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Barriers and Facilitators to African Americans Entering the Field of Occupational Therapy: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

Purpose: While the United States population is becoming increasingly diverse, the profession of occupational therapy remains predominantly White. This study aimed to better understand barriers and facilitators to African Americans enrolling in OT school from their perspective.

Participants: A snowball sample of 10 African American participants completed interviews to identify barriers and facilitators to entering the occupational therapy profession.

Methods: A phenomenological approach consisting of open-ended interviews where participants revealed their opinions, experiences, and insights into barriers and facilitators to African Americans entering occupational therapy was used. Using grounded theory to guide thematic coding, several themes were identified, and a diversity-based model was developed to promote increased diversity of students entering the occupational therapy profession.

Results: Common themes emerged that exposure to occupational therapy and exposure to African American occupational therapists was pivotal in deciding to enroll in OT school.

Conclusions: Occupational therapy as a profession needs to increase diversity among its practitioners. One way this may be achieved is by increasing the enrollment of diverse students.

Findings suggest that African American occupational therapists believe that early exposure to occupational therapy and exposure to diverse occupational therapists is important to African American students enrolling in occupational therapy programs.

Keywords: *occupational therapists, diversity, healthcare practitioners, occupational therapy*

BACKGROUND

There is a distinct lack of diverse occupational therapy practitioners (OTPs) in the United States, with only 5.4% of the profession identifying as African American. As the demographics in the United States change and become more diverse it is important to have diverse occupational therapy practitioners also known as OTPs to promote health equity (Parker et al., 2019). The lack of diversity in the occupational therapy profession is a longstanding problem that its overarching national body has acknowledged, the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA, 2021). Recruiting a more diverse membership was initiated in the mid to late 1980s (Black, 2002). While the OT profession has been trying to improve the issues related to diversity and inclusion since the 1980s, the problem persists. Currently, the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) is proactively taking action to increase professional diversity (AOTA, 2021). AOTA has taken several steps to promote diversity in the profession, not limited to forming a diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) strategic plan report; and forming special interest minority groups, including but not limited to African Americans, Hispanics, and Asians. AOTA's strategic plan aims to foster transformation toward an inclusive organization accessible to all practitioners, students, and occupational therapy professionals (Smiley et al., 2021). Despite AOTA working towards improving diversity in the profession over many decades, there is still a critical lack of diversity within the profession today.

While AOTA's strategic plan aspires to create a more diverse profession, there is no clear model to address how to improve diversity within the problem. One known factor impacting diversity is enrollment in degree programs. To increase diversity within a profession, there must be successful completion of educational programs by underrepresented minority occupational therapy students (Brown et al., 2021). A recent study found that over 80% of students enrolled in entry-level OTD and MSOT programs were white, and 90% were female (Dennis et al., 2020). While there is a lack of research to truly understand what causes the underrepresentation of minority groups in the OT profession, existing evidence suggests that factors such as limited

education, limited exposure to occupational therapy, and lack of personal experiences with an occupational therapist in school and the community may decrease the likelihood a student will enter the occupational therapy profession. Furthermore, evidence suggests that minority occupational therapy students (OTSs) were exposed to occupational therapy at a later age (ages 19-25) than non-minority OTSs (ages 12-18) (Colaianne et al., 2022). Dennis et al. (2020), proposed that occupational therapy programs should examine their practices and policies to be inclusive of diverse students.

This research study aimed to address this problem by increasing understanding of barriers and facilitators to African American individuals entering the OT profession and the consequent development of a model that could be used to promote diversity of students enrolling in occupational therapy programs.

METHODS AND RESEARCH DESIGN

This phenomenological study was conducted using semi-structured, open-ended interviews with African American occupational therapists or occupational therapy students. The model that emerged from the interviews was grounded in data collected from participants' personal and professional experiences with occupational therapy. The study was approved by the Howard University Institutional Review Board.

The lead author of this study is an African American female occupational therapist who has attended both a predominantly white institution also known as PWI, and a Historically Black Colleges and Universities also known as HBCU. She obtained her undergraduate degree from a PWI and her graduate degree from an HBCU where she took courses in both allied health sciences programs and experienced barriers at a PWI and facilitators at an HBCU. The research was advised by the second author, who is a Caucasian female who is an occupational therapist, and a professor at an historically black college. The authors acknowledge that their standpoints may have impacted the design and outcomes of the research study as well as the preparation of this manuscript.

