



7-15-2019

Community-Working Occupational Therapists Serving as Fieldwork Supervisors: Characteristics and Associated Factors

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Recommended Citation

Bonsaksen, T., Dolva, A., Horghagen, S., Sveen, U., Hagby, C., & Arntzen, C. (2019). Community-Working Occupational Therapists Serving as Fieldwork Supervisors: Characteristics and Associated Factors. *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 7(3), 1-8. <https://doi.org/10.15453/2168-6408.1627>

Community-Working Occupational Therapists Serving as Fieldwork Supervisors: Characteristics and Associated Factors

Abstract

As enrollment numbers grow in occupational therapy academic programs in Norway, the need for more fieldwork placements and supervisors increases. More knowledge about factors of importance for occupational therapists' decisions to take on the role of fieldwork supervisor may promote easier access to supervisors who are ready for the task, and it may assist in addressing the barriers for those who are not. We recruited a sample of 561 community-working occupational therapists for an electronic survey conducted in 2017. Quantitative survey responses were obtained and used in the current study. The differences between supervisors and non-supervisors were examined with independent *t*-tests and Chi Square tests. To assess factors associated with serving as a supervisor, a multivariate logistic regression analysis was conducted. One hundred fifty-six participants (27.8%) had served as a fieldwork supervisor during the preceding year. The adjusted analysis showed that having a job physically located together with other occupational therapists was significantly associated with increased odds for serving as supervisor (OR:1.79, 95% CI:1.17-2.74, $p < 0.01$). A minority of the participants had supervised occupational therapy students during the preceding year, suggesting that community-based services are an under-used arena for occupational therapy students' fieldwork. In a long-term perspective, providing social and organizational support for occupational therapists who might take on student supervision may increase their willingness and opportunity to do so.

Comments

The authors report grants from Ergoterapeutene (The Norwegian Occupational Therapy Association), during the conduct of the study.

Keywords

community-based services, fieldwork, occupational therapy, students, supervision

Cover Page Footnote

We gratefully acknowledge the efforts made by the survey participants.

Credentials Display

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By tradition, occupational therapy is a profession strongly rooted in clinical practice (Sladyk, Jacobs, & MacRae, 2010). Students are currently required to have a minimum of 1,000 hrs of fieldwork education as part of their occupational therapy training (World Federation of Occupational Therapists, 2016). Although the number of required fieldwork hours in the curriculum has lately been questioned (Thomas & Penman, 2018), the general purpose of fieldwork education is to develop students' competence by providing them with opportunities to learn from their supervisors' practice and reasoning, from their own experiences with practicing as a therapist, and from the experiences of the clients with whom they work (Lawson-Porter, 2014). It is important to note that the fieldwork experience is one where the students are facilitated in their integration to the profession's theoretical knowledge and its practice (Bonsaksen, Granå, Celo, Ellingham, & Myraunet, 2013; Lawson-Porter, 2014).

As enrollment numbers grow in occupational therapy academic programs in Norway, the need for more fieldwork placements and supervisors increases. However, higher enrollment numbers also pose a challenge for finding enough places for students' clinical fieldwork (Hamilton et al., 2015). In response, innovative forms of fieldwork have included simulated experiences, student-led clinics, role-emerging practice placements, and project-based placements in health care facilities (Hamilton et al., 2015). Moreover, the 2:1 model (one therapist serving as supervisor for two students) has been proposed as the model of choice for the future (Price & Whiteside, 2016), although it is acknowledged that this model has advantages as well as challenges (Daniels, 2010; Hanson & DeJuliis, 2015; Price & Whiteside, 2016).

In Norway, six occupational therapy education programs are currently in operation at the universities, and approximately 300 new students are enrolled in these programs each year (Samordna opptak, 2018). In turn, the increased admission of students has direct implications for an increased need for fieldwork supervisors. In view of the demographic changes in Norway, a recent policy document pointed to the number of health care students as too small to suffice for the growing needs in the local communities (HelseOmsorg21, 2014), and ongoing reform aims at using community health care more frequently as the arena for students' fieldwork. For community-based health care to take on such educational tasks, the foundational framework needs to identify and address the needs of the supervisors.

Despite innovative models of fieldwork being developed internationally, the main model still appears to be the one-on-one model. Thus, the traditional delivery of supervision may, in and of itself, pose a challenge for recruiting a sufficient number of occupational therapy clinicians to serve as fieldwork supervisors. In addition, potential supervisors are likely to consider the pros and cons before eventually accepting an invitation to supervise a student during his or her fieldwork. For example, incentives for engaging in the role may be related to upholding professional values, seeing opportunities for one's own continued professional development, co-learning with students, recruitment of future employees, and taking pride in providing good learning experiences for students (Bonsaksen et al., 2013; Hanson, 2011). However, previous negative experiences with students who have lacked foundational communication, problem-solving, and clinical skills may increase skepticism with regard to taking on the supervisor role (Hanson, 2011), perhaps, in part, owing to the increased risk of having to fail the student (Nicola-Richmond, Butterworth, & Hitch, 2017).

