

**This is a self-archived version of an original article. This version may differ from the original in pagination and typographic details.**

**Author(s):** Vähäsantanen, Katja

**Title:** Professional identity in changing workplaces : Why it matters, when it becomes emotionally imbued, and how to support its agentic negotiations

**Year:** 2022

**Version:** Accepted version (Final draft)

**Copyright:** © 2022 Springer Nature Switzerland AG

**Rights:** In Copyright

**Rights url:** <http://rightsstatements.org/page/InC/1.0/?language=en>

**Please cite the original version:**

Vähäsantanen, K. (2022). Professional identity in changing workplaces : Why it matters, when it becomes emotionally imbued, and how to support its agentic negotiations. In C. Harteis, D. Gijbels, & E. Kyndt (Eds.), *Research Approaches on Workplace Learning : Insights from a Growing Field* (pp. 29-46). Springer International Publishing. Professional and Practice-based Learning, 31. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-89582-2\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-89582-2_2)

## Professional identity in changing workplaces: Why it matters, when it becomes emotionally imbued, and how to support its agentic negotiations

Katja Vähäsantanen, Department of Education, University of Jyväskylä, Finland

**Abstract.** This chapter addresses professional identity in the workplace. The relevance of the topic derives from current trends in working life, in which constant changes require continuous professional identity negotiations. In addition, employees are increasingly obliged to recognise and make visible their professional identity in order to navigate and survive in the complexities of working life. This chapter provides an overview of the conceptual frameworks, topics, and empirical evidence pertaining to professional identity, as presented in workplace learning literature. From this, it provides suggestions for researching and elaborating professional identity, with particular attention to relational, agentic, and emotional perspectives over time. It further opens up discussion on the kinds of workplace pedagogies and practices that might support individuals' professional identity negotiations amid chaotic working life situations. Overall, this chapter has relevance for scholars and practitioners who seek to research and/or foster professional identity negotiations in the workplace.

### 1. Introduction

Professional identity is generally understood as individuals' understanding of themselves as professionals – including their professional interests, values, identifications, and ambitions (Brown, Kirpal, & Rauner, 2007; Kira & Balkin, 2014; Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, Paloniemi, Herranen, & Eteläpelto, 2017). The topic is of particular relevance in contemporary working life, given the economic, managerial, societal, and technological changes that are taking place in the 21st century, with work organisations being increasingly expected to develop not only their work practices, but also their organisational cultures and structures (Billett, 2010; Haapakorpi & Alasoini, 2018; Harteis, 2018; Tynjälä, 2013). Consequently, the daily work in a range of professions has changed in such a way that individuals face many simultaneous requirements. In particular, they encounter requirements to cross traditional (professional and organisational) boundaries, to share their expertise within social relationships, to negotiate their career pathways continuously, to be innovative, to be flexible in their work communities and employment relationships, and to develop their professional competencies (Billett, Harteis, & Gruber, 2014; Chappell, Scheeres, & Solomon, 2007). In addition, professionals face pressures to learn about themselves, via a cultivated understanding of who they are as professionals in relation to changed work (Kira & Balkin, 2014; Molleman & Rink, 2015). In other words, individuals need to engage in continuous professional identity negotiations if they are to plot a course through complex work

environments (Buch & Andersen, 2013; Vähäsantanen et al., 2017). The needs for continuous identity negotiations also emerge from breaks and discontinuities in careers (e.g. from a period of unemployment), and from a general increase in short-term work contracts.

Going beyond this, the portrayal and branding of professional identities has today become an important aspect of working (Buch & Andersen, 2013; Eteläpelto, 2008). In particular, recent trends in working life (e.g. boundaryless careers and increased project work) require that individuals should become aware of, make visible, and market their professional identity, for example via social media. It is also crucial for individuals to recognise and demonstrate their professional strengths, values, and ambitions in their portfolios and CVs, in situations involving competition for new posts and contracts (e.g. Fenwick, 2004).

The relevance of professional identity is further underlined by several phenomena that are of crucial importance for working and learning in the workplace (Billett, 2018; Collin, 2009). Professional identities mediate what people (want to) learn, how they make choices and decisions at work, and how they influence work-related matters (Brown, 2015; Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, & Paloniemi, 2014). Professional identity is also connected to employees' behaviour and motivation, their interaction with other people, their commitment to work, and their sense of meaningfulness in the work (Brown et al., 2007; Kira & Balkin, 2014; Molleman & Rink, 2015). Consequently, professional identity can be seen as a key to understanding and explaining almost everything that happens at work, and in the vicinity of the workplace.

Professional identity is undoubtedly at the core of working and learning in the workplace (Eteläpelto, 2008; Tynjälä, 2013), yet (at least as applied to workplace learning) it remains surprisingly under-explored. This chapter (which broadly follows a socio-cultural approach<sup>1</sup>) considers the research that has so far been conducted on professional identity in the domain of workplace learning, and provides avenues for its further investigation. In addition, it encompasses research in education, management, and organisational studies, since professional identity has been viewed as crucial in these areas. Note, however, that the focus of this chapter is restricted to persons who are actually employed as professionals. Thus, it does not address, for example, the potential professional identity of students in vocational and higher education.

