



Charles Sturt
University

Is Professional Identity Adequately Conceptualised in Peer-Reviewed Social Work Literature?

International Federation of Social Workers, European Regional Conference, Prague, Czech Republic 2023

Dr Bernadette Moorhead

Charles Sturt University, Australia

Professor Kyoko Otani

Nihon Fukushi University, Japan

Professor Riki Savaya,

Tel Aviv University, Israel

Dr Nicola Ivory

Charles Sturt University, Australia

Professor Wendy Bowles

Charles Sturt University, Australia

Associate Professor Karen Bell

Charles Sturt University, Australia

Dr Mary Baginsky

NIHR Health & Social Care Workforce Research Unit, Kings College
London, England





Our Research Team





Abstract

This paper reports on data from a systematic scoping review about professional identity in social work. Since the inception of social work, there have been ongoing concerns about our professional status, with recent questions persisting about how the profession defines its own identity, especially within the context of working across diverse fields and teams. To explore contemporary knowledge on this topic, a systematic scoping review was undertaken in order to critically review the terrain of the literature and examine how professional identity is conceptualised in social work. Peer-reviewed literature spanning 1999–2019 was collected from academic databases, and after screening, 65 sources formed the dataset. Our paper focuses on data related to how professional identity was defined and theorised in these sources. Surprisingly, analysis revealed that 26 of the 65 sources did not provide any definition of professional identity, and of the 39 sources that did, some of the definitions were lacking in detail and clarity. Furthermore, only 25 sources specified theories or theorists for conceptualising professional identity. Despite these gaps and issues, social constructionist theories were most prevalent across the sources. Thematic analysis produced four themes from the 39 definitions related to socialisation, characteristics, feelings towards social work, and professional structures. The findings offer new insights into possible dimensions of professional identity that can form the basis of future international comparative research. The need for further critical engagement with these dimensions and their applicability across diverse cultural and linguistic contexts are both outlined, as is the need for researchers to provide comprehensive definitions and theories that can assist the profession in grappling with the persisting questions related to the professional status and identity of social work.



The Need to Scope Professional Identity

Contested professional status and legitimacy

- Do we have adequate professional structures (Donovan et al., 2017; Webb, 2017)?

Challenges in defining or conceptualising social work

- Are there common characteristics (Hugman, 2009; Ornellas et al., 2018)?
- What is our scope and function (Gilbert, 1977)?
- How do socio-political forces shape social work (Donovan et al., 2017; Gregory & Holloway, 2005)?

Challenges for contemporary practice

- Are we distinct and/or is there clarity for social work, especially within inter-agency and multidisciplinary contexts (Baginsky, 2015; Frost, 2017)?



Research Aims

1. Examine professional identity in terms of how it is defined, formed, developed, and crystalised, and how it is measured.

2. Identify definitions, constructions, conceptualizations and theories on professional identity in social work.



Systematic Scoping Review

PRISMA extension for scoping reviews (Tricco et al., 2018)

Search strategy

("professional identity" OR "professional socialization") AND ("social work" OR "social care"*)

Databases

- Academic Search Complete; Humanities International Complete, SocINDEX, ProQuest Social Sciences Database, Proquest Sociology Database, Scopus, and Web of Science



Selection Criteria

The criteria for eligible studies were those:

- (1) with a substantial focus on professional identity
- (2) including a sample of social work professionals
- (3) that were published in English language between the years 1999-2019
- (4) and were peer-reviewed.

Data Identification, Screening and Eligibility



Records identified = **1321**



Duplicates identified = **702** ($1321 - 702 = 619$)



Items for title and abstract screening = **619**



Items removed after title and abstract screening = **475** ($619 - 475 = 144$)



Items for full text screening = **144**



Items ineligible after full text screening = **79** ($144 - 79 = 65$)

Not professional identity (n=64), No professionals in sample (n=2), no social workers in sample (n=5), not related to review aims (n= 7).



