A Synthesis of Professional Socialization Literature and Educational Opportunities in Occupational Therapy

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Abstract
The purpose of this topic on education paper is to synthesize the literature on professional socialization across disciplines, emphasize professional socialization as a research priority, and discuss opportunities to improve occupational therapy education. Relevant literature from higher education, business education, and health care professions were included that support the critical role of professional socialization to development of professional identity. A critical appraisal and discussion provide reflection on the role of educators, opportunities for program improvements, and implications to occupational therapy research and education. Dimensions of meaning associated with professional socialization are introduced and offer a unique occupation-based lens through which to view entry-level occupational therapy program experiences.

Comments
The author declares that they have no competing financial, professional, or personal interest that might have influenced the performance or presentation of the work described in this manuscript.

Keywords
professional identity, socialization, occupational science, occupational therapy education, occupational therapy research

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DOI: 10.15453/2168-6408.2211
Socialization into a profession through educational programs has been linked to the development of professional identity (PI), a concept encompassing beliefs, values, core knowledge and skills, and roles specific to a recognized profession (Adams et al., 2006; American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2018; Ashby et al., 2016; Gray et al., 2020; Walder et al., 2021). PI forms in a socially complex and dynamic fashion, ever-evolving in response to life experiences and contextually situated professional expectations (Adams et al., 2006; Trede et al., 2012; Walder et al., 2021). Occupational therapy (OT) program socialization experiences are expected to facilitate a view of humans as occupational beings, the value of occupation to health and wellness, core knowledge of occupation, therapeutic use of self and occupation-based practice, and our unique role in health care settings and society (Ashby et al., 2016; Boehm et al., 2015; Ikiugu & Rosso, 2003; Yerxa, 2000). The purpose of this paper is to synthesize literature across disciplines related to professional socialization, discuss program improvement opportunities, and emphasize the need for research into this phenomenon so integral to PI.

Socialization has been discussed as a top influencer of PI, which, if strong, acts as a protective factor through role clarity, professional behaviors and commitment, self-worth, and career satisfaction while mitigating work burnout (Ashby et al., 2016; Caza & Creary, 2016; Scanlan & Hazelton, 2019). A meta-analysis completed by Park (2021) examined burnout among occupational therapists and found PI, among other work-related factors, to have a negative correlation effect size to burnout, reflecting statistical significance. Educational programs contribute to PI development through socialization experiences that provide students with values and skill sets that differentiate them from other professions and enable adaptability to changing work environments and societal needs (Caza & Creary, 2016; Trede et al., 2012). Meaningful socialization experiences are needed for the development of strong occupational therapist identities; however, there is a lack of knowledge regarding how socialization practices influence PI and professional commitment in new therapists (Roberts, 2021; Rotert, 2006; Walder et al., 2021).

Literature Review

A succinct, non-systematic review was completed using university library databases and Google Scholar to support this topic in an education paper. The evidence below stemmed from searches centered on PI, professional socialization, and socialization. The critical appraisal and discussion that follows support potential action steps to improve OT entry-level programs that transmit our profession’s core knowledge and educate the next generation of occupational therapists who shape the future of OT. Both higher education and business education research provided relevant evidence specific to socialization and its stages.

Socialization in Higher Education

The role of socialization on PI development has been explored in higher education and various health care professions (Adams et al., 2006; Ashby et al., 2016; Barbarà-i-Molinero et al., 2017; Clarke et al., 2013; Trede et al., 2012). Clark et al. (2013) examined PI in higher education settings as doctoral students prepared to enter academia and found that professional education experiences placed students within a specific context that enabled the construction and embodiment of social norms. These contexts offer opportunities to develop new self-perspectives at individual and collective levels through new roles in a community maintained through social interactions (Caza & Creary, 2016; Clark et al., 2013; Lave & Wenger, 1991). The socialization experience can then be understood as ways in which new members learn to identify and enact new roles relevant to a new environment (AOTA, 2020).

