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‘Not easily put into a box’: constructing professional identity

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Abstract

‘Not easily put into a box’: constructing professional identity

Researching the interplay between social work students’ personal and professional identities, I found that, in talking about becoming professionals, students drew on a wide range of discourses. Three common usages of the term ‘professional identity’ are explored: it can be thought of in relation to desired traits; it can also be used in a collective sense to convey the ‘identity of the profession’. Taking a more subjective approach, professional identity can be regarded as a process in which each individual comes to have a sense of themselves as a social worker. I argue that the variations in students’ talk reflect a wide range of cultural understandings that are prevalent within the social work community and society in general, and conclude that professional identity is more complicated than adopting certain traits or values, or even demonstrating competence. The different meanings of professional identity all have something to offer, providing resources for students as they construct themselves as social workers. This is important for social work education because it acknowledges the dynamic nature of professional identity, highlights the difficult identity work which each student must undertake, and prompts us to consider how this process might best be supported.

Key words: professional identity; social work education; discourse; identity work; communities of practice.

‘Not easily put into a box’: constructing professional identity

Introduction

One aim of social work education is to facilitate the development of professional identity; but what kind of identity is this? This paper has developed out of a small-scale qualitative study (Wiles, 2010a) which investigated the impact of compulsory professional registration on social work students’ personal and professional identities. Anticipating that ‘professional identity’ might be an ambiguous term, I was nevertheless puzzled when participants consistently struggled to define it; not only that, but their attempts diverged widely. To make sense of this I reviewed the extensive body of literature about professional identity from the fields of teaching and nursing, as well as social work. I came to see why the concept of professional identity proved so difficult to pin down: the variations in students’ talk reflect a wide range of cultural understandings that are prevalent within the social work community and in society more broadly. Understanding the different meanings and their usage is important for social work education, especially at present when the reform agenda in England has generated a comprehensive new framework of ‘professional capability’ (College of Social Work, 2012).

The overall aim of the research, which was conducted between 2007 and 2010, was to explore how professional registration affects the way that social work students talk about – and thus construct – their personal and professional identities. In 2005, social work students became eligible to register with the General Social Care Council (GSCC) and were required to demonstrate their professional suitability both in and outside work (General Social Care Council, 2010). Bringing individuals’ private lives

under regulatory scrutiny has relevance for their fitness to practice, but I wanted to explore whether there are any implications for students' identities. In brief, the research found that while professional registration does impact on how students behave and how they see themselves, this forms part of the broader identity work involved in learning to be a social worker. The wider findings will be discussed in forthcoming papers; here, I review different meanings of professional identity and consider implications for social work education. The focus is on England, where the research took place. First, it will be useful to briefly outline how the data was obtained and analysed.

The research methodology was underpinned by a post-structuralist understanding of discourse and identity (Hall, 1996). Discourse, in this sense, refers to powerful ways of presenting social phenomena as 'true' and making certain social practices and institutional formations appear logical and inevitable. My particular interest was in the discourse of professional regulation established by the 1998 white paper, *Modernising Social Services* (Langan, 2000), and the ensuing Care Standards Act 2000 which created the General Social Care Council. In keeping with the methodological approach, the research took identity to be fluid and constructed in relation to changing discourses and discursive practices; accordingly, professional identity is one of the multiple subjectivities that a person occupies across their day-to-day lives.

Obtaining the data

With permission from the University's ethics panel, participation was invited from any social work student undertaking the second or final level of the Social Work Degree. Seven people volunteered: one second year and six final year students. This was a disappointingly low response for the size of the programme, and may have been

due to the sensitivity of the topic (Wiles, 2010b) and/ or the considerable workload demands for students on a professional course.

While it would not have been practical to seek representativeness within this small, self-selected sample, the recruitment method yielded a reasonable mix in terms of age gender and ethnicity. The participants, three men and four women, were aged between the late twenties and early fifties; five grew up in the UK and two had migrated from outside the European Union. Three students described their family backgrounds as either working class or economically disadvantaged. Due to the employment-based nature of the programme, all students were sponsored by their employer; their substantive posts were mainly in the statutory sector but reflected a range of settings: adult social care, child care, housing, education and mental health.

