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Picturing social work, puzzles and passion: exploring and developing professional identities

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Picturing social work, puzzles and passion: exploring and developing transnational professional identities

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Abstract

Exploring and in turn developing professional identity is a challenge faced by social work programmes, nationally and internationally. This paper developed from the authors' shared research interest in how social workers and students of social work develop and express their professional identities. We report findings from a workshop designed to explore how a group of social workers from different countries conceptualised social work identity, including the effects of transnational and cultural contexts. Our starting point drew on theoretical concepts developed in Wiles's research, in which the term professional identity is used to convey multiple meaning, and the method developed in Vicary's research which uses drawing to elicit data. We found that a collective identity is shared across national boundaries albeit, and ironically, that this shared identity has components that are not cohesive and are continually being redefined. In the participants' own words, the notion of social work identity is always just out of reach conceptually, or "over the horizon". Tensions in identity were also revealed, alongside a sense of passion or deep commitment. These findings complement and add to the existing literature on exploring and developing professional identity in social work.

Key words: Professional identity; social work; collective identity; Rich Pictures; transnational national and cultural context

Introduction

When making comparisons transnationally, the meanings and status of social work vary according to factors such as roles, training and status, as well as political, economic and social contexts (Weiss-Gal and Welbourne, 2008). Social work in the United Kingdom (UK)

is increasingly focussed on statutory duties such as assessment and protection from abuse. In other countries, social work frequently includes community and development work, therapeutic interventions, social pedagogy and counselling (Zeira and Auslander, 2010; Hussein, 2011). Thus it might be expected that professional identity carries different meanings according to national variations in role. This paper discusses data obtained from a workshop which explored how social work educators and practitioners from nine different countries conceptualised social work professionalism and professional identity. It should be acknowledged that participants worked predominantly in countries using a westernised model of social work. First, we share some insights from the literature exploring professional identity.

Professional identity

Within the academic and policy literature, the term professional identity conveys multiple meanings (Wiles, 2012). Nicoll and Harrison (2003) argue that that policy documents, along with professional and occupational standards, government reports and reviews, convey normative discourses about what constitutes 'good' and 'professional' practice. Examples from England, in which professionalism (and, by implication, professional identity) are presented in terms of desired standards and competences, include Narey's (2014) report *Making the education of social workers consistently effective* and the Health and Care Professions Council's *Standards of Proficiency for Social Workers in England* (HCPC, 2017). A different meaning can be found in the international social work academic literature (such as Beddoe, 2017; Craig and Muskat, 2013), where 'professional identity' depicts a collective sense of what it means to be a social worker. Collective identity is frequently presented in the context of a particular practice setting such as mental health (McCrae et al., 2004) or work with children (Walker, 2010). Alternatively, it is argued that social work's professional hallmark is its value base or holistic approach; Scholar et al. (2014, p. 1010) observe that one of the assessment

frameworks in England, 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'. Frost (2008) explored the potential for a collective European social work identity, concluding that despite significant variations and fluctuations in policies and roles, there was commonality at the level of ethical values and principles.

A third way of understanding professional identity recognises its subjective meaning for each practitioner. Harrison and Ruch (2007, online) suggest that social workers 'need to develop internalised professional identities on which they can draw when work challenges them'. Regardless of whether professional identity is understood in terms of traits, collective identity or the subjective sense of being a social worker, these various discourses and meanings – communicated in the workplace and through teaching curricula, regulatory requirements and public expectations – are internalised by social workers and students, acting as powerful influences on identity formation (Wiles, 2012).

The workplace plays a strong role in transmitting discursive meaning, and it is here that students and new practitioners forge their own unique synthesis of personal and collective social work identity. The agency team offers a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) in which informal, non-assessed learning has a normative effect on professional identity. On the other hand, the workplace can exert a coercive influence through implementing regulation, surveillance and target-setting which communicates expectations about desired behaviours and competences (Webb, 2016; Keddell and Stanley, 2017). Within the community of practice novices observe, at first-hand, how formal and tacit discourses are taken up by more experienced workers, and thus variations in colleagues' compliance provide a further source of identity formation. Indeed, Collins (2017) suggests that where there is tension between

professional and organisational goals, social workers' professional commitment may take the form of challenging corporate practices.

