# Becoming a 'Professional': researching the development of career practitioners' professional identity in a New Zealand context

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## Introduction

This paper outlines my current PhD research which examines how career practitioners' professional identity construction is affected by their environment. The research takes a post-structural approach, focusing on the issue from the perspective of the 'subjects' or careers practitioners, rather than the structural, 'top-down' requirements of policy-makers and other agencies. The paper introduces the research, identifies the research problem, gives a brief insight into the literature, sets out the aims and methodology, and identifies the potential contribution to understanding the effect of the environment on career practitioners' professional identity. Once my PhD is completed, I hope the outcomes of the research will contribute to understanding how practitioners construct their identity in relation to the discourse of professionalisation.

Successive Labour and National governments in Aotearoa New Zealand have pursued economic and social policies that embed the ideology of economy, efficiency and effectiveness. This is achieved through promoting market supremacy and the agency of the individual and the family (Clarke and Newman, 1997), replacing collective welfare systems with 'user-pays' models (Benington and Stoker, 1989). This 'neo-liberalism' emphasises 'career information and guidance as a source that can help us get more from the population.' (Personal interview with a senior manager, New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2001) and uses tendering and contracting processes to produce 'quasi-markets.' The supply of career advice, guidance and counselling is fragmented; delivered by a range of organisations that include an increasing number of small businesses who tender for government contracts.

Professionalisation of career practitioners in New Zealand remains problematic (Furbish and Ker, 2002), despite the founding of the Career Development Association of New Zealand (CDANZ) and some tertiary courses in career practice. Practitioners have diverse backgrounds and qualifications and although many are well qualified generally, the availability of specific qualifications in career practice is limited. Although contracts with government departments require practitioners to be members of CDANZ, there is no pre-requisite for practitioners to be qualified and no agreement of competencies from which to assess practitioners (ibid). These structural preoccupations although essential, are well researched, but do not address practitioners' experience of the professionalising process. This gap becomes the area in which my research is located.

## The research problem

Two aspects coalesce to form the foundation of my research. The first is well expressed in the most pertinent question posed by Hughes (1963) 'what are the circumstances in which people in an occupation attempt to turn it into a profession and themselves into professional people.' (p.666). To understand this necessitates studying the practitioners' desire to professionalise rather than the structures of professional associations or qualifications. Secondly, I draw on Gioia, Schultz and Corley (2000) who believe that 'the concept of identity is the key to understanding modern organizations' (p.78). These two aspects combine to provide the foundation for a fresh approach to understand how practitioners construct themselves as 'professional' subjects. The research problem focuses on the relationship between career practitioners' work environment and the development of their professional identity.

## Aims

My research aims to understand how career practitioners think about and describe their professional identity, to understand the influence of the external and internal environment on its formation and to examine whether a core identity is discernable and what characteristics may be seen to serve practitioners in their professionalisation best.

## An overview of the literature

I draw on two broad bodies of literature to inform this research: the literature relating to the professions and the literature relating to identity. A brief synopsis follows.

## The Professions

Weber (1924) emerges as an influential theorist on the professions, identifying the importance of legitimate, rational authority. Professions strive for rational power through the formation of exclusive groups, which bestow rewards upon members. These groups act to further their own interests to the exclusion of others and 'social closure' occurs as the group strives to convince others of their status and exclude those deemed unworthy. The groups seek greater economic, social and power rewards that differentiate them from each other and from non-professionals. Larson (1977) takes up the concept of social closure and identifies the 'professional project' as a deliberate act taken by occupational groups to professionalise. Durkheim (1957) emphasises the importance of altruism and professional ethics. Associated with this is the licence to practice and potential to be disciplined. Thus professions are defined by functions and traits, as identified by Moore:

> **The possession of an established body of systematic knowledge; a commitment to altruistic service to the client; the existence of an occupational association; membership of which is the licence to practice; a high level of educational achievement among practitioners and considerable autonomy at work.**
> (Moore, 1970:8)

Johnson, (1972) criticises such approaches from the perspectives of class and power, and Witz (1992) criticises them from a feminist perspective. Drawing out the Weberian concept of social closure, Witz (1992:36) emphasises the 'two key strategies' contained within it. These are exclusion and demarcation. I have already described briefly the benefits of exclusion to the professions. Demarcation is 'concerned with the creation and control of boundaries between occupations.' (p.46). For Witz, Johnson's critique of the privileging of social class and power fails to address the further disadvantages women face. She argues that while 'working men were directly embroiled in the struggle between capital and labour,' they were repressed by the class and privilege system and this 'was a struggle that was stacked against them' (p.37). Women, she argues, have an additional struggle, one against male oppression and repression.

