

FROM IDENTITY TO PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY – A MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims at offering a better understanding regarding the concepts of identity and professional identity. The approach on identity is multidisciplinary and takes into account the psychological, sociological and anthropological points of view of different authors. This approach is considered to be of grave importance and actually necessary in the process of understanding both the characteristics and the factors involved in the development of professional identity.

KEYWORDS: *professional identity, identity, factors of identity.*

JEL CLASSIFICATION: O 15

1. INTRODUCTION

Identity is an umbrella term used in social sciences to describe an individual's ability to understand himself. Erik Erikson (1968) was one of the psychologists interested in analyzing identity. The Eriksonian vision is based on a distinction between the psychological sense of continuity, known as ego identity, personal differences that separate one individual from another, united under the name of personal identity and the amalgamation of social roles that a person could play, concept known as social identity or cultural identity. Erikson's work, respecting the psychodynamic tradition, aimed at investigating the process of identity formation throughout life. Developing a strong ego identity with proper integration in a stable society, leads to a stronger sense of identity in general. Therefore, a deficiency in any of these factors can increase the risk of an identity crisis or confusion.

Before we can understand the extent of the concept of professional identity our attention needs to focus on the notions of identity and profession. **Identity** refers to "**who the individual thinks he or she is and who is announced to the world in word and action**" (Charon, 1992). In philosophy, identity was seen, at first as a whole, the unity of a thing with itself, then, in the works of Leibniz, the concept is characterized by individuality and uniqueness. In the contemporary period, the works of Erik Erikson and Alvin Gouldner (1970) observe the concept of identity in relation to characteristics of people in terms of race, nationality, gender, religion, sex.

2. A MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO THE CONCEPT OF IDENTITY

The neo-Eriksonian vision on identity emerged in recent years, having its origins mainly in James Marcia's et al.(1993) work. This author concentrates its efforts on the concepts of exploration and commitment. The central idea is that the sense of identity is determined largely by the processes of exploration and commitment that a person makes in respect to certain personal and social traits (Heidegger, M. 2002).

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A person may show either strength or relative weakness in terms of both exploration and commitment. Four distinct permutations can occur in the context of exploration and commitment:

- **Identity diffusion.** The first situation occurs when a person has neither the ability for exploration nor the interest in committing to certain roles.
- **Identity blockage.** It occurs when a person was not able to decide in the past, but now seems willing to engage to uptake certain relevant values, goals, or roles.
- **Moratorium of identity.** The moratorium describes the condition when a person experiences a kind of instability regarding decision-making and an inability to engage in undertaking them.
- **Identity implementation.** This situation occurs when a person makes choices about his identity and is committed to undertake them (Bertino, E. & Takahashi, K. 2011).

On the other hand the **profession** is a concept that defines an occupation that requires extensive training, intense study and mastery of specialized knowledge. Usually, individuals holding the same profession meet in association with a code of professional ethics and a well-organized process of certification or licensing.

Currently, professions tend to have certain common aspects. A profession is always held by a person and is generally the way in which income is generated. Membership of a profession is usually limited and regulated by a professional association.

Many organizations have structured their behavior, often including it in an "Ethical Code". Some of these codes are quite detailed, with a strong emphasis on the particular activity that the individual carries.

2.1. The concept of identity in social psychology

At a general level, social psychology investigates how individuals refer to their social environment and the theories try to explain the actions of an individual in a group considering events, mental and emotional states.

Another issue that researchers have tried to address is the question of why people discriminate, for example, why some people tend to favor those individuals who are considered to be part of the "group" to the detriment of those considered to be outsider. Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner (1979) were concerned with investigating these issues. Thus, their theory focuses mainly on the role that self-classification has, but also attempts to demonstrate that a simple distinctiveness may cause people to act in a discriminatory manner.

Another aspect of interest in social psychology is linked to the idea that there are certain strategies of identity formation that a person can use to adapt to society. Cote and Levine (2002) developed a typology that investigated various ways of behavior that individuals may have. Their typology includes:

Table 1. - Types of identity in social psychology

	Psychological symptoms	Personality symptoms	Social symptoms
The refuser	Develops cognitive blockages that prevent the adoption of different roles	Engages in childlike behaviors	Is dependent on others and does not engage in age-specific relationships with other adults.
The indecisive	Possess broader psychological resources (intelligence, charisma)	He is apathetic in applying psychological resources	Does not engage in very close relations with the community of adults

	Psychological symptoms	Personality symptoms	Social symptoms
The seeker	Feels a degree of dissatisfaction due to high expectations both socially and personally	Manifests disregard for imperfections encountered in the community	Interacts to some extent with those considered models, but in the end relationships are abandoned
The guardian	Possesses clear personal values and attitudes, but is constantly living in a profound state of fear of change	The sense of personal identity is almost assimilated to social identity	Has a rigid sense of social identity and identifies with the adult community
The solver	He consciously seeks personal development	He accepts his competencies and skills and uses them actively	Supports communities that are involved in personal development.

