



Professionalisation and Autonomy of the Occupational Therapist Profession in Poland

Authors' contribution:

- A) conception and design of the study
- B) acquisition of data
- C) analysis and interpretation of data
- D) manuscript preparation
- E) obtaining funding

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Received: 30.11.2023

Accepted: 19.02.2024

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Abstract

Occupational therapy has been practised for several decades across various medical entities. However, it was only since 2012 that opportunities for professional development in this area began to be created. It can be considered that with the establishment of higher education training in occupational therapy, the perception of this profession has changed and is becoming increasingly important among professionals and the Polish society. Various measures are being taken to regulate the profession (including a law on certain health professions currently under procedure in the Sejm), but the topic of professionalisation and autonomy is still not sufficiently explored and addressed in Polish literature. The aim of this article is to present occupational therapists' opinions on the professionalisation and autonomy of their profession. A questionnaire was used to survey 188 middle-aged people (35.18 ± 9.72 years). The results show a need to regulate the occupational therapist profession, to guarantee assistance for therapists in improving their qualifications and to increase their remuneration. According to a significant number of respondents, therapists are undervalued and treated unequally in their work environment. The prestige of the occupational therapist profession was rated at a low level. The main conclusion of the study indicates that in the process of professionalisation and autonomy of the profession in Poland, more attention should be paid to the promotion of the contemporary model of occupational therapy in order to increase its recognition and raise awareness of the essence and importance of the role of an occupational therapist in both the medical (therapeutic team) and social environment.

Keywords: occupational therapy, professionalisation, professional autonomy, professional development, social context

Introduction

In recent years, the occupational therapy profession in Poland has been developing dynamically. This has been fostered by the introduction of academic training in occupational therapy at Polish universities in 2012, thanks to previous support and preparation of teachers by ENOTHE (and the gradual expansion of knowledge about

the profession, also in a social context). Previously, it was practised and taught in the traditional occupational therapy model, which is still present in many workplaces in Poland (Janus, 2018). According to its assumptions, occupational therapy appeared as a field consisting exclusively of such forms of work as ergotherapy, art and culture therapy, and social therapy (Szyszka, 2016). The modern occupational therapy model promoted by higher education is based

on the standards set by the World Federation of Occupational Therapists (WFOT) and the European Network of Occupational Therapy in Higher Education (ENOTHE). WFOT defines occupational therapy as a discipline that focuses on promoting health and well-being through participation in activities (WFOT, 2012) and emphasises the importance of occupational autonomy for occupational therapists (WFOT, 2007). In developed countries, occupational therapy is a regulated profession that enjoys autonomy and high standing (Figueiredo et al., 2013). Therapists have a sound practical preparation acquired at the university level, have a broad theoretical knowledge of the profession with specialised skills, exercise control over the quality of their own work and work according to the code of ethics, and have professional responsibility (Kasher, 2005).

In Poland, occupational therapy is part of the general model of rehabilitation created by Wiktor Dega (Janus, 2018). It is most often directed at people with physical disabilities, intellectual disabilities and mental disorders. In contrast, occupational therapists in Western countries take care of anyone, even healthy people. For healthy people, occupational therapists offer counselling on ergonomics at work or improving their overall quality of life. The activities of occupational therapists in Western countries include, among others, people at risk/socially excluded, people in penitentiary institutions and their families (Tilenni et al., 2020; Bac, 2016). In Poland, occupational therapy is mainly associated with occupational therapy workshops, which are only one of the many workplaces of an occupational therapist (Żmudzińska, Bac, 2017; Bac, 2016). Occupational therapists also provide their services in educational settings, where they help people with learning disabilities or in the client's home environment (Seoane-Martín, Rodríguez-Martínez, 2023; Janus, 2018). They also cooperate with companies that produce and design everyday equipment and furnishings for people with disabilities (Sarsak et al., 2023; Goodrich et al., 2016). They are also members of interdisciplinary therapeutic teams in medical and rehabilitation facilities (Bac, 2016).

