Research Literature in Occupational Therapy, 2001–2005

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KEY WORDS
- professional journals
- research publications
- scholarship

One method to determine trends in occupational therapy research is to survey the literature published in occupational therapy journals. This study describes the types and topics of articles published in five prominent occupational therapy journals over a 5-year span. Feature articles published between 2001 and 2005 were analyzed to determine the types of articles and research and subject areas. The percentage of research articles published between 2001 and 2005 increased from 65% to 78% of all articles published and is higher than previous reports. More than 70% of the research articles used designs that substantially contribute to the evidence base for occupational therapy (defined by Kielhofner, Hammel, Finlayson, Helfrich, & Taylor [2004] as *correlational–comparison, experimental, qualitative,* and *meta-analysis*). Of the research articles, 60% addressed pediatric, physical disability, and rehabilitation topics. The 5-year period showed a trend of increasing frequency of geriatric and pediatric topics in research reports. Scholars should emphasize research designs that build the evidence for occupational therapy approaches and practices and focus on research topics of highest value to society.

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One method to determine the scholarship and research of a profession is to survey the profession's journals (e.g. Andresen, Tang, & Barney, 2006). When examined over time, professional journals can reveal trends in research topics and designs. A profession's research base is critical to maintaining its societal support and its viability in health care (Christiansen, 1983; Kielhofner, Hammel, Finlayson, Helfrich, & Taylor, 2004). Few studies have surveyed occupational therapy's scholarship by examining its journals. Among these, a British study (Mountain, 1997) and an Australian study (Cusick, 1995) examined the content of occupational therapy journals to analyze trends in the profession's research productivity. More recently, Andresen et al. (2006) identified the scope of occupational therapy research articles by surveying all occupational therapy articles catalogued in MEDLINE and CINAHL from 1996 to 2002.

Cusick (1995) investigated Australian occupational therapy research by reviewing research papers published in the *Australian Occupational Therapy Journal* (*AOTJ*) and the proceedings of the Australian Annual Occupational Therapy conferences from 1987 to 1991. She recorded frequency of research designs, author credentials, and topics. Of the 99 articles published, only 42 (42%) were research articles. The majority of article topics were physical disability and rehabilitation (38%), followed by professional issues (16%) and educational issues (12%).

Mountain (1997) analyzed the content of articles published in the *British Journal of Occupational Therapy (BJOT)* from 1986 to 1996. Of the 569 total articles, 343 (60.3%) were best defined as clinical topics, and the remaining almost 40% addressed nonclinical issues such as policy, education, and professionalism.

Cusick (1995) and Mountain (1997) found that about half of the research reports at this time used survey designs. In 42 research articles published in *AOTJ* from 1987 to 1991, 24 (57%) were sur-

veys (Cusick, 1995). The predominance of survey research may reflect a profession nascent in its development and whose research base is emerging. Although survey research can provide a description of practice and professional issues, more complex and rigorous designs are needed to validate practice.

Andresen et al. (2006) completed a more recent survey of occupational therapy research publication. Using three comprehensive Web-based research databases (i.e., MEDLINE, CINAHL, and OTseeker) for the years 1996 to 2002, they identified 3,786 occupational therapy articles, of which they categorized 3,391. Of these articles, only 868 (26%) were research studies with substantial contributions by occupational therapists. Higher-quality (e.g., higher-level) occupational therapy research tended to be published in high-impact medical journals rather than in occupational therapy journals. Although occupational therapy contributions to medical research journals are important, research published in the profession's journals is equally as important to building the evidence base for our profession and our practices.

Prior studies examined only a single journal (e.g., Cusick, 1995; Mountain, 1997) and are now outdated. Although Cusick (1995) did not find an increase in proportion of research articles in *AOTJ* from 1987 to 1991, she noted that the percentage of research reports (42%) had substantially increased from earlier reports (9% in 1963–1967 and 31% in 1983–1987). Mountain (1997) reported a trend toward increased publication of research; the number of research reports in *BJOT* increased from 27 in 1989 to 51 in 1996.

