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# Student, Practitioner or Both

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# Student, Practitioner or Both?

Separation and Integration of Social Identities in Professional Education  
Fiona McSweeney D.I.T.  
Social Care Ireland Conference 2009



- In professional education for the transfer of knowledge to the practice setting to occur student and worker identities need a level of integration.
- Focus of presentation is on factors identified as influencing the separation and integration of social identities of student and social care practitioner and the outcomes.

# Participants and Data Collection



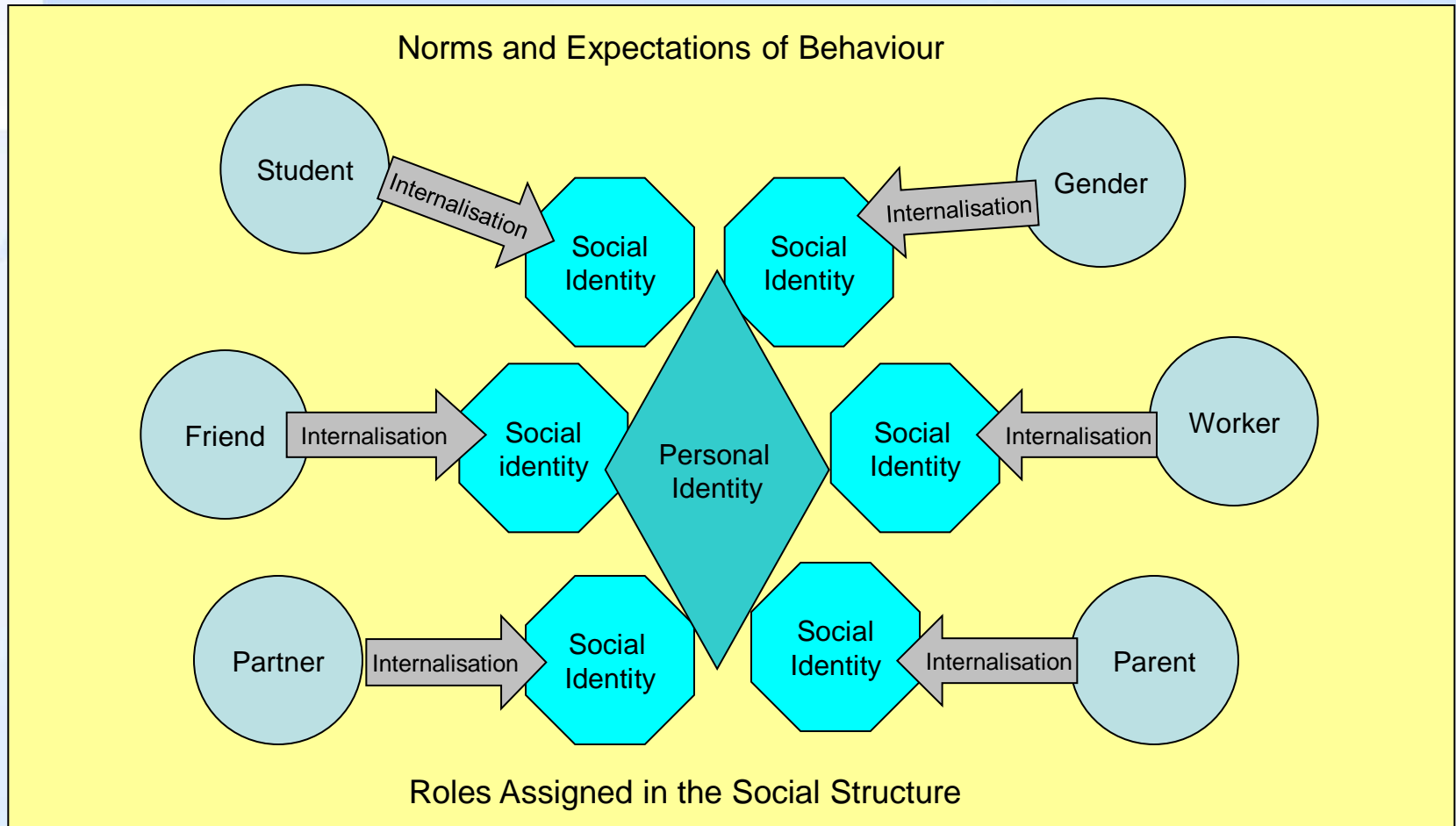
- 15 participants interviewed three times during their first year in college and 9 interviewed again at end of second year.
- 9 male and 6 female participants
- Age
  - Range - 22 to 50yrs;
  - Mean - 35.5yrs;
  - Standard Deviation - 7.2yrs
- Experience in social care
  - Range - 2 to 15 yrs;
  - Mean - 7.2 yrs;
  - Standard Deviation - 4.8yrs

