

## **Revisiting social work professional identity in the light of the impact of COVID-19**

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### **Abstract**

The meanings and status of social work – and potentially professional identities - vary internationally according to factors such as roles, training and status, as well as political, economic and social contexts. A new contextual element for social work identity is the profession's response to the global COVID-19 pandemic. This paper considers recently published international literature discussing social work and social work education during the pandemic; and revisits the author's previously published findings about social work professional identity. Following a literature search, the resulting articles were treated as texts and analysed using the theoretical concept of interpretative repertoires. The academic literature indicates that, globally, social workers have played an essential role during the pandemic. The importance of professional identity as a source of collective support, pride and inspiration is consistently highlighted. Professional values and ethics have provided guidance for dealing with unprecedented situations, both in social work practice and social work education. Social workers and educators have mobilised around professional identity to advocate for social justice and fairer policies. Innovative fieldwork placements have expanded students' understanding of how organisations can work for social change. The literature highlights social work education's vital role in supporting students to explore and develop professional identity.

**Key words:** professional identity; COVID-19 pandemic; social work education; social work values; interpretative repertoires.

## **Introduction**

At the 2017 European Association of Schools of Social Work (EASSW) conference, I conducted, with my colleague, an interactive workshop exploring how a group of social workers from different countries conceptualised social work identity (Wiles and Vicary, 2019). The main findings were that a shared professional identity, rooted in a strong commitment to social justice values, spans national boundaries. This paper revisits those ideas in the light of the COVID-19 global pandemic, through examining some of the academic social work literature published between April 2020 and April 2021. The paper is concerned with the response of social work practitioners, educators and students in the early days of a global event which was regarded as unprecedented. In particular, I consider the implications for how social workers think about professional identity.

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). Accordingly, it might be expected that these national variations give rise to both commonalities and differences in professional identity. A new contextual element for social work identity is the profession's response to the global COVID-19 pandemic. The paper will consider themes from recently published international literature discussing social work and social work education during the pandemic; and revisit our previously published findings on the theme of social work professional identity. The paper is not intended to portray a generalisable or 'true' picture, but rather to reflect on the 2017 findings alongside key messages emerging from social work literature published during the first year of the pandemic.

## **The COVID-19 pandemic**

The COVID-19 pandemic is an ongoing global pandemic involving severe respiratory illness. The virus was first identified in December 2019, and on 11 March 2020 the World Health

Organization designated it a pandemic. Different countries embarked on diverse strategies including lockdowns, wearing masks and restricting social contact ('social distancing'). According to the World Economic Forum (2022), on 25 April 2022 confirmed cases of COVID-19 had exceeded 500 million globally, and there had been 6.2 million deaths. Equally devastating:

The pandemic wiped out years of progress in reducing poverty and caused economic inequality to spike. The world's 10 richest men have doubled their fortunes since the global health emergency began, while the incomes of 99% of humanity are worse off as a result, according to Oxfam. More than 160 million people have also been pushed into poverty, the UK charity estimates (Henry, 2022 online).

The pandemic exposed longstanding inequalities and injustices: it has had a disproportionate impact on Black and Asian people, and on poorer and socially excluded individuals and communities (Oppel et al., 2020; Broadbent et al., 2020, cited in Banks 2020b, p.578).

In the context of the pandemic's challenges, social workers developed a range of online strategies to support service users despite national lockdowns, social distancing and reduced staffing. As will become clear in later sections, there was a significant impact on social work education. In summary: academic staff quickly and creatively refigured their teaching for online delivery using virtual platforms (McLaughlin et al., 2020). Many placements were required to be suspended, while others were conducted using virtual methods; and regulatory bodies permitted the professional standards to be met within a reduced timescale (Beesley and Devonald, 2020; McLaughlin et al., 2020).

### **Workshop findings on social workers' professional identity**

The 2017 workshop, developed and delivered with my colleague Sarah Vicary, involved fifteen social workers from Germany, Finland, England, Israel, Australia, the Netherlands

and Slovakia. With participants' consent, we recorded, analysed and subsequently published the workshop findings (Wiles and Vicary, 2019). We found that this small group of practitioners shared a collective social work identity, based on a strong commitment to social justice values, which spanned national boundaries. It was noted, however, that this shared identity was expressed to be one that is full of tension: continually shifting in response to conflicting elements in the social work role.