Source: Cote and Levine, 2002

Kenneth Gergen (quoted in Cote and Levine, 2002) made several additional classifications that include the strategic manipulator, the pastiche personality and the relational personality.

- **The strategic manipulator** is a person of for whom identity represent only an exercise. In time, this person becomes alienated from himself.
- **The pastiche personality** abandons all aspirations for a true identity, instead imagining social interactions as opportunities to play a role, finally adopting this role in his/her daily life .
- Finally, the relational personality describes a perspective where the people abandon all sense of self, living only through social involvement with others.

For Gergen, these typologies arose due to the increase in popularity of postmodern culture, the development of technology and the telecommunications' system.

2.2. The concept of identity in social anthropology

The anthropological approach on identity sometimes led to more restrictive interpretation of the concept, that is why we can distinguish two tendencies more or less opposite. The first favors a **primordialist** view, claiming that the sense of identity and belonging to a group, are well established things, defined by objective criteria such as inheritance and common biological characteristics. The second, rooted in **social constructivist theory**, claims that, in fact identity is made up of a range of features predominantly political. Both approaches, although criticized, continue to exert an influence in the study of identity.

These various explorations on "identity" demonstrate how difficult it is to define a concept, as identity is an abstract thing, it is impossible to define it empirically. Brubaker and Cooper (2000) observed a tendency for many researchers to confuse identity either considering it a category of practice, either a unit of analysis (2000).

Anthropologists have contributed to the debate by changing the direction of research: one of the first challenges for the researcher who wishes to conduct empirical studies in this area is to identify a suitable analytical tool. The concept of limit is useful here to demonstrate how identity works, as Cohen (1998) made an attempt at changing the focus of the analytical study from the study of identity to the study of the thresholds used for identification purposes.

As a non-directive, analytical and flexible tool, the concept of limit helps both to define and also to enclose the substitutability and varying experiences of people in society. While identity is a volatile, flexible and abstract "thing", its manifestations are often open to discussion. Identity is

highlighted by the use of markers such as language, clothing, behavior, whose effects depend on their recognition by other social beings. Markers help create boundaries that define similarities or differences between the receiver and sender of the message, their effectiveness depends on a common understanding of their meaning. In a social context, misunderstandings can occur due to misinterpretation of meanings of specific markers.

Limits can be inclusive or exclusive, depending on how they are perceived by others. An exclusive limit occurs, for example, when a person adopts a marker that imposes restrictions on the behavior of others. An inclusive border is created, by contrast, when using a marker that individuals easily associate with past experience.

2.3. The concept of identity from a sociological perspective

In sociology and political science, the concept of social identity is defined as a process which individuals use to label themselves as members of particular groups (eg. ethnicity, gender, etc). Symbolic interactionism attempts to show how identity can and is influenced by social reality. Symbolic interactionism is based largely on the work of American researchers such as Charles Pierce and William James. (quoted in Cote & Levine 2002)

Based on identity theory emerged in the work of George Herbert Mead (1934) and extended by Sheldon Stryker (1968), the interaction of the individual with others in order to create an identity is called negotiation. The purpose of negotiation is to develop a consistent set of identity behaviors that strengthen the identity of the person. In general, a person will have to negotiate separately for each identity that he holds, using the interaction with those who are affected by the role in question. Weigert et al. (1986) in their paper "Society and Identity: Toward a Sociological Psychology" argue that Erikson was the one who stimulated interest in the sociological concept of identity, and with his help five traditions in sociology emerged:

- The Chicago School of Symbolic Interactionism;
- The Iowa School of Symbolic Interactionism;
- The interpretive sociology of knowledge;
- Structural functionalism;
- Critical theory.

Next, we decided to present the perspectives of the Chicago and Iowa schools, considering them representative for the theme addressed.