The data was obtained through semi-structured interviews lasting between sixty and ninety minutes, at participants' preferred location. The interviews explored the discourses that students drew on to talk about four areas of investigation: social work education; describing themselves in private life and as developing professionals; the personal consequences of their transition from 'lay person' to 'qualified social worker'; and their experiences of the regulatory process. The schedule comprised thirteen topics which were covered flexibly. Beginning with 'ice-breaker' questions which sought personal data about participants and their route onto the Social Work Programme, the first part of the schedule elicited students' conceptualisation of personal and professional identities, and asked for examples from their practice placements. The second part was concerned with participants' experiences of professional registration and their understanding of its implications. Consistent with

the methodology, the aim of the interview was not to seek facts or 'truth', but rather to generate data about the discourses used in students' talk. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed in full.

Discourse as a resource: the analysis

To analyse the interview data, I used a form of discourse analysis developed from the field of social psychology (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Edley, 2001). Taking elements both from Foucauldian theory and conversation analysis, this method explores how people construct identity through spoken language. Unlike conversation analysis, this variant of discourse analysis (hereafter referred to simply as 'discourse analysis') requires attention to the external context; cultural and social meanings are seen to provide 'discursive resources' for constructing identity through talk.

The first stage of discourse analysis involves searching for recurring words, phrases and ideas across the body of transcripts. Recording these patterns is a relatively straightforward process (which was undertaken manually due to the small number of transcripts). Deciding which patterns are important enough to constitute analytic themes or 'interpretative repertoires', however, requires a more complex theoretical judgement based on the context of the interview and familiarity with the external environment. Interpretative repertoires (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) are commonly used ways of talking about phenomena or events, including familiar, shared contexts which appear to need no explanation. For example, the relatively spontaneous pattern of talk about 'social work values' - which participants did not seek to define - was identified as an interpretative repertoire worthy of further attention.

Following the theoretical premise that people draw on meanings that are culturally shared, it is essential to identify patterns - both commonalities and variations - across the whole sample, rather than confining the analysis to each transcript in turn. The second stage of analysis considers how speakers are using discursive patterns to construct and convey an identity in the interview context. The focus is on the use of discourses as a resource, rather than on individual narratives, emotions or attitudes. Although it is impossible to do justice to this method in the present article, further illustration will be evident as I discuss the data. A full account can be found in Wiles, 2010a. The next section presents the main findings about professional identity, with reference to relevant extracts from the literature review. This approach reflects the methodological assumption that individual talk is produced from a complex interweaving of the immediate context (the interview) and wider social debates (Billig, 1987).

Findings

The research did not initially set out to explore the nature of professional identity, and discovering that participants held varied conceptualisations was an unexpected but fascinating finding. The analysis showed students constructing their professional identity in relation to desired traits, or through developing a sense of shared identity with other social workers; alternatively it was portrayed as a process of individual development. Each of these meanings is now discussed in turn; in practice, they overlap and participants drew on a combination of discourses to describe their development as social workers.

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

Professional traits

Although all participants struggled to define professional identity, certain commonalities emerged. Consider, for example, one student's initial response:

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

Despite the speaker's apparent uncertainty, the reference to National Occupational Standards forms part of a pattern, identified across all the transcripts, which draws on a 'professionalism' discourse based on the sociological argument that all professional groups share certain traits. Yam (2004:929), writing about the nursing profession, summarises the traits thus: an 'extensive theoretical knowledge base'; 'expertise in a specialized field'; an 'altruistic commitment to service'; an 'unusual degree of autonomy in work'; 'a code of ethics and conduct overseen by a body of representatives from within the field itself'; and 'a personal identity that stems from the professional's occupation'.

Education researchers argue that policy and guidance documents act as powerful discursive resources which define 'good' and 'professional' practice (Nicoll and

Harrison, 2003:33; Watson, 2006). The government-commissioned review of the Diploma in Social Work (J.M.Consulting, 1999), which preceded the introduction of the Degree, explicitly drew on professional traits in its recommendations for the revised curriculum). Subsequently, the notion of traits as a mark of professionalism was built into the strategies which were introduced in the early 2000s to raise the status of social work in the UK: both professional registration and the Social Work Degree. Across the UK, social work's knowledge base is set out in the benchmark statement which forms part of the Degree requirements (Quality Assurance Agency, 2008). At the time of the research, the English curriculum also incorporated the National Occupational Standards (Topss, 2002:55-63) which, in prescribing the criteria for determining competence in social work practice, made frequent reference to being 'professional'. Although the term 'professional' is not defined in these documents, certain traits are inferred. For example, social workers must draw on theoretical and other knowledge, and demonstrate expertise in researching and critically analysing social work practice. More recently, in England, the Social Work Taskforce report (2009:15) has defined 'what social work should be: a profession made up of highly skilled, highly qualified practitioners, whose expertise continuously develops throughout their career'.