Awareness of practice debates can also influence practitioners' sense of professional identity (Wiles, 2012). One such debate is whether the shift towards co-location and multi-agency working threatens social work professional identity (Webb, 2016). For example, in the mental health field in the UK there is an increasing overlap between the ways in which mental health social workers perceive their role in relation to other medical and allied health professions giving rise to a mixed typology: traditionalists, who argue that there is a distinct social work identity; eclecticists who suggest a mixed professional identity; and generecists who see little difference between the professions (McCrae et al., 2013). It is not surprising, therefore, that Jones (2014, pp. 485-486) writes of social work's struggle to create a distinctive 'professional space' and 'core identity'. Other findings suggest that certain statutory roles, hitherto synonymous with social work such as the Approved Mental Health Professional, can be fulfilled irrespective of professional identity and, in turn, professional identity is influenced by role (Vicary, 2016). This finding reflects the wider policy of integration in the UK as encapsulated in New Ways of Working in Mental Health (Department of Health, 2007, National Institute of Mental Health, 2008), an England wide programme, whose rationale is the extension of professional roles and shared knowledge, skills and competences. This finding also supports the argument, discussed above, that policy documents can have a normative influence on professional identity.

When considering multi-agency working, Beddoe (2017) argues that social work identity can develop in the spaces left unoccupied by other professionals. This possibility is illustrated in a Canadian study (Craig and Muskat, 2013, p.7) which found that social workers delivering services in health care settings depicted their extremely varied roles metaphorically as 'bouncer, janitor, glue, broker, firefighter, juggler and challenger': working collaboratively

with other disciplines to resolve 'messes' and meet the immediate needs of service users. Moreover, some social work interventions, such as providing emotional support for multidisciplinary team colleagues, were not quantifiable in terms of patient outcomes. It could be argued that performing a fluid and flexible mix of tasks (often behind the scenes) prevents social workers from developing the distinctive and well-understood professional identity considered essential for multi-disciplinary work (Lymbery, 1998; Payne, 2006). Commenting on Craig and Muskat's study, however, Beddoe (2017, pp.128-129) reframes this eclectic approach as a strength: 'having strong values which mean social workers meet needs with skill rather than insisting on rigid roles'.

Further discursive resources for constructing professional identity, particularly in its subjective sense, stem from personal experience. Behaviours, assumptions and values related to characteristics such as gender, ethnicity and social class intersect with professional identity. For example, due to social expectations which align caring with women's roles, social work is not a traditional career choice for men, and male practitioners may experience an uneasy relationship with their professional identity. Christie (2006, p. 398) found that both male and female social workers accounted for men's employment in social work by drawing on discourses such as 'heroic action man' or 'gentle-man'. In addition, reconciling newly acquired knowledge with more widely held cultural discourses and political beliefs can be a source of tension for students (Reay et al., 2010; Wiles, 2012). Erickson and Price (2017) found that, when migrating to the UK, Filipino social workers had to manage another source of dissonance: exchanging their traditional sense of 'vocation', based on religious faith, for a secular professional identity based on statutory roles and recognition.

Reviewing the literature and concepts explored so far, it is clear that, given its multiple meanings, we cannot assume the concept of professional identity means the same for all

social workers. This awareness, alongside curiosity about national variations, underpinned the authors' approach to the research which is now discussed.

Methods

Building on their previous and ongoing research, the authors were commissioned to lead a workshop at the European Association of Schools of Social Work conference held in Paris, 2017. The aim of the workshop, made known to potential attendees in the conference programme beforehand, was to explore the different ways in which participants conceptualised social work professionalism and professional identity, including the effects of national contexts. The workshop was attended by fifteen participants with a range of social work roles, from Germany, Finland, England, Israel, Australia, the Netherlands and Slovakia. The workshop began with a brief resume of the literature and concepts of professional identity in social work followed by an explanation of the data collection method and rationale. In addition, participants were reassured that they could remove themselves from the workshop if they did not wish to participate and that any data collected and later analysed would be anonymous if used. A hard copy Participant Information Sheet was distributed and participants were given the opportunity to ask questions. Written permission from each participant was obtained. Working in small, self-selecting groups, participants were asked to draw a Rich Picture exploring the question 'what does social work professional identity mean for you, and what has influenced this?'. Workshop participants then described their Rich Picture to the whole group and a discussion followed, both of which were audio recorded and transcribed. Each Rich Picture was retained and photographed.

