

Article

# Becoming a social worker: Personal and professional identity formation among social welfare officers in Ghana

by

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## **Abstract**

Despite being the subject of numerous research, professional identity in social work remains an important yet contentious concept. The aim of this article is to contribute to the literature on professional identity in social work by reflecting on the mutual development of the personal and professional identities of social workers in Ghana. Interviews were conducted among 20 social workers in two regions of Ghana, the northern and central regions. The evidence shows that the identity of social workers is shaped by two major factors – the statutory legal regime in which they operate, and the professional principles they apply in their work. Understood within the frame of social identity theory, the narratives of the social workers indicate how identifying with the professional group bestows distinctiveness and a change in personal identity. This change is reflected in their attitudes and value judgements of previously taken-for-granted socio-cultural practices. But while they firmly identify with the state and the professional principles, the social workers actively attempt to build local authenticity into their professional practices.

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## **Introduction**

Professional identity in social work remains a very important and yet highly contested issue (Webb, 2017). Its importance lies in the constant need for social workers to define and assert themselves professionally, particularly for those who practice in multidisciplinary settings (Bark et al., 2023). Although much scholarly attention has been paid to the concept, it remains a very complex process, which as Fran Wiles (2013, p. 864) insists, extends beyond 'adopting certain traits or values, or even demonstrating competence.' As Wiles further notes, part of this complexity stems from the subjective nature of identity formation, whereby 'each individual comes to have a sense of themselves as a social worker' (ibid.). This suggests a connection between personal and professional identity, to the extent that one's personal experiences influence their image of themselves as a professional and vice versa.

The aim of this article is to reflect on the relationship between the personal and professional identity of social workers in Ghana. In doing this, it foregrounds the voices of social workers and projects their subjective views on the development of their personal and professional identity. Many studies in social work and related fields have long postulated a close link between personal and professional identity (Moorhead et al., 2019; Alves & Gazzola, 2011). For example, in a review of the European literature on professional identity formation among young adults, Cohen-Scali (2003) presents it as the culmination of two major socialization processes starting from childhood and continuing during professional practice. In that sense, professional identity becomes the product of one's personal experiences throughout life, a point reiterated by Alves and Gazzola (2011) in their study of experienced counsellors. Butler-Warke and Bolger (2021) and Moorhead et al. (2019) have also emphasized the mutuality of professional and personal development in social work education.

Although some studies suggest a unidirectional relationship between personal and professional identity, in which one's personal experiences shape their professional identity (e.g. Cohen-Scali, 2003; Alves & Gazzola, 2011), the evidence presented in this article instead supports the argument that the relationship between professional and personal identity is more dynamic. In other words, professionalization not only

incorporates the personal identity that has been built since childhood, it also alters it in significant ways. This argument is substantiated in the following sections using evidence from interviews with social workers in Ghana. In the first place, the narratives of the research participants indicate that the major determinants of professional identity among social workers in Ghana include the statutory legal regime and the professional principles that govern and guide social work practice in the country. Beyond this, the evidence also suggests a change in the social workers' self-image as a result of their identification with the state's law and their professional principles.

In this analysis, the perspectives of the social workers are understood through the frame of social identity theory – the idea that individuals partly construct their identities based on group membership and roles (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019). The group in this sense is defined to include organizations, units within organizations, professions, and sociodemographic categories (Hogg & Terry, 2000, p. 122). Relating the concept of social identity to a work context, Ashforth and Mael (1989) have alluded to three major factors which define a person's identification with a group – distinctiveness, prestige and the salience of the out-group. The social workers in this article clearly identify as members of a distinct professional group which operates within specific legal and ethical frameworks. This professional identity also offers them a sense of fulfilment and prestige. They derive prestige from their position as government workers who operate according to specific legal and professional principles. Finally, all these factors make them distinguishable from non-practitioners or members of other professions.

The findings presented in this article resonate with what Øydgard and Pedersen (2022) found in their study of Norwegian social workers operating in the midst of the COVID pandemic. Among the factors they identified as key determinants of professional identity were the professional principles and the government policy on social work practice during the period of the pandemic. The purpose of their study was to investigate the impact of the changing working conditions on the professional identity of social workers. In the present study, the aim is to move beyond the factors which shape professional identity to examine the relationship between professional and personal identities.

While the emphasis in this article is on the identity change that occurs when one joins the social work profession, it is important to note, as other studies have done, that identity change not only occurs at the entry point of a profession. It is a process that can also occur during re-entry into a profession after a period of leave or other prolonged absence (Ladge & Greenberg, 2015) during a transition to a new position (Ibarra, 1999), and during a period of adjustment to new professional trends (Singer, 2004) or new professional standards (Faulk et al., 2010; Egan, 1989). In all these instances, individuals go through a process of re-evaluation of the self in both a professional and a personal capacity, a process which can induce both positive and negative consequences on the self (Egan, 1989; Loseke & Cahill, 1986).

