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The professionalization of Iranian hospital social workers

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Abstract

Introduction: Identity is formed through our understanding of ourselves and what others perceive of our actions and how we do things. Formation of professional identity includes development, advancement and socialization through social learning of specific knowledge and skills obtained within the context of professional roles, new attitudes and values.

Methods: This qualitative study used content analysis approach to explain the professionalization process of 22 social workers working in 14 public hospitals in Tehran based on their experiences. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observation and writing in the field.

Results: Eleven categories and three themes of entry into the profession, identity formation, and identity ownership were extracted out of data analysis. Revealing the process, barriers and facilitators of professionalization of hospital social workers was the results of this study.

Conclusion: Certain individual characteristics were factors for the tendency of participants to choose this profession. The participants' understanding of their profession was formed, when studying in the university through learning relevant knowledge, skills, views and professional expectations. Achieving a single identity and professional pride and self-esteem are achievements of identity ownership.

Keywords: Content analysis, Hospital, Social worker, Professionalism

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Introduction

Professionalization process or professional socialization is a process in which people in a particular group acquire identity (1). In social work, as well – like other professions – this process takes mechanisms through which people seek to join the profession, and internalize values, interests, skills and knowledge that characterizes social work (1).

According to Payne (2006) professional identity emerges through the interaction between the individual identity and professional collective identity. Multi-professional hospitals and palliative teams prompt the professional identity through interaction with other professions, and provide a suitable ground for such interactions. A social worker shapes their identity as a worker by following the path to achieve professional space (job) between spaces that are occupied by other professions. They do this by gaining experience as a social worker (2).

Friedson (1986) also believed that professionalization means that a person can experience certain social situations or social status that affect his identity and enable him to turn from a career worker into a professional (3).

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Over nearly half a century of social workers' activity in public hospitals in Iran, the identity of social work as a profession has remained unclear compared to other professions in the hospital. Hospital social workers have failed in their performance reports to managers, and introduction of their careers to colleagues in hospital (4).

Several studies in different countries have examined the factors that affect the growth and development, manner of understanding, expressing and maintaining professional identity of social workers in different fields (5-21). Since professionalization affects individuals' perceptions of the profession, roles and the professional tasks, the recognition of the professionalization of social workers is considered an effective step in the education of social workers with a high level of professional identity. But in Iran, there has been no research on this issue and there is no recorded information on the status of the professional identity of social workers. Given the importance and necessity of this issue, recognizing the formation of professional identity of hospital social workers seems to be very important. Due to the lack of sufficient knowledge on the formation process of professional identity of social workers in general, and hospital social workers in Iran in particular, the present study aimed to qualitatively understand the process of formation of professional identity of hospital social workers based on their own perceptions and experiences.

Methods

In this study, the qualitative content analysis of interview transcripts was used to extract the participants' experiences. The results of data analysis were concepts that were explored in the form of codes, categories and themes through an inductive process.

A number of 22 social workers working in 14 public hospitals in Tehran participated in this study. Inclusion criteria included holding undergraduate or higher education degrees in the fields of social work or social services, having at least two years of work experience in hospital social work department and having the ability to articulate professional experience. Sampling was done purposefully. The participants aged from 30 to 60 (mean=42.22 years), and their work experience in social work units was between 4 and 33 years. The participants consisted of 21 females, and 1 male. Those with Master's degree were 7, and 15 had undergraduate degree. The data collection tools included semi-structured interviews, field notes and observations. Sampling was continued until no new concept was produced and each interview lasted on average between 30 to 60 minutes.

The interviews were conducted in Farsi by an interviewer based on the interview guide, which included a short checklist of questions to begin the interview. During the interview, questions were designed to guide and encourage the participants. The interviews were transcribed verbatim. During open coding, the precise words which best represented key thoughts and concepts were highlighted. Then, the data were thoroughly studied to analyze the content and to extract codes.

The researcher recorded her first impressions, thoughts and analyses to extract the initial codes. Next, the codes and the data were compared in order to find similarities and differences and later the final codes and categories were developed.

Based on the differences of relations between the codes, the researcher categorized them. These categories were applied to organize the codes into larger groups.

