The Institutionalization of Occupational Therapy Research

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Occupational therapy appears to be in the process of "institutionalizing" research, and this accomplishment is being brought about through the efforts of visionary individuals and groups who have been working determinedly and quietly, or not so quietly, over the last 30 years.

Two meanings of the word institution appropriately describe the development of research that is taking place within occupational therapy, a) "That which is instituted, or established, such as a practice or custom which is a material and persistent element in the life or culture of an organized social group" and b) "Any association, custom, or relationship consciously approved by a society, and organized and maintained through prescribed rules and agencies." (1, p 1288)

Over the years, research has slowly grown to become a persistent element of the society of occupational therapists. Motions and resolutions approved by the society's elected representatives established an official research program, which is now maintained by the two corporate bodies, the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) and the American Occupational Therapy Foundation (AOTF), for the benefit of approximately 36,000 registered occupational therapists (OTRs) or certified occupational therapy assistants (COTAs).

Two groups of individuals brought occupational therapy research to its present state: the doers and the supporters, who made the doing possible. There are overlaps in the groups' memberships. The individuals, the AOTA, and the AOTF seem to be committed to the generation, conduct, monitoring, and support of research that is related to occupational therapy, practice, and philosophy. This paper traces the development of the research effort up to the present and recommends what will be needed in the future to ensure that the research momentum becomes sufficiently established to sustain itself.

Background Events

The AOTA took a major step toward institutionalization of research on April 14, 1965 by establishing the AOTF (2). The second of the three long-range objectives of the AOTF was "to finance and conduct research studies to contribute to the body of knowledge of the profession." (2, p 637)

At the close of its first decade of operation, the AOTF noted its commitment to serve occupational therapy's needs for "further development and refinement of its theories through research that is then appropriately reflected in the literature and in practice." (2, p 640)

In 1975, the AOTF was able to fund a seminar that was to be the beginning step toward an AOTA/AOTF research development program. The seminar, held in April 1976, was featured prominently in the September 1976 issue of The American Journal of Occupational Therapy (AJOT) through West's (3) introductory article, and Yerxa and Gilfoyle's (4) seminar report.

West (3) set the stage by tracing the history of occupational therapy from its formal organization in 1917 up to the seminar. She catalogued the research events and concluded that, although commendable, "their total impact is short of the mark" (3, p 477) and "the deficit running throughout has been the lack of a national commitment to research." (3, p 478) With AOTF funding and AOTA assuming responsibility for planning and conducting, the seminar was "off to what was hoped to be a joint and productive endeavor that would impact on the future of research in occupational therapy." (3, p 478)

The seminar report included barriers to research, areas of critical need, specific problems that needed to be studied, recommendations to official groups and individuals, and "the hope that [seminar participants'] efforts might stimulate the beginning of a new era of occupational therapy knowledge." (4, p 514)

In 1978, the AOTA Representative Assembly approved funds for research program staff members and for direct grants. In 1979, the AOTA contracted with the AOTF to conduct the research program. A long-range research plan with goals and priorities was developed. Detailed progress reports to the AOTA's Executive Board and Representative Assembly and to the AOTF's Board of Directors are presented by the Director of Research Services at each AOTA and AOTF meeting.

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The research program is supported financially by funds allotted by the AOTA Representative Assembly and the AOTF Special Projects Funds, by gifts and bequests to the AOTF for research purposes, and by funds generated by the program, such as fees from workshops and seminars and sales from teaching and research materials. Funding from outside sources, such as government and foundation grants, is actively sought.

Major research projects are carried out by the joint efforts of research program staff members, AOTA staff members, and voluntary individuals and groups; current examples include the Standardized Evaluation Project and the Human Occupation Study. Divisions within the AOTA national office also conduct research projects appropriate to division responsibilities.

The Occupational Therapy Journal of Research (OTJR) began publication in 1981 specifically for research reporting; the AJOT continues to publish articles. Thus, authors can choose the journal to which they will submit manuscripts.

Documentation of Research Institutionalization

In the concept of institutionalization of research it is assumed that there are roles for all therapists and that research responsibilities can be assumed at many levels. The range begins with Johnson (5) noting that, “While it may not be feasible for every therapist to be involved in (the actual conduct of) research, all can support such activity by encouraging the major professional organizations to support research and development, and by making financial contributions to further research...” (p 173) At the other end of the range is the production of “synthetic research and theoretical and empirical studies [that] may be regarded as a corporate professional responsibility, and hence carried out by those therapists designated as ‘researchers’ or ‘theoreticians.’ ” (6, pp 48-49)

Many contributors to the momentum toward institutionalization of research are between the two points.

Supporters of occupational therapy research have cited needs in numerous publications. Examples, selected for aptness and diversity, are noted as follows.

