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Beyond binaries? A call for improved understanding of diverse identities of social work students and practitioners

research article

Beyond binaries? A call for improved understanding of diverse identities of social work students and practitioners

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This article reports on an exploratory study in the UK on the experiences of social work practitioners and students whose minoritised identities may not be obvious to those they interact with in work and university settings. Study is relevant because people increasingly identify in ways that fall outside singular demographic categories and because there is a dearth of research on their experiences to date. Analysis of the qualitative survey data identifies three overarching themes: experiences of misrecognition and prejudice; fears of being out; and ease with 'passing' (successfully presenting oneself in a socially favoured identity rather than an 'authentic' one) and 'code-switching' (altering language, behaviour or appearance so that it conforms to hegemonic societal and cultural norms). While a small-scale study, experiences of the surveyed practitioners and students provide important illustrations of their ongoing fears about revealing their authentic identities, despite the broader professional commitment to anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory practice.

Introduction

This article presents data from an exploratory study in the UK. It focuses on the experiences of social work practitioners and students whose minoritised identities may not be obvious to those they interact with in work and university settings. This

is relevant because more and more people identify in ways that fall outside of singular categories (Rocha and Webber, 2017). Questions of diversity and inclusion within the social work workforce are of interest within the UK (Social Work England, 2021) and beyond. Social workers engage with communities that have 'a high representation of diverse, disadvantaged, and oppressed groups' (Mor Barak, 2008: 239), and it is reasonable to expect that some of this diversity should be reflected within its own workforce.

There are examples of how to start promoting inclusivity in social work education, particularly in relation to anti-racist practice (Stephens and Rock-Vanloo, 2022; Tedam and Cane, 2022; Warde et al, 2022). However, far more needs to be done to make the workforce more inclusive. Puwar's (2004) study of the operation of the civil service illustrated how a UK public sector employer, the ostensible archetype of neutrality and professionalism, normalised white maleness within its everyday interactions. Consequently, female and racialised bodies were treated, to paraphrase Puwar's (2004) memorable title, as 'space invaders' who were 'bodies out of place'. Such analysis of the broader context influenced the primary questions that the current study has sought to explore:

- What are the experiences of minoritised social workers and social work students in their organisations?
- What are their experiences of recognition, misrecognition, visibility and invisibility in these spaces?

These questions emerged from conversations initiated in an informal group of international social work academics interested in exploring the legacy of coloniality on the social work curriculum and seeking to move beyond it. For two of the authors (Reima Ana Maglajlic and Robin Sen), these conversations also included reflections on their own experiences of dual heritage, minority multi-ethnic backgrounds and sexuality that is not part of the commonly assumed binary (bisexuality and pansexuality), and that include both the invisibility and hypervisibility of such identities. The questions also emerged from one author's personal experiences both of being a trans social work student and while undertaking a review of trans people's experiences in social work (Stevens, 2022).

These reflective conversations sit alongside emergent evidence from Canada and the US highlighting the need for the social work profession to contribute more to supporting equity and social justice for trans and gender-diverse communities in the context of the recent undermining of their legal rights (Kant and Boskey, 2022; Kia et al, 2022). They also sit within current political climates and discourse in North America and the UK promoting an 'anti-woke' ideological agenda that threatens to undermine the basic rights of several marginalised groups. The fact that most current studies on the experiences of trans people in social work focus on the experiences of white and non-disabled trans people (Stevens, 2022) also highlights the importance of intersectionality as a theoretical tool for understanding how different social categories combine for marginalised groups (Bernard, 2022). For the purpose of this study, misrecognition is defined as inadvertent or deliberate misrecognition, which can include not only prejudice (derogatory attitudes and beliefs) but also any other practices and institutions that regulate social interactions according to norms that prevent equality (Fraser, 2000).

