Brief report

Do You Have Any ID? Exploring Opinions and Understanding of Year 4 MPharm Students on Professional Identity

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To investigate Year 4 Master of Pharmacy students’ understanding and sense of professional identity (PI) and explore the factors that positively and negatively impact PI formation in the undergraduate program.

Methods: Three focus groups were conducted in January 2022 with 5–8 participants per group. Audio from the focus groups was recorded and recordings were transcribed verbatim. Reflexive thematic analysis was employed to construct themes and subthemes.

Results: Four themes, with associated subthemes, were generated. The themes were ‘Understanding PI’, ‘Experience of Master of Pharmacy degree’, ‘Interaction and comparison with others,’ and ‘Development of self’.

Conclusion: Participant understanding of PI reflected the wider literature, including ambiguity as to what it means to a pharmacist in training. The lens of legitimate peripheral participation in a community of practice was used to reflect on curricular and educational approaches to support undergraduate PI formation. Participants expressed that patient-focused learning experiences and opportunities to participate in authentic professional activities alongside peers and more experienced members of the pharmacy community positively contribute to PI formation. This suggests that a sociocultural perspective where learning is viewed as legitimate peripheral participation in a community of practice provides a valid theoretical basis to underpin curriculum design.

1. Introduction

It is proposed that participating in a vocational degree is as much about the development of professional identity (PI) as it is about learning knowledge. Professional identity is considered to be a multifaceted interaction between an individual’s perception of themselves and their career. Within the United Kingdom, the General Pharmaceutical Council’s Standards for the Initial Education and Training of Pharmacists places emphasis on professionalism, but there is a lack of specific stipulation in relation to supporting PI formation among trainees. As acknowledged by Noble and colleagues, there is little to guide educators who wish to support students in developing a PI within pharmacy education. Consequently, supporting PI formation may not be forefronted by pharmacy educators when planning learning activities.

As an alternative to regarding PI as a static attribute or an achieved outcome, the formation of PI can be viewed as a trajectory of development where students navigate professional training, while they make sense of the knowledge, skills, and behaviors of their profession and the associated cultural artifacts, social norms, and values. Moreover, students are influenced by the cultural codes and values to which professionals are introduced during training in addition to the norms and customs they have been exposed to throughout their lives, that is, their personal identities and previous experiences that inextricably contribute to their present and future selves. From a sociocultural perspective, evolution of PI is an inherent feature of legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) in a community of practice (COP) where novice members work toward fuller membership through engagement in authentic activity alongside other community members. From this perspective, as pharmacy trainees move through their professional training, they begin to ‘feel like’ and become a pharmacist.

Using the framework of LPP in COPs as a lens, we considered the current approaches to program curricula and explored, from a student perspective, if they support the trajectory to professional practice and thus facilitate the development of PI as a pharmacist. The aim of this study was to simultaneously afford exploration of what it is for Year 4 (final year) trainees at this university to ‘feel like’ a pharmacist and to understand and express what PI means to them. This was used as a

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starting point for our reflection on what educational approaches, in the opinion of trainees, can be regarded as authentic and needed to support fuller membership of their professional COP.

2. Methods

All Year 4 Master of Pharmacy (MPharm) undergraduates (UGs) at Queen’s University Belfast (QUB) were invited to participate in a focus group study investigating PI in January 2022 (n = 97). Given the common experiences shared by the participants, focus groups were used to collect data to enable these to be explored and analyzed as a collective. Focus groups also facilitated the identification of group norms and cultural values that may have an impact on PI formation. A topic guide for the focus groups was developed following a review of relevant literature. Questions were tailored to capture information related to the MPharm program at QUB, for example, exploring what elements of the course or university experience helped students ‘feel like’ a pharmacist. A pilot focus group was conducted with pharmacy PhD students (n = 4) to assess topic guide appropriateness. A total of 33 students volunteered for the study. They were advised that focus groups would be organized until data saturation was deemed to have occurred and not all volunteers may be required. Volunteers were assigned to a group based on availability and taking into consideration gender and ethnicity. The aim was to establish a mix of backgrounds within each group, according to the sample of volunteers; 14% of participants were from a Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) background and 33% were male (reflecting the student body of 14% BAME ethnicity, 86% White ethnicity and 27% male gender). Three focus groups were conducted with 5–8 participants per group. After 21 volunteers, the researchers deemed that data saturation had been reached so the remaining 12 volunteers did not participate. Audio from the focus groups was digitally recorded and recordings were transcribed verbatim.

Reflective thematic analysis of the data was conducted using the Braun and Clarke approach. Briefly, the research team familiarized themselves with the data by reading the transcripts multiple times. Due to the interpretive process of this methodology, author 1 conducted the initial open coding and theme-generation process. An inductive approach to coding was adopted with both semantic and latent codes generated. The latter was produced when the researcher interpreted relevant underlying meaning from the data. Codes were continually reviewed and revised, where necessary, until the final generation of themes (and associated subthemes). Author 3 reviewed the codes and themes generated for the purposes of interrogating the interpretive process. This involved challenging assumptions or interpretations made during the coding process in addition to identifying researchers’ biases and previous experiences that may have influenced data analysis.

