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School of Social Work
University of Windsor
167 Ferry Street
Windsor, Ontario N9A 0C5
Email: cswedit@uwindsor.ca

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A Landscape of Intersecting Discourses: Navigating Professional Identity as a Newly Qualified Social Worker

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Bernadette Moorhead

Charles Sturt University

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Abstract

This paper discusses the social contexts that influence lived experience of professional identity for newly qualified social workers during the first twelve months post-qualification. It is argued that the human services sector is impacted by competing discourses that influence ideas about the nature of problems and social service delivery, which do not always sit comfortably with social work values such as social justice and human rights that are reflected in professional identity. There is little understanding of how newly qualified social workers construct and navigate professional identity within these social contexts. An in-depth study underpinned by hermeneutic phenomenology and critical social work theory was undertaken with 17 newly qualified social workers in Australia. From a series of interviews, the participants' descriptions revealed several intersecting discourses that influenced perceptions of social work, as well as tensions between the participants' job-role and professional identity. Participants identified strategies to consciously navigate and resist aspects of these discourses to strengthen and make a social work identity more visible in the workplace. Implications for social work educators, supervisors, and professional associations concerned about professional identity are outlined to emphasize preparing and supporting practitioners for identity challenges.

Keywords: newly qualified social workers, neo-conservative discourse, positivism, professional identity, critical social work

Introduction

To flourish in contemporary workplaces, social workers across the globe are increasingly encouraged to develop and embrace professional identity (Webb, 2017), especially from the perspective of enacting core values of social justice and human rights (Asquith, Clark & Waterhouse, 2005; Cheung & Ngai, 2009), as well as maintaining professional recognition and retention in light of challenging socio-political trends in the human services sector (Healy & Meagher, 2004). This paper examines how those trends impact the lived experience of professional identity during the initial post-qualification period. It is important to explore how newly qualified social workers experience their professional identity when faced with challenging socio-political trends, in order to identify ways to support the “identity work” they undertake (Wiles, 2017, p. 47). First, this paper conceptualizes and discusses the social contexts that shape and impact the construction of professional identity. The paper then outlines the qualitative study that sought to explore lived experience of professional identity during the first twelve months post-qualification period. Whereas findings on a sub-set of data relating to how the participants experienced the research process have been reported in a previous publication (see Moorhead, Bell, & Bowles, 2016), this paper reports on a different aspect of the study that explored how the participants constructed and navigated professional identity. The findings highlight a number of identity challenges the participants had to manage within a landscape of intersecting discourses, which offers insights into implications for social work stakeholders.

The Social Context of Professional Identity

The social construction of professional identity involves complex individual, collective, relational, and environmental processes (Payne, 2006; Wiles, 2017), which can be fluid and contradictory (Fook, 2016; Oliver, 2013). Habermas (1987) emphasized the discursive nature of identity, with language being the vehicle to define ourselves in relationship to others. In social work, Wiles (2017) highlighted how professional identity unfolds within various discourses about professional qualities, collective identity with others, and a sense of individual development. These relational and discursive aspects are maintained in social identity theory, where individuals take on the values, knowledge, skills and norms of their respective professions (Nyström, 2009), which may or may not be regulated (Zikic & Richardson, 2016).

Yet, social work has a long and controversial history of establishing and clarifying professional identity (Moon, 2017) and legitimacy, especially as a predominantly female profession where gender and class inequalities are persistently replicated (Dent, 2017; Newberry-Koroluk, 2018). Various stakeholders, particularly governments, have continually questioned the nature of social work (Asquith et al., 2005; Weiss-gal & Welbourne, 2008) and have also influenced discourses that shape the profession (Gregory & Holloway, 2005). Discourses, as defined by Healy (2014), are contextual theories or ideologies that frame ideas and language, especially about social phenomena, for example, positivism, neo-conservatism, and managerialism (Gregory & Holloway, 2005; Newberry, 2014). In recent decades, discourses such as these have disputed and transformed notions of professional knowledge, integrity, independence, and expertise (Fook, 2016), which do not always sit comfortably with social work professional identity (Cheung & Ngai, 2009). Consequently, the meaning and practices of professions and professional identities have become highly contested in many contexts (Baxter, 2011).

