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Chapter Three

What is professional identity and how do social workers acquire it?

Fran Wiles

Introduction

The past decade has seen a growing interest in social workers' professional identity. For students, it is increasingly viewed as an important outcome of qualifying education, to be developed and maintained throughout their social work careers. Being clear and confident about identity is considered to improve social workers' contribution in working with other professionals. A strong, positive sense of professional identity is said to bolster social workers' resilience to stress. Professional identity, when linked with the concept of 'professionalism', has become bound up with the regulation of practitioners and the avoidance of 'unprofessional' behaviour. These are just some of the ways in which the concept of professional identity has come to the fore: but are we all talking about the same thing? Understanding the different meanings and their usage is important for social workers, especially in the face of debate about the nature of social work and how it is best taught and regulated. This chapter discusses these meanings and suggests some ways in which practitioners – especially students and newly qualified workers - develop it.

My own interest began with a small-scale qualitative study (Wiles, 2010a) which investigated social work students' personal and professional identities. Rapid changes in social work and social work education provide a continually developing context for exploring this topic; and to enrich this discussion I draw comparisons with studies that

have taken place simultaneously and more recently. The chapter concludes by highlighting some developments which have begun to emerge in the relatively short time since my research was completed, and which might impact on further studies of professional identity.

I was initially doubtful about using the term ‘professional identity’ in my research, having observed it being harnessed to regulatory discourse in the language used by England’s General Social Care Council (GSCC) (Wardle, 2008). Anticipating some ambiguity and ambivalence in the interview data, I was nevertheless puzzled when final year social work students consistently struggled to define professional identity; and their tentative efforts showed a wide divergence. Consulting the wealth of literature about teaching, nursing and social work, I saw the term ‘professional identity’ used to convey many different ideas. It is not surprising, then, that students’ talk reflects a breadth of cultural meanings available within the social work community and in society more broadly.

Research parameters and methodology

The research, conducted between 2007 and 2010 in England, explored how professional registration affects the way that social work students talk about – and thus construct – their personal and professional identities. Social work regulation was established in 2001, with professional registers operational from 2003. When the research began, registration had only recently been extended to students in England, who were required to demonstrate their professional suitability both in and outside work (General Social Care Council, 2010). Acknowledging the importance of fitness to practise, I nevertheless wanted to discover whether this scrutiny had any impact on students’ identities. In brief, the research found that professional registration does

influence how students see themselves and how they behave; but this needs to be understood as part of wider broader identity work involved in learning to be a social worker. Since the transfer of regulation to the Health and Care Professions Council during 2012, students in England are not currently able to join the professional register; however, as universities are still required to investigate concerns about fitness to practise it seems a reasonable assumption that this finding holds good.

The research methodology was derived from a post-structuralist understanding of discourse and identity (Hall, 1996). In this approach, discourses are powerful ways of presenting social phenomena as ‘true’ and making certain courses of action seem logical and inevitable. Discourse analysis probes beneath the surface of policies and institutional practices to examine their complex, and sometimes contradictory, effects. In particular, I was interested in the discourse of professional regulation established by the creation of four UK care councils: one of the measures introduced in response to ‘failings’ catalogued in New Labour’s 1998 white paper, *Modernising Social Services* (Department of Health, 1998, discussed by Langan, 2000). Post-structuralist identities are fluid and multiple, constructed in relation to discourses. Discursive meanings, conveyed through social, linguistic and institutional practices, define how people and their circumstances are viewed and – importantly – they have real and significant effects for the people concerned. So, for instance, the word ‘professional’ has many connotations in everyday language, but within the discourse of social work and regulation it often expresses normative expectations about practitioners’ roles, skills and qualities.

Research Process: Obtaining the data

The students were all studying on a distance learning Social Work undergraduate degree programme in England. Despite a cohort of some 500 students, recruiting participants proved to be surprisingly difficult. Once ethical approval was gained, I initially confined my invitation to 160 students living in three of the university's regions. Receiving only three replies, I extended the invitation to all students undertaking the second or final level of the degree. Eventually seven people volunteered: one second year and six final year students. This disappointingly low response may have been partly due to the sensitivity of the topic (Wiles, 2010b) or the considerable workload demands for the students.