The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Medicine, Health, and Life Sciences, QUB (Reference no MHLS 22_04).

3. Results

Four themes, with associated subthemes, were constructed from the data and are presented in Table 1. Fig. 1 is a visual summary of the themes and subthemes along with exemplar participant quotations. The first, ‘Understanding of PI’ considered participants’ awareness of what PI means and what factors they thought contribute to PI formation. It was evident that the ‘Experience of the MPharm degree’ (Theme 2) had a significant impact on how UGs formed their PI, with certain educational approaches fostering a positive impact on PI formation. Findings suggest that PI formation does not occur in a vacuum, and it was apparent that ‘Interaction and comparison with others’ (Theme 3) can have a considerable effect on how UGs perceive themselves as future pharmacists. This highlighted the role of peer support and mentoring within the UG program as well as emphasized the importance of exposure to a range of pharmacist role models, with varying career portfolios, from both academic and clinical environments. Participants also recognized that their PI was aligned with their own personal development (Theme 4 - ‘Development of self’) through their experiences of part-time, extra-curricular pharmacy employment and personal self-reflection based on academic assessment and interpretation of feedback. Participants discussed their identity as learners and how this developed and evolved during the degree program. The results indicate that the participants experienced tension resulting from their multi-membership with various COPs during training. There was a consensus that PI evolves over time and that as novice members of the pharmacy profession, their identity will continue to develop throughout their careers.

4. Discussion

Study participants viewed PI as a complex concept of ‘feeling like’ a pharmacist that was influenced by many internal and external factors. Appropriation of the relevant knowledge and skills was identified as important, with academic qualifications required for legitimacy in ‘being’ or ‘becoming’ a pharmacist. As qualifications are required for full membership to the profession and are recognized as confirmation of competence, it is unsurprising that those who feel competent tend to report a strong sense of PI and have confidence in fulfilling the requirements of their role. It was acknowledged that PI is broader than qualifications alone and that values, beliefs, and behaviors strongly influence what it means to be a pharmacist. This reflects the concept of PI discussed by others. Participants recognized pharmacists as healthcare practitioners with professional and social status and the associated responsibility, yet they felt that pharmacy did not always receive the same recognition as other healthcare professions. This was demotivating for the participants at this early stage of their careers. The misalignment of social status or the public’s misunderstanding of the profession has been well documented previously. This may relate to the evolution of the profession where the pharmacist’s role has shifted from that with a central focus on medicines to a patient-centered practitioner. The participants of this study were hopeful that the responsiveness and work of the profession during the COVID-19 pandemic may have positively influenced the understanding of the work of the pharmacist. The perception that pharmacists’ roles are poorly comprehended and valued by the public also reflects the ambiguity that exists within the profession itself. This is partly due to the changing focus and the broad scope of the profession resulting in multiple iterations of identity that co-exist and that are reported to be valued differently.

Participants indicated that their identities as future pharmacists were complicated by academic conventions and curricular traditions that did not align with their perceptions of what their professional role will be. They indicated the curricular approaches that better supported their PI formation, namely those presenting an opportunity to undertake what they considered to be authentic pharmacist activities, helped them to ‘feel’ most like a pharmacist. They expressed that this was possible in high-fidelity simulated environments as well as in practice sites during periods of experiential learning. However, in some instances, experiences of experiential learning did not align with academic preparation and consequently, students felt unable to contribute to community activity. Similarly, students described occasions where they were prohibited from participation in community activities on placement due to a perceived lack of experience. This exclusion elicited feelings of isolation and lack of self-worth. Being tasked with academic activities to complete while on placement was viewed by the UGs as a barrier to learning through active participation in the COP. These conflicting accounts of experiential learning align with others who highlight trajectory tensions of those who are members of both academic and workplace COPs. Although some stakeholders advocate academic approaches, proponents of socioculturalism suggest facilitating LPP as an alternative. Participants further highlighted activities
Table 1
Themes and subthemes constructed from the data with exemplar quotations provided.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme title</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Exemplar quotations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Understanding PI</td>
<td>Knowledge and qualifications</td>
<td>“there’s like so much work that goes into kinda to becoming a pharmacist and the same with doctors and nurses and like that you know just contributes to like your PI …” (1H)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beliefs, behaviors, and skills</td>
<td>PI to me is like a list of like knowledge, skills, beliefs that a pharmacist has… (2H)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Healthcare professional with social status and responsibility</td>
<td>“PI would be like how like the public or the patients like respect you, like how they like perceive you” (1D)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of awareness and visibility of pharmacy PI</td>
<td>I think a lot of people don’t really understand what pharmacists actually do… (2C)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Experience with MPharm degree</td>
<td>Curriculum structure</td>
<td>“I found in first and second year that it was actually really hard to see like an end goal of the stuff that I was learning…” (1F)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simulated educational practices</td>
<td>Experiential learning</td>
<td>“I felt like a pharmacist to a lot when say if I’m talking to someone in our year about an assignment or something that we’ve done…” (2F)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction and comparison with others</td>
<td>Pharmacy peers</td>
<td>“the fact that 2 years ago she was in our shoes where she didn’t feel like she knew anything but now she’s qualified she can do anything…” (1C)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience with other HCP students</td>
<td>“Do you know what actually did make me feel like a little bit different from doctors was when we did IPL.” (1C)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pharmacist role models</td>
<td>“I felt the most like a pharmacist when I'm working with other pharmacists.” (3E)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Positive impact on PI formation</td>
<td>“…you just get dispensing medication, actually getting to interact with patients face to face, not just reading kind of scenarios as such like you would do in workshops, actually getting out into the pharmacy and em chatting to patients with kinda like real life long term illnesses” (3D)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development of self</td>
<td>Part-time employment</td>
<td>“…(having a job in community pharmacy) gave me like a really good idea of like what being a pharmacist would be like.” (2E)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact of assessment and feedback</td>
<td>“I definitely think work teaches you things that university could never ever teach at all.” (2F)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity as a learner and traditions within the program</td>
<td>“(negative marking)… well it personally knocked my confidence (so much I was like I should not be doing this course). I should not be a pharmacist.” (1D)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PI formation is an ongoing process</td>
<td>“…it is constantly evolving… you constantly are learning new things you're constantly learning like your are constantly growing… probably would change how you view yourself and what you would think you are.” (1F)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Number in brackets represents the focus group and the letter a participant within that group.