Impacts of Discourses on Professional Identity in Social Work

From a critical theoretical perspective, a number of dominant discourses have been heavily criticized across many countries for the ways they impact organizational structure and the underlying nature of professional boundaries. For example, neo-conservatism maintains that individuals cause their own problems and inequality is a natural outcome of market forces. While some of these ideas are also reflected in neo-liberal philosophy, Newberry (2014) emphasized how the current ideological context is typified by conservatism, a term which will be utilized in this paper. Within a neo-conservative discourse, it is further argued that organizations should operate along the same principles of a private business to maximize efficiency and individual choice (Newberry, 2014). These views overlap with a managerial discourse, which emphasizes administrative and technical work (Aronson & Smith, 2011; Cheung & Ngai, 2009). Based on these ideas, it is preferable for social work interventions to be underscored by positivist scientific frameworks to target improving and monitoring the capabilities of individuals to fix their own problems (Healy, 2014).

With the increasing prevalence of neo-conservative and managerial discourses, it is argued that a dominant focus on individualism diminishes the understanding of how the social context can impact on people's lives (Houston, 2016) and moves away from collectivist values (Newberry, 2014). This conflicts with a social work commitment to critical practice, and social justice and human rights. Social workers across many countries are also challenged by tightened resources and hierarchical bureaucratic management, and this is especially so for newly qualified social workers who need support when they first transition from study to practice (Newberry, 2014).

Concerns about these discourses unfold in environments of increased competition between various occupation groups for broader, non-social work specific jobs and precarious employment arrangements (Harrison & Healy, 2015). Organizational contexts are frequently characterized by management of risk and defensive practice (Stanley & Lincoln, 2016), rather than encouraging professionals to be autonomous and reflective (Cheung & Ngai, 2009; Newberry, 2014). Social workers, including managers, have to carefully navigate tensions between organizational and professional identity that can at times conflict (Aronson & Smith, 2011), especially as "professional identity is not a stable entity: it is an ongoing process of accommodation and customization shaped by contextual workplace factors" (Webb, 2017, p.4). Therefore, these discourses have been influential in privileging organizational responsibilities and seeking to erode professional boundaries (Newberry, 2014) by placing less emphasis on the notion of a distinct professional identity (Cheung & Ngai, 2009; Gregory & Holloway, 2005). In various countries that embrace these discourses, there are fears that social work identities based on professional values and standards, are becoming narrower or simply lost within the wider socioenvironmental landscape:

...there are clearly a number of serious issues confronting the profession of social work, which are not simply to do with shortage of numbers and resource distribution. Rather, the "crisis" has more to do with loss of professional identity, which impacts on recruitment, retention, and service provision (Asquith et al., 2005, p. 39).

Indeed, it is increasingly common for practitioners to experience and embrace multiple identities across organizational, personal, and educational contexts, which means a professional identity may not be a priority in their lives (Harrison & Healy, 2015).

Tensions between professional identity and wider social contexts are highlighted in a recent Canadian study, where nine early-career, female social workers within the first three years post-qualification, reported on how colleagues perceived them in terms of gender and age (Newberry-Koroluk, 2018). Despite having a qualification, it was not uncommon for the social position of the participants, including marital status, to be used as a way of judging and minimizing their professional knowledge and ability, which the author hypothesized as a mechanism for colleagues to gain power and status for themselves (Newberry-Koroluk, 2018). In response to conflicting reactions from people, one participant preferred to identify as a therapist, rather than a social worker. They linked this title with psychology because the public perceives it as a masculinized and thus proper profession, whereas social work is perceived to be feminized, which contains an “implied degradation of caregiving work more generally” (Newberry-Koroluk, 2018, p. 11). These findings serve as a reminder of how notions of professionalism can be influenced by a range of ideas, including sexist stereotypes and gender discrimination, which continues to intersect with and entrench the lower-status of social work and to undermine female practitioners and professional identity.

