

Abstract for EASSW conference 2017: workshop (max 600 words)
Fran Wiles2 (fran.wiles@open.ac.uk)

Theme: Development of curriculum and course content in social work

Title: Being a social worker - exploring and teaching about professional identities

Summary

What does social work professional identity mean for social work educators? How can our own understanding help students to develop a sense of professional identity? This interactive workshop invites participants to share experience and ideas for helping students to develop their understanding of professionalism and professional identity. An additional aim of this workshop is to consider the possibility of creating a group for future collaboration.

Abstract

What does social work professional identity mean for social work educators? How can our own understanding help students to develop a sense of professional identity? This interactive workshop draws on the presenters' research and teaching within the UK, and invites participants to share experience and ideas for helping students to develop their understanding of professionalism and professional identity. This will include an exploration of what professional identity means to participants themselves. An additional aim of this workshop is to consider the possibility of creating a group for future collaboration (such as a research project).

Building on the global definition of social work (IFSW, 2014), developing professional identity would appear to be important for all social work students regardless of national variations in practice. At the same time, we recognise that debates about social work and professional identity are long-running. Social work has frequently struggled to be accepted as a professional occupation (and as an academic discipline). It is also important to acknowledge that due to its elitist connotations, professionalism hasn't always been valued in social work: this may influence the experiences and perspectives of some social work educators.

Research undertaken by the workshop facilitators suggests that in developing their professional identities, social workers and students draw on a wide range of discourses transmitted through the curriculum, workplace learning, regulatory and public expectations. In the UK, for example, professional identity is promoted as a way of enhancing the quality of social work practice. In England, therefore, the professional standards state that students must learn to 'identify and behave as a professional social worker' (British Association of Social Workers, 2016); and in Scotland, social work educators are required to deliver teaching 'which explores the notion of a professional' (Scottish Executive, 2006). It has also been argued that a strong sense of professional identity can provide a source of emotional resilience for social workers (Harrison and Ruch, 2007). This is of interest in UK social work, where workforce retention is a

concern. Current challenges to social work professional identity in the UK include changes in roles and practice setting such as working in the inter-professional context.

We are interested to explore with EAASW colleagues the different ways in which they conceptualise social work professionalism and professional identity, including the effects of national and cultural contexts. We invite participants to also consider the implications of these varied discourses for developing and sustaining social work students' professional identities.

Workshop method

The workshop begins with a 5-10 minute power-point presentation to stimulate discussion and share key messages from our research and teaching about social work identity.

Participants will then be invited to discuss a series of topics, with opportunities throughout the session to pause and reflect together on our experiences and ideas.

Depending on numbers, we may divide participants into several small groups to facilitate fuller participation. Topics are likely to include:

- What does social work professional identity mean for participants?
- What impact do economic and political conditions, different roles and practice settings have on social workers' perception of their identities?
- What role do professional bodies and professional regulation – where it exists – play?
- Resistance to professionalism – does professional identity help or hinder work with people who use services?
- What are the current challenges to professionalism and professional identity?
- How might professional identity support practitioners' emotional resilience?
- Sharing ideas for supporting students to develop their professional identity
- Sharing ideas for future collaboration (and exchanging contact details for those who wish).