

Original Article

Exploring Intermediate Students' Awareness and Interest in Occupational Therapy as a Career Choice

Khushboo Jan^{1*}, Nazish A Qadir², Mariya Ehtisham³, Khawla Ilyas Syed⁴, Mukhlis Razzaq⁵, Subhan Ur Rehman Burki⁶

¹BSOT, Occupational Therapist/ Teaching Assistant, IPM&R, Khyber Medical University Peshawar Pakistan.

²BSc OT, tBSOT, MHPE, Coordinator OT Program, IPM&R, Khyber Medical University Peshawar Pakistan.

³BSOT, Occupational Therapist /Managing Director, Bonsai Rehabilitation Centre Peshawar Pakistan.

⁴BSOT, Occupational Therapist, Khyber Medical University Peshawar Pakistan.

⁵BSOT, Incharge Occupational Therapy Department, Paraplegic Center Peshawar Pakistan.

⁶BSPT, PPDPT, MSPT, CHPE, CHR. Principal and Assistant Professor, Northwest Institute of Health Sciences Peshawar Pakistan.

*Corresponding Author: Nazish A Qadir, Coordinator; Email: nazishqadir@kmu.edu.pk

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ABSTRACT

Background: Occupational Therapy (OT) plays a crucial role in the healthcare system, aiding individuals of all ages to regain or maintain their independence and improve their quality of life. Despite its importance, there is a noted gap in awareness and interest among students, particularly in regions like Peshawar, Pakistan, where the understanding of OT's scope and career potential appears limited.

Objective: This study aimed to assess the level of knowledge, awareness, and interest among high school students (pre-medical) in Peshawar regarding Occupational Therapy as a career choice, and to compare these insights with existing perceptions of OT as a field.

Methods: A cross-sectional survey was conducted among 160 high school students preparing for medical entrance examinations in Peshawar, using a validated questionnaire that encompassed demographic details, knowledge, awareness, and interest in OT. The questionnaire was structured into three parts, featuring both open and closed-ended questions. Data analysis was performed using SPSS version 25.0, focusing on descriptive statistics to summarize demographics, knowledge levels, and interest in OT.

Results: The majority of participants (65%) exhibited an average knowledge about OT, with 29.7% having poor knowledge and only 5.3% showing good knowledge. Interest in OT as a career was low, with only 17.5% of the participants expressing a desire to pursue OT in the future. Misconceptions about OT were prevalent, with 65% of respondents mistakenly identifying OT as a branch of psychiatry and a substantial number underestimating the scope of OT practice.

Conclusion: The study revealed a moderate understanding and a generally low interest among pre-medical students in Peshawar towards OT as a career choice. There is a critical need for enhanced educational efforts and awareness campaigns to clarify the role and scope of OT and to foster a greater appreciation for the profession among potential future healthcare professionals.

Keywords: Occupational Therapy, Awareness, Career Choice, High School Students, Pakistan, Knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

Occupational therapy (OT) emerges as a compelling and impactful career path within the healthcare sector, marked by its dynamic nature and capacity to significantly enhance individuals' lives and community well-being. The decision-making process surrounding career choices is inherently complex, shaped by a myriad of factors including personal interests, parental guidance, societal expectations, and academic achievements. In the context of Pakistan, such decisions are predominantly made during or following the completion of high school or intermediate education, with a pronounced inclination towards professions in medicine, engineering, business, and aviation, guided by influences from parents, peers, and social electronic media (1-3).

Despite the growing demand and the promising prospects it offers, occupational therapy remains an underexplored territory within the realm of career options, especially among intermediate students. The availability of academic courses in occupational therapy is somewhat limited on a global scale, and within Pakistan, it is confined to undergraduate degrees offered in select provinces such as Sindh, Punjab, and KP (4). This burgeoning field offers a stable and secure career trajectory, appealing to those driven by a passion

to assist others and thrive in a challenging and versatile environment. Occupational therapists play a pivotal role across various settings- from hospitals and schools to outpatient clinics and community organizations- aiding individuals of all ages and abilities in regaining or maintaining independence and improving their quality of life (5).

An integral component of multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary teams, occupational therapists facilitate client participation through therapeutic engagement in meaningful activities and vocations, enhancing their ability to participate in desired occupations or modifying environments to improve occupational performance (6-8). The profession's emphasis on health and well-being positions OTs as vital contributors across diverse settings and populations, including child development, mental health, geriatrics, and healthy aging, among others (9-15). Their unique role extends to collaboration with other healthcare practitioners, contributing significantly to multi-disciplinary assessments and evidence-based practice (12, 16, 17).

