



**Exploring the Professional Identity of Social Work Academics**

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# Exploring the Professional Identity of Social Work Academics

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*Lopez-Humphreys, Teater, Dawson and Hayes*

## Abstract

Social work academics in the United States (US) experience tensions between the expectations for research productivity and the mandates for them to embody the behaviors and values of professional social work. With the various preferred roles and expectations placed on social work academics, it is difficult to distinguish whether their professional identity is more aligned to the practitioner, researcher, or a combination of the two. Thematic analysis was used to analyze twenty in-depth interviews with social work academics in the US to explore the importance in identifying as a social worker and holding a doctorate. Recommendations to strengthen the professional identity of social work academics are provided.

The role expectations of well over 12,000 social work academics in the United States (US) is continually shaped by the science of social work, professional accreditation bodies, and the practice within social service organizations (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2016). Faculty teaching within social work programs are expected to exemplify the behaviors and values of the social work profession, while also engaging in research and the production of scholarship. Yet, the science and practice of social work share long-standing tensions that have resulted in “scientists and practitioners live (ing) in different worlds and cultures” (Anastas, 2015, p. 577). With the various preferred roles and expectations placed on social work academics, it is difficult to distinguish whether their professional identity is more aligned to practitioner, researcher, or a combination of the two. Moreover, professional accreditation authorities often reinforce the separation between practice and research. Some researchers describe this divide by noting how social work doctoral

programs are not required to undergo an accreditation process from a social work education authority, yet, Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) and Master of Social Work (MSW) practice degree programs must undergo ongoing rigorous assessment to retain the recognition of the degrees granted to students (Anastas, 2012; Kurzman, 2015).

Without a required accreditation process from a social work education authority like the Council of Social Work Education (CSWE), the educational preparation within social work doctoral programs can also contribute to the dissonance between the professional identity of social workers and the role expectations of social work academics. Mendenhall (2007) asserts that although social work practitioners and researchers should “be influenced by social work beliefs, values, and ethics [...], practitioners and researchers have very different roles in different settings,” (p. 274), which often requires social work students to make a shift in their doctoral program from practitioner to researcher. Mendenhall (2007) applied role theory to this transition and indicates an element of role discontinuity because the characteristics, expectations, and settings are dissimilar between practitioner and researcher. Whereas the function of practitioners is to help those in need, the function of researchers is to extend the knowledge base of the field by testing hypotheses on societal problems (Gitterman, 2014). Additionally, the knowledge and skills for practitioners include ongoing self-awareness, adaptivity to environmental contexts, and fostering supportive relationships, whereas researchers’ skills center on scientific inquiry methods that require assumptions of neutrality, critical thinking, and hypothesis testing. In particular, a CSWE (2015) accreditation standard states, “through their teaching, research, scholarship, and service – as well as their interactions with one another,

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administration, students, and community – the program’s faculty models the behavior and values expected of professional social workers” (p. 16). Equally important, every social work program must demonstrate to CSWE’s Commission on Accreditation that the majority of full-time faculty have an MSW from a CSWE-accredited program with a doctoral degree preferred (CSWE, 2015).

In addition to the CSWE (2015) requirements and preferences for MSW and BSW social work academic faculty, social work education programs also establish a set of essential and preferred qualifications for employment. A study of job advertisements suggested qualifications in helping to obtain an academic appointment in social work education include having an MSW degree and post-MSW practice experience, teaching and publishing experience, and expertise in diversity, cultural competence, or anti-oppressive practice (Anastas, 2006). Barsky, Green, and Ayayo’s (2013) more recent survey of 226 social work programs specified a doctorate as one of the important factors in hiring social work academics. As indicated, both CSWE and the majority of universities and colleges prefer or require social work academics to have experience as a social worker, to identify with the behaviors and values of the profession, and to have experience as, or demonstrated potential to be, a researcher as evidenced by a doctorate degree. However, there has not been an exploration of how social work academics perceive these preferred qualifications as contributing to their professional identity and informing their role as a social work academic. This study aimed to expand the knowledge of the professional roles, qualifications, and identity experiences of academics by exploring the importance they place on identifying as a social worker and holding a doctorate.

