Increasing Emotional Intelligence through Self-Reflection Journals: Implications for Occupational Therapy Students as Emerging Clinicians

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Abstract

Occupational therapy practitioners and students need skills associated with emotional intelligence (EI) as it is linked with therapeutic use of self. It is vital to train and educate occupational therapy students in self-awareness in order to prepare them to work effectively with future clients and co-workers. This study explored the use of self-reflection journals among graduate students during their spring semester of a full-time on-campus Master's in Occupational Therapy program. Researchers aimed to understand the impact of self-reflection journals on trait EI. First year master level occupational therapy students (n=39) completed the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (TEIQue). Quantitative data were gathered from pre/post-test scores. Results indicated that students in the intervention group improved the following trait EI scores: (1) adaptability (p=.018); (2) relationships (p=.021). Additional data demonstrated an increase in percent change from pre/post-test among the intervention group as well. The results of this study suggest that even short-term use of self-reflection journals may have the ability to positively influence trait EI skills of future occupational therapy clinicians. Further study of the use of self-reflection journals among occupational therapy students and practitioners are recommended. Researchers provide additional strategies for developing self-awareness skills required for successful occupational therapy practice.

Keywords

Self-awareness, occupational therapy education, online

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ABSTRACT
Occupational therapy practitioners and students need skills associated with emotional intelligence (EI) as it is linked with therapeutic use of self. It is vital to train and educate occupational therapy students in self-awareness in order to prepare them to work effectively with future clients and co-workers. This study explored the use of self-reflection journals among graduate students during their spring semester of a full-time on-campus Master's in Occupational Therapy program. Researchers aimed to understand the impact of self-reflection journals on trait EI. First year master level occupational therapy students (n=39) completed the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (TEIQue). Quantitative data were gathered from pre/post-test scores. Results indicated that students in the intervention group improved the following trait EI scores: (1) adaptability ($p=.018$); (2) relationships ($p=.021$). Additional data demonstrated an increase in percent change from pre/post-test among the intervention group as well. The results of this study suggest that even short-term use of self-reflection journals may have the ability to positively influence trait EI skills of future occupational therapy clinicians. Further study of the use of self-reflection journals among occupational therapy students and practitioners are recommended. Researchers provide additional strategies for developing self-awareness skills required for successful occupational therapy practice.

INTRODUCTION
Client satisfaction in healthcare is declining, in part due to the impact of healthcare providers' impaired communication and interaction behaviors (Patterson, 2016). Evidence shows that ineffective healthcare provider communication skill is associated

with higher rates of patient complaints; poor health outcomes; increased malpractice claims; and lower levels of patient satisfaction (Kron et al., 2016). Client dissatisfaction with healthcare has a direct impact on reimbursement as clients will seek out services elsewhere when dissatisfied. Self-awareness assists healthcare providers in developing the ability to emotionally connect with clients. Building a connection may increase therapeutic rapport, which is important for successful therapist-client partnerships (Bonvicini et al., 2009). Effective communication and interpersonal skills are built upon self-awareness and are also associated with emotional intelligence (EI; Osif, 2010). Emotional intelligence is used to describe how people, such as healthcare professionals, monitor and manage one's own emotional responses and those of others in order to communicate with and relate to others (Andonian, 2017; Carmeli & Josman, 2006; Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2008). Effective communication, interpersonal skills, and EI are vital for occupational therapists as well.