As the need for recruiting competent fieldwork supervisors increases, so does the need for systematic inquiry into the factors of importance for entering the supervisor role. Two recent studies, one with a quantitative and one with a qualitative design, appear to be of particular interest. Varland, Cardell, Koski, and McFadden (2017) assessed factors associated with occupational therapists'

decisions to supervise students in fieldwork. In addition to individually perceived preparedness, on-site mentorship and support from their own supervisors were significantly associated with higher odds of serving as a fieldwork supervisor. In an interview study of newer occupational therapy supervisors in an acute care hospital setting, Krishnasamy and co-workers (2017) found that the supervisors' experiences depended on the on-site support structures. These structures were related to colleagues who would help them with their caseloads, having a mentor to whom to turn, and other means of support and training.

An overview of the literature indicates that the reasons for accepting or declining the supervisor role appear to be related to the characteristics of the supervisor (preparedness, perceived benefits from being a supervisor) and to the anticipated characteristics of the student (level of skills in diverse areas). However, the reasons also appear to include the social and organizational context of practice; for example, in the form of support or pressure to enter the role, or a reluctance and lack of support from mentors and co-workers. More knowledge about factors of importance for occupational therapists' decisions to take on the role of fieldwork supervisor may promote easier access to supervisors who are ready for the task and who may assist in addressing the barriers for those who are not.

Study Aim

This study aimed to gain knowledge about the factors associated with being a fieldwork supervisor among community-working occupational therapists in Norway.

Method

Survey Design

The study had a cross-sectional, quantitative, electronic survey design. A comprehensive questionnaire was developed for the research project, and the section relevant for this particular sub-study is provided in the Appendix. Results pertaining to other sections of the survey tool have been published elsewhere (Arntzen et al., 2018; Bonsaksen, Dolva, et al., 2018; Bonsaksen et al., 2019; Bonsaksen, Sveen, et al., 2018). The survey topics covered information about the participants and their practices, as well as information about the municipalities in which they worked. A draft of the questionnaire was set in Easy Fact, an electronic survey program. Seven randomly chosen occupational therapists working in rural or urban community practices agreed to pretest the electronic draft version of the questionnaire. Based on their experiences of text, questions, response options, and relevance, the questionnaire was revised and the final, electronic Easy Fact version was set.

Procedure

On behalf of the project group, an e-mail with a link to the online survey and an invitation to participate was sent through Ergoterapeutene (the Norwegian Occupational Therapy Association). Two reminders were given to non-responders to the initial survey distribution, after 1 and 2 weeks, respectively. The link to the survey was closed after 3 weeks, and all data were transferred to the project group.

Participants

The participants were occupational therapists working in community-based practice in Norway. The membership list of Ergoterapeutene was used to identify relevant informants. The survey was sent to 1,767 of the 1,833 occupational therapists known from the list of members working in community-based practice, the difference owing to invalid e-mail addresses, possibly a result of recent changes in employment. Five hundred and sixty-one occupational therapists responded to the survey for a response rate of 31.8%. The age and gender distribution in the sample ($M = 42.2$ years, $SD = 11.5$ years, age range 22-66 years, 92.9% women) was similar to that of the

identified population of community-working occupational therapists listed as members of Ergoterapeutene ($M = 41.2$ years, $SD = 11.7$ years, age range 22-68 years, 92% women). Thus, in these respects, we considered the population to be well represented by the sample.

Variables

Age and work experience was registered in years (continuous variable). However, for the multivariate analysis (see below) these were transformed into ordinal level variables. Age was transformed into age groups of: ≤ 30 years (1), 31-40 years (2), 41-50 years (3), 51-60 years (4), and ≥ 61 years (5). Work experience was transformed into groups with experience of: ≤ 5 years (1), 6-10 years (2), 11-15 years (3), 16-20 years (4), 21-25 years (5), 26-30 years (6), and ≥ 31 years (7). The remaining variables were registered as dichotomous, categorical variables: gender (male = 0, female = 1), having further education (no = 0, yes = 1), changed job during the last year (no = 0, yes = 1), job physically located with other occupational therapists (no = 0, yes = 1), and full-time employment (no = 0, yes = 1). Having served as a fieldwork supervisor during the last year was coded 1, whereas not having served as supervisor was coded 0.

