

## The political identity of social workers in neoliberal times

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## **Introduction**

This article explores the political identity of fourteen qualified social workers who are members of one of the UK's parliaments, councils as well as engaged in political activism. It contextualises their political identity in the social reformist and social justice framework of social work and considers the dilemma posed for the participants in neoliberal times. The participants engaged in biographical interviews that traced the development of their political identity throughout their life course to date. It explores development of social workers' political identity during their early years, social work careers and political careers. The findings include how embeddedness in politically engaged families forged strong political identities; how the skills acquired in social work were extremely useful in political careers; and how in their political careers the participants have managed to maintain a strong social work identity and involvement in social work related issues. The implications for the social work profession are examined.

## **Defining the concept of political identity**

It is argued that central to the definition of political identity throughout this article is both an ideological commitment and a political activism on the part of actors. In his classic book on political identity, Mackenzie (1978:119) offers a definition of political identity as to 'identify with' someone or something, such as identification with an ideology and political activism. According to Theodoridis (2013:545) political identity simply put is about associating 'the self with a group or category...The strength of that association is the intensity of identification'. The definition of political identity is added to by Cerutti (2003:27 and 28) who sees political identity as 'the set of social and political values and principles that we recognize as ours, or in the sharing of which we feel like "us", like a political group or entity'.

People have numerous identities but when collective identity becomes politically relevant people take political action on behalf of the collective (Klandermans, 2014). The 1960s witnessed the development of what became known as identity politics which can be defined as the rise of single-interest groups

and social movements, including groups that had been marginalised and ignored by civil society, such as women, gay people and ethnic minorities (Tebble, 2006). There is a clear and important difference between the concepts of political identity and identity politics and this distinction is important in this article. While the concept of identity politics is well defined in the political literature, political identity is a broader concept that may include certain aspects of identity politics, such as identification with a social movement or a single-interest group.

Identity according to Parekh (2009) is what distinguishes individuals from other people, such as different political allegiances. Identity has two closely related dimensions; personal development over time and a social dimension of how people 'situate and orient themselves in the world' (Parekh, 2009:276). Furthermore, according to Klar (2013) political identity has its origins in underlying psychological processes and personality traits and life experiences. Identity between the self and a particular category can vary in strength and change over time as the individual develops along the life course. It may be marked by relative stability or fluidity over time. Many commentators view political identity as forming a part of the wider social identity theory since political identities tend to be more collective in nature. For example, identification with a political party may be conceptualised as a social identity (Theodoridis, 2013).

In her classic 1991 text, Molly Andrews describes in detail how fifteen life-long socialists experienced 'political awakening' and life-long 'political commitment' (Andrews, 1991:73 and 42). In analysing her participants' narrative accounts, Andrews (1991:113 and 117) identifies three crucial factors in the 'radicalization' and 'politicization' of her participants. She describes how political consciousness is developed and constructed, consistently grounding her theorizing in the detail of the lived experiences of her participants. She identifies three common influences in her fifteen participants, namely identifiable individuals; intellectual stimulants, such as books; and the role of highly visible organisations, such as the National Unemployed Workers' Union.

According to Hite (1996) political identity is an important explanatory framework for political thinking and action particularly at times of political crisis and flux. She recognises in her participants that beneath the surface level political trajectories there are divergent class and cultural contexts, life experiences and senses of self and the relation of self to others. Her research identifies four ideal-types of political identity within the cognitive framework, namely political party loyalists, personal loyalists, political thinkers and political entrepreneurs. The other important frameworks for understanding the construction of political identity are the concepts of embeddedness, for example within a political party, family, class or generation; and life experiences, which are both positive and negative. Although these components are analytically distinct they are also intertwined and bound to one another.

