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“Sometimes We Are Everything and Nothing in the Same Breath”

**Beginning Social Work Practitioners’ Constructions
of Professional Identity**

**A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Social Work**

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Abstract

This research takes a social constructionist approach to examine how beginning social work practitioners use discursive practices to make meaning of their experiences and construct their professional identities in the social and political environment of Aotearoa New Zealand.

A qualitative inquiry, it utilises the methods of individual interviews and a focus group to gather information from ten beginning social work practitioners who have degree-level or post-graduate social work qualifications and are within their first three years of practice in child protection, health and community settings. A discursive analytic approach is employed to determine how these practitioners use interpretive repertoires drawn from wider social discourses to construct identities in relation to professional social work practice.

The research found that these practitioners utilised five interpretive repertoires, which included 'social work as social change', 'social work as helping', 'constraints', 'being professional' and 'self-care' to construct a number of corresponding identities by which they could account for themselves as competent social workers, albeit not always able to achieve their notions of best practice. These identities included 'change agent', 'helper', 'capable but constrained', 'professional' and 'person(s) first'. The research suggests that these identities are shaped by wider social discourses of social work that have formed over time within the historical, cultural and social milieu of Aotearoa New Zealand, and which often operate in contradiction to each other in education, practice and social settings.

The research recommends that to ease the transition from education to practice, new social workers be taught to understand the social work environment as one in which competing discourses interact to influence their constitution of professional identities, and that adequate material supports such as supervision be put in place by employing organisations to provide new social workers with emotional support and opportunities to critically consider their selves in the work environment. Recommendations for future research are also made and the thesis ends with a reflection on the research process.

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