The traits of expert knowledge and autonomy are evident in the way participants talked about their social work learning:

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

and

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

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

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

and

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

Some accounts drew on the notion of an 'altruistic commitment to service' referred to by Yam; for example Student C said it was difficult to distinguish between her personal and professional life because studying social work 'changes your whole being: you always want to help people, you know, as much as you can'.

These extracts provide a glimpse into one of the resources - the discourse of professionalism based on traits - which students used to construct their professional identities. Discourses continually evolve, however, and in England the Professional

Capabilities Framework will soon replace the National Occupational Standards. The new framework (Social Work Reform Board, 2010:10) provides a more specific definition of professionalism: 'to identify and behave as a professional social worker'; and this dynamic conceptualisation of professional identity hints at the second usage of the term that emerged from the data.

A shared professional identity: settings and specialisms

Another way of talking about professional identity drew on a collective sense of being a social worker. In some instances this was associated with particular practice settings, seen in the following attempt to tease out the meaning of professional identity:

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

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

Sometimes I've struggled with 'am I really making a difference, is there any purpose in this, is social work becoming un-professionalised?'. In the

community mental health team ... all the professionals seem to be doing very similar jobs as care co-ordinators. Does that mean that in five years time social workers will be a mental health kind of professional rather than specifically a social worker? But I think at the moment social work definitely brings a unique sort of thing to mixed professional teams (Student B).

Student B's reflections are consistent with the concerns expressed by social workers in Barnes et al.'s study (2000) of Community Mental Health Teams, who feared that their values and professional culture, which they perceived to be central to their professional identity, were threatened by being located in a multi-disciplinary team. The literature on multi-agency and multi-disciplinary teams is not wholly negative. Frost et al. (2005), for example - writing about children and families work - found that diverse team members can work through conflicts and complexities to develop positive ways of working together. My purpose, here, is not to evaluate arguments about the advantages and demerits of multi-disciplinary working, but rather to propose that these debates, in themselves, act as further discursive resources for social work students to construct their own professional identities. White and Featherstone's (2005) study of professional identity in a multi-disciplinary team shows how team members create collective narratives which function to maintain and reinforce occupational boundaries. The researchers found that social workers commonly referred to the failings of other professionals to recognise child abuse: a narrative which emphasises their expertise in comparison with other practitioners. My study revealed a similar sense of collective narratives being used to emphasise occupational differences. Concerned about a service user who was not allowed to see her children, a student in a mental health team expressed frustration that her colleagues had not queried this:

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

A feature of the analysis method is to look for disruptions and ‘trouble’ in participants’ talk (Wetherell, 1998), and thus tensions were revealed between social work identities in different settings. In particular there was the perception, also raised by Moran et al.’s (2007) research, that statutory child protection work is of higher status than social work in preventive family support teams or older people’s teams. This had an impact on students’ sense of professional identity:

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

and

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

A relatively new resource for collective identity is professional registration. The regulator at the time of the research being the GSCC, participants frequently drew – sometimes implicitly – on regulatory discourses transmitted in publications such as the Codes of Practice (General Social Care Council, 2010) and reinforced in teaching

materials. Students referred to the positive effects of registration for the profession overall, and by implication for themselves as individuals:

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

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

Identity work: becoming a social work professional

Given the exploratory nature of the interview questions, it is not surprising that the transcripts capture a tentative sense of individual journeys towards professional identity. These draw on the notions discussed earlier, but in addition convey something more fluid, personal and still in process:

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

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

and

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

Personal experience, as a resource for constructing professional identity (Watson, 2006), has particular relevance for social workers. Wilson et al. (2008:8) argue that the 'use of self' to form helping relationships is a vital social work skill; and understanding how and when to draw on personal history and experience is an important pedagogical requirement for social work education (Seden, 2011): this does not mean that it is easy to learn. A recurring pattern in my data was that students presented their professional identities as a source of contention in their personal relationships. Some participants were faced with the dilemma of having to reconcile culturally opposed discourses about issues such as child-rearing, women's roles and political beliefs. The following extract, which arose relatively spontaneously in the interview, gives a flavour of students' changing relationships with family and friends:

I get criticised ... for being too like a social worker. My [friend] often says to me 'oh you're a typical social worker' because I have a view about something which he wouldn't have had. People have an image of me, you know. [...] Sometimes I don't get my friends ... we can talk about football, we can talk about music. But then other issues, world issues, we just don't talk about because we can't. We're poles apart (Student G).

Similar themes are documented in the wider education literature. Research studies by Reay (2003) and Reay et al. (2010) highlight the shift - and loss - of identity that occurs when students from working class backgrounds experience a disjuncture between their families' culture and values and those of the higher education setting. Kevern and Webb (2004) found that mature women undertaking nurse education reported negative consequences for their personal relationships; and in Nel's (2006) research, family therapy trainees - mature postgraduates with a range of professional qualifications - described having to re-evaluate their personal and professional identities.

Despite the considerable personal changes resulting from the student role, most participants spoke enthusiastically about the opportunities offered by practice learning:

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

In many cases, colleagues in the practice setting were described as role models for professional identity:

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

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

From the discussion so far, it is evident that becoming a social worker requires students to do significant identity work. I have argued, moreover, that although there is no single meaning of professional identity, the different conceptualisations offer social work students a rich breadth of shared resources: combining discursive and personal meanings, each student constructs a unique sense of being a social worker. As a researcher, this idea helped me to understand why students may find it hard to put forward a single definition of professional identity. Costello's research (2004:153) leads her to observe that social work students must achieve two tasks: 'they must master a particular substantive body of knowledge, and they must internalize an appropriate professional identity', adding that although all students are aware of the first task, 'few ... are aware of the latter'. Reflecting on the wider implications of the research for social work education, it is relevant to consider the role of the practice setting in helping students make sense of different discursive resources and develop awareness of their identities as practitioners.

Arguing that workplace narratives maintain and reinforce occupational boundaries, White and Featherstone suggest that storytelling acts as a resource for novices to be inducted into 'the tacit dimension of their particular domain' (White and Featherstone, 2005:212). Some writers (Watson, 2006; Frost et al., 2005) refer to the normative dimension of the agency setting as a 'community of practice'; in my research, this concept, developed by Etienne Wenger (1998), provided a useful perspective on the

role of informal, non-assessed workplace learning (Nicoll and Harrison, 2003; Yam, 2004) in developing professional identity.

Wenger's theory builds on social learning theory and highlights the gradual adoption of professional values and norms through a process of socialisation. Through engaging in a joint enterprise, co-workers develop a shared 'repertoire' (Wenger, 1998:153) of meanings and practices which both define and reinforce the community. In the practice setting, students must synthesise different narratives and discourses about professional identity, both formal and informal. So, undertaking the role and responsibilities of a social worker - and being positioned by others in this way - is an essential vehicle for students to construct their identities as they move from the community's periphery towards more central membership. A weakness in Wenger's work is its insufficient attention to unequal power relationships (Hughes et al., 2007). Nevertheless, the advantage of regarding the practice learning setting as a community of practice is that it highlights the continual *process* involved in becoming a professional.

Discussion and implications for social work education

Clearly, the small size of this study prevents generalisation; and the employment-based nature of the sample must be acknowledged. However, as the research was not concerned with personal narratives but instead explored the discursive messages which influenced the development of professional identity, I suggest that – despite the increasing divergence of regulatory and educational frameworks in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales - the findings are relevant for any student in the UK. While there might also be wider relevance, this is limited because, internationally, the

meanings and status of social work – and thus of professional identity – vary according to factors such as the political, economic and social context (Weiss-Gal and Welbourne, 2008).

Discourse analysis provides a fresh and critical perspective on familiar social practices, and stimulates further avenues of investigation. Attending to the nuances of talk makes visible the range of difficulties, often subtle and hard to express, faced by students in constructing professional identity. Regardless of sample size, however, when interpreting the findings of discourse analysis there are a number of features which need to be taken into account.