Despite the self-selected nature of this small sample, the volunteers were reasonably mixed in terms of age, gender and ethnicity. Three men and four women, the participants were aged between the late twenties and early fifties; five had grown up in the UK and two had migrated from outside the European Union. While socio-economic data was not sought, three students depicted their family backgrounds as working class or economically disadvantaged. The degree programme is employment-based, and all participants were sponsored by statutory sector employers in adult social care, child care, housing, education and mental health.

The study used semi-structured interviews lasting between sixty and ninety minutes, held at locations chosen by each participant. Consistent with the methodology, the aim of the interviews was not to seek facts or 'truth', but rather to generate data about the discourses used in students' talk. A flexible interview schedule was designed to explore the discourses that students drew on to talk about their experiences of social work education; examples from their practice placements which illustrated their

conceptualisation of personal and professional identity; how they described themselves in private life and as developing professionals; the personal consequences of their transition from 'lay person' to 'qualified social worker'; and their experiences of professional registration and their understanding of its implications. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed in full.

Discourse as a resource: the analysis

The interview data was submitted to a form of discourse analysis developed from the field of social psychology (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Edley, 2001). Drawing on both Foucauldian theory and conversation analysis, this method explores how people construct identity through spoken language. Unlike conversation analysis, however, this approach (hereafter referred to simply as 'discourse analysis') requires attention to the external context: cultural and social meanings are treated as 'discursive resources' for constructing identity through talk.

The first stage of discourse analysis involves searching the transcripts for recurring words, phrases, themes and ideas which signify 'patterns' – both commonalities and variations - in the data. Following the theoretical premise that people's talk draws on culturally shared meanings, it is important to search across the whole sample, rather than confining the analysis to each transcript in turn. A theoretical judgement then needs to be made about which patterns constitute appropriate themes or 'interpretative repertoires' to be analysed. Such decisions are based on the context of the interview and the researcher's familiarity with the external environment. Potter and Wetherell (1987) define interpretative repertoires as commonly used ways of talking about

familiar phenomena or events: often revealed by speakers' assumptions that the context is obvious and needs no explanation. For example, an interpretative repertoire in the research data was 'social work values', which frequently and spontaneously arose in participants' talk with no attempt to qualify or define its meaning.

The second stage of analysis examines how speakers use discursive patterns to construct and convey an identity in the interview context. The focus is therefore on the use of discourses as a resource, rather than on individual narratives, emotions or attitudes. This approach reflects the methodological assumption that individual talk is produced from a complex interweaving of the immediate context (the interview) and wider social debates (Billig, 1987). Further illustration will be evident as the data is discussed below, and a full account can be found in Wiles, 2010a.

Research Findings

Perhaps due to my own caution about using the concept of professional identity, the research did not initially set out to explore its nature. It was both unexpected and fascinating, therefore, to discover that participants conceptualised professional identity in such different ways. The analysis showed students constructing their professional identity in relation to desired traits, or through developing a sense of shared identity with other social workers; alternatively it was portrayed as a process of individual development. Each of these meanings is now discussed in turn; in practice, participants drew on an overlapping combination of discourses to describe their development as social workers. To further contextualise the research findings, I will interweave additional data from both my own and others' studies.

In this form of discourse analysis, it is usual to present a series of detailed extracts showing how each pattern is repeated and varied across the sample; economy requires, however, that I select mainly single illustrative examples. For ease of reading, some pauses and hesitations in the transcript have been omitted and explanatory text has been inserted between square brackets.