The method Rich Pictures is an image based one previously employed by Vicary (2013) to collate data. First used as part of Soft Systems Methodology to help explore complex situations (Checkland, 1980), Rich Pictures involves asking participants to draw, using symbols and words, a representation of the particular phenomenon in question. This method

has two purposes: to elicit a response and, to record this, pictorially (Vicary, 2013). Categorised under the umbrella of visual research methods, drawing is a term which refers both to the process and the product thereof. Its use is increasing in many areas of research (Theron et al., 2011; Mitchell et al., 2011) including in applied areas such as nursing (Kearney and Hyle, 2004) and social work (Hus, 2012; Bryant, 2016; Hardwick et al, 2016). The rationale for using drawing to generate data through Rich Pictures for this study was simplicity; the only requirement was a pen and paper, and tangibility; once produced the Rich Picture provided a focus for conversation (Vicary, 2013). This method of generating data fits well with the authors' conceptual standpoint that professional identity is constructed and fluid. In addition, since drawing is said to use different cognitive processes, its use in research can also provide an opportunity to access thoughts, feelings and emotions in different ways (Guillemin, 2004; Kearney and Hyle, 2004). This was a particular attraction for data collection in this instance given that participants hail from a profession that uses verbal and written communication predominantly. A further advantage was that, for international participants, drawing could potentially elicit deeper data than relying entirely on spoken language. It is nonetheless recognised that methods such as drawing can be problematic for some participants including embarrassment and the fear of not producing a good enough picture (Vicary, 2013). Furthermore, verbally describing visual data adds an extra layer of interpretation. Recognising this challenge, our analysis was undertaken of the transcribed text only. The Rich Pictures nevertheless assisted the authors in checking their interpretation of the codes and themes.

Undertaken in two stages, both authors at first individually analysed the transcripts using different processes. They then shared and discussed initial themes with each other to examine similarities and differences. As shown in figures 1 and 2, this stage of analysis revealed a high degree of consistency between the researchers and agreement was reached about which

themes were most prominent in relation to the initial question. This combined analysis is discussed below. But first, the detail of the initial analysis process is outlined.

Wiles manually undertook a thematic analysis (Lapadat, 2006) informed by an interpretative methodology. The first stage involved systematically and repeatedly reading the transcripts, searching for meanings and patterns (including commonalities, variations and discrepancies). This is a subjective process: although it is important to avoid looking for pre-determined themes the researcher eventually decides what constitutes patterns, and whether they are sufficiently prominent to be identified as 'codes' and subsequently themes. Initial codes were recorded manually in a Word table, noting the corresponding location in the transcript, and two further versions of this coding document were produced (examples shown in Figure 1). Coloured font was used to highlight words and phrases which arose frequently or appeared potentially important or striking. Through this process the analysis was gradually refined and initial codes were collated into potential themes. Once themes had emerged they were transferred to a separate document and shared with Vicary.

Figure 1: Extracts from first and third stages of coding process by Wiles

Vicary undertook analysis using QSR Nvivo 10, a proprietary software tool. The use of such software is not new and attracts debate. On the one hand its use is said to dominate both method and coding and, because it takes place within the software package takes place out of context (Paulus et al., 2017). On the other hand it is said to afford explicitness and transparency and in turn enable quality and validity (Vicary, 2017).

