

# Becoming a professional: The five pillars of identification in Occupational Psychology in the UK

Vicki Elsey, Neill Thompson, Elizabeth Sillence, Laura Longstaff & Mark Moss



**VICKI ELSEY**

University of Northumbria, Newcastle, UK

[vicki.elsey@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:vicki.elsey@northumbria.ac.uk)



**NEILL THOMPSON**

University of Northumbria, Newcastle, UK



**ELIZABETH SILLENCÉ**

University of Northumbria, Newcastle, UK



**LAURA LONGSTAFF**

University of Northumbria, Newcastle, UK



**MARK MOSS**

University of Northumbria, Newcastle, UK

## Author biography

Vicki was the Principal Investigator for this research, which formed part of her Professional Doctorate in Occupational Psychology, supervised by Mark Moss (Head of Psychology) and Elizabeth Sillence (Associate Professor). Vicki and Neill are Occupational Psychologists and Laura is currently training to become a Chartered Psychologist. Vicki, Laura and Neill collectively deliver the British Psychological Society (BPS) Accredited MSc in Occupational and Organizational Psychology programme at Northumbria University. Neill is the current director of this programme and an experienced qualitative researcher. They are responsible for module design and delivery, setting and marking student assessments and supporting the employability of their students and graduates. This shared interest brought them together in this research, which has and continues to enable them to adopt an evidence-based approach to supporting students and graduates. Understanding the experiences of people post-graduation helps to ensure an authentic learning experience built on a foundation of research, practice and applied experience. Vicki and Laura are also members of the BPS's Division of Occupational Psychology Committee, and Vicki has a particular responsibility for supporting careers within the discipline. Volunteering for this committee enables them to understand the professional context and support the needs of members of the profession. As a team of scientist practitioners, there is a real passion to support the employability of all Occupational Psychology graduates.

## Abstract

This study aims to explore how professional identification occurs in Occupational Psychology (OP) in the UK. Professional identification is a sense of belonging and individual feelings towards a group. In OP, competition for jobs is high and availability of roles with the title of "Occupational Psychologist" is low. Thus, many OPs are self-employed and multiple terms are used to describe the profession. Twenty working individuals, with a BPS accredited entry-level and master's qualification in OP, participated in narrative interviews. Thematic analysis led to the development of five 'pillars' of professional identification: a) education and learning; b) networking; c) managing challenges; d) career-crafting; and e) professional recognition and authenticity. Each of the five pillars have a unique role to play in supporting professional identification in OP. Strong professional identification requires sustained effort in all pillars. Practitioners supporting the careers of Occupational Psychologists,

and Occupational Psychologists themselves must develop stronger opportunities for networking and relationship building to enable individual development through multiple and diverse experiences. Furthermore, routes to accredited professional practice must be diversified and a positive rhetoric constructed around the achievement of Chartered status. Suggestions for future research are presented providing clear actions for the practitioner community.

*Keywords:* Occupational Psychology, professional identification, thematic analysis, narrative interview, career development

## Introduction

Research into the careers of psychologists is limited, and that which does exist typically groups all professional psychologists into a macro category (e.g., Otto, Row, Sobiraj, Baluku & Vasquez, 2017). This fails to account for the nuances in professional practice and the micro categorisations of psychologists' work; for example, with children, organizations and/or clinical populations (see also Straumsheim, 2018 for a discussion of Work and Organizational Psychology in Norway).

The aim of the current study is to research how professional identification occurs in Occupational Psychology (OP) in the UK. The introduction examines the professional landscape in OP and outlines the current literature in relation to careers, identity and identification. We conclude there is a lack of research exploring OP professional education and the practitioner context.

### Career landscape of Occupational Psychology

Occupational Psychologists are concerned with human behaviour in the workplace (BPS Statement of Intent, January 2019). Whilst OP is the term primarily used in the UK, variations exist across Europe and the world; for example, Work and Organizational Psychology, Industrial and Organizational Psychology (I-O), Work Psychology, Organizational Psychology and Business Psychology (these terms are also used in UK practice).

In the UK, the title 'Occupational Psychologist' is protected by law, where title-holders must demonstrate relevant undergraduate and postgraduate training and experience, with professional practice regulated by the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC). Over the lifespan of OP, the scope of work has diversified often in

response to economic drivers and workplace changes. Primary applications include selection and assessment, organizational change, employee engagement, training, career development, and workplace well-being, as well as other more niche areas such as human factors, workplace rehabilitation and neurodiversity at work. Occupational Psychologists typically work as in-house or external (and self-employed) consultants, in the public and private sector and in academia (BPS Statement of Intent, January 2019) although they may not necessarily hold the job title of Occupational Psychologist. The term Occupational Psychologist is more often used in association with professional recognition and regulation; rather than a 'personal brand' or preference (Else, 2018; McDowall, Sealy, Redman, Chamorro-Premuzic & Ogden, 2015). Additionally, and perhaps adding to the complexity, Human Resource (HR) professionals, management consultants and other aligned professions conduct work in the same domains as Occupational Psychologists.