Despite the impacts of contemporary discourses, social work across the globe is arguably invested in the notion of professional identity (Dent, 2017; Webb, 2017). Claiming a professional identity has been reported as a point of resistance against hegemonic discourses that seek to erode professional values and boundaries (Cheung & Ngai, 2009). Social workers can choose to operate in a wider profession-based ethical, knowledge and values-driven framework (Bowles, Collingridge, Curry & Valentine, 2006; Cheung & Ngai, 2009). Such a framework means that a social worker does not have to be defined only by a job title, role description, or organization. Practitioners can embrace wider professional commitments that may transcend organizational contexts. Nevertheless, social workers must navigate professional identity in the face of a range of competing discourses that permeate organizations and job roles they undertake. With the exception of Newberry-Koroluk’s (2018) recent study, there are gaps in the profession and knowledge base, as “little is known about how social welfare professionals are affected by the well-established and extensive debates about professional identity” (Healy, 2009, pp. 405-406), especially newly qualified social workers (Harrison & Healy, 2015). These gaps are particularly concerning given the contested nature of professional identity and warrants further research.

Methods

The dearth of literature informed the development of an in-depth qualitative study to explore lived experience of professional identity with newly qualified social workers. As described earlier, findings based on a sub-set of data about experiences of the research process, were discussed in Moorhead et al. (2016). This paper reports on findings from a different part of the study related to how the participants constructed and navigated professional identity within their social contexts.

The theoretical framework for the study drew on the theories of hermeneutic phenomenology and critical social work, especially ideas from Heidegger (1962), Habermas (1987) and Fook (2016). Hermeneutic phenomenology is centered on investigating and

interpreting lived experience to emphasize the range of experiential knowledge of a phenomenon (Wertz, 2011). The hermeneutic tradition embraces interpretive analysis and subjectivity (Heidegger, 1962), seeing the researcher and participant in a co-constructed relationship as they explore lived experience together (Bell, 2013). Habermas (1987) agreed with Heidegger that interpretation occurs within socio-cultural contexts but also aimed to facilitate critical reflection as part of interpretive analysis. He wanted people to uncover power and challenge language in order to engage in transformative action (Loftus & Trede, 2009). These ideas have influenced modern critical social work theory, which seeks to explore and critique the social contexts that impact lived experience (Pease & Nipperess, 2016), by examining and building on people's sense of agency, to bring about social change (Payne, 2014). Analyzing and challenging the outcomes of power and language and how this serves to advantage and disadvantage various groups is emphasized as part of achieving that change (Fook, 2016; Pease & Nipperess, 2016). Using critically reflective processes, the influence of social contexts can be explored (Fook, 2016) within the co-constructed relationship. These ideas are important in contemporary social work, where the social construction of professional identity is contested and challenged.

Data Collection and Analysis

Semi-structured interviews were used for gathering rich descriptions of lived experience from 17 research participants. To capture depth and changes to professional identity over time, three interviews were conducted with each participant over the first twelve months post-qualification. The first interview phase began in November 2012, the second in May 2013, and the final in November 2013. The semi-structured interview schedule was designed around the literature review and theoretical framework, to explore areas related to the aims of the study and ensure participants could openly describe lived experience. Near the end of each interview the participants were asked: What do we think is the dominant story of identity here? What messages (or dominant discourses) about social work identity do you receive from others? These open-ended questions encouraged critical reflection on the construction and navigation of professional identity and the social contexts that influence lived experience.

The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis. Responses to the interview questions, including those outlined above, were thematically analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase method. The transcripts were uploaded to the NVivo computer program for analysis. Three types of coding – topic, analytic and thematic – were employed during analysis to build themes in an inductive manner. First, the transcripts were reviewed to identify topics of conversation (topic coding) such as: role identity versus social work identity; role limitations; social work versus psychology; hierarchy; reputation; and diversity of social work. The node and memo functions of NVivo were used to create codes and undertake reflective writing on the content. Next, the codes were grouped together into categories (analytic coding), and then refined into core themes (thematic coding), including *Environmental influences (macro) on professional identity*. In keeping with the methodology, transcripts and emerging themes were shared with participants for feedback and comment.

Ethics Approval

Ethics approval was given by the Charles Sturt University (CSU) School of Humanities and Social Sciences ethics committee. Informed and voluntary consent were central considerations for the study. Participants were provided with an information package that

detailed the aims and scope of the study, with emphasis on the time involved with participation, as there were three in-depth interviews over a period of 12 months. To maintain confidentiality transcripts were de-identified and protected with passwords.

