

Occupational therapy, the child of a dysfunctional union

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Introduction: The development of the occupational therapy profession in the UK has been well documented and studied. However this documentation has not been linked to any theoretical frameworks that have enabled us examine the past and use this to guide future development. This paper traces the UK history of occupational therapy against theories of human development in order to propose a projected path towards professional maturity.

Description/report: Tracing the roots of the profession from the contrasting paradigms of Aesclepius (Greek god of medicine) and Hygeia (Greek goddess of health) the paper tracks the rising and falling fortunes of these two paradigms to the beginning of the 20th century, where it sees the birth of occupational therapy as resulting from their brief union. Drawing on theories of human development the paper follows the profession through infancy, childhood and early adolescence. Viewing the profession's behaviour and characteristics as a reflection of both its 'parent's' dysfunctional union as well as its own relationship with its 'parents', the paper demonstrates how power struggles and lack of both identity and self esteem have shaped the profession's development.

Results/discussion: The paper concludes that the profession of occupational therapy is at a stage of late adolescence within the UK. As it develops towards adulthood and professional maturity the paper uses the tasks of emerging adults cited by Roisman et al (2004) to identify the jobs facing the profession as it travels towards to maturity.

Conclusion: Our adolescent profession, manifest through the behaviour of its practitioners, has a range of tasks to undertake in order to reach maturity. These include reflecting on its relationship with its 'parents', reflecting on its current 'living arrangements' and positioning itself politically, driven by its new found confidence and identity.

Contribution to practice/evidence base of OT: This paper helps to make sense of some of the dilemmas that face occupational therapy in the UK today and helps define the tasks that will guide its development towards professional maturity.

Reference: Roisman et al 2004 Salient and emerging developmental tasks in the transition to adulthood. Child Development Jan/Feb Vol 75(1) 123-133