In this career landscape, OP epitomises the 'new' career perspective where agency and career self-management (Akkermans & Kubasch, 2018) is the norm. This 'new' perspective has coincided with changes to organizational structures, from more traditional and hierarchical to flatter and matrix. Structural changes have created a necessity for individuals to be proactive in their pursuit of work and thus create their careers within (or outside of) organizations (Fugate, Kinicki & Ashforth, 2004; Wittekind, Raeder & Grote, 2010). In this context, rather than career development and management being seen as the responsibility of the organization (via the provision of job security), it is increasingly perceived to be the responsibility of the individual (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Fugate et al., 2004). Therefore, instead of 'job security' scholars refer to 'employability security' or self-managed careers (Bernstrøm, Drange, & Mamelund, 2019; Clarke & Patrickson, 2008; Forrier & Sels, 2003; Haasler, 2013). Occupational Psychology careers are essentially *boundaryless* (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996) and self-directed (*protean*, Hall, 1976), where OP graduates can move freely between organizations, across organizational and professional boundaries occupying various job titles, but less frequently with the title 'Occupational Psychologist' (Else, 2016).

In light of the professional challenges, over recent years, the professional body for psychologists in the UK (the BPS), and the Division of Occupational Psychology (DOP) has been concerned with understanding the identity and unique value of Occupational Psychologists. The DOP has commissioned two reviews focused on this issue (OP-First, 2006; Expert Panel Review, 2012 see Patterson, Harrington, Stevenson, & McDowall (2013) for a summary of findings). Both reviews concluded that Occupational

Psychologists needed to develop a unique selling point (USP) to assure the sustainability of the profession. Building upon this, the DOP Strategic Plan (2016–2020) emphasises the importance of improving the employability and visibility of Occupational Psychologists. Prior work has aimed to identify what the professional brand of Occupational Psychologists is, how to sell it, and how to inspire the next generation of practitioners (McDowall et al., 2015). Occupational Psychology is arguably having an ‘identity crisis’. But, this identity crisis is not unique to the UK, with I–O Psychology in the United States also appearing to face similar challenges (Byrne et al., 2014; Zickar & Highhouse, 2017). Although there is clear need and on-going work by the BPS to address these issues empirical work is lacking to enable understanding of how professional identification occurs in a landscape defined by fluidity, self-employment, sole roles in organizations, and multiple potential ‘career paths’ and job titles. The potential to support the careers of Occupational Psychology graduates is therefore limited, as interventions are not necessarily built upon a strong evidence base. Therefore, faced with the challenges identified, the current study aims to answer the research question: How does professional identification occur in OP?

## Professional identity and identification

Professional identity is “*the self that has been developed with the commitment to perform competently and legitimately in the context of the profession*” (Tan, Van der Molen & Schmidt, 2015, p.1505). It develops throughout a career, where individuals learn and adapt to the environment on the basis of gaining experience and understanding in more depth their own values, beliefs and motives (Ibarra, 1999; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Schein, 1978). Professional identity is believed to be relatively adaptable, as change in professional identity can be attributed to change in role or job. Having a strong sense of professional identity can lead to improved feelings of career success, job satisfaction and accomplishment (Hall et al., 2002 in Slay & Smith, 2011; Pearson, Hammond, Heffernan & Turner, 2012).

Professional identity is a social construct, which can adapt on the basis of three key factors: a) observation of role models; b) experimentation with provisional selves; and c) evaluation of professional selves (Ibarra, 1999). Research suggests individuals need to build ‘identity capital’ which can be developed through initiatives such as communities of practice and work experience opportunities (Tomlinson & Jackson, 2019). Building ‘identity capital’ is crucial in early career, and, following graduation can lead to enhanced career progression (Holmes, 2001; 2015; Tomlinson, 2017). Tomlinson and Jackson (2019) describe how professional identity supports graduate

employability by enabling early socialisation with the profession. Strong professional identity can also focus an individual through helping them to identify multiple pathways to a goal. Professional identity can occur prior to working within a profession and is termed 'pre-professional identity'. The formation of pre-professional identity in graduates can help to demonstrate their preparedness for their chosen career (Jackson, 2016). Therefore, in OP, building a strong sense of identity in early career and in the transition from university to work could be an important time point in enabling longer-term career success and satisfaction.