It could be argued that calls for greater recognition of minoritised identities in the social work workforce are remote from the lived experiences of those using social work services, who are living in poverty and within poorly resourced communities. We do not view these struggles as in opposition to each other or as an either/or (see also Young, 1997). Intersectionality allows examination of 'the complexity of categories of identities and power relationships in social work education and practice' (Mattson, 2014: 23, cited in Bernard, 2022: 23). Greater recognition of diverse identities within the social work profession is important for the well-being of the workforce and a social justice issue in and of itself. It also offers potential for the better representation of, and better responsiveness to, the diverse communities social workers support. The need to fight for better resourcing of all the communities social workers work with remains a pressing issue. This article is a conversation starter regarding how the profession should consider and recognise the multiple and diverse identities within it. The first part of the article reviews available literature on the experiences of social work students and practitioners who have such identities. This is followed by the presentation of the study methodology and of key findings from a survey that was conducted. To conclude, we offer a brief discussion and overview of the study implications for social work research, education and policy.

Reading between the lines: a review of research on diverse identities in social work

There is a dearth of research in social work on the experiences of people of dual heritage and/or mixed race (both terms are used in different cultural contexts) (Wong and Chau, 2022). The research there is has mainly focused on the experiences of people receiving a social work service and carers, particularly looked-after children (see, for example, Coward, 2015). In their review of social work literature on the experiences of mixed-race people (their terminology) in North America, Wong and Chau (2022: 322–3) stress:

> The literature reviewed indicates that biases that distort mixed-race people's existence and experiences are embedded in the theories for practice, conceptual frameworks used in research, and 'types' of mixed-raced people selected as research participants. That these social and historical biases have continued over time raises concerns about the dearth of knowledge for social work practice may lead to adverse impacts for mixed-race people in their interactions with practitioners.

The authors also conclude that social workers tend to use 'deficit-oriented frameworks that encourage mixed race people to choose a singular racial identity' (Wong and Chau, 2022: 323).

In the British context, debates about minority ethnic groups in social work have been characterised by the exploration of race, racism and anti-racism (Soydan and Williams, 1998). In the US social work literature, the term mainly appears in relation to the Multi-ethnic Placement Act 1994, aimed to improve the adoption rates for all 'minority children' (Kalisher et al, 2020: 4), including racial minority groups. In the north-western European and North American social work literature, the term refers to the broader cultural community due to the constraints of race as a social

construct (Samuels, 2014). Hence, the term has also been used, for example, to explore the experiences of refugees who have different ethnicities (see, for example, Xin et al, 2011).

In south-eastern European studies, ethnicity is a more central concept than race, being linked to the history of the migration of Slav clans from Central Asia between sixth and eighth centuries (Baker, 2018). Coupled with the impact of the post-colonial Ottoman and Habsburg history in the region, this sparked ethnopolitical violence throughout the region at the end of the 20th century (Baker, 2018). A similar impact of colonialism on different ethnic groups can be observed across Africa too (Deng, 1997). The West African region alone has more than 100 ethnic groups (Igwe et al, 2020). Understanding of this social construct is further complicated if considering, for example, countries like Aotearoa/New Zealand, where mixed heritage reflects those of Māori (indigenous) and Pākehā (coloniser) identities (Webber, 2006). Rocha and Webber (2017) argue that understanding of race, ethnicity and the ways people identify is fluid and changing. They stress that the 'emerging work on mixedness thus complicates both understandings of race – and ethnicity – and conceptions of identity … as it requires engagement with the ideas of race and ethnicity themselves' (Rocha and Webber, 2017: 3). Laird (2004) stresses parallels between the colonial export of Western European and North American social work theories and concepts across Africa, with a lack of sensitivity to different ethnic groups across the vast continent. Reporting on a study of culturally sensitive social work practice with multi-ethnic communities in Ghana, Forkuor and colleagues (2019) highlight the importance of social workers incorporating practices and strategies used by the ethnic groups they work with.

Much like race and ethnicity, sexuality and gender tend to be explored without unpacking the diverse – or *minority minority* – sexual and gender identities (Schaub et al, 2017). Social work research on the experiences of people who identify as bisexual, pansexual or asexual, or in relation to transgender identities, is usually subsumed under umbrella terms like 'LGBTQ2S+' (see, for example, Kia et al, 2021) or 'queer' (see, for example, Fabbre, 2017). The limited literature also does not include sufficient theoretical understanding 'capable of challenging heteronormativity on a more radical level' (Nothdurfter and Nagy, 2016: 2227). An early book on sexual orientation and gender expression in social work (Morrow and Messinger, 2006) did not cover asexuality. Such topics as the experiences of intersex people were only touched upon. A chapter on bisexual relationships covered the basic terminology and a brief overview of bisexual family relationships (McClellan, 2006).

