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The Perceived Benefits of International Travel for Occupational Therapy Practitioners Who Have Traveled Internationally

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Abstract

Purpose: This qualitative study aimed to examine the perceived benefits of international travel for occupational therapy practitioners who have traveled internationally during their occupational therapy education or career. To succeed, healthcare professionals must have various personal and clinical skills, including providing quality care to diverse populations. They must have cultural competence, which includes cultural humility and cultural sensitivity. Methods: A purposive, convenience sampling was used through a network of occupational therapy practitioners who had previously traveled abroad either as occupational therapy students or as licensed occupational therapists and participated in education, clinical experience, work experiences, or volunteer experience related to occupational therapy. Individually, eight participants meeting the criteria were asked 12 open-ended questions through virtual interviews focused on the potential impact of international travel on developing and enhancing personal and professional competencies. The research team transcribed, coded, and placed responses into categories to create significant themes. Results: Four major themes were identified: (1) personal growth; (2) professional growth; (3) application to occupational therapy practice; and 4) increased cultural awareness. Conclusions: Through international travel, healthcare professionals may gain a more global perspective, improve cultural sensitivity and cultural humility, increase flexibility in practice to improve client outcomes with limited physical and financial resources, and strengthen the desire to participate in advocacy efforts. Although the cost may be a barrier to requiring travel for higher-education students, innovative funding may help create opportunities to serve client needs better.

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This qualitative study aimed to examine the perceived benefits of international travel for occupational therapy practitioners who have traveled internationally during their occupational therapy education or career. To succeed, healthcare professionals must have various personal and clinical skills, including providing quality care to diverse populations. They must have cultural competence, which includes cultural humility and cultural sensitivity. Methods: A purposive, convenience sampling was used through a network of occupational therapy practitioners who had previously traveled abroad either as occupational therapy students or as licensed occupational therapists and participated in education, clinical experience, work experiences, or volunteer experience related to occupational therapy. Individually, eight participants meeting the criteria were asked 12 open-ended questions through virtual interviews focused on the potential impact of international travel on developing and enhancing personal and professional competencies. The research team transcribed, coded, and placed responses into categories to create significant themes. Results: Four major themes were identified: (1) personal growth; (2) professional growth; (3) application to occupational therapy practice; and 4) increased cultural awareness. Conclusions: Through international travel, healthcare professionals may gain a more global perspective, improve cultural sensitivity and cultural humility, increase flexibility in practice to improve client outcomes with limited physical and financial resources, and strengthen the desire to participate in advocacy efforts. Although the cost may be a barrier to requiring travel for higher-education students, innovative funding may help create opportunities to serve client needs better.

Keywords: international travel
INTRODUCTION
Healthcare professionals must have various personal and clinical skills to succeed. One of these skills is the ability to provide quality care to diverse populations. To provide this quality care, healthcare professionals must have cultural competence, which includes cultural humility and cultural sensitivity. Foronda et al defined cultural humility as "a process of openness, self-awareness, being egoless, and incorporating self-reflection and critique after willingly interacting with diverse individuals." In 2013, Hook et al noted that cultural humility is characterized by respect and lack of superiority toward an individual's cultural background and experience and has an interpersonal stance that is not self-focused but other-oriented. The results of achieving cultural humility have been described as having mutual empowerment, respect, partnerships, optimal care, and lifelong learning. Cultural sensitivity is understanding how learned values, habits, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors impact an individual's life. Cultural sensitivity must be integrated into the therapeutic process to address the challenges associated with client care effectively.

Within health professions, occupational therapy (OT) is known for its flexibility in working with different populations and occupational problems. The American Occupational Therapy Association’s Standards of Practice states that "an occupational therapy practitioner providing client-centered services demonstrates cultural humility, recognizes gaps in cultural knowledge and maintains a constant process of learning, understands differentiations between and within cultures, acknowledges implicit and explicit bias, and recognizes power dynamics in the delivery of services." OTPs (occupational therapy practitioners) must consider that occupation, the core of occupational therapy, is an essential aspect of the human being we all share. Occupations are carried out under cultural contexts and environments different for each person, which means occupation is inherent to culture and context.

