

The Social Work Hat as a Metaphor for Social Work Professional Identity

Natasha Long, Suzanne Hodgkin, Fiona Gardner and Jennifer Lehmann

Natasha Long, Fiona Gardner, Jennifer Lehmann – La Trobe Rural Health School, La Trobe University, Bendigo.

Suzanne Hodgkin – John Richards Initiative, Australian Institute for Primary Care and Ageing, La Trobe University, Albury-Wodonga

Address for Correspondence:

n.long@latrobe.edu.au

ABSTRACT

The landscape of the human service sector in Australia has changed over the past 20 years. The current context creates a sense of uncertainty around the role of the professional knowledge and skills of social workers. The risk of losing a distinct social work professional identity means discussion about the purpose and identity of social work is vital particularly for those new to the profession. This paper explores using the metaphor of a social work hat to foster understanding of social work identity. It draws on research findings using constructivist grounded theory, with 12 newly qualified social work graduates interviewed twice over an 18-month period. The process of social work professional identity development was experienced as a complex process and participants initially struggled to articulate this; however, the metaphorical social work hat enabled participants to talk about their social work professional identity more meaningfully. This paper explains the development of this metaphor as it evolved in the research, and suggests how it can be used to generate rich conversations about social work professional identity.

Keywords: *Professional identity; Social work hat; Social work graduates; Metaphor*

INTRODUCTION

The landscape of the human service sector in Australia has changed considerably over the past 20 years influenced by neoliberal policies that have moved the responsibility for welfare from the state to the individual. This has led to funding uncertainty in the delivery of human services, prioritisation of efficiency and effectiveness over the experiences of service users, and uncertainty around the original mission of service organisations and the social work profession (Wallace & Pease, 2011). In addition, neoliberal policies have enabled the proliferation of for-profit organisations in sectors such as aged care, disability and job-seeking support, previously delivered by the government and not-for-profit organisations. Wallace and Pease (2011) contend that neoliberalism has affected the Australian welfare state broadly and the role of social work specifically, leading to social workers experiencing constraints across macro and micro practice domains.

The current neoliberal climate provides significant challenges to social work professional identity (Harrison & Healy, 2016; Wallace & Pease, 2011). These challenges arise from the changes in the current employment market such as the introduction of generic roles rather than social work specific ones, working alongside other disciplines and non-professionally qualified colleagues, the devaluing of professional skills and knowledge and the casualisation of the workforce (Cheron-Sauer, 2013; Harrison & Healy, 2016; Moorhead, Bell, & Bowles, 2016; Wallace & Pease, 2011). There is a risk in this environment that graduates may lose sight of their professional identity as, increasing, employability becomes the focus and where competencies rather than specific qualifications have greater significance (Harrison & Healy, 2016; Moorhead et al., 2016; Wallace & Pease, 2011). Likewise, Nobel and Sullivan (2009), argued that short-term contract employment, the blurring of professional boundaries and challenges from the community (via the media) have had an impact on the professional integrity of social work. Oliver (2013) argues that professional identity development is made more complex for new graduates because of the mixed messages they receive about social work in the field. Similarly, Gibson, Dollarhide, and Moss (2010, p. 23) contend that new professionals need to be integrated into professional culture to develop a well-defined sense of identity, thus mitigating role confusion. It has been further argued that role confusion, particularly in multidisciplinary teams, leads to difficulties in inter-professional collaboration (Leslie & Cassano, 2003; Mellin, Hunt, & Nichols, 2011). Harrison and Healy (2016) note the particular challenge new graduates experience in relation to organisational contexts and professional identity development:

...the contemporary employment landscape in community services is marked by insecure employment, changing job profiles and uncertainty. Under these conditions, forging a professional identity as a newly qualified worker in the community services sector is arguably a complex endeavor. (2016, p. 83)

These challenges in the human service sector have led to a body of research focused on professional resilience. Of significance here is the role professional identity plays in protecting human service workers, like social workers, from the challenges they face in the current climate by supporting the development of resilience (Adamson, Beddoe, & Davys, 2014). Adamson et al.'s (2014) framework acknowledges the influence of mediating factors such as a social work professional identity, in supporting the development of resilience (Adamson et al., 2014, p. 530). Likewise, Grant and Kinman (2014) found developing

resilience assists in managing the challenges of the complex human service field. Given this, it is critical that social work graduates leave their formal education with a clear sense of professional identity and that the development of their social work professional identity is supported when they are in the field.