### **From a 'Golden Age' to neoliberalism?**

It is argued that the early roots of social work in political activism and social reform is important for an understanding of why social workers have been attracted into the profession and why they have viewed it as a profession that sees transforming society as a central goal. Even in recent times the view of the social work profession as a political activity has attracted aspiring social workers despite all the changes that have militated against it since the 1980s with the introduction of neoliberalism into social work (LeCroy, 2002; Cree 2003; Furness 2007; Stevens et al, 2010; Humphrey, 2011; and Harris, 2014). According to Stevens et al (2010) the desire to tackle injustice and inequalities in society was mentioned by as many as 70% of students in their research as a motivation for choosing social work as a career. However, despite students' intentions in entering the social work profession, it is argued in this article that the forces of neoliberalism that have achieved a hegemonic position in social work, supported by all governments since the 1980s, continue to dominate today with important implications for the social work profession, such as the morale of social workers themselves (Carey, 2014).

In Britain the Charity Organisation Society supported reforms to alleviate the distress of the dispossessed. It was also the root of what later became known as social work casework since the friendly visitors kept notes for the very first time about the families they visited. The Charity Organisation Society sought social reform rather than significant social change let alone social revolution (Hearn, 1982). Nonetheless, it was important to social work not just as a root but as an example of political activism. A more radical political initiative and another significant root of the social work profession was the Settlement Movement in both Britain and the United States. The Settlement Movement was politically radical since it had an understanding of the social and structural causes of poverty and distress and sought to address them through working in and with communities to address individual, family and social problems (Hugman, 2009).

The next great landmark in the development of social work was the establishment of the Welfare State. This can rightly be viewed as the era of 'institutionalised social work' (Statham, 1978:ix) and as the era of the 'nationalisation' of social work (Powell, 2001:2). Moreover, one of the most important steps in the development and arguably in the professionalization of social work was the Seebohm Report (1968) and its implementation, particularly the setting up of large social work departments within local authorities. Most social workers in the UK are employed by the state and fulfil roles as set out and regulated by the state (Garrett, 2010). The era of nationalised social work represented by a collectivist state approach to the social work profession practised at a local level within local authorities is viewed by many as something of a golden age in social work practice. It is often referred to as the 'high tide of social work' since it came at the 'tail-end' of the 1960s Social Democratic commitment to tackling social problems through expertise located in the state and promoting citizenship through social solidarity (Harris, 1999:920). According to Hearn (1982:22) the new social work departments were also 'spawning ground' for radical social work by enabling easier communication between social workers in large departmental offices and the reality of strong trades unions resistant to bureaucratic and managerial restrictions.

Of particular interest in this article is the development of neoliberal policies in Western countries and the effects these changes have had on social work, such as the introduction of business principles (Lymbery, 1998; Garrett, 2009; and Carey and Foster, 2013). Neoliberalism is defined as a 'thought collective' incorporating welfare retrenchment and a commitment to the supremacy of the market in the social field (Mirowski, 2014:43). It is widely regarded as having its source in the 1980s and has remained a dominant political and economic force ever since - successfully traversing changes of government, such as the election of a Labour Government in the UK (1997-2010), and emerging strongly from the financial crisis that started in 2008 (Mirowski, 2014). It's main effect on social work has been a process of marketization, consumerisation and managerialisation (Harris, 2014). Thus, social work's once autonomous position distanced from market forces has been 'eroded' (Harris, 2014: 10).

Increased privatisation of services and the use of voluntary agencies has been the result of an ideological view of the supremacy of the market (Le Grand, 2003). Privatisation had been encouraged by deregulation in the early 1980s and by the Griffiths Report (1988) which enabled the vast expansion of the private sector in social care (Ferguson, 2008). The introduction of outsourcing through the purchaser and commissioner split, initially in domiciliary and residential care, has vastly expanded private provision. In turn, this has raised concerns about adequate funding and quality of care at a time of growing demand and increased austerity. Children services such as adoption and fostering have been seen as ripe for privatisation. Even child protection and safeguarding services are viewed as candidates for privatisation. This is despite the evidence that social workers have been demoralised by private sector practices already inflicted on them (Rogowski, 2010). Moreover, even in other fields the arguments for privatisation are spurious, such as in energy where electricity prices have gone up since privatisation to the detriment of the poor (Lansley and Mack, 2015); and it is argued that the privatisation of the railways has failed (Stiglitz, 2013).

