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**Professional registration of social work: a blunt instrument  
for creating professional identity?**

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**Professional registration of social work: a blunt instrument for creating professional identity?**

**Abstract**

In this article, the authors critically examine the impact of professional registration on social workers’ professional identity in Australia. The primary purposes of professional registration are to protect the public from harmful social work practitioners and improve professional standing. However, there is contested evidence of its effectiveness in supporting professional identity development. There are additional concerns regarding implications for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who wish to practice or use social work services. Evidence indicates that registration alone serves as an overly simplistic mechanism for cultivating meaningful professional identity within social work practice.

**Implications Statement**

- Social workers need to articulate and practice a strong, independent professional identity in contemporary health and social care environments
- Clarifying how professional registration serves to develop and sustain social work identity will fortify the social work profession
- Efforts are required to ensure that the professional registration of social work will strengthen inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders within the profession

**Keywords:** Social work; Professional registration; Professional identity

For Peer Review Only

**Introduction**

Professional registration is a topic of lively debate among Australian social workers, especially in questioning whether professional registration would strengthen social work’s professional identity (AASW, 2024b; McCurdy et al., 2020). Looking broadly at health professions including social work, local factors such as relationships with service users and community, practitioner education, mentorship and practitioners’ aesthetic presentation are foundational aspects of professional identity development (Warren & Braithwaite, 2020). There is conjecture about whether professional registration is more supportive than local factors in the development and maintenance of professional identity (Warren & Braithwaite, 2020). However, among post-registration health professionals, deeper learning, qualifications and credentialing augment professional identity development, suggesting that among other credentials, registration supports professional identity development (Cornett et al., 2023). Elsewhere, there are concerns that professional registration may weaken potential for allyship between social workers and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Tangney & Mendes, 2023). Such damage would be antithetical to professional ethics and values relating to First Nations peoples that the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) espouses (AASW, 2020). Promisingly, the Social Worker’s Registration Board of South Australia (SWRB SA) is providing a road map for inclusion through commitment to including and representing voices and knowledges of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as it develops the state based social work registration body (SWRB SA, 2024). Contributing to current debates, we explore the relationship between professional registration and professional identity development, and implications for Australian social work.

## State of Knowledge

Domestically and internationally, professional social work bodies emphasise that social work is a values-first profession that promotes social justice, professional integrity and human rights (AASW, 2020; BASW, 2021; IFSW, 2020; NASW, 2021). Collective responsibility for all, practiced through values of social justice, human rights and respect for diversity are claimed to be the hallmark of social work's professional identity (Daly et al., 2024). This reputation is complicated by social workers' daily navigation of moral conflict due to organisational frameworks, policy and legislation that raise moral dilemmas regarding (for example) care vs. control, deserving vs. un-deserving, and individual vs. collective responsibility (Spolander et al., 2016). As such, social work is often viewed by the public as a well-intentioned, largely ineffective and at times harmful occupation (Gwilym, 2018; Hobbs & Evans, 2017; McCurdy et al., 2020; Nilsson et al., 2025). A further complication to public perceptions of social work is that social workers often find it difficult to adequately explain their profession in relation to other well established health professions (Daly et al., 2024). The development of a strong professional identity during university years tends to increase capacity for career endurance within multi and interdisciplinary settings throughout a social worker's career (Moorhead et al., 2019). However, a number of factors contribute to stress and burnout of social workers including tensions between professional philosophy and work demands, the organisational context, and demoralisation associated with deprofessionalisation of what were once considered to be social work specific activities (Brown et al., 2019; Curtis et al., 2010; McFadden et al., 2019; Rose &

Palattiyil, 2020; Turley et al., 2022). In a study by Papadopoulos and Egan (2021), new social work graduates report that their professional identity is not welcomed or supported in institutions where they work, operationally experienced through assignment of generic roles and duties, and perpetually through occupation of successive roles that symbolise a lateral trajectory of filling positions rather than social work career progression. For social workers, a lack of professional identity increases risk through de-skilling and de-professionalisation that cannot be mitigated simply, for example, through an increase in standardisation of tasks and widespread use of codes of practice (Spolander et al., 2016). However, in one study by Daly et al., (2024), social workers that were unsure of their professional knowledge base still felt confident in their sense of social work identity as one underpinned by values and ethics of care. To reassert professional identity, social workers could lay claim to a new framework of professional boundary-spanning, working with strangeness, and co-constructing knowledge with service users (Daly et al., 2024).

Since the 21<sup>st</sup> century began, there has been persistent but relatively uneventful discussion about regulation of social work in the Australian context, through the mechanism of professional registration (AASW, 2024c). Thus far, AASW's campaign for national registration has been broadly unsuccessful (Tangney & Mendes, 2022). The AASW states its support for the South Australian Government, who are independently working towards a state-based scheme of professional registration following the passage of The Social Workers Registration Act 2021. The AASW emphasises that national registration of social workers is needed in Australia to ensure public safety, professional accountability and recognition,



professional quality and workforce mobility (AASW, 2024a). The main aims are to raise practice standards, and efficiently and effectively deal with harmful social work practitioners to ensure that the public are protected. However, the creation of a robust professional registration scheme that supports professional identity will need to fastidiously address deficits in skills, knowledges, values, ethics, morals and professional identity of individual social workers who transgress social work practice standards and ethics (Gwilym, 2018; Worsley, 2023).

