

ACOTUP Researcher Profile

Name of researcher: Bonnie Kirsh, University of Toronto

Degrees and professional qualifications (including fellowships):

PhD (Applied Psychology); Doctoral Fellowship (SSHRC)

M.Ed. (Adult Education and Counselling), BSc (OT)

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Area of research: Community mental health; Work integration; Supported employment; Workplace mental health; Stigma; Homelessness; Supported housing; Mental health of injured workers.

Research related awards and honors:

- Muriel Driver Memorial Lectureship Award, CAOT (2014)
- Physical Therapy and Occupational Therapy Alumni Association Achievement Award (in recognition of outstanding contribution to the profession of occupational therapy by a graduate of University of Toronto) (2013)
- Enabling Occupation Research Award, Department of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy (2010)
- Excellence in Peer Mentorship Award, Department of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy (2008)
- Canadian Occupational Therapy Foundation (COTF) Graduate Scholarship (1995)

Grants / funding history:

- B. Kirsh, T. Krupa, K. Dobson (PIs). (2010-16). Anti Stigma Initiatives in Canadian Workplaces: Research on Implementation and Effects. The Mental Health Commission of Canada (\$400,000).
- P. Goering (PI), S. Hwang, V. Stergiopoulos, P. O'Campo (Toronto site PIs), B. Kirsh (Co-I) and others. (2009-13). At Home/Chez Soi, A Homelessness Demonstration Project in Five Cities. The Mental Health Commission of Canada (\$110 million for 5 cities; \$22.2 million for Tor. site).
- E. Tompa (PI), M. Endicott, J. Eakin, J. Guzman, B. Kirsh, R. O'Regan, R. Storey, E. Tucker, R. Franche, E. MacEachen, P. Ballantyne, A. Fiorillo (and others). (2006-11). Workers compensation and the consequences of work injury. Social Sciences and Humanities Council (SSHRC), Community University Research Alliance (CURA) (\$1,000,000).
- B. Kirsh (PI), T. Krupa, L. Cockburn, J. Bickenbach. (2002-05). The Social Construction of Work Integration: Is there a Canadian Context? Social Sciences and Humanities Council (SSHRC) (\$69,570).

- B. Kirsh (PI), B. Beardwood, L. Cockburn, G. LeBlanc, P. McKee, & M. Polanyi. (1999-01). The Needs and Experiences of Injured Workers: A Participatory Research Project. Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB): Solutions for Workplace Change competition (\$130,266).

Research collaboration: One of my most important research collaborations has been with the Mental Health Commission of Canada. I began my involvement with the Mental Health Commission right at its inception, as a member of its Workforce Advisory Committee. This committee was comprised of employers, human resource professionals, workplace consultants, service providers, union representatives, researchers, people with lived experience and others, so the exchange of information and perspectives was extremely rich and diverse. Several key research areas related to workplace mental health and work integration for people with mental illnesses emerged from our discussions, and resulted in a number of significant research projects, including our Aspiring Workforce project. I then became involved in additional research projects with the Commission, including the At Home/Chez Soi project, Canada's largest homelessness initiative, and the Opening Minds project, the largest systematic effort in Canadian history focused on reducing stigma related to mental illness.

What is the most important thing in mentoring graduate students? Mentoring research students involves helping them realize that the path of discovery is not necessarily a straight line, and that the process should be as gratifying as the end point. Mentors need to help students do what Rainer Maria Rilke suggests: "Try to love the questions themselves; like locked rooms and like books written in a foreign language... you need to live the question." Living the question means looking in new and interesting places, going down roads that may not have yet been explored, being open to the unexpected, and having experiences that directly and indirectly relate to the question. This path may be more convoluted than anticipated. While we as mentors are there to guide students and prevent them from getting forever lost, we must also support them in the journey that is theirs, with all the detours along the way.

Most significant publications:

- Kirsh, B., Slack, T. & King, C. (2012). The nature and impact of stigma towards injured workers. Journal of Occupational Rehabilitation, 22(2), 143-154.
This paper resulted from a large project on the consequences of work injury and brought to light the many manifestations and impacts of the stigma that injured workers encounter. The paper was presented in numerous injured worker and worker compensation knowledge arenas, and was one component of the anti-stigma policy changes that were implemented at the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board.
- Kirsh, B., Krupa, T., Cockburn, L., Gewurtz, R. (2010). A Canadian model of work integration for persons with mental illness. Disability and Rehabilitation, 32(22), 1833-1846, DOI: 10.3109/09638281003734391.
This paper synthesized the many beliefs and practices that dominate the field of OT and work integration for people with mental illnesses, and organized them into a working model. The model reflects a set of discourses that captures current thinking and practice in the area of work integration, and provides a way of analysing policies, programmes, interventions and experiences. The paper took a distinctly Canadian view, which set it apart from the existing literature on work integration.
- Kirsh, B. (1996). A narrative approach to addressing spirituality in occupational therapy: Exploring personal meaning and purpose. Canadian Journal of Occupational Therapy, 63, 55-61.

This paper was written at a time when spirituality was only beginning to be discussed in occupational therapy theory, research and practice. It offered the field some guidance around spirituality, and provided a method (narrative) by which spirituality could be addressed and explored in clinical practice. This paper laid the foundation for two book chapters that followed.

Tips would you give for new investigators: Questions facing occupational therapy need to be examined with occupation in mind. This is a unique perspective that we bring to problems of everyday living, across a range of conditions and developmental stages. My suggestion for new OT investigators is to connect with excellent research teams that cross disciplines and geographic boundaries, but to hold on to the occupational lens that shapes our understanding of well-being and meaning in life. This is not always easy, as an occupational paradigm can easily be overshadowed by more dominant ones, particularly when funding is at stake. But staying true to an occupational perspective can provide insights that others may not have access to, offer a sense of professional gratification and at the same time advance the field.

Resources/supports/training programs for new investigators: Seek out mentors who can help you clarify goals, identify opportunities, and enact strategies for success. You may need a couple of different mentors – perhaps one to guide you in your research journey, and another to help you figure out work-life balance. Reach out, take suggestions, and then weigh them against your own values and goals.