In relation to the experiences of bisexual students or practitioners, there are only two studies, both of which focus on the broader experiences of lesbian, gay or bisexual students. Messinger (2007) did a qualitative dyad analysis focusing on the experiences of lesbian, gay and bisexual social work students who were supervised by heterosexual practice educators in a southern US state. Two of the 13 participants were bisexual. Findings stress that practice educators had limited knowledge about bisexuality and that students within this group encountered biphobia in their practice-learning settings. Fairtlough and colleagues (2013) conducted a qualitative study of lesbian, gay and bisexual students' views of their social work programmes in England. However, the findings do not focus on the experiences of each group separately. Only one of the participant quotes refers explicitly to the experiences of a bisexual woman, who felt that her sexuality was 'a private affair' (Fairtlough et al, 2013: 474). Overall, lesbian, gay or bisexual students who took part in the study

did not feel they were disadvantaged in terms of their study progression. However, many reported experiencing homophobia on their course that was not sufficiently addressed by programme staff.

In parallel, Schaub and colleagues (2017) conducted an exploratory study of social workers' beliefs and values about sexuality in relation to everyday professional interactions in the UK. Participants (*N* = 112) included four with dual heritage and four who identified as bisexual, though most participants were white and heterosexual. Echoing the findings by Fairtlough and colleagues (2013), the authors conclude that some participants 'bracket off' parts of their selves and identities in professional arenas, raising concerns about their ability to engage fully in reflexive interactions with clients and colleagues (Schaub et al, 2017: 442).

Pansexuality received limited attention in the social work literature. Where mentioned, it is explored alongside bisexuality (see, for example, Prior, 2021) or in a broader analysis of the dichotomy of sexuality and its critique in relation to social work practice (Fantus, 2013). Asexuality is also frequently ignored. Available studies mainly focus on the characteristics and experiences of people using clinical services within the US (for example, Foster and Scherrer, 2014). A recent international handbook of social work and sexualities (Dodd, 2021) includes a chapter on asexuality by Kurowicka (2021) that provides a conceptual overview, highlighting the negative stereotypes encountered by asexual people, as well as the medicalisation of their identity.

All of the reviewed literature signposts a lack of knowledge about diverse identities of people receiving social work services, carers, students and staff. This includes knowledge about transgender and gender-nonconforming people's needs and experiences (Inch, 2017; Stevens, 2022). Stevens (2022: 10) stresses that such lack of knowledge is accompanied by experiences of discrimination, as well as 'global misrepresentations of trans people in culture and media … [which] contributes to transphobia and discrimination experienced by people who may access [social] services'. Equally, their review signposts how little research on trans experiences in social work is done by social work researchers who themselves are transgender. A lack of available information on the authors makes it difficult to ascertain how frequently this may be the case in relation to the research on other identities explored in this article.

Overall, such terms as 'diversity' capture the myriad complex, fluid and multifaceted identities of social workers and those who receive social work input. This overview has highlighted a lack of knowledge and understanding of what different identities mean for people, both within social work practice and education. It also spotlights the potential for discrimination against those who are rendered invisible in this way.

Methodology

A review of available literature indicates that people of dual-heritage, multi-ethnic backgrounds and bisexual, pansexual, asexual and/or trans/non-binary people are included in so-called 'hidden populations' and, therefore, frequently referred to in social work research as 'hard-to-reach' groups (Duvnjak and Fraser, 2013: 169). As such, research on their experiences would 'usually require intimate access to [their] communities', making it difficult to build sampling frames (Duvnjak and Fraser, 2013: 169). McInroy (2016: 85) highlights that online research, such as email or online surveys, may be well suited for studies with 'hard-to-reach' youth populations, including LGBTQ+ and/or youth from racial or ethnic minority groups, being 'convenient, timely, and cost

effective', and offering the appeal of anonymity for the participants and researchers. The challenges of using online surveys include difficulties with: (1) securing representative sampling; (2) measuring non-response and attrition rates accurately; (3) maintaining data security; and (4) ensuring that the research opportunity reaches participants through digital delivery (McInroy, 2016: 87–8). With limited resources available for this study and it being initiated during the second year of the pandemic (in 2021), we decided to conduct an online survey of social work students and practitioners.