Kielhofner et al. (2004) and Corcoran (2004) acknowledged that multiple research methods are needed to examine occupational therapy outcomes, given the complexity of human occupations, behavior, and disability and the complexity of the occupational therapy process. A body of evidence to validate the theories and practices of occupational therapy involves a system of interrelated investigations. The research approaches most important to documenting the evidence for and value of occupational therapy include "(1) measurement studies, (2) database research, (3) intervention trials, (4) qualitative research, and (5) meta-analysis" (Kielhofner et al., 2004, p. 18). These methods will enable occupational therapy to systematically develop its theories and interventions and to demonstrate its value to society. A survey of the research reports recently published in occupational therapy journals can provide a snapshot of the profession's scholarship and a baseline description of the published research designs and topics that support the evidence for our profession.

Purpose of This Study

This study describes published occupational therapy research through review of peer-reviewed articles in prominent journals from 2001 through 2005. We surveyed five professional journals: the *American Journal of Occupational Therapy (AJOT), AOTJ, BJOT,* the *Canadian Journal of Occupational Therapy (CJOT),* and the *Occupational Therapy Journal of Research (OTJR).* The research questions that guided the review were as follows:

- What was the percentage of research articles, and did it vary by year and by journal?
- What was the frequency and percentage of specific research designs, and did they vary by year or journal?
- What clinical practice areas were the topics of research articles?
- Did the frequency and percentage of clinical practice topics vary by year or by journal?

We interpreted these descriptive questions by considering the research designs that contribute most to the profession's evidence base.

Method

We included in the review all feature articles of the five journals from 2001 through 2005 and excluded editorials, book reviews, letters to the editor, short news items, and editor commentaries. In addition, we excluded published papers of the national professional organizations (e.g., documents accepted by the American Occupational Therapy Association's Representative Assembly). Brief reports and presentations from professional meetings were included. One journal was reviewed online (*AOTJ*), and four (*AJOT, BJOT, CJOT*, and *OTJR*) were reviewed in hard copy.

We coded all articles on the basis of type of article, type of research, practice area, and professional issues. The CINAHL database codes were used to record the type of article (e.g., research, review, presentation, and descriptive), and we then developed codes for the articles' content based on the study's aims. We developed the codes for the analysis on the basis of the literature review and piloted them by reviewing 1 year of *AJOT.* Once the codes were finalized, we used them to categorize all articles in the five journals over 5 years. (See Table 1 for a list of the codes and their definitions.) Only one code was entered for each category. For example, research designs that combined qualitative and quantitative methods were categorized as mixed. When more than one practice area was included, the study was categorized as "multiple." Most article topics were either practice related (e.g., rehabilitation, school based, geriatrics) or professional issues (e.g., reimbursement, education and training issues, issues related to the role and scope of occupational therapy); however, some articles were coded for both a practice area and a professional issue (e.g., the topic was occupational therapy scope of practice in rehabilitation).

We each reviewed each feature article. An Excel database was developed to record the type of article, type of research, and practice area. When we had questions about correct categorization, we made notes in the database and later discussed and resolved the discrepancies or questions. We agreed on all the final categorizations. The Excel files (one for each journal volume) were reviewed for accuracy or missing data, then combined and transferred to a SPSS 14.0 data file. After combining all data, we transformed the codes into numbers and computed frequencies and percentages for each of the categories. Cross-tabulations were computed to analyze categories by journal and by year. To determine differences in frequency by year and by journal, we calculated Pearson chi-square values for each cross-tabulation analysis. Significance was set at $p = .01$.

