Developing a robust professional identity: Stories from practice

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Abstract

This paper presents a model of professional robustness, developed from a series of research conversations with social work students and qualified practitioners in Western Australia, undertaken for the completion of my PhD thesis.

The paper explores the four dimensions of robustness identified in the model and relates each of these to the stories of learning and identity development recounted by research participants. The paper makes the important distinction between professionally robust practitioners and a robust profession and reflects on the circumstances that enable or impede professional strength on each of these dimensions. It concludes with some thoughts on ways in which social work education can assist students to develop a sense of their professional strength and resilience.

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This paper is based on a concluding chapter in my PhD study (Clare, 2003) in which I draw together the strands of a ‘complex macro-story’ which emerged from a number of ‘research dialogues’ (Addison, 1992) with practitioners, students and texts. The focus of the study was a consideration of the relationship between social workers’ education and their professional identity. Participants were asked to reflect on their sense-of-self-as-professional at the point of identity-transition (Thompson, 2003) from student to qualified practitioner and again later in their career. The research approach was one of dialogical engagement (Falzon, 1998) within a constructionist framework. A series of fluid research conversations, loosely structured around learning and identity, were held with 20 qualified practitioners and 17 students approaching the end of their education. Each student was interviewed twice, at the point of leaving and within the first 10 months of qualifying.

Building on the ‘lived experience’ (Taylor and White, 2001; Moffatt and Meihls, 1999) of the students and qualified practitioners who participated in this study, I developed a model of the robust professional persona. This paper explores the four dimensions of robustness identified in the model and relates each of these to the stories of learning and identity development recounted by research participants.
Building on previous constructions of identity

The construing of identity has been an ongoing preoccupation for those writing about social work and social working throughout the history of the profession (Doel, Sawdon, and Morrison, 2002; Milner and O’Byrne, 1998; Payne, 1996). In this search for identity, social work has largely been privileged over social workers and, when visible at all, practitioners have frequently been collectivised and ‘fixed’ within different paradigms and idealised visions of purpose and place. Further, long-term territorial anxieties and insecurities dominate: fear of encroachment from without as other human service professionals cross the ill-defined boundaries between their own territory of practice and that of social work (Hugman, 1991; Jones, 2000; Smale and Tuson, 2000). Finally, macro-level reflections on the profession’s identity are dogged by ‘survival concerns’ (Clarke, 1996; O’Connor, 2000) within a political climate in which the privileged discourses are those of the market place and managerialism, personal accountability and self-sufficiency.

At a more applied level, a number of writers have explored the personal-professional qualities they believe to be central to effective social work functioning, with a tendency to ‘commodif[y] qualities such as maturity, creativity, self-awareness, genuineness, courage and sensitivity’ (Compton and Galway, quoted in Davies, 1994: 175). Once again, practitioners are largely invisible as embodied beings, and the inherent interdependence between personalised constructions of the professional self and broader occupational discourses is ignored.

The model of the robust professional persona offered in this paper challenges both forms of ideal-type representation. It offers four conceptually interdependent dimensions (Gould, 1996) of robustness, all of which are ‘enfolded’ (Peile, 1994) within two discrete but inseparable ‘meta-dimensions’ of being and belongingness. Together, these dimensions of identity – perceptions of the professional world and of professional-self-in-the-world – promote and maintain a sense of personal-professional credibility and efficacy and give rise to a capacity for positive and strategic engagement with other stakeholders in service delivery.

Dimension one: A personal philosophy of practice within a hopeful vision of purpose and place

The first, foundational, dimension of robustness is an embodied construction of self-as-social worker that is both robust and professional. This requires a clearly articulated personal practice philosophy. Participants’ accounts of the difficulties they experienced in ‘holding their professional faith’ in isolation, however, indicated that whilst necessary, a personalised practice vision alone is insufficient for professional robustness. It must be accompanied by a sense of belonging within a professional community, which transcends ‘tribal territoriality’ (Clare, 2003: 179) and provides a place of philosophical safety, a professional reference point for the practitioner independent from but grounded in an awareness of his or her occupational role.

