

Changing Emphases in Mental Health Research Methodology: Opportunities for Occupational Therapy

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Abstract : Historically the profession of Occupational Therapy was closely tied to the treatment of those suffering from mental illness; more recently, and especially in the U.S., the percentage of OTs identifying as working in the mental health area has declined significantly despite the estimate that by 2020 behavioral health disorders will surpass physical illnesses as the major cause of disability worldwide. In the U.S. less than 10% of OTs identify themselves as working with the mentally ill and/or practicing in mental health settings. Such a decline has implications for both those suffering from mental illness and the profession of Occupational Therapy. One reason cited for the decline of OT in mental health has been the limited research in the discipline addressing mental health practice. Despite significant advances in technology and growth in the field of neuroscience, major institutions and funding sources such as the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) have noted that research into the etiology and treatment of mental illness have met with limited success over the past 25 years. One major reason posited by NIMH is that research has been limited by how we classify individuals, that being mostly on what is observable. A new classification system being developed by NIMH, the Research Domain Criteria (RDoC), has the goal to look beyond just descriptors of disorders for common neural, genetic, and physiological characteristics that cut across multiple supposedly separate disorders. The hope is that by classifying individuals along RDoC measures that both reliability and validity will improve resulting in greater advances in the field. As a result of this change NIH and NIMH will prioritize research funding to those projects using the RDoC model. Multiple disciplines across many different setting will be required for RDoC or similar classification systems to be developed. During this shift in research methodology OT has an opportunity to reassert itself into the research and treatment of mental illness, both in developing new ways to more validly classify individuals, and to document the legitimacy of previously ill-defined and validated disorders such as sensory integration.

Keywords : global mental health and neuroscience, research opportunities for ot, greater integration of ot in mental health research, research and funding opportunities, research domain criteria (rdoc)

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