- “For us in occupational therapy, the most fundamental area of research is, and probably always will be, the nature and meaning of activity.” (7, p 208)
- “Our research directions are unlimited in the sense that validation of practice is needed in every aspect of our service to patients.” (8, p 10)
- “The commitment of the profession to innovative research must be the prime image put forth for laymen and colleagues alike to attract the most able students, those who have lifetime career commitments.” (9, p 24)
- “Progress toward a mature research program cannot occur unless or until greater numbers of occupational therapists value theory as well as the research efforts necessary for its development.” (10, p 121)
- “It is envisioned that OTJR will provide a forum for scholars to engage in vigorous discourse, to propose researchable theoretical issues, and to report completed theory based research.” (11, pp 5–6)
- “What our profession needs are fewer innovators and more replicators and validators.” (12, p 402)

These citations show that the conduct and support of research have long been present in a collective sense in occupational therapy.

Readers of research have been offered assistance. The editor of AJOT (13) recognized the frustration of practitioners who were unaware of how to read and appreciate research papers in 1977. She responded in an editorial, on the current issue's inclusion of an article (14), and a letter to the editor (15), offering help to practitioners wishing to read about practice-related research. She also asked readers who “can offer other mechanisms, can identify specific needs, or can assist with implementing suggested mechanisms” to contact the journal (13, p 50). Greenstein (15) made suggestions that included specific examples of research articles that offered “experiential evidence to assist the grass roots therapist in program decision making.” (p 48)

Crocker (14) noted, “Some responsibility for interpretation and evaluation of research articles must be assumed by the reader himself.” (p 35) She then described a common format for research studies, listed and elaborated upon seven questions to be asked by the reader, and suggested that using these seven questions the reader first read the Abstract, quickly skim the Introduction and Conclusions, and then carefully and critically read the article. Crocker also urged readers with unanswered questions to write to the author as “these people welcome questions about their work and appreciate...” (p 821)
your serious examination of it.” (p 39)

Books on research were written. The first book specific to occupational therapy research was Ethridge and McSweeney’s Research in Occupational Therapy in 1971 (16); the content was six articles previously published in the AJOT. The introduction noted, “research articles have appeared with increasing frequency over the past 15 years to the present state in which one fully expects to find at least one research article in every issue of AJOT.” (p 2)

The authors can take pride in the status of 1984: All five of the February 1984 AJOT feature articles and all six of the March 1984 AJOT feature articles were research articles. The Ethridge/McSweeney book was informative, supportive, and persuasive for would-be researchers.

The second book was Jantzen’s Research: The Practical Approach for Occupational Therapy in 1981 (17). This simple, easy-to-read book grew out of Jantzen’s lectures on research for undergraduate students and a course on research methods for graduate students. She noted that the book was written for the occupational therapist at the baccalaureate level “with the hope that it can be recognized that one does not have to be a mathematical whiz nor a genius in order to participate in research.” (p 3)

The third book was Cox and West’s Fundamentals of Research for Health Professionals in 1982 (18). This book is informative and supportive; the persuasion of the Ethridge/McSweeney book rightfully became expectation, as the book noted, “The basic information you will need to get started has been provided. It is now up to you.” (p 82)

Journal articles on the process of research were written by competent researchers. Selected examples of these include research concepts for use in the classroom (19), single-subject research (20, 21), quantitative reviewing (22), qualitative research (23-26), validity/reliability of tests/measurements (27-35), statistical methods (36-38), instrument methodology (29, 30, 35), documentation (39), and publication trends (40).

Journal reviews of nonoccupational therapy research books bring these volumes to the attention of new researchers. Such reviews may bring out aspects of the books that are not immediately obvious to novices, such as Mann’s comments on one book’s discussion of the role of theory in research as not often found in such a book (41) and another book’s limitation because of lack of emphasis on the link between theory and research (42). It is helpful to would-be researchers to be told the following: “This is a well-organized chapter that will be very useful for graduate students who often have difficulty in selecting and refining a research problem.” (42, p 104) Novice researchers will be reassured by the following: “This presentation on correlation is thorough and understandable.” (42, p 104)

Various communication methods are used to keep therapists informed of the activities of the AOTA/AOTF research program. One method is through a monthly section in the Occupational Therapy Newspaper. This publication includes items such as announcements of workshops and seminars, availability of research grants and fellowships, new or amended federal regulations pertaining to research, funding sources for research, and announcements of availability of products such as audio-cassette courses or computer lists of completed research. Another means of communication is through the AJOT pages designated for the Foundation. Examples include a reminder that research is everybody’s responsibility (43), long-range research plans (44), research competencies (45), how to prepare grant proposals (46), research priorities (47), and reasons for studying human occupation (6). Research Forums at the AOTA annual conference allow researchers to report directly to therapists.

The Academy of Research was established in 1983 by the AOTF to recognize and honor outstanding accomplishment in occupational therapy research. It is anticipated that these awards will be another way to communicate what is going on in research; they will also be incentives for therapists to become active researchers.