Clark et al. (2013) and Miller (2013) discussed an anticipatory stage of socialization in which observation and adoption of context-specific values and attitudinal norms are key. Subsequent stages,
labeled as organizational or formal, occurred as new professionals encountered challenges to legitimacy post-graduation. These stages of socialization are applicable to OT students. The anticipatory stage of socialization into OT begins with preparatory work, required observation hours, and application submission to an entry-level program (Adams et al., 2006; Clark et al., 2013). However, Miller (2013) and Rotert (2006) argued that anticipatory socialization begins well before students initiate program application requirements. Acceptance into a program, orientation, and progress through a program with a cohort reflect anticipatory socialization. The formal stage of socialization is associated with curriculum, including fieldwork experiences, and culminates post-graduation as new occupational therapists begin their professional careers (Clark et al., 2013; Miller, 2013; Rotert, 2006).

An occupation-centered perspective of socialization includes new ways of being in the world while learning to do profession-specific work and developing a sense of belonging in a particular social context (Hammell, 2004; Roberts, 2021; Rotert, 2006; Walder et al., 2021). More recently, evidence has highlighted global pressure toward universities to produce higher-quality professionals with specialized knowledge and skill sets relevant to address evolving societal problems successfully (Barbarà-i-Molinero et al., 2017; Walder et al., 2021). In response, universities and leaders of professional education programs are charged with facilitating the context and learning opportunities to develop sufficient PI among student populations through improved socialization experiences. Barbarà-i-Molinero et al. (2017) posited that multiple factors transact in complex ways to influence the formation of PI over time, adding that different experiences result in a diversity of ideas and professional commitment levels. Authors claimed that differences in imagined professional futures impact professional behaviors, feelings of belonging, student satisfaction and retention, and career success (Barbarà-i-Molinero et al., 2017).

Socialization in Business Education

Socialization has been discussed as occurring through developmental mentoring network experiences in the business education realm. A longitudinal study by Dobrow et al. (2005) followed Master of Business Administration students over 5 years as they transitioned from graduate school into their careers to examine the impact of network density on PI. Authors shared that developmental networks consist of professional and psychosocial support in career contexts, specifying network density as the extent of one’s connection to other network members (Dobrow et al., 2005). Career transitions were identified as critical opportunities for developmental networks to impact PI. Statistically significant findings reflected that as network density increased or accessibility to novel resources was reduced over time, the clarity of PI decreased and that the more diverse and varied one’s mentoring network is, the stronger their PI (Dobrow et al., 2005).

Sweitzer (2009) used Dobrow et al.’s (2005) developmental networks approach to examine the role of relationships on doctoral student PI development. The study involved first-year business doctoral students’ identification of people who made up their social networks and explored ways these social connections may have worked as a mechanism to construct identity (Sweitzer, 2009). The focus on relational elements re-emphasized socialization as integral to PI formation. Like the higher education studies, Sweitzer (2009) discussed an anticipatory stage of socialization that encompassed the learning of profession-specific language, values, and attitudes associated with a new role (Barbarà-i-Molinero et al., 2017; Clarke et al., 2013).

Sweitzer (2009) proposed two models of doctoral student PI development consisting of four elements: (a) differences between past experiences, (b) developmental network experiences in the professional program, (c) interactions with network partners that influenced student prioritization of roles,
(d) and impact of these areas on doctoral student assessment of fit in the program and profession. Sweitzer’s (2009) work is differentiated from Dobrow et al. (2005) in that it focuses on individual differences among students entering programs. Different pre-program life experiences resulted in varying levels of socialization susceptibility that significantly influenced the adoption of profession-specific values, attitudes, and role-related behaviors (Sweitzer, 2009). These business education studies support acknowledging and leveraging student differences through diverse socialization experiences to better prepare future professionals (Dobrow et al., 2005; Sweitzer, 2009).

Inclusion and focus on context and different life experiences of students and how those differences influence openness to socialization efforts and learning orientations are familiar concepts in the profession of OT, OT education, and practice (AOTA, 2020). Furthermore, OT educators may use these findings to assess recruitment approaches, pre-program processes, and educational curriculum and fieldwork experiences that shape and impact PI strength. Reviews of program-specific processes may expose opportunities to facilitate better student-centered socialization that supports student-program fit and optimizes student learning, retention, and embodiment of OT values, beliefs, and roles.