## **What is already known about the political identity of social workers?**

There is a dearth of research on social work biographies and particularly biographies of social workers who have a declared political identity. What is already known about the biographies of social workers is extensive enough to give clear indications about the reasons why people enter the social work profession, and limited enough to strongly justify further research in this area. For example, there is a predominance of social reformist motives in the account of social workers entering the profession but a gap in gauging the effects of neoliberal changes in social work on social workers after entry into the profession. The literature provides interesting insights but mostly superficial accounts of social workers' motives and reasons for their career choice and career progression. Another handicap is the obvious problem that while the literature is theoretically informative, such as in formulating some typologies, it is also restricted in terms of the small number of published studies and accounts available. In the biographical literature of social workers one often comes across an account of early life social disadvantages which is clearly an important area for the construction of a political identity. However, the accounts lack full exploration of the link between these experiences and entry into social work and later career trajectories. Such accounts tend to be brief life histories within a volume containing other life histories but without a deeper level of qualitative inquiry.

There are three significant contemporary published volumes on social workers' biography (LeCroy, 2002; Cree, 2003; and Humphrey, 2011). These volumes are intended to be introductory reading for prospective social work students and those at the start of their programme of studies. They cast very little light on political identity in the context of social workers' career trajectories and the hegemony of neoliberalism in social work. The nature of the volumes is initiatory, seeking to give the reader an understanding of what social work is - and within this context the volumes seek to address, in varying degree of detail, the significance of background and biography on career choice. All the volumes assume that this is important but none are able to provide a satisfying account about the nature of its importance.

Humphrey (2011:24), under the heading 'Biographical Routes into Social Work', offers a basic typology of three general categories. These are: the service user route, the personal carer route and the citizen route. Of particular interest to this article is the citizen route. According to Humphrey (2011:28), the students' whose trajectory is along the citizen route '...bear witness to poverty and prejudice...so their narratives revolve around the structural and cultural conditions which underpin human suffering...' The transition from this into a social work career is dealt with only briefly. However, it is clear that the attraction of social work lies in its social reformist perspective. Referring to one subject, Humphrey (2011:28) says: 'He had escaped these problems himself and wanted to devote his life to eradicating them'. She later continues in this vein saying that their greatest asset to social work is their awareness of economic, cultural and political contexts of human suffering and commitment to the ethos of empowerment and to challenging existing power elites. This approach is of course fine as far as it goes since it acknowledges a very important area in the construction of political identity as outlined earlier in this article, namely early life experiences. However, such generalised statements owe more to the idealisation of the social work profession and social workers rather than to robust inquiry.

Cree (2003:1) in her volume is concerned with the 'driving forces' that brought the subjects of her book into social work. She does well to acknowledge that the typological categorisation of social workers owes as much to assumptions and stereotyping than anything else, at least in the public mind. She recognises that social work in the public mind is a 'detested' profession, made up of 'sandal-wearing wet liberals' and 'politically correct zealots' (Cree, 2003:2). Cree's volume does cast some light on political identity through a focus on the type of early life experiences that are known to influence its development. Interestingly, Chima (2003:12) describes the racism that she experienced as an adolescent and recalls later being dared by friends to go and do something about discrimination or 'shut up'. The implication here is that social work may not have been a long-term planned career choice but a more practical response. This might be rather simplistic since the response to enter the social work profession is certain to have had a multiplicity of determining factors ranging across many

social and personal domains. Howell (2003) also describes the racism that she experienced and while she concludes that a career in social work seemed the obvious choice, her trajectory into social work was long and involved a period of working as a hairdresser.