Professional traits

Although all participants struggled to define professional identity, their attempts all drew to some extent on the sociological notion of professional traits. One student, for example, began by musing:

Well it's so diverse, isn't it, that it's very hard to pigeon hole. They try and channel it into [occupational standards] and all the rest of it. It's not something easily put into a box is it? (Student A)

Despite the speaker's apparent uncertainty, the reference to occupational standards – used to assess students' progress while on their practice placements - formed a common pattern across all the transcripts. Similar findings are reported by Scholar et al., (2014) whose three year study of a much larger sample of social work degree students found that, especially in the earlier stages of training, participants explained social work in relation to traits. Generic professional traits are summarised by Yam (2004, p.929) as an 'extensive theoretical knowledge base'; 'expertise in a specialized field'; an 'altruistic commitment to service'; an 'unusual degree of autonomy in work'; 'a code of ethics and conduct overseen by a body of representatives from within the field itself'; and 'a personal identity that stems from the professional's

occupation'. These characteristics are easily recognised in the language adopted by policy and guidance documents, including those which set out the assessment standards for social work. Such documents act as powerful discursive resources which define 'good' and 'professional' practice (Nicoll and Harrison, 2003, p.33; Watson, 2006): and it is not surprising that students' talk is influenced by this way of describing professionalism.

An interesting example of how official documents both reflect and construct discourses is the UK government-commissioned review of the Diploma in Social Work (J.M. Consulting, 1999). Following close on the heels of *Modernising Social Services*, this report invoked and reinforced the government's rhetoric about the need to restore public trust, and explicitly drew on professional traits in the recommendations which influenced the introduction of a new Social Work Degree. Subsequently, the notion of traits as a mark of professionalism was further embedded into official discourse through the strategies which were introduced in the early 2000s to raise the status of social work in the UK: both professional registration and the enhanced qualification. At the time of the research, the English curriculum incorporated the National Occupational Standards (Topss, 2002, p.55-63) which makes frequent reference to being 'professional'. Although the term 'professional' is not defined, certain traits are inferred. For example, social workers are expected to draw on theoretical and other knowledge, and demonstrate expertise in researching and critically analysing social work practice.

In the research, the traits of expert knowledge and autonomy were evident in the way participants talked about their social work learning:

[I have gained] you know, the grounding in the theory and the knowledge
And also the confidence to be able to talk about those things. I know that I've
got that grounding now to give [my] opinions some sort of backing (Student
B).

and

At this third level, we're expected to practice professionally with greater
autonomy. So ... I feel like I'm a professional social worker because I'm
given a high degree of autonomy (Student C);

Adherence to professional codes and boundaries was another recurring trait in most
students' conceptualisation of professional identity:

I was able to display my professionalism and form a working relationship with
the [father]. But I have my line which I have to draw ... I don't use my private
mobile to text him - I borrow one of the manager's mobile phones. And
there's no phone calls outside office hours (Student C).

Meleyal's study (2014) found that media reporting of fitness to practise investigations
left some social workers feeling vulnerable, worried about coming to the attention of
the professional regulatory body. A similar finding occurred in my own study: while
very few students had actually transgressed the codes of practice, most were able to
recount a 'near miss' (such as a service user's complaint) which had caused them to
worry about being reported to the regulator. As indicated above, however, a more
common quandary was where to draw the line between personal and the professional
life. In similar vein, another recent study (Grant et al., 2014) revealed that social work

students considered it ‘unprofessional’ to allow personal life to intersect with the job, or even to talk about the emotional impact of difficult, upsetting work.

Practising social work values – which can be linked with ethical codes of practice – was another recurring pattern in students’ talk:

The values [are] a big part of me considering myself a professional now. The grounding in the beliefs... you know, the bigger picture in terms of helping disadvantaged people (Student B).

Some accounts invoked the idea of an ‘altruistic commitment to service’ referred to by Yam; for example Student C expressed difficulty in drawing a distinction between her personal and professional life because studying social work ‘changes your whole being: you always want to help people, you know, as much as you can’.

These extracts provide a glimpse into one of the resources - the discourse of professionalism based on traits - which students used to construct their professional identities. A feature of discourse is that it remains powerful by successfully adapting and evolving. In the discursive language of the GSCC, professionalism had been promoted as a way of building public trust through regulating social workers’ conduct (Blewitt et al., 2008). An interesting development since the study reported on here is that the Professional Capabilities Framework, which replaced England’s National Occupational Standards, gives a prominent place to developing professionalism in a broader sense which includes attention to one’s own emotional resilience, support and learning. Overall, social workers are now expected to be able to ‘identify and behave as a professional social worker’ (The College of Social Work, 2012). This more

dynamic conceptualisation of professional identity hints at the second usage of the term that emerged from the data.