Study Limitations

As a small-scale qualitative study, the findings only represent lived experience of the participants in this study but can still offer important experiential knowledge in an under-researched area. It is also possible the findings are most relevant to an Australian context but considering the amount of literature worldwide on professional identity the findings may provide useful insights elsewhere. In terms of theory, the framework used for this study does not adequately explore or analyze the social dimensions of identity, such as gender. This is a common issue when using critical reflection, as it often focuses on general power relations (Mattsson, 2014). Considering the particular inequalities of class and gender that occur in the social work profession (Dent, 2017; Newberry-Koroluk, 2018), further attention is warranted in this area. In light of these limitations, it is recommended that further research be undertaken with newly qualified social workers from a range of institutions, countries, and diverse backgrounds to explore their professional identities in a range of environments. It is also recommended that future research draws on theorists and critical theories such as post-structuralism and feminism to explore and analyze social dimensions of identity, especially class and gender.

Participants

The participants were recruited from the graduating cohort of undergraduate social work students at CSU in 2012. The study was advertised via several CSU social work course webpages. The information package was posted on these sites and with the assistance of the course coordinator, the package was also forwarded via email to graduands. From these methods, 12 women and 5 men (n=17) self-selected to participate in the study, and all of them completed the series of interviews. The participants were employed in non-government (n=9) and government organizations (n=8) throughout most of the year. By the final interview, participants were employed in the fields of: health (n=5); women and domestic violence (n=3); disabilities (n=2); family and children services (n=2); youth (n=2); social security/income maintenance (n=1); and aged care (n=1). One participant was doing casual teaching on top of their substantive role, and another had left social work for undergraduate study in nursing. In terms of job title, only four participants were employed in a social work titled role for most of the year. One was temporarily employed as a social worker in a short contract at the beginning of the year and some later casual work, but their main role throughout the year was as a counsellor. Thus, most participants (n = 13) held generic titled positions, such as caseworker and support worker throughout the year. This is consistent with employment trends in the Australian human services sector, which has raised questions about implications for embracing professional identity (Harrison & Healy, 2015).

Results

Across each interview, the participants described how their professional identities were based on values of social justice and human rights and multiple theoretical frameworks, especially holistic, client-centered, and strength-based approaches. They also preferred multidimensional practice, which involves being committed to change across individual (micro),

group (mezzo) and community (macro) levels of practice. They characterized the initial post-qualification period as a journey of learning how to enact these dimensions of professional identity. During the course of this journey, the participants described a number of tensions between professional identity and the organizational context and workplace relationships, which revealed several discourses – positivism, neo-conservatism and managerialism – that were dominant in their social contexts. These discourses impacted lived experience of professional identity in terms of perceptions of social work, hierarchies and job functions. These discourses and associated experiences are detailed below, followed by strategies the participants used to navigate professional identity within these social contexts to ensure it was visible and relevant in practice.

Positivist Science Discourse

The participants' descriptions revealed that the positivist scientific discourse was dominant in service delivery and workplace relationships with colleagues, especially in medicine and psychology. This discourse impacted lived experience of professional identity in two ways – perceptions of social work; and hierarchies in the workplace.

Perceptions of social work. In medical environments, the positivist framework was commonly expressed through the bio-medical model, which characterizes clients as bio-physical beings that must receive a diagnosis and prescription for intervention through expert positivist medical knowledge (Healy, 2014). When working with colleagues from psychology in any workplace setting, the positivist discourse emerged in the form of evidence-based practice. A typical example was cognitive behavior therapy (CBT), which the participants observed as dominant in psychology interventions:

...as I said to my supervisor, I've got to remember, like, social work obviously has a lot to offer and so not to get caught up in a predominantly psychological place...the stuff they do is all psychology, like CBT... (Participant two, final interview)

While most participants embraced many aspects of evidence-based practice and CBT as part of their own professional identity, they also drew from a range of theoretical frameworks, especially strength-based approaches. However, because of this theoretical diversity, many participants were concerned that social work was perceived to have a lower status in comparison to medicine and psychology in their organizations and the broader community:

I think that the social work discourse is over [ridden] by the others. I think we've got economic at the top...science, medical model, and then the psych discourses. Psychology overrides social work...so social work really does sit, in terms of the pecking order, down the bottom on the bottom rung in that sense. And yet I think that social work does the most to achieve change, really... (Participant three, first interview)