Methods

We devised two online surveys that were distributed using Qualtrics – one for social work students and one for social work practitioners. Both collected quantitative data on the participants' identities, as well as quantitative and qualitative data on their experiences. The study invitation and the first page of both surveys stated that they were intended for students and practitioners who hold the diverse identities explored in the study. For students, this referred to their experiences in education (both in university and in practice-learning settings). For practitioners, it asked questions regarding their experiences in social work practice. For students, questions explored their experiences with their peers, academic teachers and practice educators, in practice-learning organisations more broadly, and with people using social work services and carers. For practitioners, questions focused on their equivalent experiences within their employment, including those with their managers. Questions on students' and practitioners' experiences included some related to misrecognition and its impact on them. In the survey, we referred to experiences of 'misrecognition'. This idea is associated with the work of Fraser and Honneth (2003) and regards the way in which some people, as a result of marginalised social identities, are culturally denigrated so that they cannot achieve parity of participation and esteem in the social settings in which they interact. Young (1997) summarises misrecognition as subjugation to another culture, invisibility within one's own culture and being subject to deprecating stereotypes.

Questions on protected characteristics related to the participants' gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity were based on the relevant guidance (Stonewall, 2016; ONS, 2021) and previous research (Song and Aspinall, 2012; Connelly et al, 2016). McInroy (2016) stresses that it is necessary to define the meaning of the terms used in the study; hence, such terms as 'misrecognition', 'race' and 'ethnicity' were defined in the survey text. The full surveys are available for review as additional materials for this article (see Maglajlic et al, 2023).

Acknowledging the potential distress that the survey questions may cause, the survey included information as to where further specialist support could be sought (the MindOut – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Queer Mental Health Service, the Mind Out Peer Support Group for the LGBTQ+ People of Colour, the Black, African and Asian Therapy Network, and Black Minds Matter). Ethical approval for the study was provided by the University of Sussex.

Sampling

During the pandemic, researchers pivoted towards social media research recruitment strategies for hard-to-reach populations (see, for example, Archer-Kuhn et al, 2021).

Both surveys were advertised via our Twitter accounts and via the email newsletter of the British Association of Social Workers (BASW). Other promotion strategies targeted social work students and practitioners separately. For the students, we circulated the survey with the help of academic colleagues who take part in the 'Disrupting Coloniality in Social Work' group and work in five universities across England and Scotland. In parallel, to ensure representation of participants across the UK, we also asked academic colleagues in two more universities in northern parts of England, one in Wales and one in Northern Ireland to circulate the survey among their social work students. For the practitioners, the survey was also circulated via the BASW professional officers supporting LGBTQIA+ social workers and working on anti-racist practice. Thanks to the BASW officers, it was also circulated to the members of the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Social Work Association. The survey was also circulated via an informal group of trans social workers.

Participants

The survey remained open between 18 June and 31 July 2021. Tables 1 and 2 provide an overview of the participants for both surveys (students and practitioners).

Analysis

In this article, we report on the qualitative data gathered in the survey. Quantitative data are available as supplementary information for this article (Maglajlic et al, 2023). It was not a focus of our analysis both because of the small overall samples (36 students and 17 practitioners) and because most of the answers were provided through text

Table 1: Social work students' identities

Overall engagement: students	Responses targeted by the survey				
83	Students of dual heritage	Students with multi-ethnic heritage	Trans non-binary students	Pansexual, bisexual or asexual students	Students with multiple diverse identities
	2	6	1	10	17
	TOTAL: 36				
Age range					
18–23		3		4	5
24–29	1			3	5
30–34			1	1	2
35–39		1			
40–44	1			1	2
45–49		1			1
50–54				1	2
55–59		1			

