Benefactor or burden: Exploring the professional identity of safety professionals

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A B S T R A C T

Introduction: The professional identity of safety professionals is rife with unresolved contradictions and tensions. Are they advisor or instructor, native or independent, enforcer of rules or facilitator of front-line agency, and ultimately, a benefactor for safety or an organizational burden? Perhaps they believe that they are all of these. This study investigated professional identity through understanding what safety professionals believe about safety, their role within organizations, and their professional selves. Understanding the professional identity of safety professionals provides an important foundation for exploring their professional practice, and by extension, understanding organizational safety more broadly. *Method:* An embedded researcher interviewed 13 senior safety professionals within a single large organization. Data were analyzed using grounded theory methodology. The findings were related to a five-element professional identity model consisting of experiences, attributes, motives, beliefs, and values, and revealed deep tensions and contradictions. This research has implications for safety professionals, safety professional associations, safety educators, and organizations.

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1. Introduction

The safety profession has evolved significantly over the past 30 years. Increasing safety regulation and social expectation for safety has expanded the size and seniority of the profession within organizations and across industry. However, we have a limited understanding of their current role and practice within organizations (Provan, Dekker, & Rae, 2017). We understand even less about who they are and what they believe about safety — their professional identity. To embrace, work with, and make changes to the safety profession, it is paramount we understand how they view their world.

There are existing stereotypes associated with the safety profession, such as the following: Policeman (Walters, 1999), Bureaucrat (Woods, 2006), Priest (Dekker, 2018) and Psychologist (Walters, 1999). These are outsider perceptions of the safety profession, not models of professional identity. They are portrayals of who others think safety professionals are, not who safety professionals think they are. There is no existing research into the professional identity of safety professionals.

This research aims to understand the safety professional in a more intimate way than previous descriptive research into their tasks and education. Beyond the organizational focus on translating knowledge ("knowing") to practice ("doing"), professional identity looks at the combination of these with other aspects of the individual to understand who they are ("being") (Snook, Nohria, & Khurana, 2011).

Understanding professional identity is pivotal for understanding how professionals embed themselves in organizations (Webb, 2015). However, there has been limited research into professional identity broadly across the professions (Clarke, Hyde, & Drennan, 2013).

Professional identity helps us to understand why professional practice is the way that it is, therefore providing the potential for change and improved effectiveness that may, in the case of safety professionals, lead to safer organizations. This type of study, to understand the recursive relationship between professional identity and the identity of a profession, has been called for in the literature (Hotho, 2008). The findings describe a view of safety professional identity. Because professional identity is self-described, the findings make no inferences about effectiveness or ineffectiveness of safety professionals, nor do they judge whether safety professionals' self-concept and beliefs are good or bad.

1.1. The safety profession

The professional identity of safety professionals is situated within the context of their organization, and their profession more broadly. This is the intersection between who they are and the context in which they perform their role. The Safety Profession in its present form is approximately 30 years old and, to a large extent, remains immature and fragmented. Provan et al. (2017) conducted a comprehensive literature review on the role shaping factors of safety professionals across organizational, social, and individual dimensions. Twenty-five factors were identified, for example: legal regulation, education, professional accreditation, safety culture, job design, and senior management. Despite the significant recent efforts of the International

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Network of Safety and Health Practitioner Organizations (INSPHO) to define, standardize, train, and accredit safety professionals, the experiences of working safety professionals vary considerably across organizations, industries, and nationalities (Pryor, Hale, & Hudson, 2015).

The present role of safety professionals within organizations has been the subject of significant research. The tasks and activities, education, and practice of safety professionals across many countries has been described in the existing literature. Hale and Guldenmund (2006) surveyed more than 8000 safety professionals in over 12 countries to determine the core and common tasks and activities of safety professionals. Chang, Chen, and Wu (2012) surveyed almost 300 safety professionals and safety educators to establish the core competencies and curricula for the education of safety professionals. Daudigeos (2013) observed safety professionals enacting practical agency and proposed the mechanisms through which they influence safety in organizations. The safety professional body of literature, represented in the examples above, provides a description of what safety professionals might do in organizations and how they are educated. The gap in the existing safety professional literature is research into how safety professionals think and feel about, and identify with their role. This case study into the professional identity of safety professionals begins to address that gap.

1.2. Professional identity

Professional identity refers to an individual's self-concept about their professional role based on their experiences, attributes, motives, beliefs, and values (Ibarra, 1999). This is distinct from their organizational identity, which is an indicator of an individual's personal association with where they presently work (Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006). Professional identity has been scantly researched over the past 40 years, and generally only in respect of long-established professional disciplines, for example, education (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Clarke et al., 2013; O'Connor, 2008), and healthcare (Benoit, 1994; Chromik, 2015; Pratt et al., 2006).