Data Analysis

All data were transferred into the statistical software SPSS for Windows, version 25 (IBM Corporation, 2017). The data were described with frequencies and percentages for categorical variables and means and standard deviations for continuous variables. To investigate differences between occupational therapists serving as fieldwork supervisors during the preceding year and those who did not, independent t -tests and Chi-square tests were used for continuous and categorical variables, respectively. Subsequently, a multivariate logistic regression analysis was performed, using fieldwork supervisor as outcome and all of the independent variables entered in one block: age (categorical), gender, further education, work experience (categorical), changed job during the last year, physically located together with other occupational therapists, and full-time employment. The purpose of this analysis was to assess how change in each of the variables would increase or decrease the odds of being a fieldwork supervisor, while adjusting for the covariance between the other variables. Effect sizes in the logistic regression analysis were calculated as odds ratio (OR). The level of significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

Ethics

Approval for the study was obtained from the Norwegian Center for Research Data (project no. 52827). In the introduction to the survey, the participants were informed in writing that participation was voluntary and anonymous and that completing and returning the survey served as their written informed consent. We did not require approval from the ethics committee for medical and health care research, as the study did not collect data concerned with health or illness.

Results

Group Comparisons

In the sample, 156 participants (27.8%) had served as a fieldwork supervisor during the last year. The participants who had the role of a fieldwork supervisor were compared against those who did not (see Table 1). Statistically significant group differences were shown on two variables. Those who were supervisors had a lower proportion than those who had changed jobs during the preceding year ($p < 0.05$) but had a higher proportion whose jobs were physically located together with other occupational therapists ($p < 0.01$), compared to their counterparts.

Table 1*Characteristics of the Study Sample (n = 561)*

Variables	Supervisors (n = 156, 27.8%)	Not supervisors (n = 405, 72.2%)	<i>p</i>
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	
Age	42.7 (11.4)	42.0 (11.6)	0.53
Work experience	17.1 (10.0)	16.2 (9.8)	0.34
	<i>n (%)</i>	<i>n (%)</i>	
Female gender	146 (93.6)	375 (92.6)	0.68
Further education	90 (57.7)	209 (51.6)	0.20
Job change during last year	24 (15.4)	93 (23.0)	< 0.05
Physically located together with other occupational therapists	119 (76.3)	257 (63.5)	< 0.01
Full-time employment	126 (80.8)	299 (73.8)	0.09

Note. Statistical tests are independent *t*-tests for continuous variables and Chi-square tests for categorical variables.

Adjusted Associations with Being a Fieldwork Supervisor

The results from the logistic regression analysis are shown in Table 2. The full model was statistically significant but with relatively little explanatory power (Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.04$, Cox & Snell $R^2 = 0.03$). One variable showed a direct relationship with being a fieldwork supervisor: those whose jobs were physically located together with other occupational therapist colleagues had 79% higher odds ($p < 0.01$) of being a supervisor, compared to those who were not located together with other occupational therapists.

Table 2

Multivariate Logistic Regression Analysis Showing Associations Between the Study Variables and Being a Fieldwork Supervisor (n = 561)

Independent variables	Adjusted Model		
	OR	<i>p</i>	95 % CI
Age group	1.00	0.98	0.76-1.33
Gender	1.21	0.63	0.56-2.58
Further education	1.21	0.35	0.81-1.81
Work experience	1.02	0.83	0.85-1.22
Job change during last year	0.65	0.09	0.39-1.07
Physically located together with other occupational therapists	1.79	< 0.01	1.17-2.74
Full-time employment	1.47	0.11	0.91-2.36

Note. Adjusted model parameters: Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.04$, Cox & Snell $R^2 = 0.03$, Model $\chi^2 = 16.556$, $p < 0.05$. Reference categories for the independent variables are lower age group, male gender, no further education, low work experience, no job change last year, not located with other occupational therapists, and not employed full-time.

Discussion

This study of community-working occupational therapists in Norway showed that a modest proportion of the sample had served as fieldwork supervisors during the preceding year. When adjusting for all variables in the multivariate model, having a job where one was physically located together with other occupational therapists was significantly associated with having been a fieldwork supervisor in the last year.

Considering that fewer than 3 out of 10 community-working occupational therapists had been a fieldwork supervisor in the last year, the occupational therapists in the local health care sector seem to represent an untapped resource for occupational therapy students' fieldwork. The need for supervisors is likely to increase in accordance with the increased admission of students, at least until

more cost-effective models for supervision are implemented on a more regular basis. In addition to supporting an increase in the number of fieldwork placements, it appears that Norwegian education programs may benefit from looking to other countries for novel ideas about how fieldwork supervision can be organized and delivered. Internationally, innovative forms of fieldwork have included simulated experiences, student-led clinics, role-emerging practice placements, and project-based placements, in addition to implementing the 2:1 model (Daniels, 2010; Hamilton et al., 2015; Hanson & DeJuliis, 2015; Knightbridge, 2014; Price & Whiteside, 2016).