As noted by Egan (1989) in a study of graduate students, the outcome of a professional identity change is determined by 'the extent to which the individual anticipates, desires and defines such a change as beneficial' (p. 204). For the participants of this present study, the transition process is evaluated positively; it is viewed as an opportunity to internalize or adopt a new identity. Within the frame of social identity theory, this is not surprising because it is said that 'people are generally motivated to achieve a positive social identity' (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019, p. 133). Thus, becoming a social worker does not merely involve a change of profession, it is a process that actively constitutes the self by changing how the individual views themselves and their role in society.

### *Research method*

The evidence presented in this article was generated using the qualitative research method. The main instrument for data gathering was the interview, complemented by observation. The population of the study was social workers in Ghana, with the sampling of research participants done on two levels. First, the purposive sampling method was applied in selecting the location for the study. The northern and central regions of Ghana were purposively selected to reflect different socio-cultural milieus – with the northern region dominated by patrilineal kinship practices, and the central region predominantly matrilineal. Although there are numerous ethnic groups in Ghana, the most common forms of kinship reckoning are the matrilineal and

patrilineal systems (Nyarko, 2014). For a study concerned with the personal and professional identity of social workers, it is important to consider the kinship systems in which the participants operate. This is because kinship shapes both their personal identities, as well as the conditions in which they do their professional work.

The individual participants of the study were selected based on convenience. This was necessary because there was no sampling frame from which to randomly select participants. In the end, 20 social workers who were all staff of the Department of Social Welfare (DSW) were selected from the Northern Regional Social Welfare Office, the Tamale Children's Home, the Tamale Teaching Hospital Welfare Unit, the Tamale Metropolitan Social Welfare Office, the Sagnarigu Municipal Social Welfare Office, the Winneba Trauma Hospital Welfare Unit, the Effutu Municipal Social Welfare Office and the Agona West Municipal Social Welfare Office. The interviews were conducted between July 2022 and April 2023.

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the research and ethics committee of the Centre for African Studies, University of Education, Winneba. Subsequent to this, an introductory letter was issued by the head of the centre communicating the approval for the study. In the conduct of the study, care was taken to ensure that participants did not suffer any undue intrusion. At each location, the officers were provided with an information sheet about the research, and their consent sought. All the officers who were available and willing to participate were interviewed. Some declined the invitation citing various reasons, including unwillingness to discuss their personal lives.

The reason for interviewing participants at their work locations was to increase the possibility of observing them at work, and to understand as much of the work context as possible. As much as possible, the interview questions were also designed to capture a sense of their personal journeys to the profession and the effect of the socio-cultural conditions in which they worked. As Webb (2003) notes, there is merit in studying social work 'by paying attention to particular persons in locally situated reflexive situations' (p. 202). This is also worthwhile given the significance of cultural sensitivity in social work (Volckmar-Eeg & Enoksen, 2020).

The interviews were conducted in a life-history style, with questions designed to elicit information on the personal and professional life experiences of participants. Interviewees were encouraged to speak in detail about their socialization within the family, the school system and the community. The questions guided them to trace their journeys to the social work profession, and to describe their work experiences in relation to the wider socio-cultural context within which their identities were shaped. Although the questions probed for as much detail as possible, it was left to each interviewee to decide how much detail they would divulge. Therefore, while participants gave enough to bring out the processes and contradictions of their personal and professional realities, the level of depth was less than what one would expect in typical life-history interviews (Lincoln & Lanford, 2019; Lanford & Tierney, 2019; Faraday & Plummer, 1979).

Out of the 20 participants, there were 11 males and nine females. All the interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed using iterative processes. To protect the respondents from any negative consequences due to their participation, all the names used in this article are pseudonyms. The evidence from the interviews point to the fact that the social workers understood the demands of their job to mean that they must transform from archetypal members of the community into state actors with a well-defined perspective and purpose. They understood that in order to conform to this image, their personal values and attitudes must change to match what was required of them as state actors.

### *Background to the Department of Social Welfare (DSW)*

The Department of Social Welfare and Housing (predecessor of the DSW) was established during British colonial rule in the 1940s for the purpose of overseeing the reformation of juvenile offenders (Frimpong-Manso, 2014). The history of the department has largely followed the trajectory of post-independence Ghanaian history – expansion in the 1960s, followed by decline in the long periods of military rule (Laird, 2002). In the current legal regime, it is mandated to implement three core programmes in the areas of community care, justice administration and child rights and protection (Laird, 2008). It also supervises the work of non-governmental

organizations (NGOs), and administers the Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty (LEAP), a government welfare programme for poor households.