The third volume (LeCroy, 2002) is more convincing because of the research method used, namely biographical interviewing. This method is known to be extensive and allows for life experiences to be explored at depth. Interviews were conducted in the US and transcriptions were then edited and produced in the volume as life histories. However, the volume is criticised for falling into the temptation of sentimentally idealising social work and social workers. The research framework makes reference to social workers embarking 'on a calling' (LeCroy, 2002:1). It glorifies and maybe patronises social workers who have found and are following '...a meaningful and authentic life' (LeCroy, 2002:1). What is an authentic life and how are they to know whether they are living it or not? Although like Cree's (2003) volume, the life histories from social workers in this book are short, there are some fine examples that illustrate some interesting dimensions about their biographies and political identity. Instances of these include Anita Royal's account of being a child of the 1960s and the influence of the anti-war demonstrations and the Civil Rights Movement. Another is Josefina Ahumada's narrative about developing a social conscience while growing up in Los Angeles in the 1950s and 60s. In both instances the trajectory into social work involved a detour, in Royal's case into Law School and in Ahumada's case into a religious community. Detours are not a surprise in real life amongst rounded people who navigate through their various life choices. A serious shortcoming of this text is that it does not delve into data rigorously. The narratives are short summaries that raise more questions than answers.

Crawford (2012) makes some salient points in her article about social work students' experience of diversity in the classroom. Her article focuses on the experience of a young African-American male social worker's account of becoming a social worker. Crawford argues that identity is a living experience that is not constructed around fixed and universal categories, such as gender, race and

class. In her view identity incorporates ‘...the multiple constructed and shifting qualities of modern subjectivity...the complexity of identity formation and its variability over time’ (Crawford, 2012:37). Crawford contrasts what she views as the individualism of Anglo-American social discourse with autobiographical accounts which she views as ‘...never about autonomous individuals but are a way of picturing social constructs through single lives’. Crawford’s interpretive approach is convincing and is aligned to an understanding of the intersection between political identity and social work.

Swartz et al (2011) make a valuable contribution to the literature on the biographies of social workers with a declared political identity. Writing about their research in the context of South Africa as a post-conflict society they identify reluctance amongst health and social services students to talk about the past. In their view, in societies where life goes on in a ‘business as usual’ manner, such as in the UK, the political aspects of social services work are obscured and ‘politicised biographies’ of academics and social service workers are ‘erased’ (Swartz et al, 2011:490). Whether it is because the past is too painful to recount as is the case in South Africa, or whether it is the case that political biographies are ignored and erased in neoliberal countries such as the UK, it is undeniably the case that there is a dearth of published research on the biographies of social workers generally, and those with a declared political identity in particular. Reissman and Quinney’s (2005) authoritative review of narrative in social work confirms this point by uncovering few studies, in contrast to narrative research in education, nursing and other professions. Mensinga (2009:203) was also disappointed by the paucity of published research in the area of biography in social work. She believes that this has left a gap in capturing ‘the meaning making processes individuals engage in to make sense of their career choices within their personal and social contexts’.

## **Methodology**

The conceptual framework for this article is informed by a social constructionist perspective which identifies the creation of knowledge as a representation of reality rather than viewing knowledge as a body of truth to be discovered (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). In this respect the conceptual framework

develops a qualitative approach to knowledge and research which posits that knowledge is co-constructed with participants and is grounded in the lived experiences of participants and may change with new perceptions and understandings. The participants' political identity will have already been formed along the lifespan and declared and enacted in the public realm. The degree to which the participants and interviewer co-construct knowledge is through a reflection on the participants' political identity formation over time from the vantage point of the present. Within this conceptual framework the methodologies of constructivist grounded theory and biographical inquiry sit comfortably and easily together since both methodologies have close affinities to social constructivism (Roberts, 2002; and Charmaz,, 2006 and 2014).