This understanding is why occupational therapy practitioners must always be aware of the influence of culture, including social, political, and economic contexts, on occupational performance. OTPs need critical and reflexive reasoning to carry out an integrated approach that positively impacts their client's occupations. Therefore, Occupational therapy practitioners must develop skills that correlate with the needs of a diverse society, such as being culturally aware, culturally sensitive, and having cultural humility.

Henderson et al proposed that cultural competency can be mastered through exposure to authentic situations where health practitioners make ethical decisions and reflect on their experiences, feelings, and intuitions. After willingly interacting with diverse individuals, cultural humility is a process of openness, self-awareness, being egoless, and incorporating self-reflection and critique.

By adopting an international focus, universities have recognized the importance of global opportunities for their students in occupational therapy programs by exposing them to authentic situations that bring about cultural sensitivity and humility. The impact of these experiences on students' clinical and cultural skills has been researched. However, the available research on the impact of cultural experiences on OTPs and client care is limited. Also needing more in the existing literature is knowledge of how OTPs interpret their cross-cultural and international learning experiences. Allowing occupational therapy practitioners with international experience to share their own points of view could help the field gain a better awareness of the advantages of such experiences. Our study aims to explore the perceived benefits of international travel for occupational therapy practitioners who have traveled internationally during their occupational therapy education or career.

METHODS
To answer the research question that guided this study, researchers designed a series of 12 open-ended questions (see Appendix 1) to ask study participants during Zoom interviews. Open-ended interview questions were generated and developed after reviewing and analyzing the existing literature on international experiences and the potential impact of international travel on developing and enhancing personal and professional competencies. Purposive, convenience sampling was used through a network of OTPs who had previously traveled abroad either as occupational therapy students or as licensed occupational therapists and participated in education, clinical experience, work experiences, or volunteer experience related to occupational therapy. Additional inclusion criteria were that participants must be 18 years of age or older in order to participate.

Data Collection Methods
After receiving IRB approval from the researchers' university, potential study participants were emailed an Informed Consent form which they signed and returned before participating in the study. A link to a web-based survey was then emailed to participants which included survey questions used to collect participant demographics (see Appendix 2). Those who consented to participate in the study and completed the web-based survey were emailed to establish an interview date and time. Two researchers conducted individual interviews over one week virtually using Zoom. The interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and were digitally recorded to allow for transcription and qualitative analysis.
Data Analysis
Qualitative responses from study participants were analyzed using a grounded theory approach. After the recorded interviews were transcribed into text by the research team, they were reviewed by three researchers to check the accuracy of responses. Additionally, the researchers completed member checking to verify the responses’ validity. Four researchers then independently identified emerging themes and coded them into unique categories. Afterward, the researchers met until a consensus was reached.

RESULTS
A total of eight interviews were conducted and transcribed. All study participants identified as Female, with 50% identifying as White/Caucasian, 13% as Asian/Pacific Islander, and 38% identifying as "Other," with 63% of participants identifying as "Not Hispanic/Latino." Participants’ time as occupational therapy practitioners varied from two to seven years. The average age at the time of data collection was 33.75 years. The majority of participants lived in the United States (50%), with the remaining participants living in Canada (25%), Venezuela (13%), and Colombia (13%). Most participants (50%) had traveled to Colombia for their international travel experience with other countries, including the United States, Costa Rica, Mexico, Indonesia, South Africa, and Canada. Study participants spoke English, Spanish, French, Gujarati, Hindi, and some participants generally understood Urdu (See Appendix 2).

This study was guided by the research question: What are the perceived benefits of international travel for occupational therapy practitioners who traveled internationally during their occupational therapy education or career? Four major themes emerged (Table 1).

Table 1. Major Themes and Codes Identified from Interview Transcripts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Themes</th>
<th>Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Personal Growth</td>
<td>Self-awareness of own biases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Appreciation of own country (USA and Canada)/perspective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Increased cultural awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Different perspective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Professional Growth</td>
<td>Increased appreciation of tools and resources in own country, especially the USA and Canada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Increased Financial Awareness (payment systems)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Advocating for OT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Application to OT Practice</td>
<td>More flexible and creative as an OT with minimal resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acknowledge family in the OT process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>More well rounded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Better understanding of clients</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Increased Cultural Awareness</td>
<td>Understanding the breadthness of OT and the differences in each country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Increased cultural humility through learning, self-reflecting and self-awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Increased cultural sensitivity through increased awareness of client’s culture and values on them as occupational beings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Theme 1. Personal Growth
Theme one describes the benefits to personal growth that result from international travel and collaboration with other international occupational therapy professionals. It was found that international travel facilitated both personal and professional growth due to enhanced international learning experiences. Participants reported increased self-awareness of their own biases, appreciation of their own country, especially the USA and Canada, increased cultural awareness, and gaining a different, broader perspective. Some quotes from interview subject transcripts that relate to theme one include:

Participant 1: "not only do you get to see a new place, but you just get a different perspective and a different way...exploring different ways can only help you. It can't hurt you. It doesn't just limit you to one way and that experience doesn't just change you as a therapist, but I think it changes you as a person. Also, it makes you realize how lucky we are."

Participant 2: "It allows for perspective, and also to just be more in tune, or it allows opportunity to understand your own biases of, you know, maybe the way you were raised, or the communities you were raised, or the family that you were raised that just by branching out beyond what you know. It provides just like deeper connection to people. and you know, allows you to be...more well rounded in your own scale and your own therapeutic use of self and what you bring to the table."
Theme 2. Professional Growth
Theme two describes the perceived benefits of professional growth. International travel led to a better understanding of the client populations being served and greater awareness of the different means by which the availability of equipment, finances, and other resources impact how occupational therapy is practiced. In addition, a greater desire and wish to advocate for the occupational therapy profession was enhanced due to international travel experiences, specifically through enhanced collaboration and more significant opportunities to find ways to advocate for the OT profession. Some quotes from interview subject transcripts that relate to theme two include:

Participant 3: “the services that people could access in Indonesia look quite different from the programming that’s available here (Canada), and therefore the recommendations that can be made are quite different. So I would say that when traveling abroad that maybe you were thinking of kind of some simple things that you could do that would be reasonable and free, and that in Canada there’s just more opportunities to offer a wider array of interventions...And so in that sense, I think just the evaluation tools look different, and that I was grateful that we have much more at our disposal in Canada”

Participant 5: “...they didn’t have these beautiful therapy gyms. They didn’t have the resources that we have here. So it really taught me that, you know, really don’t need a lot of things to provide, like, an effective treatment sessions, and you could use very little stuff and still be just as effective.”

Participant 7: “Many people can’t afford their equipment. If they need one, they live their life without equipment. But now I have seen people making wheelchairs themselves. I have seen people making equipment they need themselves.”

Participant 8: “Here in Venezuela, people pay out of pocket, so you actually recommend it to anybody that would need it. Whereas in the US, sometimes you cannot recommend it to people who don’t have insurance that will cover those treatments.”

Participant 5: “I think a lot of people don’t know what we do as a profession, and I think there’s a lot of value in what we do. and all of the populations we can reach all the things that we can treat. So I think it is valuable to advocate our profession to all people.”

Participant 8: “So the first thing is to talk about it loud and just be vocal about what we do, just advocate for the need for services”

Theme Three. Application to the Occupational Therapy Process
Theme three describes the participant’s perception of applying what they learned traveling internationally to the occupational therapy process. They reported learning how to apply the OT process with creativity, flexibility and minimal resources, acknowledge family in the OT process, be more well-rounded, have a better understanding of clients and be more flexible and creative as an OT. Some quotes from interview subject transcripts that relate to theme three include:

Participant 3: “And so when we were in the hospital getting someone up like post-stroke, it’s very common practice when somebody is a little bit weaker to use a transfer belt, for example, and so I know that they didn’t have those there. So then we were using a bed sheet instead...I think it forced you to be a little bit more creative and flexible.”

Participant 5: “So I think it’s changed me because I’ve used that experience as thinking outside the box. I don’t need to go into a therapy session with all this different equipment. I can go in with really nothing, and use what’s there and what’s available, and be just as effective.”

Participant 6: “I just realize that I do not need all this sophisticated stuff to treat my clients. I can use the simplest things every day with my clients.... So I guess I’m more resource conscious, and that’s determined the kind of services that I would refer my clients.”

Participant 1: “with treatment just different cultures again, like what some things they want to get back to doing, or also how big a family involvement is because for some of my clients I realize now, culturally, some want to be independent where some cultures actually rely more on family.”