In light of the above arguments, social work professional identity needs to be significantly strengthened within social work education, to prevent graduates floundering in the current neoliberal environment. International and Australian research has examined the experiences of social work students during their undergraduate study as well as their expectations versus actual experiences in the field once they graduate (Agllias, 2010; Agllias, Howard, Cliff, Dodds, & Field, 2016; Choi, Urbanski, Fortune, & Rogers, 2015; Shlomo, Levy, & Itzhaky, 2012; Tham & Lynch, 2014). However, until recently, the available research has not focused specifically on social work graduates' development of social work professional identity, particularly from the perspective of the graduates themselves. More recent research has found that graduates' professional identities are shaped by political and organisational contexts (Hunt, Tregurtha, Kuruvila, Lowe, & Smith, 2017); by interactions with others (Pullen Sansfaçon & Crête, 2016); and that the concept is challenging for students and new graduates (Wiles, 2013). Wiles (2013) particularly noted a relationship between an inability to articulate a professional identity and potential challenges in establishing this identity in the workplace.

In Australia, graduates from Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) accredited courses are expected to have a "[d]emonstrated sense of identity as a professional social worker" (AASW, 2012, p. 10). The Australian research conducted to date on social work professional identity has been minimal and as such, it is difficult to know to what extent graduates have developed their sense of identity as social workers. Three studies are worthy of note. Moorhead et al. (2016) found that new graduates had insufficient time to explore their developing professional identity when they commenced employment. Harrison and Healy (2016) found that not all graduates identified with their profession once in the field, tending instead to align themselves with organisational roles and values. Mackay and Zufferey (2015) found academics were significant in assisting students to develop their professional identities.

Drawing on findings from a study about social work professional identity development in Australia, this paper adds to this emerging research area by presenting a conceptualisation of social work professional identity through the metaphor of a social work hat. This paper begins with an exploration of the concept of professional identity. This is followed by an overview of the study from which this paper draws, including the emergence of the metaphor during the research process and a discussion about how the social work hat can be used to explore social work professional identity.

Professional identity

The concept of identity is complex and represented in various ways in the literature (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Wiles, 2013). Quite simply, identity refers to how we see ourselves and how we believe others see us. Professional identity, then, is about how people understand themselves in their professional roles and how they believe others see this professional self. Wiles (2013, p. 864) suggests that social work professional identity can be understood in three ways: "in relation to desired traits"; in relation to a "collective sense" of the profession;

and “as a process in which each individual comes to have a sense of themselves as a social worker.” The development of professional identity occurs over time (Wiles, 2013) through a process of individual development that includes undertaking professional education that aligns personal and professional identity. It includes developing a shared identity with others and being socialised into the profession. Harrison and Healy (2016) note that, as the work environment has changed, so has the meaning of professional identity and the understanding of both individual and collective professional identity formation.

Professional identity and professional identity development or formation is of interest across professions and explored in different ways for different purposes. The process of professional identity development has been explored in the following professions: teaching, nursing, pharmacology, counselling and medicine (Beijaard et al., 2004; Brown & Ferrill, 2009; Crigger & Godfrey, 2014; Mellin et al., 2011; Pillen, Den Brok, & Beijaard, 2013; Sharpless et al., 2015). Despite this work, how people actually understand professional identity is less evident, reflecting the multiple ways that professional identity can be understood (Beijaard et al., 2004).