Whilst research has focused on 'identity', the related concept of 'identification' has received less direct attention with Miscenko and Day (2016) suggesting researchers have typically treated the terms as similar. Identification refers to the "*process by which people come to define themselves...to navigate their lives, workwise or other*" (Ashforth, Harrison & Corley, 2008, p. 334). There is a dearth of applied research focusing on the way in which individuals identify with their *profession*, instead focusing on how individuals identify with their *organization* (Ashforth, 2016; Ashforth, Joshi, Anand & O'Leary-Kelly, 2013). It is important that identification is contextualised to fully understand the idiosyncrasies of the different professions.

Identification is described as a precursor to identity, often referred to as the process of "*emerging identity*" (Scott, Corman & Cheney, 1998, p. 304), which includes cognitive awareness of membership, values (Ashforth et al., 2008) and the emotional investment an individual has towards a specific role, team or organisation (Miscenko & Day, 2016). Fundamentally, identification refers to belonging to a group, whether that be an organization, occupation or profession (Ashmore, Deaux & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004). Where identification occurs, individuals feel a sense of pride and oneness with that group (Ashforth et al., 2008).

To summarise, whereas identity is more internally focused on the self, identification has an outward focus relating to group membership. When an individual identifies with something, they promote it and are positive about it, almost as an extension of themselves (Ashforth, 2016). Therefore, rather than understanding what the profession (i.e., Occupational Psychology) or professional (i.e., Occupational Psychologist) is (i.e., a focus on identity and 'the self') the current research focuses on the sense of oneness an individual feels towards the profession (i.e., a focus on identification). In other words, we are interested in what factors support individuals with OP qualifications to feel a sense of oneness with the discipline, and consequently how they identify with the profession.

## Method

A qualitative approach was taken utilising an interactionist (Veld, Semejin & Van Vuuren, 2015) and post-modern (Swanson & Fouad, 2015) standpoint; which is common in identity and identification research. Essentially, the researchers believe careers are constructed through stories and meaning making activities (i.e., Career Construction Theory, CCT; Savickas, 1997, 2002, 2005, 2013) and social processes (i.e., Social Identity Theory, SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The interaction of multiple theories and the perspective that there is more than one 'truth' necessitated a qualitative approach where individuals could explain experiences in their own words, without the researcher imposing a predefined view.

The study received institutional ethics approval and participants were advised of the study content in advance, how confidentiality was ensured and their right to withdraw. Participants signed consent forms if they agreed to participate and received a written debrief following the interview.

### Participants

Twenty participants (14 females and six males) who all held a BPS accredited Masters (MSc) OP qualification (as the highest level of qualification) and Graduate Basis for Chartered Status (from completing a BPS accredited undergraduate or conversion course in psychology) were recruited for the study. This 'purposive sampling' meant participants were eligible to pursue Chartered status with the BPS and become a full member of the DOP (with potential for HCPC Registration). Recruitment was through the principal investigator's professional network on LinkedIn and other social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter as well as university alumni networks. Ages were categorised by year into five groups enabling anonymity to smaller groups: 22–26;  $n=4$ ; 27–30 years;  $n=5$ ; 31–34;  $n=3$ ; 35–39 years;  $n=5$ ; and 40 plus years'  $n=3$ . Seven participants were Occupational Psychologists who were Chartered Psychologists, six were trainee Occupational Psychologists, four were graduate members of the BPS and three held no professional membership. Participants were employed in a range of occupational settings from academia to self-employed consultancy working and as in-house Occupational Psychologists, across the UK. Work experience ranged from 0–27 years with a *mean* of 13.95 years.

## Data collection

Semi-structured interviews (Edwards & Holland, 2013) were employed utilising a narrative interview approach (Maitlis, 2012). This approach reflects the dynamic process of identification, where story-telling enables individuals to construct and reflect upon their career and externalise the identification process; something which occurs through hindsight (Ashforth, 2016; Del Corso & Reh fuss, 2011; LaPointe, 2010; Meijers & Lengelle, 2012). Interviews lasted between 50 and 70 minutes, were either face-to-face, via Skype or over the telephone, depending upon availability. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. During the interview participants were encouraged to describe their career from “*the moment they made the decision to pursue Occupational Psychology to the present day*” (an interview schedule can be provided on request). This “*generative narrative question*” (Riemann & Schutze, 1987, p.353 cited in Flick, 2014) is typical of the beginning of narrative interviews. Participants were then encouraged to explain their career history and choices, uninterrupted by the researcher (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). This process enabled participants to explain their career prior to the researcher asking any questions to clarify understanding.