# Concept of Identity – Symbolic Interactionism



- Identities are essentially social.
- Identities are developed from the roles we occupy in society.
- Formation of an identity from a role requires internalisation of behaviour expectations associated with the role.
- Individuals interpret and negotiate the meaning of role to achieve consistency with other social identities and personal identity.

# Symbolic Interactionism - Identity



# Levels of Identity – Social Identities

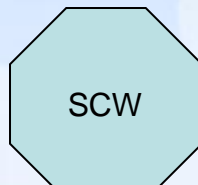


- **Social Identities**
  - Identification with social roles but meaning of roles is negotiated.
  - Multiple social identities organised in hierarchy of salience depending on commitment to identity.
  - More salient identities are more important to the individual in defining self and more likely to be enacted.
  - Salient identities are least situation specific and have greater influence over behaviour.
  - Consistency between individual and others' view of identity results in verification which increases self-esteem and self-efficacy.

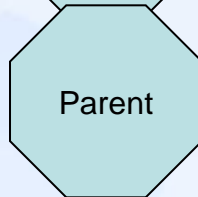
# Social Identities - Salience



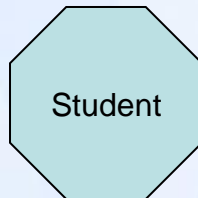
Most Salient



Caring; practical; managing people; relationship building

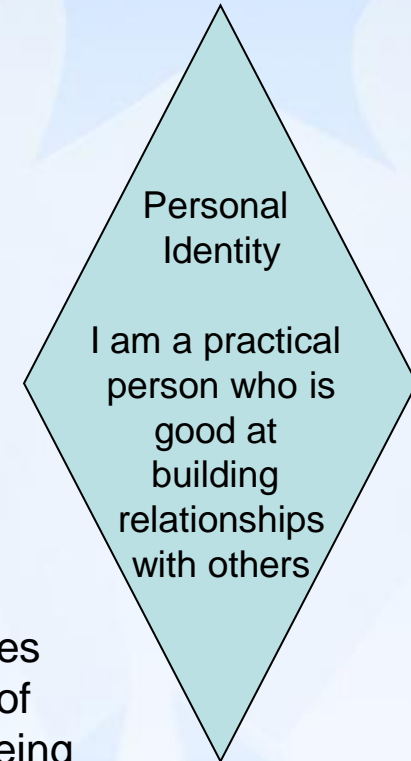


Caring; practical; relationships with children



Academic not practice; requires reading; discipline; retention of knowledge – renegotiated as being primarily social e.g. relationships with classmates

Least Salient



Individual less likely to be committed to the student role thus less likely to accept the burdens associated with the role and perhaps take a strategic rather than meaning approach to college material.



# Levels of Identity – Personal Identity



- Set of meanings that “sustain the self as an individual” (Stets & Burke, 2000 p.229).
- Include abilities, beliefs, feelings, attributes and goals.
- Affect behaviour in different situations and roles.
- Behaviour inconsistent with personal identity given alternative explanation and causes social role and identity renegotiation.

# Professional Practice



- “Reality is messy, problems are not well-defined and [...] there exists in most situations a variety of options, each involving trade-offs among competing goals and values” (Lynton, 1996 p.13)
- Professional practice is complex and ambiguous, requiring skills of critical thinking and reflection (Parton, 2003; Yelder, 2004).
- For care work, practitioners need to “accept a multiplicity of possible perspectives, depending on personal circumstances, particular dynamics and events and sources of support” (Cameron, 2004 p.145).