## Analysis

There are mixed opinions on how professional identity would be impacted by registration in the Australian context (Healy et al., 2009; Tangney & Mendes, 2023). Professional registration is not merely a point of difference, but a divisive issue among social workers in New Zealand, leading to some avoiding the label entirely post-registration (Hobbs & Evans, 2017). A common theme that intersects both positive and negative attitudes toward professional registration is self-stigma and associated shame, sensed as being either exacerbated or diminished by professional registration (Hobbs & Evans, 2017). Thus, it is not clear whether professional registration supports collective professional identity.

Some social workers reject the idea of professional registration because it feels threatening to their role, with concerns that professional identity is at risk if autonomous management of complexity is compromised through increase of bureaucratic control (McCurdy et al., 2020; Tangney & Mendes, 2023). This is a view aligned identity theory. Seminal literature from Stets & Burke (2000) suggests

that identity theory is concerned with experiential aspects of carrying out role and function, suggesting that the core of identity is based on the categorisation of oneself as the occupant of a role, and integration of the expectations, performance and meanings associated with that role (Stets & Burke, 2000). Other social workers welcomed the idea of registration (McCurdy et al., 2020; Tangney & Mendes, 2023), stating that a sense of belonging with other groups of registered allied health professions would augment social legitimacy and associated professional status and opportunities enjoyed by similar health professions. This is a view more aligned with social identity theory, which suggests that social identity depends upon a person's knowledge of belonging to a social category or group who share emotional, evaluative and other psychological correlates of in-group classification (Stets & Burke, 2000).

Well justified arguments have been made by the AASW for the protection of the public through the professional registration of social work, yet evidence has not yet conclusively proven that the poor practice of social workers causes sufficient harm to warrant mandatory registration (Fotheringham, 2018). Even if conclusive and systemic harm were proven, there are doubts about whether registration is an appropriate structural or contextual remedy for the individual breaches of conduct and ethics made by practitioners (McCurdy et al., 2020). Focusing on the punishment of individuals rather than the context of practice misses an important opportunity to manifest upstream interventions that focus on prevention of poor practice and professional improvement (Worsley, 2023).

The robustness of professional identity research that is in existence is also in question, often due to unclear theoretical underpinnings that are critical to contextualising the research questions (Cornett et al., 2023). How individuals seek to maintain, revise or reconstruct identity was found to be underrepresented in the literature (Reissner & Armitage-Chan, 2024). A recent scoping review of professional identity research in the health professions found that the construction of professional identity is complex, and broadly, is drawn from five key themes: the lived experience of professional identity; the world around me; belonging; me; and learning and qualifications (Cornett et al., 2023). Professional registration is not mentioned as a factor that supports robust development of professional identity (Cornett et al., 2023; Reissner & Armitage-Chan, 2024) and whilst the act of professional registration may be a means of validating existing professional identity, it does not generate professional identity (Warren & Braithwaite, 2020). Many social workers struggle with the tension between expert vs. dilettante that emerges when considering the broad range of spaces in which social workers reside (Beddoe, 2015). Professional registration has been cited as key to unlocking social workers' entitlement to continuing professional education, and that registration was the practical mechanism through which social workers found legitimacy in the health sector (Beddoe, 2015). Social workers tap into a reservoir of professional identity when they can confidently make distinctive contributions that other allied health professionals cannot. Yet there is no solid conclusion from Beddoe's study regarding whether it is professional registration, or continuing professional education, or the combination of the two factors that enable access to this sense of professional identity.

In Australia, a unique concern has been identified in relation to the impacts of professional registration on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders whether in social work roles or as service users (Tangney & Mendes, 2023). Some social workers question whether registration limits or advances progress towards culturally responsive and Indigenised practice and have concerns that additional fees or complexities could discourage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from entering the profession (Tangney & Mendes, 2023). Additionally, concerns have been stated about the limited level of consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in relation to the South Australian Social Workers Registration Bill (Tangney & Mendes, 2023). Since then, there have been promising signs that the SWRC SA are collaborating closely with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (SWRB SA, 2024). The AASW Code of Ethics (2020) declares that "Social workers commit to acknowledge and understand the historical and contemporary disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We work together in solidarity with them." (p.4.). To ensure that social work remains a safe and welcoming profession for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders during and beyond a process of professional registration, ongoing collaborations are crucial for eliminating institutional racism, and governing organisations must occupy leading roles in this work (Hassen et al., 2021).

There are strong arguments for increased public protection and improved professional standing through the mechanism of professional registration of social work. However, current evidence does not conclusively prove that registration alone is a sufficient instrument for preventing and ameliorating harm or solidifying the professional identity of social work.

## Conclusion

Social work is a context-driven profession, and social workers should be proud of their ability to use their professional capabilities flexibly, and across diverse and complex practice settings. Professional registration may bring benefits to social work's professional reputation in terms of raising professional standing among other health and social care disciplines. However, there is little evidence of registration as a precursor for improving professional identity, and untold concerns about its impact on reconciliation with, and inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples within the profession.

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