Both grounded theory and biographical methods share an affinity with social work practice, such as in the political links between the symbolic interactionists in the Chicago School of Sociology and the founder of the Settlement Movement and the social work profession in the US, Jane Addams. Secondly, grounded theory emerged in the 1960s at a time when biographical inquiry was revitalised in the democratic turn in methodology, particularly pertaining to qualitative methodology. The 1960s also advanced values that are important to social work, such as social justice and equality. The construction of the declared and enacted political identity of social workers is best understood through a biographical examination of their lived lives since political identity formation is a lifelong process.

Fourteen qualified social workers participated in a biographical interview – of these eight were women and six were men. The gender balance does not represent the dominance of social work by women. However, it is a higher representation of women than there is at the UK Parliament and is broadly in line with the UK's devolved parliaments. Four of the participants had traditional working class roots, while the remainder had a middle class background. There were two participants from an ethnic minority background, both were women. The participants were no longer in social work practice but were politically active, such as within a political party or interest group. The age of participants ranged from early thirties to late sixties, with most participants aged over fifty years, a reflection of the fact

that they had spent many years in social work practice before entering a political career full-time, such as parliamentarian within one of the UK's parliaments. At some point in their social work career four of the participants had worked in adult services, eleven had worked with children and families, three had worked in youth justice and five had worked in community work. There are limitations in the methodology deployed, namely the need for caution before making any generalisations from the findings. While the fourteen interviews are robust in representing themes it cannot be claimed the participants are a representative sample of social workers. Ethical approval for the research was granted by Keele University Ethical Review Panel as part of a Doctor of Social Work programme in March 2013.

### **Early experiences**

The nurturing and early years' experiences of the participants are extremely important for their political identity formation. Their social reformist values had their roots in early life experiences such as the political, social and economic upheavals of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. This finding confirms Hite's assertion that political identity is influenced by living through major political experiences (Hite, 1996), and Klar's assertion that political identity is closely linked to life experiences (Klar, 2013). Furthermore, the importance of the early years confirms Parekh's (2009) argument that political identity formation is about a process of personal development over time.

One significant finding from the early years about the strength of political identity was that participants from families with a tradition of political activism had a stronger political identity than those from families without a political tradition. In these instances, politically engaged families seemed to nurture political awareness in their children leading to political activism later on. Many of the participants were encouraged by their parents, especially by their mothers, to aim high and believe in themselves to achieve ambitious goals in life. Their parents inspired and drove them on while imbuing them with progressive values. The positive influence and support of parents cannot be overestimated as an important root in the development of participants' political identity:

*I was brought up in a household that was both political but also massively interested in social policy and issues and my mum and dad were both school teachers. My father was on the local council and he brought us up that we had a responsibility to be involved in the public realm, we would call it these days, that we, you know, we just had a responsibility.*

Other factors that influenced the early development of their social reformist values included progressive family values such as of esteeming education as a means of enablement and escaping the traps of poverty and disadvantage. The concept of embeddedness within a family's values as mentioned by Hite (1996) was true for many of the participants since they were conversant with their families' progressive values from an early age. Moreover, Cerutti's (2003) theory that political identity is associated with culture and tradition is exemplified in the lives of the participants, such as in their close affinity to their area and its history and way of life.

The experience of discrimination was present in the development of political identity in participants who encountered incidents of racism and sexism while growing up within their communities. This is no surprise since the literature has ample examples of this phenomenon (LeCroy, 2002; Cree, 2003; and Humphrey, 2011). Participants had the ability and courage to turn these experiences into something positive and channel their energies into affirmative political action such as by working for people who are disadvantaged in their communities.

