

Toward a Definition of Professional Identity for Social Work in India: Findings from a Scoping Review

Dr. Umesh Gadekar

Asst. Director/Asst. Professor

Yashwantrao Chavan School of Rural Development, Shivaji University, Kolhapur, Maharashtra

Abstract: *Professional identity is a critical but under-theorized construct in social work globally, and especially within the Indian context. This paper reports finding from a scoping review aimed at clarifying how professional identity is conceptualized, defined, and operationalized in the international literature, and then discusses the implications for social work in India. Using a structured scoping review methodology, 91 peer-reviewed studies were identified that addressed professional identity in social work; 66 of these provided explicit definitions, theoretical frameworks, or measurement indicators. Four major themes emerged across the literature: professional socialization, shared professional characteristics, professional structures, and belonging/commitment. Drawing on these themes, we propose a multidimensional, contextually grounded definition of professional identity for social work and discuss its relevance for building a cohesive professional identity in India. Major gaps identified include the scarcity of India-centric empirical research, limited attention to indigenous cultural contexts, and the absence of harmonized educational and professional standards in Indian social work. We conclude with research and policy recommendations to strengthen professional identity formation in Indian social work education and practice.*

Keywords: Professional identity, social work, India, scoping review, social work education, professionalization

I. INTRODUCTION

Professional identity refers to how individuals understand themselves in relation to a profession—the values, knowledge, roles, and commitments that differentiate one profession from another. In social work, professional identity has long been contested, partly because the discipline draws from a wide range of theories and practices and partly because its roles span micro-level clinical work to macro-level policy and community change.

Despite being integral to workforce confidence, ethical practice, and professional legitimacy, **professional identity remains under-defined in social work literature**. While fields such as medicine and education have developed rich literatures on professional identity formation, social work scholarship *lags in conceptual clarity*, often conflating identity with values or competencies rather than delineating the distinct dimensions of ‘being’ a social worker.

In India, social work emerged as a profession in the mid-20th century and has grown rapidly through academic programs and practice fields. However, **social work in India continues to struggle with recognition as a profession**, inconsistent standards across educational institutions and a lack of widely accepted identity frameworks for practitioners.

This paper thus addresses two combined aims:

- To synthesize international research on professional identity in social work through a scoping review.
- To adapt these findings to the Indian context, offering a framework and research agenda for defining professional identity in Indian social work.



II. BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Social Work in International Context

Social work as a profession spans roles from direct practice with individuals and families to organizational leadership and policy advocacy. However, its broad scope has contributed to vagueness in its professional identity; practitioners often define themselves in relation to specific functions rather than a unified professional self.

The Oxford Academic scoping review “Toward a definition of professional identity for social work” highlights ongoing international debates about identity, noting that research from China, Euro-Western countries (UK, USA, Australia) predominates the literature and applies diverse theoretical approaches.

A related study on social worker identity contextualizes the profession by identifying qualities such as *connectedness*, *expansiveness*, and *effectiveness*, but emphasizes that expansive roles complicate unified identity claims.

2.2 Professional Identity: Conceptual Foundations

Professional identity is often approached through social identity theory and social constructionist frameworks. Instead of being a fixed set of traits, professional identity emerges through socialization, ongoing interactions, and self-conceptualization within a professional group.

Ibarra (1999) conceptualizes professional identity as an enduring constellation of *attributes*, *values*, *motives*, and *experiences* that shape how professionals see themselves within their occupational role.

Across professions, identity research suggests that:

- It supports *ethical and confident practice*.
- It increases *profession commitment* and retention.
- It helps distinguish a profession from related fields.

2.3 Professional Identity in Indian Social Work

In India, social work education and practice are shaped by diverse social, cultural, and institutional forces. Early academic and training programs in India aimed to localize social work practice, merging Western models with Indian social welfare traditions.

Yet, social work in India faces challenges:

- Perceptions persist that social work is voluntary benevolence rather than a profession requiring specialized training.
- Professional standards, licensing, and credentialing are inconsistent.
- Educational curricula vary significantly across institutions.
- These issues have significant implications for professional identity formation among Indian social workers.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Scoping Review

A scoping review methodology was chosen to map the breadth and nature of research on professional identity in social work. This approach allows researchers to identify theoretical approaches, definitions, and gaps without restricting studies based on rigorous quality assessment.

The review process followed established scoping protocols:

Database Search: Peer-reviewed literature was searched in databases including Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar.