Occupational therapists have a unique position in the healthcare world as they are both clinicians and educators. That is, occupational therapists provide clinical interventions as well as educate patients and families on treatment plans, home programs, and emotional well-being (McKenna & Mellson, 2013). When working with clients and families, occupational therapy practitioners attempt to carefully balance therapeutic hands-on treatment with therapeutic rapport. As clinicians, occupational therapy practitioners have an almost equal impact on the emotional *and* physical wellbeing of clients and their families, as the relationship between therapists and clients is foundational to successful outcomes (Cole & McLean, 2003). Moreover, the focus of occupational therapist-client partnerships is often to help the client restore participation in meaningful life activities. However, like all individuals, not all occupational therapists have effective communication skills or abilities that comprise EI. Higher EI skills have been correlated with greater individual performance in task and relational skills that is above and beyond that which are associated with one's general intelligence (Romanelli, Cain, & Smith, 2006). Relational skills are an important component of clinical competence for healthcare professionals who have meaningful interactions with clients. To address this, implementation of EI programming in the higher education setting has been recommended. Johnson (2015) suggested that EI training should be integrated into the professional curriculum and give students opportunities to practice the skills, and not delivered as an additional course. Integrating EI training into the occupational therapy curriculum could be both practical and beneficial as it would be an asset to the occupational therapy profession if there was increased awareness of the interplay between EI skills and therapeutic use of self in terms of the impact these interpersonal skills have on client outcomes (McKenna & Mellson, 2013).

Commonly, occupational therapy students are engaged learners seeking knowledge in order to become effective practitioners. Occupational therapy students are taught the fundamental clinical skills as well as the value of therapeutic rapport. Occupational therapists are highly educated in the medical model of service delivery, leading to their in-depth understanding of neurology, biology, and body mechanics. However, therapists' education and training often does not include or focus on scientific insights into emotions and an individual's emotional architecture, which can result in biases or

miscommunication between the provider and the client (Johnson, 2015). When healthcare providers are unaware of personal biases it may impact the therapeutic relationship (Besika, Collard, & Coogan, 2018). Occupational therapy students should develop skills that will enable them to succeed during fieldwork. By learning to develop new emotional responses with clients, occupational therapy practitioners and students can become more interpersonally effective. In order to build new communication or interaction skills occupational therapy practitioners and students need to increase self-awareness and apply strategies to improve EI.

Despite a growing base of evidence to support the need for EI and self-awareness training, there is a limited amount of research on self-awareness and EI training for students in occupational therapy programs. As the use of EI and self-awareness training within accredited occupational therapy programs becomes more prevalent, it will be important to describe and differentiate the benefits of and barriers to potential types of EI training. There is evidence of a gap in the literature related to the degree of EI, and its relationship to occupational therapy students' receiving self-awareness training. Therefore, this study examined the relationship between EI and self-awareness training. Specifically, the research questions included: (1) what is the impact of self-awareness training through use of self-reflection journals in improving related trait EI skills of master level occupational therapy students? (2) what is the difference in trait EI skills related to self-awareness between first- and second-year master level occupational therapy (MOT) students?

LITERATURE REVIEW
Self-awareness is one of many components under the umbrella of EI. Effective communication is built upon self-awareness. Moreover, personal and social skills are associated with EI and the ability to be self-aware (Osif, 2010). In a study by Kron et al. (2016) ineffective healthcare provider communication skill was associated with higher rates of patient complaints, poor health outcomes, increase malpractice claims, and lower levels of patient satisfaction. Being self-aware includes being aware of feelings and emotions that may arise during the day. Oftentimes emotions are evoked about a personally sensitive topic. Awareness of non-verbal reactions is another key component of self-awareness. Therapeutic relationships demand a level of honesty and trust between client and healthcare provider. It is imperative that healthcare providers be self-aware in order to prevent a breakdown in trust. Providers need to be cognizant of how their own personal emotions can impact a treatment session. Therapists who are able to personalize responses and who are aware of their communication style are better able to establish rapport (Allen, Montgomery, Tubman, Frazier, & Escovar, 2003).

Emotional intelligence and its components is a relatively new theory. Research in this area has mainly been based within the field of psychology and the impact of EI within large corporations. While there is some research within the medical field and occupational therapy (Andonian, 2013; Carvalho et al., 2011), without an advancement of the evidence within the profession of occupational therapy, there has been little impetus to add specific self-awareness curriculum to occupational therapy programs. Second, there is limited research demonstrating the most effective method for self-

awareness training. The relationship between these two factors are supported by the assumption that increased self-awareness which is (a component of EI), will increase EI skills which in turn will improve therapeutic rapport, communication skills, and collaboration skills.