The staff of the DSW are primarily social workers who manage its offices across the country (Frimpong-Manso, 2014). The structure of the organization consists of a national headquarters with regional and district offices across the country. One of the major preoccupations of the district offices is the mediation of family disputes concerning spousal and child support (Salifu, 2021). In addition to these, some of the DSW staff operate in hospitals (hospital welfare), schools, orphanages and correctional institutions. The national and regional offices are responsible for supervising and monitoring the work of the district offices and the other units in hospitals, schools and correctional institutions. As a government institution, the DSW operates in accordance with a human rights perspective, as spelled out in the laws of the country.

The human rights approach of social workers at the DSW reflects a deliberate state policy to promote the rights of women and children in a sociocultural environment deemed by the state to be male-dominated. This is a philosophy that underpins all the state legal instruments that guide the work of the DSW staff, including the Constitution of the Republic of Ghana (1992), the Children's Act 1998 (Act 560), the Criminal Code 1960 (Act 29), the Matrimonial Causes Act 1971 (Act 367), the Wills Act 1971 (Act 360), the Intestate Succession Law 1985 (PNDCL 111) and the Courts Act 1993 (Act 459). Indeed, as noted by Bowan (2013), the human rights perspective permeates all legislative processes and court decisions in Ghana, especially in the area of spousal rights in customary and polygynous marriages. In addition to these national laws, Ghana is also a signatory to major international human rights agreements, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Convention on the Rights of the Child and the African Charter on the Rights of the Child (Atuguba et al., 2004, p. 29).

### **Changing identities**

For most of the people interviewed for this study, the decision to become a social worker was primarily driven by opportunity, rather than a passion for the profession.



Five persons out of the sample (Ibrahim, Jacob, David, Adjoa and Lucy) initially took courses that led directly to a career in social work, although Adjoa admitted that taking the social work course was not what she wanted to do initially. To this list we can add Felicia who, despite initially attending a secretarial school, became interested in social work after visiting an orphanage. The rest of the respondents indicated that they had been interested in something else before fate brought them to social work. Although in many of these cases, the social workers eventually obtained formal training, this still paints a slightly different picture from previous findings made by Laird (2008, p. 388), for example, who indicated that most DSW staff had formal training in social work. However, considering the small sample size of the present study, it would be difficult to make a generalization out of the few cases studied. Nonetheless, examining the respondents' personal stories about their paths to the social work profession does provide insight on the extent of the transformation that occurs during this process.

In the case of Fuseini, a hospital welfare officer in Tamale, his original career plan was to join the Ghana Fire Service. To aid his plans, he gathered his savings from his part-time job as a laboratory assistant, and bought tubers of yam which he transported to Accra with the intention of presenting them as a gift or bribe to whichever 'big man' would help him get the job. But this plan did not work, and he ended up working in a factory in Tema. It was while he worked in this factory that he saw the advertisement for admissions into the School of Social Work. Having failed in a bid to become a fireman, he saw social work as a second-choice opportunity to make something of himself. After more than 20 years in the profession, he is now able to draw a link between his previous experience as a laboratory assistant and his current role in hospital welfare. But even he admits that this link was most improbable all those years ago when he could only imagine himself in a fireman's gear.

Other respondents had similar stories about their journey to the profession. One of them, Janet, also based in Tamale, indicated that despite her mother being a social worker, her own career interest was initially in becoming an agriculturalist. She imagined herself visiting people's farms on her big motorcycle, the status symbol for agriculturalists in her youth. Unfortunately for her, this dream did not materialize because her father changed her school and her course, because he wanted to put

her in a boarding school where she ended up reading business and later accounting. It was only when she had difficulty finding work after she completed school that she took a job in social welfare with the help of her mother. She later attended the School of Social Work to obtain formal training in the profession. Similarly, Ama, who is based in Swedru, initially preferred a career in nursing. But after completing university, she had a few short-term stints at various jobs before taking up the opportunity to become a social worker. Akosua, another lady officer in Sagnarigu, shared a similar experience. She searched for a while after graduating from university until her mother arranged for the DSW job with the help of a well-connected man.

Despite their initial career preferences, all these officers soon embraced their new profession and its rights-based approach. This point was made by Seidu of Sagnarigu, who recalled feeling a sense of purpose upon becoming a social worker: 'Coming into it actually is like getting into my passion of what I actually wanted to do for children, and even beyond that I have come to appreciate dialogue and communication.' His initial job preferences notwithstanding, he became a passionate advocate for the rights of others, especially those who were deemed to be vulnerable. In her analysis of child-focused social work in Ghana, Laird (2002, p. 894) highlights its rights-based approach, which, as she indicates, is itself a legacy of the colonial relationship between Ghana and Britain. This focus on individual rights places social workers on the side of the state and the international influences that shape its legal regime. In what follows, the changing identity of social workers is analysed through two factors – the statutory legal framework within which they operate and the professional principles that guide them.