### **Data collection and initial analysis: searching and reviewing the pandemic literature**

The aim of the literature review was to examine written accounts of social work during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic, with a view to exploring how the pandemic had impacted on social workers' professional identities, in comparison with the findings from the 2017 workshop. The literature search was conducted between November 2020 and May 2021. The search was conducted using a University library's search engine which incorporates a large number of relevant databases including Social Care Online and Academic Search Complete. Due to the very specific circumstances, the key search terms were simply 'social work' AND 'COVID-19 OR pandemic'. (The additional term 'professional identity/identities' had initially been tried, but it narrowed the results to 11 articles of which only three were relevant to the search aims.) The use of parameters and filters enabled a focus on peer reviewed articles with the full text available online, published between March 2020 and May 2021. Although English language was specified, no countries were excluded because the aim was to explore a global perspective. The search yielded just over 400 results (excluding duplication from across databases). Sorting the results by title resulted in 140 articles which indicated relevance to the research focus. Scanning the titles made it possible to identify inclusion criteria: namely, articles which focused strongly on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on social work practitioners, educators and/or social work students. Conversely, articles dealing with the impact on service users and/or organisations were excluded, along with articles focusing primarily on the adjustments made to social work and

social work education; and proposals for future changes and innovations. Reading some of these excluded papers nevertheless provided important contextual information. The abstracts of the 140 articles were individually evaluated using the inclusion and exclusion criteria, and a further judgement made about relevance. By this means, forty papers were selected for review. A further five chapters from an edited book, newly published in the UK, met the inclusion criteria and were included in the review. It has not been possible to discuss all the papers here.

Data analysis was originally intended to be thematic (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Based on detailed reading of the selected literature, I created a table to manually identify initial codes and make brief notes about the arguments and ideas emerging from the source material. Although this part of the process necessarily involves subjective judgement, care was taken to record the ideas with minimal evaluative commentary. This approach generated a total of 33 codes in the form of short phrases: for example, 'teachers worked very hard to put teaching online' and 'supporting people's emotional needs – fear, anxiety, loss, bereavement'. As I began to further consider and collate the initial coding into broad themes, I became aware of repeated words and patterns of speech across the sources. This alerted me to the possibility of building on the initial thematic analysis to further interrogate the literature using the lens of interpretative repertoires. I had previously drawn on this form of discourse analysis in researching social work professional identity (Wiles, 2017).

### **Using interpretative repertoires to analyse the literature**

The concept of interpretative repertoires, developed from the field of social psychology (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) refers to the range of 'common sense' ideas that people employ in talking about and understanding familiar contexts. As an analytical concept, interpretative repertoires are usually applied to transcripts, rather than written sources. Repertoires can be recognised by patterns of similar words, lines of argument and metaphors across different

data sources. Another feature of a repertoire is that it needs no elaboration or explanation, because the knowledge is shared and taken for granted within the context. There was nothing familiar or commonplace about a global pandemic; and yet I would argue that certain ideas - social distancing, washing hands, wearing a mask, unexplained food shortages - quickly became 'common knowledge' in day-to-day life and interactions.

Taking an example from another discipline: exploring the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the UK tourism sector, Price et al. (2022, p.1088) identified three interpretative repertoires depicting the pandemic as "an unprecedented crisis, a time of opportunity for innovation and transformation and a chance to build a 'new normal'". These representations resonated strongly with some of those found in the social work literature. Illustrating the 'unprecedented' repertoire, Morris et al. (2020, p.1130) observe that "the pandemic represents a unique moment in recent history"; and Bright (2020, p.83), in their editorial, reflects:

When we look back at this time - early March 2020, I wonder if we will recognize it as a turning point in how effectively we responded to a crisis ... The uncertainty adds to our fears about a situation that is unprecedented in recent history in many parts of the globe.

Further repertoires will be discussed in due course, including those of 'opportunity/innovation' and 'building a new normal'. Whilst acknowledging that written and spoken language are used differently, I decided to adapt the concept of interpretative repertoires to explore the selected sources, which accordingly became 'texts' for analysis.