Below, various conceptualisations of professional identity are presented, followed by sections on how professional identity can be approached from relational, emotional, and agentic perspectives. Thereafter, identity is elaborated from temporal and pragmatic viewpoints. The final section gives an overview of the implications for research and practice in professional identity,

---

<sup>1</sup> The socio-cultural approach emphasises that professional identity is negotiated in mutual interactions between individual and social settings. Furthermore, professional identity is often theorised with reference to psychological, sociological, and postmodern viewpoints (see e.g. Billett, 2010; Brown, 2015; Kira & Balkin, 2014). In contrast with these approaches, this chapter emphasises the role of the *reciprocal* relationships between the individual and the social context (rather than uniquely the individual or social context). Moreover, professional identity is not viewed as necessarily a stable phenomenon on the one hand, or as a mutating phenomenon on the other.

including some reflections on research methodology. Overall, this chapter is intended to offer a comprehensive perspective for conducting professional identity research in the field of workplace learning, and to benefit practitioners with an interest in supporting professional identity negotiations in the workplace.

## 2. Conceptualising professional identity

Although professional identity is viewed as a crucial topic in working life, research on professional identity has so far been conducted with no shared theoretical understanding of the construct. Yet even if the concept remains vague, one can say that on a general level, professional identity refers to individuals' subjectively constructed conceptions of themselves as professional subjects at work (Billett, 2010, 2018; Eteläpelto et al., 2014). This means that professional identity encompasses a range of aspects pertaining to work and professional lives, but does not really extend to areas and activities outside the work. It should be noted that the term 'professional' here implies an identity constructed within a spectrum of work-related matters; hence, it does not refer to 'the professions' in the traditional sense, as in the work of lawyers or doctors.

In particular, professional identity can be theorised as a construct covering different core aspects of one's work, considered in terms of the individual's *past*, *present*, and *future*. In the first place, this encompasses the notion that professional identity is based on individuals' previous experiences and life-history. It also captures individuals' current professional interests, goals, values, and ambitions, extending further to their ethical standards and beliefs, their perceptions of the meaningful responsibilities at work, and their professional commitments and identifications at work (Eteläpelto et al., 2014; Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006). Beyond this, some scholars look at professional identity in terms of professional competencies. In this sense, identity would include employees' current understanding of their own professional knowledge, skills, and expertise, plus their understanding of their strengths and weaknesses in these areas (e.g. Chappell et al., 2007; van Veen & Slegers, 2009).

Going beyond retrospective and current perspectives, professional identity includes also professionals' future prospects, orientations, career plans, and notions of the kind of professional that they desire to be (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Ruohotie-Lyhty & Moate, 2016). All this means that professional identity should be understood in the context of the entire life course of an individual. One could also say that it is bound up with answers to three questions, namely 'How have I become a professional?', 'Who am I as a professional at the moment?', 'Who do I want to become as a professional in the future?' (Beijaard et al., 2004; Brown, 2015; Kira & Balkin, 2014).

Quite recently, a fairly comprehensive definition of professional identity has been proposed by Davey (2013). In this definition, professional identity is conceptualised as a combination of *becoming* (including motivations and initial reasons for choosing a specific profession, professional

biography, career plans), *being* (including professional values, personae), *knowing* (e.g. in the form of professional knowledge and skills), and *doing* (e.g. professional activities, key tasks). This conceptualisation is broadly in line with the definitions provided above, differing only in the particular emphasis placed on *doing* as an element in professional identity.

Although professional identity has mainly been addressed as an individual-level phenomenon, it should be noted that this perspective has limitations (Miscenko & Day, 2016). In fact, there also exists the phenomenon of collective professional identity, which encompasses answers to the question, 'Who are we together as professionals, or as a group at work?' Collective identity can thus refer to the memberships, mutual identifications and attachments, group affinities, and engagements that bind individuals as a professional group; it extends to the affinities they feel, and to their shared professional commitments, values, and priorities (Davey, 2013; Hökkä, Vähäsantanen & Mahlakaarto, 2017). Davey (2013) has further emphasised the importance of 'belonging' with regard to the collective identity of professionals. The aspect of belonging, or of simple membership, is related to the communities that the professionals feel part of, and to the shared community affiliations that they hold (see also Barbour & Lammers, 2015). Such a notion of collective identity further emphasises the significance of the ways in which professionals see themselves as a valued professional group.

Collective professional identity is a topical research area, since there is an increasing need for employees to collaborate with others, working in a wide range of multidisciplinary groups and professional communities. The existence of a jointly-built and shared collective identity makes collaboration easier, and it creates a foundation for shared influencing and developmental activities. Moreover, it has significance in terms of effectiveness and team performance (e.g. Miscenko & Day, 2016; Vähäsantanen et al., 2017).

With the definitions presented above in mind, this chapter suggests that professional identity could usefully be elaborated as a *multidimensional* phenomenon, covering the following aspects from *different time perspectives*, and taking into account the *collective* aspect of professional identity:

- Initial motivations towards one's profession; professional experiences and biography (the *retrospective view*).
- Professional goals, missions, and interests; professional values and ethics; professional commitments and identifications; an understanding of professional competencies (the *current view*).
- Future prospects, orientations, and goals; future aspirations and desires; career plans (the *prospective view*).

- Mutual identification and belonging; group affinities and engagement; shared professional commitments and values (the *collective view*).

Considering these aspects as a whole, it seems reasonable to suppose that empirical investigations could approach professional identity from one or more of the perspectives mentioned above.

The conceptualisation of professional identity presented above seems reasonably comprehensive. However, it may be observed that the definition does not capture work descriptions and tasks (i.e. the *doing* element) as part of professional identity (Davey, 2013). In fact, within the present chapter, work and professional identity are considered to be distinct phenomena, even if they are closely related to each other. This being so, the following section seeks to address in more detail the relationship between professional identity and work. The perspective applied highlights the *relational* nature of professional identity, without ignoring *individual* and *emotional* perspectives on identity.

