HOW FUNDAMENTAL IS PROFESSIONAL
IDENTITY?

Presenter:

Edgar Burns, Wellington
PhD candidate. arxione@gmail.com
School of Social Sciences, Sociology Programme, La Trobe University, Melbourne

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A not unreasonable response to the question in my title is to resist it, to ask, ‘How fundamental is professional identity compared to what?’ Professions are seen variously as leading the way in a new rational division of labour (Perkin, 1989), as beleaguered and endangered (Gleeson & Knights, 2006), in danger of eclipse (Ball, 2005), or recovering (Stevens, 2001), as indeed fundamental to the functioning of late-modern global society. What should we here at OIL-4 compare professional identity to? How important is it? Well, there are several different sorts of answers to these questions.

Hang on a minute: isn’t ‘fundamental’ a red-flag word? My rhetorical stance in the question I pose for consideration was picked up by both reviewers. One asked, ‘Presumably some kind of foundationalist epistemology would be implied here if the term ‘fundamental’ is being used.’ The other reviewer says, ‘it is not clear how far the question is worth developing in its current form: as given, the question implies a form of essentialism; if so, this needs to be argued for or to be situated more clearly in terms of alternatives.’

The claim is not intended to be justified. Posing the question in this form simply attempts to enter into the conversational spirit the organisers are aiming for. Indeed I agree with the reviewer that posing the title question in this ways does invite overstating the case of asserting what professional is or could be claimed to be. It is a dialogic tease to draw out/ invite possible essentialising responses, whether of (1) the ‘common sense,’ or ‘intelligent people know’ kind; (2) the kind that professionals and professional groups themselves regularly propose; (3) the kind implicit in functionalist theory (and sometimes structuralist and systems approaches) in the social sciences; or (4) the kind that managers and organisations may wish to impose by authority about ‘what is really going on.’ All these are essentialising discourses in one way or another, build on the belief that one can, at least in principle, finally and clearly define or get the essence of a phenomenon.

One reviewer made a valuable point that ‘wording the question a little differently as fundamental to whom might steer away from the pitfalls of essentialism. I agree. That usefully adds to the challenge of the title question I had already inserted in the opening paragraph: ‘How fundamental is professional identity compared to what?’ (original bolded). Thus in the first line of the paper I am invigilating the question itself. ‘Fundamental to whom?’ would enhance that indeed, and even more might be achieved by utilising the full set of questions: what, who, when, where, why and how? My question, the reviewers’ points, and these other questions all challenge the adequacy of the tendentiously posed title question.

Yes, the term ‘fundamental’ does invite the overcommitment of a ‘foundationalist epistemology.’ The reviewers are right to be sensitive to the use of that term. I oppose each one of the six subsequent answers as fully satisfactory explanations or models of professional identity, in the same way that social critique often tackles them elsewhere. By setting such an approach up, however, the aim is to allow myself an opportunity to flush them out in at least several forms, to start to explore how the
partial truth that each offers works, while recognising their limitations. There is obviously not enough space in such a paper to climb into the overarching weakness of each of these areas of answer. The paper sets itself a very provisional, exploratory goal to ‘go wide’ to get these ideas and half-ideas on the table. My goal is not to discuss every topic/example mentioned, but to use these as exemplifying issues within the widely and often loosely used concept of professional identity.

Each of the six sections starts with a parrying counter question that is precisely doing this job of challenging the unsatisfactoriness of the paper’s title question. Thus each section looks for some answer that can meet this ‘wedge’ or ‘slice’ of what the big question might be asking; but it can’t be fully or finally ‘fundamental’, without having to look further, because five further serious alternative contenders are canvassed right here (without exhausting the options by any means). None, therefore, can be the ‘essential’ answer to what professional identity ‘really’ and ‘fundamentally’ is.

In fact, the six places the paper looks to find fundamental professional identity do the task of setting out how rich and complex the concept is. This is not a critique of the concept, but setting a trail of where critique will need to go, and what it will need to deal with. The best theory always connects with the empirical world and the ‘ordinary’ answers to the ‘real world’ that are partial or not satisfactory; and only subsequently shows how these explanations work, how they are limited in certain respects, and how the bigger question might be answered in better ways.

