

# **Professional identity and social work**

Stephen A. Webb

Glasgow Caledonian University, Scotland

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Issues of professional identity in social work have been vexed by conceptual ambiguity, lack of consensus about core attributes and problems in identifying what counts in the constitution of identity.

Studies have tended to focus on the social workers' professional identity formation; the framing of key characteristics of social workers' professional identity; issues which convey the narrative represented by social workers in talking about their role and work; and the context in which professional identity is formed and articulated. This muddled terrain is further complicated by the fact that several competing theoretical perspectives have been deployed to help make sense of matters of professional identity.

At a practical level the extent to which front-line workers have to fulfill a narrow set of socially-coded values or "Code of Conduct", regulated by a professional body, as part of identity maintenance has been a troublesome and much debated matter for social work. As will be argued in this paper it is fair to say that issues of professional identity in social work are contestable. A mix of competing rationalities and values are involved in attempts to locate the specificities of front-line practice and social work education which make up issues of professional identity for social work.

**Professional identity - or how a social worker thinks of herself or himself as a social worker - is often defined as a practitioners professional self-concept based on attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences (Ibarra, 1999; Schein, 1978).**

Despite a growing interest in matters of professional identity in social work, researchers know relatively little about how identities are formed among practitioners who carry out complex, challenging and often ambiguous public sector functions (Baxter, 2011). The aim of this paper is to briefly examine the concept of professional identity as it relates to social work. This will facilitate greater theoretical clarity, map possible alternatives, such as **the institutional logics perspective**, to afford a better understanding of the field of social work.

**The paper focuses on the significance of professional socialisation, workplace culture, boundary maintenance, jurisdiction disputes and inter-professional tensions with health, education and the police. The paper highlights the importance of beliefs as well as attachment and sense of belonging for the study of professional identity (Rothausen, et.al, 2015).**

The importance of identity formation as mainly social and relational in nature is attenuated. I emphasize the significance of narratives of recognition, trust, accountability and organisational rituals within hierarchal settings.

### **My first claim is that**

**Professional identity is not a stable entity; it is an on-going process of interpretation and customisation which is shaped by contextual workplace factors. In this respect identity formation is viewed as more interactive and more problematic than the relatively straightforward adoption of the role or category of 'professional social worker'.**

Professional identity does not come ready-made but is continually fashioned in the movements along ways of organisational and professional life. We need

consider the re-localization, re-embodiment and entanglement of social worker as practitioner to get a grasp on the dynamics of professional identity.

As Dent and Whitehead explain "Being professional becomes more than a means by which the individual navigates the increasingly choppy waters of organizational life. Being professional suggests a context of meaning and values, whereby the lawyer, judge, lecturer, human resource manager, banker and so on is experientially located through the particular narratives and discourses which accrue with and around that identity position" (2001: 5).

The fact that individuals occupy multiple subject positions and shift, manoeuvre, and negotiate across these adds to the complexity of thinking about professional identity. This leads Dent and Whitehead to conclude that "Identity is neither stable, nor a final achievement" (2001: 11).

The literature on identity and identification in organizational settings (Ashforth et al., 2008), flags up the core phenomena are at work in identity formation and maintenance: **belonging and attachment**. This formulation is reflected in **the institutional logics conception of identity** discussed below (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008; Thornton et al., 2012).

Ashford and Mael's (1989) classic study unpacks these phenomenon and summarises professional identity as consisting of

**Three main factors: distinctiveness, prestige and the salience of out-groups. Distinctiveness refers to a profession's values and practices in relation to other comparable groups (teachers, nurses or occupational therapists); prestige, the hallmark of professional identity is the second factor with an emphasis on status, reputation and credentials. The final antecedent factor, highlighting the**

significance of relational factors, is identified as salience of the out-group, whereby awareness of the out-group, those who do not belong, reinforces an awareness of one's in-group (1989: 21).

