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Threads of Purpose: A Multi-Case Exploration of Professional Identity Formation Among Social Workers

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ABSTRACT: This study explored the professional identity formation of social work graduates during their first five years of practice across sectors. It examined the factors contributing to identity development, the challenges and opportunities encountered in different practice settings, how professional identity shaped competence and retention, and the similarities and differences across cases. A qualitative multiple-case study design was employed with ten licensed social workers practicing in selected sectors. Data were gathered through semi-structured individual in-depth interviews and analyzed using Thematic Analysis through within-case, and cross-case analyses. Findings revealed that professional identity was shaped by foundational practice exposure, integration of theory and practice, personal values and character development, continuous improvement, adaptation to practice challenges, and professional mentorship. Participants further constructed their identities through meaningful service, values, self-awareness, client engagement, resilience, and recognition of social work contributions. Professional identity strengthened competence and retention through meaningful experiences, continuous learning, supportive organizations, and a sustained commitment to service. Across sectors, participants shared a common dedication to serving communities, although their responsibilities and identity expressions varied according to sector-specific demands. The findings highlight the importance of practice-based learning, mentorship, supportive workplaces, and continuous professional development in strengthening social workers' professional identity, competence, and commitment.

KEYWORDS : *Competence, professional development, professional identity, social work practice, social work graduates*

I. INTRODUCTION

Professional identity formation among newly graduated social workers remains a significant concern, particularly during the transition from academic training to real-world practice. While this phase is widely recognized as formative, it is also marked by uncertainty, role ambiguity, and exposure to complex field demands, which can hinder the development of a stable professional identity. Without adequate support, these challenges may negatively affect practitioners' effectiveness, job satisfaction, and long-term commitment to the profession. The first few years after graduation are therefore not only developmental but also high-risk, as individuals navigate diverse and often under-resourced practice environments. Recent literature underscores the importance of resilience during this period; however, the lack of structured mechanisms to cultivate resilience factors remains problematic. Long et al. (2024) identified seven resilience factors that contribute to strengthening professional identity, yet their application in actual workplace settings is often inconsistent. This gap suggests that resilience, while theoretically acknowledged, is not systematically embedded in early career support systems. The challenges were further intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic, which exposed vulnerabilities in both social work education and practice. As noted by Wiles (2024), although a strong professional identity served as a source of collective strength, many practitioners struggled to maintain this identity amid rapidly changing roles, increased workloads, and emotional strain. This highlights the fragility of professional identity when external crises are not matched with institutional support.

Moreover, while self-awareness and reflective practice are emphasized in social work education, their translation into sustained professional identity development remains uneven. Martín-Estalayo et al. (2023) highlighted the value of self-reflection; however, there is a disconnect between reflective learning in academic settings and its practical integration in the field, limiting its long-term impact. Supporting this concern, research by Adams et al. (2021) indicates that newly qualified social workers often experience a "reality shock," where the ideals learned in school conflict with workplace realities, thereby disrupting identity formation. Given these issues, there is a pressing need to critically examine how professional identity is supported—or neglected—during the early years of practice. Research tracking social work graduates across sectors is essential to identify structural barriers and enabling conditions. Such evidence is crucial for informing educational curricula,

strengthening workplace support systems, and developing policy interventions that intentionally foster a resilient and coherent professional identity among emerging social workers.

A research study conducted between 2021 and 2023 examined the professional identity formation of six Australian international social work graduates through a series of interviews held approximately every six months. The findings revealed that participants encountered overlapping barriers, including cultural adjustment, workplace integration, and limited professional networks, all of which hindered the development of a stable professional identity. These challenges highlight a critical gap in understanding how international graduates navigate early career transitions across diverse practice settings, emphasizing the need for structured adaptation and support mechanisms to facilitate their inclusion in the labor market (Yao & Flynn, 2025). Recent literature further conceptualizes professional identity formation as a multidimensional and dynamic process influenced by both individual and contextual factors across professions. One key dimension is professional socialization, which involves the internalization of professional values, roles, and ethical standards through both academic preparation and workplace immersion (Billett, 2015). Complementing this is self-awareness and reflexivity, which Martín-Estalayo et al. (2023) identified as a critical transversal competence during university training, enabling students to position themselves more consciously within complex social contexts and thereby strengthen their emerging professional identity.