Following this narrative stage, questions were asked based upon the content of the story to seek clarification or to understand and explore responses in more depth (e.g., “*You mentioned wanting to be stretched, in the roles that you’ve said you’ve enjoyed, the words you used were ‘being in demanding roles’ and feeling ‘challenged and stretched’. Is that something that’s important to you?*”). Participants were finally asked about factors relevant to their story and the research question, often referred to as the ‘balancing phase’ (e.g., “*Why do you think that employers have chosen you for the jobs that you have had in the past?*”). Further, all participants were asked to discuss the future and how they felt about their career going forward, which enabled an understanding of the beginning, transition and future work self; a salient feature in narrative career accounts. This latter stage of the interview ensured similarly of questions for all participants.

## Thematic analysis

Inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was adopted to analyse these data. Six steps were followed: a) familiarisation with the data; b) generating initial codes; c) searching for themes; d) reviewing themes; e) defining and naming themes and f) producing a report. To ensure rigour Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) quality criteria of: a) credibility; b) dependability (e.g., Braun & Clarke’s, 2006 six steps); c) transferability; and d) confirmability were utilised throughout.



A reflective log was taken after each interview noting initial thoughts in relation to content and process to “*foster ongoing reflexivity*” (Riessman, 2008, p.191) and to improve credibility (Haynes, 2012). In addition, the researcher reflected on time and place of interview and other factors which could contribute to the participant experience (e.g., transferability). The researcher reviewed the codes after five and 15 interviews had taken place to ensure there was no repetition in coding (e.g., confirmability). A researcher (independent of the data collection stage and analytic process) reviewed one transcript, and the codes generated were discussed to ensure consistency in the development and reviewing of themes (e.g., confirmability). Then final codes and rationale were explained to a different member of the research team to ensure clear evidence and representation of views (e.g., confirmability). Finally, member checking (e.g., credibility) was utilised where initial themes were discussed with two participants to ensure they reflected their narrative accounts. Whilst these procedures did not lead to adaptations, the reflexive nature ensured the outcome was based upon the content of the interviews and therefore enhanced the trustworthiness of the findings.

## Findings

Five themes were developed from the narrative interview transcripts explaining how professional identification occurs in OP. Findings are summarised in Figure 1. The five themes are represented by pillars as the foundations for professional identification, and therefore are areas for opportunity to support professional identification in OP. Each pillar is explained in turn in the following section.

Figure 1  
The five pillars of professional identification in Occupational Psychology



## Education and learning

Professional identification was initiated through the psychology knowledge base, achieving a solid foundation in psychological theory enabling understanding of human behaviour. This knowledge came from formal education and informal learning opportunities. Participants explained a desire to ensure every job, post-qualification, afforded “*opportunities for training and development*” (Participant 8) to learn more about self and profession, and to capitalise on their investment in their formal education. When looking back over their profession, participants were continuously learning as a way to enable identification: “*I want to learn and I feel like [I] am still learning*” (Participant 12). Where experience validated learning, professional identification occurred, and this was particularly apparent following Masters (MSc) courses in OP that linked theory and application:

*“...the way in which the course is structured and the content within those courses was really valuable...being able to apply that theory into practice...working out how you would then apply them into businesses...probably the best part of the master’s degree...some of the core consulting skills that we learnt in the degree and I think that is really critical for Occupational Psychology, so on top of learning all of the science behind it, it’s actually really important to understand...how to apply”* (Participant 14),

Equally, participants were aware that simply studying the MSc did not guarantee a career in OP and a persistent risk came from the “*romantic view*” (Participant 2) of the OP career, an ideal present in formal study which did not always match reality:

*“On the first day of the masters...lecturer...looked around and he said none of you...no 6 [out of 30] of you are actually going to be Occupational Psychologists...I feel quite angry I feel like I was erm...hoodwinked actually...I was expecting to have a career...got nothing”* (Participant 3).

Whilst experiences of MSc study were mixed, it was clear that education was formative in the identification process, indeed there was a *desire* for individuals to identify with the profession. During formal education, participants described how they could ‘try out’ OP as a potential profession. Learning about the profession led some participants to conclude it was worth pursuing a career as an OP as, they believed on a cognitive level, this career would ‘fit’ with their own aspirations and values. Other participants in the study decided it was not the profession they desired.

To summarise, education and learning could serve as an anchor, both at an early formative stage in one's career (i.e., through formal study) and continuing throughout by affording development opportunities and life-long learning which could 'top up' identification.