Final dataset = **65**



Data Extraction and Analysis

Bibliographic details (descriptively analysed)

- Authors & year
- Country/ies of focus

Dimensions of professional identity (thematically analysed)

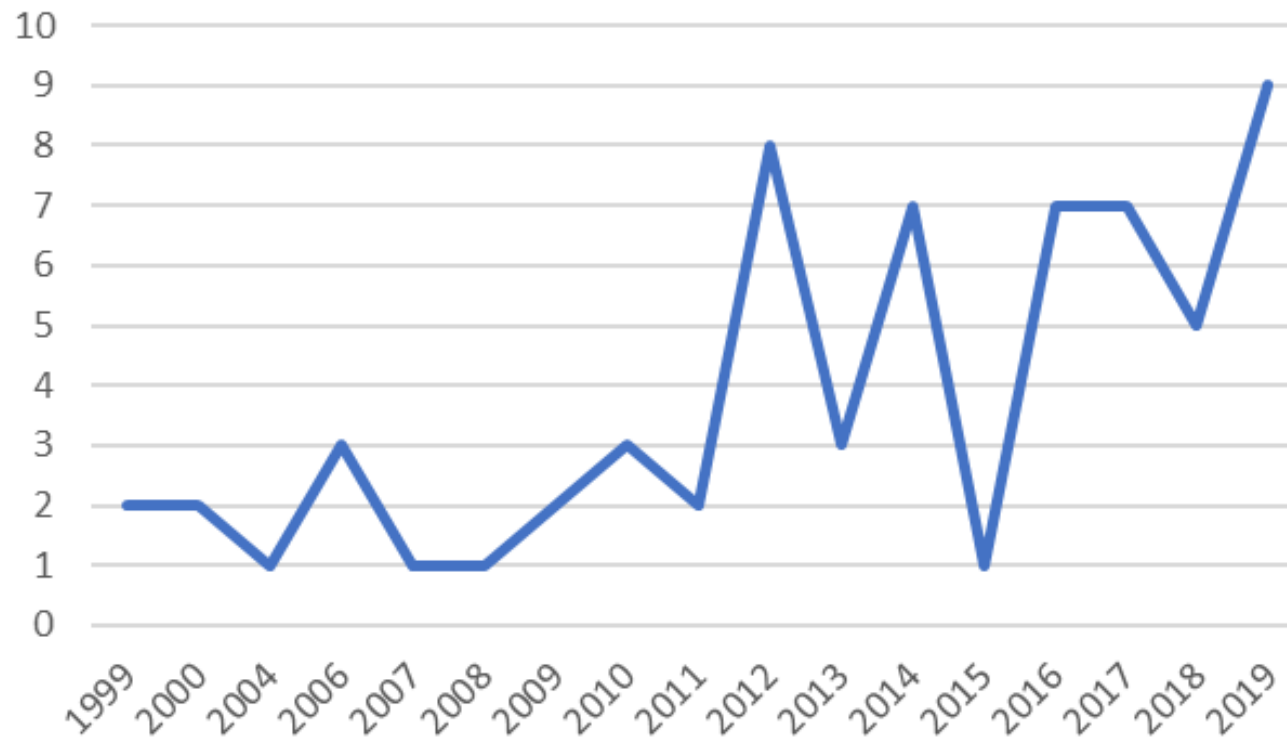
- Definitions of professional identity
- Theories or concepts used to understand professional identity



