

Promoting a More Diverse Workforce Through the Inclusion of OT Practitioners with Disabilities

Kim The, MSOT, OTR/L

Jenna Heffron, PhD, OTR/L

Elizabeth Harrison, OTD, OTR/L



Objectives

1. Identify barriers to practice that OT practitioners with disabilities experience as discussed in the literature
2. Identify strengths that OT practitioners with disabilities can bring to the profession and their clients
3. Discuss how supporting and empowering OT practitioners with disabilities can help to promote a more diverse workforce and help us to achieve AOTA's Vision 2025

Introduction

- We often talk about “practitioners” and “persons with disabilities” as if they are two mutually-exclusive groups
- But those at the intersection of those communities (OT practitioners *with disabilities*) can tell us a great deal about our profession
- There are many ways to define disability: medical model, social model, minority group model
- OT practitioners with disabilities can be considered a minority group that adds workforce diversity
- The ADA requires employers to make “reasonable accommodations” for employees with disabilities → This includes OT!

Methods

Literature review

- Databases (EBSCO, PubMed, CINAHL, PsychInfo)
- Search terms: occupational therapist with disability, disabled occupational therapist, barrier, support, experience
- From perspectives of OTs, OTAs, educators, colleagues, supervisors
- 1990 or later (ADA)
- US and international journals and sources
- Peer-reviewed and non peer-reviewed articles
- Quantitative and qualitative research

Results

Three Themes:

1. OT practitioners with disabilities experience barriers to inclusion in the OT workforce
2. OT practitioners with disabilities have unique strengths & insights they contribute to OT
3. Supports exist to promote inclusion of OT practitioners with disabilities

Theme 1: Barriers that OT Practitioners with Disabilities Face

- Attitudinal barriers
- Environmental barriers
- Organizational barriers

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Attitudinal barriers

- Accommodations as unfair, special treatment, a burden
- Low expectations
- Inaccurate perceptions of “what it takes” to be a practitioner
- Attitudes tend to be individualistic
- Attitudes tend to be hierarchical by disability type
- Clashes and convergences of cultural values

Theme 1: Barriers that OT Practitioners with Disabilities Face

Environmental barriers

- Physical inaccessibility
- Issues related to disclosure
- Barriers related to accommodations
- Accommodations needed/ not made
- Social barriers
- Barriers to career progression
- Political barriers
- Economic barriers
- Time-related barriers

Theme 1: Barriers that OT Practitioners with Disabilities Face

Organizational barriers

- Academic and technical standards
- Productivity requirements
- Workplace discrimination
- Limitations of the ADA
- Limitations of OT education: Knowledge about the ADA, accommodations, social model of disability

Theme 2: Strengths of OT Practitioners with Disabilities

- Therapeutic use of self & empathy
- Managing power differentials
- Advocacy skills
- Problem-solving skills
- Personal experience with medical system
- Technical skills
- Bridging cultural divides
- Creativity

Theme 3: Supports for OT Practitioners with Disabilities

- Formal supports
- Informal supports

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Formal supports

- Academic supports
- Support from management
- Supportive colleagues
- Provision of accessibility and accommodations
- Have procedures and processes in place for OT practitioners with disabilities

Theme 3: Supports for OT Practitioners with Disabilities

Informal supports

- Family and friends
- Roommates
- OTs with disabilities sharing adaptations they've made in the workplace
- Cultural change
- Connecting with other OT practitioners with disabilities
- OTs with disabilities getting their voices heard

Discussion

Some critiques based on the current literature:

- Need more focus on social model & human rights
- Internalized ableism
 - Primary onus on OT practitioner with disability to find their own adaptations
 - “Working through it”
 - Passing

Discussion

- “Reasonable accommodations”
 - Depends on organizations’ reading of ADA
 - Importance of defining “essential job functions”
- OT practitioners with disabilities bring important skills and perspectives to the profession
- OT practitioners with disabilities can be successful in the profession with supports in place
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Discussion

- Importance of empowering OT practitioners with disabilities
- OT practitioners value modifying and adapting the environment, yet we are not supporting of these things for our own OT practitioners with disabilities
- Walk the Talk

Limitations

- Limited evidence
- Quality of evidence
- National vs. international and different systems/policies/contexts



This is an **important** area for future research and advocacy!

Recommendations

For OT practitioners with disabilities:

- Find peer support, organize together (NOTPD)
- Make your voices, stories, concerns heard
- Know your rights for accommodation under ADA

For nondisabled OT practitioner colleagues:

- Affirm OT practitioners with disabilities' experiences and rights to accommodations
- Consider team-based (interdependent) approaches

Recommendations, continued

For OT Education:

- ADA training for all OT students, plus continuing education for OT supervisors and fieldwork educators
- Education on social model and disability rights
- Disability cultural competence/humility training for working for patients and colleagues

Recommendations, continued

For OT Fieldwork:

- Identify the core requirements of a placement and collaborate to adapt the ways these requirements can be met
- Provide flexible practice options
- Formal supervision workshops on working with students with disabilities
- Develop evaluation guidelines which neither discriminate against nor favour students with disabilities
- Assist students with disabilities to identify and negotiate their accommodations.

Recommendations, continued

For Advocates:

- Create supportive and affirming process for accommodations on fieldwork
- Publicly support the rights & inclusion of OT practitioners with disabilities – defend the ADA
- Make AOTA conference accessible
- Include disability as a minority group when considering student and workforce diversity
- Advocate to ACOTE about standards about ADA and disability justice
- Create guides on accessibility and accommodations

Activity: Brainstorming supports & barriers

Divide into groups based on the area of practice you want to discuss:

- OT education - Including classroom instruction *and* fieldwork education
 - Also consider recruitment: Outreach to disabled students
- OT practice - Supporting OT practitioners with disabilities in the workforce
- Advocacy - Advocating for inclusion of practitioners with disabilities on a broader scale

In your groups, make a list of barriers and supports. Brainstorm opportunities!

Activity: Action Planning

We've brainstormed some of the big issues, but what are YOU going to do?

Pick a tangible step you can take in the next month to supporting OT students or practitioners with disabilities. Write it down. Set a reminder in your phone. Remember, this plan should be:

Specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timely.

Pair and share with a partner. If you're willing, we'll ask a few people to share their action plans with the large group.

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Questions? Please contact us.

Kim The, MSOT, OTR/L
kthe2@uic.edu

Jenna Heffron, PhD, OTR/L
jheffron@ithaca.edu

Elizabeth Harrison, OTD, OTR/L
eharri20@uic.edu