Table 1. Definition of Codes for Research Methods and Practice Topics

Code	Definition
Research Method	
Case studies and single-subject design	Case study reports, descriptive reports of one case, and single-subject designs with data.
Group comparison and correlational	Groups were compared on descriptive variables. Variables were correlated. Included instrument development studies. Always quantitative.
Survey	Written, mailed survey methods, telephone surveys, and standard interview; always presented quantitative data.
Experimental and outcomes	Preexperimental (one group comparing pre- and posttests, but not single subject), quasi-experimental, true experimental, or randomized clinical trials. Outcome studies of interventions with pre and post measures. Always comparing intervention effects.
Review and meta-analysis	Systematic reviews, meta-analysis. Reviews of research reports.
Qualitative and naturalistic inquiry	Qualitative methods used include ethnography, grounded theory, phenomenology, and narrative. Does not include descriptive articles without data collection and analysis.
Other	Historical research, mixed designs, and other designs that were not defined in article and could not be categorized using codes.
Practice Area	
Assistive technology	Assistive technology for purposes of functional independence or participation, such as wheelchairs or computers. Does not include medical devices that promote recovery.
Geriatrics	Authors define as geriatrics, sample is all persons 60 years or older, setting is skilled nursing facilities or residences for older adults, and topic concerns aging.
Pediatric or school based	Authors define as pediatrics, sample is children and adolescents (<21 years), setting is schools or preschools.
Physical disabilities or rehabilitation	Authors define as physical function or rehabilitation; sample consists of adults; setting is hospital, rehabilitation, or outpatient clinic; includes work programs and hand therapy; excludes home-based intervention or acute medical issues.
Other	Home-based therapy, acute medical diagnoses, and studies that included multiple diagnostic groups and multiple settings

Results

A total of 1,017 articles were published in the five journals from 2001 through 2005, averaging around 200 articles per year. Of these, 306 were published in *AJOT,* 131 in *AOTJ*, 356 in *BJOT,* 143 in *CJOT,* and 81 in *OTJR*. The total number of articles was not statistically different by year, although the number decreased slightly from 2001 to 2005. A total of 219 articles were published in 2001, 196 in 2002, 209 in 2003, 197 in 2004, and 196 in 2005.

Table 2. Frequencies (and Percentages) of Article Types, 2001–2005

Type	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	Total
Descriptive	49 (22.4)	41 (20.9)	46 (22.0)	36 (18.3)	30 (14.8)	201 (19.8)
Presentation	6 (2.7)	6 (3.1)	4 (1.9)	4 (2.0)	4 (2.0)	24 (2.4)
Research	143 (65.3)	128 (65.3)	143 (68.4)	140 (71.1)	152 (77.6)	706 (69.4)
Review	21 (9.6)	21 (10.7)	16 (7.7)	17 (5.6)	11 (5.6)	86 (8.5)
Total	219	196	209	197	197	1,017

Table 3. Frequencies (and Percentages) of Article Types by Journal

Type	*AJOT*	*AOTJ*	*BJOT*	*CJOT*	*OTJR*	Total
Descriptive	26 (8.5)	39 (29.8)	99 (27.8)	36 (25.2)	1 (1.2)	202 (19.8)
Presentation	6 (2.0)	4 (3.1)	6 (1.7)	8 (5.6)	0 (0)	24 (2.4)
Research	251 (82.0)	79 (60.3)	214 (60.1)	82 (57.3)	80 (98.8)	706 (69.4)
Review	23 (7.5)	9 (6.9)	37 (10.4)	17 (11.9)	0 (0)	86 (8.5)
Total	306	131	356	143	81	1,017

Note. AJOT = American Journal of Occupational Therapy; AOTJ = Australian Occupational Therapy Journal; BJOT = British Journal of Occupational Therapy; CJOT = Canadian Journal of Occupational Therapy; OTJR = OTJR: Occupation, Health, and Participation.