Descriptive Overview

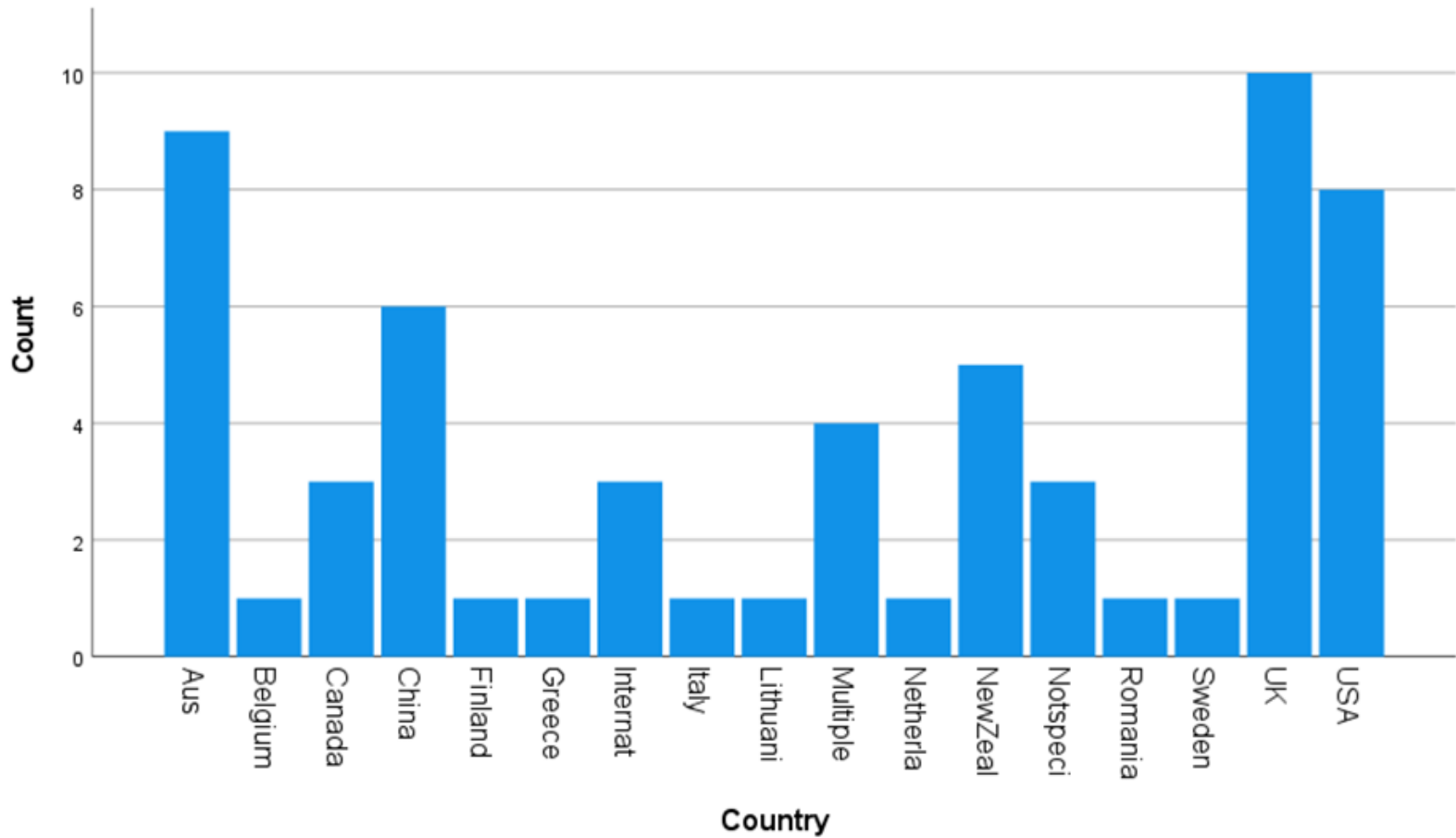
- Empirical papers ($n = 49, 75\%$); non-empirical papers ($n = 16, 25\%$)

