Check for updates

Article

International Social Work
1–13
© The Author(s) 2019
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/0020872819836703
journals.sagepub.com/home/isw

Sustaining professional identity during the initial post-qualification period: Implications for retention strategies

Bernadette Moorhead
Charles Sturt University, Australia

Abstract
This article discusses findings from a phenomenological Australian study exploring how the professional identities of newly qualified social workers are fostered and/or eroded during the first 12 months post-qualification. A total of 17 participants each completed three semi-structured interviews. The participants revealed individual and systemic factors that impacted how and whether professional identity was fostered and/or eroded. It is proposed from the findings that a combination of multilevel approaches for sustaining professional identity could improve the experiences and retention of newly qualified social workers. The implications for action by educators, employers and the social work profession in Australia and other countries are outlined.

Keywords
Newly qualified social workers, phenomenology, post-qualification support, professional identity, workforce development

Introduction

Professional identity is an important part of being a social worker as it involves expressing and representing the collective features of a profession, including common qualities, values and language (Webb, 2017). Embodying these shared features can be a source of resilience in social work practice that also has positive implications for self-care and retention (Cheung and Ngai, 2009). In order to successfully thrive in the workplace, newly qualified social workers are encouraged to develop and sustain their professional identity (Donnellan and Jack, 2015; Quinney, 2012). However, practitioners all too often enter organisations where job satisfaction, retention and burnout are problematic (Chenot et al., 2009; Hussein et al., 2014). These trends have raised concerns in the United Kingdom, for example, where the expected working life of social workers has been found to be significantly lower than other healthcare professionals (Curtis et al., 2010). In Australia,

Corresponding author:
Bernadette Moorhead, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Charles Sturt University, Boorooma Street, PO Box 588, Wagga Wagga, NSW 2678, Australia.
Email: bmoorhead@csu.edu.au

it is estimated that the human services sector replaces approximately one-quarter of workers annually (Martin et al., 2012). While these data do not distinguish social workers, there are concerns about workforce sustainability within the profession (Healy et al., 2015) and that a significant number of newly qualified social workers leave the sector within a few years (Cheron-Sauer, 2012). Against this backdrop, there are calls for a better understanding of graduate needs (Healy et al., 2015) and coordinated workforce and retention strategies (Cheron-Sauer, 2012; Healy and Lonne, 2010). This article responds to those calls by reporting the main findings of a larger study on the lived experience of professional identity. Preliminary findings from the study, which focused on motivations to participate in the research, recommended exploring systemic support mechanisms for newly qualified social workers (Moorhead et al., 2016). This article develops that key recommendation by identifying multilevel approaches for sustaining professional identity, which has implications for retention strategies in Australia and other countries.

Literature review

The initial post-qualification period is described across England, Australia, Scotland and New Zealand as an important time for learning and growth (Adams and Sheard, 2017; Agllias, 2010; Grant et al., 2016), particularly for professional identity (Donnellan and Jack, 2015). To enhance their endeavours, new practitioners must be adequately supported, which includes consideration for the individual backgrounds of practitioners (Jack and Donnellan, 2010). Suggested support and development mechanisms include sufficient induction (Moriarty et al., 2011); access to multiple supportive relationships (Hunt et al., 2016), especially supervision (Agllias, 2010; Jones et al., 2009; Pack, 2014); a manageable workload; and access to professional development and career advancement opportunities (Grant et al., 2016; Healy et al., 2015; Hussein et al., 2014). Overall, in order to recognise newly qualified social workers as developing practitioners, it has been recommended that they be eased into their workload so that they can have adequate time to reflect and solidify social work values and skills (Agllias, 2010; Hunt et al., 2016) that are fundamental to professional identity (Webb, 2017).

Despite these suggested mechanisms, the stress and demands of workplaces, especially lack of resources, makes it challenging to meet the ongoing needs of these practitioners (Hunt et al., 2016; Hussein et al., 2014; Manthorpe et al., 2014). In Australia, England and the Republic of Ireland, research consistently reiterates that newly qualified social workers are challenged by workplace conditions, including perceived competence of managers (Healy et al., 2015), complex and heavy workloads (Baginsky and Manthorpe, 2016; Healy et al., 2009), and lack of access to relational support (Burns, 2011) and to professional development (Hussein et al., 2014). In response to these concerns, a national graduate programme was introduced in England, known as the *Assessed and Supported Year in Employment* (ASYE). The structured programme aimed to embed support mechanisms such as reflective supervision and workload reductions within organisations. After several years the programme has become increasingly integrated within workplaces and the main objectives, such as improved job satisfaction and retention rates, are being met (Carpenter et al., 2015). Newly qualified social workers have reported increases in self-efficacy, including confidence and competence (Carpenter et al., 2015). These findings suggest that mechanisms embedded in organisations are more likely to achieve good outcomes with newly qualified social workers.