The first stage of the analysis involved searching for recurring words, phrases and ideas across the sources. Recording such patterns is relatively straightforward. Deciding which patterns constitute interpretative repertoires, however, requires a more complex (and subjective) decision based on the context and a knowledge of wider social work debates. The identification of repertoires was influenced by my prior interests: the broad theme of

'social work education', for example, could have been selected for closer examination. Instead, it became part of the background context for the three interconnected and overlapping interpretative repertoires selected for detailed review and analysis: these pertained to social work values and ethics; impact on practitioners' and students' personal lives; and impact on professional identity.

The second stage considered how authors were using discursive patterns to construct and convey key messages and ideas. When making a discourse analysis of written texts, it is essential to take account of the historical and social context (Keller, 2013). The majority of the selected literature comprised peer reviewed articles published in social work journals: thus they were part of an academic discourse, produced for a professional audience in response to the pandemic. It is not possible to describe here the range of theoretical and methodological approaches undertaken by the authors, but for the most part they were based on qualitative research data (surveys and/or interviews with social work students, practitioners and practice educators). A smaller portion of the literature comprised personal reflection, and this has been indicated when discussing the findings. In discourse analysis, it is usual to present a series of detailed extracts showing how each pattern is repeated and varied across a sample; for reasons of economy, however, I have mostly selected single illustrative quotes and examples.

## **Findings**

The selected papers came from Albania, Australia, Canada, China, India, Italy, Jamaica, the Netherlands, Nigeria, Norway, the UK and the USA. Despite differences between the economic, social and cultural contexts, the presence of common threads across the papers was striking. This echoes the 2017 findings where social workers from seven countries expressed a shared understanding of professional identity. A similar observation was noted by Banks et al. (2020b) in relation to the ethical challenges reported by social workers in

fifty-four countries. The findings are now presented under three headings dealing with social work values; the personal impact of the pandemic on social workers; and the impact on professional identity.

### *Social work values and ethics during the pandemic*

In the 2017 research, participants expressed their belief that social work has a collective professional identity based on a strong sense of values, particularly that of social justice. In reviewing the 2020-21 literature, the perceived importance of social work values continues to be strongly articulated. Two interpretative repertoires were prominent in relation to values: 'values as guidance' and 'rebuilding better'.

Social work values and ethics were depicted as a source of guidance for dealing with a wide range of unprecedented situations, both in social work practice and in education (Archer-Kuhn et al., 2020; de Yonge et al. 2020; Du and Chan, 2021; Pacey et al., 2021; Starks, 2021, Sunil P, 2021). As Wilson et al. (2020, p.630) put it:

The core social work values recognized by the profession are our roadmap. Specifically, if we focus on social justice, dignity and worth of the person, and integrity as the values on which we will re-build social welfare policy, we are headed in the right, ethical direction.

During the early and chaotic days of the pandemic, social work educators looked to professional values for guidance in supporting their students (Lange and Maynard, 2021; Mitchell Dove, 2021; Pacey et al., 2021). Aptly expressed by Archer-Kuhn et al. (2020, p.1017):

We held fast and tightly to our social work values ... as we embraced technology and found energy in innovation through collaboration.



Social work values also motivated educators to challenge university policies and practices which, in the pandemic context, exacerbated the disadvantages experienced by some students (Archer-Kuhn et al., 2020; de Yonge et al., 2020). Students, too, were frequently depicted as drawing on professional roles and values: for example, Pacey et al. (2021, p.11) observed that values “seemed to be grounding and centering during a time of deep uncertainty”.

The repertoires of ‘rebuilding better’ and ‘innovation’ were strong and inspirational themes in the literature. Here again, professional values provided the spur for aspiring to greater equity and more attention to ethical practice in the post-pandemic future, not only in social work but in society generally (de Yonge et al., 2020; Morley and Clarke, 2020; Wilson et al., 2020; Sunil P, 2021). An unintended consequence of the pandemic’s crisis conditions was the requirement – and opportunity – to do things differently. A number of social work educators echoed Morris et al.’s observation (2020, p.1128) that:

alternative arrangements that previously would have seemed untenable in a pre-crisis environment can be viewed differently in a crisis setting and seen as viable and in line with the underlying principles of field education and the profession.

It was clear that these creative responses were expected to influence further innovations in online teaching (Archer-Kuhn et al., 2020) and practice learning (McLaughlin et al., 2020; Mitchell et al., 2021).