Another significant factor is experiential and practice-based learning, which allows graduates to integrate theoretical knowledge with real-world demands. However, recent studies indicate that this transition period can produce tensions when workplace realities do not align with professional ideals, potentially weakening identity formation if not adequately supported (O'Connor & Leonard, 2022). In addition, organizational and relational supports, such as supervision, mentorship, and inclusive workplace cultures, play a crucial role in shaping professional identity, particularly for newly qualified practitioners navigating unfamiliar environments (Carpenter et al., 2021). Moreover, resilience and adaptability have emerged as essential cross-professional competencies in recent research, especially in the context of global disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic. These factors enable early-career professionals to manage stress, role ambiguity, and shifting expectations while maintaining a coherent sense of professional self (Wiles, 2024; Jackson, 2022). Collectively, these perspectives suggest that professional identity formation is not solely an individual developmental task but a socially constructed process shaped by educational experiences, workplace conditions, and broader socio-cultural contexts.

Gonato and General (2023) studied the correlation of social and emotional skills, professional identity, and job satisfaction of teachers in the Manay District, Davao Oriental Division. The study identified that professional identity is a factor influencing job satisfaction. While the study concentrated on teachers, its implications extend to social work professionals since both professions need to have a fully developed professional identity in order to successfully navigate the complexities of the social world. In addition, the influence of professional organizations in developing the professional identity of Filipino social work students has been stressed in previous studies. The Junior Social Workers' Association of the Philippines (JSWAP) is an important forum for students to be actively involved in the collaborative processes that are inherent in the social work profession. By promoting communication among members, faculty, and administrators, JSWAP helps develop a strong and unified professional identity among future social workers (Pangasinan State University, 2024).

Cabangcala and General (2023) conducted a study to determine the effects of professional identity and teamwork ability on teachers' behavior among public elementary school teachers in Davao City. Individuals with robust professional identity and good teamwork ability had more positive professional behaviors. While the study was focused on teachers, its results have wider applications for the social work profession because both professions demand a strong professional identity and teamwork competencies and must be able to work in intricate social environments. These results imply that enhanced professional identity and teamwork competencies could lead to better professional practice across disciplines, including social work. In another study, Cabangcala and General (2023) investigated the connection between social competence and civic volunteerism among senior high school students in Davao City. The research revealed a strong positive correlation between the level of social competence among students and their civic volunteerism. This discovery is significant in highlighting the social competence role in the promotion of active engagement in community-based activities, a key aspect of professional identity development among graduates in social work.

This study is grounded in an interpretivist-constructivist paradigm, which assumes that professional identity is developed through individuals' lived experiences and social interactions within particular contexts. This perspective is appropriate for the present study because it facilitates a deeper exploration of how social work graduates make sense of their experiences and actively construct meaning regarding their professional roles across diverse practice settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This study is guided by three major theories which are Professional Identity Theory, Socialization Theory, and Role Theory that provide a theory of integration in the professional identity formation of graduates in social work across different sectors. Professional Identity Theory posits that professional identity is developed as a result of an interaction among

personal values, education, and work experiences (Trede, Macklin, & Bridges, 2012). This theory is significant in terms of how professional ethics and values are internalized by social work graduates as they transition into the practice environment. Socialization Theory, on the other hand, is concerned with how one acquires knowledge, skills, and behaviors for successful functioning as a professional role (Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001). This theory will help to analyze how workplace culture, mentorship, and organizational support contribute to early-career social workers' identity development. Lastly, Role Theory analyzes how actors learn to accommodate themselves into their ascribed roles in professional settings and how those roles construct their sense of self (Biddle, 1986). This perspective is important in observing how graduates manage expectations and responsibilities in different social work areas. Together, the theories will build a sound platform for examining drivers of professional identity formation, problems faced by beginner social workers, and their transition to diverse practice environments. With the integration of these theoretical models, the research aims to produce findings that will guide social work education, policy, and practice, graduating eventually students who are well equipped to address complex social issues and uphold the profession's core values.

