

Who Wants to Go to Occupational Therapy School?

Characteristics of Norwegian Occupational Therapy Students

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Abstract

Background: Research on occupational therapy students has often been concerned with quite narrow topics. However, the basic characteristics of this group are yet to be examined in more depth.

Methods: This study aimed to explore the sociodemographic, education-related, and work-related characteristics of occupational therapy students. A sample of 160 occupational therapy students in Norway participated. Differences between cohorts of students were examined with one-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) for continuous variables and with Chi-Square tests for categorical variables.

Results: The sample had a mean age of 24 years and were predominantly female (79 %). More than one third of the students had one or both parents in an occupation requiring a health education, whereas two thirds of the students had one or both parents in an occupation requiring higher education. At entry, 57 % of the participants had occupational therapy as their preferred choice of education and forty-three percent had previous higher education experience. The few significant differences between the study cohorts were negligible.

Conclusion: In the education programs, specific attention may be considered for students with characteristics associated with increased risk of poorer study performance or other problems. This may concern male students and students with no previous higher education experience.

Keywords: occupational therapy, students, sociodemographic characteristics, education, work

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Introduction

The future of occupational therapy lies in the hands of the future generation of occupational therapists. To be able to impact on the profession's future, occupational therapy educators of today need basic knowledge about their students. Knowledge about the students' background, their current life situation, their motivation for becoming occupational therapists, and the efforts they put into their study, may be helpful to educators in several ways. At the personal level, knowing the individual student makes individually tailored support and guidance possible (1). At the group level, knowledge about a class of students facilitates the integration of teaching forms tailored to the needs of the class, much in line with Cole's needs assessment for groups (2). At the macro-level, more generalized knowledge about the next generation of occupational therapists may provide means to predict challenges and opportunities for the further development of the profession.

Previous research on occupational therapy students' characteristics are relatively few in numbers, and have utilized different methodologies: using the insider (students' perceptions) and the outsider view (others' perceptions), and using both qualitative and quantitative data. One study explored practice educators' views on the new generation of occupational therapy students, coined 'Generation Y' (3). In line with the 'Generation Y' concept, the participants described students in positive terms as self-confident and technologically skilled. In negative terms, they described them as reluctant towards receiving feedback, as showing poor professional communication and behaviors, and as demonstrating shallow clinical reasoning skills. These findings stand in contrast to other studies of undergraduate occupational therapy students, reporting largely about empathetic attitudes, although with a certain bias against persons with substance abuse problems (4). Occupational therapy students' preference for a people-oriented

listening style and friendly and attentive communication styles are also considered well suited for occupational therapy practice (5).

In a study of personality types in occupational therapy students, Jamison and Dirette characterized the students in terms of four personality dimensions: extraversion vs. introversion, sensing vs. intuition, thinking vs. feeling, and judging vs. perceiving (6). The researchers found that the students' most common personality type was the combination of a preference for extraversion, intuition, feeling, and perceiving, and concluded that these characteristics are "[...] useful to a competent therapist, especially a commonsense approach and powers of observation and caring for others" (6; p.93). In a more recent study, Bonsaksen (7) reported about therapeutic style preferences in occupational therapy students, where the problem-solving and the collaborating therapeutic styles more most frequently endorsed. The framework for this study, though – the Intentional Relationship Model (8) – does not imply that some styles are preferable to others, but simply that occupational therapists should shape their relationships with clients flexibly, in the way that is most productive for the client. Therefore, all therapeutic styles have inherent strengths and cautions.

Summarizing, existing research on occupational therapy students indicate that their personality characteristics and communication style preferences are compatible with values in, and required skills for, professional occupational therapy practice. Research on practice educators' views on occupational therapy students, on the other hand, shows a more problematic picture of the students as also poorly skilled and reluctant to feedback on their practice. It appears, thus, that the insider versus outsider perspectives employed in previous research contribute to divergent findings. Existing research also appear to have focused on quite narrow topics (e.g., communication styles, therapeutic styles, personality characteristics), whereas the

background characteristics of occupational therapy students appear to have been largely ignored. Generally, studies report about samples consisting of mainly young females (e.g.; 4, 5, 6), but otherwise, little or no information about the students, their background, or their current life situation is usually provided. However, one recent study by Watson (9) examined the influence from entry qualifications, age at entry, gender, and sociodemographic background on occupational therapy graduates' final degree marks. The analysis revealed that male sex and a less privileged socioeconomic background were associated with poorer final degree marks (9). Given the possible impact of background characteristics and situational factors on educational success, there is reason to investigate these aspects of occupational therapy students more closely.

