Alkhidir, Abbas (2021) Professional Identity: The Concept and Formation. Business Educator: Working Paper Series of the Centre for Management Learning and Business Education, 1. pp. 79-89.

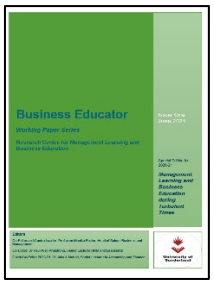
Downloaded from: http://sure.sunderland.ac.uk/id/eprint/13603/

Usage guidelines

Please refer to the usage guidelines at http://sure.sunderland.ac.uk/policies.html or alternatively contact sure@sunderland.ac.uk.

Business Educator

Working Paper Series of the Centre for Management Learning and Business Education



Professional identity: Concept and formation

Abbas Alkhidir [a,1]

[a] *PhD student at the University of Sunderland*

Keywords:

Identity

Professional

Formation

Attitudes Personal

Abstract

In spite of the frequent use of the term Professional Identity, it is hardly differentiated from other related concepts such as work attitudes, professional behaviour and professionalism.

Accordingly, this paper will represent an attempt to: (1) identify different definitions and attempt/ to conceptualise the terms, (2) to explore how professional identity is shaped by work attitudes, behaviour and beliefs etc. (3) to examine the formation of professional identity in relation to personal, social and cultural influences.

[1] *Corresponding author. Address for correspondence Abbas Alkhidir, University of Sunderland, Sir Tom Cowie Campus, St. Peter's, Sunderland, SR6 0DD, Abbas.Alkhidir@student.sunderland.ac.uk*

Introduction

This paper explores the conceptual and theoretical framework of professional identity and highlights how it has been looked at from different viewpoints, particularly by sociologists. The paper will also examine the process of formation of professional identity and the key elements that influence its construction by looking at the different approaches and orientations and will suggest an alternative approach to give further insight into the concept.

Literature Review

Professional identity has received a lot of attention in recent years. In general, sociologists have regarded professional identity as a dynamic component and a necessary foundation of professionalism as suggested by Schmidt and Crossley (2009) in addition to, Slinger and Roghr (2012) who expressed the same view. Likewise, professions and professionalism attempt to define or elucidate the nature of Professional identity and vary even within a single professional group. A basic definition was produced by Slay and Smith (2010) who defined professional identity as one's professional self-concept based on attributes, beliefs, values, and experience. Floyd (2012), Volpe and Hopkins (2010), Joshua and Lammers (2014) all shared the same view that Professional Identity is multi-dimensional and constitutes of many different identities or sub-identities (e.g., personal and social identities)

Caza (2015) suggested that professional identity or work-based identity is shaped by work attitudes, attributes, beliefs and consequently affects behaviour in each situation whilst professional identity enables individuals to assign meaning to themselves and attached to them by others. Neary (2014) insinuated that the concept describes how we perceive ourselves within our occupational context and how we communicate this to others. Neary furthered his view by suggesting that professional identity is underpinned by a professional association, body of knowledge, rationally recognised qualification, and social recognition.

In general, this view ignored the role of personal belief and values, or how beliefs influence and support professional values as well as the impact of that on professional identity formation. Caza and Neary's perspectives showed that professional identity is not only a professionals' image of who they are but also, what they want to be. Both researchers pointed out an important element of defining professional identity which is the social aspect of the concept related to role expectation and perception and how professionals see themselves in the eyes of others.

Further to the above views, Phillips and Dalgrano (2017) both announced that professional identity is not a stable entity and evolves according to changes in social norms. Daniel and Slinger (2012), concluded with the same assumption and argued that the formation of professional identity happens at two levels. First, a collective level, which involves the socialisation of a person into appropriate roles and forms of participation in the work's community. Second, identity formation at an individual level involves the development of the personnel.

Referring to the above statement, the formation of professional identity seems to be a central issue in the sociology of professionalism, with most of the literature agreeing that this formation is evolving and an ongoing process. Webb (2015), Roghr, Sligar (2012) and Mery (2010) all described it as more interactive than a relatively straightforward process. Webb (2015) stated that professional identity is not stable, it is an ongoing process of interpretation and customisation which is shaped by contextual workplace factors. Swennen, Jones and Volman (2010) all shared the same point of view that professional identity is interactive and problematic and does not come as ready-made and is continually developing along the way of professional and organisational life thus, professional identity is a process of interpretation and re-interpretation of experience.

Based on the above views, it is evident that there is consent among researchers that professional identity is continuously evolving and developing. However other researchers such as Joynes (2018) on the other hand claimed that professional identity develops mainly through socialisation into a profession and exposure to professional behaviour and interaction in real-world situations, and this can be strongly opposed by arguing that identity formation can be influenced by other

factors not directly related to a work/profession setting environment such as personal beliefs, inner value, social background etc. That being so, this literature mainly focused on the construction and factors that contribute to constructing and developing professional identity. However, the same literature does not adequately answer some related questions such as the role of socialisation, professional training and the interaction with other professionals within a profession, not only in terms of constructing professional identity but also in upholding and maintaining a stable professional identity.