Nvivo 10 was used in this instance by Vicary to enable in depth analysis of a small amount of data. Transcriptions and photographs of the Rich Pictures were imported into the software. First individual texts for each group and of the later group discussion were read and reread. This took place over a number of weeks. Next, codes (or nodes as NVivo describes them)

identifying similar or differing themes were created as they appeared to the researcher during reading of the transcripts. Each code was further examined to search for patterns and a memo created to record the researcher's thoughts as they were occurring. Figure 2 shows a screenshot of this process:

Figure 2: screenshot of analysis process by Vicary showing codes and related memos

Codes were then grouped. A good example of this as shown in the screenshot in Figure 2 was the use of metaphor and simile by participants to describe their experiences of social work identity. Data analysis by Vicary was undertaken on the basis of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) or, in other words, the researcher trying to make meaning of what the participants were saying and in turn interpreting this (Smith et al., 2009). As has been argued (Vicary, 2017), this way of analysis, or the double hermeneutic, *within* the software package, contributes to quality and validity in IPA because the themes that arise and the analyst's interpretation of them can be traced back to the data and audited.

What follows is a selective account of the findings which occurred most often or, in the authors' view, warranted further consideration. The drawings are used to illustrate the findings.

Findings

An imperfect fit

One group of participants from a range of countries compare professional identity to a jigsaw of ill-matched individual pieces:

Ok so we called our creation an imperfect fit! And, erm, what we have here are different pieces of a puzzle that doesn't quite fit. (Group 4)

Their Rich Picture reinforces this comparison by depicting a series of six pieces each containing contrasting concepts that from the way in which they are drawn are clearly not going to fit together in the sense of a conventional jigsaw:

Figure 3: Rich Picture drawn by Group four

In their description the group equate this ill-fitting to their understanding of professional identity and its complexity:

We thought it doesn't quite fit because that expresses the complexity of the professional identity. (Group four)

In this use of metaphor participants describe professional identity as a series of contrasting individual parts that do not make a coherent whole. Furthermore, the individual pieces are labelled by participants with contrasting aspects of professional identity. The personal influences have unanimous agreement in the group:

We have among the pieces, erm questions about, erm being privileged or underprivileged as an identity, or the personal story that each of us comes with, or whether we were part of a dominant group or a marginalised group erm, whether human rights are part of what we have experienced or part of what has been abused. (Group four)

Over the horizon

The notion that a coherent professional identity is something that is never quite achieved, or always to be strived for, is present in other data. A second group, also comprising participants from different countries, uses a different metaphor to explain a similar idea; that professional identity in social work is difficult to attain. On this occasion the representation is that of a vista or horizon:

> It is kind of over the horizon. You know we had this idea of what we were heading for but in fact we have never quite got there. (Group three)

This feeling of professional identity being unreachable is also depicted in the Rich Picture which they drew and described:

Figure 4: Rich Picture by Group three

Even though the group express the feeling that the horizon is not within reach, they are nonetheless clear about what goal they are seeking; social justice:

> The goal being social justice and we were all in different places about what we might think get to towards social justice (Group three)

Achieving the goal however is not without tension as is also described in an explanation of the line in their drawing:

> So this is kind of some of the tensions about actually achieving social justice. (Group three)

Tensions within the social work role

Tensions in the social work role are not only expressed by Group three, but emerge as a theme across the whole analysis. For one group, self-comparison with other professionals generates a sense of shared identity and pride, but also of anxiety:

social work has kind of a lower status than other professions and also may be less

knowledge, less scientific knowledge, and less research, resources and capacities.

(Group one)

More explicit tensions are expressed in relation to the day to day work. Using their Rich

Picture to demonstrate, participants talk about simultaneously 'working with' and 'working

against' the labels given to service users:

So, these things here are the labels … that are attached to social work …. it is

symbolic of your relationship with service users who feel very judged you know and

that you are trying to work with them and the labels that they are given. And … in

assessments, you know … that … sort of enables them, so you are sort of working

against labels as a social worker (Group two)

In sociological terms, to label someone is to make narrow and stereotypical assumptions

about them (Goffman, 1963). Here, the implication is that participants do not wish to label

service users; which poses a dilemma because people will not get services without being

assessed and categorised.