In Scotland's the *Changing Lives: Report of the 21st Century Social Work Review* (2006) made explicit references to the significance of professional identity in maintaining a central role for social work. In 2004 the Scottish Executive commissioned an independent review of social work. *Changing Lives*, the Review Report, was published in February 2006 and described as the basis for 'the biggest overhaul of social work in Scotland for 40 years'.

The Report reflects the problems that beset social work and focused particularly on issues of professional identity. It stated "There is an urgent need for social work to clarify its professional identity in order to establish clear roles for individual social workers" (2006: 8.4: 39).

The Report goes further in identifying the core values and moral commitment in the make-up of social work's professional identity. The skills social workers possess are underpinned by these shared set of values. Some would argue that these core values are what makes the professional identity of a social work most distinctive.

The danger of boundary erosion is implicit here, particularly as health and social care gathers pace, but the research literature tends to maintain that professional identity is intimately locked into aspects of organisational culture. The Scottish review dramatically concluded that

"the 'crisis' in social work is mainly a matter of professional identity that impacts on recruitment, retention and the understanding of the profession's basic aims" (2006: 8).

The crisis in social work *is* regarded a crisis of professional identity. Whether issues of professional identity actually constitute a crisis for social work, or whether we are what Latour calls a "matter of concern" remains debatable. Talk about crisis can either unsettle or stabilise professional boundaries but it does have the effect of making the discursivity of social work more visible to public and politicians. .

Being labelled 'unprofessional' is equivalent to striking the fear of God into many social work practitioners. Indeed, to be accused of being "unprofessional" is used as a powerful shaming device. Social workers who transgress risk bringing their credibility, reputation and professionalism into question. In educational settings social work students can be failed on fieldwork placements for 'being unprofessional'. 'Professional misconduct' is an offence likely to be investigated by the Health and Care Professions Council in England Wales. Indeed,

Grant & Kinman (2012) reported that social workers regard it as 'unprofessional' to admit that traumatic cases affected them emotionally and that not mixing your personal life with work is considered as "being professional".

### **My second claim is that**

The significance of professional socialisation has consistently been acknowledged as a crucial factor in the formation of identity (Loseke & Cahill, 1986: Freund et.al: 2014). Goldenberg describes professionalization as

“a complex and interactive process by which the content of the professional role (skills, knowledge, behaviour) is learned and the values, attitudes, and goals integral to the profession and sense of occupational identity which are characteristic of a member of that profession are internalized” (1993: 4).

Socialization—with its complex networks of social interaction, role models and mentors, experiential learning, and explicit and tacit knowledge acquisition— influences each practitioner, causing them to gradually think, act, and feel like a social worker. Some research has discussed how role models provide professional identities that one can “try on” to see if they fit (Ibarra, 1999).

Helpful distinctions have emerged between *socialisation for work*, which corresponds primarily with experiences of qualifying professional education and *socialisation by work* which focuses on experiences in-situ (Cohen-Scale, 2003).

Normative protocols, rules and standards are learnt on a formal level (for example, work-based professional development) and informal context in contact with peer group, experienced role models and service users.

Identity work is pivotal in understanding how practitioners embed themselves into organizational life. It is through workplace cultures of socialisation that professional identities are partly developed in relation to discourses of recognition (practitioner competence and professional values).

For some practitioners "being professional" and being oppositional or critical of the workplace are necessarily antithetical. This means that

Professional identity formation can act negatively and may not necessarily be a good thing when the possibility of organisational coercion comes into the frame. Workplace organisations exert influence on individual practitioners in part

through identity and identification but also through the regulation of professional conduct.