The symbolic interactionism supported by the Chicago School has its origins in the works of William James and Charles Pierce (quoted in Dent, M. & Whitehead S., 2002). The man who gave the name of this tradition was Herber Blumer in 1930, George Herbert Mead's student at the University of Chicago. This approach is known for its qualitative methods, which claim that social reality must be understood from a nominal perspective and thus requires a continuous process of negotiation to keep the situation at a normal level. The social reality is created continuously by people and the symbols they assign to different things in the communication process. Identities are created and modified by these processes permanently. Because of the emerging nature of social reality, identities are seen as precarious and requiring a continuous control system.

These processes are described in Mead's book (1934): *Mind, Self and Society*, although the term "identity" is not used. It is important to note that the title of the book identifies three levels of analysis corresponding to the personality (mind), interaction (self) and social structure (society), which provides a basis for understanding the concept of identity.

Two of the most prominent members of the school in the second half of the century are Anselm Strauss and Erving Goffman. Strauss's book *"Mirrors and masks: The search for identity"* (1959) is essential for those interested in the concept of identification. On the other hand Goffman developed the concept of identity by comparing the concepts mentioned by Mead in his work: ego identity, personal identity and social identity. Goffman is well-known for his detailed personal identity

management techniques in a social context and is the founder of the "drama school" that focuses just on the techniques mentioned above (quoted in Dent, M. & Whitehead S., 2002)..

The Iowa School of Symbolic Interactionism was founded by Manfred Kuhn and is considered to be less traditionalist than the one in Chicago. Although it stems from the same philosophical tradition as the Chicago School, the epistemological and ontological assumptions are opposite, favoring quantitative methodologies and realistic hypothesis regarding the concept of identity.

Symbolic interactionism promoted at the University of Iowa, is based on the idea that actors negotiate social reality through interaction, the main event consisting of the idea that human experience, although subjective, can be understood empirically and theoretically. The two key figures who promoted the concept were Manfred Kuhn and Carl Couch.

The most popular tool used by sociologists to study identity in a quantitative manner emerged at the University of Iowa and was called Twenty Statement Test (TST). Subjects were required to give 20 different answers to the question "Who am I?"

3. THE CONCEPT OF PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

In fact people are familiar with the term, but do they manage to understand it? The term often proves to be quite difficult to define, even abstract and often used in a pejorative context (identity crisis, identity in reference to a pathological perspective) (Lawler, 2008). From a sociological perspective we can identify two levels on which we base our definition of the term:

- Similarities: identity comes from the Latin word "idem" which means something that is the same. Not only we are identical to ourselves from birth to death, but we are identical to others because we belong to a certain category (Europeans, women, Asians, etc.).
- Differences: arising from the uniqueness of each person, characteristics that offer uniqueness.

Etienne Wenger (1998), in his paper *Communities of Practice Learning, Meaning and Identity*, characterizes the concept of identity from various perspectives:

- Identity as negotiated experience – defining ourselves through participation;
- Identity as community membership – defining ourselves through the familiar and unfamiliar;
- Identity as learning trajectory – defining ourselves by where we have been and where we are going.

We cannot forget the fact that professional identity as well as the organizational one forms the institutional identity that constantly interacts with the personal and social identity, thus forming the identity construct.

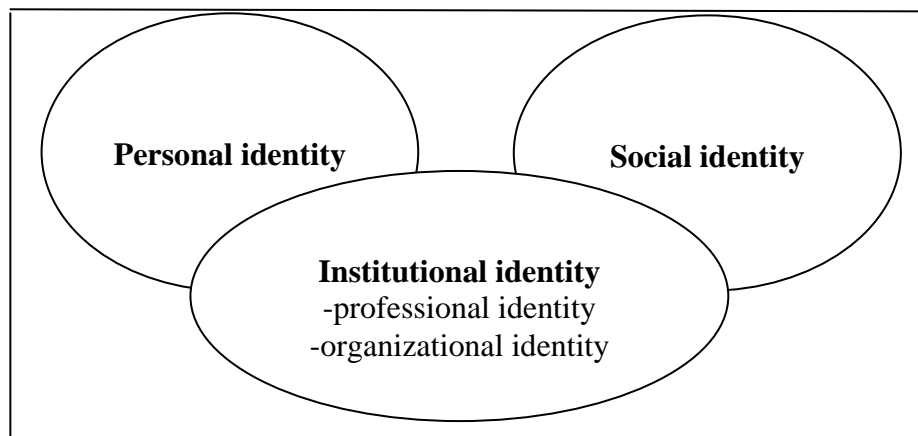


Figure 1. The identity construct

Source: adapted from Jean-Marc Larouche and George A. Legault, 2003

Another very important concept that has to be brought to attention is the identity belief. Assigning priority to a series of situations that people are confronted with requires the presence of interpretative schemes that influence the processes of scanning and analyzing the information. Through these schemes people guide and manage their actions, thus choosing an appropriate way of dealing with different situations. Collective identity beliefs have to be taken in consideration as well, as a single event can become an issue "that members collectively acknowledge as threatening their collective sense of self and as deserving a response" (Lin Lerpold et al., 2007).