Years of Publication





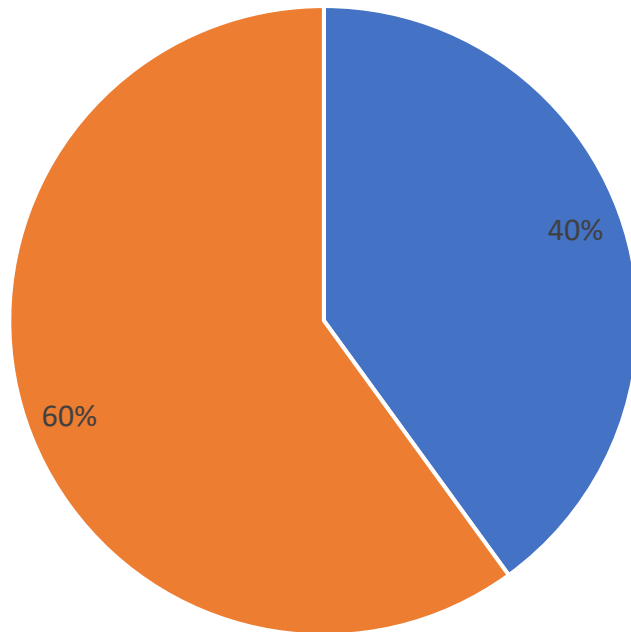
Country/ies of Focus



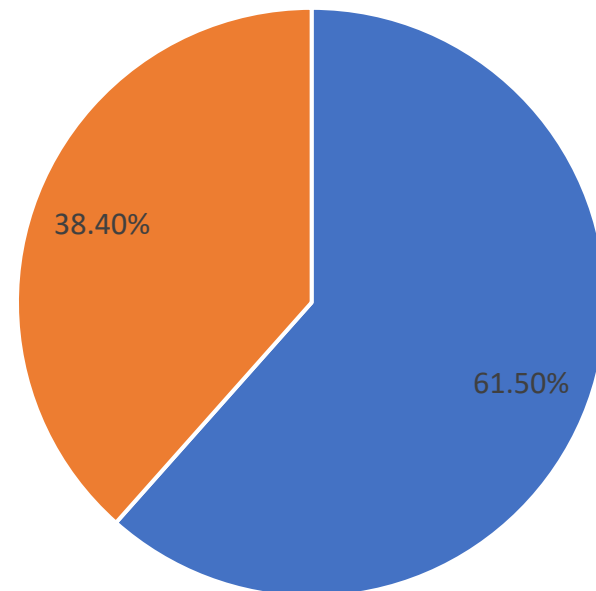


Findings

Definitions of professional identity



Theories, concepts or theorists





Four Themes Derived from the Definitions





Theme 1 – Professional Socialisation

Frequency of references within sources	Definition of Theme	Sources
n = 26	How an individual perceives themselves within the profession, informed by ongoing relational experiences and acculturation.	Best & Williams (2018); Campanini et al. (2012); Christie (2006); Ciocănel et al. (2018); Clare (2006); Forenza & Eckert (2018); Gwilym (2017); Harrison & Healy (2016); Higgins (2016); Hill-Smith et al. (2012); Jiang et al. (2019); Karpelis (2014); Kole & de Ruyter (2009); Leigh (2014); Liu et al. (2012); Moorhead (2019a & 2019b); Nuttman-Shwartz (2017); Payne (2004 & 2006); Pullen-Sansfaçon et al. (2012); Sansfaçon & Crete (2016); Valentich (2010); Wiles & Vicary (2019); Zufferey (2008 & 2012).



Theme 2 – Shared Professional Characteristics of Social Work

Frequency of references within sources	Definition of Theme	Sources
n = 19	Core and common professional characteristics social workers enact and express in practice.	Beddoe (2013); Best & Williams (2018); Bolin et al. (2014); Campanini et al. (2012); Gwilym (2017); Hill-Smith et al. (2012); Karpētis (2014); Leigh (2014); Li et al. (2019); Liu et al. (2012); Moorhead et al. (2016); Moorhead (2019a & 2019b); Nuttman-Shwartz (2017); Sansfaçon & Crete (2016); Scholar (2013); Van Robaeys et al. (2018); Wang et al. (2019); Wiles & Vicary (2019); Zorita (2017).