Concerns about professional legitimacy and status were reinforced in stereotypes of social workers, which included being described as “wishy washy” (Participant four, first interview), people who lacked professionalism and were “do-gooders” (Participant five, first interview), and who were there to “throw a spanner in the works” (Participant four, second and third interviews), meaning they “get in the way”. One participant, who worked in the domestic violence sector, regularly experienced the stereotype of being perceived as “cardigan-wearing hippies”

(Participant thirteen, first and second interviews), and another noted: “There’s a whole stereotype of a social worker being really out there and, you know, the red glasses and short hair or...really radical...” (Participant fourteen, first interview). These stereotypes were often communicated in a way to undermine the legitimacy and value of social work.

Hierarchies in the workplace. Because of these perceptions and stereotypes, most of the participants said a hierarchy emerged in their work environments and privileged the views of medical and/or psychology practitioners. One exception was a participant who worked in a national social security (income maintenance) agency, where social work is at the top of the hierarchy:

I kind of feel at the top of the food chain and [laughs] – and I’m not saying for one minute that’s an opportunity to dispense power on people, but there’s more – I guess people are more interested in your viewpoints, and there’s an opportunity to share theory, and you’re more at the top of the hierarchy if there is that in people’s workplaces. (Participant six, second interview)

Several participants who worked in the health sector noted that important cultural changes were slowly unfolding: “...it’s a culture in the older doctors because they’re just not trained that way [to respect social workers]. They’re just not open to that. Some of the younger ones, they’re fine...” (Participant seven, first interview). Also, in mental health, two participants said the growing prominence of strength-based approaches was useful because it complemented much of social work and legitimized their work in the eyes of medical practitioners.

In relation to psychology, nine participants reflected on a hierarchy that saw psychology more valued in the industry and wider community. One participant observed this as part of undertaking postgraduate study in psychology to assist with entering private practice in the future:

...even though I want to practice as a social worker, what I’ve noticed, even like when I did my prac [field placement/practice learning] in the health department... There seems to be a...it’s probably just my opinion, but I’ve felt like social workers weren’t looked on as highly as psychologists were... (Participant one, first interview)

This issue was exacerbated by a lack of clarity about social work more broadly, which eleven participants reflected on throughout the year. Misunderstandings about social work were especially evident in hospital settings, where medical staff often called upon social workers for tasks that were unrelated to their job-role, which one participant experienced regularly:

When I first stepped into the role I think we were... I don’t know, there were things we were being asked to do that weren’t really social work roles. You didn’t need a four-year degree to do the things that I was being asked to do. (Participant four, final interview)

Beyond the health sector, the participants said that clients and community members tend to have a clearer understanding of psychology. Thus, it was not uncommon for the participants to experience exchanges with confused colleagues, clients and their own family who said they did not understand social work.

Neo-conservative and Managerial Discourses

The participants' descriptions about job functions and job-title highlighted how the neo-conservative and managerial discourses were present in tandem. These discourses impacted the types of roles and duties the participants could undertake and posed challenges to enacting professional identity.

Impact of job functions. The participants said that individual-based roles and solutions, as well as performance outputs were often prioritized in their work:

And we've got KPIs to meet – key performance indicators where we need to see a certain number of people per day to justify our positions as well... And the government expects us, like social workers, to be doing certainly more transactional [work], to try to save [money], to be cost effective...getting through the numbers. (Participant ten, first interview)

This participant worked closely with social workers but was not employed as one. Her concerns about these issues continued into the second interview, and she described feeling degraded in the workplace, which impacted her decision to later leave the profession.

While most participants enjoyed their work overall, some were frustrated by how their job-role duties focused too much on individual, direct (micro level) work, and left little scope for multidimensional practice at mezzo and macro levels, as reflected in their professional identity. For example, one participant talked about how being an advocate fitted with her social work identity, but tight funding requirements on her job constricted aspects of her professional identity as the work was often reactive: "I suppose the only thing I miss is case management...you don't get to the issue, you get to deal with the consequences of the issue, so to speak" (Participant nine, first interview). The boundaries of the job limited her capacity to fully undertake social work roles that she saw could benefit her client group in a more proactive fashion. This became an ongoing challenge for the participant, which contributed to her decision to eventually find another job.