Research in relation to social work professional identity development more specifically, is an emerging area of interest. Payne’s (2006b) study explores the professional identity development of palliative care social workers and highlights how professional identities are constructed through interactions with colleagues, clients and agency expectations. Payne’s view of the socially constructed nature of professional identities highlights the tension between what the “envisioned” professional identity (Pullen Sansfaçon & Crête, 2016, p. 777) of students may be when they complete their education and how this may be at odds with actual experiences in the work environment.

Other research conducted on social work professional identity has identified the following as important: developing a unique personal sense of being a social worker (Wiles, 2013), developing resilience (Kearns & McArdle, 2012), participating in research and discussing and reflecting on their professional identity (Moorhead et al., 2016) and understanding how organisational influence and occupational instability shape identity (Harrison & Healy, 2016).

There appears to be an assumption in the literature that there is a universal understanding about what the term, *professional identity*, is and that professionals understand it. This sits at odds with a constructionist view of professional identity that suggests professional identity development is context based and dependent on interactions with others (Payne, 2006a). This constructionist perspective may shed light on the struggle new graduates have with the term professional identity given the concept/term appears to be difficult for experienced social workers and social work students to define (Wiles, 2013). New graduates may become less clear about their identity as social workers as they become involved in the complexities of organisational life in the human service sector, where they may not be working alongside other social workers.

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

The findings presented in this paper are part of a PhD study that explored the experiences of professional identity development for social work graduates in the Australian context through exploring three broad questions:

How does the process of professional identity development unfold for social work graduates?

What experiences shape the development of professional identity for social work graduates?

What does this mean for social work as a profession?

The focus of the present research was to generate an understanding of the experience of professional identity development from the perspective of social work graduates, rather than to test out an existing theory of professional identity development. For this reason, constructivist grounded theory was chosen as the research methodology. This theory, as proposed by Charmaz (2014), is a contemporary development of the original grounded theory research approach developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Constructivist grounded theory is an interpretive research approach with a focus on understanding the construction of meaning and the development of theory from data rather than the testing out of an existing theory on data (Charmaz, 2014).

Overview of the research process

Ethics approval was granted by the La Trobe University Human Ethics Committee in September, 2012 (FHEC12/88). Participants were recruited using purposive sampling. The participant criteria included the following: recently (within the previous two years) completed an undergraduate social work degree; did not work in the field prior to commencing their undergraduate degree; currently working in the Inner Regional area of Victoria or Southern New South Wales, Australia (as defined by the Australian Statistical Geography Standard 2001 (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2004)) and available for two interviews over approximately a 12-month period.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews with the participants. During the research, 12 participants were interviewed twice over a period of approximately 18 months, generating 24 in-depth interviews. Participants were invited to participate in interviews face to face or via the telephone. Interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. Fourteen interviews were conducted via the phone and 10 were conducted face to face. Although gender was not a specific inclusion criterion, all of the participants were female, reflecting the feminisation of the social work workforce (Healy & Lonne, 2010). Five participants were in the age range 18–24, two were between 25 and 34, three between 35 and 44, and two in the age range 45–54. Four participants were employed in government organisations and eight in non-government organisations. Participants ranged from five months to 20 months post-course completions at the time of the first interview. To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms are used in the findings section when referring to participants.

The early part of the research sought to discover what participants understood by professional identity and their social work professional identity rather than assuming how they saw these concepts. To that end, the research started with questions about how they understood professional identity during the data collection.

Data were analysed using grounded theory techniques of coding, constant comparison of data and memo writing (Charmaz, 2014). Interviews were transcribed and coded as soon as possible after each interview. This allowed for an iterative process of analysis and further data collection based on emerging codes (Charmaz, 2014). The overall finding from the research was that the process of social work professional identity development was a complex process of *finding fit* (with self, with agency and with the profession), as their professional identity was constructed and reconstructed pre-social-work education, during social work education and post-social-work education. The intent of this article is not to provide the overall findings of the study, but rather to demonstrate how the participants' understanding of their professional identity developed through using the social work hat metaphor.

