

The theoretical knowledge valued and used by experienced occupational therapists working in mental health practice.

Samantha Ashby

University of Newcastle, NSW, Australia

Introduction: Scholars from all health professions described a gap in the theoretical knowledge generated and use in practice. In occupational therapy, scholars argue that the gap is manifested in a lack of occupation perspective in language and practice. However, there are very few research studies which explore how practitioners value and use theoretical knowledge and how it is incorporated into their practice knowledge.

Objectives: To explore the theoretic perspectives that form the practice knowledge of experienced mental health practitioners.

Method: Narrative and semi-structured interviews were used to gather information from a sample of ten experienced mental health practitioners who worked in a range of practice contexts.

Results: Experienced occupational therapists value an occupational perspective of health and the use of occupation-focused models in their practice. This occupational perspective and the occupation-focused models used were learnt during their entry-levels degree program. All practitioners had decided to work in mental health settings because this sector offered the freedom to use occupation as an ends and means. Occupation-focused models were used as 'background' knowledge to frame their ideas about why an occupational issue was occurring. When seeking to change occupational behaviour or provide the client with strategies to assist in occupational engagement they used adaptive propositional knowledge from psychology with an occupational perspective.

Conclusion: The occupation-focused models used by practitioners were learnt during their graduate program supporting earlier research by Law and McColl (1989). These models form part of the professional knowledge which shapes the therapist's reasoning and appears to form part of their tacit knowledge. However, the main influence on practitioners practice is their own occupational perspective which guides interventions including those borrowed from psychology.

Contribution to practice/evidence base of occupational therapy: Occupational therapists working in mental health are providing occupation-focused services to their consumers. Their interventions are based on the theoretical knowledge which forms their personal paradigm and reflect the practice context and its dominant discourse.

Reference

Law, M., & McColl, M. A. (1989). Knowledge and use of theory among occupational therapists: A Canadian survey. *Canadian Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 56(4), 198-204.