3.1. Addressing professional identity in terms of interactions at the workplace

Professional identity must be seen, on the one hand from an economic perspective which refers to paid activities, on the other hand from a symbolic and social perspective. The psychological dimension of professional identity derives from the personal and unique character of each individual, but also from the affiliation to a certain group.

Professional identity refers to a concept composed by a combination of identities that shape the roles individuals adopt and the ways in which they behave when they perform their work. Professional identity represents only one part of the many personal identities that a person possesses, yet it is one of grave importance in what concerns performing a job. This concept refers less to opinions that individuals have about themselves, to behaviors outside work or in social or recreational activities and more about the quality of work and its results.

Whenever we try to describe a person with a strong professional identity we imagine a trusted and respected individual, with a well defined status that applies in his/her activity a strict ethic and moral code (Bertino, E. & Takahashi, K. 2011).

The connection between individuals and the work they carry was very much discussed in different studies, most of them in the field of social psychology and sociology (Riopel, 2006). In the process of work, a certain stream of different complex interactions exist, these interactions are making it possible to observe social and personal aspect regarding identity.

Frequently, when people meet others, they tend to use their professional identity to introduce themselves. Making acquaintances is not the sole purpose of doing that. Through this introduction the individual starts noticing resemblances and differences, starts making connections and thus begins to understand the social role that professional aspects bring with them.

This concept starts to develop and to grow whenever a person begins to take interest in a specific field. The moment differs, depending mainly on the evolution and the development process that each individual lives, for example certain adolescents begin taking interest in a specific domain from early on, this way starting to build a model of what he or she wants to pursue in the immediate future.

4. FACTORS INVOLVED IN DEVELOPING THE CONCEPT OF PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

Professional identity refers to the process whereby individuals gradually assume a number of roles. Next, we stopped out on the essential factors involved in developing the concept of professional identity.

Professional identity refers to the gradual process through which individuals assume a series of roles. This process is affected by a number of factors, including education, career aspirations, attitudes, training, work experience, job satisfaction, working conditions, but also a few others, as shown in the following figure.

As these factors have a very strong influence on the development of the professional identity construct we have decided to describe a few of them.

Career development refers to identity formation at work and the patterns of decision on career choices. This process is affected by a number of factors, including education, career aspirations, attitudes, training, work experience, job satisfaction, working conditions.

In organizational development, career development studies addresses the following issues:

- how individuals manage their careers within the organization, and beyond;
- how organizations structure the career development of its members.



Figure 2. Factors involved in developing the concept of professional identity

Source: the authors

Also in the context of our discussion, it is also important to refer to **professional organizations** (also called professional bodies, trade associations and professional societies), organizations that usually are non-profit and seek to support a particular profession, the interests of those involved in the profession and the public interest. These bodies generally strive to achieve a balance between these two terms, often contradictory.

Many professional bodies are involved in the development and monitoring of professional educational programs, and updating of knowledge, thus making the process of professional certification able to indicate that a person possesses qualifications in the field. Membership in a professional organization as a legal requirement in some professions may be the primary form to gain entry into an occupation.

On the other hand, a **professional certification** is an attribute gained by a person stating the fact that he or she is qualified to perform the duties of a particular job. Certification indicates that the person has a specific set of knowledge, skills and abilities in what concerns the certification body. Professional certifications are often offered by professional bodies or associations.

In the context of the analysis on the concept of professional identity it is essential to take into consideration the “competence” factor. **Competence** is a standard requirement that an individual must perform properly to handle a specific job. It encompasses a combination of knowledge, behaviors and techniques to improve performance. In general, competence is the state or quality of being adequately or well qualified, having the ability to perform a specific task.