FINDINGS

The participants in the study experienced significant challenges in the workplace that affected their social work professional identity. These included a lack of clarity about the identity of the social work profession, a lack of professional registration/regulation, the absences of social workers, social work not being valued in the organisation, and the risk of losing social work identity. Of particular significance for this article is how these challenges affected the participants' understanding of social work and professional identity. Bec, for example, notes the challenge for her about the lack of clarity about the social work profession,

I don't think we [social workers are] really understood...I don't think most of us knew what it was going to look like out there and what we were expected to do and how to define ourselves and how to say to co-workers this is what I do. Whereas if we could come out of it [social work education] clearer it would be easier then in the workplace to say this is what I do and feel comfortable doing this or I shouldn't do that or this is how I fit in. (Bec)

Rachael noted the challenges she experienced in her first year, highlighting her uncertainty about her own expectations and the reality of her experience.

I think the first year out has been a lot harder than what I thought it would be... I'm not sure if that's due to organisational things, or my own learning style, or lack of resources or, I'm not sure. I think it's just, yeah it's been a big struggle yeah, since I started...in terms of social work. (Rachael)

In addition, challenges also arose for participants when the organisational values and expectations did not align with social work values. Amanda's example demonstrates this. She notes the challenges of holding on to social work values, such as empathy, remaining non-judgmental and reconciling differences between social work values and those of the organisation and the potential consequences for graduates:

I don't really give up very much, but I think building resilience in your graduates is pretty important. But to some people who don't do that, the organisation can really get them down, and they get very despondent about what they're doing. I've seen this with a couple of other people, and because they haven't had that sense of resilience I think built into them, or been able to build that over the four years or so, so...I think you need to have pretty tough skin sometimes as a social worker from that point of view, to be able to keep pushing. (Amanda)

The participants in the present study also found it difficult to define professional identity and to describe their social work professional identity. This struggle reflected broader findings in the research that related to the challenges participants encountered in the workplace with explaining to others what social workers do. The breadth of the social work fields of practice and the diverse explanations of social work in the field added to this challenge. Maree for example, said, "to ... actually put it into, yes, a definition – I couldn't do it". Cassandra grappled with the idea of defining social work noting that, for her, there was a difference between describing what a social worker does as compared to what social work is, "I think I kept thinking about what a social worker does but that doesn't define social work".

Even though defining social work proved a challenge, all of the participants did provide a description of social work. Their explanations reflected a diverse understanding of social work constructed in varied practice contexts and experiences. This is consistent with Payne's (2006b) perspective about social work and social work identity being constructed by the context in which one works. Below are two examples that represent the diversity of the participants' explanations of social work:

Goodness, I think yes, that's a hard question, actually. I guess you do so much so I think it's – I guess depending on what field you're in but I think generally you could just say that you do different things from counselling to group work to education in the community to community development and just helping people that are maybe disadvantaged or struggling. (Rachael)

I guess I would define it as probably a type of practice that's got its own ethics and theories and it's different to all other psychologists and other professional practices, very client focused. That's really it in a nutshell. (Sarah)

The participants experienced a similar challenge when exploring their understanding of professional identity. This is captured in Molly's comment, "I don't know if I can answer that." In talking about professional identity, participants noted both how they understand the term and also what influences their understanding. Participants also noted a range of issues that impacted on this, including the lack of registration of the profession in Australia, the influence of the organisation on defining roles and expectations (not always aligned with social work values), grappling with what professional means and thinking about the differences between social work and other professions. Professional identity was expressed as an individual notion as well as being part of a collective. For example, Emma's comment:

[Professional identity is] how you see yourself and what practices and theories you use. Putting the professional and personal together to be able to work with clients.

And Anna's comment:

It's the feeling of having almost that group collective and sharing of values and beliefs.