Literature from other disciplines, in addition to more recently published OT studies, provide support that development of a strong PI through socialization to a profession is of concern and importance to educators across professions (Barbarà-i-Molinero et al., 2017; Clarke et al., 2013; Miller, 2013; Roberts, 2021; Trede et al., 2012; Walder et al., 2021). This broad review has provided different perspectives regarding what is known about professional socialization in higher education and business education. Next, consideration of socialization-relevant literature among health care professions will be discussed to solidify further the importance of this topic to graduate-level OT programs and the profession at large.

**Socialization in Health Care Professions**

A study investigating influential factors of PI in health and social care students by Adams et al. (2006) espoused professional socialization as critical experiences that collectively construct PI over time. During critical experiences, students may realize conflicting ideas between previous understandings of the profession and new understandings of professional practice (Adams et al., 2006; Roberts, 2021; Rotert, 2006; Walder et al., 2021). Conflict then provides space for reflection and continued professional growth, impacting the evolving identity. Viewing socialization processes in this way brings focus to the importance of professional role models in the social context (Caza & Creary, 2016; Rotert, 2006). This view aligns with the role of developmental networks previously discussed in the business education realm (Dobrow et al., 2005; Sweitzer, 2009). Adams et al. (2006) clarified that role models teach in educational programs and exist in work settings. It is suggested that student exposure to diverse role models, along with their unique past experiences, are situated at the center of professional socialization and PI formation (Adams et al., 2006; Caza & Creary, 2016; Rotert, 2006).

Maginnis’ (2018) study analyzed factors involved in the formation of PI in Australian nursing students. Professional socialization was defined as a process that enabled the adoption of core values, attitudes, skills, and behaviors to fulfill a professional role with a new identity as an outcome (Maginnis, 2018). In contrast, other definitions describe professional socialization as a negotiated adaptation to a profession-specific environment, professional enculturation, meaning-making experiences situated in a community of practice, and ways in which students become members of a new professional group reinforced through social interactions with other members (Caza & Creary, 2016; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Trede et al., 2012).
Maginnis (2018), in alignment with Adams et al. (2006), viewed professional socialization as most impactful during preregistration education and clinical practice experiences. Multiple studies have linked student feelings of belonging as integral to engagement in socialization and learning situations that influenced PI (Caza & Creary, 2016; Maginnis, 2018; Trede et al., 2012). Professional socialization has also been connected to feelings of being valued and accepted as a member or perceiving the profession as valuable to self and society (Caza & Creary, 2016; Trede et al., 2012). Maginnis (2018) stated that to belong to a profession is to gain an understanding of the history and core knowledge and embody the skills and practice expectations of that profession. Literature involving socialization specific to the profession of OT is covered next.

**Socialization in OT**

Sabari (1985) asserted the need for research on OT program socialization processes to gain new knowledge imperative to the educational experiences of future occupational therapists. The goal of socialization in professional programs, per Sabari (1985), was to prepare students for roles that address societal needs through the acquisition of specific skills, attitudes, values, behaviors, and norms. Stages associated with socialization into OT included program admittance, cohort-structured academic education, fieldwork education, and early career experiences post-graduation. These stages align with recently published OT literature but omit pre-program factors and other program experiences involving student organizations, such as the Student Occupational Therapy Association (SOTA) and Coalition of Occupational Therapy Advocates for Diversity (COTAD) (Ashby et al., 2016; Roberts, 2021; Walder et al., 2021).

Sabari (1985) and Rotert (2006) discussed participants involved throughout the socialization process, including the student, professional role models, peers, and clients receiving services. Sabari (1985) boldly questioned whether conflicting messages from different socialization participants throughout the educational experience might further complicate the development of strong PI in students. Indeed, researchers question whether the very attributes of the profession that attract and align with student personalities and values may also represent characteristics that weaken PI when seeking to establish oneself in a new work setting (Di Tommaso et al., 2019; Rotert, 2006; Sabari, 1985; Trede et al., 2012). These professionals concluded that educational programs may implicitly reward passive or conforming behaviors through socialization experiences that contradict the attributes prized in the profession, such as autonomy, self-directed learning, and healthy confrontation.

