



# Professional identity versus organisational role: A balancing act for newly qualified social workers

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# Abstract

Little is known about how neo-conservatism impacts experiences of professional identity, especially for those in the early stages of their career. In Australia, neo-conservative ideology places greater emphasis on competence and technical rational work, leading to an increase in generic based job-roles such as caseworker. This presentation explores how seventeen Australian newly qualified social workers experienced professional identity within organisations and roles characterised by such trends. A qualitative study was undertaken, where each participant completed three interviews over the first twelve months post-qualification. This paper reports on a subset of the data, which revealed how participants emerged from study to navigate and balance professional identity with their organisational identity, especially role duties.

Throughout the year, most of the participants were employed in generic job-roles. For many of the participants, this raised immediate tensions and concerns about the visibility of their professional identity and potential impacts on their growth and development. There were also concerns about administrative demands and a lack of understanding about social work. Participants described ways of expressing their professional identity to help them to navigate and strengthen a commitment to their social work values and foster professional identity.

Participants' stories indicate small powerful acts that can contribute towards fostering professional identity within neo-conservative environments. The findings prompt reflection on how social workers and educators develop and sustain distinct and visible professional identities based on the value and ethical base of social work. Further research and dialogue is needed to expand on the findings, including how to prepare graduates for professional identity challenges they may face in neo-conservative environments.

# Necessity of professional identity

- Shared dimensions
- Basis for intervention
- Socially constructed
- Controversial and contested



(Beddoe, 2013; Gregory & Holloway, 2005; Moon, 2017; Payne, 2006; Wiles, 2017, Webb, 2017)

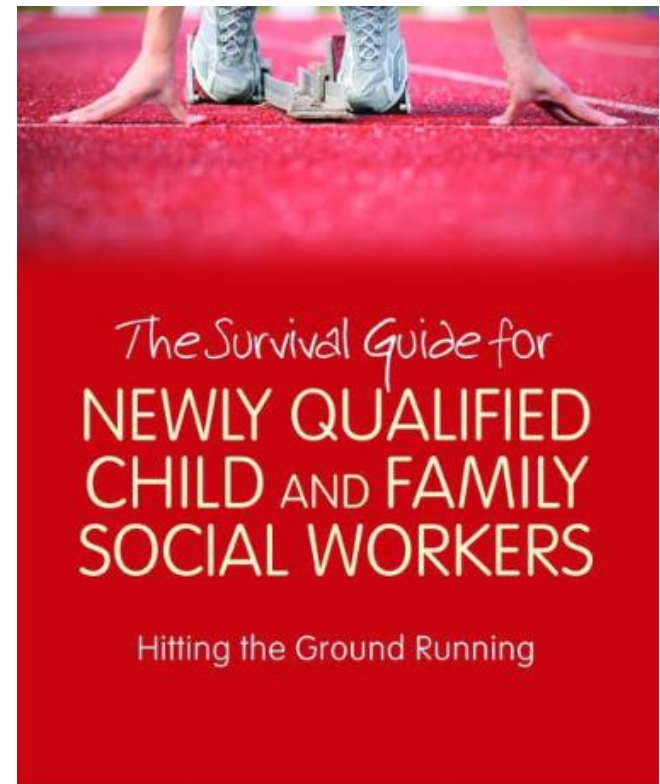
# Impacts of neo-conservative ideology

(Aronson & Smith, 2011; Asquith, Clark & Waterhouse, 2005; Healy, 2009; Houston, 2016; Newberry, 2014)



# Impacts on newly qualified social workers

- Conflicting messages
- Unrealistic expectations
- Lack of research



*Helen Donnellan and Gordon Jack*

(Donnellan & Jack, 2015; Harrison & Healy, 2015; Healy, 2009; Newberry, 2014)

# The need to embrace professional identity

- Reclaim
- Recognise
- Resist



(Cheung & Ngai, 2009; Gregory & Holloway, 2005; Healy & Meagher, 2004; Webb, 2017)

# Research questions

- How is professional social work identity experienced during the first twelve months post-qualification?
- How are the professional identities of newly qualified social workers fostered and/or eroded during the first twelve months post-qualification?

# Qualitative methodology

## Hermeneutic phenomenology (Wertz, 2011)

- Rich descriptions of lived experience
- Interpretive analysis

## Critical social work theory (Pease & Nipperess, 2016)

- Social contexts



# Data collection and analysis

- **Interview phases**
  - First round: November 2012
  - Second round: May 2013
  - Final round: November 2013
- **Thematic analysis** (Braun & Clarke, 2006)
  - Six-phases, flexible process
  - Inductive

## **Sex**

Female = 12

Male = 5

## **Agency type**

Non-govt. = 9

Government = 8

17 self-selected  
participants

## **Field of practice**

Health (5), women and DV, (3)  
disabilities (2), family and children  
(2), youth (2), aged care (1),  
social security (1), left social work  
(1)

