

## ACOTUP Researcher Profile

**Name of researcher:** Brenda L. Beagan, Dalhousie University

**Degrees and professional qualifications (including fellowships):**

Postdoctoral fellowship (medical education); PhD (Medical Sociology)  
BA & MA (Sociology)

**Email:** [brenda.beagan@dal.ca](mailto:brenda.beagan@dal.ca)

**Website:** <http://www.dal.ca/faculty/healthprofessions/occupational-therapy/faculty-staff/faculty/brenda-beagan.html>

**Area of research:** My research focuses on the ways social inequalities shape and are shaped by occupational engagement and meaning. In other words, how what we do (and don't do) constructs gender, ethnicity, class, culture etc, even as sexism, racism, ethnocentrism, ableism, heterosexism, classism etc shape what we do and don't do. I also study how social inequalities affect the everyday experiences of health professional education and practice.

**Research related awards and honors:**

- Tier II Canada Research Chair, Women & Health, Dalhousie University (\$500,000)(2007-12)

**Grants/funding history:**

- Co-PI: Brenda Beagan, Lisa Goldberg; Co-I: Sue Atkinson, Mary Bryson, Cressida Heyes. (2009-14). Health care practices and relationships: The experiences of queer women and primary care providers. CIHR Operating Grant (\$293,874).
- PI: Brenda Beagan. (2009-12). Infrastructure to support the development of a centre for research in the social determinants of women's health. Canadian Foundation for Innovation (\$131,454).
- Co-PI: Brenda Beagan, Gwen Chapman; Co-I: José Johnson, Elaine Power, Helen Vallianatos. (2007-12). Local food cultures and socioeconomic status as social determinants of nutritional health: exploring family food practices. CIHR Operating Grant (\$560,211).
- Co-PI: Gwen Chapman, Brenda Beagan; Co-I: Josephine Etowa, Ryna Levy Milne, Satnam Sekhon, Donna Smith, Shefali Raja. (2003-08). The family context of food decision-making in diverse ethnocultural groups. CIHR Operating Grant (\$393,820).
- PI: Brenda Beagan; Co-I: Sue Campbell, Carolyn Ells, Joan Evans, Joan Harbison, Donna Meagher-Stewart; Collaborators: Gail MacDougall, Liz Townsend. (2001-04). Ethical tensions in the caring professions. SSHRC Operating Grant (\$70,000).

**Research collaboration:** I have worked with Gwen Chapman (UBC) since 1998, initially as a research assistant on one of her projects while I was doing my PhD in another department. At first it was a way to earn rent money while doing something interesting. But even after the grant ran out, I continued to work with Gwen, writing and publishing the data. When I got a faculty position, we were co-PIs on my first CIHR grant. We recently co-led a national CIHR-funded team in a study that has resulted in a forthcoming book. I learned from Gwen how important it is to

support research assistants and other trainees to work to their full potential, designing the work so they can stretch to new accomplishments – which means trusting people to do good work, and supporting them with regular contact to make sure they have what they need to do so. And I have learned the value of complementary skills and abilities on a team... Gwen and I work quite differently, but together we run a great team.

**What is the most important thing in mentoring graduate students?** Flexibility. Every student learns differently, so it is a fun challenge to try to find ways to figure out each individual's passions, figure out ways to support their research interests, figure out ways to guide their work to be effective without losing the passion, figure out ways to explain and coach to elicit their best performance, figure out what they already do well and draw on that, and figure out what they don't do so well yet so they can be pushed and encouraged to take new leaps and learn new skills. It's a novel challenge with each student.

**Most significant publications:**

- Beagan BL, Chiasson A, Fiske C, Forseth S, Hosein A, Myers M, Stang J. (2013). Working with transgender clients: Learning from others to improve occupational therapy practice. Canadian Journal of Occupational Therapy, 80(2): 82-91.  
Based on a small sub-sample from a larger study of LGBTQ health care experiences and the related experiences of health care providers, this analysis was conducted with a group of entry-level students. It has scarcely been cited, as it is quite recent, but again it breaks new ground in the occupational therapy literature. Prior to this, there was only one published article in occupational therapy concerning transgender clients. Again, personal contacts from therapists across Canada have indicated that they found it a meaningful contribution.
- Kumas-Tan ZO, Beagan BL, Loppie C, MacLeod A, Frank B. (2007). Measuring cultural competence: Examining hidden assumptions in instruments. Academic Medicine, 82(6): 548-557.  
This article, cited 132 times, argues that the vast majority of research on 'cultural competence' training relies on the same set of measures to assess the impact of training. Using critical theory, we critique the available instruments, showing that they are all grounded on faulty, unhelpful assumptions. It poses a key challenge to the widespread notion of 'cultural competence.' The lead author had just completed her Masters under my supervision.
- Beagan BL. (2007). The impact of social class: Learning from occupational therapy students. Canadian Journal of Occupational Therapy, 74(2): 125-133.  
This paper was the first – and to date, almost the only – paper in occupational therapy to take up issues of social class. It documents the ways students from working class and impoverished family backgrounds work to hide their class origins and adapt to a new class milieu. Though cited only 16 times in the academic literature, several health professionals contacted me personally to say how important it was for them to read, as it reflected their own stories.

**Tips you would you give for new investigators:** Learn to love writing, and do it regularly. It will never be easy to make it the top priority in an academic position, there will always be competing demands with more immediate deadlines. And most people have emotional resistances to writing. Find a way, anyway, to make writing part of your routine. Writing grants, writing papers – it has to be part of your routine. If the approach you are using is not working, change it. If

writing every Friday never quite seems to happen, try writing every day from 8:00-9:30. Or 5:00-6:30. Or take a 4 day weekend every month. Find a structure that works for you.

Get on a peer review committee for some funding agency. If not possible, ask to be an observer. Reviewing other people's grant submissions, and hearing the discussion about them, is by far the best learning for successful grant-writing.

Research staff do not share your investment in a project... unless you give them reason to. They need rent money, and it is better than working at McDonalds. If you want them to invest, be intrinsically motivated, make sure it is excellent learning and provides wonderful opportunities for growth, camaraderie, learning from each other, and building their CVs through conference presentations and co-authorship on publications.

**Resources/supports/training programs for new investigators:** I'm not actually familiar with any programs! But use the resources and supports all around you.

In your writing, especially your grants, pretend to a confidence you don't actually feel yet. You want to sound like you know exactly what you are doing, and have been heading toward this very moment since you were 6 years old. Think of it as a creative writing exercise at first; eventually the experience and confidence catch up.

Then admit the confidence is somewhat fictional, and humbly rely on your colleagues... Every grant submission or journal manuscript is strengthened by having others read it and provide feedback. The more eyes on a piece of writing the better. If you have colleagues anywhere with peer review experience, ask them to review it. If not, any colleagues will do. Your partner or sister is better than no one. Seek out colleagues with a totally different worldview than yours – they are likely the folks who will review for the funding agency or journal! If something is unclear to a friendly colleague, it will be unclear to a reviewer. This means building in time before a deadline... And it feels vulnerable asking for critique from colleagues, but it is so worthwhile.