Let’s return to the six candidate answers to the title question, and start with an answer that is closest to current definitional conventions at least within sociology:

1. How fundamental is professional identity compared to social theory?

   Sociologist Costello (2005) in speaking of a ‘professional identity crisis’ comments:

   While the concept of identity is currently well received in academia, the related concept of role is in disfavour. The concept of role is typically criticized because roles have been reified by some theorists – that is, treated as if they have an objective existence outside people’s heads. Role theorists have also been criticised for treating roles as monolithic constructs, as if each social group did not hold different concepts of what it means to fulfil, for example the masculine role. While I agree with these criticisms, I believe it is counterproductive to throw the baby out with the bathwater and reject the concept of the role. A man does not develop a masculine identity in a vacuum but in relation to larger social understandings of what it is to be a man: the masculine role as understood in the family, his ethnic culture, his generational cohort, the larger popular culture and so on. This is socialisation: the internalization of roles as identity. If we dispense with the concept of role, we are left with a socially unanchored conception of identity. (2005, p. 236)

   Costello goes on in her study of elite US law and social work schools to develop the idea of identity dissonance to explain the different impact on otherwise equally outstanding students when they are not members of the elite socioeconomic, racial and gender groups in society. She elaborates on how identity dissonance may be experienced positively or negatively as students adopt their professional selves. Professional identity is ‘patchily’ theorised by social theorists, while more abstract concepts such as expertise and knowledge are well canvassed. However, professionals in their many occupational and other identities are the embodiment of the formal rational logic of modern society about which Weber (1947/1997) spoke.
Guichard and Lenz (2005) draw on career theory (they admit it is not always how career coaches and practitioners look at clients’ needs), outlining a ‘self-construction model’ describing how (1) each society makes an identify offer of various social categories such as religion, gender and profession; (2) individuals use interactions and conversations to construct identity frames that ‘organize their conceptions of others and construct themselves,’ using similar categories like religion, gender and occupation; which (3) grounds ‘others’ perceptions and self-orientation in identity forms as well as subjective identity forms; leading to (4) tensions between simple reproduction of internalised behaviours and reflexive self-anticipation as the engine of self-construction. I am only in the early stages of appropriating these insights, but note them here as conceptual aids to further developing these questions.

2. How fundamental is professional identity compared to organisational identity?
Well, there is evidence both ways: on the one hand, some argue that professionals continue, notwithstanding the gainsayers, to have a distinctive voice and contribution to make in organisational settings; that is, professional identity is fundamental. On the other hand, comments about the managerialist sense of prerogative conflicts heavily with professional judgement and best practice decisions; that is, professional identity is not fundamental. Is the first a claim for special privilege in a day and age when expertise comes in many shapes and sizes? Is the second part of the unhappy convergence of late-modernity, the commercialisation or commodification of so much of society?

A local example of the first might be the Wellington DHB hospital services where regularly voiced complaints of evisceration of clinical performance by ever-changing policy innovations, managerial cost control, a culture of blame and dislike between managers and workforce, politically driven compliance and policy regimes. Some argue that if it weren’t for the medical staff, doctors, nurses and others, the place would and nearly is falling apart. It was interesting at CMS5 in Manchester a few months ago to hear about alternative ways in the Netherlands and Denmark in which management and medical personnel (doctors and nurses and others) jointly set goals and strategies compared to anglo-medical modes of operating. Given New Zealand’s similarity to the latter, there are local implications in these alternatives.

A local example of the second might be the role of doctors within ACC: internal company doctors tearing apart the medical assessments of the external medical experts, disregarding specialist roles or other signs of expertise; and the improper Review Boards a scandal on anyone’s terms (recently somewhat modified). Or to take another local example: what about the rate of churn in government departments? When is the organisation wrong, and when the civil servant? What destruction to identify here? The term professional is here being applied to analysts, senior analysts and others not just traditional professional groups.

We are well beyond the 1960’s debate about whether organisations and professions are compatible (Scott, 1966); professions and organisations today are inextricably interwoven. However, professions themselves, would-be professional groups, theorists too (Freidson, 2001), and even governments wanting to exercise surveillance regimes, for example, the New Zealand 2003 Social Workers Registration Act
(whether or not these are appropriate models), all continue to raise questions about professional identity, and makes distinctions from solely organisational identity.

3. How fundamental is professional identity compared to Kiwi Lifestyle

A repeated criticism of New Zealand business people is that they make a few (million) quid and then want to settle back; the glorious American passion of taking a medium size business to full corporate scale does not seem to regularly happen. The answer can be presumed to lie somewhere between the truth of a different cultural style or mind-set granting some truth to such propositions, and the differences in scale of New Zealand’s small society compared to the behemoths of world economy.