Rigor

We used simultaneous data analysis and collection, long-term involvement with data, semi-structured interviews, notes in field, and field observation in order to increase credibility of the data. Member Check technique was used to ensure the participants' actual experience in the results, and to demonstrate the dependability of findings. The participants' statements were recorded by observing loyalty. To verify the confirmability and compliance of interviews and results of data analyses, such as basic codes and categories, we used Expert Check technique by two professors of social work profession and Peer Check with the assistance of two PhD students in social work with work experience in the field of health and care (22, 23). A review of similar studies which were conducted in other countries with different cultural and social structures proved that the results of this study and the above-mentioned ones are similar which indicates the transferability of the findings (24).

Ethical approval

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of University of Welfare and Rehabilitation Sciences (ref. no. USWR. REC.1393.184) and informed consent was taken from all participants. At the beginning of the interview, the participants were informed of the purpose of the study, method of interviewing, privacy, and confidentiality of the study. The interviews were done individually, all in the

places suggested by the interviewees such as a hospital at an agreed time. The interviewees were allowed to leave the study at any possible time.

Results

Professionalization is in fact a path that a person or group take to acquire the specific features of a profession. Understanding the profession path of social workers working in the hospital led to three concepts "entry into the profession", "identity formation" and "identity ownership" which will be discussed below (Table 1).

Entry into the profession

This concept reflects the way through which the participants entered into the field of social work, and includes five sub-concepts: "the role of the family", "specific individual characteristics", "choosing the field of social work", "motivation" and "identification with the profession".

The role of the family

The role of the family in shaping the identity of children is something undeniable. The participants in this study highlighted the role of the family, charitable activities of parents, and parents care in the face of problems of others and considered it as a factor for choosing the field of social work. For instance, *Participant NO.5* said: *"I saw my mom helping others. For example, my mother helped people when they came to work for us as domestic workers, or she introduced them to jobs when they needed one."*

Specific individual characteristics

The participants believed that having individual characteristics such as being vibrant, kind, socialized, and having the ability to empathize with people and paying attention to the situation and problems around them have pushed them towards social work profession and discipline. In this regard *Participant NO.22 stated: "There are a set of personal and individual characteristics that drag people to social work. For example, I myself feel that my kindness and socialization dragged me towards social work."*

Moreover, having personal features tailored to the profession can be considered as a factor for staying in the profession, while the lack of professional features prevents an individual from entering this field of study or quitting it. *Participant NO. 1 said that "... I remember the time when we were students. Some of us couldn't really get along with the social work profession. They entered it, but in the internships, they became agitated. On those days, Dr. Sam Aram,*

and Dr. Bazargan conducted a brief interview and told to some of them to change their major, as they aren't fitted for this job and their spirit isn't in coordination with this major, and they can't tolerate hearing people's problems."

Choosing the field of social work

Choosing the field of social work is one of the obtained concepts that implies the selection procedure for studying social work at university and then entering into the labor market. In this stage, a number of participants said that they had chosen social work with prior knowledge of this profession. A number of participants had chosen this field without knowing the content of the profession and just because it was the field of humanities and got familiar with it at university.

Participant NO.9 mentioned, "My major was mathematics, and studied physics at the university for one year. I changed the field to study Industrial Management, but I mistakenly chose another code when selecting the major. My friend called me and said that I was admitted to Shahed university, I said that it was impossible and I hadn't chosen it, but little by little I realized that my spirit is very good for this job."

Motivation

This concept explains the participants' reasons entering the field of social work and picking it up as a profession. Reasons include exploring other areas of the humanities by entering social work, because social work is an interdisciplinary course and students are required to take courses in different fields of human sciences such as psychology, sociology, philosophy, economics, laws, etc. Participant also stated their interest in helping others, solving their problems and philanthropy. *Participant NO.22 said that "I was interested in solving people's problems and helping them."*

Identification with the profession

After selecting the field of Social Work and getting familiar with it, the participants found that some of the characteristics of this profession correspond parts of their personalities. In fact goal achievement was made through social work profession. *Participant NO.10 stated that: "What I say is not a slogan; I found what I was really looking for in social work."*

Identity formation

Identity formation is another concept that emerged in the recognition of professionalization of social workers working in hospitals. This theme includes three sub-concepts: "understanding the