Despite its significant contributions to the healthcare system, awareness of occupational therapy's scope and potential remains limited both within the community and among health professionals globally (6, 18-20). Studies indicate a gap in knowledge about OT among healthcare workers, including those in medical, dental, and nursing fields, as well as the general population in regions like Jordan, highlighting the necessity for increased awareness and understanding of the field (6, 21). While research has been conducted internationally on the awareness of occupational therapy among healthcare students and professionals, and studies have examined the knowledge of physical therapy among intermediate students in Pakistan, there appears to be a dearth of literature specifically addressing the awareness and interest in occupational therapy as a career choice among high school students in areas such as Peshawar (22, 23).

The objective of this study is to delve into the awareness and interest levels among high school students in Peshawar regarding occupational therapy as a career choice, addressing a notable gap in the existing literature and contributing to a broader understanding of OT's potential impact on career selection processes. This exploration is critical in fostering a well-informed generation that recognizes the value and opportunities occupational therapy presents, ensuring a future workforce that is well-equipped to meet the growing demands of this vital healthcare profession.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

This study employed a cross-sectional survey design to investigate the awareness and interest among intermediate students (pre-medical) in occupational therapy as a career choice. Participants were selected through a census sampling method, ensuring a comprehensive approach to gathering data from this specific demographic. The research instrument, a meticulously crafted survey questionnaire, underwent a rigorous validation process involving face validity and content validity assessments by twelve senior occupational therapists, each boasting a minimum of ten years of experience. Following a pilot study with 20 intermediate students not included in the main study, adjustments were made to refine ambiguous items, thereby enhancing the clarity and reliability of the instrument. This preliminary phase yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.714, indicating satisfactory internal consistency.

The questionnaire was structured into three sections, encompassing a mix of open and closed-ended questions designed to probe participants' knowledge, awareness, and inclination towards choosing occupational therapy as a profession. The first section captured demographic information, including names, ages, genders, and academic backgrounds of the respondents. The subsequent part delved into the respondents' understanding of occupational therapy, encompassing aspects of the profession and the tools and activities commonly employed in OT interventions. The final section aimed to gauge students' perceptions regarding the significance of occupational therapy in Pakistan, its distinction from Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT), and its viability as a future career path, with responses being dichotomized into "Yes" or "No" options. A composite score derived from the correct answers to these questions facilitated the assessment of participants' knowledge and understanding of occupational therapy.

The methodology adhered to ethical standards in line with the Declaration of Helsinki, receiving approval from the Ethical Committee of Khyber Medical University. Participants were briefed about the study's objectives both verbally and in written form via a subject information sheet, with informed consent obtained from all volunteers prior to their participation. The distribution of 180 questionnaires was conducted within medical academies, eliciting a response from 160 volunteers. Completed questionnaires were collected on-site or returned by participants, with 9 being excluded due to incomplete or incorrect entries, and 11 not returned.

Data analysis was performed using SPSS version 25.0, employing descriptive statistics to summarize the findings. The knowledge level of participants was categorized based on their total score, with thresholds set for poor (0 to 4), average (5 to 6), and good (7 to 10) levels of understanding. This methodical approach to data collection, validation, and analysis ensures a robust foundation for evaluating the awareness and interest in occupational therapy as a career choice among intermediate students in a scientifically sound and ethically responsible manner.

RESULTS

In this study, a total of 160 participants were surveyed to assess their knowledge, awareness, and interest in occupational therapy (OT) as a career choice, along with their perceptions of OT as a field. The demographic breakdown revealed a gender distribution with 93 male participants (58.1%) and 67 female participants (41.9%), underscoring a slightly higher male participation rate in the study (Table 1).

When exploring knowledge and awareness about OT among participants, the findings depicted a varied understanding. A majority of the respondents, 65%, exhibited an average level of knowledge regarding OT, suggesting a moderate familiarity with the field. However, a significant portion, 29.7%, was categorized under the poor knowledge bracket, indicating a substantial gap in awareness about OT among the participants. Only a small fraction, 5.3%, demonstrated a good level of knowledge, highlighting the need for enhanced educational efforts about OT (Table 2).

Interest in OT as a career was further investigated, revealing that a notable 24.3% of participants were not interested in OT. In contrast, a larger segment, 58.2%, held a mild to moderate positive perception towards choosing OT as a career. This positive inclination suggests a potential openness among students to consider OT, contingent upon receiving more comprehensive information and guidance. Meanwhile, 17.5% of the participants explicitly expressed interest in pursuing OT as a career option, reflecting a definitive but limited appeal of the field among the surveyed population (Table 3).