Was it Roy’s paper at OIL_3 (Jacques, 2007) that talked about the imposition of non-New Zealand cultural types derived from overseas textbooks, yet the countervailing argument that the economics of production run (and hence more complex educational offering) make a bigger and better value teaching item for management teachers? Perhaps rather than grieve - on either side depending on your values or beliefs - we might see a paradox or at least a conflicted truth in this identity. Do you think young New Zealanders would echo Leicht and Fennel’s (2001) remark that ‘Most Americans who go to college eventually want a managerial or professional job.’?

There is another take on localising professional identity that has less to do with organisations, regardless of the person’s paid work incumbency in an organisation of size or not: This is the carefulness often seen in Kiwis avoiding pretension in identifying one’s status as professional, especially in the classic professional roles. Certainly this is not true of everybody, but I have observed great efforts made at social events by people avoiding naming and hence socialising on the basis of their professional identity. I would be interested in comments how you see it in NZ, US, UK and elsewhere. The German academic notion of being ‘herr’ and ‘doctor’ and ‘engineer’ and possibly some further social ranking title as appellations of professional identity is a kind of formalism of a different order.

4. How fundamental is professional identity compared to socioeconomic status?

The previous point relates of course to the general question of socio-economic status that professional identity provides, to which I now turn. I was trying to keep the topic related to the New Zealand environment. Let me suggest a ways to connect socioeconomic directly to the New Zealand setting: perhaps more than any other so-called developed or Anglo-phone society professionals in New Zealand occupy the top niche in the social order. We have no sizable landed gentry (post Seddon), nor a European aristocracy, nor Pilgrim genealogies, nor a military-industrial complex such as the United States. The civil service, professions and related managerial-professionals of business comprise our social ‘better half,’ in terms of income and also as the ‘ceiling’ reference group reflecting the relatively egalitarian nature, wittingly or unwittingly of this country. Professional identity, then, is fundamental to a certain kind of New Zealand ethos. At the same time, in this country and elsewhere, the notion of professional is becoming generic (Burns, 2006b) in ways inconceivable at mid-century and having little to do with traditional ideas of expertise or social trustee responsibility (Brint, 1994).
I am involved in work at present looking at professional career transitions, especially why some professionally qualified and practicing people would retrain at mid-career to become lawyers. As I look through the literature I can see numerous examples of people leaving business or law to do something ‘more meaningful’ with their lives – teaching and social work are not uncommon transitions. But for some the shift is into law. The purpose of the research is to find out what ‘vocabularies of motive’ (Mills, 1940) drive or enable them to change professional identity so significantly; what mix of income and status or meaning and interest provide the impetus?

5. How fundamental is professional identity compared to not having it?
A counter-question that can offer interrogation of the title question is the simple reversal: a test of its significance is the control group situation of its absence. While we may culturally go carefully in advertising our professional identity - and this may well be changing - lack of professional identity and hence status, respect or prestige can have substantial effects in who we are, how we are listened to, and what persuasive capacity we have. It is sometimes said that New Zealanders are not always good at responding to authority: there is deference, but also a cringe element, in relation to professional, organisational and political authority. We, paradoxically again, both follow ‘doctor’s orders’, do ‘what the boss says,’ but we also can get pretty angry at what is thought to be inapt use of otherwise legitimate power and managerial authority. Desire for but also objection to the ‘nanny state’ is perhaps the analogue on a political and cultural level.

Professional hierarchies can be seen in everyday events: (1) an information question of my own: you probably know how doctors, lawyers and accountants are often the chairmen (sic) of school boards in New Zealand – is that the same in other countries, or is the pattern different? (2) In reference to a land-based business I used to own, I regularly ‘practiced’ with the professional identity interface: when I visited my accountant I wore a tie; my view was that the content of our discussions needed to be conducted with me on an equal footing; (3) first day of classes I sometimes wear a tie – I’ve heard of others doing the same – before relaxing into less formal manner; (4) How do you dress ‘up’ for job interviews: what are the implicit professional hierarchies inscribed in our culture you are responding to by doing that? What cultural discourses create the identity offer?