Aim of the study

The aim of the present study is to describe sociodemographic characteristics of occupational therapy students in Norway, as well as characteristics regarding their present participation in education and work. The study also aimed to explore potential differences between cohorts of students.

Methods

Sample and data collection

The study was designed as a cross-sectional survey, utilizing data collected by self-report questionnaires in January 2015. The sample was a self-selected convenience sample of undergraduate students from one occupational therapy program in Norway, consisting of three cohorts of students.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire concerning sociodemographic, education-related, and work-related background was initially developed during the preparation for a larger study on occupational therapy students' approaches to learning, which is still in development. The question concerning living condition was adopted from a previous research project, and it has been used in a range of publications (e.g., 10, 11).

Sociodemographic background

Age was provided as years of age at the time of data collection, and sex was provided as male (1) or female (2). Mother and father's occupation (work) was provided as the participants' own answers to open ended questions. Similarly, country of origin was provided as the participants' own answer. Living condition was examined with three questions: Living with spouse/partner (1) or not (0), living with children (1) or not (0), and living with others (1) or not (0).

Education factors

The participants informed about their enrollment in the first (1), second (2), or third (3) year of the occupational therapy program. In addition, they provided answers to the following questions: a) Did you start at the occupational therapy program right after the completion of secondary school? (yes = 1, no = 2). b) Was occupational therapy your number one priority education choice when starting at the education program? (yes = 1, no = 2). c) Did you have any prior higher education experience (university or college) before starting at the occupational therapy program? (yes = 1, no = 2). Educational program attendance was registered as the average number of hours spent weekly on school activities (for example lectures, supervision, skills training, and seminars), and self-studying was registered as the average number of hours spent weekly on course-related self-study (for example reading, going through lecture notes, and

preparing assignments). The level of general satisfaction with being a student in the occupational therapy education program was categorized as very poor (1), poor (2), neither good nor poor (3), good (4), very good (5). Academic performance was registered as the grade average based on the completed exams so far in the education program. With reference to the general grading system in higher education in Norway (12), grades were categorized as excellent (1), very good (2), good (3), satisfactory (4), sufficient (5), and fail (6).

Work factors

Work participation was registered as the average number of hours spent weekly in paid work.

Analysis

First, responses to the open-ended questions were coded in order to transform them into categorical variables. Mother's and father's occupation was coded in two ways: as requiring higher education from university or college (1) or not (0), and as requiring healthcare education (higher or lower level) (1) or not (0). Both types of coding was based on the career oversight provided by the Norwegian Department of Knowledge (13). Country of origin was coded as Norway (1) or other country (0). Then, descriptive analysis was applied to the data. Differences between cohorts of students were examined with one-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) for continuous variables, using the Tukey correction for post-hoc analyses with multiple comparisons. For differences on categorical variables, Chi-Square tests were performed. The level of statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

Ethics

Approval from the appropriate data protection agency was obtained, according to the research legislation and established procedures in Norway. All participants volunteered to take part in the study, and all provided informed consent to participate prior to data collection.