### *Social workers as state agents*

In describing his journey to the social work profession, Seidu made a distinction between his old self, which had no interest in the rights of individuals, and his new self, which now saw everything from the rights perspective. Before becoming a professional social worker, Seidu worked as a secondary school teacher in a nearby town where a lot of his old friends still lived. Soon after joining his new profession, he noticed a change in himself, to the extent that he became uncomfortable with the

behaviour of his old teacher friends. For instance, he found himself rebuking them one time when they referred to their female students as their 'ex gratia'. This Latin phrase is widely used in Ghanaian public discussions to describe the severance package paid to political office holders who have served their term. In using this phrase to describe their female students, the teachers claim the right to make use of their labour and other services as a form of compensation for the low salaries they receive. What surprised him the most was that he too had been involved in such talk when he was a teacher. But having made the change to social work, he was able to critically reflect from the perspective of the state:

I just can't imagine somebody molesting a child or making it difficult for a child to learn, and more especially the girl child whom some of us always want to take advantage of. You know we have this, our common saying, 'that's the ex gratia for teachers.' Coming into this profession, I got to realize that there are even rights to protect these children and we were doing all these things. There was a day I met a former colleague of mine from secondary school and I was just like, 'Wow, if they were together with us and they were doing those things we were doing, what would I have done to them?'

In this last sentence, he is imagining what his response to his colleagues would have been all these years if he had known what he knows now. The answer to his own question does not bode well for this former colleagues. There is no way he would condone such behaviour now, given what he knows about child rights and the need to protect the vulnerable members of society. At another time, he found himself advising a friend whose wife had left his house. His friend did not quite understand why it was his responsibility to guarantee the safety of his wife at all times. Seidu had to tell him: 'When you throw your wife's things out and lock your door it is an offence. It's a human rights abuse, and it also falls under domestic violence. Where do you expect her to go and sleep?' The terms he employs here – 'offence', 'human rights', 'abuse' and 'domestic violence' – directly reflect the language of the state law. But even as he scolded his friend, he was also sympathetic, for he knew that he was only a few years removed from that kind of mindset himself: 'Previously I wouldn't think that way; I would also just slap and throw [her] things away.' This last statement from Seidu is very revealing. It shows the extent of the personal identity change that accompanies a transition into social work. It is as if we had one version of Seidu before, and another version after.

The interaction between Seidu and his friend also illustrates the challenge of implementing state law in areas where more local legal registers have operated for a long time. From interviews with DSW staff across Ghana, Laird (2011) has argued that the discrepancy between state and customary law in certain situations leaves officials with the task of adapting the rules to the reality of the situation. For example, Laird's (2011) analysis of the Children's Act shows that its recommendations for child support payment are predicated on the existence of an economy that is predominantly cash-based and dominated by a nuclear family structure (p. 236). This presumption clearly exemplifies the Euro-American influence in the national laws of Ghana. The situation in real life, as indicated by Laird, is that economic activity in small communities sometimes involves material exchange rather than cash, and the family is structured around the lineage or extended family, as well as polygynous households (ibid).

Although the social workers are themselves products of these local kinship practices, their identification with the state turns them into critics. Respondents in the northern region, which is dominated by patrilineal kinship, bemoaned the tendency for people who are brought up in this culture to show deference to male elders and generally value the male gender over female. Reflecting on this, Abu, a social worker in Tamale, noted that there was a tendency for people brought up in this culture to dismiss the contribution of women, seeing them only as secondary figures whose purpose was to complement their men. He identified this as the sort of attitude that he had to unlearn through his training and experience on the job. Unfortunately, it was an attitude that he saw quite often in the cases that he handled:

We are patrilineal and most of our people think you just own a child just by bringing him or her to the world and in fact it's not both you and the woman that own the child, but it is you the man who owns the child. So, whether you are together or divorced, the child is yours. [This is] contrary to the Children's Act and human rights laws that have been put in place to protect women and children.

Here, Abu describes the impact of patrilineal kinship practices on his work and the identity change that followed his transition to social work. As a case worker, he handles a lot of cases concerning spousal separation and child custody. His point here is that people who come from a patrilineal background tend to dismiss the role of women as progenitors. This is because the rules of patrilineal descent place children within the lineage of their father and not their mother (Nyarko, 2014; Goody

& Goody, 1967). Under these rules, a divorced woman is expected to leave her children with their father when she leaves her husband's house. This explains why the men who appear before Abu tend to assume that 'you just own a child by bringing him or her to the world.' It becomes Abu's job to explain to them that the position of the law is different. As someone who was himself raised in a patrilineal community, he had to discard these perceptions in order to assume the identity of a social worker.