A collective professional identity

Another way of talking about professional identity draws on a collective sense of being a social worker. In the data generated, this was evident in students' talk about particular practice settings, seen in the following attempt to tease out the meaning of professional identity:

I know that you can go back to the values being the same [across different settings]. But the actual day to day work can be very different to do with what client group you're with (Student A).

While the social work literature supports the idea that different kinds of collective identity are based around specialisms (Barnes et al., 2000; Moran et al., 2007; Judd and Sheffield, 2010), there is also a very strong interpretative repertoire which conveys the *loss* of identity caused by organisational restructuring and the impact of multi-disciplinary practice. This is evident in the next extract in which the speaker invokes a sense of threatened professionalism and loss of role and identity, before taking up a position which asserts social work's particular value:

Sometimes I've struggled with 'am I really making a difference, is there any purpose in this, is social work becoming un-professionalised?'. In the community mental health team ... all the professionals seem to be doing very similar jobs as care co-ordinators. Does that mean that in five years time social workers will be a mental health kind of professional rather than specifically a

social worker? But I think at the moment social work definitely brings a unique sort of thing to mixed professional teams (Student B).

Student B's reflections echo the concerns expressed by social workers in Barnes et al.'s study (2000) of Community Mental Health Teams, who feared that their professional identity, which they represented in terms of values and professional culture, was threatened by being located in a multi-disciplinary team. While powerful, this cautionary interpretative repertoire is not the only one presented in the literature on multi-agency and multi-disciplinary teams. Frost et al. (2005), writing about children and families work, found that diverse team members can work through conflicts and complexities to develop positive ways of working together. Walker (2010) argues that social workers employed in health or education settings sometimes have more opportunities than their local authority colleagues to use psycho-social and therapeutic skills, and to work creatively and holistically.

Leaving aside any evaluation of the advantages and demerits of multi-disciplinary working, the point here is that these debates act as further discursive resources for social work students and newly qualified workers to construct their own professional identities. White and Featherstone's (2005) study of professional identity in a multi-disciplinary team shows how practitioners construct shared narratives which uphold and reinforce occupational boundaries. For example, social workers reinforced their own sense of child protection expertise by frequently referring to the inferior knowledge of other professionals in the team. My study revealed a similar sense of collective narratives being used to emphasise occupational differences. Concerned about a service user's children, a student in a mental health team expressed frustration that her colleagues had not addressed the issue:

I [met up] with the children and families social worker and said ‘what’s this all about?’ See, I don’t know if that would have happened if I hadn’t done [it], because it was a very ‘health’ dominated team and most of the workers are nurses (Student A).

A feature of the analysis method is to look for disruptions and ‘trouble’ in participants’ talk (Wetherell, 1998), and this suggested tensions between social work identities in different settings. In particular students expressed their perception that statutory child protection work holds a higher status than social work in older people’s or preventive family support teams: similar tensions and findings are reported by other researchers (Moran et al., 2007; Walker, 2010; Scholar et al., 2014). This had an effect on students’ sense of professional identity:

It seems to be, in children’s services where I work, that if you haven’t worked in ... the child protection arena ... you’re looked down on as not being a proper social worker (Student D);

and

I don’t want to be working with older people ... real social work [means] children and families to me (Student E).

A variation of collective identity draws on social work as a unified category (rather than a setting-specific identity). This interpretative repertoire invokes social work’s uniqueness, defined in opposition to other professions. Jones (2014, pp. 485 - 486), for example, writes of social work’s struggle to create a distinctive ‘professional space’ and ‘core identity’. Scholar et al. (2014, p. 1010) point out that the Professional Capabilities Framework ‘implies that all social workers, no matter what setting they

may work in, share a professional identity that transcends organisational structures, specific tasks and roles associated with particular service user groups’.

Another resource for collective identity is professional registration. In my study, participants frequently drew – sometimes implicitly – on regulatory discourses transmitted in publications such as codes of practice, which were also reinforced in teaching materials. Students referred to the positive effects of registration for the profession overall, and by implication for themselves as individuals:

I think [registration] helps people to feel more professional. And when we feel more professional we act in a more professional way. I think it does build confidence, really, to be able to say ‘well I belong to this professional body, therefore I am expected to conduct myself in a certain way’ (Student F).