Results

Participants

At the time of the data collection (January 2015), the education program had 245 students enrolled. In this study, 160 students chose to participate, yielding a response rate of 65.3 %. The corresponding number of participants for the 1st year cohort was 57 out of 97 eligible students (response rate 58.8 %), for the 2nd year cohort 50 out of 69 eligible students (response rate 72.5 %), and for the 3rd year cohort 53 out of 79 eligible students (response rate 67.1 %). Overall, the study participants had a mean age of 23.9 years (range 19 years - 46 years). One hundred and twenty six (78.8 %) were female, whereas 34 (21.3 %) were male. Table 1 shows the characteristics of the study participants in the three cohorts, with corresponding statistical tests of between-group differences.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Characteristics of the Students

There was a linear increase in the students' mean age, with lowest mean age among students in the first year cohort and highest mean age among students in the third year cohort. Similarly, the cohorts were different in terms of the proportion of students who started the occupational therapy education right after completed secondary school. Post-hoc tests confirmed

that compared to first and second year students, a smaller proportion of the third year students had started occupational therapy education right after secondary school. The cohorts differed in terms of time spent in school-based activities, but the post-hoc analyses, comparing each cohort against each of the others, did not confirm this. Time spent studying at home was unequal between the cohorts. Specifically, the second year students spent less time on home study than the first and third year students did. Otherwise, the analyses detected no statistically significant differences between the three cohorts of students.

Discussion

This study found few relevant differences between students in the three cohorts. The increase in age across cohorts only indicates a consistent pattern of students being relatively young (23-24 years) when they start occupational therapy education. Among the third year students, a smaller proportion started occupational therapy education right after secondary school, compared to their counterparts in the first and second year cohorts. This may or may not indicate a trend, and longitudinal data is needed in order to argue whether or not this is the case. Students in the second year cohort spent less time on self-study, compared to the students in the other two cohorts. This is consistent with recent research, suggesting that second-year students may experience decreased engagement with the study content, and be more strategically concerned with academic progress and achievement, compared to first-year and final-year students (14). Alternatively, a more pragmatic explanation may emphasize the fact that students in the second year of their study program go through two relatively long practice placement periods, which may also reduce their capacity for self-study. However, in light of the relatively

infrequent between-group differences, the discussion will focus on the characteristics of the student sample as a whole.

Sociodemographic factors

The sample in our study had a mean age of 24 years, and 126 out of the 160 participants (78.8 %) were female. This is consistent with prior research on occupational therapy students: reports indicate a high proportion of young students, some even with large proportions under the age of 21 (5, 9, 15), and a female proportion of about 90 % (4-6, 9). Generally, students are young, and moving on to higher education is increasingly often the intermediate step between secondary school and getting a job. The very high proportion of females among the occupational therapy students appears to echo both the history and current status of the profession as largely dominated by women (5, 9, 16). Students with countries of origin other than Norway were uncommon – like Watson pointed out, there seems to be limited ethnic diversity in the occupational therapy profession, and it appears to continue that way in the years to come (9).

Sociological theory has consistently viewed education with an emphasis on concepts like social inheritance and cultural reproduction, essentially explaining ‘how working-class kids get working-class jobs’ (17, 18). Inspired by such theory, some researchers have examined the role of socioeconomic background for occupational therapy students’ success, with diverging results. Howard and Jerosch-Herold (19) found that the students’ entry qualifications were poor predictors of academic as well as fieldwork success. On the other hand, Shanahan (15) found previous higher education experience to be of importance. Watson (9) used parents’ occupation as the method for classifying socioeconomic background, and found that students with lower socioeconomic background showed poorer academic performance overall. In this study, we found that 66.9 % of the students’ parents had higher education, suggesting that the students’

choice of higher education may be related to having parents with occupations requiring higher education. In this study, we also expanded on this view and examined to what extent the occupational therapy students had one or both parents within the healthcare occupations. We found that this was the case among 36.1 % of the students in our sample. The interpretation of these findings is not straightforward. High correspondence between parents and their offspring, particularly concerning level of education, may be considered in support of the theory of social inheritance and cultural reproduction. However, it appears that parents' background in a healthcare occupation is less strongly related to their offspring's decision to study occupational therapy.

We have found no information in previous research concerned with the students' own living arrangements. In general, we found that the students most often lived with others: with spouse/partner (39 %), with children (8 %), or with others (33 %). In addition, some of the students ($n = 18$, 11.3 %) indicated that they still lived with their family of origin. Thus, most of the students lived in a community with others, family or not. Given that stress and mental health problems is highly prevalent in students (20), and especially prevalent among single students (21), the potential for social support inherent in living with others may be important.