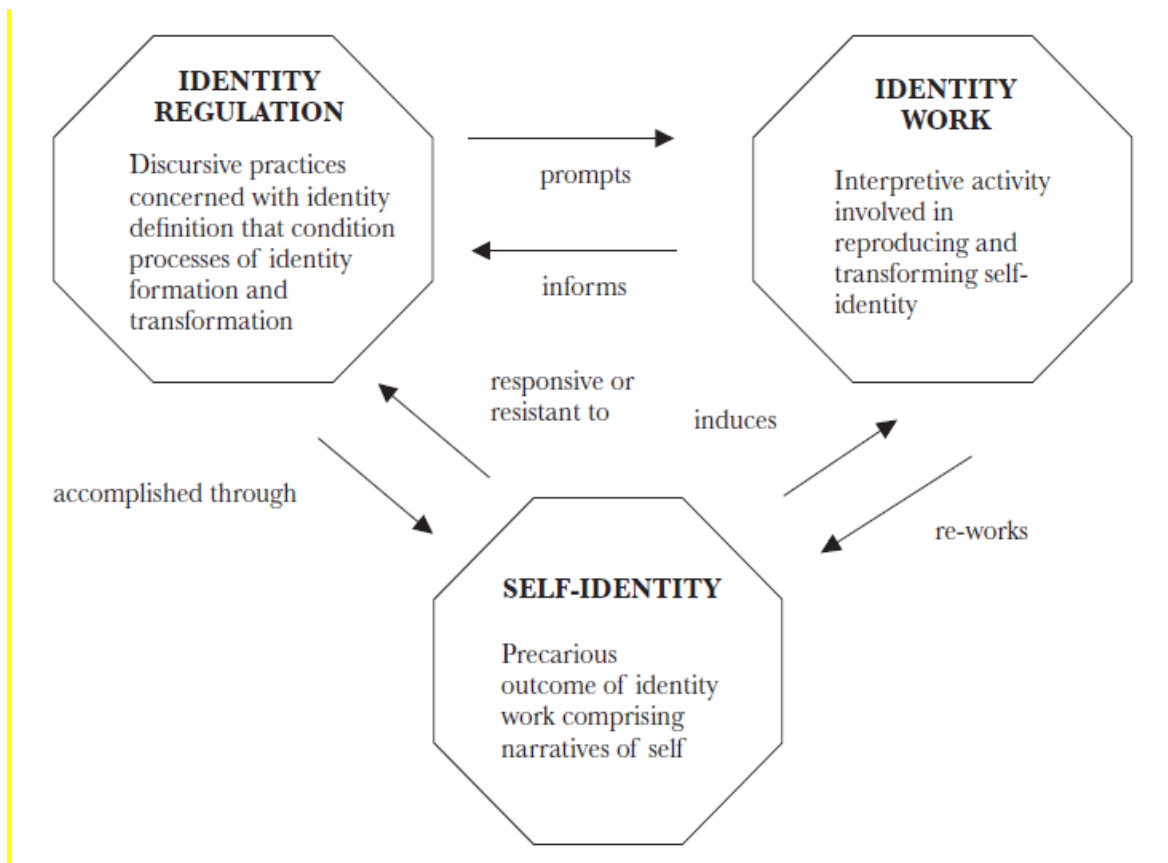
From a critical perspective we can think of professional identity as exhibiting a logic of network accountability and professional conduct which is governed at a distance. This type of governmentality is embodied in notions of 'professional competence', conduct and regulation (Fournier, 1999).

Pushing the argument that professional identity is not necessarily a good thing power Alvesson & Willmott highlight the processual aspects of power. They regard professional identity as a restrictive feature of organisational control (Alvesson, 2001; Alvesson & Willmott, 2002).

They demonstrate how employees are enjoined to develop self-images, narrative repertoires and work orientations that are deemed congruent with narrow managerially defined objectives. The iteration of self-identity and identity work regulation is likely to be keenly felt for middle and service managers in social work as they are squeezed between different constituencies. Alvesson and Willmott's focus on identity extends and deepens themes developed within other analyses of normative institutional control.

They develop empirical material to support and illustrate "how managerial intervention operates, more or less intentionally to influence employees' self-constructions in terms of coherence, distinctiveness and commitment" (2002: 619). However, identity regulation is performed as much through micro practices, and is reflexively negotiated by practitioners, as it is through top-down processes.