### **3. The individual and emotional relationship between professional identity and work**

One way to approach professional identity is to focus on the relationship between professional identity and work (Barbour & Lammers, 2015; Kira & Balkin, 2014; Miscenko & Day, 2016; Vähäsantanen & Hämäläinen, 2019). For its part, work is understood as covering professional tasks, duties, and responsibilities. It encompasses also other people (e.g. colleagues and clients), the work culture and power relations, organisational order and logics, and the social suggestions, norms, and expectations that apply to individuals' work in their work environments. The relational approach to professional identity can be applied in a range of ways.

The relationship between professional identity and work has generally been recognised as challenging and complex, since employees' professional aspirations and values often confront competing and tensioned expectations deriving from changing social settings (Beijaard et al., 2004, Pratt et al., 2006). Several scholars have thus been led to investigate this relationship in terms of tensions (Arvaja, 2018; Pillen, Beijaard, & den Brok, 2013; van der Wal, Oolbekkink-Marchand, Schaap, & Meijer, 2019), strains, (Buch & Andersen, 2013), and threats (Miscenko & Day, 2016).

Looking at the matter more precisely, the conceptual model of Kira and Balkin (2014) suggests that the relationships between work and identity can vary in such a way that both alignments and misalignments can emerge from work-identity encounters. Empirical studies, too, have addressed this relationship (e.g. Paloniemi & Collin, 2010). For example, a study by Vähäsantanen and Hämäläinen (2019) revealed the harmonious – but also tensioned – relationships between the various characteristics of the work and vocational teachers' identities. Their study also shed light on the individual nature of this relationship, indicating that even within

the same profession and organisation, teachers had different experiences of the relationship between their professional identities and their changing work. Hence, in order to understand the complex and nuanced nature of working life and professional identity, it may be preferable to consider both positive and negative types of identity–work encounters.

An appreciation of the nuanced nature of the identity–work relationship can enhance awareness of what makes work meaningful for employees, and what influences their wellbeing, organisational commitment, work performance, and learning at work (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Billett, 2018; Kira & Balkin, 2014). Where a balanced relationship exists, employees and organisations will tend to thrive and develop. In the opposite case, individuals may well become discouraged or apathetic, seeking to leave their work organisation in order to find a more meaningful professional home for their identities (Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2015).

It is also important to notice the range of emotions that can emerge from professional identity–work relationships (Kira & Balkin, 2014). While a tensioned relationship elicits emotions such as frustration, confusion, and inadequacy, a balanced relationship gives rise to emotions such as joy, enthusiasm, and satisfaction (Pillen et al., 2013; Ursin, Vähäsantanen, McAlpine, & Hökkä, 2020; Vähäsantanen & Hämäläinen, 2019). For example, these studies have showed that positive emotions emerged when individuals were able to work according to their core professional interests and commitments, and to utilise their professional competencies.

In addition to the emotions associated with the relationship between professional identity and work, it is important to consider the kinds of (agentic) activities that people enact in such relationships. The conceptual model of Kira and Balkin (2014) suggests that when there is a balance between professional identity and work, employees may tend to maintain their existing identities and work practices. Alternatively, in the case of an imbalance, people may adapt or actively seek to modify their work tasks, practices, and environments, in order to achieve a better correspondence with their professional goals and interests (see also Fuller & Unwin, 2017). Yet again, the case of an imbalanced relationship, people may actually cultivate and renew their professional identities in such a way that they encounter their current work in a better frame of mind (Kira & Balkin, 2014). In other words, they engage in professional identity negotiations. The following section considers the professional identity–work relationship in more depth, focusing on *professional identity negotiations and agency*.

#### **4. Towards an agentic perspective on professional identity negotiations**

In the domain of workplace learning, professional identity negotiation is currently a prime object of inquiry. Professional identity negotiation is particularly intense in situations where strains and tensions exist, since these tend to act as triggers for negotiations to occur. According to Vähäsantanen et al. (2017), the negotiations in question involve a mutually constitutive process whereby professionals strive to make sense of and work on their perceptions of their professional

identity, and negotiate a meaningful balance between that identity and their (changing) work. Note here that in the domain of organisation and management studies, (professional) identity work can be understood almost as a synonym for professional identity negotiation (Brown, 2015; Winkler, 2018). In these studies it is conceptualised as a process of continual engagement in processing, presenting, and sustaining a coherent and distinct notion of who individuals are, and how they relate to others.

Empirical studies on employees engaged in professional identity negotiations clearly reflect scholarly debates surrounding the relationship between the social context and agency. While it is accepted that professional identity is never negotiated in a social vacuum, theoretical approaches differ in the weight they give to social aspects. In his review, Billett (2010) has shown that (professional) identity, as traditionally understood, has been seen as influenced and shaped – and even determined – by the social environment. In the field of workplace learning, too, professional identity has traditionally been approached from the perspective of the socio-cultural context (see Eteläpelto, 2008). Viewed in this light, professional identity development involves a socialisation process whereby professionals are inducted into the practices followed in work communities, with relatively little attention paid to the role of the active subject. By contrast, recent studies in the field of workplace learning have increasingly approached professional identity via a recognition of *professional agency* (Billett, 2010; Eteläpelto et al., 2014; Fuller & Unwin, 2017; Smith, 2014). Viewed in this light, professional identities are not merely influenced by the work environment and the relationships therein; rather, employees are agentic negotiators of their own professional identities. Professional identity can therefore be seen as agentially negotiated in relation to the social world of the workplace.