## Networking and building relationships

The second theme describes those individuals who surround themselves by others to support and shape their OP identification, indicating a social element to identification. Course tutors (undergraduate and postgraduate) and fellow students supported the pursuit of an OP career and formed the basis of early professional networks. Other important relationships were with managers and colleagues, but also of note was "working with other Occupational Psychologists" (Participant 5) which led to a sense of belonging with the profession. Formal and informal mentoring relationships were described by participants as formative experiences, leading to identification with the profession by "influence[ing] my decisions" (Participant 14). These mentors encouraged participants to consider moving jobs to gain further experiences and, in some cases, were fundamental in securing new roles:

*"A couple of people in my life have been important mentors...where I've been at my best... there's been somebody else, had an important role, either challenged me, stretched me, created opportunities for me" (Participant 1).*

*"Six months into my role I got a call from the contacts I made during my time as an intern at [organization]...said 'I am building a team...I need people can you come and help?'" (Participant 12).*

Participants described the importance of nurturing contacts within the small profession of OP. Tangible benefits such as enhanced perceptions of employability and increased awareness of job opportunities could be afforded by investing time and effort in formal and informal networking. The network was additionally valued in relation to support, idea sharing and the validation that OP was the right profession for them. Professional identification that developed in this way was abundant in the career narratives, explaining how both formal and informal opportunities to enhance one's career were utilised:

*"I think having a really good network of people who kept in touch with me from the masters and that's been a massive factor, there's definitely something about networking and having a network*

*of people who you can turn to and ask questions or get support from. I don't think I'd be in the position I was now if I didn't have that network" (Participant 13).*

To summarise, networking and building relationships encouraged an interest in OP, as the career developed, participants would identify professional contacts or mentors who could support and therefore enable identification. Of particular importance was ensuring there were fellow Occupational Psychologists in this network, to champion the profession and to encourage participants to see potential opportunities.

## Managing challenges

Professional identification continued even through challenges, although involved shifts in expectations based on factors such as availability of roles, awareness of the value of OP, geographic location, work–life balance, and family commitments. Participants questioned their sense of belonging, often reshaping their understanding of the profession and the opportunities it afforded:

*"It's been challenging; I think it's opportunity as... I mean at the end of the day consultancy positions or positions where we can apply our skills as an OP doesn't come around very often..." and "...I think part of the challenge is not articulating what we can offer to our potential employers but for them to recognise that we can offer help, so...it's a two-way street isn't it? So I think in terms of our ability to say what we can offer that's one thing, for them to be open to us offering resources is another" (Participant 12).*

Lack of good quality opportunities and choice was frequently coupled with conversations around family considerations, work–life balance, part–time and flexible work arrangements. Working part–time and flexibly had led to participants feeling “restricted” (Participant 5) in their work (e.g., through an inability to travel or work away from home due to childcare arrangements). Participants experienced feelings of guilt through making decisions which were “better for my family” (Participant 4) or to achieve “balance” between career ambition and desire to “just be a Mum” (Participant 17). In these scenarios, participants often looked to the future to support their professional identification, suggesting they recognised the temporary nature of challenges to professional identification (e.g., it may be more possible to pursue different opportunities when their children are older). Whilst experiencing challenges, participants worked to maintain labour market value to remain employable, but chose to compromise their career expectations.

Diversity of terminology used in OP (such as Work Psychologist, Business Psychologist, Organizational Psychologist as well as the crossover between professions including HR, Learning and Development, and Organizational Development) was described as potentially confusing for practitioners and employers. There was also a feeling of lack of congruence between the job participants do, and the profession they are in. This was described as a challenge faced by the profession as a whole. Whilst personally participants were invested in OP, they felt more must be done to address this identity or professional branding issue. Many expressed exhaustion; constantly having to explain what OP was. Despite confusion, individuals were not prepared to let go of OP as their profession, but often chose to use more readily accessible and easily understood terminology (such as Business Psychologist), adding to the confusion described.

In summary, this pillar emphasises the personal and professional challenges faced by individuals in identifying with the profession. Challenges could weaken a strong foundation built through education and learning and networking and support. Some challenges were temporary and within the control of the individual (e.g., achieving balance), others were described as more pervasive (e.g., professional brand) and issues for the profession as a whole to address.

## Career crafting

This theme is characterised by openness to experience, adapting, creating and developing roles as well as adopting alternative career strategies to support professional identification. These strategies include work shadowing, volunteering and internships; all identified as non-traditional ways of securing longer-term roles. Identification with the profession was clarified through these more 'low stakes' experiences where OPs could try out different roles to identify a 'best fit'. For example, at entry to the profession individuals described how pursuing multiple experiences, learning how to find work, and sell and promote themselves was paramount. Participants were able to shape roles to fit aspirations. One participant described how a major organizational restructure had created a new role, which although not the desired role "*there might be some scope to change it*" (Participant 11). Creating opportunities to enact OP or "*play*" (Participant 4) with roles was important alongside the perception that OP was "*very applicable*" (Participant 10) to the workplace in many guises:

*"A lot of what I offered was very relevant so it's getting them to see that that stuff can be helpful and useful to them"* (Participant 20).