# Professional Education



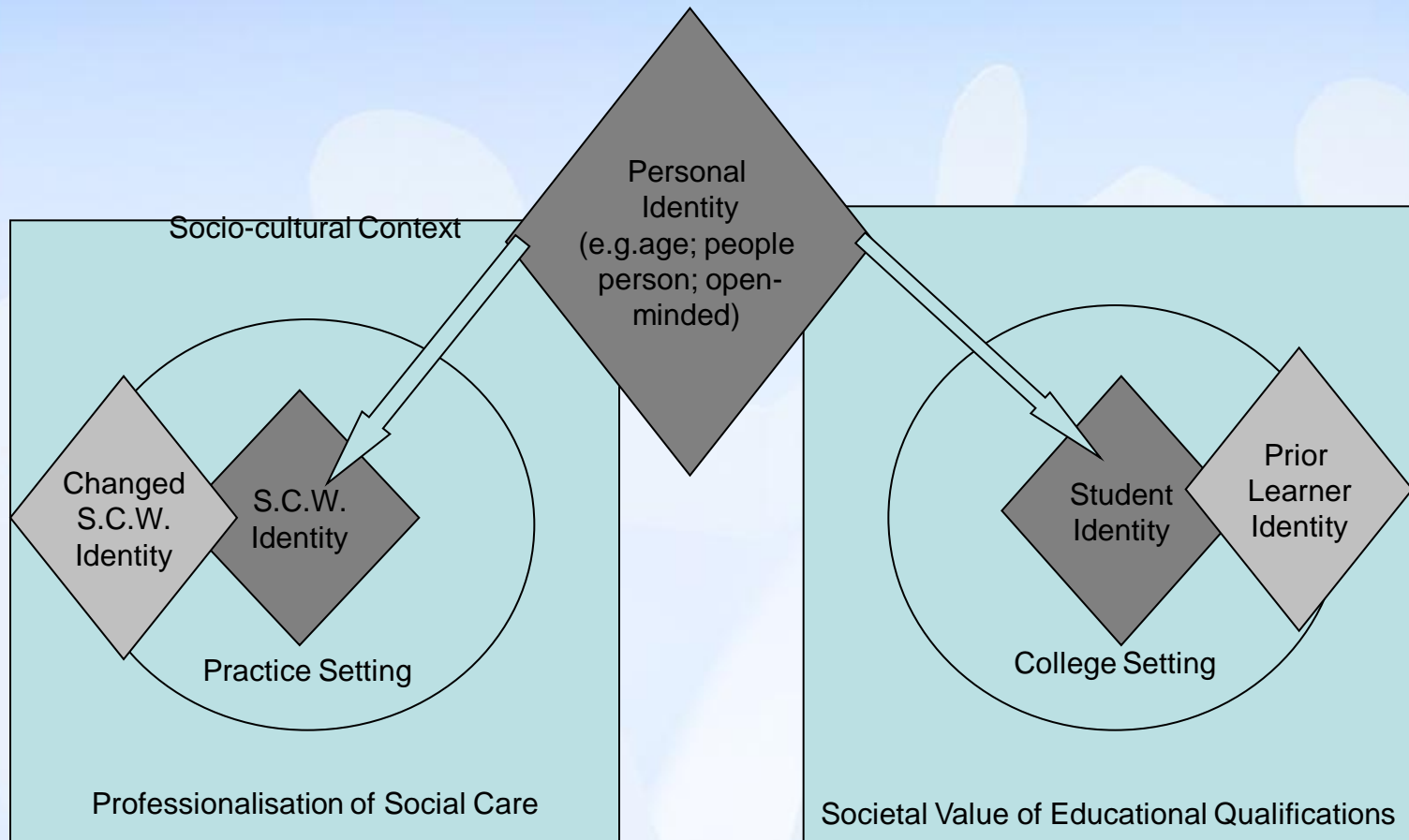
- Aims to enable the practitioner to better deal with ambiguity and change through critical examination of work practices and location of these within theoretical frameworks.

# Professional Education



- Professional education can require participants to critically examine their work practices thereby invalidating existing beliefs (Bamber and Tett, 2000), and leading to readjustment of professional identity.
- Yelder (2004), argues that when “new experiences are inconsistent with our habits or expectations” (p.64) anxiety arises, causing resistance to new learning and experiences.