These recent studies add weight to arguments that the initial post-qualification period is an important phase of learning and needs to be well supported; however, there was little or no mention of sustaining professional identity within the literature, despite being described as an important part of thriving as a newly qualified social worker (Donnellan and Jack, 2015; Quinney, 2012).

While newly qualified social workers might experience an increase in their confidence, it is not clear how levels of access to development mechanisms impact professional identity. One Australian pilot study that focused on job satisfaction and employment intentions included a subset of questions on professional identity (Healy et al., 2015). The study involved newly qualified practitioners from a range of backgrounds, including 11 social workers. Participants were asked to rate their sense of belonging to and identification with their profession/occupational group. Most of the participants strongly identified with their profession or occupation, which was based on emotional connections and alignment of values. However, the relationship between professional identity and broader workplace conditions was not emphasised in the findings. It was recommended that professional identity be explored further, including in relation to job satisfaction and retention (Healy et al., 2015).

Research design

Methodology

The lack of focus on sustaining professional identity in the literature informed the development of this phenomenological study. The study explored the lived experience of professional identity during the first 12 months post-qualification. One of the main research questions of the study, which is the focus of this article, was how are the professional identities of newly qualified social workers fostered and/or eroded during the first 12 months post-qualification? To address the question, a theoretical framework was developed based on principles of hermeneutic phenomenology. The central aim of hermeneutic phenomenology is to access experiential knowledge by gathering and interpreting rich descriptions of lived experience, including thoughts, feelings and behaviours, what an experience was like, a preferred way of the experience occurring and ultimately, meanings attached to the situation (Todres and Holloway, 2010; Van Manen, 2014).

Data collection and analysis

In order to gather experiential knowledge, three semi-structured interviews were undertaken with each participant at the beginning, middle and end points of their initial post-qualification year. These interviews were conducted during November 2012–February 2014, with approximately 6-month intervals between each interview. The interview questions were informed by the methodology and literature review and remained open so that participants could talk about lived experience as freely as possible. A central question for probing how professional identity was fostered and/or eroded involved asking the participants, in each interview, to rate confidence in their social work identity, on a scale of 1 to 10. Their individual number prompted associated questions about lived experience, such as why they rated themselves that way, and what fostered and/or eroded their professional identity. The scale was not a quantitative question designed to objectively measure lived experience; instead it was posed as a subjective phenomenological question to prompt critical reflection on professional identity.

The interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed for analysis. The transcripts were uploaded to the NVivo computer program for storage and coding. To analyse the data, Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step method for thematic analysis was used to take notes, code and develop themes. The method provided a flexible framework to approach participant descriptions in an inductive manner. The analysis was informed by the methodology, which encourages investigators to immerse themselves into participant stories, and move between parts and the whole of descriptions, to draw out commonalities and individual nuances in lived experience (Todres and Holloway,

2010). The interview transcripts were labelled by name and the interview phase (e.g. name – first interview; name – second interview; name – third interview) so that analysis could take into consideration what was said, by whom and when. The method made it possible to capture how professional identity was fostered and/or eroded over time for each participant and across the group.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Charles Sturt University (CSU) School of Humanities and Social Sciences ethics committee. Confidentiality, voluntary participation and informed consent were essential ethical considerations. An information sheet and consent form outlined the aim and scope of the interview questions, the estimated number of hours for participation and the option to withdraw. Considering there were three in-depth interviews over a 12-month period, it was important the participants understood how much time was involved and that they could withdraw. For confidentiality, printed documents were securely stored, and electronic data were de-identified and password protected. In keeping with the theoretical framework, all but one of the participants were given a pseudonym, which will be used in this article to emphasise their experiential knowledge. One participant, Cass, requested in writing that her name be used.