Interview data is not treated as a direct reflection of what people think; language is not ‘neutral’ or simply descriptive, but constructs the identities and other concepts that are being discussed. Accordingly, the meanings produced in an interview are co-constructed by the participant and researcher; the subsequent interpretation produces a further version of reality. Furthermore, as identities are fluid and multiple, those which are expressed in the interview context are not the only versions. This does not mean that participants sought to present a misleading picture, but rather, that they were constructing a particular version of professional identity in that situation. They were, like the people in Wetherell and Edley’s study (1999:352):

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

The context of the interviews is important because, in view of their stated purpose, the recurrence of the professionalism discourse is not surprising. In addition, as I had been transparent about my role as a lecturer and manager on the Social Work Programme, this may have increased participants' wish to present a positive professional identity. What is especially interesting, given that participation was entirely voluntary, is that almost all the students were in the final six months of their studies when workload pressure would have been very high. Post-interview feedback indicated that participants had found the topic of professional identity very relevant at this final stage of the programme, when they were preparing assignments and practice records which required reflection on their professional development. Taylor (2006) argues that social work practitioners construct a particular version of professional identity in the reflective writing that they submit for assessment and supervision. In this sense, therefore, participants had had many previous opportunities to 'rehearse' their professional identities; I suggest that the interviews provided a further reflective space in which these identities could be tested out.

Regardless of how easy or difficult it is for social work students to fulfil the required academic and practice standards, the findings from my research and the wider literature highlight that they are continually involved in difficult identity work and may need support to achieve this. At a time when social work education in England is undergoing change, I want to conclude by considering some practical implications and suggesting points for further consideration.

Reviewing the education literature, Troman (2007) suggests that the meaning of professional identity is contingent on changing political, academic and professional

contexts. We need to recognise that, alongside conceptualisations used within the curriculum, students will be exposed to a range of additional meanings about professionals: in the workplace, university, their own families and in society generally.

Professional identity is not just about conforming to external definitions. Acquiring a specified knowledge base, understanding social work values, and being able to integrate these with practice are essential components of professional competence. In addition, however, students must develop a personal sense of *being* a social worker. This can only emerge through opportunities to articulate this identity in both the workplace and the academic setting.

I have noted that students appeared to use the interviews as a reflective space to rehearse their professional identities. Social work courses usually require and facilitate reflection on practice as part of the assessment, but it may also be important to include opportunities for students to articulate tensions and difficulties away from the assessment context. It would be helpful for students to understand that professional identity is not a once-and-for-all achievement, but will continue to develop and change throughout their career (Wiles, 2011). In this respect, social work educators could assist them in developing mechanisms for reflecting on professional identity after qualifying: for example, seeking appropriate professional supervision, using team working as a vehicle for consultation, and taking up opportunities for continuing professional development. It is encouraging to see that these skills are included in the Professional Capabilities Framework developed by the College of Social Work (2012). This framework offers the potential to reconceptualise

professional identity as more than a set of competences, promoting the expectation that it will develop continually across the working lifespan.

In my research, students recognised the regulatory function of the GSCC and felt it enhanced their professional status. They were generally ambivalent, however, about its role in supporting their professional development. From July 2012 England's regulation will be transferred to the Health and Care Professions Council, and it is unlikely that students will continue to be eligible for professional registration (British Association of Social Workers, 2012). It is all the more important, then, that the new College of Social Work successfully engages with students as they embark on their individual professional identity journeys. Such engagement needs to go beyond specifying the professional 'capabilities' required at different stages of learning (helpful as these are) and offer students a stake in the professional community of practice. It is too early to comment on the effectiveness of the College, but two of its web-based initiatives - a monthly bulletin and the development of online communities of interest - create exciting possibilities for supporting students to develop and consolidate their professional identities.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have suggested that professional identity is more complicated than adopting certain traits or values, or even demonstrating competence. Three approaches have been outlined: professional identity can be thought of in relation to desired traits; it can also be used in a collective sense to convey the 'identity of the profession'. We can also take a more subjective approach and regard professional identity as a process in which each individual comes to have a sense of themselves as

a social worker. The different meanings of professional identity all have something to offer, providing resources for students as they construct themselves as social workers. This is important for social work education because it acknowledges the dynamic nature of professional identity, highlights the difficult identity work which each student must undertake, and prompts us to consider how this process might best be supported.

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