Theoretical Frameworks
Two frameworks were used in developing this research project to better understand the foundational components of the identified problem or knowledge gap. This gap is defined as the limited amount of self-awareness training in occupational therapy programs which impacts occupational therapy students as emerging clinicians as well as practicing clinicians. The EI theory (MacCann, Joseph, Newman, & Roberts, 2014) and the Objective Self-awareness (OSA) theory (Duval & Wicklunds, 1972) were selected to guide the researchers in developing the intervention. These theories emphasize the relationship between self-awareness training and improved overall EI.

Emotional intelligence theory. Emotional intelligence is defined as the "ability to process and reason about emotional information and is therefore measured by tasks that require this ability" (MacCann, Joseph, Newman, & Roberts, 2014, p. 358). Emotional intelligence is comprised of dimensions that include self-awareness and is a competence of perceiving emotions in others and within one's self (Goleman, 2006). In contrast, emotional unintelligent behaviors may have damaging effects to organizations and clients. Self-awareness is a personal competence of recognition in the areas of emotional self-awareness, accurate self-assessment, and self-confidence and EI is important in order to manage emotions and reactions (Zeidner, Matthews, & Roberts, 2009).

The main focus of the EI theory is an examination of the learned skills that may translate into success throughout various social domains, such as the healthcare workplace. Insight into one's own emotional competencies is a core component of self-awareness, improved ability to work with others, and building rapport (Brown, Williams, & Etherington, 2016).

The Objective Self-awareness theory. Objective Self-Awareness theory (Duval & Wicklund, 1972) postulates that human consciousness is bidirectional. That is, becoming aware of oneself and behavior results in increased awareness and ability to compare oneself to others and recognize standards of correct behavior. Duval and Wicklund (1972) described standards as "all of the standards of correctness taken together define what a 'correct' person is" (p. 3-4). In other words, the standards of correctness for a professional in the workplace include appropriate attire, professional language, and ability to adjust communication style and represent the company brand. A key principle of OSA theory is comparing personal performance or internal state with external standards.

In summary, the OSA theory (Duval & Wicklund, 1972) and EI theory (Goleman, 2006; Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2008) provide lenses for examining one's self, the interaction with others, and the transactions between these elements within healthcare

practice. By understanding the value and impact of self-reflection, occupational therapy students, and emerging clinicians will have the ability to modify personal elements though self-reflective activities. Through self-reflection, one begins to identify areas of strength and need, and can identify emotional responses. The process of reflection may improve personal performance and encourage continued self-awareness over time.

METHODS

Research Design
This was a non-equivalent group study design. The experimental group consisted of first-year MOT students who received and completed monthly self-reflection journals during the spring academic semester. In order to evaluate trait EI scores, second-year MOT students completed pre and post assessment but did not complete the self-reflection journals and received no additional intervention outside of their standard occupational therapy curriculum.

Participants
Participants included first and second year MOT students within the Department of Occupational Therapy at Colorado State University. Participants voluntarily participated in the study, which was separate from coursework and activities and therefore, were completed on their own time.

Procedures
Institutional Review Board approval of the study was received from Colorado State University as an exempt study. First and second year MOT students were contacted and provided an explanation of the study. Students who chose to participate consented to participate in the study. There were no identifiers collected and all participants remained anonymous.

First-year MOT students completed the TEIQue in January 2018 and May 2018 (beginning and end of the semester). First-year MOT study participants received a total of four online self-reflection journals, one journal each month of the spring semester (January, February, March, April). The journals consisted of 3-4 short answer open-ended questions. Online self-reflection journals were developed for occupational therapy students to use throughout the academic semester. Using the background, theories, and literature reviews, the researchers developed the questions for the self-reflection journals. The following are examples of some of the journal questions:
1. How do your behaviors and actions support what you say and do?
2. Discuss a time when what you said or did had a positive impact on a fellow student or co-worker.
3. Describe how you impact the occupation choices of those around you. Reflect on what was said, how each person responded, and the feelings involved.
4. Discuss a time you were distracted or preoccupied by something. How did you know? What impact did it have on your performance? What impact did it have on others?