Table 2: Social work practitioners' identities

Overall engagement: practitioners	Responses targeted by the survey				
42	Practitioners of dual heritage	Practitioners with multi-ethnic heritage	Practitioners with diverse gender and sexuality	Pansexual, bisexual or asexual practitioners	Practitioners with multiple diverse identities
	1	2	3	3	8
	TOTAL: 17				
Age range					
18–23					
24–29				1	
30–34			1		1
35–39	1	1	1		1
40–44					
45–49			1	1	4
50–54					1
55–59					1
60–64		1			
65+				1	

boxes that participants primarily used to share their experiences (as opposed to the multiple-choice answers). The lead researcher cleaned the survey data and shared the raw data and the cleaned data with the rest of the team, which was stored and analysed on Excel (Brookfield, 2021), with Padlet also used as an additional tool to allow a more visual consideration of the experiences of each participant. To facilitate the analysis of the qualitative data, we employed a team-based inductive thematic analysis to 'increase confidence in dependability and trustworthiness' of the analysis (Cascio et al, 2019: 116). Each team member read all the available data on Excel and Padlet and initially coded categories of experiences relating to misrecognition within the data. The categories from individual analyses were compared and contrasted over two, whole-team, meetings in order to discuss and develop the three overarching themes. During these meetings, it was agreed via discussion of first-round analysis categories that the concepts of passing and code-switching (see later) were helpful lenses to apply in the interpretation of the data, and three overarching themes were identified: misrecognition and prejudice; fears of being out; and ease with passing and code-switching. Each is illustrated in the following.

Limitations

Asexuality was not listed in the available guidance on gathering data about gender and sexuality (Stonewall, 2016) and hence not included in the survey. This was commented on by the asexual social workers who filled out the survey. They noted how the survey itself, much like their experiences in life, ignored their experiences. In parallel, we opted

out of collecting data on disability and neurodivergence. We wanted to illustrate the importance of experiential knowledge on protected characteristics within the research teams that study these topics, which we lacked the experience and funding to facilitate at the inception of this work. Nonetheless, an important 'invisible' aspect of identity among social workers was therefore omitted. The data are also based on responses from a small, self-selecting sample. We do not know how they differ from the wider population of social work practitioners and students in the UK, beyond the fact that respondents are from minoritised social groups within the broader UK social work workforce.

Findings

The study invitation and the first page of both surveys stated that they were intended for students and practitioners who hold the diverse identities explored in the study. It is notable that more than half of the student (47 [56.6 per cent]) and practitioner survey responses (26 [61.9 per cent]) were filled out by cis, heterosexual, white women of single-ethnic heritage − the majority group in the UK social work workforce (Department for Education, 2022). It is possible that this may have partly been because the invitations were sent, for example, to whole cohorts of students and through a public invitation rather than specialist groups alone. However, comments left by some of these participants indicate that they took part to query why the survey questions explored gender identities beyond a binary understanding, or employed the category of gender rather than sex. This is a relevant introductory note for the findings from the students and practitioners whose experiences we set out to explore.

Before proceeding to the analysis, we introduce the concepts of passing and code-switching. 'Passing' is defined by Harrison (2013) as successfully presenting oneself in a socially favoured identity rather than an 'authentic' one, for example, presenting as heterosexual when LGBTQ+, or cisgender when trans. We ourselves interpret the concept of holding an 'authentic' identity in a non-essentialist way, reflecting the ways in which someone may adopt, or not correct the misperception of, a publicly established social identity when they privately hold a different social identity that is less socially valorised. The term 'code-switching' originated within linguistic study of changes in an individual's discourse, dialect and accent according to the context of a social interaction (Morrison, 2022). When applied to those with minoritised identities, it has been used to refer to an individual altering language, behaviour or appearance so that it conforms to hegemonic societal and cultural norms. An illustration could be a gay or bisexual man who presents in a more stereotypically masculine way in heteronormative spaces to counteract cultural stereotypes associating male homosexuality with effeminacy. While passing involves knowingly presenting oneself in a more socially valorised identity in public settings, we will here use code-switching in relation to both conscious and non-conscious processes where an individual holding a marginalised minority identity adjusts micro-aspects of their social presentation to conform to prevailing cultural expectations within the work or study space.