# Integration or Separation



# Impacting Factors on Approaches to Professional Education



- View of professional role
  - Advocacy, care, relationship building, provision of living environment, using activities as opportunities for reparative intervention.
- Level of autonomy
  - Bureaucratic organisational system limits professional autonomy (Daley, 2002).
- Organisational culture - in particular whether others in their professional community “sanction, support and affirm the learning as important in the professional role” and accept or reject the practitioner’s new knowledge (Daley, 2002 p.82; Ottoson, 2000).
  - “I said at a staff meeting, I believe he [a client] is operating at a three, four or five-year old emotional level. I was immediately told that I can’t say that because I was not a trained psychologist. So what is the point of the course if I can’t make an assessment and I can’t give an opinion.”

# Impacting Factors on Approaches to Professional Education



- View that idealised version of profession is presented in educational programmes unrelated to the ‘real work’ in practice (Adams et al., 2006).
  - “I noticed one day he was talking about the ideal. You know we always strive for the ideal but there is no point in fighting with him because he just comes back with what the ideal is and you just come back with the reality.”
- Theory generated by academics “far removed from the real life practice setting” (Burton, 2000 p. 1011).
  - “Whereas someone who may have the qualification, or qualifications as long as your arm but put them in the real world of residential care and what it brings up wouldn’t deal with it as effectively as I possibly can or have done.”
- Theory as irrelevant ‘jargon’ (Bamber and Tett, 2000).
  - “I’ve always found theories used as an excuse. Recently when one client of mine was warned about slamming doors and abusing people and I sat and listened in disbelief hearing four different views. [...] All we seem to be doing in making excuses for him.”



- **Societal value of educational qualifications**
  - “I feel a bit more important because I’m in college”
  - “I’m glad I engaged with university because I suppose it was missing in some ways from my CV that I wasn’t honest enough to say that it probably bothered me more”
- **Professionalisation of social care**
  - “It’s political. I have to have it [the degree] if I’m going to stay in the work. I know I do. [...] That’s what our union has done on us. They’ve signed us into this degree.”



# Learner Identities



- Judgement of oneself as practical (in interaction with social care work as a practical activity)
  - “[Sociology and social policy] do have an impact but they don’t on the floor. So I just don’t see the relevance really because probably I’m a more practical person than learning about this history and that.”
- Judgement of learning strengths lead to rejection of modules which require different strengths
  - “Health and well being, I still don’t understand what relevance its got. There are some things [that], ever so often I think, well that’s useful, but for the amount of information that we’re being examined on and the detail which we’re being examined on. [...] Because it is just fiddly detail and I’m not good at remembering facts [...]. But I prefer the waffly subjects. The ones where you add a bit of opinion and they say this and they say that.”

# Fears



- Fears associated with adult students
  - Self-presentation
    - “You’re trying to wonder should I stay quiet or should I try and join a group to study. Talk so everybody notices me”.
  - Language used
    - “When people have these expectations of all these words and I’m a simple straight person and I use simple words.”
  - Academic conventions
    - “The last exam I did was the inter cert. How far back was that and we didn’t do much referencing there.”
  - Failure
    - “I think I realised then that what was bothering me more was fear of failing that anything else.”

# Fears



- Judgement of professionalism through comparison with peers
  - “We all come from different units and we’re saying are these doing the same as we’re doing. [...] Are we as professional as they are?”
- Performance in college equated with performance in the workplace
  - “You’re thinking to yourself when you’re writing that if I write this she’s going to think I’m crap at my job.”

# College Setting



Learning environment impacts on students' orientation towards learning thus identity.

- Relationships with staff

- Expectation of respect for knowledge and adult status.
- Expectation of class discussion but yet provision of relevant material to enable success in assessments.

- Safe and respectful learning environment

- Evidence of regressive behaviour and expectation that staff will control class
  - “We’re all there nearly like teenagers and we’re talking at the back and then they’re giving out why isn’t the lecturer keeping control over this class. And we’re mature adults up there you know. S/he shouldn’t have to keep control over us. S/he’s there to give the spiel and that. We have regressed big time.”
- Frustration with behaviour of peers
  - “Like they say be quiet but its unfair to lecturers. I pity them as well spending their whole bloody class saying will you shut up.”