Theme 3 – Feelings of Belonging and Commitment to the Social Work Profession

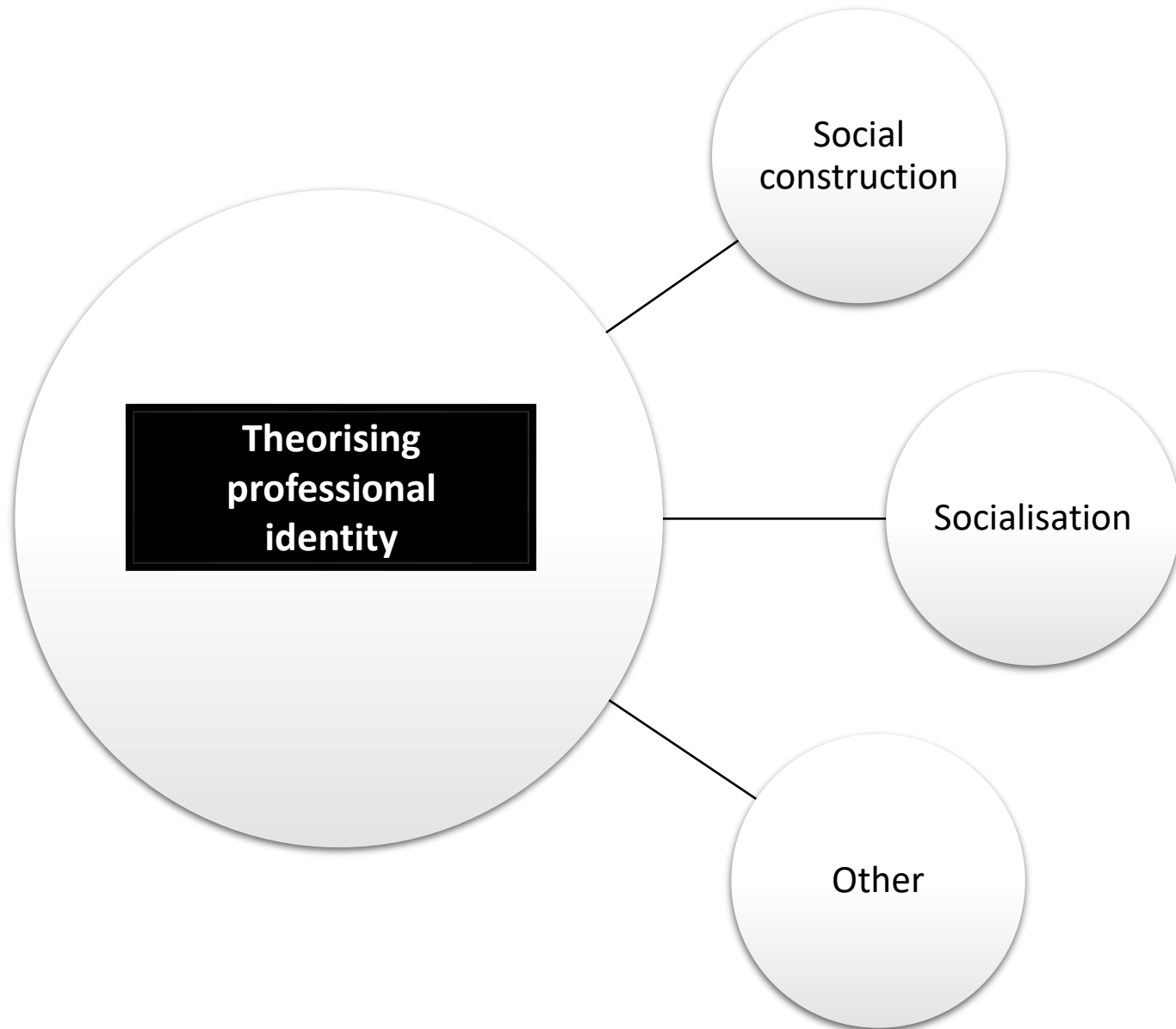


Frequency of references within sources	Definition of Theme	Sources
n = 12	How an individual feels about identifying as a social worker and their sense of belonging to the profession.	Beddoe (2013); Best & Williams (2018); Campanini et al. (2012); Clare (2006); Higgins (2016); Jian et al. (2019); Karpētis (2014); Leigh (2014); Li et al. (2019); Liu et al. (2012); Pate et al. (2010); Pullen-Sansfaçon et al. (2012a).



Theme 4 – Professional Structures of Social Work

Frequency of references within sources	Definition of Theme	Sources
n = 10	How a social worker perceives the structures, status and roles that make up social work as a recognised independent profession.	Beddoe (2013); Bolin et al. (2014); Clare (2006); Gudliauskaitė-Godvadė et al. (2010); Law (2017); Li et al. (2019); O'Neill (1999); Pecukonis et al. (2019); Wang et al. (2019); Van Robaeys et al. (2018).





