

Social Perceptions of Occupational Therapy: a Study of the Students' Perspective

Spoleczne postrzeganie terapii zajęciowej: studium perspektywy studentów

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Abstract

Background. In geriatrics, particular attention is paid to the role of an occupational therapist in a multidisciplinary geriatric team. People commonly do not know who an occupational therapist is and how this person can help them. **Aim.** The aim of the study was to investigate the social perceptions of OT according to the OT students. **Materials and Methods.** The study group consisted of 2nd-year students of Occupational Therapy from Poznan University of Medical Sciences, who were expected to have good knowledge of their field. A total of 17 students took part in three focus groups discussions (FGD). **Results.** During FGD, the following topics were discussed: the persons who have the knowledge of OT – students and graduates of selected courses and OT clients including older individuals, the place for OT in the system, in social perception – medical units, social units, education, the definition of OT, in social perception – doing something, e.g., crocheting, a remedy for boredom, doing nothing, the recipients – persons to whom OT is dedicated, in social perception – subjects with certain medical conditions, including older individuals as an age group. **Conclusions.** We believe that our students and graduates will bring a new dimension to the perception of their profession. Indeed, several scientific papers indicate changes in the social perception of the availability of OT in the care system as well as ongoing OT professionalisation in different countries. Older adults will benefit from the development of professional identity of occupational therapists. (*Gerontol Pol* 2023; 31; 77-81) doi: 10.53139/GP.20233118

Keywords: occupational therapy, students, social perceptions

Streszczenie

Wprowadzenie. W geriatry zwraca się uwagę na rolę terapeuty zajęciowego (TZ) w zespole geriatrycznym. Jednak ludzie często nie wiedzą, kim jest TZ i jak może im pomóc. **Cel.** Celem badania była ocena społecznego postrzegania TZ, w opinii studentów terapii zajęciowej. **Materiał i metody.** Grupę badaną stanowili studenci II roku Terapii Zajęciowej Uniwersytetu Medycznego w Poznaniu. Do badania włączono 17 studentów, u których przeprowadzono dyskusje w trzech grupach fokusowych. **Wyniki:** Podczas grup fokusowych poruszono następujące tematy: kto posiada wiedzę na temat tego czym jest terapia zajęciowa – studenci wybranych kierunków studiów i uczestnicy zajęć TZ, często są to osoby starsze, gdzie jest miejsce - w odbiorze społecznym - TZ w systemie – w jednostkach medycznych i społecznych oraz w edukacji, jaka jest definicja TZ w odbiorze społecznym – robienie czegoś, np. szydełkowanie, lekarstwo na nudę, nic nie robienie, komu dedykowana jest TZ, w odbiorze społecznym – osobom z określonymi schorzeniami, ale tzn. wybranym grupom wiekowym, w tym osobom starszym. **Wnioski:** Uważamy, że studenci (a później absolwenci) wniosą nowy wymiar do postrzegania swojego zawodu. Rzeczywiście, kilka prac naukowych wskazuje na zmiany w społecznym postrzeganiu OT w systemie opieki, a także postępującą profesjonalizację tego zawodu w różnych krajach. Osoby starsze będą korzystać z rozwoju zawodowego terapeutów zajęciowych. (*Gerontol Pol* 2023; 31; 77-81) doi: 10.53139/GP.20233118

Słowa kluczowe: terapia zajęciowa, studenci, percepcja społeczna

Introduction

There is no doubt today that a geriatric patient, due to the complexity of their clinical situation, requires a holistic approach that should be carried out by a team of professionals from various fields. In countries with well-developed geriatric care, such as Germany, such a team includes, among others, an occupational therapist [1].

Occupational therapists are highly qualified professionals who help clients/patients to gain or maintain independence in daily activities; they are also prepared to assess the physical, psychological and social functioning of the client/patient, identify areas of dysfunction, and involve the client/patient in a structured programme of occupational activity to overcome their problems and disabilities.

Occupational therapy (OT) has a rich history throughout the world. This field grew out of the rising social consciousness of the early 20th century, and at the same time, became a profession, mainly in highly developed countries [2,3].