Through reflection, participants described how they had developed an acute awareness of how others perceived their careers and the impact this could have on their identification with the profession. Tensions were expressed over broad versus specialist careers – both perspectives were apparent in the transcripts from concern over not having a “specialism” (Participant 17) to becoming “too niche” (Participant 16). In these cases, participants sought ways to enhance their career through adopting a future focus. Looking to the future facilitated participants to set goals and think about next career steps, these strategies enabling them to continue to identify with the profession. Next steps were not limited to seeking new roles but also acquiring volunteer experiences:

*“In reality I think now I have been ready to broaden out again and actually possibly one of [my] motivations for joining the [professional body as a volunteer] and getting involved with [them] is to give me a bit more breadth” (Participant 19).*

Experiences were not all positive, but participants described how even the negative ones were still “formative” (Participant 1) in helping OPs to broaden their mind-set, including looking for opportunities to work overseas (Participant 12). Occasionally a clear career planning strategy was not evident, with participants describing serendipity, where they “fell into” (Participant 6) roles within the profession and made the most of opportunities presented to them, again evidence of crafting.

To summarise, career crafting was utilised as an effective strategy to enable professional identification, finding the ‘OP’ in any role and viewing career at a macro level. All opportunities (regardless of job title, paid or volunteer work) were seen as useful in understanding how to be a practitioner within the profession.

## **Professional recognition and authenticity**

The final pillar is characterised by stories of achieving success (both objective and subjective) which solidified the participants’ professional identification. Purely objective success included a desire for status and recognition achieved through becoming qualified as an Occupational Psychologist (known as Chartership). For those individuals not yet Chartered this was a driving force in their career. Such recognition helped to establish professional identification and improved marketability beyond their organization. Professional recognition helped to build self-confidence and “cred[ibility]” (Participant 20) and was viewed as important. This was despite a perceived lack of awareness from employers about the specific detail, the fact it was a professional

qualification, that was recognised and therefore valued. Professional membership enhanced feelings of oneness with the discipline; particularly where employers were aware there was an evidence-base or “science” (Participant 6) behind decisions and interventions:

*“I got Chartership...and registered in the same year and I’ve got to be honest I’m pleased that I did that. Although it’s not a pre-requisite to the role I’m doing now it’s a personal achievement and maybe looking to pursue things differently in the future I think I’m pleased that I did do it...I feel competent in the experience that I’ve got and to have someone say ‘yeah you’re competent to do that role’, and I think it just gives me a bit more confidence behind that”* (Participant 5).

*“...that was me at my best...and that was because I am an [Chartered] Occ[upational] Psych[ologist]...couldn’t have arrived at that [solution] any other way”* (Participant 1).

Professional identification was enriched by doing meaningful, OP work (as defined uniquely by the individual). This more subjective element emphasised values and authenticity and demonstrated that status was not the only driving force. Additionally, working authentically by achieving congruence between the values the individual had and the work they did was evident:

*“I think for me it’s just being able to really relate to the work that you are doing and seeing the difference that it makes and the impact that it has on the people that you are working for or with or the organizations or clients that you are working with...and being able to see how they have changed as a result of your work...”* (Participant 14).

Where perceived values were incongruent (between individual and role), participants described taking action such as becoming self-employed so they could identify with the profession in a way that was authentic, and a driving force for achieving satisfaction and happiness.

Professional recognition was emphasised as an investment and personal achievement which enabled professional identification through boosting confidence and enhancing credibility. It was a mark of professional pride and often enabled participants to work authentically, ensuring roles were congruent with their values.

## **Summary of the five pillars of identification**

The five pillars identified from the 20 narrative interviews explained the ways in which professional identification occurs in OP. Some of these pillars such as ‘Education

*and learning*' and *'Networking and building relationship'* offered clear ways in which an individual could develop a sense of belonging to the profession. *'Career crafting'* and *'Professional recognition and authenticity'* demonstrated an active role on the part of the participant to consciously find ways to identify with the profession. This is why these four pillars are represented pictorially on either side of a central pillar in Figure 1. The middle pillar of *'Managing challenges'* presented more significant concerns; requiring the support of the external pillars. All pillars provide opportunities to enable professional identification in OP in order to build a solid foundation for practitioners in pursuit of their career within the discipline.

## Discussion

This research aimed to understand how professional identification occurred in OP, given the nature of the profession, and the challenges and opportunities it faces as outlined in the introduction. Analysis of the narrative interviews led to the development of five key themes, or 'pillars' to professional identification (see Figure 1). These pillars act as a foundation, each serving a purpose in developing secure identification. At various stages in career, different assessments were made of the current situation and linked to a broader concept of professional identification.