Participants

The criterion for recruitment was that participants be CSU Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) graduands at the end of 2012. A total of 17 participants voluntarily self-selected and completed the series of three interviews. Most of the participants were female ($n=12$), from a White Australian background ($n=13$) and mature aged ($n=14$). During the interview period, all participants were employed in direct, client-based roles, including one participant who was also a programme manager. They worked in a range of fields such as health and mental health, domestic violence, foster care, disabilities and social security. The participants were almost evenly split between non-government ($n=9$) and government ($n=8$) organisations throughout the year. By the end of the year, most were employed on a full-time basis ($n=11$), and one had left the profession.

Findings

Based on responses to the scale question and associated descriptions of lived experience, most participants revealed that their professional identity was fostered throughout the first 12 months post-qualification period. A majority of 13 participants described a steady or slight increase in their scale number over the course of interviewing. Two had irregular numbers (Geraldine and Julia), which did not reflect a decline in professional identity, whereas two other participants experienced a steady decrease that did reflect erosion of professional identity (Belinda and Maggie). There were general commonalities across the group, where those able to consistently pursue their learning and development within supportive relationships and organisations were more likely to foster and/or sustain their professional identity. These commonalities and experiences are outlined further in the following across each interview phase.

First interview phase

During the first interview, most participants described confidence in their professional identity as 5 or 6 out of 10, which reflected their desire and need to gain further experience and grow as a newly qualified social worker:

> I feel like I have an idea of what social work is, I feel like I have an idea of how I would like to be a social worker, I just don't feel like I've had an opportunity yet to fully do that. And I'm sort of really excited about starting full time and having a really large client load … (Nina, first interview)

From the outset of the post-qualification period, the participants emphasised the importance of taking individual responsibility for the growth and development of their professional identity. They characterised themselves as active, lifelong learners who had to pursue opportunities to critically reflect, develop and sustain a professional identity. A number of experiences confirmed and fostered their professional identity at this stage, such as employment, collective identity, prior social work study and successful outcomes.

First, several participants gained a new job quickly and this brought them a sense of elation and a confidence boost through external validation of professional identity: 'I suppose I'd always known I'd get a job, but I just didn't think it would happen like that [happen quickly]' (Chelsea, first interview). These experiences confirmed that they had 'arrived' as a qualified social worker, enabling them to move beyond their student identity and step into their professional one.

In relation to collective identity, many of the participants found it was meaningful to experience shared dimensions of membership, language and mindset with other social workers in their workplace or networks. These connections provided a sense of strength in numbers and common beliefs and understanding, or as Maggie (first interview) said, 'you are on … the same wavelength'. Shared membership and language also fostered a sense of collective belonging:

> … there is that shared language and we [social work colleagues] talk about reflection, and I mentioned that to my [manager who is not a social worker] today and she had no idea what I was talking about. (Geraldine, first interview)

Of note, a collective identity was a new experience for Geraldine, despite more than 20 years of employment in the human services sector.

The shared features of collective identity were further emphasised when the participants described their professional identities being grounded in a strong foundation that they had gained from a previous study, particularly field placement (workplace learning/practice learning). All participants agreed that field placement was a fundamentally important part of their study, especially for enacting theory, learning from experienced practitioners, developing networks for future practice and, finally, professional identity formation: 'I really enjoyed that five months to be able to really go into something with depth …' (Catherine, first interview). Undertaking two placements, totalling 1000 hours, was considered ideal by most participants, as one could gain sufficient practical experience. Thus, social work education became a launching pad for the post-qualification journey as an active learner, as the participants did not want their education and previous field experiences to stagnate.

As newly qualified social workers, being active learners involved drawing on their studies to gain experience and confidence in their abilities. Many of the participants started to gain confidence when they experienced successful outcomes in their work with clients and colleagues. Experiencing a successful outcome built a sense of competence and proficiency: 'I've had some really good outcomes so far, and that fosters, and sets an identity here that we offer something very different [as hospital social workers]' (James, first interview). Overall, there was a sense of hope, passion and enthusiasm expressed in many of the participants' stories and experiences about their professional identity, and how it will grow or change over the course of the year.