Misrecognition and prejudice

A majority of students and practitioners who hold multiple diverse identities reported experiencing misrecognition and articulated the negative impacts arising. A cisgender

straight female student in her late teens/early 20s who has multi-ethnic and multi-racial heritage explained the pressures to code-switch in university and placement spaces where her racial identity was marginalised:

> It makes me feel like I need to justify myself and my race…. It makes me feel like I need to prove myself to be part of the group, otherwise I'm singled out…. [Misrecognition] has me feeling like I'm not going to be a good enough social worker because of my ethnicity which is something I can't change. It automatically plays a role in how clients perceive me.

A white British Romany cisgender female practitioner in her 30s is lesbian and open with her colleagues about these identities. However, in the survey, she noted that colleagues sometimes misrecognise her sexuality despite her openness, and when it happens: 'It can make me feel uncomfortable especially with those I have corrected who continue to do so.' The same happens in relation to her Romany heritage, which makes her feel: 'Erasure … [it] feeds into the negative held views, bias, stigma, negative stereotypes in wider society.' In relation to misrecognition of her Romany identity by people she is supporting as a social worker, she noted: 'it can be a challenge if an individual is being derogatory'.

A Welsh Romany cisgender female social worker in her 50s who took part in the survey is bisexual but passes as heterosexual at work. Misrecognition of both her sexual orientation and ethnicity causes her to feel an 'erasure of identity', and she also noted that she is 'subjected to stereotypes and racism'. Both misrecognition and experiences of racism also sometimes happen with people she supports as a social worker due to her White ethnicity. When some of those she supports find out she is Romany, 'the subtle and not so subtle changes happen once they know'.

Others who were open about their marginalised identities at work reported experiencing prejudice as a result. A cisgender female social worker of 'mixed' heritage in her late 40s reflected on heteronormative assumptions being openly made about her sexuality at work despite being out as asexual: 'Assumption of heterosexuality is generally annoying but expected. I have been told that my sexuality (asexual) does not exist and that all I need is good partner (but put less delicately than that!). I try and avoid most discussions about sexuality apart from with people who know me well.' She also noted challenges related to assumptions about her ethnicity; challenging these entailed revealing intimate parts of her personal background that had an emotional and psychological impact:

> It continues [with co-workers] to have an impact on me, particularly as my ethnicity (I don't use the word race as a rule) is complicated and there are lots of unknowns. Discussing this means revealing a lot about my background and history, which can be exhausting…. Although ethnicity/race is a live discussion topic within my Team, people often forget that I am not White, or assume that as I am not Black then I do not experience racism.

> [Among people receiving social work input from me, there is] a whole mixture [of impact] – from people assuming my ethnicity and being negative about it. To assuming I am White and being racist about People of Colour. To

commenting on my 'exotic' looks. I try not to share a lot about my ethnic background but will challenge any direct racist comments.

Fears of disclosure

Some participants' comments revealed how they passed in favoured identities due to fears about the impact disclosure would have on their social work careers. This was particularly so in relation to minoritised gender and sexuality identities. For example, an agender and bisexual student in their late 20s noted: 'I haven't begun to explore it – it seems a box I can't reasonably open until I am established in my career…. I haven't even started to unpack those feelings because it isn't safe and practical to do.' A non-binary and bisexual student in their late teens/early 20s similarly noted that their identity is 'not normalised enough to be taken seriously'. In relation to their sexuality, they wrote of their fear that coming out 'could lead to unfair treatment and assessment as I would be the only "out" person on my Course'.

Prevailing heteronormative assumptions, as well as a binary understanding of gender, ethnicity and race, shaped some students' decisions to pass with their peers. An Indian, cisgender female student in her late teens/early 20s explained:

> It does not significantly affect me; however, it does make me think about what opinions they would have if they knew based on their current assumptions about my sexuality…. It does not affect my daily life, however, it does make me think that I may not be accepted as much as people currently assume my sexuality.

Similarly, a White British female bisexual student reflected on how questions on placement had led to some discomfort: 'On placement people said I was quiet, but I was only quiet as my only response to "do you have a boyfriend" is no. Why should I be the one to say "No, I'm actually bi"?'