Types of Articles

Of the 1,017 articles, 706 (69.4%) were research reports. The types of articles by year are listed in Table 2 and by journal in Table 3. In 2001, 65.3% of the articles published in occupational therapy journals were original research; this percentage increased to 77.6% in 2005. Using chi-square analysis based on the cross-tabulations by year, this increase was not significant ($\chi^2[12, N = 1{,}017] = 11.53$, $p = .485$). The frequency of article types was significantly different across the five journals ($\chi^2[12, N = 1{,}017) = 100.75$, $p < .001$). The proportion of research articles was highest in *OTJR* (98.8%), followed by *AJOT* (82%). *AOTJ, BJOT,* and *CJOT* published similar percentages of research articles (57%–60%).

Research Designs

The research designs published in the occupational therapy journals by year are presented in Table 4. Systematic reviews of research literature were included in this analysis. We combined the categories originally coded to represent only the primary types of designs (see Table 1). Levels of research were considered when combining;

Table 4. Frequencies (and Percentages) of Research Designs in Journals, 2001–2005

Category	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	Total
Case study and single subject	9 (5.5)	9 (6.0)	6 (3.8)	11 (7.0)	7 (4.3)	42 (5.3)
Survey	27 (16.5)	23 (15.4)	24 (15.1)	24 (15.3)	33 (20.2)	131 (16.5)
Comparison and correlational	41 (25.0)	39 (26.2)	37 (23.3)	28 (17.8)	44 (27.0)	189 (23.9)
Experimental and outcomes	25 (6.5)	23 (15.4)	24 (15.1)	24 (15.3)	10 (6.1)	99 (12.5)
Qualitative	31 (18.9)	33 (22.1)	41 (25.8)	41 (26.1)	48 (29.4)	194 (24.5)
Reviews and meta-analysis	23 (14.0)	22 (14.8)	16 (10.1)	17 (10.8)	13 (8.0)	91 (11.5)
Other	8 (4.9)	6 (4.0)	10 (6.3)	14 (8.9)	8 (4.9)	46 (5.8)
Total	164	155	158	159	163	792

for example, case studies and single-subject designs were combined, as were true experimental, quasi-experimental, and outcome studies. Using these categories to define research types, naturalistic–qualitative research designs were used in 24.3% of the published research articles, and group comparison or correlational designs were used in 23.7%. Survey designs were used in 16.4%. Experimental and outcome research accounted for 12.5% of the research articles, and reviews (systematic and meta-analysis) accounted for 11.4%. Other research designs were used in fewer than 10% of the research articles (e.g., single-subject and case studies represented 5.3%). Distribution of research designs did not vary over the 5 years ($\chi^2[24, N = 799] = 28.08$, $p = .257$). Trends for research designs can be visually assessed using Figure 1. The mandate to increase the evidence for occupational therapy intervention would suggest that surveys and case studies would decrease during this time span; however, both were stable during the 5-year period. In addition, the frequency and percentage of experimental and outcome research did not significantly increase during this time frame.

Frequency of research designs did vary by journal ($\chi^2[24, N = 792] = 124.87$, $p < .001$). *OTJR* had no case studies or reviews in this period of time. *BJOT* had more survey research ($n = 65$, 25.9%) when compared with *AJOT* ($n = 26$, 9.5%) and *OTJR* ($n = 8$, 10%). Experimental designs and outcome studies appeared to be more prevalent in *AJOT* ($n = 44$, 16.1%) and *OTJR* ($n = 11$, 13.8%) than in *AOTJ* ($n = 4$, 4.5%).

Topics of Articles: Clinical Practice Areas

Of the 792 research and review articles, 604 (76.3%) focused on practice topics. The percentages for each practice area by year are presented in Table 5 and Figure 2. Physical disabilities, rehabilitation, and work were the topics of 34.8% of all research articles, and pediatric and school-based practice were the topics of 28.6%. Article topics did not differ by year ($\chi^2[20, N = 604] = 25.94$, $p = .169$), although from 2001 to 2005, articles on pediatric topics increased from 25% to 35% and articles on geriatric topics increased from 9.5% to 13.8%. Approximately 15% of all research articles addressed mental health practice, and 5% focused on assistive technology.