Given the diversity of student backgrounds, a diversity of role models for students undergoing fieldwork appears important. Throughout its history as a profession, occupational therapy has been dominated by women (Pollard & Walsh, 2000). Although recent studies suggest that the proportion of men in the profession is increasing, the predominance of women persists (Bonsaksen, Kvarsnes, & Dahl, 2016; Yu, Brown, & Thyer, 2018). Nonetheless, we believe it is good for the new generation of therapists that the role of fieldwork supervisor did not vary systematically by gender. In fact, as shown from the multivariate analysis, none of the sociodemographic factors was significantly associated with having served as fieldwork supervisor during the preceding year. The interpretation of the results is that fieldwork supervisors in occupational therapy are as likely to be young as to be older, as likely to be male as to be female, and as likely to have a long experience as to have a short experience. Although more experience is likely to give an advantage in student supervision, we generally consider the results to embrace diversity in the supervisor role.

Having a job that was physically located together with other occupational therapists was the only factor significantly associated with being a supervisor during the last year. The finding clearly mirrors previous studies that found the impact of the social and organizational context has been emphasized. Two recent illustrative examples come from diverse cultures: the US (Varland et al., 2017) and Singapore (Krishnasamy et al., 2017). Both studies underscored the importance of support structures and having someone to turn to for discussion and advice. Of particular interest is the study conducted by Varland et al. (2017), which had a methodology similar to ours. These researchers found that the odds for always accepting the role of fieldwork supervisor (as opposed to never or sometimes) were more than twice as high among those indicating the presence of onsite mentorship, compared to their counterparts. In the present study, the odds for being a supervisor during the last year was nearly twice as high among the participants whose jobs were physically located together with other occupational therapists, compared to their counterparts. The interpretation is, therefore, that being physically located close to colleagues from the same profession may provide some of the support functions that are frequently needed for taking on the role of fieldwork supervisor. Initiatives by local and national organizations to provide intentional training on how to be a fieldwork supervisor may also support occupational therapists to adopt the role.

We consider two implications of the study to be of importance. First, for universities who are in a hurry to find potential fieldwork supervisors, it would be wise to focus on workplaces with more than one occupational therapist working. As suggested from this study, occupational therapists who are located together with other occupational therapists would be more inclined to accept the invitation to become a supervisor, compared to occupational therapists otherwise located. Second, in view of the increasing need for fieldwork supervisors, universities should, preferably, also look beyond their immediate challenges and set up a longer-term plan addressing how they can recruit supervisors in the future. Norway is a geographically large country with relatively few people, and many of the country's occupational therapists, especially in the rural communities, work in the absence of colleagues from the same professional background. If these therapists are to take on the

role of supervisor, they may need other types of support. What measures might be perceived as support, and how such measures might be organized and delivered, appears to be a question for future studies.

Study Limitations

The study employed a cross-sectional design, with its inherent limitations regarding the possibility of making causal inferences. The survey tool was developed for this study, and several of the questions have not previously been used in research. However, a pilot study ($n = 7$) was conducted to ensure that the questions and response options were relevant and appropriate. The participants' suggestions for improvement were largely incorporated into the survey before the commencement of the study. The sample size was considered appropriate for the performed analyses, whereas the response rate (32%) was rather low. It was, however, similar to the response rate obtained in a previous member survey (Hagby et al., 2014; Horghagen et al., 2015) and similar to the response rate frequently obtained in large population surveys (Bonsaksen et al., 2018; Schou-Bredal et al., 2017). The data were based on the participants' self-report, which may produce biased results.

Conclusion

In the sample of Norwegian community-working occupational therapists, 28% had served as a fieldwork supervisor during the preceding year. In view of the association between having a job that was physically located together with other occupational therapists and taking on the role of supervisor, universities may increase their success in locating potential supervisors if they focus on workplaces where there is more than one occupational therapist working. However, in a larger perspective, more fieldwork supervisors are needed in the profession, and the universities and local and national professional bodies are advised to make plans for how they can contribute to provide sufficient support for taking on the supervisor role.

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Appendix

Translation of the sections of the survey tool relevant to the current study:

1. In which year were you born? (indicate year)
2. Which gender are you? (indicate gender)
3. What is your level of education? (indicate bachelor's degree, master's degree, or doctoral degree)
4. How many years of experience as an occupational therapist do you have? (indicate number of years)
5. Do you have further education after completing the occupational therapy education program? (indicate yes/no)
6. Have you changed jobs during the last year? (indicate yes/no)
7. Is your job physically located together with other occupational therapists? (indicate yes/no)
8. Do you have full-time or part-time employment? (indicate percentage employment)
9. Have you supervised an occupational therapy student during his/her fieldwork? (indicate yes/no)
10. If stated 'yes' to the former question: When did you last supervise an occupational therapy student during his/her fieldwork? (indicate last year/1-2 years ago/3-4 years ago/5 years or more)