A few participants noted benefits of these discourses, such as an increased focus on client choice, which complemented their social work values, including client self-determination. However, the participants remained concerned that client choices were often limited, and administrative tasks were increased and/or did not reflect how they preferred to practice as social workers:

And as I said to our manager, that's great that you want to do that [keep service evaluation data], but what are you going to do with the information? "Oh, it just sits on file...It's basically just ticking a box." (Participant twelve, first interview)

Consequently, some participants wondered whether the social work profession, with a commitment to social justice and human rights, will be valued in the future because of these dominant work practices and trends.

Impact of job-title. Another important facet of these discourses were generic titled job-roles, in which most participants were employed during the year. This genericism was reflected in their teams, as the participants often worked alongside colleagues from a diverse mix of qualification backgrounds, including their managers. As they moved from university to qualified practice, many of the participants became immediately aware of the relationship between their

generic job-role and social work identity. There were concerns about possible tensions and the need for a more visible professional identity:

I just want to reflect on some of the discourses that have been in my practice so far, and also some of the challenges that I've actually encountered as I try to develop my identity...as a social worker. And how to manage the managerial discourse...I wanted to maintain my same being with them [my organization and manager], but at the same time trying to identify myself as a social worker and standing for the values of our profession. (Participant eleven, second interview)

Another participant was often told directly by a manager that she was not a social worker in her casework role, which downplayed her professional identity. At the beginning of the year, these comments from her manager prompted the participant to reflect on how professional identity is evident in her job-role:

...when I think about my manager [who says I am not a social worker in my role], that makes me feel stronger in my identity because I think that's not right. And then I think about how essentially I am a social worker and I feel like that's defining for me. And I feel because of my degree I have those things to draw on, and there's a code of ethics and things like that, no matter what I do my practice will be social work practice. (Participant fourteen, first interview)

Negative exchanges with her manager became frequent and overwhelming over time, as there was little regard for her background or views as a social work professional. These issues contributed to the participant seeking another job where a more positive environment would support her needs and value her professional identity. The need to be valued was reiterated by a number of participants who were grateful that their managers encouraged them to enact professional identity, no matter their job-title.

Towards a Visible and Enduring Professional Identity

In response to the impacts of these discourses the participants described two strategies for navigating their professional identity – openly expressing professional identity and advocacy to challenge and change perceptions of social work. The first involved developing an understanding of the relationship between their job-role identity and professional identity, so they could promote the latter within their work. The second strategy was about building a positive reputation and advocating for a strong collective identity on a broader scale.

Openly expressing professional identity. Concerns about tensions between job-role and professional contexts prompted the participants to develop confidence in expressing their professional identity, so it could be more visible in the external environment. To do so, 12 participants talked about explicitly identifying as a social worker despite their generic job title. They introduced themselves as a social worker, added “social worker” to their job title, and/or wrote it down on paperwork. These were small but overt acts of naming oneself as a social worker, which increased external visibility of their professional identity:

I'm not actually hired as a social worker...I'm hired for my social work qualification...it's becoming more and more prevalent that we don't get hired as social workers...So where is

that taking our profession? ... I'm proud to be a social worker. So I don't hide behind it; I identify with it strongly (Participant thirteen, first interview).

The participant maintained this stance in all of her interviews and was supported by her organization in this endeavor. For one participant, naming herself explicitly as a social worker was also about being transparent with clients: "Because I think it's good to see what type of discipline and core values that the worker has" (Participant five, second interview).

Another important method was learning how to navigate limitations within their job-role, which converged and/or diverged with professional identity in various ways:

...because you're not being referred to or described or acknowledged as a social worker, there's a lot more internal work that you have to do to keep paddling to stay afloat in your identity as a social worker. (Participant 3, second interview)

For many participants, identifying these role limitations over the course of the year was useful for developing self-awareness and then considering ways of expressing their professional identity, based on professional ethics and standards:

...in some ways you have your own individual identity, but there's an organizational identity that can tend to take over what it is you're talking about, and how you're seeing things, and how situations should be dealt with. A lot of that comes under organizational identity, although I still maintain when I'm talking and working through things with my supervisors or managers, there's ethical consideration of what I will and won't do, and how I take things into consideration... (Participant sixteen, second interview)