We also analyzed practice topics for all research articles by journal. The prevalence of specific practice area topics differed by journal ($\chi^2[20, N = 604] = 119.6$, $p < .001$). Pediatrics and school topics were more prevalent in *AJOT* (42.8%) than in the other journals (6.2%–27.1%). Physical disabilities and rehabilitation appeared to be comparable across journals. *BJOT* had a small percentage of articles on geriatrics ($n = 11$, 6.2%) when compared with *OTJR* ($n = 19$, 27%). In comparison, *BJOT* had more research articles on mental health topics ($n = 51$, 28.7%) than *AJOT* ($n = 14$, 5.6%) or *OTJR* ($n = 4$, 4.5%).

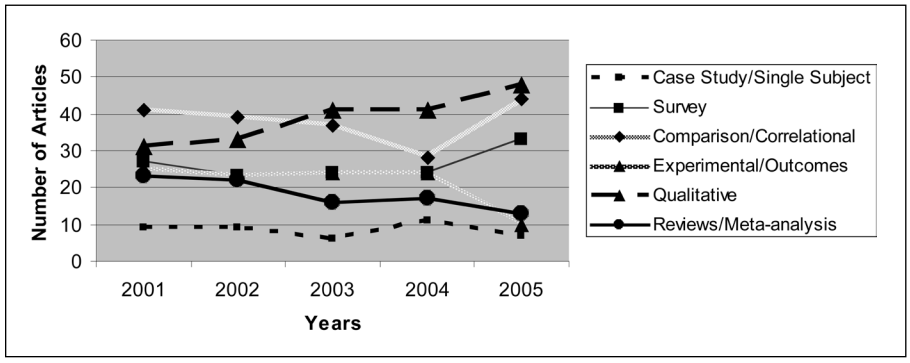

Figure 1. Frequency of research designs, 2001–2005.

Discussion

As stated by Christiansen (1983) and cited by Kielhofner (2006, p. 4), "Without the development of a research base to refine and provide evidence about the value of practice, occupational therapy simply will not survive, much less thrive, as a health profession." Kielhofner (2006) further explained that the existence of occupational therapy depends on societal support and the public's confidence in the value of its services. The public, including consumers, learns of the value of occupational therapy services through research that tests and validates the profession's intervention approaches and practices.

Given the vital nature of research to our profession, we explored trends in publication of research in occupational therapy from 2001 to 2005 by examining five prominent professional journals. The percentage of research articles published in occupational therapy journals increased from 65.3% in 2001 and 2002 to 77.6% in 2005. Although this was not a statistically significant change, it suggests a positive trajectory in research and scholarship. This percentage compares with 30% in 1987 and 42% in 1991 for *AOTJ* (Cusick, 1995) and 46% in 1996 for *BJOT* (Mountain, 1997). Our selection of the profession's prominent journals resulted in a higher percentage than the 26% documented by Andresen et al. (2006), who surveyed all published occupational therapy articles. The journals appear to have established a priority to publish research and to replace descriptive reports and articles on professional issues with research reports. With 82% and 99%, respectively, of their articles

Table 5. Frequencies (and Percentages) for Clinical Practice Area Topics in Research Articles, 2001–2005

Practice Area	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	Total
Physical disability and rehabilitation	44 (37.9)	43 (37.1)	51 (38.9)	35 (29.7)	37 (30.1)	210 (34.8)
Pediatrics and school based	29 (25.0)	39 (33.6)	34 (26.0)	28 (23.7)	43 (35.0)	173 (28.6)
Mental health	21 (18.1)	10 (8.6)	20 (15.3)	27 (22.9)	11 (8.9)	89 (14.7)
Geriatrics	11 (9.5)	13 (11.2)	18 (13.7)	16 (13.6)	17 (13.8)	75 (12.4)
Assistive technology	5 (4.3)	6 (5.2)	6 (4.6)	5 (4.2)	6 (4.9)	28 (4.6)
Other	6 (5.2)	5 (4.3)	2 (1.5)	7 (5.9)	9 (7.3)	29 (4.6)
Total	116	116	131	118	123	604

Note. "Other" included topics such as acute care, home health, and multiple diagnoses.