Group two's picture includes a keyhole, and it is explained that:

people's perceptions of social workers is that they will lock you up and get you

locked up, if your children are removed parents talk about so it's got those kinds of

images (Group two)

At the same time, the metaphor of the keyhole represents participants' insight into how

service users experience professional scrutiny and judgement:

> So … that came from a time when working with a parent saying she was feeling judged with the social worker looking through her keyhole at the state of her home. (Group two)

The act of judging does not sit easily with participants, who suggest a double standard is at play:

> and she asked a very good question 'what it would look like if I looked through your keyhole?' … Well, actually if you caught me not on a good day it would be similar. (Group two)

Figure 5: Rich Picture drawn by Group two

Forming professional judgements leads workshop participants to consider dilemmas inherent in social work power, particularly between 'care' and 'control' functions:

> we thought also about the power that social workers have and are given by society and the state, but it is really important that we acknowledge that power. Because it can be very erm disempowering sometimes in the way that, say for example as social workers we might involve service users in education erm one day. Next week the social work profession might be taking that person's liberty away from them and sectioning them. There is a real tension in … the power that is vested in social work. (Group two)

Although it is not clear whether service users or social workers are disempowered by experiencing care and control alternately, the tensions are experienced by participants themselves. A further source of role conflict arises from feeling that social work has lost value in the wider society:

we have a sense of where we want to go but it would appear that society is becoming less and less valuing … so there is a constant tension about how we actually work with this. (Group three)

Tensions between personal and professional identity

A variation on the 'tension' theme refers to the interface between the personal and the professional. One group talks about the contribution of their personal perspectives and histories to their professional identity:

and sometimes the different aspects of the professional identity can conflict with one another … Religion, where does that fit in as part of our identity and also whether we are from a socialist or a capitalist or neo liberalist or a right or left erm orientation? So all of that is part of erm what we bring with us as part of our professional identity (Group four)

For some participants, the job is such that social workers describe feeling pulled in different directions:

So we of course have the trappings of the cell phone of the, computer, many different things that pull on us such as our clients who may need help. … On the other side of that is the boss who is talking to you about you have fewer hours to do this so you really can't help them with that. And you need to be reporting on your client work and all of that. … … we also have coming over our shoulder, honey when are you coming home from work and mom can I get a ride to practice. (Group five)

It is not surprising that this group of participants raises the heartfelt question:

how do we manage … the bureaucratic part of it as well as the hands-on part of it … and … remain healthy? (Group five)

Figure 6: Rich Picture drawn by Group five

Passion

Finally, the data reveal a sense of deep commitment to, and enjoyment of, social work; or, as participants express it: passion. This theme is found in data from two groups of participants. Group three, exploring what contributes to professional identity, report:

> Oh and the question which we talked about passion, can you actually, can social work values be learned or is it something in us innately that attracts us to social work? (Group three)

For another group, this intense commitment arises from their self-comparison with other professionals:

> Ok, but one thing that is also different and it is important to us: we think that you cannot do social work without passion. … Erm we don't want to say that other professions or people don't have passion for their work but maybe in social work it is a necessity, a pre-condition … if you do social work without passion you will not succeed. (Group one)

This is vividly illustrated in the group's Rich Picture, showing a heart in the middle as illustrated in Figure 7.

Figure 7: Rich Picture drawn by Group one

Discussion

The workshop set out to explore how social workers and educators conceptualise professional identity. Before discussing the findings it is important to acknowledge features of the research which may impact on interpretations of the data.

The data collation took place in the context of an international conference, attracting practitioners who are interested in building a global social work community. The fifteen participants presumably chose our workshop because they were interested in social work identity; their views might be atypical. The method elicited a group response and did not distinguish the impact of participants' home nations on the data. Not everyone had English as a first language and the use of metaphor and simile and the nuances thereof had the potential to not be understood in translation. In addition, the workshop began with a brief resume of the current research and concepts concerning identity and this could possibly have influenced the participants' responses. However, the data show that group discussions went far beyond the parameters presented at the outset, which suggests that the conceptual thinking was generated primarily through participants themselves.