Both Morley and Clarke (2020) and Bentley-Davy et al. (2020), writing in Australia, and Morris et al. (2020) in the USA describe how educators worked with community-based organisations to develop innovative placements characterised by student-initiated projects. Advocating for the continuation of this approach, Morris et al. (p.1128) assert that:

Such a model ... challenges prevailing assumptions regarding the traditional faculty-student-field work relationship, can be responsive to rapidly developing social needs,

and is consistent with our profession's commitment to empowerment and social justice.

Looking to the future, both authors argue for broadening the definition of social work to embrace community work and activism, alongside a greater variety of 'non-traditional' social work placements. Acknowledging the importance of enhancing graduates' employment prospects, Morris et al. (2020, p.1129) nevertheless stress that this should not be at the expense of:

preparing social work students with the ability to engage critically with power structures and to act as agents of social change in times of great social and economic turmoil.

Whilst asserting the importance of values, the 2017 workshop participants felt that difficulties in achieving social justice rendered their professional identity elusive: "we have this idea of what we were heading for but we have never quite got there" (Wiles and Vicary, 2019, p. 54). This was partly related to tensions experienced between the care and control roles inherent in social policies and the nature of social work power. It will be seen in subsequent sections that tensions continued to exist around practising in accordance with values.

### *The personal impact of the pandemic on social workers*

In keeping with the methodology, I tried to focus primarily on the way in which interpretative repertoires were being used, rather than on the detail of individual arguments and narratives. As a participant in the unusual circumstances of the pandemic, however, at times I interacted more directly with authors' emotive and narrative content. The pandemic literature contains accounts of how the crisis was touching the personal and family lives of social workers. I have treated 'personal impact' as an interpretative repertoire because firstly, this subject matter occurred across the sources. Secondly, the idea that people's lives were

being significantly affected by the pandemic became something that soon needed no explanation.

Social workers were on the frontline (albeit not always recognised as 'key workers') and, in some countries, exposed to infection with minimal protection when working alongside health professionals (Banks et al., 2020a; Dominelli, 2020; Sunil P, 2021). There are reports of high emotion and anxiety, fears for the health of self and loved ones, financial worries, and feelings of loss and loneliness (Banks, 2020b; Fargion et al. 2020). Social work students were struggling to cope with isolation, economic hardship, and studying around family commitments (Lange and Maynard, 2021; Lorimer et al., 2021). There was a disproportionate impact on Black and minority ethnic students (Lorimer et al., 2021; Tedam, 2021) and those needing support with learning disabilities such as dyslexia (de Yonge et al 2020).

The literature conveys a sense of solidarity and shared experience with students, service users and local community (Paceley et al., 2021). In many instances, online learning and other interactions dissolved the normal boundaries between the personal and professional:

I never imagined that I would share such intimate aspects of my life with students, but they appreciated seeing me model parenting, while simultaneously holding class sessions. Students saw me in a different element, one that challenged preconceived beliefs about me as a professor and allowed them to see me as a human being and a mother (Mitchell Dove, 2021, p.166).

Shared experiences offered an opportunity for collective sense-making of an extraordinary event, illustrated by Fargion (2020, p.994):

Promoting a sense of community among students, professionals and academic social workers has been found as a way to share emotions about the fear of an unknown disease, the disruptive change in routines and ways of interacting, making sense of the new situation together.

Personal life was also impacted by the heavy workload demands associated with the pandemic. For social work practitioners, there was a large amount of “mental and physical effort ... just to continue to practise in abnormal circumstances” (Banks, 2020b, p.577). Fargion et al. (2020) and Archer-Kuhn et al. (2020, p.1011) describe the considerable burden placed on social work educators when placements and face-to-face academic delivery ended very abruptly:

This led to unimaginable additional work at an already busy time, including overnight addendums to course outlines; urgent protocol and policy development; time sensitive communication; and immediate professional, program and curriculum development. All of this had to be coordinated through lengthy and frequent meetings that stripped us of time to attend to our tasks and reflect on our own wellbeing. We became academic robots on overdrive.