It is also important to point out that Abu ends his statement by referring to the state laws that guide their work. In his estimation, these laws must serve as the metric for determining which practices are acceptable and which are not. Another practice associated with patriliney, which was deemed by Abu to be an affront to the law, was widow inheritance. Abu's conception of this practice was that women were deemed to be the property of men, to the extent that when their husbands died, they were inherited along with the lands and livestock once owned by the deceased. In his view, it was a practice which also left the children at the mercy of the inheritors, who were often keen to inherit the property and not the responsibilities. Under a legal dispensation in which individual rights were guaranteed, such practices had no place.

Interviewees who were based in the areas dominated by matrilineal kinship had similar difficulties reconciling some of the practices with what the law envisioned. Amanda, who was based at the Winneba DSW office, described scenarios that were characteristically matrilineal – women having children at an early age, no qualms about having children with multiple men, little involvement of fathers in the lives of their children, and consequently, considerably more cases of child support for social workers to deal with.<sup>1</sup> Seen through the lenses of state law, these practices do not conform to an ideal family life as envisioned in the Children's Act, in which a father is supposed to name his children, cooperate with their mother to raise them and provide for all their needs. Here, Amanda directly makes the point that the ambiguity surrounding the roles of fathers in matrilineal communities partly accounts for the

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<sup>1</sup> Although the original settlers in Winneba were patrilineal, external influences over the years have resulted in a marked shift towards matriliney. This was corroborated by Julius, a native of Winneba and a colleague of Amanda's.

relatively high number of child support cases. This is a point that has been made from research in other matrilineal areas in Ghana (Salifu, 2021).

David told of similar clashes between the law and customary practice in his base in Swedru, another matrilineal area. Here, when a man fathers a child out of wedlock, he is obliged to pay a fine to the woman's family. This fine, which is referred to as *domufa*, is paid in recompense for 'stealing' her from her family when the necessary marriage rites have not been performed. The conflict with the law arises when the family insists on receiving the payment before any naming ceremony can be performed for the child. But in identifying with the state as a social worker, David insisted in his interview that the law must hold supreme in such cases:

When you go to the Children's Act, it tells us every child is entitled to a name. So, whether he has paid *domufa* or not, the naming must take place for the child to be known. Then you can tackle him on the other issue of *domufa*.<sup>2</sup>

As agents of the state involved in the mediation of family disputes, social workers become identified with the political and judicial structures of the state, as opposed to the pre-existing political and judicial structures in the communities where they work. These pre-existing structures include the courts of the chiefs and queen mothers, which operate in parallel to the state courts and tribunals. Despite the erosion of the power of chiefs in the post-colonial democratic nation-state, they continue to wield influence, particularly in rural communities where the presence of the state is relatively weak. Until the year 2011, when sections of the Chieftaincy Act (Act 759 of 2008) were struck down by the Supreme Court, it was a punishable offense for a citizen to deliberately refuse to attend the summons of a chief.<sup>3</sup> In some places, members of the localized lineage (*abusua*) remain subject to the authority of lineage elders, as well as the chiefs and queen mothers who maintain courts for the resolution of disputes between individuals and groups (Stoeltje, 2009).

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<sup>2</sup> *Domufa* is described as a payment demanded by the family of a girl who becomes pregnant out of wedlock. The man responsible for the pregnancy must make this payment before he is allowed to name the child, an act which confirms him as the progenitor of the child. It is important to note that this practice does not pertain in all matrilineal groups. Nonetheless, it is a popular practice among the matrilineal groups living in the Swedru area.

<sup>3</sup> The Ghana Chieftaincy Act (Act 759), 2008. Section 63 (d) was struck down. <https://www.rawgist.com/national-house-of-chiefs-appeal-for-restoration-of-power-of-summons/>

For the social workers who have faith in the state and its judicial processes, there is a real dilemma in dealing with these pre-existing political and judicial structures. On the one hand, they recognize the importance of collaborating with key local actors such as family, lineage and community elders in order to bridge the gap between the state and the community. Ideally, these influential figures play a crucial role in the conflict mediation work of the DSW – exerting a calming influence when conflicts threaten to get out of hand, helping with the summons of uncooperative parties, and generally offering authenticity to the process. The alliance between social workers and traditional authorities is something that social work researchers in Ghana have made an argument for (Kreitzer, 2005). On the other hand, the problem with these pre-existing institutions is that they are too resistant to change. In describing the intervention of chiefs in his case work, David alluded to their staunch belief in tradition. According to him, they would say things like: ‘This is how our fathers did it, this is how we are doing it, and this is how it must be done.’ As explained in the excerpt below by Abu in relation to the chiefs’ courts or the home settlement of abuse cases, another problem was that the punishments administered to persons who were found to have committed offences were not deterrent enough:

I used to see men who rape children being whipped at the chief’s palace. Assuming the guy doesn’t fear [the] whip, it means that he will go back and keep doing it. So, there are certain practices in my own culture that are not right and if I have that opportunity, I will change things. When you go to the university and you do a course like sociology, social science, mostly they give you a comparative exposure to so many other cultures, and then you tend to compare and understand where your culture is going wrong.

In this statement, Abu not only questions the chief’s method of adjudication, but also offers a general critique of the culture he grew up in. His new professional identity as a social worker is anchored by his academic training, and his faith in the state and its methods. Fuseini, the hospital welfare officer, had a similar difficulty with the interference of chiefs and religious leaders in cases before the DSW. In his view, the cases before them were usually about the rights of people, which must be handled by the well-developed structures of the state:

We see a lot here, a lot of abuses. I see either child abuse or wife battery. When you come here our role is to identify the problem to the appropriate agencies, so we do what is called referral. The agency here we refer to is DOVVSU.<sup>4</sup> They can investigate and prosecute but we don’t have that power, we can only investigate

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<sup>4</sup> DOVVSU stands for Domestic Violence and Victims Support Unit. It is a branch of the Police Service.

locally in the hospital and then refer to them. You will go and traditional rulers and other people will say let bygones be bygones; they would want to pick it out of [the system] and go settle it.

In this case, allowing bygones to remain bygones is alien to the law of the state. In the logic of the state law, it would mean that the perpetrators of abuse are let off easily, although this does not deter others from engaging in such behaviour in the future. It is also clear from Fuseini's statement that collaboration with other state agencies is very central to the work of the DSW. To help ensure this, it is important that the social workers clearly identify with the state and its procedures. As David makes clear in the following quotation, it is essential that the social worker sticks with the law, and other state institutions must back them up: 'At the end of the case, we make sure that the law takes its place. If you do not understand why we have done that, we will direct you to the next place. There too, the same law will apply.'

For the social workers in this article, the role conflict arising from identifying with the state is perhaps most strongly felt in the area of religion. Admittedly, there is evidence from research in other parts of the world which indicates a complementary relationship between the religious and professional identity of social workers (Ranz et al., 2016). But in this particular context in Ghana, religious belief and practice has been a source of tension for some social workers. Narrating an incident involving a family of Jehovah's Witnesses who refused to give consent for their sick child to receive a life-saving blood transfusion, Fuseini recalled that he had to cite the law to make a case for the child to receive health care regardless of the parents' religious beliefs:

What we do is, you just look at the law and apply, and make sure that the child gets care based on the law. Then you explain the law to the parents or guardian that the law says this is your belief, this child might grow up to say I will be a Muslim, or he will be a Catholic and he will not be a Jehovah's Witness.

In discharging their duties as agents of the state, it is the law of the state which must hold supreme over any religious considerations. However, role and identity conflicts can arise when there is a clash between one's religious and professional identities. In difficult situations such as this, the law becomes a shield that social workers can deploy in defence of their official actions. In this particular incident, the case was first handled by one of Fuseini's social work trainees who was herself a Jehovah's Witness, and had sided with the child's parents. But Fuseini maintained that it was



wrong to let her religious belief supersede her professional duty. His verdict was that the trainee had more to learn, and her switch to social work was still incomplete: 'I said give way. And I quoted a principle in social work that when you think your emotions or belief can compromise what you do, give way and call another social worker.'

But things are not always as straightforward as this. Seidu, who was a very experienced social worker, admitted to his constant struggles to strike a balance between his devotion to his religion on the one hand and his professional beliefs on the other. He was all too aware that there were times when the two became mutually exclusive:

In fact, it is not an easy thing. You need to be steadfast, and you need to do a lot of crosscutting, cross stages. For instance, somebody like me coming from an Islamic background, knowing the jurisprudence on segregation of male and female... Meanwhile, the religion equally protects the dignity of the human being.

Seidu's statement here shows his role conflict, and specifically, his difficulty with reconciling the aspects of his religion which contradict his professional principles with the aspects that endorse them. Like the other social workers, he knew that the segregation of male and female was the basis for discriminating between the sexes. But his religious faith made it difficult for him to perform his duty, which required him to help protect the dignity of all manner of persons. Thus, although he was fully committed to living by his professional identity and had no problem scolding his friends for saying derogatory things about women, there were times when balancing that with his religious faith became a challenge.