Education and learning were important drivers for many early career OP graduates, their experiences during undergraduate and master's programmes served to support professional identification or in some cases led to dis-identification (see Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004). This stage was about building capital (e.g., human, employability, social, psychological). Participants were not (at this stage) Occupational Psychologists (as defined by law) but they were learning whether and how they could identify with the profession on a cognitive level (often referred to as 'liminality'). Ashforth et al. (2008) believe it is possible to "*think or feel one's way into identification*" (p.329), something which was clear in the narratives. Individuals described a 'need for professional identification' and wanting to feel part of something, linking to the concept of Need for Organizational Identification (nOID; see Glynn, 1998) which has been suggested to predict actual identification. If there is indeed a 'need for professional identification', this formative stage is where individuals can make conscious choices about their engagement with the profession.

It may also be at this formative stage where individuals consider recognition (e.g., Chartership) as a way of enhancing professional identification through building



confidence and credibility and becoming an authentic practitioner (linking to Kaleidoscope Career Model, KCM; Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005). However, our findings indicate that education and learning, and achieving Chartership alone are perhaps insufficient to secure professional identification. There are challenges along the way. This is where it is important to adopt strategies such as building social networks, mentoring, engaging with other OPs in order to gain the identity they desire (Ashforth et al., 2008). This is because identification was enhanced through relationships and comparisons with others in the same group or the group they aspired to be part of (SIT, Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Perhaps most interesting in our research was that professional identification could be reinforced through a more experiential approach of career crafting, building on the job crafting concept (Demerouti, 2015; Tims & Bakker, 2010; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Individuals found ways to identify with the profession in a more global way (Ashforth, 2000) over and above role and organization, through collections of experiences which were shaped into professional relevance. Career crafting involved adopting a mind-set that allowed them to work in the way an Occupational Psychologist would, or to do the work of an Occupational Psychologist without necessarily having an Occupational Psychologist job title.

The process of identification is turbulent, careers are plagued with challenges, turning points, and transitions (Cooper & Mackenzie-Davey, 2010) from aspects such as external environmental issues, family considerations, external awareness or willingness of employers and practitioners to offer experiential opportunities and part-time and flexible work (see also KCM; Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005). Ashforth et al. (2008) described this process as self-verification, where during periods of change individuals are forced to cope with threats to who they think they are. They will seek to stabilise these challenges and reaffirm or “*manipulate the immediate environment*” (Ashforth et al., 2008, p.335) to ensure consistency. As long as professional identification has occurred these challenges can be managed. However, if they are coupled with a weak foundation from the other pillars, it is possible individuals will dis-identify with the profession, presenting a wider risk to the future of OP careers.

The five pillars were utilised to varying degrees throughout all career stories, dependent on experience and factors outside of work, thus providing support for the developmental nature of careers (Super, 1980). Utilising CCT (Savickas, 1997) this research reinforces the view that careers and professional identification manifests

in a fluid way. This fluidity and flexibility is important for practitioners as it means there are opportunities to develop applications which can enhance professional identification, in a more overt way. Currently, there appears to be an assumption that individuals already *have* professional identification if they choose to study OP. This position is naïve, given the storied nature and fluidity identified in research. We should not assume professional identification is stable but rather develop collective and on-going strategies to support individuals to feel part of the profession, building on SIT. However, in order to secure professional identification and therefore develop a strong professional identity, all five pillars need to be attended to and nurtured. Supporting individuals to feel positive about their group membership (i.e., identification), will mean they are increasingly likely to describe themselves as being part of that group which becomes the ‘core of identity’ (Ashforth et al., 2008). Indeed, this could support the brand and identity that the professional body and practitioners seek. Additionally, this will enable “*ontological security*” (Morales, 2019, p.253) where identification can become a precursor for identity even in careers where multiple roles and career paths exist.

As practitioners, we must support the construction of professional identification enabling OPs to build ‘capitals’ such as ‘employability’ (Peeters et al., 2019), ‘human’ (Becker, 1964; Veld et al., 2015), ‘movement’ (Forrier & Sels, 2003), ‘social’ and ‘identity’ (Tomlinson & Jackson, 2019). This is an on-going activity and a collective responsibility.

## Implications for practice

This research provides numerous potential implications for practice. Perhaps most obvious and important, due to its ability to impact on all pillars, is the development of good quality social networks and support mechanisms. There are multiple ways in which enhance this, including, building a solid network at all career stages with individuals already in the profession. Whether this is between students and course tutors, practitioners and students or both, these networks provide individuals with something to feel part of, but must be built upon more than sharing OP theory and knowledge. The networks must also share journeys, skills, contacts and opportunities (e.g., work shadowing, internships), and include discussions around what it means to identify as an Occupational Psychologist, what it means to be part of the profession and the benefits of group membership.