In elaborating professional identity negotiation as an agentic process, one is led to consider how professional identity may be enacted via a range of agentic activities and decisions in the workplace. So far, some empirical studies have been conducted on this topic, paying attention to the tensioned relationship between professional identity and work. In such relationships, agentic efforts and activities can involve processes of maintenance, strengthening, or redefinition of professional identity, encompassing professional commitments, ambitions, values, and the most meaningful responsibilities in one's work (Fuller & Unwin, 2017; Kira & Balkin, 2014; Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2015; Vähäsantanen et al., 2017). Along similar lines, a study by Ruohotie-Lyhty and Moate (2016) suggests that agency includes activities such as questioning former beliefs, identifying new goals, taking a new direction as a professional, developing self-confidence, and orienting oneself towards future learning. In other words, agentic professional identity negotiations can produce maintained, strengthened, shaped, or transformed professional identity.

Brown (2015) has argued that there is a considerable scope for future research on how the process of working on one's identity is influenced by *emotions* within work organisations. Winkler



(2018) has responded to this by demonstrating a reciprocal relationship between emotions and identity work. Her review suggests that (i) emotions (e.g. frustration, uncertainty, and confusion) can work as triggers for identity work, (ii) identity work as a process can be an emotional endeavour (involving e.g. fear, anxiety, and unhappiness), and (iii) emotions (e.g. vulnerability, frustration, shame, happiness, relief, and comfort) can emerge as outcomes of (un)successful identity work. Feelings of trust, confidence, and safety can further be seen as necessary conditions for shaping professionals' identities (Hökkä et al., 2017). A recent theoretical model by Conroy and O'Leary-Kelly (2014) describes how transitions in work roles and relationship may result in a loss of identity, triggering emotionally imbued identity negotiations. This process involves cognitive activity and emotion-processing in two domains: thus there is a loss orientation (including emotions such as anger and guilt in letting go of some parts of one's identity) and a restoration orientation, in terms of defining who I will be now within a new situation.

To conclude, a useful starting point for further examination of professional identity negotiations would be to understand it as a process that (i) occurs in social relationships and contexts, and (ii) is premised upon and mediated by professional agency and emotions. In this sense, professional identity negotiations constitute an agentic and emotional process whereby one constructs a meaningful perception of one's professional identity in relation to (changed) work (see also Buch & Andersen, 2013). Here it should again be noted that although professional identity negotiation takes place in the present, it must be understood in the context of the individual's life course. For example, the relationship between professional identity and work is not perceived and negotiated only from the perspective of one's current professional identity, but also from that of future prospects, including one's future plans and desires (Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2015). The following section will consider the *temporal perspective* on professional identity negotiations in greater depth. Thereafter, the sixth section will examine how professional identity could be supported from a *practical perspective*.

## **5. Professional identity negotiations over time within changing workplaces**

Professional identity negotiations are interwoven with professionals' training and education. Within this, the individual typically identifies with the values of the profession, and adopts a certain way of approaching the profession (Buch & Andersen, 2013). However, professional identity negotiations are not required only of (young) professionals-to-be; in fact, they continue for the whole of one's professional journey. For experienced professionals, various (especially large-scale) changes in work practices and organisations tend to be the most powerful triggers that impel them to renegotiate their existing professional identities (Arvaja, 2018; Brown, 2015; Collin, 2009; Smith, 2014). One should nevertheless recognise that the call for professional identity negotiations and transformations can also emerge from individual experiences, desires,

and needs – and also from one's individual personality (Eteläpelto et al., 2014; Molleman & Rink, 2015) – even if these aspects have so far been given less attention in the literature on workplace learning.

All of the above suggests that it is impossible to see professional identity as something that is stable and unchangeable in contemporary work environments. Rather, it is generally conceptualised as a changeable and flexible phenomenon (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Brown, 2015). In line with this, a study by Collin (2009) gives empirical evidence on the fluid nature of identities in the sector of information technology. The study revealed a range of stories encompassing professionals' experiences of their learning and identity transformations over time (including a giving-up story, a success story, a survival story, and a readjustment story). However, it is important to recognise that this could be only one part of the 'true' situation regarding the nature of professional identity.

In fact, professional identity transformations are not necessarily self-evident in changing work contexts. Some of the core elements of professional identity appear to be fairly resistant to change, or at least difficult to redefine in the short term. In line with this, Illeris (2014) has argued that individuals have three layers of identity, beginning with a relatively stable core identity (which is biographically constructed). The other layers are the personality layer and the outer preference layer, with the latter (which includes certain reactions, behaviour, and routines) being more changeable than the core identity. Billett and Pavlova (2005) have also argued that the consequences of changing work practices are not necessarily negative for the sense of continuity in professional identities. In fact, changes in work environments can actually promote such continuity, and provide the means by which professionals could better enact their preferences at work, towards gaining a sense of reward (Billett & Pavlova, 2005). In this sense, work-related changes can create a foundation for a balanced relationship between professional identity and work.

For their part, Vähäsantanen and Eteläpelto (2011) found that teachers' professional identities showed varying degrees of continuity and transformation during a reform in vocational education and training. In fact, continuities in professional interests and commitments were found to emerge more often than transformations. In addition, they found that the changes and continuities in professional identities were based on teachers' (emotional) experiences and on how they enacted their agency when they made sense of the experiences arising from the changed situation.

Although some empirical evidence exists on professional identity as a temporal phenomenon, it can be suggested that future research should focus increasingly on how and why both changes and continuities occur in professional identities over time. Since professional identity negotiation takes place in the tension between continuity and change (Tynjälä, 2013), it

seems crucial to explore how employees enact their agency within such dynamics, and how their agentic activities may change over the course of professional identity negotiations.