# College Setting



- Workload
  - Development of strategic approach to cope with workload and balance with other social identities.
  - Varied from purely strategic approach for those who keep identities separate to moving between strategic and meaning approach depending on whether material is assessed, as found by Sutherland (1999) with nurse tutors.
    - “Like in one of the classes within the second week of the class we had our essay titles for the end of the year and then it became quite obvious that the stuff we were doing every week after that had no relevance or bearing to your essay title so what was the point of going to class.”
    - “I’m really looking forward to there not being any pressure and being able, in the summer, to read the stuff to see how much knowledge I have gained. With no pressure on me to get it down on paper.”

# College Setting



- Assessment - success verifies student identity thus increasing self-efficacy and self-esteem and improving motivation.
  - Need for student to be equipped to succeed through knowledge of expectations and feedback to enable improvement.
    - “We need written our exactly what they want.”
    - “It’s nice to see where you’re going wrong. Maybe the next time around you’ll be able to change it.”
  - Concerns about success exacerbated by relationship with work and public nature of success in workplace.
    - “It is very public. You’re putting yourself out. I mean the manager and the director and all said well done on your exams, which is great when you pass them but it’s hard in a certain sense of why do you have to know.”

# College Setting



- Problem of acceptance of experience but using theoretical framework for questioning
  - “Most students need tutor guidance in understanding that experience itself is not sufficient in an academic course; it has to be embedded in ‘theory’ and used in assignments with scholarly detachment and rigor. Course tutors face a delicate, dual challenge to develop students’ self confidence by accepting and valuing their experience and to develop students’ understanding by encouraging them to venture beyond the ‘safety’ of their own experience” (Whalley, 1999 p.5).
- Limitations of assessment
  - “I think you only know what you want to learn by reading everything. [Assignments] take the fun out of it. Thinking I have to write this stuff now and what angle am I coming from. Why are you ruining it with such a rigid essay title?”
  - Focus on expressing and referencing rather than content obvious through amount of concern expressed by participants, particularly early in the course.

# Social Care Worker Identity



- Social care as a practical activity
  - “Care workers are fine for the practical stuff but don’t get me to write about it.”
  - Social care practitioners themselves have reported not seeing the purpose of “thinking about doing” (Eisikovits and Beker, 2001 p.430).
- Social care as based on relationships and relating inherent or based on life experiences:
  - “I’ve had the talent first.”
  - “My own upbringing, my standards in life, my willingness to help others [...] I think life experience is the main element.”



# Practice Setting



- Perceived support
  - Financial – economic costs of professionalisation
  - “I have issues about them not paying my full fees. I think in some ways they’re very good at telling you, you must do this professional approach, but when it comes to actually stumping up they take a back seat.”
- Practice teacher role
  - “I felt that [linking theory and practice] was up to me mostly. In fact I don’t think I had a discussion with anybody either a manager or supervisor or a lecturer about theory and put it into practice.”
  - “Yeah I think that [time for supervision] will always happen where I am because there’s always something crops up.”



- Organisation and Staff Changes
  - “I suppose in work we’ve been under pressure because we’ve got a new manager and everything has been up in the air and then we’re short staffed so college wasn’t a priority.”
  - “There have been a lot of changes in work that I haven’t been happy with so I’m fighting them and challenging them. [...] at points you could just think it is just as well you have college because you’d just be so 100% in this and maybe your stress levels would have gone way over whereas college was a deflection or I don’t know, a distraction in a way.”

# Practice Setting



- Reflection on knowledge
  - Eraut (1994) suggests that professionals require designated time to reflect on practice for them to learn from it and for it to contribute to their professional knowledge.
  - Smith (2005 p.268) notes incongruity within residential child care between the importance of reflection and professional judgment and the structures within which the practitioner must work, where “management push a competency and best practice agenda”.
  - Lack of facilitation of reflection through an absence of formal supervision (Heron and Chakrabarti, 2002b).
  - Even when studying for a qualification in social care students report time, insufficient resources and workload as factors which prevent them reflecting on knowledge and using it in practice (Forrester-Jones and Hatzidimitriadou, 2006).
  - This study found that the most reflective participants saw college as a place where they had time to reflect on knowledge practice relationship.

# Evidence of Integration of Identities



- Willingness to reflect and question
  - “I would maybe have been of the school of opinion of what can you learn in college, you know this is real life. I suppose that part of being reflective is that I didn’t find any module or course completely unrelated to what I was doing.”
  - “So even stuff that’s impractical in that sense [not directly applicable to practice in a day to day sense] is actually practical because it makes you question.”