### **Professional Identity of Social Workers**

Political and philosophical debates about identity and the locus of authority within the profession of social work have existed since the emergence of the profession (Donovan, Rose & Connolly, 2017; Gibleman, 1999; Houston &

Soydan, 2012). Similar to professional education within the disciplines of nursing and education, social work has been characterized as a “swampy lowland” steeped in tacit knowledge, often requiring a nuanced integration of a range of professional values and the application of multiple definitions of the profession’s practice and skills (Schon, 1983, p. 42). In response to the unique identity challenges within the discipline of social work, the literature includes several models for understanding the process of professional identity development among social work practitioners (Donovan, Rose & Connolly, 2017; Foreza & Eckert, 2018; Miller, 2010). Guided by Bourdieu’s theory of social actions, Donovan, Rose, and Connolly (2017) provide an outline of responses that the profession of social work can strengthen to center common disciplinary experiences, reduce philosophical/political conflicts, and leverage its adaptive capacities. Donovan, Rose, and Connolly (2017) argue that the broad variability of fields where social workers are socialized into practice is a critical and often an overlooked aspect of professional identity debates within social work literature.

### **Background and Significance**

Within the literature on social work education, several studies examine the professional identity development of BSW, MSW and doctoral students (Barak & Brekke, 2014; Kwong, 2017; Levy, Shlomo & Itzhaky, 2014). For example, Wiles (2013) explored the construction of social work identity among students pursuing a degree in social work. The qualitative study outlined three approaches that fostered students’ development of professional identity: (a) supporting desired professional traits, (b) connections to a collective identity, and (c) promoting the student’s internal professional identity process. In addition to study outcomes that support the use of external approaches to foster professional identity development with students, Levy, Shlomo, and Itzhaky’s (2014) study with 160 graduating BSW students showed that individual characteristics, including empathy and personal social values, were positively

associated with professional identity development. In an effort to bridge the gap between practice, research, and students' professional social work identity, Kwong's (2017) study evaluated case-based, experiential learning approaches with MSW students enrolled in social work research courses. Findings from the multi-methods study suggested that using a case-based, experiential design enhanced students' competencies in practice-based research while also showing an increase in students' understanding of the interdependent relationship between the consumption and production of research. While the importance of providing multi-faceted supports, including the use of introspective tools, observable professional exemplars, and practice-informed learning opportunities to enhance the professional identity of students is often underscored within the literature (Kwong, 2017; Valutis, Rubin & Bell, 2012; Wiles, 2013), little attention has been paid to analyzing professional identity from the perspectives of the social work academics involved in the research and teaching of social work curriculum. With well over 12,000 social work academics who operate within the context of higher education and a strong literature base that asserts academic social workers as 'gatekeepers' of the profession, with the power to shape the identity development of future social workers (Mackay & Zufferey, 2015), there still has been little exploration of the influence and authority experienced by social work academics and how these experiences inform the academic's understanding of their professional social work identity within an academic setting. Equally important, Epstein et al. (2015) argue that the chasm between practice and research has also served to create an unequal status relationship between academics and practitioners, thus limiting the occurrence of collaborative learning practices between social work practitioners and social work academics and deepening the disparate understanding of professional identity between academics and practitioners. Conversely, a number of studies have argued that the chasm between social work practitioners and social work academics has little consequence on the trajectory

of social work identity, but rather the legitimacy of social work as a science is what will continue to define the identity of the professional social worker (Anastas, 2015; Barak & Brekke, 2014; Brekke & Soydan, 2012). Given the paucity of evidence-based research, what we understand about social work academics and their professional social work identity remains in its nascent stages. Therefore, this study aimed to answer the following research questions: (a) To what extent do social work academics identify as a social worker? and (b) What importance do social work academics place on holding a doctorate within their social work academic role?

### Methodology

#### Sample and Data Collection

This study consisted of a qualitative study of 20 social work academics. The participants were requested to be interviewed after previously completing an online survey from a cross-sectional, exploratory study (N=504) examining academics' roles and aspirations, past and present experience of practicing social work, and research activity (see Teater & Mendoza, 2018). At the end of the online survey, 109 participants willing to be contacted for an interview provided their contact details. One researcher contacted 40 academics whose characteristics and demographics varied based on identified gender, race and ethnicity, academic position/rank (i.e., Assistant Professor, Associate Professor, Full Professor, Clinical Appointment), type of employing institution (i.e., public, private – religion-affiliated, private – nonsectarian), and whether or not they reported being actively engaged in research. Academics were invited to participate in the interview one by one until all 40 academics had been contacted; the researcher did not need to recruit additional academics as the information obtained through the interviews had reached saturation where no new data or themes were identified (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). The sample became one of convenience as 21 of the 40 academics indicated a willingness to participate; data from only 20 interviews are

included in this study as one individual, a telephone interview, was not audio-recorded, thus was unable to be included in the data analysis.