*Figure 1. Identity regulation, identity work and self-identity (Alvesson and Willmott 2002)*

In a recent visit to a local authority social services department in Scotland I discovered a vivid manifestation of how micro regulation assimilated the physical workspaces of frontline social workers. I was told how practitioners were allowed to decorate their workspace and desks but the colours used had to be explicitly the same as the corporate colours of the local authority organisation. Should their colour scheme not match, it was removed. What was a bit surprising about this **top down corporatism** was the manner in which it was accepted. In some cases it was seen as a positive. Colour-coded uniformity contributed to a neat, tidy and ordered workplace environment, one that gave off an air of professionalism and a semblance of "were all in this together". A typical managerial strategy which means "do as you are told".

## **My third main point is that**

Studies of identity resistance have contributed to an appreciation of the role of agency in power struggles. Malcolm Carey has extended the focus on resistance to include more routinised, informal, and often inconspicuous forms in everyday practice. Kärreman and Alvesson (2009) imaginatively take this further in developing the concept of "counter-resistance".

They maintain that professionals do in fact resist the pressures that public sector employers place upon them, but they internalise this resistance. Rather than jeopardise their position in the organisation by openly expressing their resistance, they develop an internal discourse which embodies their conflicting perceptions. Whilst employers may perceive that the professional is conforming to the organisational demands of micro management practices, the suppression of this resistance can ultimately give way to sudden and unexpected ruptures of discontent.

I have argued that professional identity is a vehicle for understanding the interaction between work organisations and identity and its consequences for the service users and organizations served by professionals (Korica & Molloy, 2010). Since professionals are organisationally situated, a better understanding of their identities needs to take differences in workplace culture, credentials and professional status into account.

In social work, the differences between practitioners working in children and family teams may be significantly different from those working with disabled service users. Mark Smith (2003), from Edinburgh, considers the poor relation of residential child care to the rest of social work. He regards the former as marginalized in a professional training curricula which fails to reflect the

essential task of group care and is preoccupied with overriding child protection concerns of safety and regulation. Smith claims that:-

Any more discrete professional identity for residential child care will also need a pedagogy that supports the professional task. It should certainly draw on the academic disciplines of psychology and sociology which underpin social work training but would be usefully widened to include insights from education, political philosophy and anthropology (2003: 247-248).

In emphasizing the relation between reputational status as it is bound to various types of professional qualification (vocational versus formal learning) and workplace conditions Smith goes on to say that this

"marginalization is structurally reinforced in poorer conditions of service and through the proposed institutionalization of qualification structures of inferior status and dubious efficacy" (249).

It is important to recognise that gender divisions and gender bias plays a significant role in this context. I know Liz Harlow here at Chester has done important work in this area.

She has shown how female social workers have struggled to gain formal professional recognition and comparable pay conditions. Practitioner's gender may play a significant role in the formation of professional identity. Given the care ethics of social work and its welfare role it would be important to establish whether women social workers understand their gender and professional identities as compatible

### **My fourth main point**

Is that the "institutional logics" perspective which emphasises the interplay of social structure and agency may well be a viable theoretical lens from which to

approach issues of professional identity for social work (although at Glasgow we are also looking at the potential of Actor Network Theory and the "materiality of participation" approach)

As Barbour and Lammers note "The concept of institutional logics is distinctively suited to the study of professional identity, because it provides resources for understanding the interplay of institutional and organizational structures *and* the communicative enactment and individual negotiation of professional identity and identification" (2015: 14).

From this perspective professional identity is embedded in a mix of different modes of institutional reasoning or "rationalities". This perspective provides a useful trajectory of connecting professional identity to workplace cultures and public institutions.

Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury show sources of identity to be the "building blocks [that] specify the organizing principles that shape individual and organizational preferences" (2012: 54) in workplace cultures. Identity conveys behavioural repertoires for individuals, including knowledge of "who they are, their logics of action, how they act, their vocabularies of motive, and what language is salient" (54).

Often these institutional logics can be in conflict or contradictory. Thus Blomgren and Waks (2015) report on the way that various rationalities incorporating a

democratic logic, a professional logic, a managerial logic, and a market logic collide as micro processes of institutional complexity.