Similar themes are evident in Meleyal’s (2014, online) study which found that ‘the majority of social workers ... welcomed being a registered profession. They spoke of hopes that registration would improve the status of social work and how it is perceived by the public and media.’.

So far, then, I have discussed two broad ways in which research participants conceptualised professional identity, drawing on discourses of professionalism (in terms of desired traits and qualities) and a sense of collective identity. Also present in my data is a third way of understanding professional identity, concerned with how students were coming to ‘identify themselves’ subjectively as social workers. Post-structuralist writers refer to this process as identity work.

Identity work: becoming a social work professional

The interview transcripts capture a tentative sense of students' individual journeys towards professional identity. In addition to the notions discussed earlier, participants' talk conveyed something more fluid, personal and still in process:

In your thinking, you're a social worker. Your understanding [and] knowledge you have gained as a social worker rubs [off] in your personal life as well.

Even though it's your personal identity, your thinking has changed from your learning (Student C);

and

[Being a social worker is] part of your identity really; I suppose it is part of me (Student A).

Personal experience is a significant resource for constructing professional identity (Watson, 2006). Understanding how and when to draw on personal history and experience – the use of self - is thus an important aspect of social work education (Harrison & Ruch, 2007; Seden, 2011): this does not mean that it is easy to learn. A recurring pattern in the data is that students present their professional identities as a source of contention in their personal relationships, requiring them to reconcile conflicting cultural discourses about issues such as child-rearing, gender roles and political beliefs. The following extract, which arose relatively spontaneously in the interview, gives insight into students' changing relationships with family and friends:

I get criticised ... for being too like a social worker. My [friend] often says to me 'oh you're a typical social worker' because I have a view about something which he wouldn't have had. People have an image of me, you know. [...]

Sometimes I don't get my friends ... we can talk about football, we can talk

about music. But then other issues, world issues, we just don't talk about because we can't. We're poles apart (Student G).

Challenges of this kind are frequently reported in higher education research. Some working class students experience an initial disjuncture in negotiating identity in the university setting (Reay, 2003 and Reay et al., 2010). Family therapy trainees describe having to re-evaluate their personal and professional identities (Nel, 2006); and mature women undertaking nurse education have reported negative consequences for their personal relationships (Kevern and Webb, 2004). Newly qualified social workers can also experience the disruptive effects of emotionally demanding and stressful work on their personal lives (Jack and Donnellan, 2010).

Despite the considerable personal changes experienced in the student role, most participants represented their practice learning very positively:

It's a very complex case but I'm working closely with the senior practitioner. So I feel very supported in this [student] role. And I feel like I have got a right to be doing this (Student F).

They frequently described other practitioners in the practice setting as role models for professional identity:

I learned a lot from the senior workers on our team, who were really good role models in terms of how you conduct yourself (Student F).

I had a really good Practice Assessor and there was just something about the way he pulled his professional identity and his private identity together that made me feel I want to do that (Student E).

The influence of the practice educator / supervisor is reported in other studies of students and newly qualified social workers (Grant, Sheridan & Webb, 2016).

Evaluating the impact of different variables on the development of students' professional identity, Levy et al. (2014) found the most important to be a satisfactory relationship with the supervisor who was seen as a role model. Similar findings are reported by Scholar et al. (2014), and in Kearns and McCardle's (2012) study of newly qualified social workers. It would appear that the assessment relationship is influential on professional identity, perhaps by offering novice practitioners close insight into how formal and tacit discourses are used by an experienced colleague.

Reviewing the discussion, I have argued that each practitioner draws from a breadth of discursive resources, combined with personal meanings, to construct their individual sense of being a social worker. As a researcher, this idea helped me to understand why students may find it hard to put forward a single definition of professional identity; it also highlights the important role of the practice setting.

Some writers (Watson, 2006; Frost et al., 2005) refer to the normative dimension of the agency setting as a 'community of practice'; in my research, this concept, developed by Etienne Wenger (1998), provided a useful perspective on the role of informal, non-assessed workplace learning (Nicoll and Harrison, 2003; Yam, 2004; Kearns and McCardle, 2012) in developing professional identity.