Another component of self-reflection is the ability to recognize emotional responses. Understanding and recognizing how one's emotions impact others is a central component of self-awareness. Positive reflection can lead to learning self-awareness and also facilitate personal accountability. The following are example questions addressing emotional responses:

1. Describe a time when your emotions were triggered by the actions of another.
2. Did you recognize your emotional trigger in the moment or later?
3. How could you respond differently next time?

Second-year MOT students completed the TEIQue in January 2018 and May 2018. These students did not receive the self-reflection journals and received no additional intervention activities outside of the standard second year MOT curriculum.

Instruments
The TEIQue Full Form (Petrides, 2018) was used to measure trait EI and was the dependent variable. The TEIQue is a self-report inventory that is comprised of 153 questions which are rated on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), and measures 15 distinct facets (Emotion Perception, Trait Empathy, Emotion Expression, Relationships, Emotion Regulation, Stress Management, Impulsiveness, Adaptability, Self-Motivation, Assertiveness, Emotion Management, Social Awareness, Self-Esteem, Trait Happiness, Trait Optimism). These facets were grouped into 4 factors: Well-Being, Self-Control, Emotionality, and Sociability and global trait EI (Blanco, Garcia, & Aluja, 2016). The scores vary between 1 (minimum) and 7 (maximum), with a theoretical average of 3.5. The higher the value, the more likely an individual has strong skills within that EI trait. Internal consistency of the TEIQue was measured by Cronbach's alpha coefficient. According to Petrides (2009) Cronbach's alpha coefficient reliability for the scale is usually above 0.80. Cronbach's alpha total for this construct was 0.80 (pre-test) and 0.85 (post-test) in the current study.

Data Analysis
Data were entered into, and quantitative data analyses were performed, using SPSS version 25. The changes in the total scores, subscale scores from post assessments were then calculated for each group for targeted traits (first year and second year MOT students). Independent *t*-tests were used to compare pre and post TEIQue facet scores between the two groups (first year and second year MOT students). Alpha was set at 0.05 for significance.

RESULTS
Approximately 52 first year students received an email with a link to an online self-reflection journal. Those that voluntarily completed the journals (n=49) and those that were also able to be on campus for the pre/post assessment (n=39) were included in the data in Table 2. Second year students who completed the TEIQue pre/post assessment (n=44) facet scores were included in the data in Table 1. Intervention group means, standard deviations (SD), and Cronbach's alphas for the TEIQue facet scores are reported in Table 2. First-year MOT participants who completed the self-reflection journals improved overall scores in 14/15 facet categories (see Table 2).

Table 1

Pre-post TEIQue Scores for the 2nd Year MOT Students (n=44)

TEIQue Trait	Pre-Assessment Mean	Post-Assessment Mean
Self-Esteem	5.10	5.17
Emotion Expression	4.96	5.03
Motivation	4.86	5.03
Emotion Regulation	4.44	4.26
Happiness	6.07	6.02
Empathy	5.38	5.48
Social Awareness	4.64	4.72
Impulse Control	4.87	4.89
Emotion Perception	4.91	4.95
Stress Management	4.38	4.45
Emotion Management	4.74	4.69
Optimism	5.73	5.66
Relationships	5.69	5.62
Adaptability	4.23	4.12
Assertiveness	4.10	4.28

Table 2

Pre-post Intervention TEIQue Scores for the 1st Year MOT Students (n= 39)