The interviews took place between October and November of 2015. The semi-structured interview guide consisted of 14 questions that explored how and why academics moved into academia, their past and current practice experience, and research activity. Example questions included:

“How do you stay connected to social work practice issues?”

“How do you define social work research?”

“To what extent does your research influence social work practice?”

“How important is it for you to identify as a social worker?”

“How important is it for you to have a doctorate?”

Eighteen individual telephone interviews lasted between 44 and 63 minutes, and one joint face-to-face interview with two academics lasted 92 minutes. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) granted ethical approval. The purpose of the study was explained to the academics in the invitation email, and an approved consent form was attached indicating the study procedures, time commitment, potential risks, the voluntary nature of the study, audio-recording procedures, and how confidentiality would be maintained.

### **Data Analysis**

We will present this data analysis section in first person to acknowledge our active roles as researchers. Two of the authors conducted the data analysis using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six steps of thematic analysis and identified themes using an inductive approach where the analysis is “a process of coding the data without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame, or the researcher’s analytic preconceptions” (p. 83). We conducted the six steps as follows:

(a) Familiarizing yourself with the data – Together, we read the transcripts in full and listened to the recorded interviews against the

transcriptions to ensure accuracy making corrections as necessary. We noted initial ideas about what is in the data and what is interesting about them in relation to the research questions; (b) Generating initial codes – Individually, we re-read the transcripts and generated initial codes that provided a brief summary or explanation of each data extract. We met to discuss the initial codes; (c) Searching for themes – We reviewed the initial codes and collated similar codes into potential themes; (d) Reviewing themes – We reviewed the themes in relation to the direct quotes extracted from the data set and further collated similar themes; (e) Defining and Naming themes – We refined, named, and defined the themes in relation to the overall story; and (f) Producing the report – Four themes and four subthemes representing academics’ identification as a social worker and four themes and three subthemes representing academics’ importance placed on a doctorate are presented below with supporting data extracts.

### **Findings**

The participants were predominantly female (65%) and held an academic rank of Assistant Professor (35%), followed by Associate Professor (30%) and Full Professor (30%), and Clinical Professor (5%). Eighty-five percent were employed in a public institution, with 10% employed in a private religion-affiliated university, and 5% in a private nonsectarian university. All of the academics held an MSW and 95% held a doctorate, with one academic (5%) currently in a social work doctorate program. The majority of the completed doctorates (89.5%) were PhDs in social work or social welfare with the remaining two doctorates (10.5%) being PhDs with a focus in education or counseling. The academics reported between 0-40 years of post-MSW practice experience with a mean of 9.4 years; only one academic did not have at least two years of post-MSW practice experience. Finally, the academics reported between 0-25 years since practice with a mean of 9.4 years, with three academics practicing at the time of the study.

### Identifying as a Social Worker

The extent to which the academics identified as a social worker is described below along the following four main themes and four sub-themes:

(a) “It’s a liability”; (b) Indifference; (c) Ambivalent; (d) “It’s my identity”—(i) Image effect; (ii) Linked to licensure; (iii) Linked to education; and (iv) Social justice/advocacy.

**“It’s a liability.”** Two academics indicated it was a liability for them to identify as a social worker. In fact, one academic replied, *“It’s a handicap,”* reporting *“social work is just not competitive [especially when] compared to other disciplines. [And] as a result when you present your social work credentials, certainly an MSW and even a Ph.D., and you’re identified with social work, it’s essentially disqualifying”* (2). This academic went on to state, *“in retrospect I would have been much better off pursuing studies in political science, perhaps economics than social work”* (2). Similarly, one academic explained that despite being an influential social work academic, peoples’ views of her/his scholarly identity were negatively impacted as soon as they find out she/he is a “social work” professor:

I think I do good, meaningful work. And when I tell people I’m a professor of social work, it just changes. People change in how they view you. And I’m going ‘I don’t think you understand. Like I’m the legit scholar’ but when I say I’m from social work that changes things. So, that’s actually usually one of the last things I disclose. (1)

Another academic also dismissed the title of social worker, particularly because she/he argues that social work academia conflicts with social work values. This academic reported, *“I do not identify in any way as a social worker,”* and elaborated that the reason was because *“the more I stay in social work research, the more I become disillusioned. And, I think [social work academia] is racist, and I think people like me don’t really*

have a place, although we give lip service to that as a profession” (17). This academic also expressed concern about the incongruity of social work values with an academic institutional structure in that, *“academia is a very different place. So, social work has to conform to the organizational structures and balances of the academic institution, which may conflict with the values of the profession”* (17). The only way in which this academic would identify as a social worker is if she/he *“talk[s] to practitioners. I might call myself a social worker, but that’s just because I’m talking to social workers* (17).”