The significant other was also an important influence on developing an early social reformist perspective, both within and outside the family. This confirms Hite's theory that political identity construction is about assigning value to others who might be in positions of leadership, such as teachers and councillors (Hite, 1996). The significant other was also identified as an important factor in Andrew's study of fifteen life-long socialists (Andrews, 1991). The current research confirms the importance of the significant other in the construction of the political identity of social workers:

*A close friend of mine who lived nearby, his father was a Labour councillor and we'd spend time in each other's houses but when I went to his house I was always very struck by the sort of community role really which councillors played and how whenever you went there, there would be people knocking on the door and looking for help in various sorts of ways. That side of politics I remember being very struck by even when I was very young.*

The experience of poverty in early life was a determining influence on the political identity formation for many of the participants. Participants witnessed the effects of post-industrialisation on their communities and the near Dickensian experiences of parents at the hands of economic forces and the economic powers that be. In these instances, the experience of poverty awakened a strong sense of injustice and a burning ambition to create a better society. In this regard the participants' experiences reflect what Pozo (2011) describes as political identity forming as a result of being aware of bourgeois hegemony and social injustice at the hands of ruling classes.

Another root of political identity formation amongst the participants is the experience of conflict and resistance to reactionary ideology and arbitrary authority. Conflict illustrates that political identity development can be challenging and at times painful, such as conflict regarding political beliefs with parents. This finding confirms Hite's (1996) theory that the formation of political identity can be a psychologically conflictual process; and Balcells' (2012) understanding that political identity formation can involve both acceptance and rejection of ideologies. Thus, the early years are important in forming participants' political identity and social reformist values. These values would be important later on in attracting them into a social work career.

### **Social work career**

The process of political identity formation continued to evolve along the participants' life course and included critical phases, such as entry into and progression within the social work profession. Initially participants were enthusiastic and passionate about social work as a career that could bring about

change in the lives of people in receipt of social work services. They identified with social work as a social reformist and social justice profession (Hugman, 2009). Their entry into the profession reflects Humphrey's (2011) general typology of the citizen route into social work since participants were aware of structural issues such as poverty and prejudice and wanted to change society. Participants encountered serious levels of poverty in their roles which was significant for their professional and political development. Humphrey's other routes into social work, namely the service user route and the carer route were not relevant in the lives of the participants in this research. The effect entry into the social work profession had on the participants was to quicken their political identity through their motivation and passion for social work as a way of achieving social change.

Participants had a strong affinity with community engagement including community work to bring about real social change. This seems to have been a natural fit for them in that it allowed for a degree of creativity and flexibility, but most importantly many viewed this form of social work as a type of political engagement. It reflects Klandermans' (2014) definition of political identity as taking action on behalf of a collective. Taking action on behalf of a collective enabled the participants to engage in partnership working with community cohorts to transform their communities, such as tenants on social housing estates campaigning to improve the safety of their local area. Participants viewed community work as an antidote to case work which they found very restricting, and a real opportunity to address the wider socio-economic problems that blighted their clients. Alarming, today community work at least within statutory social work is virtually non-existent in the UK. It is not difficult to see why community work should have been a casualty of neoliberalism in social work since it was a vehicle for working class groups to organise against state institutions (Jones, 2012; and Mirowski, 2014):

*I remember working with adolescent girls and feeling that, you know, I wanted to work with them in a different way to what managing them as a social worker, as a case worker, you were able to... There were then opportunities coming up in my... home town of [Town]... And they*

*were beginning to do community work, where they were basing workers to established projects in three of the most difficult areas of the town... So I got a job in the area of [Town] that my mother had grown up in, which was not far from where we had lived as a family... So I moved back to [Town] and got involved, setting up a community project and actually also setting up a youth work project - that took me a bit longer. And I did that out of the community work project.*

Later, participants experienced disillusionment as a result of the neoliberal changes in social work, particularly changes in management systems and the financial pressures social workers have had to bear as a result of the Great Recession and financial austerity that started in 2008. All the participants commented about facing the neoliberal dilemma in social work and how this was a reason for leaving the profession. Many were concerned about the changed management style which they felt had become more intimidating with its emphasis on targets and procedures. This is consistent with Carey's view that social workers had less time with clients and experienced more stress (Carey, 2007). Participants were particularly concerned about the effects of the austerity measures on social work and social work clients. In effect they felt social work had become a lesser activity in terms of its political mandate of social justice which had been an inherent part of social work (Hugman, 2009) and which had attracted them into the profession.