Education factors

A minority of the students (11 %) started occupational therapy education right after the completion of secondary school. When starting, however, a substantial proportion (57 %) had occupational therapy as their first priority. Having occupational therapy as the first priority indicates a strong motivation for this particular line of study and for subsequent professional practice in the field, at least at the time of entry. This is not a claim that motivation is a fixed measure – for all students, motivation for the chosen line of study will probably fluctuate during

the education as a result of an interplay between many forces. Previous research demonstrated that entry qualifications did not predict subsequent study performance (19), but future studies are needed to examine to what extent students' initial motivation impacts on their study performance during their education.

Motivation is important for the individual student, but also for the learning environment in the classroom and in study groups. The sharing and discussion with a group of motivated students is an important aspect of a positive learning environment regardless of study programs, as shown in previous research (22). Similarly in Norway, annual surveys have examined higher education students' views of the quality of their current study program (23). In the 2013 survey, the factor 'academic stimulation and coherence' came out as the most important predictor of student satisfaction with the study program (24). A highly motivated student group may in itself foster much academic stimulation, thus adding positively to the learning environment.

A substantial proportion (43 %) of the sample had prior experience from higher education. Previous studies have shown conflicting results concerning the value of prior study results for predicting subsequent study performance in relation to fieldwork as well as academic topics (19, 25), and students with experience from basic science university programs may need to revise their concepts of learning and knowledge when entering an applied science program like occupational therapy. However, an impact of higher education experience prior to entering occupational therapy was demonstrated by Shanahan (15), who found that the initial effect from age on academic outcomes was mediated by the superior academic performance of those with a previous degree. Thus, it may be that students with prior experience from higher education are twice blessed: They have already been socialized into the culture and requirements of academic

education, and they may be more motivated for learning and achievement due to being older and more mature, compared to the students coming directly from secondary school.

The students' were generally satisfied with the education program, and the average exam performance is expected to be close to the average level (grade C) reported by the students. The average weekly hours of self-study, however, is a variable of interest. The hours invested in self-studying may indicate the level of effort the student places on his or her studies. Greater efforts may (and hopefully should) in turn translate into improved learning, better outcomes (exam grades), and potentially more satisfaction with oneself in the role of a student. The average number of hours spent on self-study is practically equal to the results of last year's student survey in Norway (23). Future studies may be important in demonstrating the value of self-study for different outcomes. So far, a cross-sectional study has shown that more hours spent on self-studying was associated with higher self-esteem, and was borderline associated with higher general self-efficacy (26).

Work factors

On average, the students participated almost eight hours weekly in paid work. This represents one full day's work on a weekly basis, and one view may suggest that more time spent working will be at the expense of learning. Indeed, learning requires time dedicated to studies, and modern learning ideologies emphasizing the students' own exploration, reflection, and activity may place extra demands on time, as opposed to ideologies more concerned with the activity of the teacher (27). However, it is premature to assume a direct relationship between more hours spent in paid work and poorer learning and study performance. Assuming such a relationship runs the risk of overestimating the impact of quantity (hours of studying) – the detached and disinterested student may get just as little out of his presence in class as he or she

may get out of reading at home. Conversely, successful students may be able to translate work experiences so that they become useful and relevant for the study course. More explorative research into the associations between work, studying, and study performance is needed.

Study limitations and suggestions for future research

The employed questions concerning the students' living condition may have been ambiguous. Some overlap between the participants' responses is possible; for example, participants who indicated 'lives with others' may have referred to spouse/partner or children, which is also asked about in separate questions. The study used an adequate sample size, but the response rate ($N = 160$, 65.3 %) constitutes a problem for generalizing the results to the entire student population. Similarly, using a sample from one university alone limits the generalizability of the results. A large number of statistical tests were performed, increasing the possibility of chance results reaching the level of statistical significance. However, we have not placed much emphasis on the differences between study cohorts.

The principal researcher (first author) was known to the students as one of the teachers at the occupational therapy education program. This may or may not have led to a social reporting bias in some of the students (e.g., reporting more hours of self-study). However, the mean hours of self-study was similar to the extent of self-study reported previously (mean 9.7 hours) in a large anonymous survey (23). Thus, these results do not seem to have been inflated at the aggregated level. On a related note, self-report data concerning academic performance (average exam grade) may not be as robust as data from student records, and this potential limitation should be kept in mind.