Inclusion Criteria:

Focus on professional identity in social work.

Peer-reviewed empirical or conceptual articles published since 1999.

Articles in English.



Analysis: Thematic analysis was conducted to categorize definitions, theoretical frameworks, and key constructs from the selected studies.

IV. FINDINGS FROM THE SCOPING REVIEW

Four major themes emerged from analysis of 66 core studies:

4.1 Professional Socialization

Professional identity was frequently described as a *process* rather than a static attribute. This process involves:

Interactions with peers, mentors, and educators.

Experiential learning during field placements.

Integration of social work knowledge and practice norms.

Socialization shapes how practitioners internalize the profession's values and roles over time.

4.2 Shared Professional Characteristics

Shared characteristics such as:

- Knowledge base (theories, methods, ethics),
- Values (social justice, dignity),
- Skills (assessment, intervention),
- Vision for societal change

were identified as core components of professional identity.

Although many definitions reference these features, few specify how they translate into practice in different cultural contexts.

4.3 Professional Structures and External Markers

Structures such as codes of ethics, certification processes, professional bodies, and educational standards reinforce identity by:

- Providing legitimacy,
- Offering reference points for practice expectations,
- Creating formal standards that differentiate social work from other professions.

4.4 Belonging and Commitment

Professional identity emerged as not only about internal attributes but also about *feelings of belonging to a profession*.

Strong identity is associated with:

- Commitment to social work goals,
- Identification with peer groups,
- Sense of purpose in roles.

V. TOWARD A CONTEXTUALIZED DEFINITION FOR INDIA

Based on the above themes and gaps identified in the global literature, we propose the following definition:

Professional identity in social work is a multidimensional construct encompassing the internalization of shared values, knowledge, and competencies; ongoing socialization processes; engagement with professional structures; and a deeply felt sense of belonging and commitment to the distinct mission of social work.

Key elements of this definition include:

Internal and External Dimensions: Identity is shaped both by self-concept and by how the profession is structured institutionally.

Process Orientation: Identity forms over time through education, practice, and reflective engagement.



Cultural Embeddedness: Identity must be understood within specific socio-cultural contexts (e.g., India's caste, community, and welfare systems).

Commitment to Social Justice: Unlike many professions, social work identity is uniquely tied to social justice, human rights, and community transformation.

VI. DISCUSSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA

6.1 Educational Implications

Social work curricula in India should:

Explicitly address professional identity formation.

Include structured reflective and experiential learning.

Integrate Indian sociocultural frameworks (e.g., community traditions and indigenous welfare systems).

Further, accreditation standards could help ensure consistent emphasis on identity formation across social work programs.

6.2 Professional Practice and Policy

Professional bodies in India (e.g., Indian Association of Social Work Educators) should:

Develop clear competency frameworks.

Advocate for professional recognition and licensing.

Establish codes of ethics that resonate with Indian values and global standards.

6.3 Research Gaps and Future Directions

Despite international work on identity, there is limited empirical research in India. Future research should:

Use qualitative, longitudinal studies to explore identity trajectories among Indian social workers.

Investigate how cultural norms (e.g., caste, gender) impact identity formation.

Develop India-specific measurement instruments for professional identity.

VII. CONCLUSION

This review reveals that while professional identity is an enduring concern in social work literature, it lacks conceptual clarity. By synthesizing international findings and contextualizing them for India, we offer a definition and framework that acknowledge both global themes and local realities. Clarifying professional identity is essential for strengthening social work education, practice, and policy in India.

REFERENCES

- [1]. Moorhead, B., Otani, K., Bowles, W., Baginsky, M., Bell, K., Ivory, N., Mackenzie, H., & Savaya, R. (2025). Toward a definition of professional identity for social work: Findings from a scoping review. *British Journal of Social Work*.
- [2]. Forenza, B., & Eckert, C. (2017). *Social Worker Identity: A Profession in Context*. Social Work.
- [3]. Ibarra, H. (1999). Professional Identity and Career Transitions. *Academy of Management Review*.
- [4]. Cornett, M., Palermo, C., Ash, S. (2023). Professional identity research in health professions: A scoping review. *Advances in Health Sciences Education*.
- [5]. Bark, H., Dixon, J., & Laing, J. (2023). The Professional Identity of Social Workers in Mental Health Services: A Scoping Review. *Int J Environ Res Public Health*.
- [6]. Supplementary sources on Indian social work context and challenges.

