

Cross-Cultural Work Experiences: Understanding the Challenges and Demands

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Introduction:

Occupational therapists and students are engaging in cross-cultural experiences throughout their careers. At times, this engagement is related to local practice concerns. At other times, it may also be related to international work opportunities. While there is evidence in the literature as to the challenges and demands of such practice, there is limited information specifically related to how occupational therapists and students do engage in and attend to these issues.

Objectives: At the conclusion of this session, the participants will be able to:

1. Identify three benefits and challenges with cross-cultural engagement within occupational therapy practice.
2. Identify the differences between local and international cross-cultural experiences.
2. Identify three considerations when engaging in cross-cultural occupational therapy practice

Methods:

This research project was a multiple case study design which utilized a qualitative, phenomenological approach to conduct semi-structured interviews with occupational therapy practitioners and students. Three groups were identified including internationally-trained practitioners working in the United States, US trained occupational therapy students completing international educational experiences and occupational therapists engaged in international volunteer and work opportunities. A constant comparative analysis of the data was completed with all interview transcripts among and between participants.

Results:

The results of the data analysis indicated major themes of connectedness, internal conflict, spirit of the people, and minimizing the impact. The participants expressed appreciation and sensitivity to cultural issues; however, conflict was identified and multiple ways to cope with and overcome that conflict will be shared.

Conclusion:

This study utilized the Model of Occupational Adaptation to examine the importance of adapting to new and different demands in order to successfully engage in cross-cultural work experiences.

Contribution:

When engaging in cross-cultural work it is important to consider the cultural differences and the demands involved to successfully implement occupational therapy services. Understanding these demands and attending to them will assist practitioners and students to be better prepared for and more effective when engaged in such work.