6. How fundamental compared to other professional identities?
Nowadays the description ‘professional manager’ establishes professional identity, where once manager was seen as the antithesis or at least contrast to professional identity. That managers generally have tertiary education today, and also changing cultural definitions of profession, professional and professionalism, all contribute to ‘managerial-professional’ becoming a category of equivalence. This is despite the managerialist impact on organisational change in recent decades. Perhaps a New Zealand perspective on this is that earlier eminence of professional practitioners was not balanced by an attention to the functions of managing complex entities, so the sense of offence and imposition of change processes in recent decades has been all the greater (and combined with the New Zealand habitus I mentioned before of not always been good in responding to authority).

But there are other ways that a sense of professional identity is more complex today.
While I may have more qualifications than my parents’ generation that ‘prove’ my professionality, non-formally defined professional ability has its own kind of powerful ethos of competence. I am challenged every day by people of both genders, and white and non-white ethnicities, both in and not in the paid workforce, who exhibit that ‘natural professionalism’ or quality. Is that not something to aspire to, beyond formal rationalism and structural-legal definition? (Remember the old saw - Do you have a certificate that proves you are sane?)

Another way in which we exist within multiple professional identities is through our partners or spouse (and wider community of family and friends). The true story I heard ten years ago of an orchestra member constantly letting drop that her husband the doctor…, stripped of its masculinist connotations, can be read today more generally. Do dual careers provide an average professional identity? How do they weight each other, or otherwise interact? What do additional professional capacities, labels and skills that we add through life do to professional identity?

Looking Towards Theory
One reviewer said ‘It would be useful to have a bit of a tighter focus for the OIL session.’ And, ‘I would like to see some more explicit discussion of the theoretical issues at stake in framing the concept of ‘identity.’’ Also, wants ‘critical perspectives on professional identity (however the writer might define ‘critical’)’

I have written quite a bit recently about theoretical issues in studying professions (e.g. Burns, 2006a; Burns, 2006b, 2006c, 2007a, 2007b). The purpose here was not to duplicate that material, but extend it by casting a wide net around the sometimes amorphous terminology of identity and professional identity. I appreciate that is not the same as bringing the present possible audience up to speed on those points, but one has to make some assumptions about audience interests/understanding, and in practical terms for this event choose a primary goal for the paper’s focus.

The stance I feel best captures what is happening to professions and professional work in contemporary Western and global society is a post-professional approach. Some of the writing cited above delves into that, although there is much yet to be written that draws this into a fully extensive and coherent form. Out of this flow many specific areas of theoretical contestation and reframing, such as the issue of professions and professionalism as a binarising institutional form and discourse in modern society. There are some suggestions that beyond this, even, a ‘new’ professionalism is emerging today (e.g. Dahan, 2007; Jones & Green, 2006; Sommerlad, 2007)

One observation I can make, for example, is the way identity is often related to identity politics and the sense of pride, ownership, empowering or self-naming programs of different – especially marginalised – groups. There is a translation needed if such language in the form of professional identity is going to be applied to or claimed by professionals. This is because professionals, and the organisations with which they/we are so frequently involved, inhabit for the most part the privileged parts of contemporary society.

Appropriating the language of those with less capacity and agency by those with the most is problematic to say the least. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) pointedly states:
‘Postmodernism neither gave African-American women license to decenter the authority of privileged White males nor planted the idea to do so. Rather, postmodernism provides powerful analytical tools and…’ This sort of issue is what I am alluding to in the first bullet points about binary theory in the final section of the paper.

In connection to the New Zealand material, and theorising it, I do want to mention here a new book called *Southern Theory* by Raewyn Connell (2007). Connell (2007) talks about modern general social theory ‘and its hidden assumptions’ meaning northern assumptions; that is, American and Western European ideas and discourses as the economic and political centres of the twentieth century. Connell summarises what she sees as the ‘northerness of general theory’. She says (2007, p. 44), ‘the consequences of metropolitan geo-political location can be seen, I suggest, in four characteristic textual moves: the claim of universality; reading from the centre; gestures of exclusion; and grand erasure.’ And then expands on each of these. The example that sticks in my mind the most is her comment that Bourdieu, perhaps freest of the well-known French social theorists from many of the implications of post-structural controversy, was writing *The Practice of Logic* in the midst of the Algerian colonial war – ignoring an immense fact you would not know occurred from just reading that book.

