Developing cultural awareness in occupational therapy education: A pilot study of student learning in two parallel rehabilitation cases

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Background and Research Question

• **Problem-Based Learning** (PBL) as an educational method
  - Complex, realistic cases with student-directed learning opportunities
  - Promotes critical thinking and problem solving (Kong et al., 2014)
  - Promotes group dynamics and collaboration (Hommes et al., 2014)

• **Preparation to work** with diverse communities
  - Health disparities and inequities in the USA (Weinstein et al., 2017)
  - Limited diversity in occupational therapy workforce

• **Research Question: How does the cultural background of a PBL case influence students’ development of cultural awareness and reflection?**
Method

- **Participants**: 34 students, most self-identified as white, 4 small groups with an OT educator or clinician as facilitator.

- **PBL Case**: Two parallel PBL cases; differing only in whether the client was from the majority or minority culture; two day case.

- **IRB approval**

- **Measures**: Post-case survey (Likert scale and open ended questions); discussion of other version of case

- **Analysis**: Themes and descriptive statistics
Two Parallel PBL Cases

**Tom** (majority culture)
- White (assumed); Catholic; uses both contemporary medicine and herbal supplements

**Both**
- Brachial plexus injury, hunting accident; supportive families; roles as spouse, father, son; work as butcher; local resident

**Toua** (minority culture)
- Laotian/Hmong ethnicity; Shamanism; uses both contemporary medicine and spiritual healing
Results

The client's health beliefs and culture were important areas to understand.

This case encouraged me to reflect on my beliefs and values.

Tom: “...are alternative medicine approaches within the scope of OT?”
Toua: “...an opportunity to practice respect for clients with differing cultural views...”
Effective treatment requires:

- To best work with **Tom**, understand his:
  - **Motivation**
  - Priorities, goals
  - Medical condition, pain

- To best work with **Toua**, understand his:
  - **Values, beliefs, culture**
  - Priorities, goals
  - Medical condition, pain

**Majority culture**

**Minority culture**
How are your values & beliefs similar to this client’s?

- **Tom (majority culture):** 89% identified similarity in health beliefs, values, spirituality
- **Toua (minority culture):** 94% identified similarity in spirituality, commitment to family, hard work

Students’ predicted comparable levels of client motivation, compliance, and success in therapy for both **Tom** and **Toua**.
Summary and Practice Implications

• Assumptions of cultural similarity reduced reflection.
• Cultural unfamiliarity facilitated greater reflection on personal beliefs.
• Expectations of equal outcomes for both cases;
  • Does the anticipation of equal outcomes require additional consideration?
• Parallel cases appear to offer rich learning, but results suggest additional facilitator prompts and cues are required to focus and further depth of reflection.