These accounts focus on 'profession' as a status achieved through social closure, after having met the criteria of traits and functions. These structural and formulaic definitions remain highly influential despite the 'casual generalisation' of profession (Fournier, 1999:281) in which traditional constructs are cast aside and all self-respecting trades personnel lay claim to being professional. Yet these accounts omit how subjects constitute themselves within their occupation. To address this, I examined the literature on identity which I now review briefly.

## Identity

The literature on workplace identity reveals a range of representations. The most common is corporate identity (Rodrigues and Child, 2008), which is 'for what and for whom the company stands' (p.889). The corporation imbues job holders with its identity, they are expected to absorb and reflect this in their dress and behaviour. Consequently, this influences constructions of identity through compliance and/or resistance (Hodgson, 2005).

Organisations use collective identities to classify people by hierarchy and position, conferring titles, rewards, resources and sanctions accordingly (Jenkins, 2004). Collective identity also occurs through social class, occupation and trade union affiliation (e.g. Whyte, 1956; Tunstall, 1962; Braverman, 1974). However, the neo-liberal emphasis on individualism challenges traditional occupational collectives, encouraging people to construct an individual identity according to the sense they make of their situation, environment and assessment of the future (Giddens, 1991).

Dramaturgical interpretations of identity (Goffman, 1984; Hochschild, 2003) understand the individual as playing a part according to their environment, changing their identity as the situation demands. Thus, its formation is transient and audience-dependent. Hochschild shows the lengths to which organisations resort to compel employees to enact the polished performance of identity their corporate vision requires. Goffman argues that the ensuing persona is internalised through 'deep acting,' and, as Hochschild shows, this corporate creation is highly dependent on the self, through self-talk and self-discipline. Dramaturgy provides an important insight on what people do to develop their occupational persona, but begs the question as to why organisations and institutions are so influential and why identity work is so important.

## Theorising the literature and positioning the research

I have chosen to use a post-structural 'lens' to theorise the literature and position the research. Poststructuralism is not a theory per se, but a 'movement of thought' (Peters, 2001:2), that challenges the inevitable and cumulative forward motion of structuralism. It 'folds the limit back on the core of knowledge and on to our settled understanding of what is true or good.' (Williams, 2005:2) For me, this necessitates moving away from externally imposed constructs of what constitutes the 'professional' and towards comprehending how career practitioners understand and define themselves.

Foucault's work provides a way to understand and theorise these issues. Power, resistance and wider societal discourses within which the subject is positioned or located (Foucault, 2002) emerge as key themes. What does this mean? Discourses are the collection of regulatory writing, speaking and acting (commentaries) that influence 'how ideas are put into practice and used to regulate the

conduct of others.' (Hall, 2001:72) These underpin how we define our knowledge, make sense of the world, what ideas are accepted or rejected, and how these regulate behaviour in society. The use of the term 'subject' instead of 'person,' 'self' or 'individual' is important. 'Subjects are produced through systematic relations of power' (Kondo, 1995:98) and the term 'connotes both agency and subjection/discipline' (ibid).

Rather than understanding profession and identity as deliberate acts of social closure or self-representation, a Foucauldian perspective examines discursive formations and subject positions. These affect and are affected by the relationships between power, knowledge, control and resistance (Foucault, 1979, 1997). The subject is malleable, produced 'through and within discourse, within specific discursive formations and has no existence and certainty ... from one subject position to another.'(Hall and du Gay, 1996:10). Discourses position the subjects and this causes identity formation to become plastic.