# Evidence of Integration of Identities



- The experience of partaking in education is described as increasing confidence, as has been documented in studies of adult learners (e.g. Stevens, 2003; Moore, 2004). This confidence is transferred to the workplace and as a consequence improves work practices. Success in the student role leads to verification of this identity which makes behaviour associated with it more likely to be transferred to other situations:
  - “My confidence level has risen and I feel better equipped to handle bad situations. I sense the kids feel it too and respond as they know you are in control.”
  - “I think it’s [taking part in the course] having some impact, confidence and relationships. When I’m confident it gives me the opportunity to interact more with the clients and with the team.”
  - My language changed. [...] I’m becoming more articulate in what I want to say [...] and people are listening to it more rather than this bullish kind of guy running in.

# Evidence of Integration of Identities



- Increased personal autonomy and fighting the system. Karban and Frost (1998) and Vatcher and Coles (2004) found that education can result in conflict with the organisation particularly through the questioning of standards.
  - “I’m becoming more I suppose rights focused even where the young person is concerned. That this [standards] is there for them. This is available for them and we need to be following that.”
  - “College has made me much more articulate and more politicised in terms of standards. I can just whip them up. Why are we learning about these things when we are not fucking implementing them and I am not going to be accountable or complicit for the health board.”

# Evidence of Integration of Identities



- Education seen as enhancing work practices. Participants refer to both direct knowledge acquired during the course and improved understanding as found by Karban and Frost (1998) with regard to residential child-care workers in the U.K.
  - “I think it gives you more confidence that you have an understanding of national standards and all those kinds of things can just give you, maybe makes you aware of what way you’re working and what way you can maybe do things differently or change things”.
  - “Young people come in and I read through their background and take my time to understand their background more since I went to college whereas before I’d look at their background as that’s where he was. This is where he is. Let’s move on. [...] You know I think until we can resolve some things in the past we’re not going to be able to move forward whereas before I would have never really stopped and thought about it.”

# Evidence of Separation of Identities



- Frustration with social care system leading to disillusionment
  - “We should be doing a hell of a lot more for them but we can’t but it states that we should be. [...] It’s resources and it’s red tape as well with the health board. [...] They’re saying you can’t lock them in and you can’t blah, blah, blah. You can’t keep them in so they can stay out there ‘til four if they want, drinking, but yet in the Child Care Act safety is paramount.”
  - “Cos a lot of our systems in the residential units are designed to meet the needs of the unit.”
- Work as practical – college as theoretical
  - As found by Sutherland (1999) the work-related nature of a course can lead to the students using a more concrete and practical approach in learning and writing rather than the abstract and theoretical approach valued in academic institutions (Boud, 2001; Martin, 2003). Particularly when social care work is seen as a practical activity.
- Nature of theory practice relationship
  - Eraut (2003) distinguishes between theory being “regarded as a direct guide to action” (p.62) versus theory being considered to be an intellectual resource “that aids one’s understanding of a context or an issue” (pp.61-62).



# Evidence of Separation of Identities



- Assessment format - examinations lead to superficial memorisation rather than engaging with meaning
  - “Say for psychology. It was 16, 17 weeks of constantly engaging with the ideas so an awful lot of it was retained and you were able to engage with it at a far deeper level. Now I’m left the thing of getting little flash cards and trying to memorise words. Is that learning really do you know because I will forget that as soon as I don’t have the flash cards.”
  - “But if I’m working on something over time it’ll stay in my head. But you’re working on it the whole time do you know what I mean. You’re not trying to cram all this information in and then sure you just lose it after the exam. [...] If you ever want to look back on your course stuff you have it all written there.”
- College as irrelevant (Protection of SCW Identity)
  - “I suppose this whole question is still out there that you’re just going for the piece of paper and then as lots of people, or the joke that goes around about college is that you go through college for three years and then you go out and forget about everything you learned in college.”

# Questions Raised



- If identities are integrated there is a greater likelihood of knowledge and behaviour transfer across situations.
  - Does the bureaucracy of the structures of social care settings conflict with the aims of professional education?
  - Difficulty in professional education of acknowledging and supporting practice experiences but yet challenging this – constraints of educational system.