The study used a cross-sectional design, and future studies may use longitudinal designs to assess changes in students' characteristics over time. It may be useful to obtain additional

knowledge about the students, concerning both their academic performance in secondary school, their current education situation, and personal factors like their health status and study motivation. In addition, we suggest that future studies use relevant outcome measures to assess how student characteristics are associated with important aspects like approach to learning, academic performance, and subsequent work performance.

Conclusion

This study showed that characteristics of occupational therapy students were largely similar between study cohorts. The sample was described in terms of their sociodemographic, education-related, and work-related factors. In the occupational therapy education programs, specific attention may be considered for students who deviate from the normal student characteristics, particularly in cases where previous research have found the characteristics to be associated with increased risk of poorer study performance or other problems. This may concern male students and students who have no previous experience with higher education.

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Table 1

Sociodemographic, Education-Related, and Work-Related Characteristics of Norwegian Occupational Therapy Students (N = 160)¹

Variables	All (N = 160)	1st year (n = 57)	2nd year (n = 50)	3rd year (n = 53)	test	p
<i>Sociodemographic factors</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>F</i>	
Age	23.9 (4.5)	22.8 (4.4)	23.4 (3.4)	25.6 (5.1)	5.78	< 0.01
	<i>n (%)</i>	<i>n (%)</i>	<i>n (%)</i>	<i>n (%)</i>	χ^2	
Female sex	126 (78.8)	46 (80.7)	37 (74.0)	43 (81.1)	0.98	0.61
One/both parents higher education (N = 130)	87 (66.9)	28 (63.6)	27 (61.4)	32 (76.2)	2.46	0.29
One/both parents health education (N = 147)	53 (36.1)	13 (25.0)	18 (38.3)	22 (45.8)	4.85	0.09
Norwegian origin (N = 153)	137 (85.6)	51 (92.7)	41 (83.7)	45 (91.8)	2.67	0.26
Lives with spouse/partner (N = 157)	63 (39.4)	16 (28.1)	22 (44.9)	25 (49.0)	5.59	0.06
Lives with children (N = 157)	13 (8.1)	5 (8.8)	2 (4.1)	6 (11.8)	1.97	0.37
Lives with others (N = 157)	53 (33.1)	24 (42.1)	17 (34.7)	12 (23.5)	4.18	0.12
<i>Education-related factors</i>	<i>n (%)</i>	<i>n (%)</i>	<i>n (%)</i>	<i>n (%)</i>	χ^2	
OT education right after secondary school	18 (11.3)	8 (14.0)	9 (18.0)	1 (1.9)	7.22	0.03
OT as #1 education choice	91 (56.9)	35 (61.4)	30 (60.0)	26 (49.1)	2.00	0.37
Prior higher education (N = 159)	69 (43.1)	24 (42.1)	22 (44.0)	23 (44.2)	0.06	0.97
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>F</i>	
Average weekly hours of school attendance	23.5 (6.7)	24.5 (7.5)	21.7 (4.6)	24.0 (7.2)	3.24 ²	0.04
Average weekly hours of self-study	9.5 (5.4)	11.4 (4.7)	6.7 (3.5)	10.3 (6.6)	12.20	< 0.001

General satisfaction with current education	4.0 (0.6)	4.1 (0.7)	4.0 (0.8)	4.1 (0.5)	0.45	0.64
Average exam grade	2.9 (0.9)	3.1 (1.0)	2.7 (0.6)	2.8 (0.7)	1.99	0.14
<i>Work-related factors</i>						
Average weekly hours of paid work	7.8 (7.2)	6.9 (7.0)	8.5 (7.3)	8.2 (7.3)	0.69	0.50

Note. ¹ $N = 160$ unless otherwise noted (lower N on some of the variables is due to missing or uninterpretable data). ² As Levene's test of homogeneous variances was significant, the reported statistic is the more robust Welch statistic.