The responses from the participants provided some insights into the participants' understandings of the key terms in the research (Charmaz, 2014) but the data were not well developed. After coding initial transcripts, it was evident that participants used the terms *professional identity* and *social work* but the meanings were not clear and they did not appear confident in their understandings. This may be attributed to the fact that they were new and developing social workers. However, given that the participants had all graduated from Australian accredited social work programs, it seemed reasonable to assume that participants would have had some exposure to those two terms. This is particularly so given that Australian accredited social work programs are expected to facilitate a "[d]emonstrated sense of identity as a professional social worker" (AASW, 2012, p. 10). At this point in the research, it was important to gain more of an understanding about how the participants understood their social work professional identity and/or to understand more about why this was difficult. After returning to the data to explore this more, a comment from the first participant took on further significance. In the first interview, Molly indicated that people would know she is a social worker because of her "social work hat". The idea of the social work hat also resonated with Sarah, "I guess when you put your social work hat on it's a different way of thinking." Amanda also spoke about wearing a social work hat:

I think having a social work hat on, that's what we do differently. We don't just diagnose and go, well that's what's wrong with you, so we'll fix it like this. We also look more broadly. I think that's the different hat we wear.

The iterative process of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) encourages the researcher to go where the data are leading them. Given this, it seemed reasonable to explore the idea of the social work hat further with participants. After Molly's interview, subsequent participants were asked what their social work hat would look like if it could be seen. By describing this hat, participants were also describing parts of their professional identity. The metaphorical social work hat for professional identity became a helpful tool for generating more in-depth discussion about social work professional identity and led to 12 diverse descriptions of social work hats that reflected the participants' social work professional identities. The metaphor became significant for two reasons. First, it encouraged conversations about professional identity and second, it emerged from the data as a tool that was grounded in the experiences of the participants, reflecting the iterative approach of constructivist grounded theory.

The social work hat as a metaphor for professional identity

Building on Molly's initial comment, in the first interviews, participants were asked to describe their social work hat and what would be on their hat that would let others know they were a social worker. In the second interviews with participants, they were asked what

they would add to their social work hats and what had changed for them in relation to their professional identity. For some, the hat stayed much the same and for others there were subtle yet significant changes that were identified as part of their developing professional identity. The metaphor provided a useful way for participants to think about how they saw themselves as social workers and also to think about the hat changing over time; the development of their social work professional identity. A significantly clearer picture emerged about the participants' social work identities.

Exploring social work professional identity through the hat metaphor involved more than just asking the initial question about what the social work hat would look like. Using follow-up questions that encouraged the participant to explore the meaning of their description led to a richer understanding of social work professional identity. The follow-up questions also assisted those participants who initially were unsure about the metaphor. This demonstrates what Morgan (2016) refers to as the metonymical process that adds meaning to metaphors and shifts metaphors beyond description, that is, through the questions participants were encouraged to add meaning to their descriptions. It is important to note that the participants' descriptions of their social work hats were co-constructed between the participants and the researcher (Charmaz, 2014; Nayar, 2012). The questions asked influenced the responses from the participants and another researcher might have asked different questions, and hence elicited different descriptions.

Through conversations with the participants, 12 unique social work hats emerged. Rachael's hat was a broad hat with bike spokes, representing a strong foundation and broad knowledge base and the personal and professional elements that work together. Sarah's was made of butcher's paper, demonstrating the generation of ideas and a different way of thinking while still being client focused. Cassandra's hat resembled an Emirates flight attendant hat, understated but maintaining the professional image. For Maree, the hat is a rubric cube shape, with each cube representing a soap box with question marks, indicative of her social work role to raise questions and be a voice for others. Kate's is a graduation hat, representing continuous learning and facing challenges. Emma's hat has a "social workyness quality" letting others know that she sees the world differently and she has a different perspective to bring to her work. Anna's reflects an "Alice in Wonderland" image, evoking curiosity and uncertainty and being able to work in an environment that is challenging. Heidi's hat has a tree growing on it, providing a symbol of her quest for new knowledge and experiences, while Bec's hat is a straw sunhat with a smiley face on it, representing a professional who is friendly but not a friend, showing her awareness of boundaries. Amanda's is represented by a lake with ripples, as if a stone had just been thrown into it, illustrating the difference she can make as a social worker with clients and the wider community. Molly's is a wizard's hat with a broken wand, highlighting that there is a little bit of magic in social work but that it is important to empower clients to be able to find their own answers.