Second interview phase

Six months later, most of the participants ($n=11$) rated their professional identity as 6–8 out of 10, indicating an increase in confidence across the group. Three participants gave a lower rating during this interview. In one case, the lower rating was irregular and did not represent erosion of professional identity, but rather a readjustment after reflecting on the influence of completing study:

> … [you are on] a little bit of a high because you get your piece of paper [when you graduate] … and I think you're still floating on that a little bit and that sense of achievement that I did it, I finished, I've got the piece of paper to prove it. (Geraldine, second interview)

Most participants talked frequently about achieving growth and development, especially in terms of understanding and balancing their role, organisation and professional identity. Many of the hopes they talked about in the first interview were coming to fruition through a combination of individual effort and social support. In terms of individual effort, many of the participants, no matter what their job or employment setting, described being in the depths of learning every day as experiential learners, like they were during their field placements. Learning was a continuous process that for some was also exhausting and needed to be balanced with time for reflection and self-care. For example, in her first interview, Julia said: 'I'm like the … the proverbial duck … going like hell under that water.' By her second interview, Julia was making some progress:

> [There are] probably more days where I'm the poor little duck going like 100 miles per hour, but I've had days where I'm kind of swimming and I'm lying on my back looking at the sun, looking at the sky and the water, so that's been nice. I have made progress, so I really want to give myself more of that; I don't want to steal that away from myself; I think that would be silly.

The participants emphasised that they needed more time to gain experience and further confidence.

Alongside individual effort, supportive relationships were emphasised as a key component of fostering and/or eroding professional identity. Two relationships emerged as being particularly important since the first interview – those with managers and/or supervisors. While participants were asked directly about supervision arrangements, they initiated discussions about the quality of the relationship with their immediate manager. Most described the relationship as good ($n=11$), with smaller numbers as mixed ($n=2$) or poor ($n=4$). Across the group, the participants said that managers influenced the organisational culture and were gatekeepers for accessing growth and development opportunities, which related closely to their individual commitment to lifelong learning.

Those who experienced a good relationship said that their manager, who was not necessarily from a social work background, fostered a culture where they could learn and be valued for their abilities as social workers:

> … so when I had my three-month review, after I had started working full time, that was the first time that my boss had said: 'Oh, you can tell you're a social worker' – I think that was it when I thought to myself, okay, well, I think what I am doing is really social worker based. (Nina, second interview)

These experiences were based on perceived manager competence, including how managers afforded an appropriate level of autonomy, respect and trust towards their staff.

In contrast to these positive experiences, several participants said they were bullied by managers, some of whom were social work qualified. Belinda and Maggie did not feel safe or supported to critically reflect or express professional identity, which was unexpectedly eroded during the last

6 months. Another example was Chelsea, who said that she was afforded little autonomy to make small decisions daily and was devalued in respect of her social work expertise. Unlike Belinda and Maggie, Chelsea described being able to sustain her professional identity through connections in her wider network and undertaking postgraduate social work study.

Proficient abilities and respectful behaviour were also described as relevant in supervisory relationships, whether it was with an immediate manager or external supervisor. The participants said that they needed to engage with someone who was experienced and skilful and could understand their needs as a newly qualified social worker. In general, the main topics during supervision sessions were client work, developing an understanding of the organisation, settling into practice, and administrative functions. Much of this was described as relevant to their initial induction and settling into the organisation during the first few months of the post-qualification period.

Most of the participants stated that they had access to formal one-on-one supervision arrangements, but some were concerned about not having regular access to supervision. Nevertheless, quality supervision was said to be more important than frequency, and access to diverse supportive relationships, such as with colleagues, was just as necessary: 'And I can ask any questions [in my team]; it's like having supervision on tap. It's amazing. I can turn around and ask any question at any time' (Cass, second interview). The participants highlighted that a combination of relationships that offer flexibility and responsiveness to individual needs can be as effective as typical supervision arrangements. Despite this, to enhance their relationships with managers and supervisors, the participants emphasised that they needed deeper critical reflection on professional identity and career development in order to build on their current progress as active learners.

Third interview phase

During the final interview, a greater number of participants ($n=14$) rated confidence in professional identity as between 6 and 9. Since the second interview, Maggie had left the profession and Belinda had sought a new job. Their professional identity had deteriorated further but they described themselves as survivors, in acknowledgement of their strength to endure excessive workloads and workplace bullying. They were beginning to recover from their experiences and move on to a new journey:

> I was saying to my mum the other day when I found out I got the [new] job … I said I feel like a survivor … if they write a farewell card I want them to say congratulations, you survived. (Belinda, final interview)

> I've survived – I'm a survivor – so pretty much that's my mentality; if I can work there and survive it, I can do anything really; so if anything, it just made me a little bit more sort of harder in that sense [laughs] and a little bit more jaded … (Maggie, final interview)

The majority who experienced growth and development emphasised that they did not rate themselves as 10 because there was always more to learn, and one must not be complacent: 'I would say about a 7. Just because I feel like I'm kind of comfortable where I'm at, but I think, I've still got lots to learn' (Nina, final interview).