An issue that arose for social workers in the 2017 workshop was experiencing conflicting demands and tensions between their personal and professional identities. Participants raised questions about “how their own histories and personal lives ... often messy and sometimes disadvantaged - sit alongside those of the service users they support or constrain” (Wiles and Vicary, 2019, p.60). They depicted a divide between themselves and the people who use services, experiencing discomfort at putting service users’ lives under scrutiny when their own lives were less than perfect. Tensions around the gulf between social workers and disadvantaged communities were equally evident in the 2020-21 literature. Some social workers felt acutely aware of their privileged position and power, compared with service users; and feelings of guilt appeared to be a source of increased stress. This was particularly expressed by social workers and educators who were required to work at home (Labuschagne et al., 2021; Lange and Maynard, 2021). Fargion et al. (2020, p.995), described students’ and educators’ positive experience of online classes as “a sort of normality and a sense of togetherness”; but simultaneously observed that in the context of

external chaos, “a weird feeling emerged in relation to the fact that universities’ activities were carried out in a ‘bubble’”.

Both online and in person, social workers and educators found themselves supporting people’s emotional needs stemming from pandemic-related fear, anxiety and loss (Aaslund, 2021). Evidently this took its toll, as expressed by Mitchell Dove (2021, p.164) recounting how, as a social work educator, she reacted on hearing of a student’s homelessness:

I wept. It was the culmination of tension, anxiety, and uncertainty trapped inside of my body that activated this response ... I also wept because the sanctuary, the classroom as we once knew it, no longer existed.

The theme of collective trauma was explored in some of the literature (Fargion et al., 2020; Mitchell Dove, 2021). According to Bridgland et al. (2021), emerging research suggests that COVID-19 can be understood as a traumatic stressor event, with the potential for eliciting and exacerbating mental health problems. Recognising this potential, Mitchell et al. (2021) adopted a trauma-informed approach in practice supervision. Pacey et al. (2020) undertook research to explore students’ response to the pandemic and gain insight into how they could be supported. Like Archer-Kuhn et al. (2020), they found students experiencing loss and guilt over the abrupt ending of their relationships with service users and placements.

In this section I have treated the pandemic’s unprecedented impact on personal life as an interpretative repertoire. Wiles (2012) argues that the interaction of personal and professional values is challenging and requires ‘identity work’: a continued and deliberate effort to make sense of tensions and integrate them into one’s own identity. The repeated use of this repertoire across the literature - often vivid and raw - suggests that social workers’ sense of personal identity came under threat during the pandemic, and that at the time of writing they were still in the process of reflection and sense-making.

### *Disrupted professional identity*

Recapping on the arguments discussed so far, the evidence suggests that social workers' identity is linked with strong professional values, especially a commitment to social justice. Social workers have drawn on their values to guide and support their practice during the pandemic. At the same time, it is suggested that some social workers' sense of personal identity was undermined during the pandemic. This section explores the pandemic's implications for professional identity. Is it reasonable to treat 'professional identity' as an interpretative repertoire? The term itself cannot be said to require no explanation: indeed, elsewhere I have argued that it has multiple meanings which are not always well understood (Wiles, 2012). Examining the literature, however, I suggest that the *concept* – of identifying with a profession which has values and standards – was repeatedly invoked and is well understood amongst social workers.

Professional identity was depicted as strong and passionate in the 2017 findings whilst, simultaneously, being continually undermined and requiring identity work. The pandemic literature reflects this tension. Positive affirmations of professional identity were linked with social workers experiencing confidence in their existing knowledge and skills, and being able to adapt these to unprecedented situations (Bright, 2020; Turner, 2021). As previously discussed in relation to values, professional identity provided the motivation for both field social workers and educators to influence local policies and practices in the interests of social justice and fairness.

Social workers in the 2017 workshop experienced conflicting demands and tensions when they were prevented from practising social work according to their professional values and expectations. In the 2020/21 literature, challenges to collective professional identity and values were expressed in relation to feeling helpless, being unable to support service users, and undermined by restrictive government or employer policies. Practitioners revealed frustration and distress at having limited resources to support service users who were experiencing extreme grief, anguish and hardship (Banks, 2020; Labuschagne, 2021; Lange and Maynard, 2021; Sunil P, 2021). Labuschagne (2021) highlighted that the pandemic had

severely impeded social workers' capacity to protect children at risk, and indicates that at times it had been difficult to work humanely and compassionately. This is illustrated by a painful example of a child brought into care during lockdown:

The child went to the placement on his own in a taxi because social workers could not accompany him due to the restrictions on physical contact. This almost certainly compounded the trauma of removal for the child. This way of working could not have been conceived of less than a year ago, leaving the social worker having to manage profound feelings of distress and guilt (Labuschagne (2021, p.17).