This leaves open the distinct possibility of role conflict for professional social workers and particularly team leaders. Hybrid types of professional identity emerge from these institutional logics and we may find say an entrepreneurial-careerist and the activist identity sitting side by side.

Our recent GCU study of newly qualified social workers in Scotland elicited a similar pattern of identity splitting in accounts given of the first few months of employment in local authority social services (Grant, Sheridan & Webb, 2015). The uncertainties surrounding the transition to work and the lack of a comfort zone which easily accommodates task functions meant that newly qualified social workers often resorted to scripts and accounts they'd previously procured in their qualifying training. It is likely that after several months in practice newly qualified social workers will have moved from an *identity-patching* to an *identity-enriching* process. The informal contact of newly qualified social workers, notably through peer groups or shadowing, represent shared advantages, such as access to information, and a greater sense of professional similarity and expectations. Feedback through informal channels, gossip and stories helps form social workers identities by shaping their behaviour and values.

**My fifth and final point** about thinking about professional identity is to consider the way boundaries and networks are significant in the entanglements of social workers.

As Bourdieu shrewdly observed "What is at stake in the struggles about the meaning of the social world is power over the classificatory schemes and systems which are the basis for the representation of groups and therefore of their mobilization and demobilization" (1984, 479).

This gets at the heart of issues of professional identity and its boundary making. Boundaries, as involving both elements of social structure and process, are important to the study of professional identity because they mediate almost every aspect of organisational life. Abbott's (1988) study of professions, professional boundaries and turfs, mapped fields of jurisdiction between those professions and turfs. His model helps explain interprofessional conflict.

"Professions' claims for legitimate control are judged by various "audiences": the state, the public, co-workers in the workplace. These external judgments ratify professions' claims, thereby making them efficacious against competitors" (Abbott, 2005: 246).

Social work as conceived by Abbott is a complex turf which needs to be defended in a systems approach to professions. He deploys a "network-constitutive approach" to examine the way social work emerges out of a set of social "boundary groups" with different types of jurisdiction claims at stake (546: 1995).

A typical example of boundary conflict and competing jurisdiction claims are tensions in child protection between the police and social work over access to national data and risk assessment of sex offenders. In the UK multi-agency public protection arrangements (MAPPA) attempt to conflate professional roles but are often deferred by social workers because they impose a quasi-criminal justice role thus resulting in risk minimisation. The police will typically informally control access to ViSOR (Violent and Sex Offender Register) - a computer system which provides a UK multi-agency information sharing tool - thus reducing the potential for sharing and storing critical information on sex offenders. The emerging integration agenda between health and social care will further test the silo effect of professional boundaries and territorial claims.

**Finally,**

It is important to acknowledge that professional identity in social work is an area that is under-researched. It is influenced by complex value beliefs and attributes, early field work socialisation experiences, and contextual workplace factors. I have drawn attention to the value of the emerging

institutional logics perspective to consider how social work organisations influence and shape cognition and action in front-line practitioners and agencies, and how are they in turn shaped by them. We do need to consider normative notions of value, worth and justification

as central to considerations about professional identity. I know Paul Michael-Garrett and Stan Houston, who are here this week, have done some cutting edge critical sociology around these areas.

I found Andrew Sayer's account of value in his book "Why Things Matter to People" really helpful as a corrective to debates across the postmodern, constructivist and critical theory divide. And I'll just leave you with this to think about

On Sayer's view values should be understood as past evaluations sedimented as present dispositions which we believe to be justified. This view sees value as "based on repeated particular experiences and valuations of actions" while also tending "recursively, to shape subsequent particular valuations of people and their actions, and guide that person's own actions". They are "habits of thinking to which we become committed or emotionally attached" (Sayer 2011: 26-27). This goes hand-in-hand with a broader argument that "we should think of

normativity more in terms of the ongoing flow of continual concrete evaluation, and less in terms of norms, rules, procedures, or indeed decisions and injunctions about what one ought to do” (Sayer 2011: 97).

Thank you !



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