Ashby et al. (2016) completed an international survey study that gathered data on student perceptions of PI in their last year of entry-level OT programs across five countries. Participants from all countries rated professional education and socialization experiences as the highest curricular influencers of PI development. Study findings further emphasized the role professional education processes and curricular design play in the transmission of core knowledge, values, attitudes, and behaviors through role modeling, observation, and application of occupation-based practice (Ashby et al., 2016; Roberts, 2021).

Gray et al. (2020) researched PI development among OT undergraduate students in Australia and found that PI strength varied considerably among students in the same cohort completing their 2nd year of the program. Out of 59 students, the scores reflected 12% with poor, 25% with advanced, and 63% with developing PI (Gray et al., 2020). The authors determined that socialization through professional education and assessment of student PI across the program is critical to career-related outcomes and success. It was stressed that knowledge of PI scores as the students progressed through the program will provide opportunities to better support students identified with poor PI (Gray et al., 2020).
Walder et al. (2021) completed a scoping review of OT literature on PI development. The review included 89 papers and highlighted the critical role of several factors in PI formation and maintenance. Professional socialization, occupation-based practice, ontological awareness, and explicit use of theory in practice were named as factors that influence PI strength across time (Walder et al., 2021). The importance of sharing a unified pragmatic ontology, embodiment of OT culture, and enacting and believing in OT were inter-relational themes identified through thematic analysis relevant to professional education experiences.

Collectively, this body of literature reveals what we know about PI development and the plethora of gaps specific to professional socialization. What has not been studied in-depth is which contexts, informal and formal socialization experiences, and teaching/learning strategies most facilitate the development of strong PI. Although the topic of professional socialization has been listed as an OT education research priority at the national level, the lack of scientific inquiry on the topic is evident. Knowledge regarding the mechanisms that strengthen OT student PI and enable resiliency across diverse contexts is imperative for professional success, health, and career longevity of future occupational therapists (Ashby et al., 2016, 2019; Gray et al., 2020; Sabari, 1985; Walder et al., 2021).

Critical Appraisal and Discussion

This section will serve to reflect on the role of OT educators, opportunities to improve professional socialization experiences, and future implications. Authors across disciplines reiterate the critical role educators and professional socialization processes have on students’ sense of belonging; engagement in socialization; and adoption of profession-specific philosophy, behaviors, and skill sets that form their PI (Ashby et al., 2016; Maginnis, 2018; Trede et al., 2012). Sabari (1985) stressed that “occupational therapy education must continually present a balance between what is and what can be” (p. 101) while facilitating consistent messaging and learning experiences that develop change agents versus graduates that assimilate to the status quo. Research strongly supports the importance of professional socialization and relevance to one’s career post-graduation (Di Tommaso et al., 2016; Edwards et al., 2015; Scanlan & Hazelton, 2019; Whitcombe, 2013).

Although some studies on PI development in OT exist, no research to date has explored the professional socialization processes that occur in our professional programs and how they influence developing PI. No studies were found that examined the impact of program culture on socialization or what socialization experiences strengthen OT PI in U.S. programs. Gaps in knowledge exist, and research is needed to understand professional socialization and ways educational programs can implement changes to strengthen student PI through these social processes. One way to accomplish this may lie in explicit efforts to engender a sense of belonging before program admittance via assessment of individual differences and educational needs for the development of targeted support plans integrated into faculty advising and learning experiences.