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Participant 2: “It provides just like deeper connection to people. and you know, allows you to. you know. Really just be like. What do I want to say? Like more well rounded in your own scale and your own therapeutic use of self and what you bring to the table”

Participant 3: “So just when you are working with people from other cultures, I think, having that experience with being abroad can help you to just have a little bit of a broader perspective and a little bit more understanding in terms of how different cultures perceive maybe disability differently, or how culturally family may be more or less involved in the rehabilitation process.”

Participant 8: “I do think that better OTs come from people who are well informed and that understand other cultures.”

Participant 1: “You think people are being rude, but it’s really just a different culture…just build your rapport with them and kind of have more understanding”

Participant 3: “I think, within North America we have quite diverse populations, and so it’s hard to know about kind of every culture, of course, but definitely for some of the more dominant ones. It’s nice to be able to have that added level of understanding, and to hear about people’s lived experiences to again just establish more empathy between us as practitioners and the clients that we’re looking to support, especially from that kind of client-centered standpoint.”

Participant 6: “It made me one to understand my clients better than I previously did, because I realized that I may not have been taking into consideration the actual needs of clients, and I was just going with what I was taught and what was available to me…but in getting exposed to so many different things and so many different places, I have come to appreciate that everybody is the same when people have different values and wishes, and there are so many dynamics that come into play in the clinic.”

Theme Four. Cultural Awareness

Theme four describes how international travel aids in enhancing cultural awareness and improves the effectiveness of occupational therapy practice. International travel enhances cultural awareness of occupational therapy professionals by gaining deeper insights into other cultures and the different ways occupational therapy is practiced worldwide. Cultural awareness makes a vital contribution to the educational experience of OT students. Some quotes from interview subject transcripts that relate to Theme four include:

Participant 1: “So I think it just gives you like a different perspective of how broad ot is, and how many different avenues like you can go”

Participant 4: “You really realize that it (OT) can be done in different ways and sometimes even much more in other places, and see different values. And so it really really opens your eyes and expands your horizons up to how other countries can you realize your profession.”

Participant 5: “So it gave me a broader idea of like what ot can look like to see it in other countries to learn about our profession, and how it’s different there versus here they do a lot of preventative care, whereas we do a lot of reactive care.”

Participant 8: “I have found that each of the countries I went to; they did things very, very differently. So, I could create my own OT, kind of like pulling things from Columbia and pulling things from the US and pulling things from Venezuela. And I kind of just built my own career path without having to be locked down to how people do things in the US, or how people do things in Colombia.”

Participant 2: “to try to think about the individual as a whole, and not just focusing on the deficit and kind of seeing, like what is actually important to this person, what’s culturally relevant to this person…you’re thinking about an individual as a whole person. You can’t really separate an individual from their culture or their heritage, or their traditions…”

Participant 3: “being able to travel abroad, especially when I went to Indonesia. It’s quite a different culture from what we have here in Canada, and so, in that sense, it just offers you a different lens to see how people approach things, and that builds, I think, empathy.”
BENEFITS OF INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL FOR OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY PRACTITIONERS

Participant 5: “(traveling internationally) has made me more mindful of their (client’s) culture, and like to try to understand them a little bit more.”

Participant 6: “That's the best. plus that you get to see the beauty in diversity, cause there isn't one ideal culture, and there isn't one this place is. It's good to sample a bit of everything you know like the way you've done.

Participant 7: “So the benefits that they can take home the values and different styles different countries are using.”

Participant 8: “...it has opened a door for me...I am the one that understands other cultures. The one that has, like, been outside of this small city, and I kind of understand or can understand a little bit more where people are coming from.”

DISCUSSION

This study showed that international travel was beneficial to occupational therapy practice. Traveling helped provide continued professional and personal learning and improved cultural awareness. The sharing of knowledge, a deepened understanding of different values and beliefs, and in-person observations of the Occupational Therapy Domain, such as occupations, environmental contexts, and roles, and the Occupational Therapy Process, including evaluation and treatment, were reported as valuable learning beneficial to occupational therapy careers. For example, OTPs putting patients and safety first during treatment was a shared international belief. The observed differences in evaluations, treatments, and referrals also contributed to practice changes, particularly regarding the view of physical and fiscal resources and global views of disability.