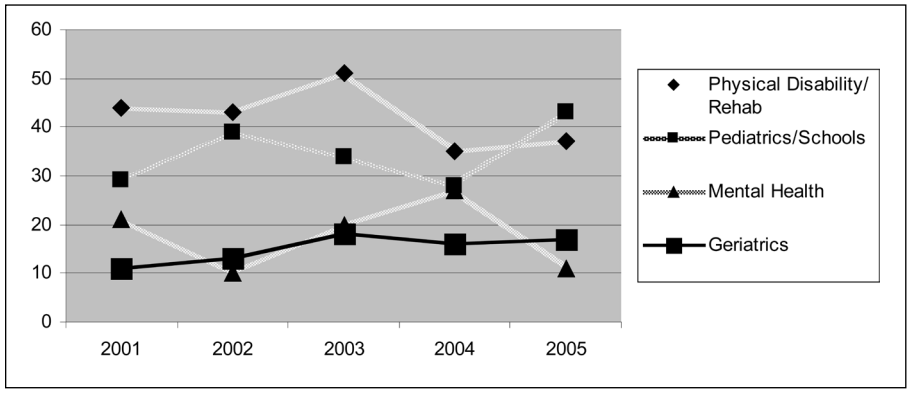

Figure 2. Frequency of primary practice topics in research articles, 2001–2005.

being research studies, *AJOT* and *OTJR* appear to have clearly established their research mission.

When research methods were compared, qualitative and correlational and group comparison research were the most prevalent research designs in the occupational therapy journals. Scholars of the profession have recognized the importance and essential nature of qualitative research to the profession and to the development of occupational science (Clark, 1993; Yerxa, 1998). Leaders in the profession (e.g., Clark, 1993; Hasselkus, 1997; Kielhofner, 2006) have promoted qualitative research as the optimal research design for understanding the human experience (Zemke & Clark, 1996), giving voice to the disability culture (Kielhofner, 2005; Krefting, 1989) and analyzing daily life (Hasselkus, 1998; Wood, 1998). The finding that 24.5% of all research articles in these five journals were qualitative validates the relevance of these research designs to the occupational therapy profession. It suggests that the profession remains dedicated to understanding the complexities of the human experience as a foundation to practice.

Building an evidence base for occupational therapy is of paramount importance to the profession (Holm, 2000; Kielhofner et al., 2004; Law, 2002). To obtain this evidence base, researchers should focus on developing reliable and valid instruments, evaluating outcomes using databases with longitudinal outcome data, and completing rigorous intervention trials. In addition, qualitative designs are needed to understand consumer needs, explain the intervention process, and fully understand the consumer's perceptions of intervention (Kielhofner et al., 2004). Therefore, a focus on occupational therapy research using correlational and comparison, experimental, meta-analysis and systematic review, and qualitative design is of high priority. We found that these research designs accounted for 72.4% of the research literature from 2001 to 2005 compared with 21.8% that used single-subject, case study, and survey designs (and 5.8% other). Therefore, the proportion of research designs that contribute most to research evidence are published three times more than descriptive designs (e.g., survey or case study). Survey research accounted for about 18% of 2001–2005 research reports compared with the 57% for 1987–1991 reported by Cusick (1995).