The occupational therapist profession in Poland is still an undervalued profession and, as previously mentioned, perceived in a narrow way and associated mainly with forms of art therapy and ergotherapy (Żmudzińska, Bac, 2017; Juśkiewicz-Swaczyna, Białkowska, 2015). E. Janus estimates that the recognition and identification of the key competencies of this profession is rather low (Janus, 2018). Similarly, the profession is still poorly recognised in the social space, which is a big challenge to change (Janus, 2023). In a study by Żmudzińska and Bac (2017), the respondents – residents of the Malopolska region – most often indicated that they associate the profession of an occupational therapist with occupational therapy workshops, where activities supporting manual dexterity

and pre-vocational preparation are conducted. Although the occupational therapist profession has existed in Poland since at least the 19th century, it is only recently that a clear process of its professionalisation has been observed (Janus, 2018). Professionalisation is the process by which a profession has become, or seeks to become, publicly recognised as a profession (Hoyle, 2001). A profession is defined as an organized occupational (professional) group with social and/or legal status (Adams, 2010). It is associated with terms such as autonomy, respect, recognition, status, prestige or influence and authority (Cooper, 2012). The term professionalisation can be defined in various ways, depending on the approaches presented by the people creating the definitions (Janus, 2016). The structuralist approach assumes that professionalisation means a natural process of gaining control over the profession and its structuring. Professionalisation in the functional approach involves raising qualifications, guaranteeing high quality of services and their standardisation. Taking control over a given profession, which is a part of the monopolistic approach, is perceived as the desire to take over power, money and domination in a given profession. However, the cultural approach assumes that the profession is shaped on the basis of society's recognition, specialists' knowledge and the resulting power (Reed, 2015). Cooper (2012) lists the elements that influence the process of professionalisation of the occupational therapist profession in relation to the profession of occupational therapist in Canada. It distinguishes factors that make us optimistic in the context of the professionalisation process and those that may slow down its development. Positive factors include occupation as the aim of therapy, therapeutic models, client-centered approach, education and educational programs, increasing the amount of scientific knowledge in the field of occupational therapy, expanding areas of practice, a growing number of receivers of occupational therapy, international education and practice, and the use of media social media. However, it also draws attention to factors that may negatively affect the professionalisation process, such as gender inequality, too low salary, inability to use existing knowledge in practice, or low public knowledge about this profession (Cooper, 2012). Professionalisation of the profession increases its prestige, which is associated with greater respect, esteem and status (Janus, Filar-Mierzwa, 2019). It also increases professional autonomy, which, on the one hand, has a real impact on the directions and processes of activities taking place in the work environment, and on the other hand, increases independence in the implementation of professional tasks, planning one's own work and freely choosing work methods and their evaluation. It is closely related to making decisions and taking responsibility for one's actions (Davis, 1996; Mastekaasa, 2011).

The functioning of occupational therapy is still an under-reported topic in Polish literature, but it is a very important one in terms of the professionalisation of the profession (Cooper, 2012), which was the rationale for undertaking the presented research.

The aim of the research was to provide occupational therapists' opinions on the professionalisation and autonomy of their profession in Poland. These two aspects constitute important components affecting the position of occupational therapists, not only in the professional context but also in the social one. The analysis included answers to the questions: whether the contemporary model of occupational therapy is sufficiently recognised in medical and social settings, how occupational therapists evaluate the directions of changes, how they perceive opportunities for professional advancement and their role in an interpersonal therapeutic team, what positive changes have occurred in the last decade in the process of professionalisation in Poland. The study conducted within this thesis also presents the current needs and challenges of occupational therapy.

Methods

In a questionnaire study using a diagnostic survey method, 190 respondents from all over Poland took part. Two questionnaires were rejected due to their incorrect completion. The table below presents the characteristics of the respondents (Table 1).

Table 1. Characteristics of the respondents (N=188)

Characteristic	N	%
Gender		
Female	178	94.7
Male	10	5.3
Education		
Students	4	2.1
OT bachelor degree	42	22.3
Ot master degree	25	13.3
Occupational therapy vocational study	76	40.4
Postgraduate education	16	8.5
Other	25	13.3
Age [years] (, SD)	35.18±9.72	
Seniority as OT [years] (, SD)	8.19 ±8.06	

Most often, the respondents provided occupational therapist services in Social Welfare Homes, Community Self-Help Homes, Social Welfare Centers, Care and Treatment Facilities and in hospital wards. The fewest people worked in associations/foundations. For 114 people, the workplace belonged exclusively to the public sector. It

should be emphasised that 21 respondents work in private facilities, and 31 people provide occupational therapist services in both public and private facilities. Some of the respondents (n=17) had experienced occupational therapy conducted abroad. Most often, it was Germany. Countries such as the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Great Britain and Sweden were also mentioned.

The research tool was a questionnaire developed in Google Forms. It contained 34 questions divided into four sections. The first section contained questions on basic information about the respondents, the second section on the autonomy of the occupational therapy profession, the third on its professionalisation, and the last one on the prestige of the profession. The questionnaire was made available online on various forums for occupational therapists in Poland and in workplaces.