Experiencing nurturing environments emerged as vital for supporting this journey of learning and development. For example, in her final interview, Cass, who experienced the highest increase in professional identity over time, described being valued in a nurturing environment, which fostered her professional identity:

> I am so much more – personally and professionally I am more … confident … Probably because there's people who trust me; who trust my professional judgement and my professional abilities; I've got so many

> opportunities coming at me with work and further study and learning and I'm bombarded with opportunity and it's like wow this is such a great life.

Her experiences of being valued were informed by organisational policies committed to orientation/induction, supervision, professional development and professional self-care. Similar policy frameworks existed for Julia in her organisation, with emphasis on practitioner autonomy and valuing the qualification background of workers.

Most participants said that they had access to professional development, especially short course training throughout the year, which contributed to fostering professional identity. However, access did not guarantee that they could regularly engage in such activities, especially when there were high workload demands. It was common for organisations to require employees to cover most costs, citing a lack of resources and budget cuts from funding bodies. In a few instances, finding an appropriate activity was a challenge, as short courses did not always provide sufficient depth for knowledge and skill development. The need for depth is captured by Julia, who rated her professional identity lower in this interview, but said this did not reflect erosion:

> . . . I wouldn't put me at 6 now, I'd put me at 4 for confidence . . . because again it goes back to that – well, I've realised I need more depth to my knowledge; I realised to be a good advocate, you need to know your stuff … (Julia, final interview)

After completing a number of short training courses and workshops, Julia had grown significantly over the year but needed time to consolidate and deepen her knowledge and skills.

In relation to self-care, this was described not only as an individual responsibility, but a shared responsibility with organisations and the broader sector. Isabella raised this when reflecting on her experiences of vicarious trauma related to working in the domestic violence sector:

> … it was really actually quite comforting [the training], so I thought well okay so it's showing me that my work is affecting my life outside of work, it's affecting my home life, my social life in more ways than I thought … it's going to happen to whatever degree and so … it actually becomes a workplace health and safety issue and as a result of that we've come back [to work] and said well we need to put this into our policies and it's a dual responsibility of the worker as well as the workplace because [vicarious trauma] it's actually a cause of the job. (Isabella, final interview)

It was validating to see that more responsibility was being placed on the entire sector to acknowledge the well-being of practitioners, which contributed to fostering Isabella's professional identity.

For 11 participants, an important dimension of professional self-care also related to workload needs. Many participants said it was important to be eased into complex and/or heavier workload levels over time and be well supported during periods of resource constraints, which was a common experience during the year. Some participants said that it was important for managers to recognise that newly qualified social workers may have specific workload needs, which could be negotiated through a mutual approach. A good example of this was James, who described having changed his workload since the second interview, in order to be more realistic:

> And I think for too long I just wanted to do everything for everyone, and, of course, that was dangerous because people see you as the person who the more you say yes, then people just ask you to do more and more and more … but as time goes on you learn how to deal with particular people and you learn the processes … I'm working closely with our manager, the senior social workers and the rest of the team, and my colleagues in the ward from other disciplines to say, oh, this is not just me being a maverick, and going

> off on my own tangents. It means working with these people and with advice from more experienced people such as … my manager, well, this is where we feel social work, that is, I think maybe it's strained a little for a while. (James, final interview)

Without the support of his manager, it would not have been possible for James to modify his workload, which would have had further implications for his professional self-care.

In summary, through continued individual commitment to learning and sufficient support in nurturing environments, many of the participants were able to gain greater clarity and confidence regarding their professional identity. By their final interview, most had gained a better sense of who they are as social workers, the knowledge they draw on and how to practice effectively in line with their professional values. The participants had changed and adjusted over the whole 12 months, no matter what their job, and were aware that they would continue to grow beyond this initial newly qualified period. While there were highs and lows throughout the year, most of them had gained from the many challenges they faced and were able to foster professional identity. By the end of the interviews, most participants were looking to the future with renewed passion and enthusiasm for a new chapter in their life's story.

Discussion

It is important to recognise that the findings of this small-scale study offer only some rich descriptions of lived experience, not all, especially in light of the number of participants, who studied at one university in Australia. This may mean that some of the findings may be contextual only to Australia and CSU. Nonetheless, hermeneutic phenomenology takes the position that knowledge is never complete (Van Manen, 2014), and so investigators can only offer *an* interpretation, not *the* interpretation. Furthermore, considering the number of international studies on newly qualified social workers, there are opportunities for educators, employers and professional associations in other institutions and countries to consider the findings of this study and possible areas of inquiry that they could follow-up to add to the knowledge base. Further research should be undertaken with larger cohorts in a range of locations, especially as the current research, including this study, is most frequently centred in Euro-Western contexts.