Although the majority of studies used research designs that matched the categories that Kielhofner et al. (2004) identified as important to building the evidence base for occupational therapy, only 12.5% of the articles used experimental designs. When frequencies by year were compared, publication of experimental design articles did not increase in this time period. One potential explanation for the stability in publication of experimental design research is that occupational therapy scholars publish clinical trials and experimental research in journals with higher impact factors than the occupational therapy journals. Andresen et al. (2006) found that leading occupational therapy investigators tended to publish their research in high-impact journals. Given that experimental designs are often multidisciplinary, occupational therapists may participate in clinical trials that are published in interdisciplinary journals (e.g., *Developmental Medicine and Child Neurology*, *Archives of Physical Medicine*). If this interpretation is accurate, occupational therapy experimental studies receive more visibility; however, the profession's best research is not published in its primary journals; hence, it does not contribute to growth of the journals.

The most prevalent clinical topics were pediatric and school-based practice and physical disability and rehabilitation. Pediatric topics increased during this time period, and percentages were two to three times higher than those reported in previous studies (9.5% in Cusick [1995] and 12% in Mountain [1997]). Given the mandate for occupational therapy services in the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act (2004), the number of occupational therapists in early intervention programs and schools has increased (American Occupational Therapy Association, 1999). Research on pediatric occupational therapy has also been fueled by doctoral program funding from the U.S. Bureau of Maternal and Child Health (McEwen, 2004). A cadre of funded doctoral students and their advisers has created a body of pediatric occupational therapy researchers that likely promoted the prevalence of pediatric research in the American journals.

The increase in published occupational therapy research on geriatrics (9.5%–13.8%) corresponds with the aging of the population and the high demand for services for elderly people. The decline in research articles on mental health (18.1%–8.9%) also follows a decline in the number of mental health practitioners. Funding for mental health positions has declined, as has funding for mental health research (Hu, 2003). Current emphasis on mental health practice (Baum, 2006) may produce a rise in mental health research in the coming years. *BJOT* continues to publish a high percentage of articles on mental health topics, suggesting that mental health research is stronger in the United Kingdom than in other countries.

To systematically build the occupational therapy evidence base, occupational therapy scholars should collaborate to focus on the topics of greatest importance to the profession and to society. Through a consensus process, the profession can harness its resources to build the areas of practice with the greatest potential to serve society, improve health care, and grow the profession. Occupational therapy scholars and leaders have encouraged the profession to use its resources wisely by mounting research programs that include clinical trials and focus on high-priority health care and education issues (Baum, 2006; Corcoran, 2007; Kielhofner et al., 2004).

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Our review of occupational therapy research included five prominent journals from four countries, limiting the scope of the project. Inclusion of additional peer-reviewed journals would have provided a more representative picture of all occupational therapy research during the 2001–2005 timeframe. We piloted the research methods and practice topic codes using several journals, and they were revised several times to include all of the research designs and practice topics; however, the findings may have changed had we used additional codes.

The time period that framed our data collection provides a snapshot of occupational therapy scholarship and research; review of occupational therapy literature over a longer period of time would result in a more comprehensive analysis of the profession's research productivity. Use of the research databases (e.g., MEDLINE, CINAHL) can also facilitate finding and assessment of occupational therapy research. A more in-depth analysis of the research designs used in the articles can produce a detailed baseline and a roadmap for increasing the level of research published by occupational therapists.

Conclusion

This analysis demonstrated that more than 75% of articles in occupational therapy journals from 2001 to 2005 were research reports. Although frequency varied by journal, qualitative and correlational or group comparison (nonexperimental) designs accounted for almost 50% of the research designs. Experimental design studies represent about 12.5% of the journals' research articles and were more prevalent in American journals. Designs identified by Kielhofner et al. (2004) that contribute most to the evidence base for occupational therapy accounted for 72% of the research reports. Trends in the topics of occupational therapy publications seem to follow shifts in practice and may be influenced by funding streams. Building a consensus as to what topics are of greatest importance to society and the profession may serve to increase capacity for and success in our research mission. ▲

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