Wenger's theory builds on social learning theory and highlights the gradual adoption of professional values and norms through a process of socialisation and belonging. Through engaging in a joint enterprise, co-workers develop a shared 'repertoire' (Wenger, 1998, p.153) of meanings and practices which both define and reinforce the community. This includes informal everyday interactions: ways of talking, shared narratives, and even humour (White and Featherstone, 2005; Richards, 2006). In the practice setting, students and newly qualified social workers must synthesise different narratives and discourses about professional identity, both formal and informal. So, undertaking the role and responsibilities of a social worker - and being positioned by others in this way - is an essential vehicle for novices to construct their identities as they move from the community's periphery towards more central membership. A weakness in Wenger's work is its insufficient attention to unequal power relationships (Hughes et al., 2007). Nevertheless, the advantage of regarding the practice learning setting as a community of practice is that it highlights the continual *process* involved in becoming a professional. Indeed, this idea is reinforced in the requirement that 'to support the development of professional identity, students should not be the sole social work representative in a setting' (The College of Social Work, 2013, p. 16), and that they must work alongside a qualified and registered social worker in their final placement.

A note of caution towards the research findings

The small size of this study, and the employment-based nature of the sample, prevent generalisation. It must also be acknowledged that study took place prior to social work reforms in England since 2012. On the other hand, similar findings have been

reported by larger studies taking place during, or soon after, the same period. As the research was not concerned with personal narratives but instead explored the discursive messages which influenced the development of professional identity, it is suggested that the findings are relevant for any student in the UK. Other research studies indicate that these considerations are also important for newly qualified social workers.

Discourse analysis provides a way of standing back and gaining a new and critical perspective on familiar social practices, and can suggest further questions for investigation. Attending to the nuances of talk makes visible the range of difficulties, often subtle and hard to express, faced by students in constructing professional identity. When interpreting the findings of discourse analysis, however, there are a number of features which need to be taken into account.

First, interview data is not treated as a direct reflection of what people think. In this methodological approach language is never seen as 'neutral' or merely descriptive, but constructs both the concepts being discussed, and the identities of the speaker and others. It follows, therefore, that in an interview the meanings are co-constructed by the participant and researcher; and further meanings are produced during the subsequent interpretation of the data. Second, following the premise that *identities are fluid and multiple, participants construct a particular version of professional identity* in the interview situation. This does not mean that participants seek to present a misleading picture, but rather, that the identities which are expressed in the interview context are not the only version. A good illustration of this argument is given in Wetherell and Edley's (1999, p. 52) observation that the people in their study were:

... engaged in accomplishing a wide variety of identity positions. They were simultaneously constructing themselves as reasonable human beings, as individuals with certain reputations and histories and (usually) as co-operative and willing research subjects.

In Chapter 14 of this book Leigh discusses this in terms of social workers producing "credible performances". Furthermore, it is important to consider the context of the interview and its impact on the data. With hindsight, the recurrence of the professionalism discourse in the transcripts is not surprising: my research invitation had stated my interest in students' experiences of professional registration; their experiences of developing a sense of themselves as a social worker; and the links between professional and personal identity. In addition, although I did not teach the participants individually, they were aware of my role as an academic and manager on the Social Work Programme, which may have increased their wish to present a positive professional identity. Another very interesting contextual detail is that almost all participants volunteered during the final six months of their studies when workload pressure would have been very high. Post-interview feedback indicated that participants had been attracted by the opportunity to discuss the topic of professional identity at this stage of their learning. Similar observations have been made by other researchers, including Moorhead et al. (2016, pp. 8 - 9) in their study of newly qualified social workers in Australia:

professional identity was perceived as an important part of ... early career

experiences and participants greatly appreciated opportunities to critically reflect on it. Their motivations to participate in this study support international literature from Kearns and McArdle (2011) and Campanini et al. (2012) who found exploring and maintaining a social work professional identity was an important dimension of early career experiences, and that newly qualified social workers appreciated opportunities to do so.