One of the ways participants responded to the dilemma that neoliberalism presented to them in social work was to intensify their political activities outside work, for example in campaigns against government austerity cuts. They also campaigned against what was perceived as a harsh criminal justice regime reflecting neoliberal's strong identification with the penal system (Mirowski, 2014). Similar encounters with the effects of unemployment on working class communities, following the demise of traditional industries in a post-industrial society, led to a deeper involvement with politics. This dimension is similar to Miller's (2010) account of socialisation as phase-based with critical incidents heightening the process of identification over time. It also reflects Valutis' (2012) theory of

political identity formation through crisis stages, such as encountering injustice and challenging authority.

The participants became social work skilled politicians by adapting their social work skills to a political role, such as elected councillor or parliamentarian. Some of the participants took on political roles after a relatively brief period as a social worker while others took on political roles after many years in social work practice. From the fourteen participants, four became councillors and seven became a member of one of the UK's parliaments. The other three participants were involved in political activism outside parliament. Remarkable similarities between the social work role and the role of an elected representative emerged in the research. Both require good people skills, particularly empathy, when meeting the general public either in their own homes, the social work office or in the constituency surgery. All the participants testified to how social work skills enhanced their role as an elected representative. The social work skills acquired from practice were an important component in enabling the participants to carry out their constituency case work more effectively and later on in taking on a full-time political role. Social work skills such as working in partnership are an important characteristic in the identity of the participants, as all participants developed a way of working collaboratively with constituents and linking into community campaigns.

There were three instrumental and linked factors in participants' decision to leave social work practice and extend their social work identity beyond the confines of the agency, to wider political action and representation. These three factors were the effects of neoliberalism on social work; the restrictions of social work, particularly the dominance of casework; and in some instance a natural desire for a change because of long social work careers. However, all participants remained committed to social work - campaigning on social work and social welfare issues in their locality, constituencies and in their various parliaments and councils.

### **Political career**

During this final phase, participants become very skilled and sophisticated political actors within the context of their political roles. Their activism can be categorised as campaigning for social reform and against neoliberal policies and the effects of austerity. Indeed, the participants extended the social work role into their political careers. They chose to do this rather than create a new non-social work interest for themselves, such as in foreign affairs. The participants' vocational commitment is both to social work as well as to their political careers. They continue to engage and identify strongly with social issues and some volunteer with charity organisations and community groups. The vocational dimension of their identity was and still is as much social work as it is politics. Moreover, within their political careers participants have become very widely respected both amongst their political colleagues and amongst outside observers. Such political capital could be further used to advocate and campaign on behalf of the social work profession and those who are its clients.

All participants are resolutely committed to transformative politics and a changed society - in line with social work ideals of social justice and social reform. This fits in with Friedman's concept of the transformational in defining political identity since all participants had a vision of a fairer and more equal society (Friedman, 2010). However, they felt that they could best oppose neoliberal policies in politics rather than social work since they would have more power and leverage to make a difference on the structural socio-economic level through policy development, legislation and campaigning. Participants enthusiastically campaigned against the Conservative Liberal Democrat Coalition Government's (2010-15) neoliberal policies of welfare reform and austerity measures such as the bedroom tax. In this regard the participants' political identity has been stable throughout their life course to date since they have shown a life-long commitment to the politics of change. Moreover, the research findings are consistent with Huddy's (2001) theory of political identity stability since participants have demonstrated life-long devotion to social reform. This is in stark contrast to the fluidity of political identity in some scenarios, such as in post-soviet societies.