In Banks et al.'s international study (2020b, p.573):

[Social] workers reported ... guilt and shame (at not being able to do more). They found particularly distressing occasions when they could not visit people in need and when they knew they were complicit in dangerous and unjust practices, such as supporting the discharge of hospital patients to care homes without the patients or care home staff and residents being tested for COVID-19.

For de Yonge et al. (2020, p.1034), it appeared that a national professional identity was being undermined by safety rules such as the prohibition of face-to-face contact with service users:

[Too] powerful government supervision can lead to the reduction of the social worker to a governmental instrument. There is also the danger of overregulation whereby social workers are restricted by an excess of protocols and regulations, while flexibility and improvisation are the strengths of Dutch social work.

As social workers learned to build online communities of practice, they gained strength through sharing responses to adversity, and endeavouring to find creative solutions to challenges (Fargion, 2020; Labuschagne et al., 2021; Ma and Lyu, 2021). Nevertheless, the loss of shared office space reduced normal opportunities for reinforcing collective identity (Labuschagne et al., 2021, p.16):

practitioners have not been able to share immediate misgivings and doubts with colleagues on an ad hoc basis in the office – those so-called ‘water-cooler moments’ – which are essential for containment, reflection and care planning.

Finally, as found in the 2017 research, professional identity can be undermined by a perceived absence of public/ political recognition and support:

We have a sense of where we want to go but it would appear that society is becoming less and less valuing [of social work] so there is a constant tension (Wiles and Vicary, 2019, 2019, p.57).

This did not change during the pandemic: on the contrary, social workers in many countries expressed frustration at not being valued or recognised as key workers (Banks et al., 2020b; Tomlin et al., 2020). Dauti et al. (2020, p.642) report that

[Social] workers faced difficulties obtaining permits to leave the house and they have even been interrogated by police officers when traveling to support victims of domestic violence. Social workers have raised the concern that, compared to other essential workers, they have had lower access to safety supplies.

Social workers saw their professionalism and expertise undermined when they were required to assist with public health care tasks (such as taking people’s temperatures and monitoring infected people), whereas their own skills and expertise were neither understood nor regarded as relevant to the pandemic (Banks, 2020b; Dominelli (2020). Lack of public acknowledgement was not experienced in all countries, however. In the Netherlands, social work was included on the government’s list of vital professions (De Yonge et al., 2020). In Italy, as reported by Fargion et al. (2020, p.999):

[The] National Council of Social Workers ... issued a public message ...paying tribute to practitioners for their work during the emergency. It has been widely circulated across tv programs and newspapers, reaching out to the public at large.



Reflecting on the themes expressed across the literature, it appears that while some social workers experienced a heightened sense of professional identity during the pandemic, for others this identity was threatened by lack of recognition for their role or by their professional values being compromised. For example, recounting the lockdown challenges around protecting children, Labuschagne (2021, p.20) writes that “it is vital that existing feelings of anxiety and uncertainty are not compounded by fears of culpability and blame for situations beyond their control”. The concept of ‘moral injury’ may be relevant in this context.

Originating in the military, this term refers to “the psychological distress that results from actions (or the lack of them), which violate someone’s moral or ethical code” (Greenberg et al. 2020, p.1). People who have sustained moral injuries are “likely to experience negative thoughts about themselves or others ... [and] intense feelings of shame, guilt or disgust” (Greenberg et al. 2020, p.1). While this concept merits further exploration, it suggests the possibility that being unable to fulfil professional expectations had a negative impact on social work identity.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

The academic literature indicates that social workers all over the world have played an essential role during the COVID-19 pandemic. This came through in my review of individual journal articles, as well as in Banks et al.’s (2020a, 2020b) qualitative international study of ethical challenges experienced by 607 social workers in fifty-four countries. Despite national variations in the extent to which this contribution has been externally recognised, the pandemic literature consistently highlights the importance of professional identity as a source of collective support, pride and inspiration. Professional values and ethics have provided guidance for dealing with unprecedented situations, both in social work practice and social work education. Social workers and educators have mobilised around professional identity to advocate for social justice and fairer policies. These insights are

consistent with the findings from the 2017 workshop, with the pandemic acting as an additional context in which professional identity is expressed and performed.