**Indifference.** Two academics reported not being interested in identifying as a social worker because bringing up the title needs to be followed by an apology or explanation due to a misunderstanding or marginalization of the profession. One academic stated, *“I don’t think it means as much to me [...] it’s like we’re so marginalized as a profession anyway that it actually hinders me sometimes”* (1). The other academic responded that identifying as a social worker is *“not very important”* and that *“there’s other ways I would identify myself”* (7). This academic clarified, *“It’s not that I avoid saying I’m a social worker or I don’t like identifying as a social worker but it’s not that important to me”* (7).

**Ambivalent.** Three academics expressed an element of ambivalence or reluctance to identify as a social worker. The academics expressed identification with some parts of the social work profession but often identified themselves as something other than a social worker, or expressed experiencing some sense of regret or embarrassment. One academic reported:

Some days I’m proudly waving my flag, and I’ve got my banner, and I want to have a hat, t-shirt, everything that says, ‘I am a social worker!’ And then other days, I’m walking around going, ‘I’m really embarrassed to say I’m a social worker.’ (13)

Another academic reported identifying with the values of social work, but would more identify as a psychotherapist, or as a professor while only stressing “social work” if prompted:

I totally align with the values of a social worker in terms of social justice and the good work that social workers do. [...But], I would identify as a psychotherapist because that was the primary thing that I did. [...] If someone said, ‘Well, what do you do?’ I might say either I’m an instructor, a professor, or I teach. If they’re interested and they say, ‘Well, what do you teach?’ I’d be like, ‘I teach social work and this is what I teach.’ (4)

Two other academics expressed reluctance to identify as a social worker because they have transitioned from the field to academia and are not currently practicing as a social worker; thus, identifying as a social worker could be misleading. One academic explained:

I feel like in my heart I'm a social worker but almost feel sort of fake saying that I'm a social worker. [...] I mean, if you say you're a social worker and they're like, ‘Well, who do you work with?’- ‘Who is your client base?’ (14)

***It's my identity.*** Twelve academics identified as a social worker first and foremost and saw this title as part of their personal or professional identity. One academic explained:

I always primarily identify as a social worker. [...] If I meet somebody on a plane or in a line at the bank, and they're like, ‘What do you do?’ I'm like, ‘I'm a social worker.’ It has always been first and foremost a primary part of my professional identity. (10)

Other academics expressed the pride and significance connected with sharing the identity of a social worker and reported, “*It's very important to me. I think it's very much a part of who I am and my identity and how I see myself*” (11); “*I'm very proud to identify as a social worker*” (20); and “*Well, for me, it's*

*extremely important. That is my primary identity*” (19). The academics expanded on ways in which the social work title was part of their identity, which spanned across the four subthemes discussed below.

***Image effect.*** Two academics described identifying as a social worker due to the image effect that comes with the title. For one academic, identifying as a social worker was viewed as an identity that served to mitigate the status differential and distrust experienced when one’s academic identity was revealed.

I think that when you identify as an academic, as a researcher or a professor or say, ‘I'm a professor at whatever university,’ that changes the energy in people. There's something kind of ivory towery, lefty liberal maybe, about it that puts people, not on a defensive, but kind of ... if they have nothing to do with that field at all, then their energy with you changes when you say that, but for whatever reason, people could stay more real with you if you're like, ‘I'm a social worker,’ and then leave it at that. (10)

For the other academic, identifying as a social worker provides an opportunity to redefine the profession and challenge assumptions that people have of social work. This academic identifies as a “*professor at the university*” but “*press[es] the social worker*” (5) as she/he sees this identification as an opportunity to challenge the negative image of social work:

When you say you're a social worker, people are always like, ‘Oh, that's so sweet. How wonderful for you. You're just a gem.’ I like to throw it back in their face and say, ‘Well, that's not how my experience was.’ That's why I like to represent the profession. (5)

***Linked to licensure.*** Four academics mentioned the importance of holding a social work license in relation to their identification as a social worker. Two reported that they were licensed, so they viewed identifying as a social

worker as “*absolutely critical*” (18) as one academic indicated, “*I do, period. I’m licensed. If people ask me what I do, I would say I’m a social worker and then I would say where my job is*” (15). The other academic specified that, “*It’s my professional identity. I’m a licensed clinical social worker in the state of [blank]. I would frame my professional identity as, I’m a social worker whose area of expertise is in [area]*” (18).

Two other academics reported being a social worker as part of their identity, yet as individuals who are not licensed within their state, they expressed frustration with adhering to gatekeeping authorities of the title. Therefore, although they identified as a social worker, they were not legally allowed to call themselves social workers. One academic explains: “*I always identified as a social worker although technically I’m not supposed to in [this state], because I’m not licensed yet. But I’m still licensed in [another state] so I always identify as a social worker*” (12). The other academic reported on the incompatibility between gatekeeping within the profession and social work education standards within academia.

[O]ne thing I hate about [this state] is the legislature has just signed; you can’t call yourself a social worker unless you have a license. And we’re not required to have a license, so, I just think, I don’t know, it’s an important part of my identity, so for the legislature to tell me, oh I can’t have that part of my identity. (9)

**Linked to education.** Five academics expressed their identity as a social worker by having obtained social work degrees or by being a social work educator. One academic reported difficulty in not identifying as a social worker: “*I’m very proud to be [a social worker]. I have three social work degrees, so, it’s hard not to identify as a social worker*”(20). Other academics reported keeping “social work” as part of their identification and title but using it within the context of social work education. One academic reported, “*I always identify myself as a social work educator*” (3). The other academic stated, “*I’m a social worker who is teaching the next*

*generation of our profession. It is my identity. It’s professional*” (15). Finally, one academic expressed caution with identifying as a social worker because of the difference between being a social work practitioner and being a social work educator. This academic argued that the responsibility of an academic is to represent the self as a social worker but within the role of a social work educator, not social work practitioner:

I teach, and I do advising, I do my scholarship [...] I see my responsibility is to represent myself as a social worker in that role. I don’t agree with any of my colleagues who will say, ‘Well, teaching social work is being a social worker.’ I personally don’t agree with that. [...] But within my role as an educator, representing myself as a social worker really holds primacy for me. (19)

**Social justice/advocacy.** Three academics reported identifying as a social worker because of their identification and commitment to social work values and ethics, particularly social justice and advocacy. One academic reported, “*I think our commitment to social justice and working with vulnerable populations is really important, as well as our theoretical framework for working with different populations. I really value being a social worker. I identify myself as a social worker*” (8). Another academic reported identifying with the code of ethics in graduate school and how this had “*shaped my entire professional career*” (9). The academic stated, “*It’s absolutely important. [...] I was looking for graduate programs, and that just was it for me, I mean the code of ethics, everything fell into place, it made so much sense for me. So, that identity is really important*” (9). Finally, one academic indicated that “*the values and the beliefs that our profession holds influence everything I do, so I never hesitate in interdisciplinary circles to announce very loudly that I’m a social worker*” (16).

### Importance of a Doctorate

The findings revealed the following four main



themes and three subthemes that comprised the academics' importance in having a doctorate: (a) Tools and skills—(i) Research, (ii) Teaching; (b) Means to an end: Employment—(i) Flexibility; (c) Credibility; and (d) Conflict about the title or role.

**Tools and skills.** Many academics indicated that obtaining a doctorate was important for them in terms of formally developing their knowledge and giving them the tools or skills needed to become an academic or to be a better one, particularly in terms of research and teaching. One academic indicated, *"It's a knowledge thing I wouldn't have otherwise"* (15), and another stated, *"It's important to me personally because I like to think of myself as a philosopher. Someone who's engaged in progressive projects that benefit the public"* (2). For two academics, the title that accompanies a doctorate was not as important as the skills that the doctoral education provided. For example, one academic stated:

It gave me the skills that I needed to do the work that I wanted to really do. So it's not so important from, you know, kind of a, oh, hoity toidy, look at me. I'm Dr. [name], you know. It's more about having the skill set that I need. I don't care about the title. (5)