## **Job title**

Generic = 13

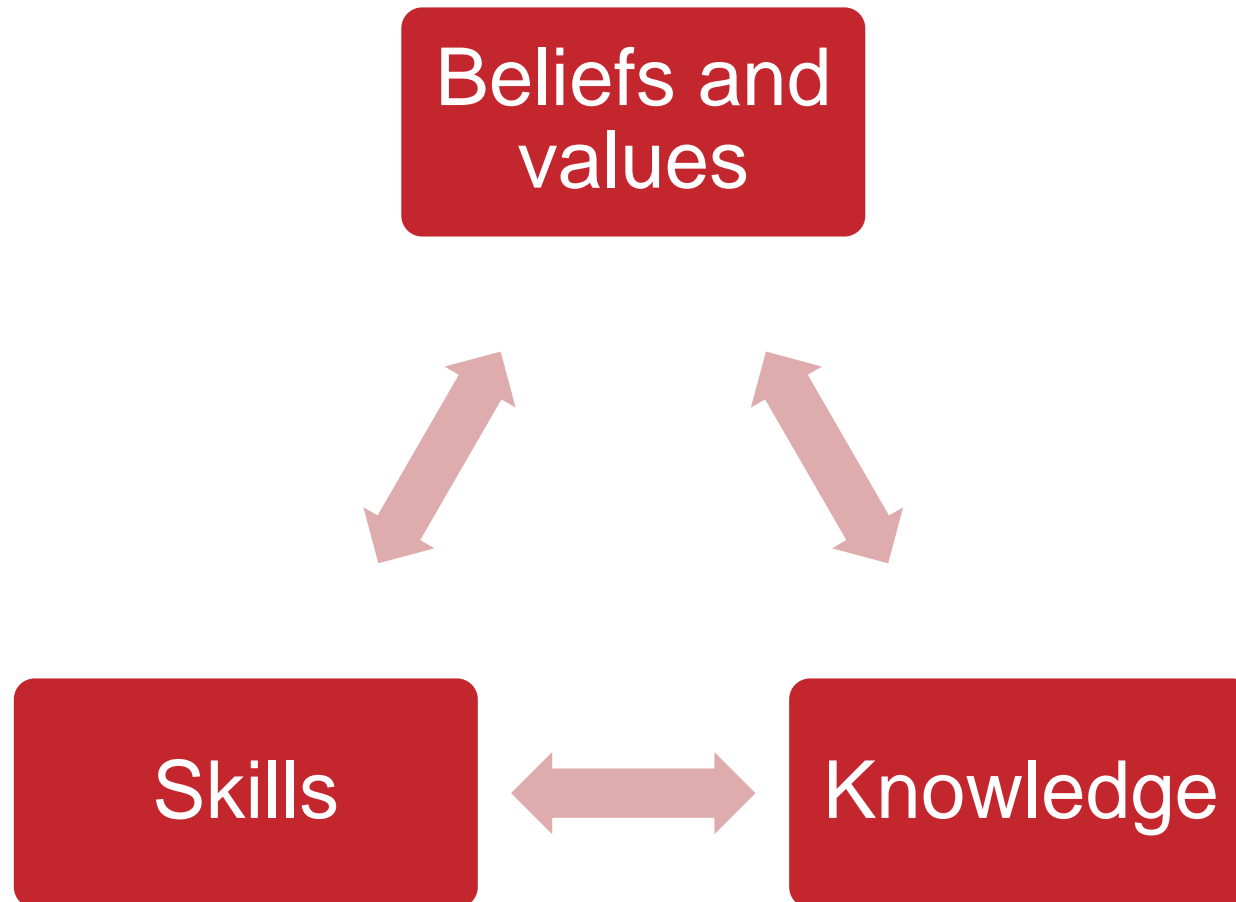
Social work = 4

**Limitations**



# Findings

## Dimensions of professional identity



# Social Worker



What my friends think I do



What my mum thinks I do.



What society thinks I do.



What my clients think I do.



What I think I do.



What I actually do.

# Tensions between job-role identity and professional identity

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

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

# Making professional identity visible

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



# Embracing professional identity

*It's part of my responsibility to break that [stereotype] down, so when I identify being a social worker... it's about making a stand that our work is very theoretically based, and we're really cemented in what we do and social justice and our code of ethics*





# Systemic advocacy

*I think social work's very important, and the stronger social work identity we have, I think the better the chances there are of actually planting that into society more strongly because if we have a stronger collective social work identity, we're going to have a more powerful voice...*



# Implications for social work

## Educators

- How are we preparing future graduates for challenges to professional identity?

## Social work managers, supervisors and colleagues

- How are we supporting professional identity in our relationships?
- What action can we take collectively to enhance professional identity in our workplaces and communities?

# Implications for social work

## Professional associations and international bodies

- What standards can we develop to promote professional identity?
- What resources can we provide to social workers to support their endeavours in making professional identity visible and understood?
- What action can we take to support and advocate for professional identity?

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