Practicing OTPs reported changes to their evaluation process after international travel. They recognized flexibility as essential, the increased need to focus on mental health, and the importance of remaining culturally sensitive. Meaux et al described cultural sensitivity as required to fully understand the impact of culture on one's life and its importance in the therapeutic process. OTPs became more focused on creativity without resources during treatments, the recognition of family in the process, and the increased consideration of cultural awareness, specifically religious beliefs, and traditions. Due to a perceived increase in cultural sensitivity, OTPs understood referral barriers and perceived themselves as more empathetic. Lastly, teamwork was understood differently after international travel, as the need to rely on other professionals increased when resources were unavailable or limited. OTPs also report being more payment conscious.

Based on their personal experiences, study participants unanimously agreed that occupational therapy education should have a cultural competence requirement. They perceived that this requirement would aid in identifying and eliminating personal biases. While considering the American Accreditation Standards for Occupational Therapy Education, additional potential benefits of student learning of cultural competence include improving the therapeutic use of self (B.4.1), advocacy (B.5.2), professional engagement (B.7.2), effective communication (B.4.23), the promotion of occupational therapy (B.7.3), and ongoing professional development (B.7.4). These Standards are required to be addressed in higher education for students entering the occupational therapy profession in the United States. International travel may also help to address these Standards and may be helpful to students from universities in other countries with different educational standards.

The expansion of global awareness has been linked to technological advances, which are shown to assist students and OTPs in building rapport, improving cultural awareness, learning compassion, and sharing ideas. Despite using technology for educational case studies and video application systems such as Zoom for international virtual educational collaboration, all study participants recommended traveling abroad to expand and improve their occupational therapy practice. They felt that this experience helped them deeply learn about the lived experience and empowered them as individuals. They perceived travel as beneficial in acquiring an actual cultural perspective on different international healthcare systems, populations, and occupational therapy services that are valuable to their current practice. As reported by a participant regarding travel, “It changes who we are as a person. It helped to show how fortunate we are in the United States and helped me to develop a greater sensitivity for people.” To conclude, although all participants unanimously recommended international travel, only some thought it should be an educational requirement versus a recommendation secondary to the associated costs, including obtaining Visa applications.

Limitations and Recommendation for Future Studies

Although the study showed the impact of international travel on practice, it has limitations. Some limitations include a convenient, purposive sample, which may have excluded some OTPs from providing additional perspectives. The sample size was small, thus limiting the transferability of the study findings. Furthermore, the interview questions were author developed based on recent literature. The authors were from one university in the northeastern United States. Having international OTPs co-develop and review the interview questions for validity may have benefited the study.

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Based on this study, future research considerations include 1) studying the improvement of practice on a global scale through international travel with targeted competencies, 2) the perceptions of OTPs sponsoring and mentoring travelers and the impact on the host site’s practice, 3) identifying funding sources and obtaining research grants to support international student travel.

REFERENCES

Appendix 1

Interview Questions
Did you work with other occupational therapists while abroad? If yes, from what countries?
Do you speak another language? If yes, which language(s)?
What do you believe are the benefits of occupational therapy practitioners traveling internationally during their occupational therapy education and/or career?
How did traveling abroad change how you evaluate clients in your current practice?
How did traveling abroad change how you treat clients in your current practice?
How did traveling abroad change how you recommend services for clients in your current practice?
Do you look at culture regarding occupations more frequently during practice since traveling abroad? If yes, how?
Would you recommend traveling abroad to occupational therapy students? Why? If yes, anywhere specifically?
Do you think occupational therapy education should incorporate international collaboration among students in different countries? Why or why not?
Do you think there should be an international requirement within occupational therapy education?
Do you think there should be a cultural competence requirement within occupational therapy education?
How do you think occupational therapy can be advocated for on a global scale?

Appendix 2
Qualtrics Demographics Questions

Q1- What is your name?
Q2- What is your gender identity?
Q3- What is your age in years?
Q4- What is your race
Q5- What is your ethnicity?
Q6- In what city and country do you currently live?
Q7- Where did you travel internationally as an occupational therapist or student? Please specify if you were an occupational therapist or student during the time of travel, length of each trip and if the trip was for leisure or practicing occupational therapy
Q8- If you traveled abroad prior to your occupational therapy education, please list the countries and length of stay
Q9- Where did you attend college?
Q10- How long have you been a practicing OT (in years)?
Q11- Do you speak another language? If yes, which ones? Please include your primary language