Polish experiences with academically educated occupational therapists are shorter. In 2012, the Faculty of Health Sciences at Poznan University of Medical Sciences (PUMS) was among the first in the country to offer a professional curriculum: the Bachelor's Degree in OT (B.Sc., Polish title: Licencjat). The mission of the programme is to provide professional education in OT, conforming to contemporary standards. Our graduates are skilled hands-on generalist practitioners, client-centred and occupation-centred in their approach to the profession.

Aim. The aim of the study was to investigate the social perceptions of OT, according to OT students.

Materials and Methods

Groups of OT students from PUMS approaching the end of their 2nd year (n=23) were invited to take part in the study, as they were expected to have good knowledge of their field. After the presentation of the study protocol, all of them agreed to participate and gave their written consent. They were twenty females and three males (which was typical for the gender structure of OT students and practitioners in Poland).

The method of focus group discussions (FGD) was selected as the most appropriate one for the study. It utilises group synergy and stimulates processes associated with the group context of shaping and expressing opinions which are created as a result of the mutual stimulation of participants. Moreover, focus groups provide

an opportunity for data to emerge as a result of dynamic interactions between group members [4].

Three FGD were organised, each composed of 5-6 participants, led by a professional moderator. The subject of the discussion was the situation of OT in Poland. The discussions concentrated on the topic: Why is the social reception of OT poor?

The discussions were recorded and then transcribed. The analysis of transcripts was performed by two independent researchers, based on the grounded theory methodology described by Corbin and Strauss [5-7]. One of the main advantages of this approach lies in its well-structured and practice-oriented method in generating grounded theory [8]. A key issue in this approach is coding – the operation by which data are broken, conceptualised and put back together in new ways – the open coding and after that, the axial and selective coding were performed. All variables were discussed until a consensus was reached.

The project was approved by the Bioethical Committee of Poznan University of Medical Sciences, Poznan, Poland.

Results

As far as the social perception of OT in Poland is concerned, four main categories were identified with related subcategories (Table I). Students discussed:

- the persons who have the knowledge of OT
- the place for OT in the system, in the social perception
- the definition of OT, in the social perception
- the recipients – persons to whom OT is dedicated, in the social perception.

The following has been pointed out:

1. The most members of the public have no knowledge of OT. Hence the students are frequently asked what OT is all about.
 - *“Even in the circle of my friends, if I say I’m studying OT, then I hear: and what is it? As I begin to explain what it is about, I hear that it is just something like painting.”*

Some believe OT is *something between physiotherapy, nursing and psychology, and artistic actions*. The professionalism of OT is often depreciated – *such studying is not studying, it is not a profession, you will just play with plasticine, crayons, whatever...* The perception of OT as a minor artistic activity is strengthened by views like *I have no talent, no ability, I am not good for the therapy*. This means a misunderstanding of the fundamental role of therapy in which, when creating, the most important and valuable is the

Table I. Summary of categories and subcategories identified during focus group discussions of OT students on social perceptions of OT in Poland

Category	Sub-category	Example	Citation
The persons who have the knowledge of OT	Studying	Students and graduates of selected courses, mainly pedagogics, and physiotherapy	In fact, many people do not know what it is. And if they know, they are usually students of pedagogy or medical studies or people who are after such courses, and so they work
	Participation	Clients of OT and their environments, parents of children with disabilities, older persons in care homes, word of mouth	Older people often know because they participate in OT activities, e.g. in sanatoriums
The place for OT in the system	Medical units	Psychogeriatric wards, daily psychiatric units	In hospitals (...) only in psychiatric wards, there is an OT lab, and that is one for the entire hospital
	Social units	Prisons, homes for single mothers	OT is, for example, working with mothers who raise their children on their own
	Education	Schools, care, and education centres	There are places where social skills are improved, such as care and education centres
The definition of OT in the social perception	Passing time	Doing something, e.g., crocheting, remedy for boredom, doing nothing	It is viewed as such a filling the time, without any therapeutic function
	Other therapeutic occupations	Branch of physiotherapy, balneotherapy	OT is a faction of physiotherapy
	Artistic occupations	Seasonal decorations, cut-outs, painting, singing	OT is more fun than working with a patient
The recipients of OT in the social perception	Age groups	Older persons, children	Occupational therapy is associated with old age and mental illness, and these are two things people do not want to talk about
	Certain medical conditions	Psychiatric patients in hospitals, neurological post-stroke patients, oncological patients	OT is applicable in post-stroke neurological patients; you can quickly reverse the damage that has occurred

process of creation, not the perfection of the object produced. The myth that *it is just filling the time, that is to say, so that people do not get bored, and not to gain anything in terms of fitness and independence*, is deeply rooted.