In this study, professional identity is understood as the integration of an individual's values, professional roles, ethical responsibilities, and self-perception within social work practice. Professional socialization refers to the process through which individuals internalize the norms, expectations, and behaviors required in their profession (Billett, 2015). Resilience is defined as the capacity to adapt effectively to challenges while maintaining professional functioning and well-being (Jackson, 2022). Meanwhile, self-awareness involves a reflective understanding of one's beliefs, values, and positionality, which informs ethical and responsive practice in social work (Martín-Estalayo et al., 2021). For the purposes of this analysis, professional identity is not treated as synonymous with confidence, competence, commitment, job satisfaction, or intention to remain in the profession. These may support or accompany identity formation, but stronger evidence of identity formation occurs when participants explain how experience reshapes their understanding of who they are as social workers, the values and responsibilities that define the role, and how they negotiate those values within workplace expectations.

Social work graduates' professional identity formation in their early years of practice is an essential domain that determines their effectiveness and job satisfaction. There has been research on many aspects of this process. For example, Martín-Estalayo et al. (2023) discussed the significance of self-knowledge as a basic competence in social work training, emphasizing that higher education is the right moment for future professionals to reflect on themselves and critically position themselves in complicated social contexts. Moreover, a scoping review conducted by Bark et al. (2023) investigated how mental health social workers perceive their professional identity and role in mental health services, shedding light on the issues and views of social workers in such environments. Despite existing studies, there remains a significant gap in research that examines how professional identity evolves. Although existing studies have examined professional identity, self-awareness, professional socialization, and the experiences of social workers in particular practice contexts, the literature reviewed for this study provides limited insight into how social workers interpret the development of their professional identity across different sectors during the early years of practice. Studies focused on one setting, one professional group, or a short period of experience cannot fully show how identity-related meanings may be shared across cases yet shaped differently by sector-specific roles, organizational conditions, supervision, and client needs. This limitation is especially important in the Philippine context, where social workers practice in varied public, private, community, health, educational, and non-governmental settings. The present study addresses this gap through a qualitative multiple case study of ten registered social workers in selected areas of Davao, examining participants' accounts of early-career experiences and comparing similarities and differences across cases. Because the data include retrospective accounts from participants with differing lengths of experience, the study explores participants' interpretations of identity formation rather than claiming to track every participant prospectively over time. The study therefore contributes context-specific, case-based understanding rather than statistically generalizable conclusions about all social workers or sectors.

The objectives of this research are fourfold. First, it explores factors that participants describe as contributing to professional identity development during the early years of social work practice in different settings. Second, it examines the challenges and opportunities participants encounter in diverse practice settings and how they understand these experiences as shaping their professional development. Third, it explores how participants perceive the relationship between professional identity, their own confidence and competence in practice, and their motivation or intention to continue practicing social work. In this study, continuing means participants' self-reported motivation or intention to remain in the social work profession; it does not mean verified retention in a particular agency or sector. Fourth, it establishes similarities and differences across the individual cases.

The research is of global significance, particularly for understanding professional growth among social workers in various practice environments. Social work has a vital role in responding to social injustices, advancing human rights, and promoting the inclusion of marginalized groups (Healy, 2022). By exploring factors that participants describe as influencing professional identity during their early career stages, this study

may inform education, policy, and workforce-development approaches. For the research and academic community, it contributes case-based insight to the literature on professional identity construction, which remains underexplored in studies following identity development across contexts and time (Bark et al., 2023). The findings may help education providers reflect on curricula and training that prepare students for practice, including critical thinking, self-reflection, and resilience (Martín-Estalayo et al., 2021). Social work agencies, government agencies, and professional associations may also use these insights to consider mentorship, career development, and supportive workplaces. In this way, the study has potential relevance to SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions). These are areas of potential relevance; the study does not directly measure SDG indicators or outcomes.