I think Connell’s work bears on the distinctively New Zealand issues facing OIL, and other social theory groupings, but it gives a broad theoretical way of framing so we don’t have to over-assert the New Zealand things (see my point about Roy Jacques’s paper). Only as professions and professionalism, and organisations are placed within such a wide yet locally nuanced framing, will the kind of enterprise we are engaged in reach to a new level. This is because she is not merely (1) distinguishing us from the northern centres; (2) nor simply appropriating the language of Foucault, Derrida, Habermas, Giddens or whomever; (3) defending us in a binarised form from the centres (since we’re in fact implicated in them as well as marginalised by them). She is doing all of these and providing us with a platform on which to stand and see for ourselves: we use northern theory but we also critique it; and it is repositioned for us in a unique way across several nations – southern ways.

The last paragraph in the final section below gives a condensed summary of a body of reflection on theoretical implications that I am happy to expand on or which may be useful in some parts of the discussion.

**Finally**

One man who changed from being a doctor to business via an MBA, found things very different (Gwyther, 2002):

> It was a tricky move to give up a true ‘vocation’ in one of the caring professions and turn to Mammon. … Certainly, some people tried to make me feel guilty, but four years of 120-hour weeks as a junior doctor was defence against that. What I felt was not guilt but loss. That job had been my identity, and for quite a while I felt disorientated. I was a doctor to myself and those around me. I missed other doctors around me - their culture, their humour and the way they communicate with just a raised eyebrow. Now my job isn’t my identity and never will be again.
Whether the shift is from caring profession to commercial profession or the other way round, questions wider than just occupational identity continue to crop up. Not just professional role, but the sense of meaning, and who you are. Identity and colleagueship can be changed, lost, have major impact. As we theorise management and organisational functioning, do we see articulations of identity which either encourage change, competence and stability or inhibit it, or the ingredients of professional identity in trade-off and compromise? Ball’s (2005) term of concern for adverse managerialist demand on educators was professional ‘depthlessness.’ In the case of career transition, how does a sense of identity as a person and a professional seem now, compared to before? Is this a better identity to have? Is it more respectable, valuable? …In what way is the transition preferable? Can I pose this in terms of us - is your sense of professional identity a trade-off, or does it complement your on-coming self?

I have not expanded on the examples much since the first submission, though I’m in agreement with the reviewers’ comments doing this might help focus discussion; this is simply to forgo adding further length to the paper. I am hopeful that participants will have pressing and familiar instances of identity formation, functioning and contestation that both contribute to and reflect professional identity discourses.

Two themes I have not explored here but I want to just note them so I do not lose them: (1) Does the personal wider social matrix in which we move socially form an exclusion around us, or is it inclusive - do cultural and our own identity forms cross between professional and non-professional identities; do we use professional identity as a useful bridge to others? (2) The relationship between professional identity and professional accountability is a subject I log here, having not explored it but sure it is an important aspect whether in blame and surveillance regimes, or whether giving expression to the very old-fashioned and admirable aspirations and intents of care, benefit and contribution to clients, organisation and society.

In trying to sharpen my understanding of professional identity, a number of refinements and useful specifications begin to appear based on the politics of contested identity emerging over several decades as the ‘truths’ of modern organisational and professional narratives are challenged (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991). I am listing here:

- ‘Normality’ and ‘normal’ professionalism often creates marginalised identity.
- The logical opposite of professional is not ‘lay’ (which I always put in quotation marks), but non-professional.
- ‘Professional’ is a major binary in modern society, but invisible in ways that gender, race and disability are not, in creating identity.
- Professional identity dissonance can function both positively and negatively, while varying in how it is subjectively experienced.
- Starting points for theorising professional identity include identity offers, identity frames, identity forms, and reflexive self-anticipation.
- Implicit professional hierarchies respond to professional structures and interests, but are constituted from major and lesser cultural discourses.
- Distinguishing between professional attribution, professional role, and professional identity deepens role and identity analysis of professions and professionalism.
Whether initiated from a sociological, organisational or personal stance, the concept of professional identity offers multiple starting points to engage each of those. Drawing on cognitive models, emotion work models or less embodied structural and discourse analytic techniques, the concept of professional identity seeks to comprehend the complexity of professions and professional performance. Grappling with the complexity and multiple-ness of professional identity in social analysis is probably the only way to avoid repeating the disfavour with how the concept of role-

Costello’s reference at the start of this paper – is sometimes viewed. Whether addressing transition, success or failure; whether in relation to client, state or organisation; professional identity appears worth pursuing as a means of asking fundamental questions about these central contributors in today’s society.

References