TEIQue Trait	Before Intervention Mean (SD)	Cronbachs α	After Intervention Mean (SD)	Cronbachs α
Self-Esteem	5.11 (.70)	.67	5.19 (.82)	.85
Emotion Expression	4.93 (1.06)	.80	5.04 (.99)	.85
Motivation	4.88 (.65)	.68	5.01 (.61)	.45
Emotion Regulation	4.43 (.73)	.79	4.33 (.73)	.74
Happiness	6.00 (.79)	.88	5.96 (.88)	.90
Empathy	5.42 (.67)	.55	5.52 (.63)	.63
Social Awareness	4.65 (.80)	.72	4.75 (.76)	.74
Impulse Control	4.79 (.83)	.66	4.92 (.85)	.74
Emotion Perception	4.98 (.70)	.81	5.10 (.75)	.89
Stress Management	4.36 (.91)	.79	4.48 (.85)	.77
Emotion Management	4.68 (.77)	.65	4.70 (.70)	.37
Optimism	5.63 (.78)	.81	5.61 (.95)	.91
Relationships	5.74 (.63)	.35	5.80 (.73)	.70
Adaptability	4.28 (.79)	.75	4.39 (.78)	.67
Assertiveness	4.13 (.92)	.72	4.29 (.98)	.75

The percent change was calculated (t1-t2/t1 X 100) for each facet related to self-awareness (adaptability, relationships, impulse control, and stress management). Scoring increased for each facet item, see Table 3.

Table 3

Percent Change from Pre to Post Assessment 1st Year MOT Students

Trait	Pre-Assessment Mean	Post-Assessment Mean	% Change
Adaptability	4.27	4.57	7
Relationships	5.79	6.00	3.6
Impulse Control	4.77	5.09	6.7
Stress Management	4.31	4.49	4.1

Lastly, in order to answer the research question, is there a difference in trait EI skills related to self-awareness between first and second-year MOT students, a t-test was performed to compare pre (beginning of semester) and post-test (end of semester) TEIQue scores (see Table 4). There were no significant differences between groups at the beginning of the semester, so no variables were controlled for the analysis of post-semester data.

Table 4

Comparison of Post-semester Assessment Data between 1ˢᵗ and 2ⁿᵈ Year MOT Students

Trait	1ˢᵗ Year Students Mean	2ⁿᵈ Year Students Mean	t value	p value
Adaptability	4.57	4.12	-2.42	.018*
Relationships	6.00	5.62	-2.33	.021*
Impulse Control	5.09	4.89	-.917	.33
Stress Management	4.49	4.45	-.217	.82

*Indicates significant value

DISCUSSION
The purpose of this study was to describe the impact of using self-reflection journals during the first-year of a MOT program on related trait EI scores. The increase in the TEIQue scores in the first-year students indicates that use of self-reflection journals may contribute to improving overall trait EI scores. Emotional intelligence and self-awareness skills are critical for the development of positive client-provider relationships and are often predictive of success within one's profession (Romanelli et al., 2006; Slaski & Cartwright, 2003). Emotional intelligence training has also been shown to lead to improvement in health indicators, well-being and decreased levels of stress (Slaski & Cartwright, 2003).

The first year MOT students demonstrated an overall increase in the four areas that are addressed using self-reflection journals (Table 4). The students improved in the following trait EI areas: adaptability, relationships, impulse control, and stress management. This is important, because, individuals with higher impulse control are more likely to be reflective and less likely to act upon their urges (Petrides, 2009).

Further analysis of the data demonstrated that the facets of relationships and adaptability had a significant increase in scores among the intervention group (Table 4). Higher scores within the relationships facet indicate increased ability to be capable of maintaining fulfilling personal relationships. Also, higher scores within the adaptability facet indicate being flexible and willing to adapt to new conditions (Petrides, 2009). Our findings demonstrate that the use of self-reflection journals has the potential to impact EI facets. Prior research has also demonstrated that self-awareness training is proven to be effective and to endure after the initial training is provided (Carvalho et al., 2011; Flowers, Thomas-Squance, Brainin-Rodriguez, & Yancey, 2014; Hen & Sharabi-Nov, 2014). The online self-reflection journals allowed students to have time to reflect on personal emotions which may lead to recognition of personal cognitive strategies and emotional responses.