The study relates to several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The first objective may inform SDG 4: Quality Education by identifying educational and workplace experiences that participants described as contributing to professional identity development. The second and third objectives relate to SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth because participants' accounts address workplace challenges, support, professional competence, and factors associated with continuing in the profession. The study also has a potential connection to SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions, because social workers' accounts of ethical responsibilities, professional roles, and service within public and community settings may inform reflection on responsive institutions and access to social support. This is a conceptual connection, not an evaluation of institutional effectiveness, justice outcomes, or SDG progress. The fourth objective provides a case-based comparison that may inform education and workforce development across different practice contexts. The connection to SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities is relevant to the profession's broader commitment to marginalized groups, but the present study does not directly evaluate SDG outcomes. These links describe the study's potential relevance rather than outcomes measured by the research.

This study is limited by its qualitative design and relatively small number of participants, and its findings are intended to provide contextual understanding rather than statistical generalization. Although the study focuses on professional identity formation during the early years of practice, participants' reported years of experience varied. Participants whose experience extended beyond five years reflected on early-career experiences retrospectively; these accounts may be affected by recall bias and by later professional experiences influencing how earlier events are interpreted. In addition, all participants were actively practicing when selected. The study therefore captures the perspectives of practitioners who remained in practice and cannot explain the experiences, decisions, or circumstances of social workers who left the profession. Participants' accounts may illuminate perceived competence, confidence, and motivation to continue, but they do not independently demonstrate improved job performance or establish actual retention. Here, continuation refers to self-reported motivation or intention to remain in the social work profession, not verified retention within an agency or sector. The study is also delimited to selected sectors and geographic contexts, which may influence transferability.

II. CONCLUSION

2.1 Implication for Practice

The findings have implications for Social Development practice, education, organizational development, and policy. From a Social Development perspective, the accounts show how practitioners' professional self-understanding is shaped not only by individual learning but also by organizational resources, community relationships, institutional expectations, and opportunities to participate in meaningful service. The findings are case-based and suggest directions for practice; they do not establish causal effects or outcomes for all practitioners.

For higher education institutions and Social Development programs, the findings support reviewing curricula to connect theory with community-based learning, reflective practice, ethical decision-making, and analysis of structural and organizational conditions. Field education and applied projects can help students understand how individual needs intersect with community resources, institutional systems, and social inequalities. These are practice implications suggested by the participants' accounts, rather than demonstrated effects of a particular curriculum.

For government and non-government organizations, community-based programs, hospitals, courts, schools, corporate organizations, and development agencies, the findings suggest the value of enabling conditions for Social Development practice: accessible supervision, manageable and clearly defined responsibilities, continuing learning, interprofessional coordination, and opportunities for community participation. Organizations should also attend to resource constraints and staff well-being rather than relying on individual commitment to compensate for structural limitations.

For field instructors, supervisors, and program managers, the findings highlight the practical value of guidance, constructive feedback, reflective discussion, and mentoring. These supports can help practitioners clarify their responsibilities, reflect on ethical tensions, and connect day-to-day work with broader community

and development goals. Because the study relies on participants' accounts, these supports should be understood as promising practice directions rather than proven causes of retention or improved performance.

For professional associations and development networks, the findings may inform continuing education, peer mentoring, leadership development, and cross-sector learning activities. These initiatives can provide spaces for practitioners to discuss ethical dilemmas, community engagement, organizational constraints, and ways to sustain a development-oriented and rights-based approach across practice contexts.

For policymakers and institutions responsible for social development, social protection, education, health, and community programs, the findings may inform discussion of workforce development, supportive supervision, continuing professional development, staff well-being, and coordination across services. A Social Development lens also calls attention to the conditions that enable practitioners and communities to participate meaningfully in addressing social needs. The present study does not test the effectiveness of any policy; the recommendations should be evaluated in future research.

Finally, the findings have potential relevance to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. SDG 4 (Quality Education) is relevant to practice-oriented learning and continuing professional development; SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) relates to supportive working conditions, staff well-being, and sustainable employment; SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) connects with inclusive services and attention to marginalized communities; and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) relates conceptually to accountable, responsive institutions and ethical service delivery. These links describe the possible contribution of Social Development practice and are not claims that the study measured SDG indicators or demonstrated progress toward the goals.

