Professional Identity Interactive Framework

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1.1 Purpose

The purpose of this research is to explore third year students’ constructions of the nature of professional identity in human resources (HR) and employment relations (ER), and the nature of professional practice. Research questions are: (1) what factors have influenced students’ professional identity construction, and how; (2) what are the major components of third year HR/ER students’ fledgling professional identities; and (3) what are the research’s theoretical implications, and its practical messages for universities, students and the profession?

1.2 Background

Professional identity is defined as one’s professional self-concept based on attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences (Ibarra, 1999; Schein, 1978). Individuals create their identity through their unique traits (individual), dyadic relationships (relational) and group membership (collective) (Hallier & Cascón-Pereira, 2012; Sedikides & Brewer, 2001). Professional identity is not stable; it is complex, personal, and shaped by contextual factors (Sutherland & Markauskaite, 2012), thus changing over time. A professional identity involves continuous ‘becoming’ rather than having a fixed point to aim for.
Identity is always contested; there is a general tendency for the professions to be steered by targets and managerialist agendas which may not be consistent with overall societal (and indeed, organisational) welfare (Baxter, 2011), let alone the needs of employees. HR and ER has been subject to particularly vociferous debate about what they ‘are’ and whose interests they serve (Bailey, 2013; Bolton & Houlihan, 2007; Sheehan & De Cieri, 2012; Thompson, 2011). It appears the profession is in a continuous identity crisis, with varied identity roles such employee champion, strategic business partner, personnel administrator, cultural change agent and so forth. All the more reason, therefore, for students to be aware of these debates and how to steer a course through them.

Professional identity is a broad concept, and potentially useful for those teaching in higher education as it goes beyond single (albeit multi-dimensional) factors like ‘graduate attributes’, and is more theoretically robust and less one-dimensional than concepts such as ‘employability’.

The positive outcomes of having a sense of professional identity include:

- status, pride and self-esteem (Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011; Tajfel, 1978);
- a sense of belonging and attachment (Ahsforth & Mael, 1989); and
- mastery of the varied aspects of the profession (Niemi & Paasivuara, 2007), which is linked with feelings of self-efficacy, motivation and commitment (Canrinus, Helms-Lorenz, Beijaard, Buitink, & Hofman).

In sum, a sense of professional identity counters a tendency to ‘imposter syndrome’ (Lake, 2000) as a professional; that is, feeling inadequate and incapable compared with peers and co-workers.

These outcomes are all important for a successful graduate transition to the workforce, sustaining the new professional in what may be taxing and challenging circumstances. In addition, displaying a sense of professional identity contributes to employability as the new graduate is demonstrating awareness of the challenges and complexity of the job. It can be argued that developing a sense of professional identity is a key element of the student’s transition, and indeed should begin in first year (Field, Duffy, & Huggins, 2013).

The literature informing the research on professional identity encompasses three areas: social identity and social categorisation theories which explain how individuals develop a professional identity (Haslam & Ellemers, 2005; Tajfel & Turner, 1979); the nature of ER and HR work (Bolton & Houlihan, 2007; Sheehan & De Cieri, 2012); and empirical studies – in a variety of disciplinary contexts – exploring how students construct a sense of professional identity whilst at university (eg Hallier & Summers, 2011 with respect to HR; and Noble, Coombes, Shaw, Nissen, & Clavarino, 2014; Ronfeldt & Grossman, 2008, with respect to other disciplines). To date, however, the weight of research on early professional identity development is in some health sciences areas, and disciplines such as education.

There is widespread agreement that professional identity cannot be ‘taught’ by direct instruction; rather, the lecturer develops ‘pedagogical trigger points’ to help students attempt to create plausible routes to the goal of a positive professional identity (Field, Duffy, & Huggins, 2013: 20).

Our research contributes to the pedagogy of professional identity development amongst business students more broadly, not simply in HR and ER, and thus will assist universities enhance business students’ sense of self-efficacy as new graduates.
1.3 Conceptual framework

This study uses Molinero and Pereira’s (2013) conceptual framework of professional identity construction at university, which includes six factors,

1. **Role models through social experience**: Social experiences influence professional identity construction and include experiences with family and friends, at school and in the workplace. For example, if a student’s relative had a certain profession then this may influence the student’s decision to choose in that profession. Also, if a student and their friends discuss the desirability of certain occupations then this is likely to influence their choice of profession.