Table 1: Examples of meaning units, extracting codes, categories and themes from raw data

Meaning units	Code	Category	Theme
"I saw my mom helping others. For example, my mother helped people when they came to work for us as domestic workers, or she introduced them to jobs when they needed one."	Parents' charitable activities, caring for others' problems	The role of the family	
"It was something in me that made me choose social work, I keep it for myself that I shouldn't be stagnant water and should move." "I myself feel that my kindness and socialization dragged me towards social work." "I had the spirit of sympathy since high school, and these characteristics are required for social work ".	Being kind and emotional, paying attention to the situation and problems, having the ability to sympathize with people and to socialize	Specific Individual characteristics	
"I thought that social work fits my taste so I selected it." "I mistakenly chose another code when selecting the major. My friend called me and said that I was admitted to Shahed university, I said that it's impossible and I haven't chosen it, but little by little I realized that my spirit is very good for this job. "	Choosing social work with prior knowledge of this profession, choosing social work without knowing the content of the profession, accidentally entered the field	Choosing the field of Social Work	Entry into the profession
"I think because it is an interdisciplinary field and we get information of all fields in human sciences such as psychology, sociology, philosophy, logic and even economics, and management, so this field is really interesting." "I was interested in solving people's problems and helping them."	Being interested in social work, being interested in helping others and solving their problems and philanthropy, being interested in human sciences	Motivation	
"What I say is not a slogan; I found what I was really looking for in social work." "I studied and saw that there are different fields in the university and social work fitted my taste so I chose it"	Consistency between features of the profession and personal characteristics, achieving personal goals through the profession	Identification with the profession	
"I had no knowledge of the social work ". "I had no prior familiarity with this field, I wanted to change my field up to one year, then I came to the hospital for internship and I got familiar with it."	Knowing social work as a university field of study, Learning about social work at university	Understanding the profession	
"Especially, internships and practical units we passed and the visits we had really contributed to my mentality of the profession and I could understand what social work is." "The professor provided us with both positive and negative experiences". "Well, the most important thing… what we studied and theories that we passed at University, were almost helpful."	Learning through theoretical discussions, profession literature and available books, class discussions and experiences of professors, experiences from internship fields and learning, from colleagues, self-learning, lack of proper formation of professional approaches, lack of learned theories to be employed when working at hospitals	Learning the profession	Identity formation
"Your view of the issue will change. It's right that we are all born with differences, but the society will affect us later and we become what we are now." "That's how I am trained; due to my major, I consider my problems trivial." "My perspective of life has changed. I look deeper into the issues. "	Achieving a different insight into issues, deep insight into issues, achieving a set of values and skills, paying attention to the influence of environment on a person, multifactorial issues and problems, and understanding one's own and individual strengths and weaknesses	Achieving professional insight	
"Although I was not interested in theories, but I loved working and I was very interested. I mean, I went to Naser Khosrow and Shoush kindergarten". "I always wanted to work in the hospital and I stayed here as the plan ended." "When I graduated, I was told to go to a medical center to spend my internship for two years .... Then I spent two years in Mofid Children's Hospital. And then they said that they employ social workers and I was hired then".	Doing volunteer jobs while still a student, being admitted in employment exams, starting to work as an apprentice, starting to work at other units and then moving to the social work unit	Access to job	
"When I was a student I was telling everyone that I am majoring in sociology, but after I was hired and started working, I proudly told everyone that I studied social work and work in a hospital. " "... I always enjoy that I am the only social worker in the hospital and always get a kick out of introducing myself as a social worker."	Declaring to be a social worker, being satisfied with being a social worker, not being embarrassed to introduce oneself as a social worker	Declaring the identity	Identity ownership
"My job in the hospital began with 2 hard cases and still goes on. I got quite experienced in relation to those. " "I am a social worker everywhere. Not just in the university or hospital. Yeah, all aspects of my life's filled with social work, It feels good when someone could resolve problems of people and guide them. "	Mastery at the profession, understanding roles and tasks, social work as a lens, social work as a lifestyle	Internalizing the identity	

profession", "profession learning" and "achieving professional insight".

Understanding the profession

Some participants decided to choose this field having previous knowledge about it and a number of them learned about this field at university through meetings and consultations with professors in this field. Some participants also learned about the profession at the time of employment in the hospital and during the internship program.