2.2 Implication for Future Research

The present study focused on professional identity formation among social workers using a qualitative multiple-case study design. Future research could use longitudinal qualitative designs and recruit practitioners at different career stages, including people who have left social work, to examine how identity, perceived competence, workplace experiences, and decisions to continue or leave evolve over time.

Moreover, future studies may conduct comparative investigations among social workers of various regions of the Philippines or other countries in order to know the effects of the variables such as culture, organizational setting, and policy environment on the professional identity formation process. Further, comparative investigations among the government, private, non-government, and international organizations may help know about sector specific factors influencing the process of professional identity development.

Future research may use quantitative or mixed-methods designs to examine relationships among professional identity, perceived competence, independently assessed performance, resilience, organizational support, job satisfaction, burnout, and actual retention. Studies should distinguish intention to remain from observed employment histories and specify whether retention refers to staying with a particular agency, remaining in a sector, or continuing in the social work profession. Including former practitioners would help explain professional departure as well as continuation.

Lastly, future research may also consider conducting investigations related to the professional identity formation of social work students, newly licensed social workers, and experienced social workers.

2.3 Concluding Remark

This study explored how ten social workers across diverse practice settings understood professional identity formation through accounts of early-career experiences. From a Social Development perspective, the findings show that professional identity is negotiated through the interaction of personal and professional values with community needs, organizational conditions, institutional expectations, available resources, and opportunities for learning. Participants' accounts suggest that development-oriented practice requires both reflective practitioners and enabling systems; individual dedication should not be treated as a substitute for adequate support or decent working conditions. The findings may inform practice-oriented education, supportive organizations, community-responsive services, and workforce policies, while remaining case-based and not statistically generalizable.

Participants described learning new responsibilities and developing confidence, perceived competence, and commitment, but these outcomes were not treated as interchangeable with professional identity formation. Confidence reflects how capable participants felt; demonstrated competence would require evidence beyond self-report, such as independent assessment of practice. Participants also described reasons or motivation to continue practicing social work, but this is not the same as observed retention. Because all participants were actively practicing when recruited, the study cannot explain the experiences of practitioners who left the profession or determine whether participants later remained in an agency, sector, or the profession. The findings also caution against interpreting commitment or a sense of vocation as evidence that inadequate salaries, heavy workloads, limited resources, or weak support are acceptable. Professional purpose may be meaningful to practitioners, but decent working conditions remain an organizational and policy responsibility.

As the researcher, conducting this study became more than an academic undertaking; it provided an opportunity to understand how participants described becoming and acting as social workers in their particular contexts. Their accounts suggest that professional identity involves more than acquiring knowledge or technical competence. It also involves articulating professional values, interpreting ethical responsibilities, understanding the purpose of the role, and negotiating that purpose when workplace expectations or external recognition create tensions. This interpretation is grounded in the participants' accounts and should not be read as evidence that every challenge or learning experience necessarily changes professional identity.

The cases suggest that professional identity is shaped by shared service values and context-specific negotiations over responsibilities, recognition, resources, and organizational expectations. For Social Development practice, this points to the need to connect direct service with community participation, institutional responsiveness, equity, and attention to structural barriers. Participants' accounts of vocation or passion are meaningful expressions of professional purpose, but they should not be used to romanticize sacrifice or shift responsibility for poor working conditions onto individual practitioners. The study's potential relevance to SDG 4, SDG 8, SDG 10, and SDG 16 lies in education and learning, decent work, reduced inequalities, and responsive institutions; it does not establish measurable progress on these goals.

This study supports the need for further research on professional identity formation among social workers. Future work involving academic institutions, professional associations, employers, supervisors, policymakers, current practitioners, and former practitioners could examine how education, workplace conditions, and professional values shape identity, perceived competence, and decisions to continue or leave. Such research should distinguish self-reported confidence from demonstrated competence and intention to remain from observed retention.

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