Taylor (2006) argues that social work practitioners construct a particular version of professional identity in the reflective writing that they submit for assessment and supervision. In this sense, therefore, participants had had many previous opportunities to 'rehearse' their professional identities; I suggest that the interviews provided a further reflective space in which these identities could be performed and tested out.

Further considerations: developments in the discourse

Before concluding, I want to briefly highlight some additional discourses which are relevant for social workers' identity development. They were not evident in my research data but are useful to consider for further study.

A current strand in the identity literature expands what is known about the effect of the employment context. One area of interest is the growing concern with training and supporting newly qualified social workers. In that context, having a strong professional identity is promoted as a source of resilience and strength (Kearns and McArdle, 2011; Moorhead et al., 2016). Harrison and Ruch (2007 online), for example, suggest that 'practitioners with integrated and attended-to professional identities are less likely to experience overwhelming stress, ill health or burnout'.

They caution, however, that ‘having a professional identity’ - constructed in response to regulatory processes and prescriptive statements about social work tasks and competences - is far too narrow. More important, in their view, is ‘being and sustaining a professional self’: developing an internalised professional identity which acts as a source of strength. Recent government-led developments in social work qualifying education and post-registration training have raised concern that the greater focus on meeting employers’ requirements may potentially encourage a narrow sense of professional identity (Rogowski, 2012; Scholar et al., 2014).

As noted earlier, the social work literature contains extensive discussion about the effect of multi-disciplinary teams on professional identity. A recent development of this theme is the impact of working in ‘non-traditional’ settings (that is, agencies such as community projects which do not set out to offer a social work service). Despite advantages such as the opportunity to work holistically or therapeutically, Scholar et al., (2014, p. 1005) found that in their day-to-day practice, social work students ‘faced the challenge of maintaining and developing their professional identity without immediately available social work role models’. In Australia, Harrison and Healy’s (2015) study of social work graduates employed in generic non-government agency roles, found that they were ambivalent about their professional identity, or in some cases rejected the social work title. On the other hand, social work values - aligned with the ethos of the non-governmental organisation - remained an important part of these practitioners’ identities.

Harrison and Healy’s findings serve as a reminder that identities are sometimes formed in opposition to discursive norms (Foucault, 1994). There is a long history of

resistance to the perceived elitism and conformity associated with the ‘professionalisation’ of social work. Despite social work’s overall engagement with regulation and protected title, some ambivalence about its professional status remains: indeed, this may signal a healthy criticality (Payne, 2013).

Finally, social work does not look the same in every country. Outside the UK, for example, it embraces community and development roles (Moriarty et al 2015); and social work also needs to be seen in the political and socio-economic context of each country (Weiss-Gal and Welbourne, 2008). With the increasing divergence of social policies, and of regulatory and educational frameworks, these considerations may even become increasingly true within the UK nations (Wiles, 2015). The influence of national meanings on professional identity, therefore, is an area requiring further investigation.

Concluding discussion

It has been argued in this chapter that there is no single meaning of professional identity, and suggested that it is more complicated than adopting certain traits or values, or even demonstrating competence. We need to exercise caution in using and teaching the concept of professional identity in a narrow way, without understanding the political, academic and professional discourses which underpin it. The slippery nature of the concept makes it open to appropriation by competing policy, regulatory, managerialist and professional discourses (Cribb and Gewirtz, 2015) which variously seek to control or empower social workers.

Alongside conceptualisations used within the curriculum, novice practitioners will be exposed to a range of additional meanings about professionals: in the workplace, university, their own families and in society generally. Three main approaches have been outlined in this chapter: professional identity can be thought of in relation to desired traits; it can also be used in a collective sense to convey the ‘identity of the profession’. We can also take a more subjective approach and regard professional identity as a process in which each practitioner comes to have a sense of themselves as a social worker. The different meanings of professional identity all have something to offer, providing resources as novices construct themselves as social workers.

Acquiring a specified knowledge base, understanding social work values, and being able to integrate these with practice are essential components of professional competence. In addition, however, practitioners must develop a personal sense of *being* a social worker. This can only emerge through opportunities to articulate this identity in the workplace setting. Acknowledging the dynamic nature of professional identity highlights the difficult identity work which each practitioner must undertake, and prompts us to consider how this process might best be supported.

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