The findings emphasise that for these participants, the initial post-qualification period involved experiential and reflective learning, which relied on the quality and availability of relationships, and suitable systemic conditions to meet their needs. These themes are consistent with literature and published research into the experiences of newly qualified social workers (Adams and Sheard, 2017; Agllias, 2010; Grant et al., 2016), including the necessity of support structures and supportive relationships (Carpenter et al., 2015; Hunt et al., 2016). A unique and important contribution of this study is that it brings attention to how professional identity can be fostered and/or eroded within these contexts, and draws together a coherent picture of sustaining professional identity based on three multilevel and interconnected approaches that were necessary across the first 12 months post-qualification: being an active learner (individual/micro), access to supportive relationships (relational/meso), and systemic mechanisms (macro). Implications of these findings include undertaking further research so that professional associations, employers and supervisors can develop and integrate these multilevel approaches into professional standards and workplace policy to prioritise sustaining professional identity as part of broader workforce and retention strategies.

At the individual (micro) level, being an active learner across the whole year was an important strategy, especially for gaining confidence in professional identity. Other studies have uncovered growth in confidence over time as newly qualified social workers gain experience and a sense of proficiency (e.g. Carpenter et al., 2015), but in this study, a connection between confidence and

professional identity was highlighted. The participants who were able to enact their commitment to learning, especially in the early months of the post-qualification period, became more clearly aligned with social work values as part of professional identity, reflecting emotional connections and alignment of values as identified elsewhere (Healy et al., 2015). Implications of this finding include educators preparing emerging graduates to plan for the post-qualification period as lifelong learners and to seek out, where possible, suitable workplaces where they can communicate effectively with employers and supervisors about their professional needs.

At the relational (meso) level, a unique finding is the experience of a collective identity that the participants emphasised as a powerful influence on professional identity. Experiences at this level reflect what Webb (2017) refers to as the common features, such as language, that constitute a professional identity and form the basis of socialising members into a group. This finding encourages employers, supervisors and experienced social workers to prioritise these types of connections in the workplace and wider networks, especially supervision, which is recognised as an important relationship (Agllias, 2010; Jones et al., 2009; Pack, 2014). It would be worth undertaking further research to understand how a collective identity contributes to constructing professional identity, especially through a shared social work mindset and language. The participants highlighted working in diverse teams and organisations, including with managers who do not come from social work backgrounds. This raises questions about how newly qualified social workers articulate and promote professional identity in these relationships and how they navigate non-social work languages.

Participants' experiences within wider supportive relationships also resonate with literature in the area (e.g. Burns, 2011; Hunt et al., 2016). In the present study, many of the participants were able to draw from a mix of formal and informal relationships to foster their professional identity, but especially with their managers and/or supervisors. It is noteworthy that while supervision arrangements were a predetermined interview question, the participants brought up the relationship with their immediate manager themselves and more often, indicating that it was a particularly important relationship during this period. In both relationships there were challenges with perceived competence, which is similar to another Australian study (Healy et al., 2015), as well as respectful behaviour, particularly from managers, and appropriate access to reflective supervision. The findings emphasise that lack of connectedness and poor relationships can not only impact stress levels, but also pose risks or erode professional identity. Managers and supervisors are prompted to recognise the learning experiences that characterise the initial post-qualification period and consult with employees about how to best support their growth and development. For example, employers could develop explicit agreements with newly qualified social workers about supervision arrangements, mentoring opportunities and peer/group activities, centred on their individual background, as highlighted by Jack and Donnellan (2010).

In order to maximise individual and relational dimensions, a broader focus on policy settings at the organisational and systemic (macro) level is highlighted in the findings. Most of the participants were able to foster their professional identities when they experienced nurturing environments that met their support and development needs. However, as was the case for supervision, access to professional development was not consistent across the group. While most of the participants described being well supported during the year, there were few guarantees that those resources would be reliably available. Only some workplaces had appropriate policies mandating support and development for all employees, but specific provisions for newly qualified practitioners were not common. These inconsistencies raise questions about how the needs of newly qualified social workers are embedded in organisational and broader policy. This includes how professional development is valued and resourced, especially by government funding bodies. In the participants' workplaces, funding for programmes regularly did not include access to professional development,

and for those that did, it was cut during times of resource constraints. These issues highlight how graduate needs can be highly dependent on the organisational and broader sociopolitical context. When resources for professional development are not prioritised, there are risks to retention (Hussein et al., 2014), as well as the undermining of professional identity in newly qualified social workers as indicated in this study.