As part of the statistical analysis, the frequency of responses was calculated with the determination of their percentages. The normality of the distributions was checked with the Shapiro-Wilk test, the significance of differences between the means for variables taking three or more values was determined using a one-factor analysis of variance with the Sheffé's multiple comparisons post hoc test. A significance level of $p \leq 0.05$ was adopted. Analyses were performed using the IBM SPSS Statistics package.

Results

The main results obtained from the questionnaires are presented below. With regard to the assessment of professionalisation, the majority of the respondents stated that the role and tasks of this profession are not clearly presented from the legal side (Fig. 1). 35% of people strongly believe that there are no clear rules/regulations regarding the role and tasks of an occupational therapist. At the same time, 70% of the respondents strongly see the need for a law on the profession of an occupational therapist.

The next issue addressed in the survey was opinions related to the profession of an occupational therapist in relation to other professionals with whom the respondent interacts/works. The results are presented in Figure 2. A larger number of the respondents experiences negative feelings about the profession. The highest number of the respondents, 39%, feel they are treated unequally compared to other therapists and 38% feel belittled. However, the smallest number of people indicated that they are criticised for their actions by other professionals.

Respondents' membership in various types of professional associations was another issue raised in the survey. Only 7% of the respondents belong to the Polish Occupational Therapy Association, and 4% of the respondents declared membership in international associations for occupational therapy.

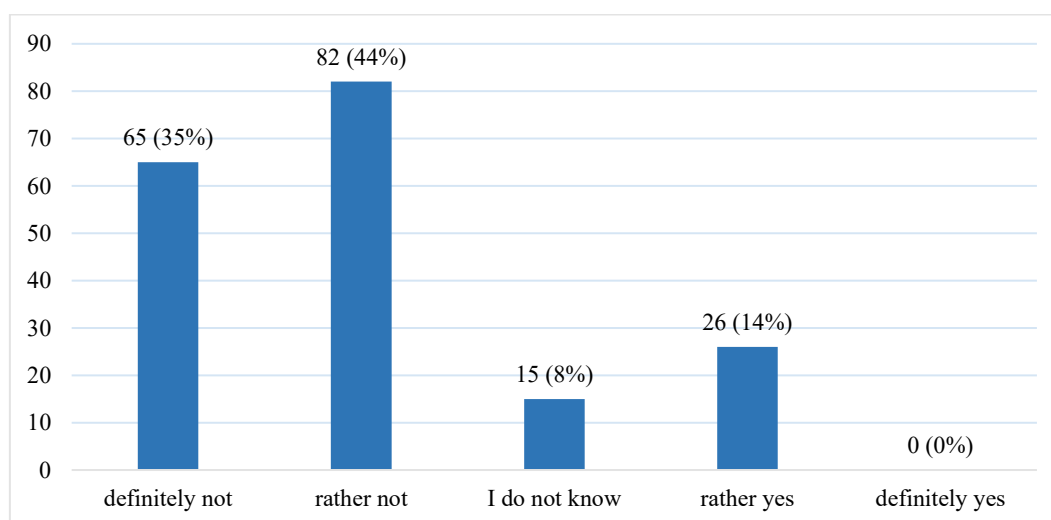


Figure 1. Respondents' opinions on the legal issues of practising as an occupational therapist. "Are the role and tasks of an occupational therapist clearly presented in the regulations/legal acts in Poland?" (N and % of respondents)