Most students and practitioners in the study were able to articulate personal-professional philosophies that sustained and energised them and enabled them to ‘think beyond’ organisational roles. While they were able to articulate a ‘private’ practice vision, however, a sense of philosophical belonging and ‘place’ within a wider professional community was
less evident, and a hopeful vision of the broader purpose and place of social work was rare. Instead, several participants spoke as if they were working in a ‘war zone’, within their organisations, or more broadly, within the welfare sector. A number referred to their decision to retreat to ‘places of safety’ in practice settings where they could work in accordance with their personal-professional beliefs and beyond which they chose not to travel.

Rejecting the term professional because of the inequitable associations this identity held for them, some participants relied on deeply held personal beliefs – political and/or spiritual. Within the research group there were also a number of participants – some recently qualified, others very experienced – who were unable to articulate any vision of social work practice of personal relevance. These practitioners appeared to have assumed an organisational rather than a professional, or even an occupational, persona (Jones, 1991). Lacking workable ‘social-work-practice maps’ (Eraut, 1994; Milner and O’Byrne, 1998), they conformed to the membership rules of their practice organisation (Pithouse, 1987) or followed alternative contextualised maps of ‘territories of practice’ such as child protection, mental health or other discrete areas of intervention.

**Dimension two: An empowered stance to practice**

The second dimension essential for professional robustness is the ability to maintain an empowered stance to practice, a capacity reliant on a thorough understanding of professional power and its limitations, and a willingness to own professional authority. This was an area of some ambivalence for participants. There was a broad ownership of enabling power, but many participants voiced considerable discomfort with regulatory power as an aspect of the social worker’s role, a view mirroring the long-held occupational distinction between, and anxiety around, care and control. As noted above, for a small number of participants, elitist notions of professional status were confused with professional expertise resulting in considerable ‘identity discomfort’ and disempowerment. In their desire to assert their equality with clients they assumed a paradoxical stance, rejecting notions of expertise and professional power whilst seeking to empower the people with, and on whose behalf, they were working.

A number of participants were able to assume a stance of professional authority and personal empowerment, and it became clear in our conversations that this ability was closely related to the first dimension of the model of professional robustness – a personalised practice vision and sense of professional belonging. Some reported feeling supported and confirmed within their organisation; others were members of an external reference group of like-minded colleagues. All reported the importance of an external philosophical reference point as a source of personal-professional empowerment.

A number of participants expressed a sense of individual occupational power within their organisation, and some reported the importance of informal support gained from professional friendships, however, few referred to a broader sense of collective potency as a profession. Many were silent on this topic. Others spoke of the conflicting and confusing messages they had received as students about professional power. Universally absent was a sense of belonging within a clearly identifiable empowered professional collective with which they could identify once qualified.
Dimension three: The achievement of marginality

The third dimension of robustness is the capacity to maintain a stance of *marginality*, defined by Smale and Tuson as:

The ability to operate effectively as a participant and as an observer in any circumstance, and to neither become part of problem-perpetuating interactions, nor remain impotently outside of the networks of people with whom they are involved (Smale and Tuson, 1988: 32).

This capacity for maintaining an insider-outsider perspective (Clare and Mevik, in press) requires both a clear personal practice philosophy and a sense of place within a larger, robust and hopefully professional collective with the strength to counter dominant organisational trends towards managerialism, proceduralism and routinised practice (Thompson, 2003). It enables practitioners to maintain their personal-professional integrity (Jones, 2000) in their interactions with clients and their broader engagement within their practice organisations.

As indicated above, this sense of individualised professional belonging was not widely reported by the practitioners and students with whom I spoke. A number did report very positive collegial relationships within their practice settings, but for many this sense of collegiality and shared purpose was absent. Instead, routinised and/or chaotic and defended cultures of practice prevailed (Argyris, 1999). Rather than experiencing a sense of empowered marginality, which enabled them to remain assertive and potent within their practice environment, several participants reported a strong sense of professional disjunction and disaffected marginalisation.