PARTICIPANTS

A snowball sample of 10 African American participants was recruited for the study. Using social media (Facebook OT groups, LinkedIn, and Instagram), email, and word-of-mouth, 10

current OT students and/or recent OT graduates aged 18-45 participated in the study. To be included in the study, participants had to be currently enrolled in OT school or had graduated from OT school and obtained licensure as an occupational therapist in the past 5 years. Recruitment continued until data saturation was reached. Participants were screened before the study to determine if they qualified, by answering closed-ended demographic questions that addressed the participant's age, race, ethnicity, gender, degree level of their program, and years in their OT program or as a licensed clinician. Once participants were approved for participation, a consent form was sent to obtain the participants' signatures before interviews were conducted.

INTERVIEWS

A qualitative approach was used to capture each participant's lived experience. Data was collected via semi-structured interviews conducted via telephone by the lead author, using open-ended questions about facilitators and barriers faced by OT clinicians before they entered the occupational therapy profession. The interviews lasted between 30 - 60 minutes. Three broad-scale discussion points/questions were used to guide the interview:

- A. When was your first exposure to the occupational therapy profession?
- B. What influenced you to become an occupational therapist? and
- C. What were or are barriers you experienced as an OT student and/or an OT practitioner?

Follow-up questions were used to elicit details from each participant. The lead author recorded and transcribed the interviews. The transcriptions were then entered into NVIVO (11v) to facilitate data analysis. Participants received a \$10 gift card after their interview.

DATA ANALYSIS

Following the methodology by (Strauss and Corbin, 1988), data was analyzed via initial coding, focused coding, and axial coding. Annotations were made throughout the data analysis. The authors engaged in open coding to identify major categories and codes using the NVIVO (11v) data analysis computer software program. The benefit of this type of analysis was that it allowed the participants to express their true feelings about barriers and facilitators to enrolling in an OT program. The data analysis was ongoing, and the researchers looked for repetition, similarities, and differences in the participants' responses and added questions to the semi-

structured interview as the process continued. Once data saturation was achieved, the author used the themes which emerged from the data to develop a diversity-based model that identified factors that participants believed impacted choosing occupational therapy as a career path. Information was reviewed again after the conceptual model was drafted to review the alignment of key themes with the model.

A variety of methods were used to ensure trustworthiness as per (Simundić, 2013) and (McLeod, 2011). First, the authors acknowledged their own implicit biases, and experiences and classified their knowledge and assumptions by letting the data direct the theme development. Annotations and memos were used during the data analysis. Last, development and refinement of the themes was completed to obtain the final version of the model.

RESULTS

Demographic Characteristics

Interviews were completed with ten participants. The participants included 8 females (80%) and 2 males (20%). Their ages ranged from 21-35 years and 100% of participants identified as African American. The majority (80%) of participants had 3-4 years of experience working as an occupational therapist. All ten (100%) of the participants attended an HBCU for their occupational therapy degree.

Table 1: Participant Characteristics

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Characteristic	N (%)
Gender	
Male	2 (20%)
Female	8 (80%)
Age	
18-20	0 (0%)
21-35	10 (100%)
35-40	0 (0%)
Years of OT Work Experience	
1-2 years	1 (10%)
3-4 years	8 (80%)
5 years	1 (10%)
Undergraduate Institution	
PWI	9 (90%)
HBCU	1 (10%)
Graduate Institution	
PWI	0 (0%)
HBCU	10 (100%)
Race	
African American	10 (100%)
Hispanic or Latino	0 (0%)
Asian	0 (0%)

Note: Primarily White Institution (PWI), Historically Black College or University (HBCU)

Several themes emerged from the participants' responses. The participants described several factors which impacted their entry into the profession. Some of the factors facilitated their entry into the profession, and others were barriers to entry. The factors were broadly categorized into Barriers and Facilitators as summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Most Common Facilitators and Barriers to African Americans entering the Occupational Therapy Profession

Facilitator or Barrier
Barrier
Never heard of occupational therapy before college
Did not know any occupational therapists
Poor minority representation
Lack of resources
Facilitator
Exposure to OT before college
Academic advisement or coursework promoted OT
Minority representation

Barrier 1: African American students had not heard of occupational therapy until they were already enrolled in college.