Participant NO.9 pointed out: "I had no prior familiarity with this field, I wanted to change my field up to one year, then I came to the hospital for internship and I got familiar with it."

Profession learning

Profession learning is the stage in which the participants learn how to think and work as a social worker and numerous opportunities are placed before them for learning about the profession. Learning through theoretical discussions, profession literature and available books (Persian resources which are available are limited and most of them are in English), class discussions and experiences of professors (with positive or negative effects), experiences from internship fields and learning from colleagues, and the accumulation of work experience are among the opportunities that are involved in professional learning of social work. In this regard, *Participant NO.12 said: "I was lucky because our professors were very professional in this field. They taught us various practices and ... ".*

The participants also stated that many of the working practices and implementation of individual tasks and roles had been earned through their own efforts and the supervisors and trainers were not involved in this process, and some have stressed that they learned the work alone without relying on their colleagues. In the meantime, the lack of educational resources and sometimes inexperienced professors led to a lack of proper formation of professional approaches and thus lack of learned theories to be employed when working at hospitals.

Achieving professional insight

The participants believed that in the learning process of social work, they learn elements of social work profession identity and internalize them, and act accordingly. These elements include having a different and deeper look at things, achieving a set of values and skills, attention to the influence of environment on a person, multifactorial issues and problems, and understanding one's own and individual strengths and weaknesses. *Participant NO.3 stated that "My perspective of life has changed. I look deeper into the issues and problems."*

Identity ownership

This concept is the last concept of the professionalization process, and shows how the participants have passed the final stage of professionalization and includes the sub-concepts of "access to job", "declaring the identity" and "internalizing identity".

Access to job

Access to jobs for the participants in this study occurred in different ways. Some participants began working in college. Some of the participants entered the hospital to spend their apprenticeship and after spending this period in hospital continued working in the form of formal or contract employment. One of the participants after a few years of working experience in office decided to study in social work, and then chose the social work profession and began working in the social work department. A number of participants initially attended courses of University of Medical Sciences and after admission, began working in social work department. *Participant NO.5 stated that: "When I graduated, I was told to go to a medical center to spend my internship for two years .... Then I spent two years in Mofid Children's Hospital. And then they said that they employ social workers and I was hired then".*

Declaring the identity

In the process of identity formation, the participants said they gained a specific pride and prejudice toward their careers, and achieved a position that proudly and without shame called themselves a social worker. This situation occurred in most cases after the studentship in the workplace. One of the participants avoids stating his career in public and introduces himself a social worker just when he wants to help people with his profession tools. *Participant NO.13 added: "... I always enjoy that I am the only social worker in the hospital and always get a kick out of introducing myself as a social worker and I want to help people."*

Internalizing the identity

This concept suggests that social work has become a part of the person and a part of his life such that the other aspects of his/her life are affected as well. Although the participants mentioned it in the previous stages, at this stage,

they acknowledge it with greater confidence. Dominance on work, and understanding the roles and tasks are some of the aspects and effects of internalization of identity. Social Work as a lens, conversion of social work to the lifestyle of individuals, as well as the effect of a person's emotional experience and feelings which develop from social work in individuals are other manifestations of professional identity and integration of personal and professional identity. *Participant NO.15 mentioned, "Once, I was talking with my daughter because of a mistake that she made, then she turned to me and said, 'Mom, would you please not treat me like a social worker. Please just be my mom."*

Discussion

This study is the first study in Iran done with a qualitative method to investigate the professionalization of hospital social workers. Overall results of this study revealed the professionalization of social workers working in hospitals. The original concepts extracted from the data were "entry into the profession", "identity formation" and "identity ownership". All categories, included subcategories that fell in their respective classes based on their differences and distinctions.