The evidence adduced in this section points to identity changes in social workers, as gleaned from their own narratives about their beliefs, attitudes and work experiences in their capacity as agents of the state. These are variables that have been identified in the research as useful measures of professional identity (Barbour & Lammers, 2015). The narratives in the following section similarly demonstrate the change in identity among social workers, as induced by the principles which guide their professional conduct.

### *Social workers as exemplars of professional principles*

Apart from their role as agents of the state who enforce its human rights agenda, the social workers who are the subject of this article closely identify with a specific set of professional principles that guide their work. From their narratives, it is clear that the principles offer them a professional distinctiveness and prestige which distinguishes them from salient out-groups (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). In telling the story of her experience with the social work principles, Benedicta, a hospital welfare officer, made a specific distinction between who she was before encountering these principles and who she became after. She described herself prior to her entry into the School of Social Work as 'a lay person', invoking religious terminology to emphasize the almost religious transformation that the profession brought, a transformation that set them apart from non-social workers. Fuseini re-echoed this point by describing how the principles serve as a catalyst for a major transformation in the outlook of persons joining the profession for the first time:

If you look at how you are trained, the principles of social work vis a vis the ethics that we are trained to go out there and do, you will see that there is a total drift, a total overhauling of your orientation. When you go out there you will apply those things because you will be confronted by some of the things, and you will see that you have actually been changed from one stage to another, to a professional way of looking at things. Your client comes and the principles come – confidentiality, uniqueness of the individual, non-discrimination, the rights of the individual. All these things come, and you would have to apply. So even though you might have your own [opinion] about it, your professional upbringing supersedes your personal [view] that you have on an issue.

Here, Fuseini's emphasis is on what he calls the total overhauling of one's orientation, a change from one stage to another. This implies that social workers assume a different identity in a personal and professional sense which distinguishes them from their earlier selves and non-practitioners. This comes across clearly in their interactions with clients. On one occasion while I was speaking with Ibrahim at the Regional Office in Tamale, a woman walked in to follow up on an application she had made to adopt a child. However, the officer who had started the process with her was not present at that time and instead of waiting for them to return, she asked Ibrahim to continue the process with her. But he explained to her that his involvement with the case would violate the principle of confidentiality. He stressed that it was necessary to uphold the discreetness of the process, especially because the subject of the adoption was a minor whose identity needed to be protected. The woman, as a 'lay person', needed schooling on the importance of upholding these principles.

On her part, Janet illustrated her personal transformation with a story about one of her siblings who was forced to write with their right hand in school, although they were naturally left-handed. It has been established that the condition of left-handedness is generally stigmatized in Africa because of the negative connotations of the 'left' in comparison to the 'right' in many places (Shanunu et al., 2022; Alhassan, 2018). Because of this, parents and even teachers sometimes try to correct this perceived wrong by encouraging children to use the right hand more. In Janet's experience, the School of Social Work was where she first encountered the social work principles which changed her perspective on things that she had taken for granted. The principle of acceptance appealed to her personally because of the experiences of her sibling mentioned above. She began to see the wrong in punishing people for their natural dispositions.

The origins of these professional principles can be traced to the work of the American Jesuit priest and academic, Father Biesteck (Dominelli, 2002). His principles of case work, which continue to form the bases for the codes and guidelines developed by professional social work associations, include ideas such as 'respect and dignity for the person; confidentiality; and self-determination' (ibid., 64). In practice, these principles encourage practitioners to have a:

...belief in the worth and dignity of each person; commitment to non-discrimination and equality; acceptance of the rights of persons to self-determination and to confidentiality in their dealings with social workers; and recognition that social workers have multiple ethical responsibilities to those served, to the profession, to employing institutions, to fellow professionals and to society at large (Healy, 2007, p. 16).

The history of the profession in Ghana shows that these Western-inspired professional principles have been part of social work training since the beginning. The colonizers established a social work training system modelled on the British curriculum (Darkwa, 1999). Before the 1940s, when the first local training institution for social workers was established, the staff of the Department of Social Welfare and Community Development were trained at the London School of Economics in England (Kreitzer et al., 2009). In the years following independence in 1957, the training of social workers has largely retained these colonial influences, although efforts have been made to localize the training and make it more relevant to the needs of the Ghanaian people (Kreitzer, 2005; Darkwa, 1999; Björck, 2013). But as

has been stated already, the social workers interviewed for this study showed themselves to be agreeable to the training, the professional principles and the human rights orientation of the state.