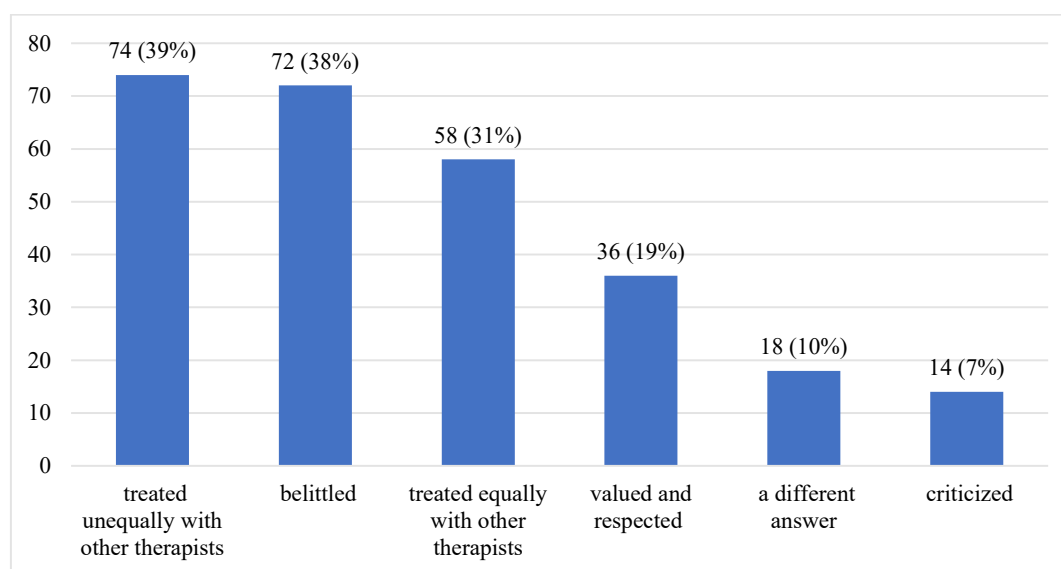


Figure 2. Feelings about the profession in relation to other professionals with whom the respondent interacts/works – multiple choice question (N and % of respondents)

The respondents were also asked whether they had observed a greater provision of occupational therapy courses/training over the last 5 years. 52% of the respondents confirmed this trend. At the same time, 48% of them were in favor of attending various refresher courses in the area of occupational therapy on a regular basis.

The results of the prestige assessment of the occupational therapist profession in Poland are presented in Figure 3. The respondents most often assessed prestige as low (31%) and very low (26%). Only a few equated the profession with very high prestige.

The need for the process of professionalisation, including professional autonomy, is noted by the respondents. In spite of the observed positive change in the development of this profession by a significant number of people, there is a predominance of opinions about the underestimation of this profession, treating it as auxiliary and unprofitable. In order to change this and to improve the process of professionalisation of the occupational therapist profession, the respondents suggest the following measures: providing assistance in taking training courses, unification of regulations on this profession (including the introduction

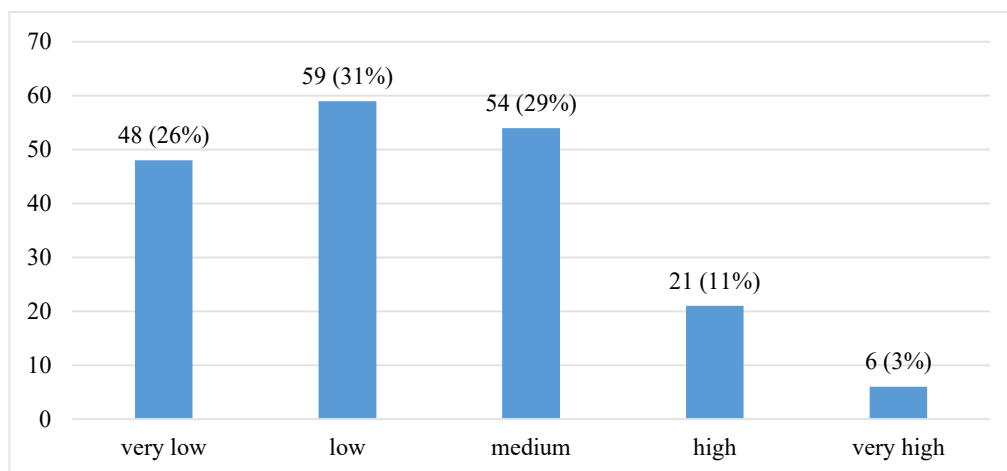


Figure 3. Degree of prestige of the occupational therapist profession in Poland (N and % of respondents)

of a law on the profession of an occupational therapist), raising the level of awareness about this profession. The respondents also point to an economic issue, namely a need for salary increase.

It should be mentioned that, after statistical analysis, no significant correlations were found between the assessment of the level of professionalisation and the age of the respondents (Table 1).

Table 1. Level of professionalisation versus age of respondents - post hoc Sheffé's tests

Age of respondents		Difference in averages	Standard error	P Lower limit	95% confidence interval	
					Upper limit	
Group 1	Group 2	-0.09	0.47	0.983	-1.26	1.08
	Group 3	0.56	0.62	0.661	-0.96	2.09
Group 2	Group 3	0.65	0.61	0.563	-0.85	2.15

Note: Group 1 - age up to 30 years old, group 2 - 31 to 45 years old, group 3 - 46 years old and over.

Similarly, as above, no significant correlations were found between the respondents' age, their length of service, and assessment of the profession's autonomy.