This sense of disempowerment and confusion about the rules of organisational membership was particularly marked at the point of transition from student to qualified practitioner. Several new graduates reported feeling ‘swamped’ and unclear, unable to articulate their professional needs in practice organisations with cultures that, in the experience of one new graduate, ‘didn’t value the social work role, played down the skills involved in being a social worker [and] had a very negative and defeatist culture’.

Confronted by their own early uncertainty about their professional purpose and place in practice cultures lacking visionary and empowered leadership, they also lacked clear and positive external reference points to sustain them in achieving and maintaining a position of empowered marginality. In the face of this triple challenge, a number of participants reported that they quickly became enmeshed in their organisational culture, ultimately able to protect their professional integrity and individuality only by leaving.

Dimension four: Provisional certainty

The fourth dimension of the model, which, once again, is both an outcome and an aspect of all other dimensions, is an attitude of *provisional certainty* – a capacity for action-oriented decision-making that incorporates the ability to remain open to new information and insights. Such a stance requires a strong sense of ontological security (Thompson, 2003), a secure *unknowingness* (Clare, in press) which facilitates contextualised judgements-in-action and provides a starting point for dialogical engagement and a capacity for ‘practical
reasoning’ (Usher and Bryant, 1989: 21) in the ‘hot action’ of the practice setting (Eraut, 1985: 127). This sense of provisional certainty and self-efficacy enables workers to engage in genuinely reciprocal relationships (Falzon, 1998: 7) in which they feel required neither to colonise the thinking of others, nor to surrender their own knowledge and understanding. Instead, they can remain open to alternative perceptions and aspirations whilst retaining their sense of integrity.

When discussing their day-to-day practice, a number of participants in the study displayed just such capacity for critical subjectivity and dialogical engagement. However, only a minority were able to articulate clearly the complexity of their practice. Instead they offered metaphorical and anecdotal accounts (Scott, 1990), stories in ‘the private first voice’ (Weick, 2000) from which complexity and expertise, left implicit, could be inferred. Used to verbalising their interventions in lay terms for the benefit of clients, and informed by experiential learning and tacit understandings which bypassed language (Scott, 1989), several participants expressed difficulty in translating their knowing-in-action into formal, codified frameworks which captured the intricacy of their interventions. Their ‘professional language’ was impoverished, confined to thinly described ‘social work values’ or ‘ethics’, or sweeping reference to universal social work frameworks such as systems theory which they found impossible to articulate with any clarity.

A gap was clearly evident between the practice expertise of participants – the know-how of their day-to-day work – and the language available to them to properly describe that expertise and a consequent inability to articulate and argue for their action-knowingness, intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual. Far from operating from a position of provisional certainty many of the participants reported that their sense of linguistic impoverishment frequently caused them to enter into exchanges in the broader professional arena in a disempowered frame of mind or chose not to engage in them at all.

**Robust people: Marginal professionals**

In summary, then, conversations with practitioners and students provided many stories of personal robustness, courage, vision and capacity, frequently in the face of considerable adversity. Universally absent, however, was a sense of belongingness within a broader empowered and dynamic professional social work community. As a consequence, while some practitioners were able to identify themselves as professionals, none were able to articulate a clear sense of membership of a robust profession. Indeed, many participants were unable to articulate a sense of any meaningful professional collectivity, and reported a lack of clarity about what it meant to them to be a social worker beyond their own practice setting.

For some of the participants, this absence of a sense of ‘global community membership’ was unproblematic because they identified smaller-scale professional communities of interest within which they maintained a sense of connectedness and direction as practitioners and developed their critical thinking and professional fluency. Lacking any direct professional reference point, other participants were required to fall back on idealised, ungrounded and frequently conflicting definitions of social work and/or abstract theoretical frameworks or practice models which did not easily translate into the demands of their organisational setting. Rather than providing a sense of professional efficacy, these high-order abstractions
were frequently viewed with suspicion or anxiety by practitioners unable to articulate the complexity of their thinking. They reported feelings of insecurity, inadequacy and vulnerability when required to move from their known arena of ‘doing’ to revisit the abstract territory of orthodox knowledge (Ruch, 2002).