Similar experiences may continue into practice, as summarised by a Northern Irish cisgender bisexual female practitioner in her late 40s who has a multi-ethnic background. She noted that she passes and code-switches as heterosexual in this space, despite having friendships at work, for fear as to what impact this may have on opportunities for promotion: '[I am] unable to present myself as such professionally despite working with colleagues who are friends. I remain heterosexual in this audience and don't mix friendship groups for fear of lack of access to management opportunities.' She also commented on why she does not discuss her ethnic background at work: 'In the Northern Irish context, I was accused of being from the "other side" where they [the people she was supporting as a social worker] were unhappy with assessment.'

Experiences of ease with misrecognition, passing and code-switching

It was notable that, in distinction to the experiences outlined earlier, a minority of participants who pass and code-switch in their places of study and work suggested that they would not find it desirable to talk about these aspects of their identities in these contexts. Their comments suggested some level of ease with the disparities between

their assumed work/study identities and their social identities outside the work and university space (though, arguably, some level of unease may also be read in them).

A cisgender Asian female student in her late teens/early 20s stated that she would not find it appropriate to discuss her sexuality on placement, noting: 'We don't talk about sex [on placement]. That would be inappropriate. Anyway, I am asexual.' Similarly, a cisgender female student in her early 30s and who has a multi-ethnic background noted how she both passed and consciously code-switched in respect of her sexuality. She also suggested that she was, at one level, very comfortable with such separation:

> I am sexually and romantically attracted to all types of people for all different reasons. I find it so complicated (and futile!) to spend any of my time explaining this to people. I avoid labels, especially as those labels have been stretched in meaning over recent years. Yes, I come across as a very straight (in all senses of the term) woman, but the reality is far from that. I don't mind misrecognition though, not at all. I actually enjoy the fact that my identities are very different in 'work mode' and 'off mode'.

However, on another level, there was also some discomfort. Since this student 'passed as straight', she found some moves to inclusivity, such as the greater visibility of pronouns, difficult, as it challenged the very separation between work and private selves that she valued:

> This subject is really difficult for me, despite being personally very comfortable with my sexuality and identity. I am finding the direction of travel of openness about sexuality and gender identity really difficult to deal with…. With pronoun visibility, I strongly feel that the opposite effect is actually happening to what is intended. There is far more pressure than ever in my lifetime to discuss and be open about things that I (and my kids) would really rather not.

In parallel, some students and practitioners noted that misrecognition does not have an impact on them. A cisgender straight male practitioner in his early 60s who is Irish–British noted that he gets misrecognised, but that this has 'very little [impact on me] other than annoyance that they make English-centric assumptions … to be honest, it's something I think many White/English speaking, but non-English identifying people have'. Misrecognition by people he is supporting as a social worker has 'probably less [impact on me] because why would they necessarily know or even be that interested'.

For others who do not pass for white, misrecognition may work differently. A cisgender straight female practitioner in her late 30s noted: 'I identify as Hong Kong Cantonese. I was adopted into a White British family, so I also identify as British.' In relation to misrecognition, there appeared to be some ambivalent feelings reflected in her comment that misrecognition 'doesn't really worry me, but as a generalisation I am allocated cases that are identified as East Asian, even if I don't know much about that particular culture'. In relation to people she is supporting as a social worker, she noted that she was misrecognised '[s]ometimes, but I will usually make race a non-taboo subject by talking about it frankly and by self-identifying'. Therefore, while her answers suggest that she successfully manages misrecognition with those she is supporting by openly discussing the ethnic identities she holds, she is still

subject to misrecognition from generalising assumptions in the workplace. Unlike those participants discussed earlier, however, she does not find such misrecognition very problematic.

Similarly, a student in his early 50s who identifies as pangender and pansexual and is of multiple heritage is open about their identity at home and at the university generally. They noted that they get misrecognised on placement but commented that 'I don't care, I don't have strong expectations about pronouns.... People don't usually know or understand being pangender.... I'm not sure I expect people to know my ethnic identity.' In a related comment, but that focuses more on the advantages of passing, a trans male queer white student in his early 30s commented: 'people assuming I'm heterosexual doesn't negatively impact on me'.