The significance of this approach to exploring social work professional identity is highlighted when comparing participants' first responses to the question about professional identity with their descriptions of their hats. For example, Molly's response to the interview question about professional identity was "I don't know if I can answer that." In contrast, Molly's

response to the question about her social work hat demonstrated that she saw herself as a social worker as helping people but that a key part of the role was to help people do things for themselves.

I think that I would make my hat like a pointy tall wizard's hat but it's got to have a princess tiara on it like Glinda the good witch. So yes I think it should definitely have a tiara but unfortunately my magic wand is broken so people [have] to do it for themselves but I think a pointy tall wizard's hat with a tiara on it sounds really good – sparkly. (Molly)

Similarly, Angela's understanding of professional identity, although more developed than Molly's, was still brief, "I suppose it's how you see yourself as a professional or how you see your profession." Using the metaphor of the social work hat enabled Angela to explore her hat in more detail and a picture emerged of a social worker who was grappling with the challenges she was facing in her practice. The symbol of rose coloured glasses attached to her hat enabled her to articulate the need for hope and positivity when working with people:

I think it'd have a magnifying glass on it... So you can look closely at things. It would have lots of grey. I just think the world's just not black and white ... It would have a pair of rose coloured glasses. I think it's important to still have that ability to look at the world a bit like that, but also have the ability to take them off at times. A Chance card from Monopoly. Everyone deserves a second chance. People can make changes (Angela).

DISCUSSION

Earlier in this article, it was argued that neoliberal policies have impacted on professional identity. The present study set out to examine this through the experience of new graduates. The findings demonstrate that new graduates are struggling to forge their social work professional identities in the current human service context that can be hostile towards social work. Developing professional resiliency is seen as a way to navigate these challenges (Adamson et al., 2014; Grant & Kinman, 2014) and professional identity is a key factor in supporting professionals' resilience in the work environment (Adamson et al., 2014; Grant & Kinman, 2014). Participants in the present study found it difficult to articulate their professional identity at the commencement of this research. This highlighted the complexity of both the concept of professional identity and the process of professional identity development. Understanding more about this experience for newly graduated social workers is important to support them in navigating their professional identity development in the current challenging context. In this research the aim was not about testing out definitions or coming up with one set definition of social work professional identity, but rather exploring the concepts with participants as they grappled with how they made sense of, or struggled with, their social work professional identity.

The metaphor of the social work hat as professional identity assisted this exploration. Metaphor use is a part of everyday language and conversation, "seeing, experiencing or talking about something in terms of something else" (Ritchie, 2013, p. 7). The use of metaphors can assist people to understand topics that may be conceptually difficult to

understand (Ritchie, 2013) as well as assist in structuring thinking and understanding of events (McEwan, 2007). The significance of this approach to exploring social work professional identity can be seen by comparing the participants' first responses to professional identity with their developed social work hats.

The examples provided demonstrate how the metaphor of the social work hat is a useful tool for engaging with and reflecting more deeply, and in significantly more complex ways, on the development of a social work professional identity. Using the metaphor of a social work hat encouraged participants to think about what is important to them about social work, to develop a picture of their version of being a social worker and also to reflect on the image that they are presenting to others. The ability to notice a shift in the understanding of their professional identity was also significant for participants. For some of the participants, more confidence in their social work identity meant tensions in the work environment related to the neoliberal context became more apparent. Amanda for example, was grappling with her social work identity versus the expectations of her agency. Using the hat metaphor, and paying attention to the details of the hat, enabled many participants to move to a more nuanced view of social work and professional identity and to feel more confident in their social work identity.

The idea of a social work hat is in itself not new. In research by Mackay and Zufferey (2015), a participant referred to the idea of wearing a social work hat as representing multiple social work identities. Likewise, in a study of qualified social workers by Pullen Sansfaçon and Crête (2016, p. 775), one participant referred to the idea of a social work hat to reflect the idea that social work was "a way of being"; not something that they took off and put on. In both studies, however, the notion of the social work hat and the meaning behind this was not explored in detail.