Methodology and Method

As the objective of this paper is to explore the existing knowledge of Professional Identity and suggest an alternative approach of conceptualising the term, scoping literature review was conducted to, (1) identify a research gap and the unexplored aspects of the topic, (2) to suggest a different approach for further research.

Discussion

A new approach to conceptualise the term

In line with all these different attempts to conceptualise the term professional identity, it might be suggested that professional identity can also be defined and understood as a social state of mind'. This new approach or perspective of professional identity will provide an insight into a professional identity that is based on two basic assumptions illustrated separately in most previous studies.

The first assumption is the ''Self'' and the second assumption is the ''Scio-dynamic'' nature of the term. These two inter-related components of professional identity appeared when professional identity was discussed in sociology and the medical field. For instance, Murdoch and Crossley (2015) who focused on building a model of professional identity formation concluded that the self-perception of professional is a key element in forming professional identity. In other words, this formation of one self's professional identity is a person or an internal process by which individual

professionals modify and develop their behaviour to accept the responsibilities and obligations of the professional role. Similarly, Muller (2006) in his study of aspects of professional identity, referred to the natural connection between the ’self’ and ’personality’ and recommended integrating them in an attempt to define the term.

Based on this, Muller designed a personality model in which he claimed that professional identity is shaped by ‘’The big five’’ personality characteristics as a limited personal trait that forms identity, and these are openness to new experiences, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism and extraversion (see; Cobb-Clark and Schurer (2011) and their discussion on the stability and consistency of the Big five personality traits. In the same vein, Crocett and Mees (2008) revealed in their identity formation model that the Big Five personality dimensions of extroversion, agreeableness and conscientiousness along with emotional stability are intertwined in the process of identity formation, with in-depth self-exploration, commitment and reconsideration of commitment, this will intensive the formation. Although Muller, Crocett and Mees discourse highlighted an important aspect of professional identity which is the personal trait as well as partially addressing the identity question of Who am I? Limiting professional identity mostly in ’oneself’ or personal qualities appear to be a narrow perspective that attempts to understand professional identity formation based only on the pre-exited personal traits and rule out other active ingredients that form identity. These other active ingredients were highlighted by other researchers such as Liegh (2019) who asserted that professional identity is not just an interpretation of personal traits or who we are, but also, provides insights into elements of the environment that affect a professional’s experience where identity construction is seen as a negotiation with both self and others and within the discourses present in one's life. This point is furthered by Mancini and Tonarelli (2015) when they argued that professional identity includes both personal and social dimension, they also attempted to provide evidence of the relationship between what they called Inter-group and Inter-individual processes through work value, professionals’ behavioural involvement and professionals’ emotional adjustment.

In summary, the views of Muller and Crocett did not provide answers to questions that closely related to the Big five characteristics for instance. Are these traits fixed or changeable over time? What are the impacts of the change -if occurred on the

stability of one's professional identity? Are there any other non-personal traits that may influence and contribute to identity formation? Having in mind that some researchers cited other traits and described them being necessary facets of professional identity, these traits were mentioned by Fletcher and Dashper (2019) who include notions such as; autonomy, peer review, critical self-evaluation and professional judgement. Additionally, are these Big five traits measurable? Even so, does Personality tests, which are widely used as a tool to measure The Big five can be used to measure professional identity on a collective level? Although most literature lacked addressing these issues, it is understandable that this can be due to the difficulties in identifying an appropriate tool or a method of measuring the concept aside from the ones in the medical field such as the self-evaluation and even this method can only be implemented on an individual level, not on a collective level (e.g. measuring the shared identity).

The second assumption and the foundation of this suggested approach is the 'Socio-dynamic' nature of the professional identity which based on the argument that professional identity is mainly of a social nature. This view can be promoted by the previous work of Fricke (2010) who saw the identity as a social construct, defined and given value only when evaluated in terms relative to a specific cultural context.

Thus, professional individuals classify their place in the world based on their membership of a collective group, during which individuals influenced more by the categorisations of others rather than their own cognitions and emotions. (see; Godlie (2012) and her study of the formation of professional identity in medical students which published in Medical Teachers' Journal. Relatedly, Evetts and Aldridge (2003) described professional identity as a work-inflected phenomenon that is distinctly structured by work contexts. Once again, Evetts and Aldridge devoted their efforts to outline only one aspect of the professional identity which demonstrated that the concept can often be best understood in relation to the inter-group processes and inter-group relations.

Conclusion

Comment on previous efforts to conceptualise professional identity:

To conclude, some academics attempts in examining professional identity took two different approaches. The first approach was much concerned with the formation of professional identity and overemphasised the components of the professional identity (see, Lane (2018), Daniel and Slinger Webb (2015). Therefore, most of the literature highlighted the same conceptual confusion likewise professions, in defining and understanding what professional identity is. It means different things to different professionals within different professions.

Added to, by having previous literature approached professional identity this way, it helped to overlook how professionals balance between their personal identity components such as inherited traits, values, culture and beliefs and their work identity, as well as how this will impact their professional decision-making in given situations.