Discussion

There is a lack of items in Polish literature concerning the assessment of professionalisation and autonomy of the occupational therapist profession, so the aim of the presented research was to expand knowledge in this area. The results show that 41% of the respondents feel autonomy at work, and almost 40% have perceived changes in the process of professionalisation of the profession in the last 10 years. This can be influenced, among other things, by the place of work or cooperation in the therapy team. An occupational therapist belongs to an interdisciplinary team. The literature emphasises the lack or low level of knowledge of the interdisciplinary team

about occupational therapy. Low levels of awareness of occupational therapy among health professionals are observed in different parts of the world (Kasar et al., 2021; Sarsak, 2022). Gaps in knowledge concerning the tasks and role of an occupational therapist are observed in both doctors and nurses (Patel, Shriber, 2001; Smith, Mackenzie, 2011; Vij, 2023). Tariah et al. (2012) point out that physiotherapists have more knowledge about the occupational therapy profession than other professionals such as doctors or nurses. Our own research conducted as part of another project, 'Physiotherapists' knowledge of occupational therapists' professional competencies', shows that physiotherapists notice the need for this profession in the healthcare system. They most frequently associated the profession with occupational therapy workshops, hand therapy and training in activities of daily living. Most of the respondents' answers reflected the actual image of occupational therapy in Poland, in which the traditional occupational therapy model prevails.

The lack of knowledge about the profession among health professionals may influence their attitudes towards occupational therapists. The majority of the respondents feel negative emotions connected with performing their profession. Above all, they point to unequal treatment and being belittled by members of the interdisciplinary team. At the same time, it should be emphasised that a significant group of people – 31% feel equally treated by the staff and 19% of the respondents feel appreciated and respected at work. Emotions, relationships in the work environment, the current realities of the profession, and own practical experiences in different areas of occupational therapy interventions and in different workplaces taking into account the role and perspectives of occupational therapy, were described by occupational therapists themselves in the work *Terapia Zajęciowa. Praktycy-praktykom* (Janus, 2023). This publication provides a very accessible look at the work of an occupational therapist ‘behind the scenes’ and recommendations for professional development opportunities. It definitely represents a positive, measurable step in the promotion of autonomy and professionalisation of the occupational therapist profession in Poland, enriching literature with examples of so-called good practice according to the contemporary occupational therapy model.

Membership organisations are an important part of the professionalisation process. There are some organizations for occupational therapists in Poland, the leading one being the Polish Occupational Therapy Association which promotes Polish occupational therapy internationally. Only 7% of the respondents indicated membership of this organisation. This may be due to the fact that it is an organization that was only established in 2016. The respondents may also not feel the need to belong to an organisation for occupational therapists, although to determine that further research focusing on this aspect would need to be conducted. In the opinion of occupational therapists, current legal regulations do not clearly define an occupational therapist’s role and tasks. According to 70% of the respondents, a law on the occupational therapist profession could take care of that problem. The respondents also stress that this law would, among other things, increase people’s awareness of the profession and influence the promotion and prestige of the occupation.

The results show that there is a need to regulate the occupational therapist profession, to guarantee assistance for therapists in improving their qualifications, and to increase their remuneration. According to a significant number of the respondents, therapists are undervalued and treated unequally in their work environment. This assessment may be connected with a low level of public knowledge about the profession, as confirmed by numerous studies. The respondents themselves point to the need for introducing measures aimed at raising awareness among the public about occupational therapy. Improving the conditions of

the profession may translate into a change in respondents’ feelings about it. This can significantly influence the process of professionalisation and the quality of work.

Some limitations of the study were a relatively small sample of respondents and only a proprietary survey instrument.

Conclusions

1. In the process of professionalisation and autonomy of the occupational therapy profession in Poland, more attention should be paid to the promotion of the contemporary occupational therapy model, which is still not sufficiently known in the medical and social environment, in order to strengthen the perception and roles of an occupational therapist in the therapeutic team.
2. The prestige of the occupational therapy profession was rated low by the respondents, regardless of their age and length of service, and this needs to be changed.
3. Some positive changes and directions in the professionalisation of the occupation in the last 10 years have been shown according to the respondents, e.g. the importance of the establishment of higher education training, greater availability of courses and trainings, and the expression of a significant need for legal regulations including a law on the profession.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interest for any commercial associations or financial interests held by the authors.

Funding

The publication is a result of the International Scientific Conference Occupational Therapy Evidence-Based Practice project funded by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education under the program Excellent Science II.



Ministry of Science and Higher Education
Republic of Poland

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