During the transition into their political careers, the benefit of social work skills continued even as they progressed up the political career ladder. Of particular value were listening skills when working with vulnerable constituents with complex needs. It is interesting how some participants regarded themselves as more of a social worker in their political role, and more in contact with ordinary people, than what was possible in social work practice which was dominated by eligibility criteria for scarce resources. Thus participants' strong social work identity endured well into their political careers and they were able to successfully combine multiple identities in their political roles:

*I find that in terms of interacting with people, especially in terms of dealing with people who are angry or emotional in any way, you know those skills kick in and also around things like, people needing to take responsibility for their actions and things like that as well. I still feel those instincts, those reactions coming in, you know... So most people that come into the politicians' offices are very needy, vulnerable people who we were dealing with in social work. So sometimes in some ways, my job still feels like a social worker, you know. But I have got a few more levers I can pull as well I suppose. I just don't have to keep saying the computer says no, which is a bit what it feels like being a social worker sometimes.*

Participants became skilful and successful politicians within their elected bodies, such as in the manner they were able to negotiate their way through formal procedures. Significantly, participants have also been prepared to go against the party line when led to do so by their conscience, such as in relation to the Iraq war which many opposed. The Iraq war was one issue where a number of Labour Party participants felt a sense of ambivalence about their political party. In this regard the participants most certainly do not easily fit into Hite's (1996) typological group of party loyalist in her defining of political identity. However, they do reflect Hite's (1996) view that political identity formation involves psychological processes of conflict and resolution. In contrast, some participants felt an emotional attachment to significant actors and groups within their political party, such as veteran and highly respected politicians. This is consistent with Theodoridis' (2013) view that political identity is collective

in nature and Tajfel's (1974) view that political identity is about attaching emotional significance to a group.

## **Discussion**

This article contributes to the discussion regarding typologies within social work. A typology has been described as 'an organised system of types' such as the citizen route into social work (Collier et al, 2012:217; and Weller et al, 2013). This research confirms the citizen route (Humphrey, 2011) into social work since the findings are consistent with Humphrey's findings, such as the experience of poverty in early life. However, Humphrey's citizen route typology has limitations in that it only covers the period into the social work profession. This research extends the citizen route beyond a narrow focus on what drove participants into a social work career to include what motivated them in both their social work and political careers. In political careers the citizen route is developed through the politician who has a vocational calling to social work and campaigns on social issues as well as having a continued strong social work identity long after leaving social work practice.

Today the participants are interested and engaged in social work and social work related issues in their various parliaments, councils and activism. Indeed, their social work identity remains their master identity. It is argued that in relation to social work's future this group is a valuable potential resource for social work since they have political capital and are in a position to advocate and campaign on behalf of the social work profession. They have intimate knowledge of the social work profession and are able to act as consultants and policy advisers. Furthermore, they are in a position to work for the expansion of democratic control of political, economic and social institutions - viewed as an antidote to the advance of neoliberalism (Ayers and Saad-Filho, 2015).

This group of social work politicians offers a positive antidote to the narrative of despair that is so often reiterated about the hegemony of neoliberalism in social work, albeit for understandable reasons. By taking action and becoming members of elected bodies social workers can be in positions

to influence social policy and legislation. They can make a distinct and valuable contribution alongside other social work voices, such as the British Association of Social Workers (BASW), the Social Work Action Network (SWAN) and the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Social Work.

## **Conclusion**

This article has explored the construction of social workers' political identity throughout their life course to date. It has demonstrated how their early years were important in forming a social reformist political identity and how this has been added to during their social work career and subsequent political careers, such as members of one of the UK's parliaments and councils. The article has explored the significance of being embedded in politically active families and how the participant's political identity has remained a stable social reformist identity throughout their life course to date. Further, participants identify strongly with social work and remain engaged in social work issues in their various political roles. Moreover, the article has shown how the participants responded to the neoliberal hegemony in social work such as by being committed to political action against austerity measures. The article has also explained how the typology of the citizen route into social work has been extended to include social work career and political career trajectories. It is argued that the participants have the political capital and will to advocate effectively on behalf of the social work profession and its clients by challenging the neoliberal hegemony in their political roles.

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