In the second approach, much of research has focused on self-identification and how professionals self-define themselves in relation to their professions, and here it can be said that professional identity in its root is a personal identity that is mostly shaped by organisations' culture, values and ethics as well as, through professionals' social engagement with colleagues in a professional work environment. To illustrate this, the concept can be best described as a self-controlled situational human behaviour or a state of mind that can be interpreted into actions, attitudes and influenced by a certain social atmosphere in a work context.

Further to the above, the current wave of Covid-19 spread has shed new light on the understanding of professional Identity - as well as many professional practices- on both micro-level and macro-level for instance, the closure of school, universities and colleges will impact directly the identity and behaviour of teaching professionals either positively or negatively, as some identity component might be affected such as their own personal perception to the work-setting environments procedures, their attitudes towards virtual learning methods, the absence of the group cultures, and their ability and readiness to monitor their own performance by identifying their learning and training gaps and needs. Another example of that is in the medical field

as the possibility of professional Identity conflict can be present particularly, when we have to closely consider how the current Covid-19 pandemic required different professions to work collaboratively both at the micro and macro level.

References

Caza, B. (2016) 'The Construction of Professional Identity,'' Cornell University School of Hotel Administration', *Research article*, available at: https://scholarship.sha.cornell.edu/articles/878

Cobb-Clark, D. and Schurer, S. (2011) 'The stability of big five personality traits', *Discussion Paper*, Germany: Institute for the study of labour

Crocett, E. and Mees, W. (2008) 'Capturing the dynamics of professional identity formation in various ethnic groups: Development and validation of three-dimensional model', *Journal of Adolescence*, 31 (2)

Crossley, J. and Murdoch, D. (2015) 'A model of professional self-identity formation in student doctors and dentist: A mixed method study', BMC Medical Education, University of Sheffield, *Research paper*

Evetts, J. and Aldridge, M. (2003) 'Rethinking the concept of professionalism: The case of Journalism', 6th *ESA Conference*, Sociology of Professions, MURCIA

Floyd, A. (2012) 'Turning point: The personal and professional circumstances that lead academics to become middle managers', Institute of Education, University of Reading, Available at: www.centuar.reading.ac.uk,

Fletcher, T. and Dashper, K. (2019) 'Do not call me an academic: Professional identity and struggle for legitimacy within vocational filed of event management higher education', *Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism Education*, Issue: 25

Fricke, K. (2010) 'The Influence of Society on Queer Identity Development and Classification', *the Vermont Connection Journal*, Issue: 31

Goldie, J. (2012) The Formation of Professional Identity in Medical Students: Considerations for Educators, Medical Teachers Journal, 34 (9)

Joshua, B. and Lammers, J. (2014) 'Measuring Professional Identity: A review of literature and multi-level confirmatory factor analysis of Professional identity constructs', *Journal of Professions and Organisation*, 1(23), available at: www.researchgate.net

Joynes, V. (2018) 'Defining and understanding the relationship between professional identity and inter-professional responsibilities: Implications for educating health and social care students', Advances in Health Sciences Education, Journal, Issue: 23

Lane, S. (2018) 'Professionalism and professional identity: what are they and what are they to you', *Australia Medical Student Journal*, available at: www.amsj.org

Leigh, L. (2019) 'Of course I have changed: A narrative inquiry of foreign teachers' professional identities in Shenzhen, China', *Teaching and teachers education Journal*, Issue: 86

Mancini, T. and Toonarelli, A. (2015) 'Personal and social aspects of professional identity: An extension of Marcia's identity status Model applied to a group of university students', Journal *of Vocational Behaviours,* Issue: 89

Mery, M. (2010) 'Identity', *International Enecycolopedia of Education Journal*, available at:www.sciencedirect.com

Muller, M. (2006) 'Characteristics of personality and identity in population surveys: n approach for operationalisation and use to explain life satisfaction', BMS *Journal*, Issue: 53

Neary, S. (2014) 'Professional Identity', *Career Matters Journal*, Issue 23, Available at: www.core.ac.uk

Slay, H. and Smith, D. (2010) 'Professional Identity Construction: Using Narrative to Understand the Negotiation of Professional and Stigmatised Cultural identity', *Sage Journal*, research article, available at: www.sage.org,

Slinger, S., Daniel, D. and Roghr, G. (2012) 'Competency id not enough: Integrating identity formation into medical education discourse', *Journal of Academic Medicine*, 87 (9)

Swennen, A., Jones, K. and Volman, M. (2010) 'Teachers educators: Their identity, sun-identities and applications for professional development', Professional Development in Education Journal, 36(2)

Volpe, R., Hopkins, M., Haide, P., Wolpaw, D., and Adams, D. (2019) 'Is research on professional identity is biased? Early insights from a scoping review and met-synthesis', Medical Education in review, *Medical Education Journal*, available at: www.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/

Webb, S. (2015) 'Professional identity and social work', *5TH International conference on sociology and social work*, Conference Paper, Glasgow Caledonian University, available at: www.chester.ac.uk

Author Biographies

Abbas Alkhidir (ORCID ID: 0000-0002-1054-2060), is a research student at Business School, University of Sunderland.