Theorising Professional Identity

Social constructionism paradigm (n = 19) with five sub-codes

- 1) Social construction (Ciocănel et al., 2018; Clare, 2006; Fouché et al., 2014; Nuttman-Shwartz, 2017; Zufferey, 2008)
- 2) Social identity theory (Gwilym, 2017; Higgins, 2016; Jiang et al., 2019; Karpets, 2014; Pate et al., 2010; Payne, 2004; Wiles & Vicary, 2019), including Wenger (Forenza & Eckert, 2018)
- 3) Post-modern paradigm (Payne, 2006), including critical theory (Zufferey, 2012), power theory (Li et al., 2019), third wave feminism (Valentich, 2010)
- 4) Bourdieu (Beddoe, 2013)
- 5) Schein's construction of professional identity (Best & Williams, 2018)



Theorising Professional Identity

Socialisation (n = 3), with three subcodes

- 1) Socialisation (Campanini et al., 2012)
- 2) Dubar's process of integration (Sansfaçon & Crete, 2016)
- 3) Self- development (Bolin et al., 2014)

Other – theorists with one reference each:

- Freidson's theory on professionalisation (Leigh, 2014)
- Sen's capability approach (Hendriks & van Ewijk, 2017)
- Tsang's dialectics (Moon, 2017)



Implications: A Proposed Definition of Professional Identity

Drawing on social identity theory, professional identity is a multidimensional concept which emerges from lifelong professional socialisation and development, which is manifested by social worker's **feelings of belonging and commitment** to the profession and the **shared professional characteristics** that they enact within the **professional structures** of social work.



Limitations and Future Directions

- Strength of the research design
- Need for international comparative research
- The conversation about professional identity continues



Thank you | Děkuji

Bernadette Moorhead

bmoorhead@csu.edu.au

<https://researchoutput.csu.edu.au/en/persons/bmoorh01csueduau/publications>

Kyoko Otani

https://researchmap.jp/read0139687/published_papers?limit=50&lang=en

Riki Savaya

<https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Riki-Savaya-2>

Nicola Ivory

<https://researchoutput.csu.edu.au/en/persons/nicola-ivory-2>

Wendy Bowles

<https://researchoutput.csu.edu.au/en/persons/wbowlescsueduau>

Karen Bell

<https://researchoutput.csu.edu.au/en/persons/kbellcsueduau>

Mary Baginsky

<https://www.kcl.ac.uk/people/mary-baginsky>



References

* Empirical paper from dataset

^Non-empirical paper from dataset

Baginsky, M. (2014) 'Social work in hiding? The views of other professionals on social workers and working with social workers', *Research, Policy and Planning*, 30(3), pp. 143-154.

Beddoe, L. (2013) 'Health social work: Professional identity and knowledge', *Qualitative Social Work*, 12(1), pp. 24-40.*

Best, S. and Williams, S. (2018) 'Integrated care: Mobilising professional identity', *Journal of Health Organization and Management*, 32(5), pp. 726-740.*



References

Bolin, B.L., Crews, D.A., Countryman-Roswurm, K.I. and Grant, N. (2014) 'Six-word memoirs: A reflection of social work professional competency and identity', *Professional Development* (10974911), 17(1), pp. 28-38. *

Campanini, A., Frost, L. and Höjer, S. (2012) 'Educating the new practitioner: The building of professional identities in European social work', *Revista de Asistentă Socială*(1), pp. 33-47. *

Christie, A. (2006) 'Negotiating the uncomfortable intersections between gender and professional identities in social work', *Critical Social Policy*, 26(2), pp. 390-411. *

Ciocănel, A., Lazăr, F., Munch, S., Harmon, C., Rentea, G.C., Gaba, D. and Mihai, A. (2018) 'Helping, mediating, and gaining recognition: The everyday identity work of Romanian health social workers', *Social Work in Health Care*, 57(3), pp. 206-219.*



References

Clare, B. (2006) 'Developing a robust professional identity: Stories from practice', *Social Work Review*, 18(4), pp. 37-44.*

Donovan, J., Rose, D. and Connolly, M. (2017) 'A crisis of identity: social work theorising at a time of change', *The British Journal of Social Work*, 47(8), pp. 2291-2307.

