How do we describe our professional selves? Investigating collective identity configurations across professions

Petra Saskia Bayerl[a],[*], Kate E. Horton[a],[b], Gabriele Jacobs[a]

[a] *Erasmus University Rotterdam, Rotterdam School of Management, Burgemeester Oudlaan 50, 3062PA Rotterdam, The Netherlands*
[b] *Federal University of Pernambuco, Recife/PE, Brazil*

A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Understanding how individuals make sense of their professions provides important guidance for career decisions and career counseling. In this paper we aim to further our knowledge of profession-specific self-understandings by investigating collective accounts of what professional members consider to be 'one of us'. In contrast to objective approaches to job descriptions, our study thus investigates the subjective framings of professional identities. For this purpose, we collected self-descriptions from two different professions: police officers ($n = 149$) and market researchers ($n = 357$). Content analysis of the 7545 resulting statements revealed that self-descriptions in both professions relied on only a small number of thematic building blocks for their construction, yet focused on disparate aspects to frame their identities. We refer to these framings as *identity configurations*, reflecting variations in the relevance given to topics and themes across professional groups. Comparing these collective accounts of identity configurations with existing schemes, we find important additions to current understandings of professional identities by their members. Our findings also reveal the multi-level nature of professional self-descriptions. Our observations offer a new conceptual lens to study professional self-understandings, with practical applications for career counseling and guidance. In addition, our paper contributes to discussions around identity congruence as well as the content and multi-level nature of professional identities.

It is well known that professions differ in the way they describe and make sense of themselves, not least through reports of conflicts when these descriptions fail to match (e.g., conflicts between musicians and administrators in the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra; see Glynn, 2000). Such collective professional self-descriptions form a vital aspect in understanding work- and career-related behaviors and decisions and thus constitute an important basis for career guidance and counseling (Bangali & Guichard, 2012; Bujold, 2004; Del Corso & Rehfuss, 2011). Yet, so far the study of career phenomena and vocational experiences is all too frequently focused on the individual, while paying limited attention to the collective framing of professional groups (Cohen & Duberley, 2015; Lee, Felps, & Baruch, 2014). In consequence, little knowledge exists about the content and construction of professional identities as collective self-understandings of a profession (Ashcraft, 2013; Horton, Bayerl, & Jacobs, 2014). This gap limits our ability to understand how professional collectives position themselves and hence reduces our ability to pinpoint disparities among professional identities or between individual members and the collective. Both aspects are vital prerequisites for recognizing issues of person-occupation fit for career decisions and counseling support.

In this study, we utilize members' self-descriptions as expressions of professional identities by tapping into shared narratives about what a profession "is" or "should be". By doing so we move conceptualizations of professions away from objective features towards an

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understanding as subjective collective framings, which serve as a basis for decisions about work and careers. This investigation led us to a content-based view of professional identities that extends current theoretical perspectives. We further investigate how collective professional self-understandings may differ across professions and potentially national contexts.

A good grasp of the internal makeup of professions is vital to understand career experiences and career decision making processes (Gati & Nathan, 1986). Belonging, for instance, to a stigmatized group within the own profession (e.g., LGBT ministers in the Presbyterian church; Creed, DeJordy, & Lok, 2010) or a group seen as "atypical" (e.g., women entrepreneurs in Bangladesh; Mair, Marti, & Ventresca, 2012) can lead to frictions with members of one's own professional group as well as to internal struggles about how to be part of a profession, when fundamental aspects of the self are not in keeping with the prototype. Such struggles are the result of misfits between individuals' self-constructions and the construction of the collective one belongs to, which can have severe consequences for individuals' wellbeing and career success (Ford, 2012; Vogel & Feldman, 2009).

Pinpointing misfits and resolving such struggles are at the heart of many career counseling interventions (e.g., LaPointe, 2010; Perdrix, Stauffer, Masdonati, Massoudi, & Rossier, 2012), often with the purpose of finding a better match between individuals' vocational values and expectations and the occupation and/or environment they work in. Our objective in this paper is to offer a deeper understanding of professional identities as a basis for subjective sense-making of professional groups about their own collective. Such knowledge can help career counselors in identifying content-based (mis)fits and thus improve guidance in vocational decisions such as transitions into other professions or specialties and/or the internal resolution of vocational misfits.