The first theme was "entry into the profession" showing the participants' entry to the profession of social work and included five categories of the family role, individual characteristics, choosing social work major, motivation and identification with the profession. This concept indicated that assistive parents and their care towards the problems of others have cultivated the seed towards this profession in participants. In addition, individual characteristics such as sociability, the ability for empathy and curiosity are driving forces of participants in choosing Social Work accidentally or intentionally. Also, interest in helping people and tendency to study the humanities and identification with social work profession will keep the individual in the field of social work. In a study conducted by Tom (2010) the concept of entry into the profession included two sub-classes of profession selection model including random selection and informed choices, and motivation to enter the field includes the challenging, emerging and independent nature of the social work profession (25). In another study Noakes (2002) found similar concepts such as falling or accidentally entering into the profession, decision-making and choosing the profession and acknowledging that social work profession is a part of one's own and that the willingness of family members to help the needy ones (26) . Lee

(2014) in the study of the formation of professional identity of social workers protecting children, found inauguration to profession concept which included interest in children and desire to change the lives of children (12).

The second theme referred to "the formation of professional identity" in the participants that included the following categories: understanding the profession, profession learning and achieving professional insight. The profession learning process begins from the admission time at the university and during academic education. The theoretical foundations, academic resources, class discussions, experiences of professors, and training courses all provide the opportunities for professional learning. Then, by entering the work environment through working with colleagues and staff in social work department, the learning process will continue and become completed. The study findings of Ross (2005), on the professional socialization process confirms that this process occurs with others through the background of the participants including motivation for choosing Social Work, work experience in the past and personal values as well as experiences from the training course, such as course content and education (27). Tom (2010) in his study extracted data collected from the concept of growth and professional competence that included the following subcategories: professional training, personality traits, adaptation with the environment, and the relationship between theory and practice (25). Noakes (2002) in his study extracted the concept of identity creation, and shaped the subcategories of profession learning, identity refinement, and understanding the role in child protection area. He believes that it is a non-linear process and participants in different time periods enter each of these subcategories and pass them behind (26).

Achieving professional insight is another category of the theme of identity formation that refers to the acquisition of a set of values and specific methods for understanding the surrounding world and seeing problems and issues as multifactorial. The findings of Noakes study (2002) also confirmed this point that social workers in the course of professionalization achieve a kind of unique approach and a new look to acquire (26).

The third theme was called "identity ownership", which included three categories of access to jobs, declaring the identity and internalizing identity. This theme is the last step in the process of professionalization. The first step in identity ownership includes achieving the job in different ways, such as admission

through the exam, spending staffing plan and then contract employment, employment in non-social work departments and then transfer into the social work department and employment from the studentship period. Mc Ardle (2007) in his study referred to the ability to obtain and maintain the job as career identity (28). The category of declaring the identity refers to declaring being social worker at general assemblies and not being ashamed of expressing one's own profession. Noakes (2002) in his study concluded that declaring the identity depends not only on the bias of what can be done, but people are required to believe in it, and have a sense of security by stating being a social worker (26). Lee (2014) called this concept as the emergence of different defensive techniques which includes declaring the identity as a social worker and inviting others to engage in this work and avoidance of declaring one's identity as a social worker due to families' fear of social workers (12). The category of identity internalization also refers to dominance on the work, true understanding of roles and duties and looking at life through the lens of social work. Emotions caused by the problems of the clients linger with social workers and are not forgotten. Noakes (2002) concluded that at this stage, professional social workers found that their profession is an inherent and natural part of their existence and they feel comfortable with it (26). Lee (2014) also selected the title of "*blurring of personal and professional image: the emergence of a unified and coherent identity*" for this class, which refers to the internalization of the social work profession characteristics by the individuals and living with a social working style (12). Paula et al. (1994) extracted the concept of work centrality to determine the importance of individual jobs in their life (29).

Conclusion

This study dealt with the recognition of the professionalization process of social workers working in the hospital. The first concept which was extracted dealt with the entry of participants to the social work profession. Having individual characteristics such as sociability, interest in helping each other, the ability of empathy and compassion are among the factors affecting the tendency towards the profession and staying in it. The second concept showed the identity formation that is the central concept of this study. The results of this study showed that the academic training and learning opportunities that universities provided for individuals, and the work experience and accumulation of the experiences are the most basic factors which affect the professionalization of the participants. The third concept refers to the identity ownership that was the final stage of professionalization. Gaining a single identity, professional pride and self-esteem are the achievements of this stage. Lack of familiarity with the social work profession before choosing it, negative attitude of some social work professors about this profession, lack of school resources in the Farsi language, and unpractical theories of the profession are the problems that the participants were facing in the professionalization process.

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