Fouché, C., Beddoe, L., Bartley, A. and de Haan, I. (2014) 'Enduring professional dislocation: Migrant social workers' perceptions of their professional roles', *British Journal of Social Work*, 44(7), p. 2004. *

Forenza, B. and Eckert, C. (2018) 'Social worker identity: A profession in context', *Social Work*, 63(1), pp. 17-26.*



References

Frost, E. (2008) 'Is there a European social work identity?', *European Journal of Social Work*, 11(4), pp. 341-354.

Frost, N. (2017) 'From “silo” to “network” profession – a multi-professional future for social work', *Journal of Children's Services*, 12(2-3), pp. 174-183.

Gilbert, N. (1977) 'The search for professional identity', *Social Work*, 22(5), pp. 401-406.

Gregory, M. and Holloway, M. (2005) 'Language and the shaping of social work', *British Journal of Social Work*, 35(1), pp.37–53.



References

Gudliauskaitė-Godvadė, J., Godvadas, P., Malinauskas, G., Perttula, J. and Väänänen, A. (2010) 'Understanding professional identity of social work - the Finnish case', *Bridges / Tiltai*, 50(1), pp. 23-38. *

Gwilym, H. (2017) 'The political identity of social workers in neoliberal times', *Critical and Radical Social Work*, 5(1), pp. 59-74. *

Harrison, G. and Healy, K. (2016) 'Forging an identity as a newly qualified worker in the non-government community services sector', *Australian Social Work*, 69(1), pp. 80-91. *

Hendriks, P. and van Ewijk, H. (2017) 'To have voice and choice: Turkish and Moroccan Dutch professionals in social work', *International Social Work*, 60(3), pp. 720-732. *



References

Higgins, M. (2016) 'Villains, fools or unsung heroes? A study of the contradictory narratives of social work identities in contemporary England', *Czech & Slovak Social Work / Sociální Práce / Sociálna Práca*, 16(4), pp. 57-65. *

Hill-Smith, A., Taverner, R., Greensmith, H. and Parsons, D. (2012) 'Staff relationships in multidisciplinary teams', *Mental Health Practice*, 15(8), pp. 14-19.
^

Hugman, R. (2009). But is it social work? Some reflections on mistaken identities. *British Journal of Social Work*, 39(6). 1138–1153.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcm158>

Jiang, H.Y., Wang, Y.A., Chui, E. and Xu, Y.B. (2019) 'Professional identity and turnover intentions of social workers in Beijing, China: The roles of job satisfaction and agency type', *International Social Work*, 62(1), pp. 146-160. *



References

Karpetis, G. (2014) 'Advocating the clinical social work professional identity: A biographical study', *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 28(1), pp. 23-41. *

Kole, J.J. and de Ruyter, D. (2009) 'Nothing less than excellence: Ideals of professional identity', *Ethics & Social Welfare*, 3(2), pp. 131-144. ^

Law, W.F.E. (2017) 'An exploratory study of different approaches between social work practice and correctional services in hong kong special administrative region', *China Journal of Social Work*, 10(1), pp. 52-68. ^

Leigh, J.T. (2014) 'The process of professionalisation: Exploring the identities of child protection social workers', *Journal of Social Work*, 14(6), pp. 625-644. *



References

Li, X., Yu, X., Zeng, S.C. and He, X.S. (2019) 'Degree or examination: What is the foundation of the social work workforce in China?', *International Social Work*, 62(1), pp. 447-460. *

Liu, Y., Lam, C.M. and Yan, M.C. (2012) 'A challenged professional identity: The struggles of new social workers in China', *China Journal of Social Work*, 5(3), pp. 189-200. *

Moon, J. (2017) 'Developing integrative perspectives of social work identity through dialectics', *British Journal of Social Work*, 47(5), pp. 1326-1343. ^

Moorhead, B. (2019) 'Sustaining professional identity during the initial post-qualification period: Implications for retention strategies', *International Social Work*. *



References

Moorhead, B. (2019) 'Transition and adjustment to professional identity as a newly qualified social worker', *Australian Social Work*, 72(2), pp. 206-218. *

Moorhead, B., Bell, K. and Bowles, W. (2016) 'Exploring the development of professional identity with newly qualified social workers', *Australian Social Work*, 69(4), pp. 456-467. *

Nuttman-Shwartz, O. (2017) 'Rethinking professional identity in a globalized world', *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 45(1), pp. 1-9. ^

O'Neill, S. (1999) 'Social work - a profession?', *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 13(1), pp. 9-18. ^



References

Ornellas, A., Spolander, G. and Engelbrecht, L.K. (2018) 'The global social work definition: Ontology, implications and challenges', *Journal of Social Work*, 18(2), pp. 222-240.