The other academic reported how the letters and status that can accompany the degree are less valuable than the knowledge and experience gained:

[T]he letters themselves aren't that valuable to me [...]. So, I would say the process of getting it, and the substantive knowledge that I gained, and experience, and confidence that I gained with that are more important than the status of the degree itself. (9)

**Research.** Five academics specified that the doctorate was important in providing the tools and skills needed to conduct research as an academic. One academic simply stated, *"It gave me the tools that I needed to do research"* (5), and another academic indicated that it was through the doctoral program *"that I learned how*

*to do research"* (3). Although all social work students receive research training in undergraduate and/or graduate social work degrees, the doctoral program was said to build upon these skills. One academic highlighted:

[W]ithout my Ph.D. I would not have gotten the training that I needed to be able to do the research. The advanced training and knowledge that I got has built tremendously on the skills and the knowledge that I gained in my undergraduate program. (16)

Another academic indicated the research skills were important in *"[being] able to look at the data that I was interested in and ask interesting questions of data. [T]he Ph.D. gave me a chance to take a bunch of statistics classes and figure out how to do that"*(8). Finally, one academic indicated that through the doctoral program, *"I learned a skill set to use research to ask questions in a way that allows me to arrive to conclusions [...] I strongly believe in the scientific method"* (17).

**Teaching.** Five academics indicated the doctorate was important in giving them the skills to be a teacher. Several academics had experience teaching in higher education as an adjunct prior to or while obtaining their doctorate and indicated that the way in which they teach had changed significantly based on the knowledge and skills obtained in the doctorate program. One academic who taught as an adjunct for four years stated:

[T]he difference between how I was as a teacher before and after is now quite totally different [...] it changed me a lot in ways that I think I didn't even anticipate. [...] It gave me the skills to be a better teacher in terms of opening up critical thinking. [B]ecause I think as an adjunct, I was an MSW, and while we had research in school and stuff, it's nothing like what you get in your Ph.D. and so as an adjunct, to what extent did I incorporate that stuff into my teaching? Not very. (4)

Other academics reported ways in which they

were able to bring the knowledge obtained through the doctoral program into their teaching. For example, one academic indicated, *"It's certainly sort of refreshed and re-grounded me in theory and broadened my understanding. And teaching, it forces you to stay up with what's going on"* (9), and another academic reported, *"Everything I have learned from being a student at the [University] and what I have learned in my work with clients via my private practice, all of that comes into the classroom"* (11). Finally, two academics commented on how they gained knowledge on educational theory and curriculum development through their doctoral programs. One academic stated, *"I think I have a better concept and a broader concept of curriculum development and how to integrate classroom with field and those types of things"* (6), and another academic reported, *"I learned educational theory, educational methods, curricular design, scope and sequence..."* (18).

**Means to an end: Employment.** Four academics indicated that the doctorate was important by being a means to an end of employment in academia. The tools and skills for research and teaching were not necessarily stressed for three of the four academics, but the importance of the doctorate was stronger for preparing the academic to take on the various roles within academia and was critical for their job. For example, one reported, *"In terms of my career it's critical. We're required to have PhDs to be on a tenure track position here. So if I wanted to work as a social work educator that was something that I had to do"*(19). Another academic simply stated, *"I couldn't have my job if I didn't have a Ph.D."*(14). As the following academic indicated, it opened up doors within academia:

It's one of the best things I ever did. It's really been extremely important for me to have my Ph.D. [I]t's literally opened doors. I mean, here in our program, all of our faculty has doctorate degrees, or Ph.D.'s. So, it's really important from an academic standpoint. (20)

Finally, one academic who had reported the importance of the doctorate for teaching also indicated it was essential for gaining access to Ph.D. level roles in their employment. *"It's also essential primarily because I get to teach in our Ph.D. program, I get to chair dissertations, I get to serve on Ph.D. committees, and I teach the art and science of social work education at the doctoral level"* (18).

**Flexibility.** Three academics indicated the importance of the doctorate in providing flexibility. For one academic, this flexibility was by being able to select and focus on a specific area of research or curriculum design, which was empowering: *"[G]etting that Ph.D. is so important because you get some flexibility, you get to define what you do and what you work on, which is extremely empowering"* (8). Two other academics spoke to the importance of flexibility for employment choice. One academic highlighted the mobility for employment within a range of academic institutions: *"I would probably have been pretty stuck in [university] or working at one of the community colleges, but with a Ph.D., I have some more flexibility to move"* (12).