The participants utilized social work values, ethics and knowledge as a basis for decision-making in practice and being critically reflective. Some raised concerns that an inability to draw on and enact social work values and knowledge could lead to feelings of helplessness that could marginalize their social work identity. Conversely, this challenge could also become a useful source for critical reflection and action. One participant best described this during a meeting about a client, where his voice was not given ample opportunity to be heard by his manager:

I felt helpless...I really felt okay, I'm a social worker but what does it mean? Even in my role as a case manager, take the social-worker perspective away am I really being effective in my role, and why did I actually attend to that reassessment at all in the first place? So it was some of those questions that I was pointing at in my own self to say honestly why, why, why. (Participant eleven, second interview)

This experience became a catalyst for the participant to take responsibility for expressing aspects of his professional identity in the future with his manager. As such, similar scenarios was often helpful for participants to reflect on their job-role and clarify professional identity, so it could become more visible in everyday interactions.

Advocating for social work. Building on the first strategy, the participants described being advocates for the social work profession more generally to change the perceptions of others, especially in the workplace. For example, participants in hospital settings resisted the conventional biomedical model by constructing a social work identity that sat outside or alongside the medical hierarchy:

On the other hand, I think... we're just not in the hierarchy at all, I like to think that we're not, not that we're at the bottom, we're just not in it at all; we're somewhere else.
(Participant four, second interview)

This formed the basis of advocating for social work, as they did not want to become part of the medical hierarchy and see social work being devalued because of this discourse. Other participants reflected on the importance of enacting their professional integrity as a social worker by establishing a positive reputation. They focused on building networks and having a positive influence on the perceptions of others:

It's part of my responsibility to break that [stereotype] down, so when I identify being a social worker, I'm making a political stand in terms of I get what you people think, and we joke about it in the office. It's like, oh, I've got to go do this and it's, like, put your cardigan on – we laugh, as we all wear cardigans – so it's about making a stand that our work is very theoretically based, and we're really cemented in what we do and social justice and our code of ethics... (Participant thirteen, second interview)

To build on these actions, several participants looked to the collective level of the profession by advocating for broader action, such as formal and ongoing support for maintaining social work identity, especially during the initial post-qualification period:

.... some sort of a new graduate program maybe where there's... I don't know who would organize it, whether it's the AASW [Australian Association of Social Work] or the university, where it brings new graduates back.... like to social work, and talking, theories and practice and how everyone's going with that... (Participant fourteen, final interview)

The participants argued that a social work identity resides in an individual identity, a collective identity, and the wider profession: "Gain confidence, be strong, and believe in ourselves that it's such a valuable thing that we offer..." (Participant eight, final interview). They emphasized that an enduring social work identity, forged through collective action, is needed in the future to strive towards the aims of the profession and to sustain social work.

Discussion

This small-scale study goes some way to addressing the gaps about impacts of socio-political trends and discourses on professional identity, as described by Healy (2009). The participants' descriptions reveal that in contemporary workplaces efforts to incorporate professional identity can be a challenging but worthwhile enterprise for newly qualified social workers to pursue, which as Wiles (2017, p. 47) noted, involves a great deal of "identity work" that occurs within various discourses about professional qualities. In this study, the participants articulated a commitment to social work identity based on common values, ethics, and knowledge, especially multidimensional practice and holistic, strength-based perspectives. These dimensions of professional identity drove the participants to not simply undertake generic job-role tasks or technical work driven by the organizational context; they were determined to utilize professional frameworks and identify as social workers. The findings encourage educators to consider how students are prepared for such identity work and how they can effectively respond to discourses that attempt to disrupt professional contexts once they are in the field. Employers, managers, and supervisors can also contribute by working closely with newly qualified social

workers to reflect on professional identity and articulate methods for addressing identity challenges in the workplace, especially within supervision relationships.