The students, based on their own experience, stated that *doctors, first of all, do not know what it is, and we are supposed to work with them*.

On the other hand, one of the students stated that

- many persons *“as soon as they are explained what OT is, they often say that this is a cool thing.”*

2. The incorrect perception of the field results – at least in part – from the lack of professional knowledge, skills, and competencies of non-academically educated occupational therapists.

“Occupational therapists sometimes create a false picture of what OT actually is (...) they take people’s time without thinking how to help them (...) they use some techniques they are accustomed to and (...) they do origami everywhere...”

Discussion

OT, as a profession, is in its developmental stage in Poland [9]. A contemporary occupational therapist is a

client’s/patient’s assistant, advocate, educator, and advisor. These new professional roles call for the creation of a new image of the profession while, so far, little attention has been drawn to develop a tangible public perception of occupational therapists. Redefining professional roles depends upon the presence of socially and culturally competent practitioners as well as activities and change agents [10], both organisational and social. Developing new professional roles also seems a logical consequence of the changes in formal professional education and training of occupational therapists in Poland.

Students of OT conceptualise thinking about the discipline and develop their own professionalism during their studying at the university. The teaching methods are expected to be up to date and include modern techniques, such as learning by doing [11]. During the discussions, our students also used relevant examples and their own broader societal context to understand professionalism. The needs of better legal, organisational and educational context, pointed by our participants, are also indicated in published papers [12,13]. Similar concerns were also expressed by therapists in other countries [14,15].

The important role of OT in supporting older people is demonstrated by the fact that students indicated ol-

der adults as recipients of this kind of therapy, and particularly – among the medical units where occupational therapy is conducted – the psychogeriatric wards. Indeed, the role of OT in the so-called *ageing in the place* is stressed [16]. Furthermore, the need to perform OT specifically in the place of residence of the client is emphasised. A significant feature of the social perception of OT in Poland is that it is being located only in institutions (social care units, hospitals, and outpatient clinics), whereas, in countries with long therapeutic traditions, the occupational therapist's working setting is equally the community, that is, the client's/patient's living environment [17].

As for the social perception of OT in Poland, lack of knowledge about the profession, combined with the past picture of practitioners without university-level education, provokes prejudicial stereotypes. Cook and Stoeker reviewed numerous studies on the creation of stereotypes by medical students of different fields and medical practitioners [18]. In most cases – also among occupational therapists – the self-assessment was higher than that of other professionals. Likewise, the participants of our study in their statements presented a positive image of their profession. Still, the students often face ignorance and inadequate social perception among both laymen and other professionals. This phenomenon was similarly observed in other countries, for example, a paper in Brighton Journal of Research in Health Sciences [19] described an abnormal image of OT practitioners presented in articles published mainly by medical doctors in British medical journals.

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Our study has some limitations induced by its qualitative nature. Lack of quantitative data results in an inability to perform statistical analysis, create statistics-based comparisons, and derive conclusions. There was also gender imbalance as we had a lot more female participants than male ones. Nevertheless, OT is a predominantly female profession [20]. The average percentage of men in this profession is about 8-20% [21], similarly to the proportion in our study.

An important strength of the focus group method is the collection of opinions of several individuals and insights gained into the way they are formed. Additionally, we were able to include students of three consecutive years, so their opinions should be representative of the OT course at our university.

Conclusions

We believe that our students and graduates will bring a new dimension to the perception of their profession. Indeed, several scientific papers indicate changes in the social perception of the availability of OT in the care system as well as ongoing OT professionalisation in different countries. Older adults will benefit from the development of professional identity of occupational therapists.

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Conflicts of Interest

None

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