**Implications for social work education**

In the concluding paragraphs of this paper, I offer, tentatively, an educational framework which might lay the foundations for robust and empowered practice at an individual level and provide opportunities for the early development of collective awareness essential for the growth of a stronger professional community. The framework challenges the current ascendency of the discourse of rationality in social work education, with its emphasis on the acquisition of commodified knowledge and skills as outcomes. I argue instead for a more holistic approach to teaching and learning, which recognises the many ways of knowing (Hartman, 1990) – emotional, cognitive, tactile, moral and spiritual – required to equip social workers for the complexity, fluidity and challenges of their work environment.

Central to this holistic approach is the re-conceptualisation of the relationship between abstract and applied knowledge (theory and practice). Rather than assuming a position of foundational knowledge (Aymer and Okitipi, 2000) to be revered and applied, codified knowledge such as formal theories and ethical codes become ‘data for consideration’ together with other sources: cognitive, emotional, spiritual and moral. This data then becomes transformed into *information* through the purposeful lens applied by practitioners-in-action making contextualised judgements. Instead of requiring students to become adept at learning and applying other people’s frameworks, the focus of teaching and learning shifts to their capacity to theorise – to ‘make sense’ and critique their sense-making, and to engage in empowered dialogical exchange with the ideas of others, through talk and/or interrogation of texts (Clare, in press). Further, this reasoning capacity should be accompanied by an equally well-developed ability to make principled action decisions, a capacity learned through continuous rehearsal in both agency and academic settings.

A foundation premise underpinning this recommendation is that whilst theories offer maps to guide action, they are insufficient, and become unsafe when mistaken for the territory they describe. Given the fluid nature of the territory inhabited by social workers, professional robustness and wise practice rely on the practitioner’s capacity to read and respond directly to the territory of action, and to feel safe as a writer of maps and a creator of knowledge. Rather than focusing on the acquisition and application of codified knowledge (Erut, 1985) – an emphasis steeped in notions of techno-rationality – teaching-and-learning would focus on the acquisition of critical understanding which extends beyond cognition to incorporate a capacity for moral reasoning and creativity. As well as requiring propositional knowledge, this creative capacity necessarily involves experiential knowledge – practical ability obtained through observation, rehearsal and active experimentation.

The second key element of this framework is the development of a strong teaching-and-learning community, a safe place of belonging within which to explore, rehearse and gain practice fluency. Ideally, students would experience this ‘place of learning safety’ in both classroom and practice settings, each of which would provide opportunities for intellectual rigour, critical reflection and ‘professional action’. Underpinning this holistic framework
for educating robust practitioners is the premise that if social work is to be professionally strong, practice performance – students’ behaviour, their thoughts, feelings and actions – must be central to the teaching-and-learning endeavour in both settings. They must be required and assisted to develop the complex capacity to integrate, filter and personalise data from many sources – theoretical, philosophical, emotional, and political. In this process they will develop a ‘language of relevance’ with which they can articulate and critique their own and others’ practice.

As Aymer and Okitipi (2000) and Hall (1997) illustrate, it is only through a process of locating the little narrative of everyday understanding within the larger narratives of codified formulations that abstract concepts become relevant and applicable. Through the process of rehearsing such understandings within the safety of a learning community, students are more likely to move beyond a sense of ‘acute self-consciousness’ to one of ‘relative mastery’ (Reynolds, 1985) allowing for a stance of provisional certainty and open dialogical exchange. Through this holistic educational experience, it is hoped that as individuals and as a collective, student practitioners would develop early ‘the skills for finding courage in the face of uncertainty’ (Papell and Skolnik, 1992: 22). Arguably this capacity is the cornerstone of professional robustness.

References