Concerns raised by the participants about the visibility, value, and place of social work demonstrate the challenging and contested nature of professional identity (Baxter, 2011; Moon, 2017), and how a range of influences converge onto practitioners (Harrison & Healy, 2015), especially within the organizational context (Webb, 2017). The findings also reinforce the socially constructed and discursive nature of professional identity as it is impacted by language (Habermas, 1987), social contexts and relationships (Oliver, 2013; Fook, 2016; Payne, 2006; Wiles, 2017), which in this study included managers and colleagues whose perceptions and stereotypes influenced lived experience of professional identity. The participants discovered that a social work identity did not always sit comfortably alongside the dominant discourses that permeated their organizations and workplace relationships. Indeed, many of the participants worried that professional identity risked being marginalized, which reflects current debates and concerns in social work (e.g. Asquith et al., 2005; Gregory & Holloway, 2005; Stanley & Lincoln, 2016), especially in terms of increased administrative work and conservative individualized approaches to fixing problems (Cheung & Ngai, 2009; Houston, 2016; Newberry, 2014).

In response to these social contexts, most of the participants focused on openly expressing professional identity because it gave them a framework from which to see the world, undertake interventions, and critically reflect on their roles and relationships. Many of the participants were able to exercise some power by taking active steps to construct and navigate professional identity within their environments, including professional hierarchies with medicine and psychology. Of note, when faced with these challenges to professional identity many of the participants were more likely to show resistance by identifying as a social worker, which contrasts with one participant in Newberry-Koroluk's (2018) study who conformed by identifying as a therapist, allying with gendered perceptions that privileged professions such as psychology. While there were concerns about how psychology was better understood and valued than social work with the Australian participants in this study, gendered dimensions of those experiences were not adequately explored, but likely to be present. This reinforces the need for further research to investigate these issues. On the whole, the participants were motivated to develop and articulate a more visible social work identity throughout the year, which as Cheung and Ngai (2009) identify, can be a point of resistance against hegemonic discourses. It would be interesting to further research and compare cohorts in a range of countries to understand what influences a practitioner to embrace or reject a professional identity and title.

Finally, it is noteworthy that most of the identity work that the participants undertook involved individual action within the immediate organizational environment. While it was useful to identify and name oneself as a social worker in everyday practice and advocate for the profession, the participants did not describe participating in wider social action, which could reflect the impacts of a neo-conservative discourse that often reduces interventions to individual activities. However, the participants did emphasize that there needs to be broader action beyond the individual level, especially as there can be limits to personal agency when faced by insurmountable difficulties in the workplace. One participant felt particularly degraded by the business environment of her workplace and another experienced frequent hostility from a manager about being recognized as a social worker.

These experiences add weight to calls for coordinated multilevel activities that promote strong social work identities from the individual, to the team, group, professional, and global levels. Professional identity involves individual development and a collective identity (Wiles, 2017), which requires the profession, locally and globally, to consider the multidimensional and interconnected layers that can influence the professional identities of newly qualified social workers. The participants' calls for a strong identity based on leadership and broader action resonate with wider literature (e.g. Asquith et al., 2005; Cheung & Ngai, 2009; Healy & Meagher, 2004), and encourage all key stakeholders to develop partnerships to address the needs of newly qualified social workers, who require support when they transition from study to qualified practice (Newberry, 2014). With increasing competition between professions, and trends towards unstable employment and broader job titles (Harrison & Healy, 2015), it would be worthwhile to further investigate formal and collective ways of exercising power that supports and sustains professional identity. Professional associations could develop and provide resources to encourage newly qualified social workers to take individual, collective, and social action while also being supported in the social/professional environment.

Conclusion

This paper reported on a small phenomenological and critical study that involved seventeen Australian newly qualified social workers. The participants found it was necessary to construct and navigate their professional identity within a landscape of intersecting discourses, including positivism, neo-conservativism, and managerialism. The findings indicated that these dominate discourses impacted professional identity in terms of perceptions about social work and hierarchies in the workplace, as well as posing challenges to the value base and theoretical diversity of the participants. The participants discovered that professional identity is not always embraced at the socio-political level and within human service organizations but can provide a source of strength for resisting problematic aspects of dominant discourses. The participants were motivated to openly express their professional identity and to be advocates for the profession, rather than see social work become invisible, especially within generic job-roles. Their individual strategies were underscored by relationships in their workplace, including with managers, some of whom, but not all, were an important source of support and validation of professional identity. The findings encourage educators, employers, and professional associations to work together to prepare emerging graduates to express professional identity, to encourage newly qualified and experienced social workers to be visible in organizations, and to engage in advocacy in the broader community to influence and change the discourses that seek to undermine a commitment to professional contexts.

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