

“CRISES OF CONFIDENCE AND IDENTITY”: Occupational Therapy during the 1960s and 1970s according to Students and Tutors of Dorset House

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ABSTRACT:

This study is based on a series of oral history interviews with occupational therapists who were either students or tutors at the Dorset House School of Occupational Therapy between 1956 and 1980. The research period saw occupational therapy change its focus from the teaching of arts and crafts to long-stay hospital patients to enabling people to live independent lives. During the transition period, many newly-qualified occupational therapists lacked confidence about their role and questioned the relevance of their training. The study analyses the experiences of the Dorset House alumni and the issues they faced.

INTRODUCTION:

The Dorset House School of Occupational Therapy was England's first school of occupational therapy. Founded by psychiatrist Dr Elizabeth Casson (1881-1954) in Bristol in 1930, the school moved to Oxford in 1946 and became part of Oxford Brookes University in 1992.

In 1955 the occupational therapy training syllabus was subject to major revision in an attempt to keep pace with the rapidly changing medical environment. [1] Occupational therapy has nonetheless suffered “crises of confidence and identity” throughout its history. [2] The 1970s were identified by Ann Wilcock as a “decade of professional self-doubt” [3], and by Tessa Perrin as the period when the profession suffered “some of the more painful throes of its identity crisis”. [4]

METHOD:

Twenty in-depth, digitally-recorded interviews were conducted with Dorset House alumni who were present at the school either as students or staff between 1956 and 1980. The research methodology was cleared by the Oxford Brookes University's Ethics Committee.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

- To what extent were class and gender an issue for students and newly-qualified occupational therapists?
- How significantly did arts and crafts feature in the Dorset House curriculum and how useful did students find these skills as practitioners?
- Were occupational therapists respected by other healthcare professionals?
- Did occupational therapy have a clearly defined role?

FINDINGS:

All Dorset House students during the research period were white and female, and most were middle-class. The training at Dorset House built upon an enthusiasm for arts and crafts frequently encouraged in middle-class girls, particularly those educated privately. Many alumni cited the appeal of arts and crafts as a key reason for choosing occupational therapy as a career.

Maturity and gender were important factors in a therapist's ability to “stand up to” medical practitioners, who were often male and unsupportive, while the exclusive middle-class environment of Dorset House did not prepare students for mixing with the cross-section of people they would encounter in the workplace. A lack of diversity amongst occupational therapists remains an issue for the profession today. [5]

Arts and crafts – increasingly considered unscientific and difficult to quantify by medical practitioners – still dominated the Dorset House curriculum after the syllabus revision of 1955. Only students before 1962 found the level of arts and crafts training relevant to their work after qualifying. Many found that the emphasis placed on arts and crafts at Dorset House left them ill-prepared for their duties on the wards, leading one newly-qualified therapist to claim that she “used to dread ward rounds”.

An overlap between the roles of occupational therapy and physiotherapy resulted in tension between the professions. The lack of clarity regarding the role of occupational therapy, highlighted by the Tunbridge Report of 1972, caused one interviewee to regret her choice of career. [6]

CONCLUSIONS:

An interviewee's comment that her training fell somewhere between the “holistic listening and problem-solving” of contemporary practice and the “diversional therapy” of pre-war craftwork, encapsulates the sense of uncertainty surrounding the identity of occupational therapy during the late 1960s and 1970s. Occupational therapists found it difficult to shed the out-moded basket-weaving image, particularly as their training continued to devote significant amounts of time to learning crafts. An association with arts and crafts led to the perception that occupational therapy was more of an art than a science, which was detrimental to its reputation in an era which upheld the biomedical model. The practitioners' social profile often impeded their relationships both with other healthcare professionals and with their patients.

REFERENCES:

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- * All images from Dorset House Archive

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

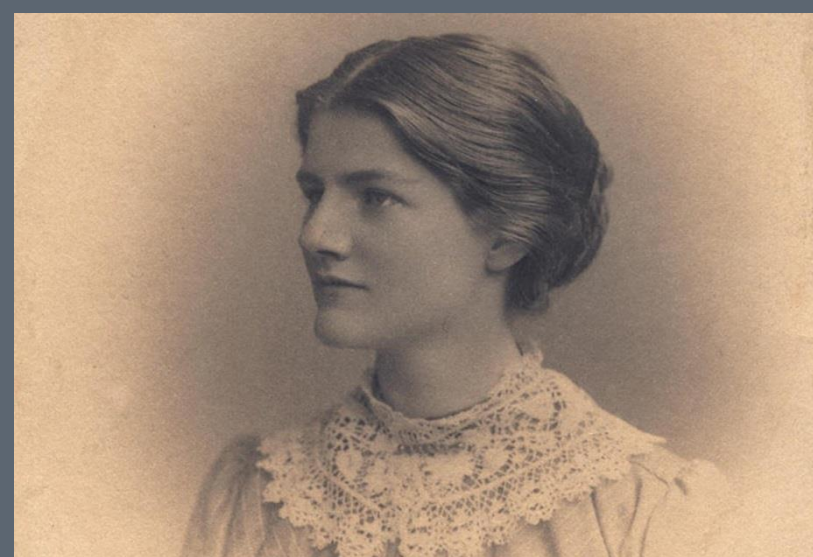
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Basketry class at Dorset House in the late 1950s



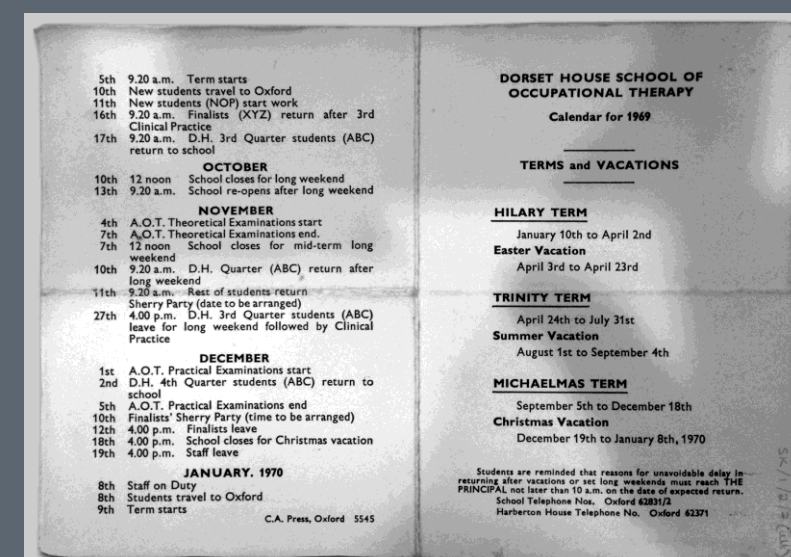
Mary McDonald, Principal of Dorset House, 1938-1973



The young Elizabeth Casson, founder of Dorset House



Dorset House, London Road, home to the school from 1961



Dorset House school calendar for 1969