The analytical concept of interpretative repertoires refers to commonplace ideas that enable people to collectively understand and talk about familiar contexts (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). A repertoire usually needs no elaboration because it draws on shared and taken-for-granted knowledge within a specific community. In this case, the adapted use of interpretative repertoires, identified through noticing patterns of phrasing, arguments and metaphors across the selected literature, captured the way in which the unthinkable became part of everyday life during the first year of the pandemic. Portrayal of the pandemic as 'unprecedented' quickly entered everyday discourse as a way of explaining or justifying disruptions ranging from the shortage of toilet rolls and disinfectant to the closure of schools and workplaces, extending to the pressure on health services. As initial shock gave way to problem solving, 'innovation' became a familiar response to organisational challenges; and in due course the concept of 'rebuilding better' was understood in the context of imagining a post-pandemic life. The interpretive repertoires of 'social work values', 'personal impact' and 'professional identity' were chosen for their potential to enable a comparison between the findings of the 2017 workshop and the insights offered in the literature. However, as I have argued in the earlier sections, each of these concepts already had a meaning within the social work community.

Reviewing the selected literature, I suggest that the act of writing provided the authors with an opportunity to articulate – and share within the social work community - their response to the unexpected and traumatic circumstances of a global pandemic. Two things support this interpretation: first, that although authors were writing from a range of national, economic and social contexts they came up with remarkably similar kinds of wording, even taking my subjective interpretation into account. Second, it appeared that many authors were endeavouring to make sense, emotionally and professionally, of a rapidly unfolding and unparalleled event. This included reporting on collaborative research projects which aimed to

capture experiences of the pandemic, evaluate its impact and generate ideas for addressing social injustices (de Yonge et al., 2020; Fargion, 2020). Collective sense-making, with ongoing implications for social work education, is also evident in reports about pedagogical innovations. As a result, several authors expressed the intention to continue and develop blended and online teaching. The pandemic literature provides evidence that virtual communication and intervention can offer richer practice learning than previously recognised (McLaughlin et al, 2020). There is also a renewed interest in broadening placement opportunities to include community development, expanding students' understanding of how organisations can work for social change.

It is important to acknowledge certain limitations with this study. My pragmatic decision to compare the spoken data from the 2017 workshop with the written data from a body of academic literature is, methodologically, neither usual nor straightforward. In addition, I chose to include book chapters as data alongside peer-reviewed articles. Some account should be taken of the variations in aims and intended audiences for these different sources of spoken and written data. When identifying interpretative repertoires, it is important to look for variations between sources which might prompt an exploration of whether some of them are drawing on alternative repertoires. I have been selective in identifying repertoires which – although repeated across the sources - were not the only ones which could have been highlighted. Some authors focused on the personal, others on the global and political. For example, some authors took the opportunity to call on the social work profession to engage in social action or which placed the pandemic into the wider context of previous crisis situations, extreme poverty, racial inequalities and human rights breaches ( Wilson et al., 2020; Isangha et al., 2021; Pacey et al., 2021). I chose to focus on smaller local contexts to enable comparison with our 2017 findings, and this is a limitation which has prevented me from looking for a more varied range of interpretative repertoires. As noted earlier, I chose to only search the English-speaking literature. This, and the largely Western bias of the selected articles and some of the arguments must also be acknowledged. For example, the

'non-traditional' placements and broader definitions of social work envisaged as part of 'rebuilding better' are already common outside of the Western model of social work. This bias does not fully reflect the global practice of social work and is an additional limitation of this paper, pointing to the need for further research.

Summing up, findings from the workshop data indicated that collective identity does not appear to be reliant on a particular national context, but rather it is linked with shared professional values. Furthermore, the data supports the idea that professional identity is fluid, shifting and not always fully attainable. Using interpretative repertoires as a lens, the 2017 findings are confirmed by this modest review. A development, elicited from the pandemic literature, is that attention has been drawn to the value of making opportunities to collectively articulate professional identity. The literature has further highlighted social work education's vital role in supporting students to explore and develop professional identity.

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