## 6. Practices to support professional identity negotiations

Up to now, we have gained knowledge on professional identity in working life, including its nature and elements, and the negotiations it involves (in terms of emotions, agency, tensions, and relationships). Research is still needed along these lines, but one can suggest that new avenues are required. Continuous professional identity negotiations are problematic for employees amid demanding and hectic work settings. If professionals do not have sufficient individual and social resources to work on their identities, they are at risk of losing their way, struggling at work, or drowning in a stream of continuous work-related changes (Conroy & O'Leary-Kelly, 2014; Kirpal, 2004; Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2011). This being so, there is a need to adopt a practical perspective, seeking to determine the kinds of practices and pedagogies that would provide the best (evidence-based) support for professional identity negotiations. In the best case, one will arrive at scaffoldings that empower people to be agentic in negotiating their professional identities, supporting them so that they face up to and proactively address the challenges in their professional lives.

Although there is at present only limited empirical evidence on practices and methods to support professional identity negotiations, some promising initiatives have been undertaken. Most of them involve narrative and arts-based methods. Within the teaching domain, Leitch (2006, 2010) has explored the use of *masks* as a means to become aware of, elaborate on, and transform personal/professional identity, in conjunction with the emotional aspects of professional lives. The use of masks at an individual and collective level includes (i) the explorative and creative development of masks, and (ii) improvisation and storytelling about these masks.

Following a somewhat different approach, Vähäsantanen et al. (2017) have explored an arts-based method called the *Professional Body*. This also combines individual and collective processes pertaining to professional identity negotiations. The *individual* phase includes (i) drawing an outline of one's body on paper, and (ii) personalising this body figure by setting out the various aspects of one's professional identity that have arisen over time (e.g. one's professional history, one's current professional mission and skills, and future goals and dreams). These themes can be illustrated via a variety of materials (e.g. painting, pictures, clippings, and drawings). Going beyond this, the *collective* phase encompasses, for example, (i) presenting the outlined body to other people, and (ii) receiving comments and questions from other people via drama methods, either with or without words. This method seems to provide a fruitful arena for identity negotiations. It should be noted that the processes in question are also emotional, such that, on the one hand, the emotions boost the identity work, or on the other hand, the emotions emerge out of the identity processes (Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, & Paloniemi, 2020). Overall, both methods

(i.e. the mask and the Professional Body) provide opportunities to reflect on and cultivate – or even strengthen and shape – one’s professional identity, both on one’s own and with the help of other people.

For her part, Kosonen (2018) has designed a *visual narrative* method as a means of inquiry, seeking to study and promote professional identity in the field of design. This method combines narrative and creative processes that encourage people to reflect on the most meaningful experiences in their life, and to create a visual narrative to describe their identity, touching on previous experiences, current values, and future wishes. The method can be summarised as (i) creating a visual narrative about oneself alone, and (ii) expressing and sharing it verbally with other people (see Kosonen, 2018). A number of other methods, such as creative and narrative writing in a group (Martin, Tarvainen, & Tynjälä, 2018), portfolio work (e.g. Eliot & Turns, 2011), and group mentoring (Geeraerts et al., 2014) have also been reported as effective means for comprehensive learning at work, including professional identity negotiations.

Overall, it appears that different kinds of social affordances and practices have potential for enabling employees to reflect on their work environment, and to achieve resources for working on their professional identities. However, although the practices and tools used for identity work are closely connected to professionals’ identity, and to authentic work, up to now they have mostly been organised within separate or independent training sessions and work-related interventions. In the future, it will be necessary to look at how professional identity work can be undertaken as a part of authentic work and in the everyday life of work communities. This will not necessarily demand intensive resources or innovative tricks. Sometimes it is enough if people are able to reflect on, share experiences, and discuss their own life and work in a confidential environment. However, in times of hectic work practices, there may be very few naturally-occurring opportunities for the forms of informal and formal social interaction that would encourage learning and identity work (e.g. Kira, 2010); hence, extra efforts will be needed to orchestrate such arenas.

As indicated above, narrative and arts-based methods and pedagogies can be powerful means to promote professionals’ identity work. It has been observed that the arts activate individual and collective reflection. In particular, they make it possible to approach life situations and identities from a range of perspectives, including those that not rely on words or cognitive processes alone (see also McKay & Sappa, 2019). It should be noted that at the same time, different practical methods offer possibilities to collect research data, including visualisations and narratives of professional identity. These kinds of datasets may well be fruitful in efforts to gain a deep understanding of professionals’ identity. Nevertheless, in using such research methods, scholars will need to understand that they are not merely researchers; they are at the same time facilitators of professional identity negotiations, and must themselves have the resources and competencies to promote challenging and fragile identity work (see e.g. Kosonen, 2018).

## 7. Conclusions for professional identity research

### 7.1. Theoretical research avenues

This chapter has argued that a focus on professional identity has the capacity to broaden our ways of understanding the complexity of professionals' work and learning (see also Billett, 2018). As a theoretical conclusion, it is suggested that professional identity should be conceptualised as a multidimensional phenomenon that is temporally imbued. In particular, taking a temporal perspective, there is a need to strive towards new understandings on the continuities and changes that can occur in professional identity in the course of fluid working life. We also need more information on which core aspects of identity are more susceptible to change, and which are more resistant to change over time. So far, the evidence appears to indicate that a strong professional identity is beneficial for employees' performance, commitment, learning, and wellbeing at work (e.g. Kira & Balkin, 2014; Molleman & Rink, 2015). However, it would be interesting to know whether a strong or unchangeable professional identity could actually have negative consequences in working life, in situations where employees are required to be flexible, proactive, and innovative – to be in effect 'nomads', working across professional and organisational boundaries.