Notwithstanding the social workers' enthusiastic identification with the professional principles, there is no suggestion here of a wholesale adoption without modifications. As Healy (2007) notes in her review of the debates on universalism and cultural relativism in social work ethics, practitioners in non-Western settings tend to modify the principles to fit their local circumstances. For example, a social worker might give advice or even directives or prescriptions to a client on how to behave in order to achieve a particular goal, knowing that this contravenes the principle of self-determination. Björck (2013, p. 24) provides examples of this from interviews with social workers in Accra. Similarly, the responses of the social workers in this study show that they do indeed interpret their professional principles within the context in which they operate.

When reflecting on the question of the external influences on their practice, my interviewees for this study presented a perspective that underscored the local roots of their professional principles. In their narratives, the social workers were deliberate in dispelling any misconceptions about the extent of the external or Western influences in their work. Of specific concern to them was the notion, as expressed in some of the literature (Umoren, 2016; Mwansa, 2012; Kreitzer et al., 2009), that their emersion in the presumably Western-derived principles made them ineffective in an African context. In responding to this criticism, the social workers attempted to establish the local foundations of these apparently foreign ideas. In doing this, they not only make a case for their personal authenticity, but they also tried to demonstrate the relevance of locally generated ideas in an ever-globalizing world.

Broadly speaking, they conceptualized the principles, which are derived from the idea of universal human rights, as norms that help people to live together. The implication of this definition is that the principles have a universal quality, and are expected to be found wherever there are people hoping to live together, including Ghana. Although they acknowledged that the terms were foreign, they insisted that the ideas they conveyed had always been part of Ghanaian culture. For example, Abu and Seidu

both contended that the respect for personal liberty had always been part of local norms, just that it was not called a human right. Other respondents claimed that the same could be said about the principles of confidentiality, the uniqueness of the individual, or the right to protection for children and other vulnerable members of society. Indeed, there is evidence to show that social workers in Ghana do attempt to implement these principles, particularly in places where specific historical and cultural conditions allow (Salifu, 2021). Findings from Kreitzer et al. (2009) also show that despite the difficulty involved in doing so, Ghanaians are generally open to balancing Western and local ideas and values.

However, as one would expect, the social workers also experience role conflict, even as they try to adhere to the professional principles. As Ibrahim indicates in the quote below, the rule on avoiding emotional involvement with clients has often proved tricky for him and his colleagues:

One of the principles again [is that] you shouldn't sympathize, you must empathize with the client. But you might be so emotional that you end up sympathizing, and that would affect the outcome of the case or the approach you use in that case. I think it's normal, we are human. You might be so attached to a particular case that it will affect the outcome of such a case.

Alexander and Charles (2009) made a similar observation from their study of social workers in Canada, where they found that the professionals regularly developed 'caring relationships' with clients during the course of their repeated interactions. This shows that such dilemmas arising from the principles are not limited to a Ghanaian or African context, but is a situation that affects social workers around the world.

From these narratives, it is clear that the professional principles play a major role in shaping the identity of social workers. The principles mark them out as a distinct professional group. They also shape the personal values of the social workers as they apply them in their daily practice. Again, at least based on the evidence of what the participants in this study had to say, we can surmise that while the professional principles and statutory legal regime shape the identity of social workers, they are localized in a way that reflects the role of practitioners as constructors of their own professional worlds.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this article has been to reflect on the dynamic relationship between the personal and professional identity of social workers in Ghana. What has been demonstrated here is that the identities of social workers are shaped by two main conditions of their work – the state law which anchors their legitimacy, and the professional principles which guide their daily practice. More specifically, the narratives of the respondents indicate that the transition into professional social work triggers changes in their personal identity. This happens because admission into the profession requires one to personally identify with the state and adopt its law and philosophy in the performance of one's duty. In practice, this usually involves a personal commitment to upholding the individual rights of all persons, particularly women and children. But this is a commitment which often brings them into conflict with the pre-existing social and religious norms and the persons who articulate them. The second major influence on the identity of social workers – the professional principles – equally require personal changes, and bestow on them a unique professional disposition which distinguishes them from non-practitioners.

Finally, it is important to reiterate that understanding the identity issues of social workers is important because of their role as gatekeepers for state justice in the most remote communities. Together with the family courts, social workers in the DSW are significant actors in the resolution of disputes over family and child welfare. As a result, in some instances they mediate between the state and the community; and as already demonstrated in other studies, their personal attitudes and beliefs directly impact their work with clients and in communities (see Obasi, 2022; Kreitzer et al., 2009; Alexander & Charles, 2009; Dominelli, 2002). By analysing how the personal identity of social workers is altered through their professional association, this study contributes to ideas about the role of social identity in a professional context. Furthermore, given the significance of the professional principles in their practice, and considering the fact that these principles (and indeed the statutory law) are Western-inspired, this study offers insight on local responses to the global spread of social work values and practices.

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