The findings in this study also align with current perspectives in various healthcare fields, including occupational therapy, regarding the need for EI training. EI skills are tied to therapeutic use of self in that the emotional skills of therapist inform what the therapist brings to the client-therapist relationship (Andonian, 2017; Carvalho et al., 2011; Romanelli et al., 2006). Increasing self-awareness leads to improved rapport, communication, collaboration, and removes any potential blockages between healthcare providers and clients (Flanagan, 2013; Hall, Roter, Blanch, & Frankel, 2009; Stoller, Taylor, & Farver, 2013). Through this study, specific areas of self-awareness that may be impacted by self-reflection journals were identified and include: empathy, emotion expression, emotion perception, and relationships. Improving these specific skills may lead to improved therapeutic rapport for emerging occupational therapy clinicians. Also, curricular changes can be made to address these areas through the creation of self-reflection journals so that occupational therapy students can work to improve these skills as well.

Limitations

The authors recognize several limitations of the study, including use of a non-equivalent group design, non-randomized, small sample size of students, and data collected from one university, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Also, one group was first year students while the other was second year students. It is possible that the first year students had more potential for growth compared to the second year students. Another limitation is the TEIQue is a self-report tool that measures trait EI skills instead of measuring actual EI ability. Additionally, multiple comparisons could lead to a false positive. The authors did recognize the possibility of students feeling cohesion due to being in the current occupational therapy program. Therefore, while the researchers are faculty at the university, they were not current instructors the students during the semester of the intervention.

Implications for Occupational Therapy Education

Published research addressing how to improve overall trait EI skills among occupational therapists are limited. While the ability to effectively communicate and work collaboratively with diverse populations is required by Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education, many professional programs do not have specific training targeting self-reflection as a component of how to build strong communication skills (Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education, 2018). This study breaks new ground in several ways, which leaves ample room for future research to probe or refine its findings. First, our results indicate that some trait EI abilities may be effectively improved, even using a relatively short intervention. Second, the benefits of self-awareness training may allow our profession to educate more individuals on the value of self-awareness and the impact of EI when working with clients. In addition, this intervention provides occupational therapy students with new strategies and tools that can be taught to future clients as well. The study program design and results may contribute to the larger body of knowledge about the impact of self-awareness training and fieldwork performance. As such, this study provides an innovative example of promoting evidence-based, inclusive education within occupational therapy and will assist the profession in expanding its efforts in meeting the American Occupational

Therapy Association's goals of *Vision 2025* (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2017)*.*

Future Research
This research study was designed to contribute to knowledge as it applies to occupational therapy programs and the impact of self-reflection for occupational therapy students as emerging clinicians. Future research inquiry on program designs, and with a larger sample or longitudinal study, is indicated. Additionally, this study might be conducted on a multi-university level to identify common themes across diverse geographical areas. Furthermore, future research could include examination of how to integrate this training in the occupational therapy curriculum to determine the optimal impact, as well as adding qualitative analysis of students' self-reflection journals.

CONCLUSION
The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of the use of self-reflection journals on trait EI skills. This study's findings add new perspectives and depth to the current research and the evidence supporting the need for EI training in occupational therapy curricula. The use of self-reflection journals is one approach that may be used to increase self-awareness and overall EI skills. Occupational therapy students that are trained in the use of self-reflection journals could continue to build upon their skills as they move towards becoming emerging clinicians.

The participants' improvement in key areas of trait EI components adds important insight to the current body of knowledge regarding how incorporate EI training into occupational therapy curricula. Developing training that encourages more opportunities for self-reflection provides students with a chance to practice and develop new cognitive strategies and emotional responses. Occupational therapy educators, supervisors and employers need to encourage students to practice self-reflection skills and allow time for students to process this competency.

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