Support plans that account for student differences and past life experiences may improve program retention, academic engagement and performance, and strengthen student PI. Furthermore, socialization support plans could set the stage for success as new graduates enter the professional workforce. A review of institution-level recruiting and hiring practices may enable a just-right fit between educators and programs by targeting educators with professional identities that align with an institution and program philosophy, ideals, and goals. Efforts such as these will provide OT leaders and educators with an understanding of the dimensions of professional socialization and the impact it has on students and occupational therapists alike.
Dimensions of Professional Socialization

Yerxa (2000) proclaimed that the discipline of occupational science and the OT profession are informed and strengthened through deepened and broadened knowledge of occupation. Curiosity and research endeavors provide this depth and breadth of core knowledge. Occupational scientists have demonstrated significant contributions to OT knowledge through the dimensions of occupational meaning, namely doing, being, becoming, and belonging (Hammell, 2004; Rebeiro, 2001; Wilcock, 1999). These dimensions are applicable to client-centered OT practice through the belief that engagement in meaningful occupation directly influences health and well-being (AOTA, 2020). These ideas are relevant when reflecting on formal and informal education as a meaningful occupation inclusive of socialization experiences that shape PI.

Before admittance into entry-level programs, prospective students are required to complete observation hours that expose them to future work environments. Pre-program materials and observation requirements provide ideas of the profession’s role and attributes accepted in various social contexts. These pre-program socialization experiences facilitate new understandings of what it means to be an occupational therapist, what occupational therapists do, how and where they belong in particular settings, and opportunities of who they could become if admitted into a professional program. Dimensions of professional socialization are experienced throughout the educational program, further influencing ideas of OT practice and PI development.

Of interest, the meanings associated with professional socialization experiences that impact PI formation are discussed in fragmented ways in the literature. Trede et al. (2012) defined PI as “a way of being and a lens to evaluate, learn, and make sense of practice” (p. 374) through social encounters. PI has been described as ways of doing and being in practice and belonging to and within a community while answering the question of who someone may want to become (Barbarà-i-Molinero et al., 2017; Clarke et al., 2013; Roberts, 2021; Trede et al., 2012). Lave and Wenger’s (1991) theory of situated learning through communities of practice reframed learning as a relational process based on being and belonging as a community member and the doing associated with a shared domain of knowledge, vocabulary, and practice. Dimensions of professional socialization critical to PI are implied but not understood through an occupation-centered lens.

Future Implications

The implications for the profession of OT, OT education, and occupational therapists are many. Profession-specific research that examines a deeper, broader understanding of how program socialization influences PI development will directly support programmatic improvements that shape student experiences, academic success, and the future of OT. Ways to do this would include the development of pre-program social events that target a sense of belonging while leveraging past life experiences of students and subsequent development of student-centered support plans based on baseline PI.

At the program level, leaders could assess recruiting and hiring criteria and processes for an improved program-educator fit. Faculty and occupational therapists also have an opportunity to initiate research to explore how relational transitions from academic communities of practice to workplace communities of practice influence PI (Lave & Wenger, 1991). New knowledge addressing gaps in the literature regarding professional socialization and its dimensions holds the potential to reshape ideas, reveal new questions, and lay the foundation for future OT education and practice that better reflect the profession’s big ideas and reflect the knowledge contributions of occupational science (AOTA, 2020; Hooper et al., 2020; Society for the Study of Occupation, 2019).
Conclusion

This paper introduced background on professional socialization across disciplines and its connection to PI development. The literature review provided diverse perspectives related to evidence on the topic, further emphasizing what is known as well as gaps in knowledge. Relevant literature on OT was included to reiterate the need for research on OT program socialization processes (AOTA, 2018). Literature was critically synthesized, resulting in identified opportunities to improve socialization experiences in entry-level OT programs as well as recruitment and hiring of educators based on program-educator fit.

In conclusion, Yerxa (2000) shared that true professionalism could be obtained through the establishment of a self-defined realm of practice. OT education leaders claim that deep, broad knowledge of occupation learned through professional education in a social context facilitates the development of strong PI (Hooper et al., 2020; Price et al., 2017). The connection between PI strength and career success, longevity, and behaviors of lifelong learning in the face of changing environments and work-related challenges has been prominently noted (Gray et al., 2020; Park et al., 2021; Walder et al., 2021). The fact that both work and education are understood as meaningful occupations further demonstrates the need for research into what contextual factors, socialization experiences, or pedagogical approaches best support strong PI formation in OT students (AOTA, 2020). A profession is only as strong and relevant as the professionals representing it and whether those professionals meet society’s needs. Improving professional socialization experiences for future occupational therapists is a critically necessary starting point.

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