**Credibility.** Eight professors spoke to the importance of the doctorate in providing them with credibility as a person and to the work they do in academia. One academic stated, *"Maybe it shouldn't be that way, but it adds credibility [to] some of the work we do. So it's a good thing"* (20). Another academic described a transformation in authority in academia:

[I]t's like the world changed once I became Dr. [name]. [...W]hen I walk into a place, I don't get taken seriously until they know I'm Dr. [name]. And even though I always introduce myself, 'Hi, my name is Dr. [name], but please call me [first name].' You know, I have to get that part out there- So people take me seriously. (1)

Another academic stressed the doctorate as important in being taken seriously as an administrator: *"[T]o be taken seriously in the*

*academic world I think having a Ph.D. is really important, and that's important at this university"* (3). Finally, one academic highlighted the value of academic authority when one holds a social identity (e.g., race) that is often disenfranchised from academic belonging: *"Having a Ph.D. is important" as "it gives you credibility, especially as a person of color"* (17).

Other academics described how they used the doctorate to gain credibility or respect with students. For example, one academic described how she/he ensured the use of "Dr. [name]" with the undergraduate students, as *"for a small minority of undergraduates that label is an important distinction"* (7). Another academic described how highlighting the credentials in specific places gives her/him *"the credibility to speak in places where I wouldn't be able to speak otherwise"* (15). In this sense, this academic uses the doctorate to be more influential and to enable her/him to *"get in the door,"* yet does not use or rely on the doctorate in all aspects of her/his interactions. The academic stated, *"People don't call me Dr. [name] very often. It's weird to do that. It's like other people call me that, or I introduce myself when I feel like, okay, I need this to get in the door"* (15). Another academic was also selective in using the credential in order to gain respectability: *"[T]he only time I ever check the box saying I'm a doctor is when I'm working with some institution that's irritated me for some reason or other. Then it's like, 'I'm a doctor to you, buddy.'"*(19).

**Conflict about title or role.** While many academics pointed to their enhanced credibility due to the doctorate, one academic expressed caution and another academic indicated they either didn't always identify with the doctorate or felt internal conflict with the influence and expectations that come with a doctorate. One academic exposed the label depending on the context, where *"beyond the teaching, I'd say identifying as a Ph.D. depends on where I'm at. If I'm with colleagues or in a research-related conference, that kind of thing, then yes I would say it's very important"* (7). Yet, exposing the

doctorate in social settings can be challenging:

[B]ecause it's really hard to then form friendships and have social relationships mainly because of their expectations of what that means. [...] I had someone say to me not long ago, 'You know when I first met you, and I knew you were a doctor, I just figured you were a snob.' [Therefore disclosing the doctorate], depends on the audience. (7)

For the other academic, sobriety about the importance of the doctorate was expressed as:

[N]ot as magical as I thought it would be. I'm not a world-famous researcher or extraordinary at all. I'm just still me—happy with my career, but not defined by it. And the people who really matter to me don't really give a shit about my Ph.D. (10)

## **Discussion**

The results of this study should be considered against several limitations. First, the use of a convenience sample limits the transferability of the findings, as the extent to which the findings would vary based on academics from varying backgrounds is unknown. Second, three of the authors are current social work academics; thus, the extent to which their experiences and prior knowledge of academia influenced the findings is unknown. The authors attempted to address such limitations by incorporating the following: (a) to enhance credibility, the authors used member checking by sending the findings to the participants where they were asked to verify the interpretation of their comments and make corrections as necessary; and (b) to enhance dependability, two of the authors each analyzed the data independently before agreeing on the final themes and maintained an audit trail, which involved detailed field notes and a thorough description of the data collection and analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Shenton, 2004).

The findings from this study highlight important themes associated with the professional identity among social work academics. The social

work academics in this study generally recognized that holding a doctorate provided the skill, opportunity, and authority for accomplishing academic roles (e.g., teaching and researching) in addition to the strategic mobility (e.g., academic appointment and flexible employment) acquired in holding a doctorate. Yet conflicted perceptions were more prevalent when participants discussed the importance placed on identifying as a social worker. If CSWE requirements for social work academics to model the behaviors and values expected of professional social workers and to hold a doctorate are to remain, then social work education will need to implement several recommendations aimed to enhance the presence and credibility of social work within academia and prepare future academics for this dual role and identity.