Abbreviations: HCP, healthcare professional; PI, professional identity.

reflecting the role of the pharmacist as a scientist, a more traditional perception of the profession, conflicted with their anticipated future role as caregiver and clinician, a tension that has been highlighted by others.1,2,21 Study participants expressed opportunities to interact with patients were valuable formative experiences since they presented a chance to ‘practice’ their professional selves and mirrored what they intended to be involved with after registration. The opportunity to trial approaches to practice when training is espoused by others,22 and findings from this study underlines the impact on PI of authentic community experiences while training, as advocated from a sociocultural perspective.6,23 Like literature findings,22 participants referred to the positive effect of their MPharm peers and other healthcare students on PI formation. Furthermore, they alluded to the influence of role models, such as pharmacist faculty members and pharmacists encountered in practice settings. These findings echo advocates of sociocultural approaches who
view learning as mutual engagement in joint enterprise with peers, with fuller participation facilitated by more experienced community members.6,25,26 Focus group data showed that like the findings of others,7 students identified that extra-curricular part-time employment in pharmacy settings molded their expectations of future professional practice. Some regarded this positively in terms of PI formation while others depicted difficulty in reconciling work activity with university experiences. Others in the literature note the difficulties in aligning education with practice in pharmacy settings27 and view academic and pharmacy practice as separate COPs advocating ‘brokering’ and sharing of practices between members of both COPs to further practice education.19 Drawing specifically on experiences within the higher education setting, participants explained that some academic practices, such as certain types of assessment negatively impacted their confidence and self-perceived ability to continue in the profession. This aligns with literature that emphasizes the necessity of curricular approaches and assessment that represent future professional practice.28,29 Like Lave and Wenger6 who consider identity formation as an inseparable condition of COP membership, study participants perceived PI formation as ongoing, long-term, and related to membership in their profession. Although this is a single university case study, the findings offer insight into a pharmacy program accredited by the United Kingdom pharmacy regulator with outcomes and proposals relevant to our global counterparts. Moreover, this work helps address the paucity of research on pharmacy students’ experiences of PI formation and supports pharmacy educators to construct curricula that facilitate trainees’ PI development. Specifically, within this school, findings of the study are being used to support the creation of a curriculum that aligns with new regulatory standards.30 For example, a significant change is an increase in experiential learning opportunities from 4 to 12 weeks, over the 4-year program. In designing these placements there is a focus on sociocultural aspects of professional development rather than concentrating on cognitive attainment based on academic conventions. Professional identity development is also supported during student induction where the concept is discussed and explored with UGs. Briefly, other examples of how study findings are being used in the new curriculum include a focus on continued and enhanced provision of interprofessional learning opportunities and review of assessment practices.

5. Conclusion

Students’ understanding of PI coincides with literature findings, including uncertainty as to what it means to be a pharmacist in training and that the impact of pedagogical approaches on formation of PI should be considered during curriculum design. This study used the lens of LPP in a COP to reflect on curricular and educational approaches to support PI formation. Students expressed that learning opportunities that provide a patient focus and opportunity to participate in authentic professional activities alongside peers and more experienced members of the pharmacy community positively contribute to PI formation. This aligns with the framework espoused by Lave and Wenger2 suggesting that a sociocultural perspective where learning is viewed as LPP in a COP provides a valid theoretical basis to underpin curriculum design. As this cohort formally joins the professional COP over the next 2 years, the researchers are interested in exploring how their PI evolves and how their UG experiences influence this process. The findings of this study have been used in the revision of the MPharm at this university. As such, future work will also include the investigation of PI among those enrolled in the new program.

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Hughes Fiona: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Graham Laura: Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation. Kearney Mary-Carmel: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of Competing Interests

None declared.
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