The movement involving professional competences was initiated by David McClelland (1973) in the 1960s, with the aim of changing the traditional view on the term, until then described using terms as: skill, knowledge, attitude, and focus instead on concepts such as self image, value, motivational features and provisions, concepts that make the difference between performance and

normality in a job. It should be noted that different competencies predict outstanding performance in different roles, and that there are a limited number of competencies that predict outstanding performance in any given job or role. Thus, a feature that represents a "competence" for a certain role, cannot predict an outstanding performance for a different role.

Lyle and Signe Spencer (1993), in their book "Competence at work" have called into question the issues proposed by McClelland, re-analyzing the connection between skills and outstanding performance while bringing into question and reuniting a wide range of skills identified in the hundreds of studies made on this subject until that time.

More recent studies strengthened and underlined the importance of skills as key predictors of performance at the highest levels.

Professional development often refers to verbal and tactile skills needed to pursue a particular career or general skills assimilated through continuous education, including skills in the area of personal development. Professional development can be considered a process of adaptation with the changing technology, the practice of a profession or the concept of lifelong learning. Implementing a professional developmental program is often a function of the Human Resources Department within an organization or corporation.

Professional development in the workplace can develop or improve procedural skills, also known as leadership skills and skills focused on certain work tasks. Some leadership skills can include: effectiveness, teamwork, strategic thinking.

Professional specialization is the training done in a certain specialty within a profession. This professional specialization process may or may not lead to professional certification or professional licensing. This activity can be performed for personal development, career development or professional reasons.

Professional standards are specifications regarding the minimum level of acceptable performance for an activity. A few factors contributing to the maintenance of standards are:

- Constant evaluation;
- Compliance with professional ethics;
- Adherence to professional organizations;
- Professional supervision;
- Clear guidelines for action.

Formation and strengthening of professional identity depends quite a lot on the way an individual assumes a certain role. Thus **role perception** refers to the perception of the activity and also on the manner in which this behavior makes changes visible.

The lack of a clearly defined role of the employee or an inconsistent perceptions about their responsibilities within the organization, are issues that can have a negative effect on morale and self-esteem of employees. A blurred perception of the role can also lead to inefficiencies and poor use of the potential of the individual. Consequently, the organization in the long term could not only lose precious time but also some competent employees. It is therefore in the interest of the organization to provide employees with a clear role to combat the growing competition in the global environment.

Self-concept or self-identity represents a concept referring to the awareness that human beings have regarding their own existence. In other words, this concept represents the total amount of knowledge and understanding that an individual has of his own being. Components of self-concept include physical, psychological and social attributes, which may be influenced by individual attitudes, habits, beliefs and ideas. These components and attributes can be condensed into more general concepts of self-image and self-esteem.

By far, the most influential and eloquent voice that took into consideration the self-concept was Carl Rogers (1947), who introduced a whole system of support built around the concept of self-importance. According to Rogers, the self is the central ingredient in human personality and personal adjustment. Rogers described the self as a social product, developed on the basis of interpersonal relations and the struggle for consistency. He argued that there is a human need for

positive appreciation, both from others and from themselves. He also considered that every man has the tendency for self-actualization and development so long as it is allowed and encouraged by an inviting environment.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Professional identity is a bond that unites the professional practitioner with his group and is also the method by which a person creates an image representing its methods of action, value and efficiency. For a person who has a specific job, the identification process brings a sense of affiliation and likeness to a professional group, playing a role in the development of professional identity.

Roles, responsibilities and behaviors define both the professional identity and the organizational one. The degree to which these issues are prioritized by each member of the organization represents a key to success, a path to a highly competitive and efficient structure.

Professional identity nowadays is a much desired label, offering value and prestige to an organization in which individuals operate. The value that members bring with their expertise translates into results, objectives and goals achieved.

Also, a powerful organizational system based on a strong set of values, a highly functional decision-making capacity and a reliable communication process with highly efficient human resources is a model of performance to any organization.

Performance is still strongly influenced by how employees promote the mission of an organization to the outside world and also the way in which they carry out their responsibilities, obligations and duties. Also, appropriate skills, abilities and knowledge needed to perform an organizational role at the environmental objectives while maintaining good relationships at work.

Identity is a powerful construct that influences an individual's success both in his personal life and also in the workplace. The road to achieving stability in terms of this construct is full of obstacles, stemming mainly from its strong, unstable and mutable character.

The identity is a constant process of combining the elements from the past with the present ones, our expertise in the field of interest, in order to obtain the desired stability, both at a personal and also at a professional level.

It can be concluded that professional identity has critical implications in terms of work quality, economic performance, attaining key objectives and is also important in influencing outcomes.

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