The method relied on group interaction in which participants share their ideas, opinions and beliefs, in this case about professional identity. This process provides the opportunity to review and evaluate their prior understandings, and in this sense, participants jointly construct meaning (Kitzinger, 1995). A possible limitation is that collective opinion might over-ride individual views. However, analysis showed that the themes were found *across* and not just *within* the groups suggesting that participants were contributing individual ideas rather than simply conforming to a majority view.

The findings both reinforce and develop ideas, seen in the existing literature, about the nature and development of professional identity at both a collective and individual level. In describing their drawing, participants shared their thoughts that there is a collective

professional identity based on a strong sense of values. Concerns with elusive social justice

and the tensions inherent in exercising social work power are prominent in our data. Similar

to Keddell and Stanley's (2017) finding that risk discourses undermine values of social

justice, in our data there is a vivid sense of social workers expressing tensions between their

care and control roles. Keddell and Stanley argue that such tensions can lead to an ambivalent

professional identity: this, too, comes across in the way our participants depicted the

'imperfect fit' evoked by trying to make sense of social work's complex and fluid role

boundaries. The connections between personal and professional identity, expressed in several

groups, are vividly illustrated in Figure 3. However, managing the interaction of personal and

professional values is not easy and requires 'identity work': active effort to make sense of

tensions and integrate them into one's identity (Wiles, 2012). This is evident in the way

participants question how their own histories and personal lives – not 'perfect' but often

messy and sometimes disadvantaged - sit alongside those of the service users they support or

constrain. For some participants, professional identity generated an expression of passion for

doing social work. Overlapping with the data about strong values, this resonates with other

recent research findings. Erickson and Price (2017, p. 80) suggest that reclaiming the

concept of 'vocation' or 'calling' (a component of which, they remind us, Weber described as

'passionate devotion') - can move social workers away from 'a purely capitalistic conception

of what work entails'. Similarly, Collins (2017, p. 151) argues that 'affective commitment'– a

profound engagement in a meaningful activity – may be a significant factor in the formation

of professional identity.

The data offers some support for the identity challenges of multi-disciplinary teams,

discussed by Vicary (2016) and Webb (2016). Our analysis echoes other research findings

which indicate a sense of social work identity being under threat. In this case, however, this is

not especially attributed to supposed flaws or disadvantages in inter-professional working but

more to changes in government policies and public opinion. As discussed earlier, some of the existing literature associates specific social work settings, for example work with children or mental health social work, with having a particularly strong collective identity (McCrae et al., 2004; Walker, 2010). By contrast, in the present data, no such distinctions are apparent. A strong sense of common purpose and collective identity is expressed by all participants, even though they hailed from different specialisms and, interestingly, from different nations. This may have been as a consequence of the group exercise whereby a collective conclusion was presented. Nevertheless, our findings are consistent with Frost's (2008) data about social workers in Europe, in suggesting that the sense of a collective identity is shared across national boundaries regardless of specific social work tasks. This topic remains under-researched, and thus our findings are potentially significant and warrant further investigation.

Summing up, the findings indicate that social workers can have a sense of collective professional identity based on social justice values even though – and even because - its components may be complex, incoherent and conflicting. Moreover, there is a sense that professional identity is not a static, attainable construct. Rather, in the words of the participants, professional identity has separate contrasting components which are an imperfect fit and always in the distance, or over the horizon.

Conclusion

This paper discusses the findings from an international conference workshop. Drawing on past research and method use, the authors developed previous work to further explore professional identity in social work. Our analysis revealed tensions in identity, sometimes expressed alongside a sense of passion or deep commitment. We found that the notion of a collective social work identity straddles national boundaries albeit this shared idea is, ironically, made up of disparate elements which were nevertheless common to participants in

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the workshop. This finding adds to the current literature on social work identity but warrants

further research.

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Figure captions

Figure 1: Extracts from first and third stages of coding process by Wiles

Figure 2: Screenshot of analysis process by Vicary showing codes and related memos

Figure 3: Rich Picture drawn by Group four

Figure 4: Rich Picture by Group three

Figure 5: Rich Picture drawn by Group two

Figure 6: Rich Picture drawn by Group five

Figure 7: Rich Picture drawn by Group one