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‘Sometimes I don't feel like an osteopath at all’- a qualitative study of final year osteopathy students' professional identities

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ABSTRACT

Background: Research suggests that professional identity has implications for standards of professionalism, patient care and work satisfaction. Professional identity develops during professional education and continues into working life. While osteopaths' professional identities and conceptions of practice have been outlined, the professional identities of osteopathic students are yet to be elucidated.

Objectives: To explore and describe final year osteopathy students' professional identities and their development.

Method: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of eight final year osteopathy students from two osteopathic education institutions in the UK. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and constructivist grounded theory was used to conceptualise, collect and analyse data.

Results: Participants' professional identities varied and were illustrated by their thoughts and beliefs around their approach to patients, the osteopathic profession, learning experience and practice skills. There was also variation in the stages of development of participants' professional identities which lay on a continuum ranging from 'under construction', 'transitioning' and 'constructed'.

Conclusions: The findings suggest that final year osteopathy students held differing professional identities, and four categories were constructed which describe this variation, these were: approach to patient care, view of osteopathy, learning experience and view of practical skills. Students' professional identities varied in their stages of development and related to three points along a profession identity continuum and are in accordance with role transition theory. A well-developed professional identity, which is also flexible in response to new knowledge and evidence, has positive connotations for students' confidence in practice, well-being and career success.

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Introduction

The concept of professional identity has been described as the construction of a person's experience, qualities, beliefs and values that define their professional role [22,26,47,50]. Professional identity, therefore, is a changeable combination of biological, environmental, social and psychological factors, which provides a theoretical framework from which an individual approaches their professional role [22,64]. From the perspective of healthcare, professional identity begins to develop during an individual's professional education and as such the educational environment, curriculum and course

structure play a role in constructing professional identity [16]. Furthermore, professional identity has been shown to be influenced by a range of factors preceding an individual's entrance into formal healthcare education, such as personal attitudes, motives and values [19]. Professional identity development during education has been researched in a range of healthcare professions including physiotherapy [38]; [29,30], nursing [63] and occupational therapy [23]. Research into the professional identities of medical students recommends a curriculum which explicitly cultivates students' professional identities with a view to inculcate the profession's values and standards for the benefit of practitioners and patients [24].

Recent qualitative research developed a theory of osteopaths' professional identities and conceptions of practice in the United Kingdom (UK) [55]. This research suggested that there was variation in how osteopaths viewed themselves in relation to other healthcare professions, and osteopaths' professional identities

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were related to their views of health and disease, their clinical decision making and their clinical approach with patients [54–56]. This research highlights the relationship between professional identity, clinical behaviour and decision making, and illustrates the importance of generating new knowledge of how professional identity develops in osteopathy students. Knowledge of students' professional identities may offer an insight into how the osteopathic curriculum may best support professional identity formation. A recent cross-sectional study using questionnaires with Australian osteopathic students found that students had positive perceptions of an interprofessional curriculum and education [62]. However, qualitative research is necessary to obtain a more complete understanding of osteopathic students' professional identities and how these relate to their professional and inter-professional perceptions.

In physiotherapy, qualitative research has suggested that final year students' professional identities vary in relation to their perceptions of their role, practice, vision, beliefs and scope of practice as physiotherapists [29]. Adopting a phenomenological approach, Lindquist et al. [29] interviewed eighteen final year physiotherapy students from the UK and Sweden in the final month before leaving University, with the aim of exploring their learning experiences and professional identities. The findings outlined several attributes which defined physiotherapy students' professional identities including their learning style, the context in which they worked, perceived role and focus of their practice [29]. Similar research with osteopathy students has not yet been conducted. However, qualitative research also suggests that the professional perceptions of experienced osteopaths vary; in particular osteopaths' core conceptions of osteopathic practice, which were described as either 'practitioner-centred', 'collaborative' or 'empowerment' [55]. A qualitative understanding of the range of professional identities of osteopathic students may help to establish how these identities and conceptions develop and translate into working life as shown in other professions including teaching, occupational therapy, nursing and physiotherapy [23,29,31,58]. The aim of this study was to explore and describe osteopathic students' professional identities in their final year of study.

Methods

The consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ) were used to structure the methods section of this paper [59].

Study design and theoretical framework

From the outset of the study, the researchers assumed professional identity to be a socially constructed concept which develops from the social processes and interactions which occur between individuals in the "day-to-day and minute-to-minute social exchanges in the workplace" [45] (p471). With this assumption, a qualitative study design employing constructivist grounded theory

method (GTM) was adopted in view of its' ability to generate explanatory theories and understanding of social processes from the perspectives by which they occur [4,57]. Constructivist grounded theory was used as a framework to conceptualise, collect and analyse data, and the study drew upon the following features of GTM: constant comparison of data during analysis, coding, memo writing, concurrent data collection and analysis and diagramming (Fig. 1) [4]. Semi-structured interviews were used as the method to collect data of participants' views and perceptions of their professional identity.

Participant sampling

As clinical work encompasses a significant part of professional osteopaths' practice, final year students were the focus of this study due to the extent of their clinical experience compared to earlier year groups and their proximity to professional working life. All seven UK based Osteopathic Education Institutions (OEIs) with a final year cohort (Table 1) were invited to participate in this study to facilitate the most diverse spread of data [4].

Following approval by the British College of Osteopathic Medicine Research Ethics Committee (BCOM REC), each OEI registrar was emailed an invitation to participate in the study. Participants were recruited through open invitation via posters and emails which were distributed by the registrar of each OEI. Student that expressed an interest were sent a participant information sheet via email, and general biographical information was obtained via a form (e.g. age, gender, educational background, particular

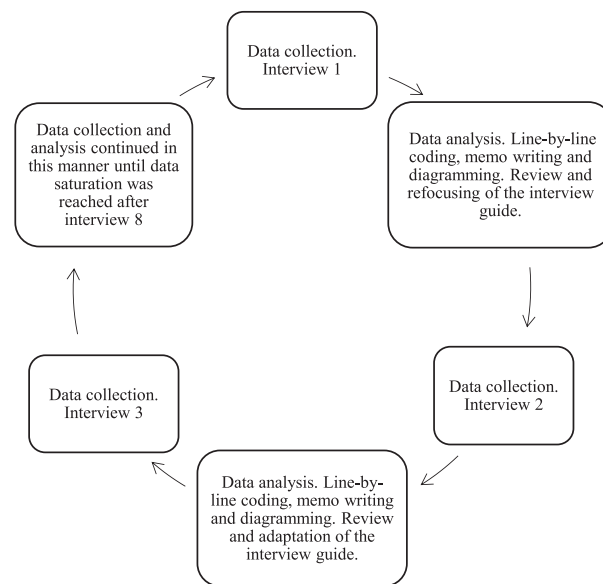


Fig. 1. Flow chart demonstrating concurrent relationship between data collection and analysis.

Table 1

List of UK based Osteopathic Education Institutions (OEIs) invited to participate in the study.

| United Kingdom (UK) Osteopathic Education Institutions (OEIs) |
|---|
| The British College of Osteopathic Medicine (BCOM) |
| The British School of Osteopathy (BSO) |
| The College of Osteopaths (Middlesex programme) |
| The College of Osteopaths (Staffordshire programme) |
| The European School of Osteopathy (ESO) |
| London School of Osteopathy (LSO) |
| The Surrey Institute of Osteopathic Medicine |

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