First, CSWE (2015) requires social work academics to model behaviors and values expected of the profession, yet the findings indicate inconsistency among the academics regarding the importance of identifying as a social worker. While the majority of academics expressed identification with being a social worker as derived from their values (e.g., social justice) and/or credentials (e.g., license and practice education), other academics reported dismissing the title or feeling ambivalent or reluctant to identify. For those academics that dismissed the title, social work is viewed as less competitive in academia when compared to the status of other disciplines. As confirmed by the literature reviewed in this article, the context and employment setting appeared to play a significant factor in how academics experienced their identity as professional social workers. For these academics, the values of social work were identified as incongruent with the culture, practices, and organizational structures of academic institutions. Similarly, academics within the study that expressed indifference or ambivalence reported that the marginalization of social work hinders them because the discipline is not fully understood and requires ongoing explanation within the academic setting.

These findings suggest a need for philosophical education that broadens the

research values and relationship with social work practice beginning in social work doctoral programs so that future academics are socialized in a manner that is collaborative with the practice of social work early on. The philosophical underpinnings of social work research persistently lack a clear and functional relationship between logical empiricism and the heuristic nature of professional practice (i.e., practice wisdom; Barak & Brekke, 2014). Results of a study by Anastas and Congress (1999) showed that 75% of doctoral program directors (n=48) identified challenges and complications with the integration of philosophical content in the curriculum. Staller (2012) identifies how an "epistemological unconsciousness, with its built-in preference for objectivist epistemologies" (p. 396), often reinforces the use of marginalizing categorizations that deem "alternative" philosophies (e.g., post-modern, social constructivist, and critical epistemologies) as devalued "knowledge development" paradigms within the discipline of social work. A comprehensive foundation of philosophical stances within the curriculum of doctoral social work programs could contribute towards the development of an academic identity that holds an investigative posture inclusive of practice knowledge and, ultimately, contributes to closing the research-practice gap.

Second, to further strengthen and support an identity of social work academics that maintains both academic credibility and professional relevance, CSWE should consider requiring all social work academics to hold post-MSW practice experience and a doctoral degree in social work. Establishing this standard would entail requiring an MSW degree and two years post-MSW experience for admission to doctoral programs, which has been argued as needed in filling the hiring requirements for social work education programs (Barsky et al., 2013). Drisko, Hunnicutt, and Berenson (2015) suggest "not requiring an MSW degree does provide a mechanism for bringing talented individuals into the profession, but would suggest the possibility of less acculturation and socialization to the profession for individuals" (pp. 24-25).

Given the ongoing process of professional identity development, authorities in social work practice, including the National Association of Social Workers (2008), have acknowledged and provided continuing education programs to assist in addressing the professional identity opportunities and challenges that exist throughout the career of social workers. Authorities in social work education, including CSWE and chairs and deans of academic social work education programs, are in a position to publically validate and provide academic incentives for social work faculty to pursue continuing education opportunities that address the unique structures, role differences, and institutional needs found within the academic setting and their impact on the professional identity of social work academics. Moreover, such professional development opportunities should seek to foster meaningful partnerships and mutually beneficial collaborations between the spheres of social work practitioners and social work academics. These suggested revisions to the standards in social work education call attention to the need for a broad set of desired traits that can be used to reinforce a "collective sense" of social work identity across different context (Wiles, 2013, p. 866). Strengthening these desired traits across all social work settings—both academic and practice-based—could support the distinctiveness of social work as a profession and an academic discipline.

Finally, several academics reported that identifying as a social worker may be misleading. For these academics, being in academia is different than being a social worker; therefore, moving from being a social work practitioner to being a social work academic requires a shift in professional identity from less practitioner to more academic. The experiences of these academics support Mendenhall's (2007) claims that social work academics are required to make a transition from practitioner to researcher as each role has different functions and expectations. However, with a clear social work identity integrated and applied within in BSW, MSW, doctoral and continuing education programs, social work academics can be assisted in making

this transition from a practitioner while holding onto the professional identity of social work that makes the discipline distinct. Although becoming social work academics means they are no longer "social work practitioners" (unless they are still practicing), academics can continue to embrace the "social work" title by being a "social work" academic who models behaviors and the unique values expected of social work professionals and is committed to bridging the spheres of research and practice for the benefit of the social work profession.

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