1. Efforts to define professional identities

The most commonly used definition of professional identities describes them as "the relatively stable and enduring constellation of attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences in terms of which people define themselves in a professional role" (Ibarra, 1999, p. 765). Professional identities can be understood as group-based identities in that they are "shared with a group of others who have (or are believed to have) some characteristic(s) in common" (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004, p. 81). In consequence, members tend to be bound by similar principles of operation, not only through common regulatory bodies (e.g., medical, engineering or education), but also due to implicit agreements regarding their profession's standards, values and goals (Ahrens & Chapman, 2007; Chreim, Williams, & Hinings, 2007). Professional identities signal collective norms, rules and values and provide symbols and social rituals specific to the group. Due to the shared nature of these agreements, professional identities can transcend institutional contexts (Lammers & Garcia, 2009; Mael & Ashforth, 1992) as well as national boundaries (Gomez-Mejia, 1984).

Several efforts have been made to conceptualize professional identities. Starting with Hall (1968), they generally contain structural as well as attitudinal aspects. Structural aspects refer to features such as the organization of training, the formation of professional associations and ethical codes, while attitudinal aspects include a sense of calling, an emphasis on autonomy and self-regulation through professional organizations (Kerr, von Glinow, & Schriesheim, 1977; Norris & Niebuhr, 1984). Adler, Kwon, and Heckscher (2008) further emphasize the need for abstract knowledge and practical apprenticeship, which stem from the generally non-routine nature of tasks, while other authors focus on the values, norms and beliefs that are shared among group members (e.g., Ahrens & Chapman, 2007; Ibarra, 1999). Another group of scholars focuses mostly on role theory and the role-expectations of internal and external stakeholders (e.g., Dahrendorf, 1968; Mead, 1934; Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006). An effort to develop an integrative framework of collective identities was made by Ashmore et al. (2004) by combining theoretical and empirical work on social, organizational as well as professional identities. This framework draws attention to the multi-dimensional nature of collective identities, but still lacks aspects that are specifically relevant to professions, such as roles and specialized knowledge (Adler et al., 2008; Pratt et al., 2006; Vough, 2012). It therefore cannot serve to fully explain and differentiate professional self-understandings.

As this short overview illustrates, there is a clear lack of consensus about what collective professional identities entail and how identities compare across professions. This omission was highlighted by Ashcraft (2013) who stated that "we pay much attention to how people construct the central, enduring, and distinctive characteristics of organizations […] yet we show little if any curiosity about how they do so with regard to occupations. Is the identity of where/with whom we work somehow more of a collective identity […] than what we do?" (p. 10). Thus, while members of a profession often have very clear views about what it means to be a teacher, designer, politician or soldier, as researchers we still seem to lack the conceptual tools to systematically describe and differentiate such collective identities across professions.

2. The relevance of professional identities for vocational choices

The importance of professional identities for vocational choices and the wellbeing and functioning of individuals as well as organizations has been amply illustrated in the past. Most relevant here are questions of congruence or fit between a person and a profession or between professional and organizational characteristics (e.g., congruence between values, knowledge, norms or interests; Ford, 2012; Nye, Su, Rounds, & Dragow, 2016; Wille, Tracey, Feys, & De Fruyt, 2014). Person-occupation fit, for instance, positively impacts upon occupational commitment as a precursor to professional identity and thus affects intentions to remain or leave an occupation (Nägele & Neuenschwander, 2014). Relatedly, person-vocational fit, defined as the "congruence of skills and needs at the level of the occupation" (Vogel & Feldman, 2009, p. 70), positively influences the perceived fit between the person and their job as well as their organization, which in turn is positively linked to job satisfaction and perceptions of career success, and negatively to turnover intentions (Vogel & Feldman, 2009). Conversely, when professional values come into conflict with organizational cultures and goals, lower identification and commitment are often the result (e.g., Bunderson, 2001; Ford, 2012; Johnson, Morgeson, Ilgen, Meyer, & Lloyd, 2006; Sorensen & Sorensen, 1974).