Table 1 Demographics of Participants

Gender	Number	Percentage (%)
Male	93	58.1
Female	67	41.9
Total	160	100

Table 2 Knowledge & Awareness about Occupational Therapy

Knowledge Level	Percentage (%)	Total
Poor	29.7	100%
Average	65	
Good	5.3	

Table 3 Interest in Occupational Therapy as a Career

Interest Level	Percentage (%)	Total
Not interested in OT	24.3	100%
Mild to moderate positive perception	58.2	
Interested in opting OT as a career	17.5	

Table 4 Perceptions of Occupational Therapy as a Field

Perception of OT	Percentage (%)
Medical field other than Physical Therapy	42.5
Occupational therapists only work on physical disabilities	51.9
Occupational therapists deal with both sensory and motor issues	29.4
Work on maintaining activities of daily living	37.5
Areas of OT working	33.1
Activities as intervention	42.5
Tools used by OT during intervention	22.6
OT refers to Health care practitioners	21.2
Branch of psychiatry	65

Perceptions of OT as a field were diverse among participants. A significant number of respondents, 51.9%, incorrectly believed that occupational therapists only work on physical disabilities, while 42.5% correctly identified OT as a medical field distinct from physical

therapy. About one-third (29.4%) of the participants recognized that occupational therapists deal with both sensory and motor issues, and a similar proportion (37.5%) understood that OT focuses on maintaining activities of daily living. The role of OT in working across various areas was acknowledged by 33.1% of the participants, and 42.5% were aware of activities as interventions used in OT. However, knowledge about the tools used during OT interventions and the referral process to healthcare practitioners was notably lower, at 22.6% and 21.2% respectively. Surprisingly, a majority (65%) of respondents perceived OT as a branch of psychiatry, indicating a significant misconception about the scope and focus of occupational therapy (Table 4).

These findings underscore a critical need for educational initiatives to bridge the knowledge gaps and correct misconceptions about OT. Enhancing awareness and understanding of occupational therapy's broad scope, including its role in addressing not only physical but also sensory, motor, and psychiatric conditions, could significantly influence students' interest and career choices in this field.

DISCUSSION

This study embarked on an exploration of the knowledge and interests regarding Occupational Therapy (OT) among high school students preparing for medical entrance examinations in Peshawar. The findings revealed a landscape where OT is perceived with moderate knowledge and lesser preference as a professional career choice. A striking majority displayed a limited understanding of the roles and values intrinsic to the OT profession, echoing the sentiments found in previous research conducted among medical and healthcare sciences students in Nigeria, which reported a range from poor to moderate knowledge concerning the roles of OT in various work settings (6).

Intriguingly, only a small fraction (17.5%) of participants viewed OT as a potential future career. This contrasts starkly with perceptions towards Physical Therapy within a similar demographic in Lahore, Pakistan, where a robust awareness and an overwhelming 81% of students recognized it as a viable career path (23). Such comparisons underline the critical need for enhanced visibility and understanding of OT among the student populace.

Occupational therapists, pivotal in the interprofessional healthcare team, facilitate the rehabilitation process by fostering independence and aiding in the skill development of their clients. They employ a holistic approach that spans cognitive, sensory, and physical domains through meaningful activities (12). Yet, this study highlighted a prevalent misconception, with a significant majority (65%) misidentifying OT as a branch of psychiatry and distinguishing it from physical therapy (55.6%). This misunderstanding underscores not only a lack of awareness but also deep-rooted misconceptions about the OT profession's scope relative to other health professions (22, 25).

Furthermore, the study unearthed a parallel with findings from Jordan, where half of the participants held the belief that OTs solely focus on physical disabilities (26). This narrow perception was mirrored in our study, revealing gaps in understanding the comprehensive scope of OT practice. A mere 33.1% were aware of the various domains OT covers, with similar percentages recognizing the role of OT in maintaining daily living activities and the use of specific tools and activities as interventions. These findings resonate with studies from India and Kuwait, which reported limited knowledge among medical professionals and students about the full spectrum of OT (27, 28).

The singular nature of this survey, as the only one of its kind to probe into the knowledge and interests of intermediate students regarding OT in Pakistan, marks a significant strength. However, the study's limitations are notable, including its confinement to only two coaching academies in Peshawar, which may not fully represent the broader student perspective.

Conclusively, the study's outcomes point to an average level of knowledge and awareness among participants, coupled with a generally positive yet cautiously interested stance towards OT as a career. This underscores an urgent need for concerted efforts in education and awareness-raising, including seminars, workshops, social media campaigns, and community engagement, alongside forging collaborations with educational institutions to elevate the profile of OT. Future inquiries should delve into the barriers hindering effective collaboration with stakeholders to amplify OT awareness (28).

This discourse not only illuminates the existing gaps in knowledge and perception about OT but also champions advocacy and interprofessional involvement as strategic avenues to integrate OT more prominently within the multidisciplinary healthcare framework.

CONCLUSION

The findings from this study illuminate a moderate level of knowledge and awareness about Occupational Therapy (OT) among high school students in Peshawar, with a discernible lack of interest in pursuing OT as a career choice. This highlights a significant gap in understanding the full scope and potential of OT, suggesting an imperative need for targeted educational initiatives and awareness campaigns. By engaging in seminars, workshops, and social media outreach, stakeholders can enhance visibility and appreciation for OT, potentially steering more students towards considering it as a viable and rewarding career path. Such efforts are crucial for

integrating OT more effectively into the healthcare system and ensuring a well-informed future workforce capable of meeting the diverse needs of the population.

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