2. **Educational experience**: Educational experiences influence professional identity construction and include education both at school and at home. For example, if a student takes mathematics in secondary school they tend to choose particular kinds of degrees.

3. **Perceived congruence with the profession**: The values and beliefs of the profession and the perceived similarity to their own values influences professional identity construction. For example, HRM students who compare their values and beliefs to the ones in the HRM profession opt to choose a career that will allow the expression of their core values.

4. **Demographic characteristics**: Demographic characteristics, such as gender, geographical proximity and parents’ professions influence professional identity construction. For example, students who live in a certain town or area may be more likely to choose certain professions over others. Also students may be more likely to choose a degree or a profession based on the profession of their parents.

5. **Professional image**: Professional image, such as prestige and financial security, influences professional identity construction. For example, students may choose a career in Engineering due to the security of the job.

6. **Professional experience**: Professional experience, either during or prior to study influences professional identity construction. For example, students who have worked prior to starting a degree and/or who work during their studies, have a higher level of professional identity than those who have not worked before.
1.4 Method

Data was collected via a two-part qualitative study via (1) analysis of a reflective assignment (n=45); and (2) focus groups/interviews with students (n=20) in the Griffith University capstone subject 3006EHR Employment Strategies in Action and 3012EHR Applied HRM and Change in 2014 and 2015. Samples of questions include: “what ideas did you have about ER/HR as a career pre-university?”; “what do you think now about what careers in the field of ER/HR involve?”; “were there any critical moments that changed your thoughts and ideas on what is involved in a career in ER/HR?”; “what are the key elements of professional identity in ER/HR, for you?”. Data was analysed using a thematic analysis following the steps of thematic content analysis outlined by Weber (1985). Ethical clearance will be sought from the Griffith University Ethics Committee.

1.5 Results

Results show that three of Molinero and Pereira’s (2013) factors are significant in students’ construction of professional identity. First, role models were important; one set via family and friends, and another set comprised of university lecturer role models. These two factors most strongly influenced students’ construction of professional identity. Second, educational experience, particularly practical assignments during university subjects, was critical in forming professional identities. Third, professional experience, such as work experience, work-integrated learning and participating in university mentoring programs also helped students form their professional identities.
The Professional Identity Framework is intended to open up discussion, particularly amongst students. Many elements of it may be contested by both academics and students (which is only to be expected, given the general tendency of professional identities to be contested and resisted).

So the Framework can form the basis of discussion with students using questions such as:

- Do these aspects of how professional identities are constructed (i.e. inner circle) square with your experiences?
  - What other experiences have you had?
  - How did a particular incident affect your professional identity?

- The components of professional identity (middle segment) are often contested. Find an academic reading or an online resource that illustrates this.
  - Which elements are contested, according to the reading? How and why?
  - Problem-based learning activities can also be useful ways of exploring the dimensions of professional identity.

- How would you use activities you have engaged in (outer segment) when crafting your CV and cover letters, or in job interviews?
  - What can you do between now and graduation to build on activities you have already done? What resources are available to you to do so?
Other questions could include:

- Does having a professional identity negate your identity as an individual? What is the relationship between professional identity and ‘who you are’ as a person? Discuss.

- What do relevant professional bodies say about professional identity; for example, check out the Australian Human Resource Institute’s ‘Model of Excellence’ at https://www.ahri.com.au/about-us/model-of-excellence. What elements of this are not already incorporated into the middle segment of the model?

- Is being ‘competent’ in HR the same as having a strong HR professional identity? (see Ulrich, Brockbank, Ulrich, & Kryscynski, 2015 for a discussion of HR competencies).
Professional Identity Framework

- **Practical Strategies**: Practice strategies and activities to aid the development of useful professional identities.

- **ERHR Professional Identity**: Key components of ERHR professional identities.

- **Professional Identity Construction**: Key factors that influence the construction of students’ professional identity.
2.1 What factors have influenced students’ professional identity construction? (Inner Circle).
Explanation: Students talked about certain aspects of their lives that influenced the construction of their own professional identity.

2.1.1 Practical use of the Professional Identity Tool for Academics and Students

**Academics:** In the inner circle you are able to see the types of factors that influence student’s professional identity. As an academic and teacher you may be able to influence some of educational and social experiences in your subject to help students construct their own professional identity.