The relationship of research to practice has received much attention. Ethridge and McSweeney (16) probably oversimplified the relationship in their zeal to “persuade” therapists to do research by speaking of “a natural flow from one to the other.” (p 1) They qualified this somewhat by saying, “the results of [research will] hopefully modify and improve practice.” (p 1)

Ten years later West (48) noted the importance of “the point at which all that has been learned and shared may, at last, be used” (p 11) and stressed the importance of facilitating use of research as well as dissemination.
Avres (49) concluded her Slagle Lecture by saying, "There is a long gap between these basic research data and the assurance that a treatment procedure is effective. We need many studies to test, scientifically, the hypotheses suggested by the theories." (p 135) It is unlikely that Ayres has presented a lecture, workshop, or seminar without repeating this admonition.

What is implied in the institutionalization of research hopefully will protect occupational therapy from what is thought to happen in some of the disciplines in which research has a long history. Researchers and practitioners are sometimes so distant from each other that neither group considers the other. The two groups are said to "with rare exceptions, form camps whose inhabitants talk and write predominantly for each other." (50, p 2) Another factor might save occupational therapists from such a fate: Researchers and practitioners are, as yet, the same people; they play different roles at times.

Theory-based research that can be translated into practice was probably the most talked about and written about topic among occupational therapy researchers in the early 1980s. A major undertaking of the AOTA/AOTF research program is the workshop series "Clinical Thinking Skills," which has an emphasis on the treatment theories of human occupation and sensory integration. Workshops are scheduled across the country during the next two years.

References listed in this article and other articles in AJOT and OTJR provide information on theory, research, and practice issues in occupational therapy. Two recent books by Kielhofner and Reed will also be beneficial. Kielhofner's book (51) "is devoted to an examination of the full range of knowledge that has accrued through practice and research..." (p xii), whereas the purpose of Reed's book (52) is to "suggest some directions for research on theoretical and practice models in occupational therapy." (p v) She further notes that "development of models provides a useful first step in the quest towards achieving a scientific rationale for the practice of occupational therapy." (p 26)

**Research**

**"Institutionalization" by Nursing**

Examination of research efforts of other disciplines identified nursing as being most likely to offer a useful model for occupational therapy. Except for being bigger in all dimensions—more practitioners, more schools, more representation in federal agencies, four research journals (instead of one)—nursing seems to be similar enough to occupational therapy to offer interesting comparisons along with mutual problem-solving methods. Problems identified as nursing problems may also be occupational therapy problems.

Dumas and Felton (53) reported that a recent congressionally mandated study found that lack of funds for research training and carrying out research hampered efforts to improve nursing's research capacity. The study's recommendation was for a center for research highly placed in the federal government with adequate funding. Possibilities are for an Institute of Nursing within the National Institutes of Health (NIH) or for a Center for Nursing Research or Bureau of Nursing outside the NIH. Many nurses are reluctant to become part of the NIH because of its restrictive focus on biomedical studies. They also wish to keep research, education, and practice under one organizational umbrella to avoid a split in the nursing constituency. Final decisions have not been made as yet.

One study (54) found that it was essential to have nurses do nursing research and have the research be concerned with clinical problems, be anchored in a theoretical framework that is continuously refined through replication, and use a sound methodology. The study recommended that instruments be developed to measure phenomena of interest to nursing. The study also concluded that the major problems of nursing research were that research a) was not linked to prior work, b) was not planned so as to refine, extend, or refute theories, c) was not tested for generalizability of findings over time and samples, d) had not been directed toward building a science for nursing practice, e) did not have steps that were clearly spelled out, and f) had few studies suitable for replication.

Another study (55) reported trends toward a) questioning the use of strictly quantitative research methods as sacrificing meaningfulness for vigor, b) seeking alternatives to logical empiricism that failed to deal with the nursing phenomena of humanism and holism, and locating alternatives to help bridge the
expresses alarm at the slow headway in overcoming "the attitude of neglect toward scientific inquiry [which has an] adverse impact on the amount of research being conducted [and] is also apparent in the limited response to studies that have been published. Critical review and discussion of research are essential for the sound and steady development of any body of knowledge." (p 197)

As a means of maintaining the tempo of research, the following are needed:

- individuals to generate research ideas;
- individuals to conduct research;
- collaborations to move research ideas into clinical situations;
- generators of publications to document the results of clinical practice based on research findings;
- generators of publications to produce materials on various areas of the research process, on qualitative research, on the ethical concerns and parameters of research, and on public policy implications for research;
- educators to pick up on the results of research studies and pass them on to students;
- watchdogs of research to look at the global area of research and hypothesize as to the next step; and
- researchers to continue dialogue so proponents of specific theories can be kept honest.

Conclusion

Circumstances described under the term institutionalization are seen as being beneficial to occupational therapists in their commitment to professional research. These circumstances allow the two corporate bodies, AOTA and AOTF, to monitor research efforts and results, to commit more or less resources to research with full knowledge of its impact on both research and other professional obligations, and to change structure, focus, or methodology of the corporate research efforts. The same circumstances encourage supporters of research to monitor the research program and its results, and to make suggestions; write letters to the editor, or make financial contributions; the circumstances also allow individual researchers to keep abreast of the current status of research and to plan their own research studies accordingly.

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