Occupational Psychologists need to know how to sell themselves and their profession, how and where to find work congruent with their own values as well as support in becoming practitioners. Building communities of practice will only serve to make the profession stronger. In a profession where individuals may be the sole OP (i.e., self-employed or within an organization), we must find ways to network formally and informally, to champion one another, and to share stories of successes, in a much more open and proud way. Perhaps the national professional body (the DOP) and equivalents across Europe (EAWOP) and globally (such as SIOP) could support this, for example, sharing stories through social media and platforms across professions, where practitioners explain, “I achieved that *because* I am an Occupational Psychologist”. There is an appetite for this within the profession, in the UK, and there must be opportunities to share more openly outside of the profession.

Achieving Chartership afforded confidence and credibility and supported professional identification. However, the single process of becoming a Chartered as an Occupational Psychologist has undergone challenges over recent years. Therefore, developing multiple approaches to achieving practitioner Occupational Psychologist status seems necessary. Choice would enable a more competitive market for training Occupational Psychologists. Linked to the process of Chartership, mentoring was important for supporting professional identification and perhaps one of the easiest ways to develop this is through education providers and professional supervision, however this is delivered.

Given the range of opportunities present for OPs, coupled with the perceived lack of awareness of how OP differs from other (related) professions, OPs must be trained to career craft. Career crafting relies on OPs having the confidence to sell themselves and to deliver interventions within their own professional framework. Every OP practitioner must get on board to truly promote the profession, to share their stories and successes, and to engage the next generation of Occupational Psychologists to create a voice which communicates the unique value of OP to the external world.

Finally, there must not be arrogance that individuals will simply want to be ‘part of the OP club’; membership must be something worthy of time and financial investment. The authors would like to see a more positive rhetoric around achieving Chartership, sharing stories of the advantages of working as a qualified professional. Individuals and organizations who employ Occupational Psychologists, can add support by clarifying the benefits of employing qualified Occupational Psychologists within their organizations.

This requires people to have confidence to use the title Occupational Psychologist. The work of the professional body to create a clear brand is necessary and must continue – this is about supply AND demand and the nurturing and enabling of talent in the profession. As participants described the applicability of OP to all workplace contexts as a selling point, it would seem professional adaptability is a real strength of the profession. However, without clearly articulating the diversity of opportunity, this breadth of application can appear a weakness leaving individuals, particularly early in their career, without a clear understanding of what they can tangibly do, after leaving education, to develop into the profession.

### **Limitations and ideas for future research**

Whilst there are strengths of the current research, there exist limitations that could be addressed by follow-up work. This research focused on a very traditional route to OP which may fail to address the nuances associated with career changers (e.g., individuals finding OP as a second or third career). Therefore, the authors would like to see more research investigating the careers of a broader range of practitioners, and those finding OP later in their career. Exploring career changers may enable us to understand how professional identification is portrayed to the outside world (see, for example Lefsrud & Meyer, 2012; Kitay & Wright, 2007; Van Dick, 2004) through various career transitions.

In addition, this research focused on OPs in the UK, however it is likely that professional identification challenges exist in other psychology professions (such as Health Psychology), or indeed different professions with multiple routes to practice (e.g., accountancy or consultancy.). The authors would also like to research other European nations and globally to identify whether there are idiosyncrasies or commonalities across country and culture, critical to building a picture of shared challenges and opportunities. The five pillars could be utilised as a template to foster research in professional identification, to identify whether these five pillars are pervasive across professions. This understanding would encourage the development of bespoke, contextual and evidence-based interventions for professionals.

Finally, the model presented is theoretical, and has not been empirically tested, nor does it explain whether professional identification predicts any tangible outcomes such as engagement, employability, career success and so on. Additionally, aspects such as psychological capital (Luthans, Avolio, Avey & Norman, 2007) in the form of self-efficacy and optimism were referred to throughout the narratives. These aspects although implied and therefore not thoroughly investigated indicate avenues for future

empirical and longitudinal research to fully understand the factors which can support OP careers and build employability capital (Peeters et al., 2019).

## Conclusion

This research demonstrates the way in which professional identification occurs in OP, and to the authors knowledge is the first time it this has been explored empirically. In the era of the boundaryless career and career self-management, it is essential to engage in empirical career related research, which enables evidence-based interventions to be developed to support individuals to maintain continuous professional development. Our findings suggest the five pillars of *Education and learning, Networking and building relationships, Managing challenges, Career crafting and Professional recognition and authenticity* could all lead to a strong sense of professional identification. Professional identification in OP is fluid and develops over the lifespan via multiple experiences (e.g., learning, achievements, networks). Practical solutions to support professional identification include building strong and active support networks, promoting the profession (i.e., the brand) and options for developing the next generation of Occupational Psychologists, via solid educational and practitioner pathways. It is hoped this research will encourage more empirical and practitioner work in OP to fully appreciate the career challenges and advantages of OP qualifications. This work is paramount to the sustainability of a profession which has the potential to add considerable value to the working lives of individuals.

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