

Guest editorials

Research in Occupational Practice

A major component of my day to day work as a lecturer involves the teaching of research methods at all levels of training (first year to doctoral level) and across many professions (registered for programmes in Public Health, Rehabilitation and Disability Studies). Ongoing review of the content offered in these courses involve, on one hand, a consideration of content to include and, on the other hand, the exit-level competencies. The pertinent question here is on the scope of occupational therapy research and the knowledge and skills required by occupational therapy researchers for them to contribute confidently and competently in their chosen fields of interest. My experience has been that occupational therapists require broad research knowledge and a full range of skills in order to answer the varied research questions our profession has to answer in order to produce the evidence that will be needed for our profession to thrive in a new legislative environment in which all health intervention increasingly will have to produce demonstrated outcomes. Several factors that are valued in our profession call for researchers with sophisticated knowledge and skill that will allow them to match/critique the goodness of fit between methodology and research question. These factors include:

- ❖ the complexities associated with understanding occupation (in context) and the meaning/fit of improving health,
- ❖ the lived experience of 'doing' as influenced by personal, cultural and environmental realities,
- ❖ the broad range of techniques used, for which evidence is required,
- ❖ the extent to which our practice is shaped by influences emanating across system levels (from human to societal level),
- ❖ implications of holistic practice and
- ❖ our commitment to client-centred practice and community-led processes.

The question that comes to mind is the minimum requirements needed for effective practice given the complexities associated with occupational therapy practice. To answer this question two (rather obvious) factors require consideration; (1) the exit-level competencies of novice researchers when they enter the field. I hold the view that occupational therapy researchers should, at the very least, be able to judge research coherence (alignment between the ontology, epistemology and methodology) and appraisal of the fit between the research question and the methodology used. Because these competencies are required when producing findings (research evidence) and consuming (reading, applying, disseminating) research it becomes clear that every practitioner should at least meet expected research competence. To achieve of such competence

I would argue that, for occupational therapists to judge their own knowledge and skill as adequate they would need to be able to do this for the range of methodologies presented in publications in the field. At a postgraduate level a student needs to comprehend the full landscape of research, including different paradigms (qualitative and quantitative), orientations (e.g. positivist, interpretivist, post-modern), and traditions (e.g. ethnography, phenomenology, life history work). My experience has been that researchers' own appraisal of their research knowledge and skills strongly influence the confidence level of researchers and reviewers.

It is with consideration of the above argument for occupational therapy researchers to engage in research drawing on the full landscape of research that I found the studies presented in this Special Edition South African Journal of Occupational Therapy so encouraging and exciting. The diversity of research contained in it begins to demonstrate the breadth and depth of knowledge and skill on which researchers drew to conduct their research. Similarly, the scope covered by researchers disseminating their findings in this Edition is worth noting. The variation in authors' level of experience (for research and publication) – from final year occupational therapy students to seasoned authors – is also noteworthy. Further variation is demonstrated in research sites that include schools, community sites, university contexts and rehabilitation units ranging from one-on-one direct intervention to modification/adaptation of environment right through to policy development. The lessons to take away from this realisation are that research should be an integral part of day-to-day occupational therapy practice and that publication can be a natural extension. The profession can no longer afford a culture in which a small group of researchers engage in research for personal development or out of interest; the need for empirically produced evidence will play an increasingly larger role in the funding, shape and size of the occupational therapy profession in future.

As guest editor of this edition it is my hope that you, the reader, will enjoy the research produced and presented here by authors with an affiliation to the Stellenbosch Occupational Therapy Division. The Stellenbosch Division embarked on a serious drive to improve research output and make a positive and relevant contribution to the ongoing development of occupational therapy in South Africa; it recognises and salutes similar initiatives at other institutions and across practice contexts.

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