Edward de Bono (1999) also chose hats as metaphors to assist with thinking in decision-making because of the cultural understandings of hats, their representation of a person's role and because people have a common understanding of hats. Hats also fitted with de Bono's thinking model because they can be taken off and put on as required; just as people can adopt different perspectives of thinking (see de Bono, 1999). This idea of a metaphor that is commonly understood fits well with this current research. The significance of the social work hat here is that it emerged from the participants, rather than being a metaphor that was suggested or tested out. In addition, the examples demonstrate how the metaphor can be used for in-depth exploration of these issues.

The literature supports the significance of the role formal education and educators play in relation to the development of professional identity for students (Mackay & Zufferey, 2015). Harrison and Healy (2016, p. 90), both social work academics, recommend that educators rethink social work curriculum suggesting it focuses on preparing students for "occupational instability" providing them with the skills needed to constantly renegotiate professional identity in the current human service context. Similarly, Wiles (2013, p. 864) suggests that both the academic space and the workplace could enhance social work professional identity by providing "opportunities to articulate this identity in both the workplace and the academic setting". This affirms that social work education and social

work educators are pivotal in the construction of social work professional identity and that, to date, this influence has perhaps been underestimated. Engaging in conversations about social work professional identity can enhance personal and collective meaning to being a social worker and furthers students' understanding of professional identity development. The social work hat as a metaphor for professional identity can assist significantly these types of conversations with students, new graduates and experienced social workers. In addition, as demonstrated in this article, the social work hat metaphor can also be used in discussions about professional identity in research.

Given that professional identity develops over time, using the metaphor of the social work hat to explore social work professional identity could also be of use in social work supervision with both new graduates and those more experienced in social work. With this focus on professional identity, graduates may gain a more nuanced understanding of their social work professional identity, identify the professional tensions and work towards addressing these. This contributes to graduates' ability to be resilient in response to the tensions in the work environment and has the potential to reduce role confusion.

LIMITATIONS

There are limitations in this research that preclude generalisation of the findings. The data are derived from a relatively small sample comprised only of women. This notwithstanding, the participants were quite diverse in relation to the organisations they worked with and their practice experience. Despite the lack of generalisability, the concept of metaphor is one that is a common part of language and is familiar to others outside this research and, as such, the findings discussed in this article are likely to be helpful and interesting to others.

CONCLUSION

Central to the expected graduate outcomes for social workers in AASW-accredited courses is a "[d]emonstrated sense of identity as a professional social worker" (AASW, 2012, p. 10). However, in the literature and the present study, the concept of professional identity is poorly articulated by graduates, leading to the potential for graduates to lose sight of their professional identity amidst the competing demands they experience in the workplace. Graduates experience significant challenges in relation to professional identity development when their role and purpose are not immediately clear. This is exacerbated by the current human service context given prevailing neoliberal ideologies, where generic roles rather than social work specific roles are more common, where professional boundaries are blurred, where professional knowledge and skills are devalued and where employment instability makes it difficult for graduates to feel secure in their employment and profession. Adding to this is the challenge of connecting with a professional community that is, to some extent, invisible. However, with a clear professional identity, social work graduates are better equipped to identify and manage the challenges they face in the current human service sector, contributing to the development of professional resilience.

The social work hat is a seemingly simple idea that resonates with students and graduates and has the potential to enhance conversations about professional identity, particularly when combined with metonymical processes. Social work professional identity

development arguably begins prior to students entering their social work course. At the point of choosing the course, students have already started to consider their fit to the social work profession. Students continue to develop their professional identity and are influenced by the academic staff who teach them as well as their peers and placement experiences. It is important that educators and supervisors find ways to support the development of a social work professional identity for students and graduates. This article suggests the metaphor of the social work hat as one way to encourage deeper, more meaningful conversations about professional identity.

These conversations are important for new graduates who are grappling with their developing social work identity as they develop *their* unique sense of being a social worker and find their *fit* with the organisations they work for, and the social work profession.

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