This chapter has described professional identity as being relational, and imbued with professional agency. This implies that in seeking to understand and promote professional identity negotiations, one should recognise the nuanced nature of professional identity in relation to work, and the outcomes of this relationship. Current discussion has indeed emphasised the reciprocal relationship between work and identity (Kira & Balkin, 2014; Miscenko & Day, 2016), but more research is needed on the precise ways in which professional identity and work interact and shape one another. Furthermore, it seems crucial to recognise the extent to which professional agency is at the heart of professional identity negotiations. If one accepts that this is the case, research will touch on, for example, the kinds of choices, activities, and strategies that are manifested when individual employees negotiate their professional identity in relation to changing work, and also the purposes for which such agentic activities are used.

As emphasised in the sections above, one must not ignore the emotional perspective on professional identity. Some research evidence is already available on this topic. Professional identity and its negotiations seem in fact to be imbued with emotions in several ways. Emotions emerge from the relationship between professional identity and the work environment (Kira & Balkin, 2014; Ursin et al., 2020). Such emotions can boost employees so that they engage in shaping their professional identities or professional practices. Emotions can also emerge as an outcome of (un)successful identity work (Vähäsantanen et al., 2020; Winkler, 2018). However, a greater focus is needed on emotions in and for learning at work, and overall, there is a need for more empirical evidence on the underlying emotional processes and outcomes of professional

identity negotiations. Future studies could reveal, for example, the kinds of emotions that initiate, promote, and inhibit professionals' identity negotiations, via examination of different interactions, training sessions, and simulations.

Recently, several scholars have investigated emotions, seeking to develop new methodologies for exploring the emotions connected to learning in the workplace (e.g. Rausch, Seifried, & Harteis, 2017; Watzek & Mulder, 2018). Of particular interest are methods that measure, for example, electrodermal activity (EDA) and heart rate variability (HRV), and thus reveal the intensity of emotions. (Eteläpelto et al., 2018) However, they are unable to indicate the actual nature of the emotion in question. By contrast, research methods such as interviews may be capable of indicating the precise emotion (or combination of emotions) present in a specific situation. Overall, a combination of different methods would seem to be optimal for exploring emotions in and for professional identity negotiations.

## **7.2. Methodological aspects and practical prospects**

This chapter has sought to offer standpoints for developing professional identity research in the domain of workplace learning, with particular attention to relational, agentic, and emotional aspects as they evolve over time. So far, professional identity and its relationship with work has mostly been explored via interviews (e.g. Fuller & Unwin, 2017; Vähäsantanen & Hämäläinen, 2019). The limitation of interviews often lies in the retrospective view they offer; this being so, diaries could function either as an alternative or as an additional research method, in conjunction with interviews. Such methods could collect more authentic datasets, relating to different time slots (e.g. Arvaja, 2018). Also in conjunction with interviews, some scholars have utilised observations as additional data, conducted within an ethnographic framework (Paloniemi & Collin, 2010; Smith, 2014). In this way it is possible to gain contextual information on professional identity in specific socio-cultural contexts.

With these considerations in mind, one can see a particular need to engage in longitudinal research, with possibilities to reach a more sophisticated understanding of professional identity as a temporal phenomenon. Narrative methods (which might or might not form part of an arts-based approach) would be particularly well-suited to longitudinal studies. Narrative data collection methods can shed light on how subjects reveal, make sense of, construct, and impart meanings concerning themselves and their identities, giving insights into the role of their actions, experiences, and feelings in the course of the work they do, and the events that take place in their lives (e.g. Goodson et al., 2010). In addition, narrative analysis methods make it possible to examine what has happened to people over a series of time points. The processes revealed are likely to encompass both continuities and discontinuities over time, in relation to professional lives and identities (Arvaja, 2018; Collin, 2009; Goodson et al., 2010; Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2011).

Scholars have recently developed a number of quantitative instruments to explore professional identity. These are able to measure identity tensions (e.g. Pillen et al., 2013), and identity in relation to organisational order and logics (Barbour & Lammers, 2015). It is true that such quantitative instruments are unable to provide as deep an understanding of subjectively constructed constructs as can be achieved via interviews; nevertheless, they give possibilities for the gathering of extensive datasets, with the potential for comparative research on variations in professional identity between different socio-cultural and national work environments. Overall, one can expect that multimethod approaches will in future be needed for extensive explorations of professional identity.

It is worth noting that much of the empirical research mentioned in this chapter was conducted on professionals working in the fields of healthcare and education. More attention will have to be paid to professional identity in new kinds of work environments and organisations, for example, among those that have adopted less hierarchical management strategies. Here one should bear in mind that new forms of working and work employment are becoming increasingly prevalent, including freelance and project work. It would also be interesting to explore the professional identities of immigrants, who face requirements to renegotiate and market their professional identities in new socio-cultural work environments. Furthermore, contemporary working life is becoming increasingly technologised and digitalised (Haapakorpi & Alasoini, 2018; Harteis, 2018). Such trends seem likely to challenge familiar work practices, roles, patterns, and professional identities, with a concomitant need to generate new ways of working, collaborating, and leading in a wide range of professional contexts. The investigation of professional identities in technologised environments would seem to be a particularly pressing issue, given that employees are required to engage in novel, technologised ways of conducting their work.

