

Professional identity as a matter of concern

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**Conference paper: European Social Work
Research Conference, Aalborg University,
Denmark, 19th - 21st of April 2017**

Why is professional identity a matter of concern for so many different professions and especially for social work? Here is the first suggestion. Professional identity is a matter of concern because it involves something inherently unsettled, to be investigated and explicated. The second insight follows from this. Issues of professional identity, permeate working life and exist to a large extent, across all elements in social work. In this sense it is overrun by the issues rather than simply reproduced by individual practitioners (Anderson et.al, 2015).

Ivakhiv claims: -

Everything begins with matters of concern. Such matters are always, as they have ever been, matters that involve us, touch and brush up against us, envelop us, or otherwise call on us to respond to them (2014: 3).

Concerns have worked their way ever deeper into our lives to the point that even the primal act of eating and anticipation of the next weather forecast become matters of concern.

How then are we best to approach these matters of concern surrounding professional identity? Here we examine some of the dominant tendencies evident in perspectives offered on professional identity. These give us a strong sense of why identity is such an embattled concept, so unsettled and an enduring matter of concern. Here we closely examining the underlying logic which sits behinds these different accounts and issues. How is professional identity, as a matter of concern, sustained and reproduced by various logics and assumptions. In this context we can make good use of insights developed in the burgeoning organisational theory literature on “institutional logics” (Thornton, Ocasio & Lounsbury, 2012).

There are institutional logics to professional identity in social work which displays a certain ontological order and status (i.e. which gives way to a more lucid definition of what professional identity is as a phenomenon and what it is not). Refining the ontology of concepts, such as professional identity, is a good way to make clearer what it means for social work, and how it can be articulated with other concepts, such as professional socialisation, resilience and workplace recognition. As Friedland explains: -

An institutional logic presumes that institutional meanings, on the one hand, and individual or organisational interests and powers, on the other, are interdependent. An institutional value, or substance, finds the ontology of the central object or state of being through which normatively enforced practices are organised and hence constitute the resource through which powers are afforded and upon which these practices depend. (2013: 35).

Question of value and worth sit at the centre of this push to translate the institutional logics perspective into re-considering issues of professional identity. Again turning to Friedland, he says, "Institutional logics, I would argue, return us to that element from which the new institutionalism fled: value" (ibid, 386).

There are several logics of value inherent in matters of concern with professional identity, which includes the four logics of: -

- Productionist rationality.
- Sentimental politics of authenticity.

- Dynamic stabilisation as a mode of professional reproduction.
- Regimes of justification, worth and recognition.
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The paper deals with each of these institutional logics in turn. The purpose is to investigate these “orders of worth” as well as the limitations and dangers associated with conceiving of professional identity as a matter of concern. The four logics interlock in the institutional arrangements of social work and its professional regulation, in patterns of education and socialisation and in the mechanisms of practitioner optimisation.

Productionist rationality

The first institutional logic in play relates to operativity and production.

Thinking of professional identity as production (rather than formation) is the key to understanding this logic. The mantra of “Becoming a social worker” characterised as a journey is crucial to this respect. Different relationships and contexts, encourage or dissuade, different possibilities for becoming in social work (Van Dooren, 2016: 45).

Case study material consistently shows that professional identity is a prerequisite and not something that simply exists but *has to be* brought into being. There is a tacit requirement to produce it. It appears that there is no opt out for students or practitioners’ in giving form to matters of professional identity. Anecdotally, one colleague reported to the author, we are here to “support students to develop their own identity- we can't do the 'identity work' for

them”. The assumption is identity is waiting to happen, it simply needs to be kick-started and supported.

Implicitly professional identity is viewed through the lens of self-actualisation, as an achievement. The (unspoken) expectation is that students and practitioners will labour on it. Professional identity is the actualisation of having-to-be, with the practitioner self as the container which needs to be filled. This operativity translates as an imperative of duty or morality of office to be achieved by the practitioner. The prerequisite of a professional identity is already decided (by educators and field practitioners) in a preliminary way in educational or workplace contexts. Let’s be clear here, it is reckoned to be accumulative, linear and progressively affirmed.

Sentimental politics of authenticity

There is a tacit ideal of authenticity of a professional self that can be organized to convey the values and mission of social work.

This second logic is called the sentimental politics of authenticity. A deficit of authenticity becomes a matter of concern for social work. Authenticity invokes tradition, and taps into the shared identity of a social work profession. Educators and senior practitioners are regulators of this for newly qualified social workers. They test for authenticity driven converts in

relation to the social work mission and values. An affected folksiness is almost a necessity to “be a professional practitioner”.

It strikes us that the huge industry which has grown around the virtues of the reflective practitioner is somehow related to this (Webb, 1996). Reflection should reveal the professional ideal of authenticity and the goals of a self-realised, self-fulfilled practitioner. Reflection gives more sentimental force to the professional culture of authenticity in social work (Taylor, 1991). The preoccupation with authenticity, and the technique of reflection used to achieve it, move considerations of professional identity beyond static and fixed identities to embrace an attentiveness to the way in which practitioners themselves exert their own agency in remaking what counts as ‘professional behaviour’.

There is a darker side to authenticity politics, confirmed by McQueen’s comments on identity:

Such claims are often cloaked in a language of ‘authenticity’ which leads to demands for conformity amongst individual members of the group in order to gain acceptance and approval. (http://www.iep.utm.edu/recog_sp/)

Conformity, regulation and disciplinary practice, all involving power relations, reflect what has been referred to as the darker side of thinking about professional identity.