Pate, J., Fischbacher, M. and Mackinnon, J. (2010) 'Health improvement: Countervailing pillars of partnership and profession', *Journal of Health Organization and Management*, 24(2), pp. 200-217. *

Payne, M. (2004) 'Social work practice identities: An agency study of a hospice', *Practice* (09503153), 16(1), pp. 5-15. *

Payne, M. (2006) 'Identity politics in multiprofessional teams: Palliative care social work', *Journal of Social Work*, 6(2), pp. 137-150. ^



References

Pecukonis, E., Keefe, R.H., Copeland, V.C., Cuddeback, G.S., Friedman, M.S. and Albert, S.M. (2019) 'Educating the next generation of public health social work leaders: Findings from a summit', *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 39(2), pp. 132-147. *

Pullen-Sansfaçon, A., Brown, M. and Graham, J.R. (2012a) 'International migration of professional social workers: Toward a theoretical framework for understanding professional adaptation processes', *Social Development Issues* (Follmer Group), 34(2), pp. 37-50. ^

Sansfaçon, A.P. and Crete, J. (2016) 'Identity development among social workers, from training to practice: Results from a three-year qualitative longitudinal study', *Social Work Education*, 35(7), pp. 767-779. *

Scholar, H. (2013) 'Dressing the part? The significance of dress in social work', *Social Work Education*, 32(3), pp. 365-379. *



References

Tricco, A.C., Lillie, E., Zarin, W., O'Brien, K.K., Colquhoun, H., Levac, D., Moher, D., Peters, M.D.J., Horsley, T., Weeks, L., Hempel, S., Akl, E.A., Chang, C., McGowan, J., Stewart, L., Hartling, L., Aldcroft, A., Wilson, M.G., Garritty, C., Lewin, S., Godfrey, C.M., Macdonald, M.T., Langlois, E.V., Soares-Weiser, K., Moriarty, J., Clifford, T., Tunçalp, Ö. and Straus, S.E. (2018) 'PRISMA extension for scoping reviews (PRISMA-ScR): Checklist and explanation', *Ann Intern Med*, 169(7), pp. 467-473.

Valentich, M. (2010) 'Finding one's own identity as a feminist social worker', *Canadian Social Work Review*, 27(2), pp. 221-237. ^

Van Robaeys, B., Hans, v.E. and Dierckx, D. (2018) 'The challenge of superdiversity for the identity of the social work profession: Experiences of social workers in 'de sloep' in Ghent, Belgium', *International Social Work*, 61(2), pp. 274-288. *



References

Wang, Y., Zhang, H., Lei, J. and Yu, Y. (2019) 'Burnout in Chinese social work: Differential predictability of the components of the Maslach Burnout Inventory', *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 28(2), pp. 217-228. *

Webb, S. (2017) 'Professional identity as a matter of concern', in Webb, S. (ed), *Professional Identity in Social Work*, Routledge.

Wiles, F. and Vicary, S. (2019) 'Picturing social work, puzzles and passion: Exploring and developing transnational professional identities', *Social Work Education*, 38(1), pp. 47-62. *



References

Zorita, P.M.B. (2017) 'Social work professional identity and catholic identity: A critical exploration of the source of conflicts', *Social Work and Christianity*, 44(3), pp. 115-134. ^

Zufferey, C. (2008) 'Responses to homelessness in Australian cities: Social worker perspectives', *Australian Social Work*, 61(4), pp. 357-371. *

Zufferey, C. (2012) 'Jack of all trades, master of none?' Social work identity and homelessness in Australian cities', *Journal of Social Work*, 12(5), pp. 510-527. *