Professional identity should be seen as central to workplace pedagogies and human resource development (Billett, 2018; Kira & Balkin, 2014). This chapter introduced some narrative and arts-based methods that have been found to be supportive for agentic professionals' identity negotiations in social interaction, but these are merely a starting point. The challenge now is for practitioners to orchestrate novel ways of encouraging individuals to reflect on and reshape their professional identities – possibly through shared experiences – and to create new directions for their professional lives. Nevertheless, this issue is not merely one of creating new kinds of pedagogical practices and workplace pedagogies. In fact, there is also a need for discussion of leadership in relation to professional identities. Leaders should be able to support the identity renegotiations of their staff (Hökkä, Rautiainen, Silander, & Eteläpelto, 2019) in terms of creating social arenas for reflecting on and working with their professional identities, within the authentic settings of work organisations. In addition, leaders should design work-related tasks that are aligned with employees' preferred identities and unique competencies, without ignoring

organisational goals and values (see also Kira & Balkin, 2014). In the ideal case, there will be a balance between employees' professional identities and the work environment, such as will allow sustainable and successful organisational development.

This review of theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches has been compiled in order to give persons working in the field of workplace learning a more structured understanding of the most relevant theoretical perspectives, methodological opportunities, and pragmatic practices applicable to professional identity. It will hopefully function as a launching pad for more intensive study of the issues pertaining to professional identity, and for orchestrating identity-focused learning avenues and leadership practices.

## References

- Akkerman, S. F., & Meijer, P. C. (2011). A dialogical approach to conceptualizing teacher identity. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 27*(2), 308–319.
- Arvaja, M. (2018). Tensions and striving for coherence in an academic's professional identity work. *Teaching in Higher Education, 23*(3), 291–306.
- Barbour, J. B., & Lammers, J. C. (2015). Measuring professional identity: A review of the literature and a multilevel confirmatory factor analysis of professional identity constructs. *Journal of Professions and Organization, 2*, 38–60.
- Beijaard, D., Meijer, P. C. & Verloop, N. (2004). Reconsidering research on teachers' professional identity. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 20*(2), 107–128.
- Billett, S. (2010). Lifelong learning and self: Work, subjectivity and learning. *Studies in Continuing Education, 32*(1), 1–16.
- Billett, S. (2018). Subjectivity and human resource development: A quest for intersubjectivity. In K. Black, R. Warhurst, & S. Corlett (Eds.), *Identity as a foundation for human resource development* (pp. 39–52). New York: Routledge.
- Billett, S., Harteis, C., & Gruber, H. (2014). (Eds.) *International handbook on research in professional and practice-based learning*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Billett, S., & Pavlova, M. (2005). Learning through working life: Self and individuals' agentic action. *International Journal of Lifelong Education, 24*(3), 195–211.
- Brown, A. D. (2015). Identities and identity work in organizations. *International Journal of Management Reviews, 17*, 20–40.
- Brown, A., Kirpal, S., & Rauner, F. (2007). (Eds.). *Identities at work*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Buch, A., & Andersen, V. (2013). (De)stabilizing self-identities in professional work. *Nordic Journal of Working Life Studies, 3*(3), 155–173.
- Chappell, C., Scheeres, H., & Solomon, N. (2007). Working on identities. In L. Farrell, & T. Fenwick (Eds.), *World yearbook of education 2007. Educating the global workforce: Knowledge, knowledge work and knowledge workers* (pp. 167–177). Abingdon, OX: Routledge.



- Collin, K. (2009). Work-related identity in individual and social learning at work. *The Journal of Workplace Learning*, 21(1), 23–35.
- Conroy, S. A., & O'Leary-Kelly, A. M. (2014). Letting go and moving on: Work-related identity loss and recovery. *Academy of Management Review*, 39(1), 67-87.
- Davey, R. (2013). *The professional identity of teacher educators: Career on the cusp?* London: Routledge.
- Eliot, M., & Turns, J. (2011). Constructing professional portfolios: Sense-making and professional identity development for engineering undergraduates. *Journal of Engineering Education*, 100(4), 630–654.
- Eteläpelto, A. (2008). Perspectives, prospects and progress in work-related learning. In S. Billett, C. Harteis, & A. Eteläpelto (Eds.), *Emerging perspectives on workplace learning* (pp. 236–259). Rotterdam: Sense.
- Eteläpelto, A., Kykyri, V-L., Penttonen, M., Hökkä, P., Paloniemi, S., Vähäsantanen, K., Eteläpelto, T., & Lappalainen, V. (2018). A multi-componential methodology for exploring emotions in learning: using self-reports, behaviour registration, and physiological indicators as complementary data. *Frontline Learning Research*, 6(3), 6–36.
- Eteläpelto, A., Vähäsantanen, K., Hökkä, P., & Paloniemi, S. (2014). Identity and agency in professional learning. In S. Billett, C. Harteis, & H. Gruber (Eds.), *International Handbook of Research in Professional and Practice-based Learning* (pp. 645–672). Dordrecht: Springer.
- Fenwick, T. J. (2004) Learning in portfolio work: anchored innovation and mobile identity. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 26(2), 229–245.
- Fuller, A., & Unwin, L. (2017). Job crafting and identity in low-grade work: How hospital porters redefine the value of their work and expertise. *Vocations and Learning*, 10(3), 307–324.
- Geeraerts, K., Tynjälä, P., Heikkinen, H., Markkanen, I., Pennanen, M. & Gijbels, D. (2014). Peer-group mentoring as a tool for teacher development. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 38, 1–20.
- Goodson, I. F., Biesta, G., Tedder, M. & Adair, N. (2010). *Narrative learning*. London: Routledge.
- Haapakorpi, A., & Alasoini, T. (2018). Work organization and technology: Introduction to the theme of the special issue. *Nordic Journal of Working Life Studies*, 8(S3), 1–6.
- Harteis, C. (2018). (Ed.) *The impact of digitalization in the workplace – An educational view*. Cham: Springer.
- Hökkä, P., Rautiainen, M., Silander, T., & Eteläpelto, A. (2019). Collective agency-promoting leadership in Finnish teacher education. In J. Murray, A. Swennen, & C. Kosnik (Eds.), *International research, policy and practice in teacher education: Insider perspectives* (pp. 15–29). Dordrecht: Springer.