**Students:** In the inner circle students are able to see some of the ways that professional identity may be constructed and this will ultimately give students a sense of awareness. Students can reflect on some of these to see how these factors may (or may not) have influenced their professional identity.
2.1.2 Student’s comments about Professional Identity Construction (a snapshot)

“Connected with since I was a kid, grow up with dad getting dressed up in a business suit, going off to work every day”

– Jane.

“Bring that real world experience in and it does allow them to network with people so they get to see what professional people are like too”

– Sue.

“Thought that the people skills element required in the field was well-suited to my personality”

– Mandy.

“Probably being out working at the same time because I’ve been able to put what I’ve learnt at Uni into everyday life”

– Aleisha.

“Mainly it’s the lecturer who been talking about the experience and the story”

– Mia.
2.1.3 Factors that influence Professional Identity Construction

**Role models:** A role model is a person whose behaviour and achievements can be imitated by another person. A role model may be a family member, friend, colleague, teacher/lecturer and/or an industry professional. Whether an individual has a role model and the type of this role model (personal, professional, academic) is likely to influence how students construct their professional identity.

**Professional experience:** Professional experience relates to the length of time students have spent working in industry jobs and roles. The level of professional experience is likely to be quite diverse and is often not the same as their study discipline. Students with more professional experience are likely to have a more developed sense of professional identity.

**Individual values:** Individual values are things high importance that govern actions and behaviours both personally and professionally. Individual values and the perceived congruence between students’ own values and the values of their profession are important in the construction of professional identity.

**Social experiences:** Social experiences refer to any experiences a person engages in with friends and family. Social experiences, such as talking with friends, help in the construction of professional identity.

**Family:** Family culture, values and experiences impact on how students construct their professional identity. For example, discussions with an older sibling in Human Resource Management helped one student better understand the profession. For another student, seeing their grandfather ‘build a business empire from the ground up’ helped build their professional identity.

**University subjects:** University subjects impact on how students construct their professional identity. Some subjects were identified by students as being particularly influential in helping develop their professional identity, particularly effectively-taught capstone subjects, although any subject taught with enthusiasm and perceived by students as having a practical bent received favourable mention.

**Schooling:** The types of studies undertaken at high school had an impact on students’ construction of their professional identity. For example, students who had taken some kind of business studies at school believed that it had somewhat developed their professional identity and that they were more aligned to the profession as a result.
2.2 What are the major components of third year HR/ER students’ fledgling professional identities? (Middle Circle). Explanation: Students talked about some of the key skill and abilities that they believe are critical for HR and ER professionals.

2.2.1 Practical use of the Professional Identity Tool for Academics and Students

**Academics:** In the middle circle you are able to see some of the components that students perceive are prevalent in the ER and HR profession. As an academic and teacher you may want to focus in on some of the factors that you believe are important to the profession and create practice discussions on why this is the case and what types of roles and responsibilities may be associated with these components of the profession.

**Students:** In the middle circle students are able to see some of the components involved in a career in ER and/or HR. This may help students to get a clear idea on what is involved in the profession and create more accurate expectations on what a career in ER and/or HR may involve.
2.2.2 Student’s comments about ER and HR Professions (a snapshot):

“Many different views because there are a whole range of roles that HR/ER professionals find themselves doing”

– Mandy.

“You’re looking at the more practical, hands on with, with documents and things like that side, recruitment and selection side. Where I think if you’re looking at the ER side, you are kind of, you’ve got a different kind of professional identity… Where you’re more interpersonal, connected to your, to your staff”

– Kim.

“Personally I always see that ER and HR is that third party that are fighting for both the employer and the employee and creating that relationship and that connection between the two of them”

– Lisa.
2.2.3 Components of the ER and HR profession

**Legal skills:** Skills relating to current employment law and domestic and international legislation.

**Soft skills:** Skills relating to emotional intelligence; self-awareness; managing emotions; self-motivation; empathy for others; social/interpersonal skills.

**Conflict management:** Skills to resolve conflict and negotiate workable solutions for all parties involved in the dispute.

**Attention to detail:** Skills relating to the accuracy of completing a task.

**Creating policies and procedures:** Skills relating to developing new policies and procedures to govern the employment relationship.

**Problem-solving:** The ability to use initiative and be creative in order to find optimal solutions to problems.

**Hands on and practical:** The ability to be involved in all aspects of the job and take a hands on, practical approach in the workplace.