Professional identity is a complex individual phenomenon that is shaped by both individual and contextual factors surrounding their professional life (Clarke et al., 2013). Individuals continually bridge their personal identity with their professional identity through participation, observation, interpretation, and re-interpretation of individual and organizational experiences (Beijaard et al., 2004). Thus, professional identity is both an individual and a social construct shaped by education, moral, and conceptual frameworks and also by the performance of roles strongly determined by the professional community and organization (Bévort & Suddaby, 2016; Giddens, 1984; Hotho, 2008; Kogan, 2000). Individuals develop and adjust their identity, as they acquire discourses (Gee, Hull, & Lanshear, 1996) from many knowledge sources, such as: affect, human relations, and subject matter (Beijaard et al., 2004). Professional identity is both a product of structure and a product of choice (Bourdieu, 1993; Hotho, 2008).

1.3. Investigating professional identity

Given the constructivist nature of the development and interpretation of professional identity, much of the research into professional identity consists of context specific qualitative case studies (Pratt et al., 2006). Professional identity research needs to consider the personal and often unconscious nature of the beliefs associated with professional identity. The aspects of individual and social life that form professional identity are tacit and unarticulated and significantly influenced by family, close relationships, early career experience, and professional traditions (Sugrue, 1997). Individuals internalize these professional and social experiences mostly without giving them much critical reflection (Clarke et al., 2013). Therefore, professional identity research needs to find ways to elicit these underlying individual narratives through observation and open discussion with professionals about themselves, their subject matter, and their role (Webb, 2015). Qualitative case studies provide researchers with the opportunity to explore professional identity as a complex social and individual phenomenon.

Sugrue (1997) developed a theory of the formation of professional identity of teachers through analyzing interview transcripts of nine student teachers for emerging themes. Gibson, Dollarhide, and Moss (2010) conducted two focus groups of student counselors at a single academic institution, using qualitative research methods and grounded theory analysis to develop a professional identity theory of new counselors. Kosmala and Herrbach (2006) conducted semi-structured interviews with 18 practicing financial auditors and 10 former auditors in the UK and France to establish a theory of professional identity in audit firms. Eliot and Turns (2011) conducted a study on the formation of professional identity among engineering students through conducting four workshops with a total of 36 participants from a single institution, where participants completed an online survey consisting of open-ended questions. Williams (2010) completed one-hour semi-structured interviews with 15 participants to explore the creation of new professional identities for participants who had undergone a career change into the teaching profession. O'Connor (2008) conducted semi-structured interviews with three participants to establish discourses of emotionality and professional identity through the lived experience of teachers. The small number of participants in each of these studies is a reflection of the depth required in each individual case (participant) when exploring professional identity. Case study research should be depth-first rather than breadth-first research and where a single case may comprise an entire study (Yin, 2017).

Professional identity forms and evolves at the intersection of the individual and their landscape. As professional identity is constantly evolving, it will be influenced by the context that the professional is currently operating within, including their current organization (Beijaard et al., 2004; Reynolds, 1996). Tensions between agency (the personal dimension) and structure (the socially given) manifest in descriptions of professional identity (Coldron & Smith, 1999). Researchers need to find ways through their sampling and data collection to isolate professional identity from organizational identity. In this way researchers are able to describe the thoughts, beliefs, and actions of professionals, as they are derived from the individual, historical, structural, and social landscapes.

The position of the researcher relative to the research (reflexivity) is particularly important for professional identity analysis. The implicit professional identity of participants is made explicit through an ongoing dialog and discovery between participant and researcher (Gibson et al., 2010). For this reason, it is common to include in the research team a member of the profession under investigation.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Thirteen senior safety professionals from an Australian Energy Company participated in this study. As professional identity is both an individual and a social construct (Kogan, 2000) participants were deliberately selected from within a single organization (social system). This research design enabled the separation of individual identity constructs from those related to organizational identity. These participants were performing a diverse mix of dedicated generalist and technical specialist safety roles. Participants are currently mid-level and senior-level safety professionals and all were recruited into the organization to perform safety professional roles (i.e., no participants had performed other roles in the organization prior to their appointment as a safety professional). Twelve participants were male, and 1 participant was female. Participants had worked in full-time safety professional roles for between 2 and 20 years with an average of 11 years of experience. Eight of the 13 participants had tertiary safety qualifications.