Dynamic stabilisation as a mode of professional reproduction

The third logic which attenuates matters of concern to professional identity relates to reproduction qualities in what is termed 'dynamic stabilization' (Rosi et.al, 2016).

With this logic identity is cast as dynamic with respect to professional growth, innovation and change. If you will it is "identity on the move".

Dynamic stabilisation derives its veracity in growth, augmentation, and innovation, not just from processual reproduction. This dynamism, in turn, entails an intrinsic logic of continuous improvement and acceleration. It is developmental for the social worker because it commits practitioners too perpetual 'progress' toward new challenges, projects and affiliations in the making of professional identity. Identity takes on dispositional qualities of resilience and defined by Rajan-Rankin (2013) as "a dynamic process wherein individuals display positive adaptation despite experiences of significant adversity or trauma" (2426).

The most obvious example of the dynamic stabilisation logic is the continuing professional development (CPD) agenda - a central requirement for professional registration - which refers to learning activities professionals engage in to develop and enhance their abilities. Scattered throughout the CPD policy literature practitioners, and particularly newly qualified social workers, are hailed to "maintain", "assert" and "embrace" their professional identities.

In the UK the introduction of the new assessed and supported year in employment (ASYE) programme and probationary period is another example. The ASYE is a twelve-month programme for assessing newly qualified social workers (NQSWS). We can detect ways in which professional identity is deployed as a benchmark construct to measure the impact of CPD and AYSE activities. HCPC (Health & Care Professions Council) typically uses practitioner cases examples to justify the AYSE. Below is an example which highlights the link between professional development and identity.

I found the ASYE workshops very helpful in developing my professional identity as a Social Worker. The first workshop (which took place 2 months prior to this registration period) was based on this subject and gave me a wider view of Social Work including a historical and international perspective. During the session we revisited our values and what sustains and motivates in the role.

www.coventry.gov.uk/sc/f/download/.../id/467/jo_di_costa_sw_registration_

In this figure of the ‘active social worker’, sits the reproductive logic of “self-optimisation” with the imperative of growth, actualisation and expansion inherent in all appeals to professional identity. In this context professional identity is effectively privatized as a matter of concern. The extent to which managerialist policy assumes social work identity to be fundamentally individualistic is certainly a worthy area for future research.

Regimes of justification, worth and recognition

Taylor is keen to stress just how important recognition is, referring to it as "a vital human need" (1994: 26) and stating that misrecognition "can inflict a grievous wound, saddling its victims with a crippling self-hatred" (ibid: 26).

The struggle for worth and recognition in social work is intimately bound up to matters of concern around professional identity. The fourth institutional logic centres on the way regimes of worth and recognition impact on thinking about professional identity.

Two areas providing fertile ground for examining struggles for worth, legitimacy and recognition in relation to professional identity are: (i) forms of knowledge in practice; and (ii) inter-professional partnerships and collaboration.

Legitimation confirms and cultivates professional identity. But more importantly, perhaps, in terms of relations of power, claims for specialised formal knowledge are essential. In Abbot's terms this is why "the ability of a profession to sustain its jurisdictions lies partly on the power and prestige of its academic knowledge" (1988: 53).

Worth and practices of valuation are necessarily linked to the ethics of care agenda. Starting with Latour's notion of 'matters of concern', discussed earlier in the paper, this inspires Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2011) to develop the concept of "matters of care". Drawing on feminist knowledge politics she suggests that a focus on matters of care adds a 'critical' edge that Latour's politics of things tends to disregard. She stresses: -

the capacity of the word ‘concern’ to move the notion of ‘interest’ towards more affectively charged connotations, notably those of trouble, worry and care.

Understood as affective states, concern and care are thus related. Care, however, has stronger affective and ethical connotations (2011: 89).

Bellacasa goes on to contend that “Understanding caring as something *we do* extends a vision of care as an ethically and politically charged practice, one that has been at the forefront of feminist concern with devalued labours” (ibid, 90, my emphasis added). One popular formulation of care opposes it to knowledge. Others, however, argue that knowing requires caring about what and how one knows (Friese 2013). How we enact care in relations with students, colleagues and service users and how care circulates as a gendered performance remains an important consideration for any analysis of professional identity.

Conclusion

In this final section we draw attention to emergent areas for research for the study of professional identity in social work.

As a concept, it suffers from a well-known problem in sociology, of being regarded, simultaneously as structuring and structured. On the one hand, practitioners are thought to have lively agency in forming their own identity, on the other hand, it is argued that

professional identity is interiorized and structured for practitioner's workplace contexts, professional associations and government policy. Various authors have pointed out that attention to "identity work" is likely to yield good results. Identity work can be thought of as an act of producing and is constitutive

Bourdieu (1990: 69) illustrates the problem: 'It is because agents never know completely what they are doing that what they do has more sense than they know'. As we've seen above institutional logics as social structures exist independently of practitioners' perceptions and condition their actions. It is along these lines that Summerson Carr (2015) offers fascinating insights in her study of care workers having to deal with bedbugs in service users homes.

Yet rather than viewing agency as a property and potentiality of human individuals more or less constrained by "structure," as a crass version of practice theory would have it, seasoned *U-Haven* professionals tended to see agency—or, the capacity to effectively act—as the sum total of complex, non-linear transactions among program participants, staff, drugs, monthly checks, visitors, medications, policy mandates, psychotic symptoms, aspects of the built and crumbling environment and, of course, bedbugs.

An understanding of professional life as ecological, stressing the dynamic reciprocity between materiality and affect, human actors and their environments, and to conceive of action as performative adaptations to complex networked relations, may well be the way forward for studies of identity.

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