**Empathy:** The ability to understand other people’s needs and emotions.

**Do the right thing:** The ability to act in an ethical and moral way.

**Help people:** The ability to help other people and look after their needs and interests.

**Approachable:** Being friendly and easy to talk to.

**Compassion:** Being caring and considerate of other peoples’ needs.

**Working with people:** The ability to work with others and act in a collegial manner.
2.3 What are the main practical messages for universities, students and the profession in regards to professional identity construction? (DARK BLUE CIRCLE or Outer Circle). Explanation: Students talked about the types of strategies, activities and events that they believe are important to construct accurate identities of their profession.

2.3.1 Practical use of the Professional Identity Tool for Academics and Students

**Academics:** In the outer circle are strategies and activities that could be incorporated in the subjects you teach to help develop students’ professional identities. You can use the checklist below to keep a record of what strategies you are using in your subject. For example, practical activities range from simpler, less resource- and time-consuming activities such as videos, case studies and group discussions, to more intensive (and perhaps more costly) activities, such as field trips, internships and work-integrated learning.

**Students:** In the outer circle students can see practical strategies that they could use to further enhance their professional development. For example, work-integrated learning, internships and mentoring programs can enhance students’ understanding of the profession, further develop their professional identity and increase their employability.
2.3.2 Students’ comments about practical strategies and activities to aid Professional Identity Construction (a snapshot)

“Like staff have always given us plenty of opportunity to, you know talk to them or come to them with questions or concerns in regards to the actual profession”

– Lisa.

“To equip students better for when they actually go out into the real world”

– Addison.

“More engaging experiences that show people what, what to expect in the field, I think, instead of just, sort of, giving them assignments”

– Eva.

“Somehow get the majority of people involved in mentoring or touching base with people more often more often and connecting the dots more often in a gentle way and in an easier way”

– Sue.

“Including more practical assessment tasks rather than these big long assignments”