Ninety percent of participants reported that they did not know of OT as a profession until they were adults attending undergraduate school. Participants came to be exposed to occupational therapy through a variety of experiences. Participant #6 knowledge of and interest in OT did not come into focus until after completing his/her research about the profession. Participant #6 stated *“So I first discovered or knew about occupational therapy I want to say 2017. It was my senior year in undergrad, and I was in class, and we were talking about what plans we had after graduation, and someone brought up occupational therapy. I had no idea what that was, so I took the initiative to look it up and that's how I was exposed to it.”*

Participant #8 described internships during her senior year as her first exposure to OT: *“My senior year of college. I graduated with the major that I started with, I didn't change my major but, I was able to meet an occupational therapist during my senior internship at a cardiac rehab*

facility, and then from there on I pursued OT because I figured that I was interested in that field.”

Participant #7 stated they did not know about OT until nearly the end of their undergraduate career. *“Toward the end of my undergrad studies, I was a caretaker for my grandma, and we had another caretaker come to the house. I told her that I was a kinesiology major. She asked if you ever thought about occupational therapy, and I responded I didn't know. After that, I did more research and completed some shadowing experience. But besides that, I wasn't exposed to it until literally undergrad.”*

When finding out about occupational therapy late in their studies, it created additional logistical challenges to applying for OT programs. For example, students may have had to take additional classes to meet prerequisite requirements, or they may have had to switch majors.

BARRIER 2: Black students did not know what OT was.

Participants reported that they felt that occupational therapy as a profession was poorly known in general and that more needs to be done to increase the profile of OT, particularly in diverse communities. Participant #5 explained, *“I think OT in general, is just not a well-known profession.”* When people are aware they often think of it as physical therapy or something else. *I think overall OTs and people in the health profession just need to do a better job of setting a standard for what OT is and how it can be beneficial. Because if they are not doing that on the broad scope of things you want to try to make it more specific if you're using the top-down approach to communities of color or less populated places that are less fortunate, exposure is not going to happen if it's not coming from the top down.”*

BARRIER 3: Poor Minority Representation

Multiple participants described the lack of exposure to OTs from minority backgrounds as a barrier to entering the profession. Others commented that they would have chosen occupational therapy sooner if they had been exposed to a variety of African American occupational therapists before their college experience. Participant #2 states, *“I 100% think early exposure to minority Occupational therapists will lead to an increase in minorities entering the OT profession. As a kid, I lived in Atlanta, and that's the black Hollywood of the South. I had black teachers and black pediatricians; everybody was black that we were exposed to and that we had access to go to. They all were black so in my mind, I knew I wanted to go into the medical field. But I never saw black OTs. I never saw black PTs. I saw black pediatricians, I saw black dentists, black doctors but I never saw a black OT, especially not a black female OT. So, I think*

if I would have been exposed to OT at an earlier age, I would have done the research way earlier before college to be prepared.” Participant #5 commented that the lack of exposure to the occupational therapy discipline in communities of color and youth of color is the main reason why there is a lack of knowledge about the profession: “ When you think of all over the United States I do feel like there is a lack of therapist of color so the exposure isn't going to be as high as someone who is white or Caucasian being in the field. I think that has to do with the lack of exposure to black OTs also, well no I think that's probably the main reason I know that when it comes to black and minority therapists, there is a very low percentage overall. So, I think that has to do with the lack of exposure.

Participant # 3 commented, “You can't be what you can't see. I feel like because there is already less than 6% of the entire OT profession who identify as black or African American and then that's why there's just a lack of representation. People can't be what they can't see. If they don't see a black OT or if they don't know a black OT to even get that exposure, then I feel that reduces the chance or limits their exposure to what OT is in general.”

Participant #9 also described how minority OTs could have more influence on the diversity of the profession: “As we've seen in this profession, white people are the majority in this profession. But I do believe if young black boys and girls had the exposure to it and the opportunity to know what this profession is there would be a higher minority rate. I used to see OT's around indirectly doing treatment sessions. I was observing the rehab hospital when I was an intern for home health. That's when I ran into an African American OT male, and I was like oh ok y'all exist. I ran into another African American female when I was observing early intervention, and I was like OK now I start to see more African Americans.”

