characteristic was even more pivotal as she lived most of her life as an African American woman in the deep south during the Jim Crow era.

### **Personal Factors**

Since family is something very important to Dr. Llorens and aided in the development of her sense of wellbeing, she included them in all her career activities. Her husband and daughter attended conferences with her so frequently that "many people in the field [knew] him almost as well as they [knew] me." She credits her family early in life as well for setting her on the academic path to success. Her parents moving her and her sister from Louisiana to Michigan allowed them better opportunities for education.

Further, it was during this time that her mother set the example of advocacy, pushing to make sure that she and her sister were placed in the proper grade in school rather than being held back grade levels which were common for children moving from the south to the north. Through her mother's advocacy, she was able to follow whatever career opportunities she felt called to pursue. She has gone on to be her example of advocacy and service-driven lifestyle for others. Dr. Llorens places great value in serving others. Her career positions, volunteer work, and leadership style over the decades have demonstrated that value. "I really think that anything that I can do that makes other peoples' lives better is what gives me the best joy." This sentiment has carried over into her current stage of life by helping facilitate and reconcile meaningful relationships with the people at the senior living community she now resides.

### **Occupational Therapy**

Having entered the field of occupational therapy before it was considered a true "standalone profession," Dr. Llorens stated that much of her identity developed along with the professional identity of occupational therapy. She feels that being an occupational therapist is not just a career, but "a way of life" as it changed the way that she viewed the world and the people around her. Having seen the changes that have been made in the field over the years, she perceives that some changes made have been for the better and others for the worse. For example, the shift from the entry-level of education being raised to a doctoral degree is something that Dr. Llorens believes is being based on the profession being "seduced" by other rehab professions doing it first, rather than making the change based on actual evidence of benefits to clients. "The profession needs to have very stringent criteria for what constitutes a doctoral education in occupational therapy. I am not aware that they're as clearly defined as they will be".

Additionally, she stated that she has seen the development of certified occupational therapy assistant (COTA) programs evolve into what OT was initially. Her perspective of COTA programs in some cases replacing the career role of OTRs, is another example of possible problematic development of the profession throughout her lifetime. In Dr. Lela Llorens's perspective, attributes that have progressed the profession positively and beneficially include the addition of models, frames of references, formal evaluations and assessments. She stated that practice "in the beginning was symptom-driven" and only "provided activities to alleviate symptoms." With the addition of those features, the profession grew to treat all populations better and have a more science and evidence-based background.

### **Conclusion**

Dr. Llorens served as a pioneer for the occupational therapy profession. She was able to maintain success and optimism during a time that was discriminatory for her. Her family and desire to serve others was instrumental in her professional and personal life as they gave her actions meaning. To illustrate the river metaphor of the Kawa Model, her relationships with her family and those she served were driftwood, influencing factors that filled her life and helped her maintain a strong life flow (Teoh & Iwama, 2015).

With her positive mindset, the rocks in her life were not necessarily barriers but served to give her river movement and provide opportunities for growth and engagement with others. Different events occurred over her lifetime that served as rocks. From growing up in the American south during the Jim Crow era to the sociopolitical upheaval of the 1960s-80s. She asserted that she did not feel that she experienced much discrimination due to her race and/or gender during these times. The events taking place in parallel to her life still set the stage for her growth and the growth of OT as a profession. These events forced her, and those around her, to

recognize and navigate the challenging environment created by these political and cultural atmospheres. Such as the barriers in life, when seen as opportunities for improvement and growth, make one stronger and more capable for the next challenge (Teoh & Iwama, 2015).

Through this interview, the researchers were able to gather a great understanding of the life of Dr. Lela Llorens, her perspective of occupational therapy, and other significant events that occurred throughout her lifetime. With the number of accomplishments she has achieved in the profession, she will be known as one of the major influences that made occupational therapy into what it is today.

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Appendix

**Evolution of Occupational Therapy Practice: Life History of  
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CODES		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Racism</li> <li>• Diversity Issues</li> <li>• Politics</li> <li>• Positivity Mindset</li> <li>• Challenge</li> <li>• Success</li> <li>• Judgment</li> <li>• Jim Crow</li> <li>• Pioneer</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lifestyle &amp; Convenience</li> <li>• Identity</li> <li>• Financial Security</li> <li>• Family</li> <li>• Relationships</li> <li>• Daughter</li> <li>• Spirituality</li> <li>• Humor</li> <li>• Advocacy from Family</li> <li>• Serving Others</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Occupational Therapy</li> <li>• Evidence-Based</li> <li>• The professionalism of occupational therapy</li> <li>• Mental Health</li> <li>• Collaboration</li> <li>• Leadership</li> <li>• Payment Models</li> <li>• Learning/Education</li> <li>• Inspiration</li> <li>• Growth and Development</li> </ul>

CATEGORIES		
Overcoming Challenges	Personal Factors	Occupational Therapy

THEMES		
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. During her early years in practice, discrimination was present in Dr. Llorens’s social and professional life, but this did not personally affect her.</li> <li>2. Dr. Llorens’s positive mentality helped her to be successful throughout her career.</li> <li>3. Dr. Llorens served as an inspiration to other African Americans wanting to get a higher level of education.</li> <li>4. Dr. Llorens served as a pioneer as she progressed in her career in occupational therapy as she was the first African American to win the Eleanor Clarke Slagle Lectureship Award.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Because Dr. Llorens’s family gave her a better sense of well-being and her career more meaning, they were included in her activities throughout her career.</li> <li>2. Dr. Llorens found immense satisfaction in her ability to serve others.</li> <li>3. Dr. Llorens and her family structured their lifestyle to enable her to pursue her calling.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. There were major influential changes in the profession of occupational therapy that advanced its legitimacy during Dr. Lloren’s lifetime.</li> <li>2. Dr. Llorens self-identifies occupational therapy as more than a career.</li> <li>3. She believes many aspects of occupational therapy have changed for the better, and others have become problematic.</li> </ol>

ASSERTION
<p>Dr. Llorens served as a pioneer for the occupational therapy profession. She was able to maintain success and optimism during a time that was discriminatory for her. Her family and desire to serve others was instrumental in her professional and personal life as they gave her actions meaning.</p>