– Mandy.
## 2.3.3 Professional Identity Activity Checklist

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<th>Practical strategies and activities to aid Professional Identity Construction:</th>
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<td><strong>Internships:</strong> Internships may be paid or unpaid. They provide students with a learning opportunity to work in a real-life organisation for a certain period of time.</td>
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<td><strong>Work Integrated Learning:</strong> Work Integrated Learning is an academic subject that integrates academic learning with application in the workplace.</td>
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<td><strong>Practical assessment:</strong> Assessment pieces that are practical in nature are important to help develop practical workplace skills. For example, assessment pieces where students have to conduct a training activity or where students need to research a real-life organisation and report on their findings.</td>
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<td><strong>Social networks:</strong> Students can enhance their social networks through the classroom, student clubs and events, professional associations, professional networking events (e.g. Australian Human Resources Institute [AHRI] events and online through LinkedIn profiles.</td>
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<td><strong>LinkedIn profiles:</strong> LinkedIn is a professional networking site whereby people can build an online profiles and start building their professional networks. Website <a href="https://au.linkedin.com/">https://au.linkedin.com/</a>.</td>
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<td><strong>Online discussions:</strong> Students can engage in online discussion through university subject websites (Discussion Boards, Yammer, Facebook) or through their own personal and professional sites.</td>
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<td><strong>Group discussions:</strong> Students can talk to others in university workshops, seminars and professional networking events. Student may also like to set up their own informal study groups.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Peer learning:</strong> Students learn via their peers in lectures, workshops and seminars. Adding a peer review component to assessment pieces (such as a group workshop) is a great way to involve the class as well as provide important feedback to students to enhance their learning.</td>
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<td><strong>Case studies:</strong> Real-life and/or hypothetical case studies are an excellent tool to help students apply subject content and theories to a workplace scenario.</td>
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<td><strong>Free online professional resources:</strong> There are a range of free resources that give access to ‘HR and ER in the news’; for example, HC (Human Capital) Online: <a href="http://www.hcamag.com/">http://www.hcamag.com/</a> and HR Zone: <a href="http://www.hrzone.com/">http://www.hrzone.com/</a>. Subscription services such as Workplace Express may be willing to provide limited-term access for educational purposes.</td>
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<td><strong>Videos and YouTube clips:</strong> A mixture of educational video clips, Ted X talks and YouTube clips can break up lectures and keep students engaged. Inspirational messages, the use of humour and/or movies can be used to help students understand content and theories.</td>
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<td><strong>Joining professional associations:</strong> Joining a professional association is an excellent way for students to start networking with professionals in their discipline. Students can often join such associations without cost, or for a low fee. They may also offer a range of career services and professional development opportunities. List of Professional Associations in Australia: <a href="http://www.journoz.com/ausproforgs.html">http://www.journoz.com/ausproforgs.html</a>.</td>
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<td><strong>Employment seminars and workshops:</strong> Seminars and events which relate to graduate employment very advantageous to students. Workshops run by the university’s career services may be more general, or discipline based. For example, some student societies organise workshops on creating resumes (CV Bootcamp) or personal success seminars with industry guest speakers.</td>
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<td><strong>Practical advice from industry:</strong> Advice from industry professionals is important so that students can see what is happening in the ‘real world’. While this may occur as a result of their own professional contacts, it is more likely to be enabled through the university avenues such as industry mentoring programs and/or professional networking events.</td>
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<td><strong>Academic advice:</strong> Advice from lecturers is important for students to learn and grow. If academic staff see that their brief goes beyond merely imparting content and developing skills, but encompasses holistic student development, they are more likely to provide timely and effective help.</td>
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<td><strong>Career advice and support:</strong> Advice about careers and employability is critical. While there is often extensive information about careers on university websites, it is important that the careers staff and their support is visible to students through marketing (both university wide and through specific disciplines and individual subjects). Often the academic can play an important role in emphasising the availability and importance of this material.</td>
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<td><strong>Field trips:</strong> Field trips and excursions enable students to gain further insight into an organisation and/or workplace and allow students to start making connections between academic learning and the application to the workplace. However, this option may be limited to subjects with smaller numbers due to access and logistical issues. In some disciplines, ‘virtual tours’ are being developed to allow all students access to a simulated organisational workplace.</td>
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<td><strong>Industry mentors:</strong> Industry mentors offer students the opportunity to work with a professional on a one-to-one basis. Students are able to shadow their mentor, ask questions and seek advice over a period of time. This enriches the learning process and helps students to understand intricate details about the challenges and expectations of their profession.</td>
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<td><strong>Industry guest speakers:</strong> Industry guest speakers offer students the opportunity to hear what actually happens in a 'real life organisation' and helps them develop connections between theory and practice. It also provide students with a networking opportunity where they can ask in-depth and specific questions and engage with the speaker.</td>
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<td><strong>Real world stories and experiences:</strong> Real world stories and life experiences are extremely beneficial to students understanding, learning and engagement with the subject material. Lecturers providing examples and stories will bring the concepts and theories to life, enabling students to see the relevance and practical application of the concepts.</td>
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<td><strong>Assessment items:</strong> Any assessment item that encourages students to reflect upon self and profession in relation to their experiences along with targeted reading, can be useful. One capstone lecturer directs students to specific readings, and asks them to reflect on a number of issues in an assessed ‘reflective practitioner’ exercise. Those issues can be anything related to the Professional Identity Framework. For instance, students’ experience of teamwork in a group project in the subject and how they and others responded to the challenges; reactions to industry speakers in the subject (including what they demonstrate about the moral and ethical domains of the profession); and open-ended questions such as: <em>Briefly discuss the three most important insights you now have into the nature of professional practice, and the three most important insights you have developed about yourself as a practitioner-in-training.</em> The readings this lecturer (in ER) gives to students are found in the Appendix.</td>
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3.0 How to use the Interactive Professional Identity Tool

Step One

Enter the link [http://go.gudev.net/interactives/professional-identity-framework/index.html](http://go.gudev.net/interactives/professional-identity-framework/index.html) into the search bar.
Step Two

Click on ‘Part 1 Review Framework’ to review the Professional Identity Framework. Click on the different sections of the framework to reveal more information.

http://go.gudev.net/interactives/professional-identity-framework/index.html
Step Three

Click on ‘Part 2 Start Activity’ to explore your own professional identity through using the three simple steps in the Professional Identity Framework. Simply click on ‘Edit’ to add your information. Remember to click the save button before selecting a new section. Once you have completed the three sections, you can download your answers into a Word document.

http://go.gudev.net/interactives/professional-identity-framework/index.html
These are for ER/IR students doing a double major, but a similar list could be made for HR-only students. (Students are not required to read ALL resources, but most of the shorter ‘practitioner’ articles and a selection of the longer academic articles.)


References


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