Barrier 4: Lack of Resources

Some participants commented on the logistical challenges of going to college, such as financing their studies. Participant #8 stated, “But again, it's the lack of resources. Even if kids do want to, sometimes it's hard to get scholarships to go into grad school even to college and so it's harder for them to get the first step into it sometimes. Whereas the white people have all those years ahead of us”

On average, participants discovered occupational therapy around their junior year of college. Multiple participants commented on how this late awareness of occupational therapy ended up costing them more because they had to complete additional coursework. Participant #8 talked about the emerging realization that if she was exposed to OT earlier then “I would have been

more prepared.” Various individuals discussed how they had to take extra courses to satisfy the prerequisites to get into OT school and their financial concerns influencing their decision to pursue OT.

Facilitator 1: Minority Representation

While nine out of ten (90%) participants attended a PWI for their undergraduate studies, ten out of ten (100%) attended an HBCU for their graduate studies. They felt that seeing minority OTs, OT students, and faculty was important. Participant #5 explained *“Yes, and why I say that is because and I might be biased because I went to an HBCU where I got to see a lot of that exposure and being able to see you know a lot of minority OT's doing this job. Especially through networking, not even just at the school even through networking outside of school and seeing other people doing it. I think it allowed me to be more confident in myself. Knowing that there are other people like me doing the same thing that I'm doing and making it look good and thriving in their career choice. Knowing that I could be a part of that same thing and I think that's what my HBCU gave me and allowed me to see that early on before even getting into the career or graduating, but I also knew it just from being in school.”* Participant #9 discussed the importance of seeing an African American occupational therapist, *“I used to see around indirectly doing treatment sessions. I was observing the rehab hospital when I was an intern for home health. That's when I ran into an African American OT male, and I was like oh ok y'all exist. I ran into another African American female when I was observing early intervention, and I was like OK now I start to see more African Americans.”*

The Diversity & Inclusion Model Occupational Therapy Admissions (DIMOTA)

The Diversity and Inclusion Model: Occupational Therapy Admissions (See Figure 1) emerged from the participants' narratives of their experiences initially while studying as an OT student, and practitioner and their exposure to the OT profession before choosing it as a career path. The model uses the themes revealed by the research and evidence from other research studies to provide strategies for addressing barriers and leveraging strengths to enhance the recruitment of diverse students into occupational therapy programs.

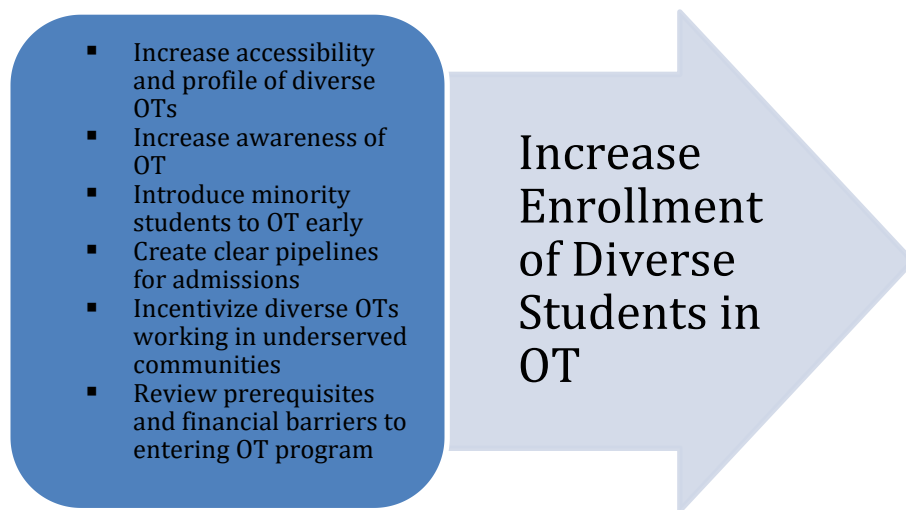


Figure 1: Diversity and Inclusion Model Occupational Therapy Admissions (DIMOT)

Applying the Diversity and Inclusion Model: Occupational Therapy Admissions (DIMOTA)