- Hökkä, P., Vähäsantanen, K., & Mahlakaarto, S. (2017). Teacher educators' collective professional agency and identity: Transforming marginality to strength. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 63, 36–46.
- Illeris, K. (2014). *Transformative learning and identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Kira, M., (2010). Routine-generating and regenerative workplace learning. *Vocations and Learning*, 3(1), 71–90.
- Kira, M., & Balkin, D. B. (2014). Interactions between work and identities: Thriving, withering, or redefining the self? *Human Resource Management Review*, 24(2), 131–143.
- Kirpal, S. (2004). Researching work identities in a European context. *Career Development International*, 9(3), 199–221.
- Kosonen, K. (2018). *Finding one's own way in design. Reflections on narrative professional identity*. Aalto University publication series Doctoral dissertations. Helsinki: Aalto University.
- Leitch, R. (2006). Limitations of language: Developing arts-based creative narrative in stories of teachers' identities. *Teaching and Teachers: Theory and Practice*, 12(5), 549–569.
- Leitch, R. (2010). Masks as self-study. Challenging and sustaining teachers' personal and professional personae in early–mid career life phases, *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 16(3), 329–352.
- Martin, A., Tarnanen, M., & Tynjälä, P. (2018). Exploring teachers' stories of writing: A narrative perspective. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 24(6), 690–705.
- McKay, L., & Sappa, V. (2019). Harnessing creativity through arts-based research to support teachers' identity development. *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education*. Online first: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1477971419841068>
- Miscenko, D., & Day, D. (2016). Identity and identification at work. *Organizational Psychology Review*, 6(3), 215–247.
- Molleman, E., & Rink, F. (2015). The antecedents and consequences of a strong professional identity among medical specialities. *Social Theory & Health*, 13(1), 46–61.
- Paloniemi, S., & Collin, K. (2010). *Workplace learning and work-related identity constructions in a clinical setting*. In M. Caltone (Ed.), *Handbook of lifelong learning developments* (pp. 141–161). New York: Nova.
- Pillen, M., Beijaard, D., & den Brok, P. (2013). Tensions in beginning teachers' professional identity development, accompanying feelings and coping strategies. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 36(2), 240–260.
- Pratt, M. G., Rockmann, K. W., & Kaufmann, J. B. (2006). Constructing professional identity: The role of work and identity learning cycles in the customization of identity among medical residents. *Academy of Management Journal*, 49(2), 235–262.
- Rausch, A., Seifried, J., & Harteis, C. (2017). Emotions, coping and learning in error situations in the workplace. *Journal of Workplace Learning*, 29(5), 374–393.

- Ruohotie-Lyhty, M., & Moate, J. (2016). Who and how? Preservice teachers as active agents developing professional identities. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 55*, 318–327.
- Smith, R. (2014). Conceptualising the socio-personal practice of learning in work as negotiation. *Vocations and learning, 7*(2), 127–143.
- Tynjälä, P. (2013). Toward a 3-P model of workplace learning: A literature review. *Vocations and learning, 6*(1), 11–36.
- Ursin, J., Vähäsantanen, K., McAlpine, L., & Hökkä, P. (2020). Emotionally loaded identity and agency in Finnish academic work. *Journal of Further and Higher Education, 44*(3), 311-325.
- van Veen, K., & Slegers, P. (2009). Teachers' emotions in a context of reforms: To a deeper understanding of teachers and reform. In P. Schutz, & M. Zembylas (Eds.) *Advances in teacher emotion research: The impact on teachers' lives* (pp. 233–252). New York: Springer.
- van der Wal, M. M., Oolbekkink-Marchand, H. W., Schaap, H. & Meijer, P. C. (2019). Impact of early career teachers' professional identity tensions. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 80* (4), 59–70.
- Vähäsantanen, K., & Eteläpelto, A. (2011). Vocational teachers' pathways in the course of a curriculum reform. *Journal of Curriculum Studies, 43*(3), 291–312.
- Vähäsantanen, K. & Eteläpelto, A. (2015). Professional agency, identity, and emotions while leaving one's work organization. *Professions and Professionalism, 5*(3), 1–16.
- Vähäsantanen, K., & Hämäläinen, R. (2019). Professional identity in relation to vocational teachers' work – An identity-centred approach to professional development. *Learning: Research and Practice, 5*(1), 48–66.
- Vähäsantanen, K., Hökkä, P., & Paloniemi, S. (2020). University teachers' professional identity work and emotions in the context of an arts-based identity coaching program. In L. McKay, G. Barton, G. Georgina, & V. Sappa (Eds.), *Arts-based research, resilience and well-being across the lifespan* (pp. 233-256). Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Vähäsantanen, K., Hökkä, P., Paloniemi, S., Herranen, S., & Eteläpelto, A. (2017). Professional learning and agency in an identity coaching programme. *Professional Development in Education, 43*(4), 514–536.
- Watzek, V., & Mulder, R. H. (2019). Team learning behaviours and team affective reactions: An empirical study on interdisciplinary work teams. *Vocations and Learning, 12*(1), 1–22.
- Winkler, I. (2018). Identity work and emotions: A review. *International Journal of Management Reviews, 20*, 120–133.