Similar policy considerations are needed for workload as part of a broader focus on professional self-care. The participants' experiences of workload needs are consistent with other studies, where it is recommended that newly qualified practitioners be eased into their caseload (Agllias, 2010; Hunt et al., 2016). However, it remains unclear how decisions should be made on levels of workload, which is an area future research could target in order to make appropriate recommendations for professional standards and policy. Levels of workload are particularly important in light of the busy organisations many of the participants described, and erosion of professional identity experienced by Belinda and Maggie. These experiences reflect other studies, especially where workplace conditions such as heavy workloads and lack of support were found to impact job satisfaction, retention and burnout (Chenot et al., 2009; Healy et al., 2009; Hussein et al., 2014). The findings in this study emphasise how such issues can also impact professional identity, which reinforces calls for the social work profession, such as in Australia (Cheron-Sauer, 2012; Healy et al., 2015), to acknowledge the needs of newly qualified social workers, which could include advocating for resources, and developing policy around professional development and workload protections tailored for this group. Organisational policy could be informed by broader professional standards that focus on sustaining social work identity, no matter where practitioners are employed. Progress in developing systemic mechanisms has been made in countries such as England, where the *Assessed and Supported Year in Employment*, a national programme, has produced positive results (Carpenter et al., 2015). There are opportunities for other countries to consider such schemes and research the circumstances and needs of newly qualified social workers in their own contexts. The findings of this small study strengthen calls for further research and dialogue on providing adequate and consistent support for professional identity, which can underpin retention strategies in the profession.

Conclusion

This article has detailed how the professional identities of 17 newly qualified Australian social workers were fostered and/or eroded by interdependent individual, relational, organisational and systemic factors. Central to lived experience was being recognised and valued as social workers, and having access to connections and resources, including supportive relationships, professional development and professional self-care mechanisms. For most of the participants who experienced a positive year, individual and wider social policy systems, especially through managers and supervisors, shared responsibility for professional growth and development. Even when there were some negative experiences, most participants were able to draw on other areas of support to sustain their professional identity. The two participants whose professional identities were eroded experienced significant challenges in all areas, as they had no time or space for reflection as an individual and experienced excessive workloads and workplace bullying. There is a need for social work in Australia and other countries to develop and strengthen systemic mechanisms, especially policy, to recognise the particular needs of newly qualified social workers and facilitate access to consistent and reliable resources so that they can sustain professional identity and be retained as committed social work practitioners.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Bernadette Moorhead https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8648-1148

References

Adams, J. and A. Sheard (2017) *Positive Social Work: The Essential Toolkit for NQSWs*, 2nd edn. St Albans: Critical Publishing.

Agllias, K. (2010) 'Student to Practitioner: A Study of Preparedness for Social Work Practice', *Australian Social Work* 63(3): 345–60.

Baginsky, M. and J. Manthorpe (2016) 'The Views and Experiences of Step Up to Social Work Graduates: Two and a Half Years Following Qualification', *British Journal of Social Work* 46: 2016–32.

Braun, V. and V. Clarke (2006) 'Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3(2): 77–101.

Burns, K. (2011) '"Career Preference", "Transients" and "Converts": A Study of Social Workers' Retention in Child Protection and Welfare', *British Journal of Social Work* 41(3): 520–38.

Carpenter, J., S.M. Shardlow, D. Patsios and M. Wood (2015) 'Developing the Confidence and Competence of Newly Qualified Child and Family Social Workers in England: Outcomes of a National Programme', *British Journal of Social Work* 45(1): 153–76.

Chenot, D., A.D. Benton and H. Kim (2009) 'The Influence of Supervisor Support, Peer Support, and Organizational Culture among Early Career Social Workers in Child Welfare Services', *Child Welfare* 88(5): 129–47.

Cheron-Sauer, M.C. (2012) 'Report on Social Work Education and Workforce Planning and Development in England, Europe, the United States and Canada'. Available online at: http://www.churchilltrust.com.au/fellows/detail/3693/marie-claire+cheron-sauer (accessed 29 September 2014)

Cheung, C. and S. Ngai (2009) 'Surviving Hegemony through Resistance and Identity Articulation among Outreaching Social Workers', *Child & Adolescent Social Work Journal* 26(1): 15–37.