No matter how they initially were exposed to OT study participants described a similar process of overcoming barriers and choosing to enter OT school. Opportunities to be exposed to occupational therapy through family members, internships, and African American peers served as critical motivation for increasing their awareness and knowledge about the OT profession. All the participants discussed moments in which they reflected on their first time being exposed to OT and how those factors influenced them to become occupational therapists. These findings align with the findings of (Muncan et al., 2016) who discussed the importance of early exposure to medicine for adolescents who later went into the medicinal field. Their research showed the value of volunteering programs and shadowing opportunities when children were in high school and undergraduate school to groom them for a healthcare career. In the current study, the age and situation for first exposure to OT varied by participant, but most were already in university. By the time some participants realized they wanted to pursue OT they were in college and had to change their major or take extra courses to fulfill the requirements to get accepted into OT school. This suggests that it may be beneficial to create opportunities for students and children to learn about OT before beginning college.

Some ideas to promote earlier exposure to OT include:

- Through proactive youth OT programs that promote prerequisite knowledge, skills, and hands-on experience, minority students or practitioners may gain profound awareness and early exposure needed for the pursuit of an OT career. Minority OTRs, family

members, peers, teachers, and advisors can encourage African Americans to take advantage of these opportunities just as the participants in this study did.

- Create pipeline programs from undergraduate to graduate studies.
- Increase social media presence of occupational therapy in diverse populations.
- Encourage participation of minority OTs in community events (e.g., Backpack Awareness, Driver Safety, Falls Prevention, Home Safety)
- Encourage practicing OTs to participate in career days, and to advocate for their profession to clients and their families to increase awareness of OT.
- OT programs may review prerequisite requirements.

Implications for OT Programs:

Many of the participants described limited exposure to African American OTs prior to entering college. Some encountered African American OTs in their professional career and expressed greater interest and impact in OT from seeing that small representation. Because many of the participants stated that they had limited exposure themselves, they want to be that change so that younger generations are exposed to African American OTs at a younger age. The findings imply that the shortage of OTs from minority backgrounds is perpetuated by not serving people from different backgrounds and underserved communities, which may perpetuate healthcare disparities. It is important to provide support to OTs from different backgrounds so that they may find career fulfillment in serving underserved communities. Some strategies that may promote this include providing tuition remission for occupational therapists working in underserved areas; providing mentorship programs for OTs; and increasing the social media presence of diverse OTs. Finally, minority occupational therapists can encourage other minorities to pursue the profession. Collaborative relationships with minority OT practitioners and inspiring minority students can help students achieve their goal of one day becoming an occupational therapist. Most importantly, minority practitioners can share their experiences and utilize the barriers they face as opportunities to learn from them and explore ways to overcome potential barriers. Forwardly exposing minority students to minority OTs may lead to increased enrollment of diverse students and then an increase in diverse OTPs. Some actions that may be talented to achieve this include placing more minority OTs in leadership positions, increasing the presence of minority OTs at professional meetings and conferences, within local and national organizations, increasing presence on social media platforms, and promoting participation of diverse OTs in mentorship positions.

LIMITATIONS

The study limitations included:

- There was a small sample size (data saturation was achieved with only 10 participants).
- All study participants identified as African American.
- Because of the small sample size, and homogeneity of the sample, the findings cannot be generalized.
- A snowball effect where individuals were asked to refer other individuals to participate in the study was used as the recruitment method.
- The authors were unable to do member checks to clarify information during the reviewing of transcriptions.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Despite the small size of the study, this study is a first step in exploring why there is a lack of African Americans and African American representation in the occupational therapy profession. The results offered new insights into the topic and the importance of increasing diversity and inclusion within occupational therapy. More research in this area is warranted. Ideas for future research include recruiting racially and ethnically diverse participants to describe barriers and facilitators to entry and to expand the study to include more participants.

CONCLUSION

This research study supports much of the literature that has shown that exposure to occupational therapy and diverse occupational therapists is important to increasing diversity within the profession. The participants felt that increasing the profile of occupational therapy, particularly amongst diverse communities was important to promote more diversity in the profession. They also touched on the importance of earlier exposure to occupational therapy, and the importance of exposure to diverse occupational therapists. The implication is that occupational therapy programs and community organizations may use this information to create processes that would increase the likelihood of diverse students enrolling in OT programs. Changing the face of healthcare specifically, occupational therapy is important to close the racial representation gap so that minorities will have healthcare providers that not only look like them but are culturally relatable.

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