Discussion

There is limited literature available to situate these findings within. Nonetheless, the findings have some resonance with, for example, a review of social work research on mixed-race people in the US, particularly in relation to the experiences of prejudice, racism and practices of passing (Wong and Chau, 2022). The findings about passing and code-switching by those with minoritised sexual and gender identities also have resonance with an earlier finding from Schaub and colleagues (2017: 442). A bisexual practitioner they interviewed spoke of 'bracketing off' this aspect of their identity.

While a small-scale study, these experiences provide important illustrations of the ongoing fears of minoritised students and practitioners that will be viewed as 'bodies out of place' (Puwar, 2004) within social work spaces if they reveal their authentic identities. This is itself a notable finding given the social work profession's overt commitments to anti-oppressive practice, as well as the UK government's (intended) criticism that the profession's education is 'dominated by theories of non-oppressive practice, empowerment and partnership' (Narey, 2014: 12). This study provides evidence that well over a decade since the UK Equality Act 2010 outlawed employment discrimination based on sexual orientation and transgender status, social workers and social work students continue to pass as straight or cisgender because they fear the consequences for their social work careers of not doing so. This finding does have some correspondence with prior research showing the wider social work workforce to be, at best, unprepared for and, at worst, perpetuating harmful rhetoric and action in practice with transgender people (Inch, 2017; Kant and Boskey, 2022; Stevens, 2022). It follows that practitioners and students may feel uncomfortable and unsafe to be open about being trans in a professional setting. The current findings suggest that holders of other minoritised invisible identities may feel similarly.

The findings also illustrate the importance of the cultural and political context of diverse identities within a specific geographical context. For example, in the UK context, the history of relationships between the Republic Ireland, Northern Ireland and England – particularly after 'The Troubles' – offers insights into the impact this conflict has on the ongoing lived experiences of Irish people in England. Equally, we feel that it is important that the study includes the experiences of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller social workers from the UK, whose marginalisation and economic, social and health inequalities in the UK and elsewhere are frequently ignored (Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Social Work Association, 2021).

We also note that there is need for a nuanced and sensitive understanding of advocacy for a more open culture in respect of identities within the workplace. There are good reasons why many are not inclined to share details of marginalised identities within work and study settings. Some participants' accounts of hidden identities clearly resonate with prior evidence suggesting the costs of identity invisibility and code-switching (Berger, 1990; Brown, 1991; Carbado and Gulati, 2013). Nonetheless, some participants' experiences provide a useful challenge to assumptions that greater openness about minoritised identities would be universally welcomed by all those who hold them. These accounts are equally important. This finding should also lead us, both as social scientists and as social workers, to consider the social processes whereby some social identities are assumed in social work spaces, while some holders of minoritised identities prefer that these identities remain hidden in those same spaces. Passing and code-switching have historically been used as mechanisms for facilitating minoritised individuals to get by in social environments where parts of their identity are stigmatised (Carbado and Gulati, 2013). The potential ways in which white heteronormativity continues to be valorised within workplace spaces should also not be underestimated (Puwar, 2004).

Conclusion

The survey findings offer new insights into the professional experiences of social work students and practitioners who hold minoritised and immediately invisible identities. Our findings suggest that their identities may be diverse beyond a single characteristic. In the context of this study, diversity is also intersectional, transgressing gender, sexuality, race and/or ethnicity. The fact that a number of students and practitioners holding minoritised identities voice experiences of misrecognition, discrimination and fears of discrimination in respect of these identities should give some pause for thought for the profession. The findings suggest that some social work learning and practice spaces continue to operate within heteronormative, white, European, cisgender norms. If professional workplaces and education spaces do not provide a safe space for social workers and social work students to be seen and accepted as they would like to be, this must lead to questions about how well the profession is able to acknowledge, support and celebrate the diverse identities of people accessing social work services. Other implications are not entirely straightforward given some degree of divergence about the desirability of the greater visibility of minority identities in the social work study and workplace among their holders.

Further research is needed to generate greater depth of understanding across a wider range of experiences of students, practitioners, people using social work services and carers. Mixed-methods, creative and longitudinal research would be better suited to facilitate the creation of such knowledge, not least due to the fluidity and change in the relationship people have to their diverse identities over their life course. We hope that this article serves well as a conversation starter on these topics, creating the possibility for further, in-depth exploration. It is much needed if the social work profession is to be true to its stated values.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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