Curtis, L., J. Moriarty and A. Netten (2010) 'The Expected Working Life of a Social Worker', *British Journal of Social Work* 40(5): 1628–43.

Donnellan, H. and G. Jack (2015) *The Survival Guide for Newly Qualified Child and Family Social Workers: Hitting the Ground Running*, 2nd edn. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Grant, S., L. Sheridan and S.A. Webb (2016) 'Newly Qualified Social Workers' Readiness for Practice in Scotland', *British Journal of Social Work* 33(7): 874–89.

Healy, K. and B. Lonne (2010) 'The Social Work and Human Services Workforce: Report from a National Study of Education, Training and Workforce Needs'. Available online at: http://eprints.qut.edu.au/39674/1/DS7-627_social_work_and_human_services_%28Healy%2C_UQ%2C_2010%29.pdf (accessed 5 May 2017)

Healy, K., G. Harrison and M. Foster (2015) 'Job Satisfaction and Workforce Retention of Newly Qualified Social Work and Community Services Workers: An Australian Pilot Study', *Advances in Social Work and Welfare Education* 17(1): 8–24.

Healy, K., G. Meagher and J. Cullin (2009) 'Retaining Novices to Become Expert Child Protection Practitioners: Creating Career Pathways in Direct Practice', *British Journal of Social Work* 39(2): 299–317.

Hunt, S., S. Lowe, K. Smith, A. Kuruvila and E. Webber-Dreadon (2016) 'Transition to Professional Social Work Practice: The Initial Year', *Advances in Social Work and Welfare Education* 18(1): 55–71.

Hussein, S., J. Moriarty, M. Stevens, E. Sharpe and J. Manthorpe (2014) 'Organisational Factors, Job Satisfaction and Intention to Leave among Newly Qualified Social Workers in England', *Social Work Education* 33(3): 381–96.

Jack, G. and H. Donnellan (2010) 'Recognising the Person within the Developing Professional: Tracking the Early Careers of Newly Qualified Child Care Social Workers in Three Local Authorities in England', *Social Work Education* 29(3): 305–18.

Jones, K., H. Donnellan and C. Owens (2009) *The First Year in Practice: Exploring Effective Supervision – A Practice Toolkit for Newly Qualified Social Workers (Nqsws) and Line Managers*. Bristol: University of the West of England.

Manthorpe, J., J. Moriarty, M. Stevens, S. Hussein and E. Sharpe (2014) 'The "Making" of Social Workers: Findings from Interviews with Managers of Newly Qualified Social Workers', *Practice* 26(2): 97–111.

Martin, B., R. Phillips and N. Xiang (2012) 'Developing an Effective Homelessness Workforce'. Available online at: https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2012/02/apo-nid74059-1139921.pdf (accessed 1 May 2017)

Moorhead, B., K. Bell and W. Bowles (2016) 'Exploring the Development of Professional Identity with Newly Qualified Social Workers', *Australian Social Work* 69(4): 456–67.

Moriarty, J., J. Manthorpe, M. Stevens and S. Hussein (2011) 'Making the Transition: Comparing Research on Newly Qualified Social Workers with Other Professions', *British Journal of Social Work* 41(7): 1340–56.

Pack, M. (2014) '"Unsticking the Stuckness": A Qualitative Study of the Clinical Supervisory Needs of Early-Career Health Social Workers', *British Journal of Social Work* 45(6): 1821–36.

Quinney, A. (2012) 'Joining and Contributing to a Team', in S. Keen, K. Brown, J. Parker, I Gray and D. Galpin (eds) *Newly Qualified Social Workers: A Practice Guide to the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment*, pp. 80–96. London: SAGE.

Todres, L. and I. Holloway (2010) 'Phenomenological Research', in K. Gerrish and A. Lacey (eds) *The Research Process in Nursing*, pp. 177–87. West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing.

Van Manen, M. (2014) *Phenomenology of Practice: Meaning-Giving Methods in Phenomenological Research and Writing*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.

Webb, S. (2017) 'Matters of Professional Identity and Social Work', in S.A. Webb (ed.) *Professional Identity and Social Work*, pp. 1–18. New York: Routledge.

Author biography

Bernadette Moorhead is a lecturer in social work and human services at Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga, Australia.