Initially, Foucault (1995) saw identity as inscribed on 'docile bodies' which were then reformulated as the organisation required. These disciplinary processes wipe out previous identities and a new one is re-fashioned by the disciplinary regimes. The whole system of discipline and punishment leads to 'normalisation' i.e. compliance to achieve an ideal in a process that simultaneously collectivises and individualises. Collective identity occurs by complying with the imposed norm, and individual identity through how well the individual enacts the norm. External expectations are internalised and worked on through the individual's own self-critical gaze. Organisational mechanisms such as appraisal therefore become both a performative act that confers or reinforces identity (e.g. how good or bad someone is at something) and convert real lives into writing (Foucault, 1995), creating a permanent record of a selected version of the person's identity.

Later, Foucault (1997) shifted his gaze from genealogy to care of the self, with the self central to identity formation. From this thesis, identity requires a high degree of self-work, crafting, self-examination and understanding. Not only must one 'become the doctor of oneself' (1997:235) but also conduct oneself ethically towards others, (Rabinow and Rose, 1994) 'listening to the lessons of the master' and finding 'someone who will be truthful to you' (Rabinow and Rose, 1994:30).

Career practitioners' professional identity evolves and changes according to the discourses within which their subject position is located. For career practitioners in Aotearoa New Zealand, the neo-liberal discourse strives to reconcile individual freedom with the need to control, frequently at a distance, aided by contracting arrangements with government departments. Further discourses are constituted through government policies

and required practices, continuous professional training and development, requirements of the professional association and supervision. Career practitioner subjects are positioned in relation to these powerful 'discursive resources' (Fournier, 1999:281), collective identity is moulded by contracting arrangements with government departments, occupational titles, work content, and monitoring and review mechanisms. These enable 'control at a distance through the construction of appropriate work identities and conducts' (ibid). Reflexive practices become the chosen mechanism of career practitioner self-care, and supervision provides a forum for confession (Rabinow and Rose, 1994) which reinforces modes of behaviour through pastoral power (ibid). This practice governs the conduct of conduct (Gordon, 1991) and 'concerns the different ways in which humans have been urged and incited to become ethical beings' (Rose, 1999: 244-245); which ultimately affects formation, maintenance and adaptation of professional identity between the subject, the subject position and the discourses within which the subject operates.

## Methodology and method

Moving on, in the research I use a phenomenological (interpretive) paradigm which views the world as socially constructed and subjective, recognising that the observer is part of the process. 'Phenomenology emphasises that things and events have no meaning in themselves. They only mean whatever human beings take then to mean' (Jones, 1993:98).

I have chosen discourse analysis (DA) as the method. This choice aligns the methodology, method and the Foucauldian theoretical framework. DA embodies a critical element which challenges 'naturalised' assumptions, recognising that 'particular actions serve(s) particular interests' (Cameron, 2001:123).

Primary data comprises in-depth interviews with thirty-five participants. These include career practitioners and managers from career-related occupations across New Zealand and those involved in professional accreditation processes. Potter and Wetherell (1987) advise against large sample numbers because the focus is on discursive forms, 'it is *not* the case that a larger sample necessarily indicates a more painstaking or worthwhile piece of research.' (p.16). Instead, large samples lead the researcher to get 'bogged down … without adding anything to the analysis.' (ibid). Primary data comprises detailed, semi-structured interviews and secondary data consists of organisational and policy information. Close reading of the data identifies 'interpretative repertoires' (Wetherell, 2001:269), revealing 'consistent and bounded discursive themes' (ibid). These show how the subjects construct their identity in relation to different discourses. Models of identity become discernable, constituted by the participants in relation to their subject position (Davies and Harre, 1990).

## Conclusions and potential contribution to knowledge

Career practice in New Zealand is a small but growing and increasingly diverse occupation. Formal attempts to establish a profession have met with limited success and have concentrated largely on structural aspects. Using a Foucauldian theoretical framework and discourse analysis as a method, I consider how the practitioners construct their identity as occupational and professional subjects. This research will contribute to the theorising of the career practitioner subject from a Foucauldian lens.

Besides contributing to the theoretical understanding of what constitutes the professional subject, my research findings may have a practical application for employing organisations and career practitioners. Employing organisations may find aspects that inform their recruitment, retention and staff development, but also, practitioners may find an external gaze offers the opportunity to make sense of the relationships between environmental factors and development of their professional identity. Furthermore, the research has the potential to be generalisable to other nascent professional groups.

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