

PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY CRISIS

This page intentionally left blank

PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY CRISIS

Balancing the Internal and
External Perception of
Professional Image

BY

ANDREA TOMO

University of Naples Federico II, Italy



United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India
Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2019

Copyright © 2019 Emerald Publishing Limited

Reprints and permissions service

Contact: permissions@emeraldinsight.com

No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, transmitted in any form or by any means electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without either the prior written permission of the publisher or a licence permitting restricted copying issued in the UK by The Copyright Licensing Agency and in the USA by The Copyright Clearance Center. Any opinions expressed in the chapters are those of the authors. Whilst Emerald makes every effort to ensure the quality and accuracy of its content, Emerald makes no representation implied or otherwise, as to the chapters' suitability and application and disclaims any warranties, express or implied, to their use.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-78769-808-6 (Print)

ISBN: 978-1-78769-805-5 (Online)

ISBN: 978-1-78769-807-9 (Epub)



Certificate Number 1985
ISO 14001

ISOQAR certified
Management System,
awarded to Emerald
for adherence to
Environmental
standard
ISO 14001:2004.



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

CONTENTS

<i>List of Figures</i>	vii
<i>List of Tables</i>	ix
<i>List of Boxes</i>	xi
<i>About the Author</i>	xiii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xv
Introduction	1
1. Professional Identity: Features and Implications	
Andrea Tomo	7
1.1. Introduction	7
1.2. Previous Literature on Professional Identity	10
1.3. Research Design	17
1.4. Professional Identity Dynamics: Antecedents and Consequences of Identity Struggles	19
1.4.1. Identity Struggles per Type of Profession	41
1.5. A Multi-level Approach to Professional Identity Struggles	46
1.6. Concluding Remarks	55
2. Professionals and Identity Crisis: A Flexibility Matter?	
Davide de Gennaro	59
2.1. Introduction	59
2.2. The Crisis of Professional Identity	60
2.3. De-professionalization, Precarization, and Proletarianization of Professions	66

2.4.	Why Flexibility Matters	74
2.4.1.	The Role Played by Individuals	81
2.4.2.	The Role Played by Institutions and Organizations	85
2.4.3.	A Flexible Vision	88
2.5.	Concluding Remarks	93
3.	Professionals' Attempts to Manage Uncertainties and De-professionalization: The Case of Italian Accountants Andrea Tomo and Davide de Gennaro	95
3.1.	Introduction	95
3.2.	A Behavioural Perspective in Coping with Hardships: Theory and Hypotheses	100
3.3.	A Peculiar Case Study: The Methodology	103
3.3.1.	Research Context: The Italian Setting	103
3.3.2.	Data and Procedures	105
3.3.3.	Measures	105
3.4.	Findings and Discussion	107
3.5.	Theoretical and Practical Implications	111
3.6.	Future Research Agenda	113
	Conclusion	115
	<i>References</i>	125
	<i>Index</i>	149

LIST OF FIGURES

Chapter 1

Figure 1.1. Identity Features Over Time.	15
--	----

Chapter 3

Figure 3.1. The Mediating Role of Proactive Personality within the Negative Relation between Perceived External Image and Goal Orientation.	103
Figure 3.2. Results from the Linear Regression Analysis.	109

This page intentionally left blank

LIST OF TABLES

Chapter 1

Table 1.1. Overview of the Studies Analyzed.	20
Table 1.2. Overview of the Countries Analyzed in the Studies.	21
Table 1.3. Overview of Cases Included in the Study. . .	22
Table 1.4. Categorization of Antecedents to Identity Struggles.	39
Table 1.5. Categorization of Identity Struggles.	40
Table 1.6. Categorization of Consequences of Identity Struggles.	41
Table 1.7. A Multi-level Description of the Struggles in Professional Identity.	47

Chapter 3

Table 3.1. Descriptive Statistics.	106
Table 3.2. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations.	107
Table 3.3. Results of the Hierarchical Regression Analysis (Hayes, 2013, for SPSS).	108

This page intentionally left blank

LIST OF BOXES

Chapter 2

Box 2.1.	Identity Crisis in Italian Educational and Training Sectors.	67
Box 2.2.	The Role of Technology.	75

This page intentionally left blank

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andrea Tomo is Assistant Professor of Organisation Studies at the Department of Economics, Management, Institutions of the University of Naples Federico II, Italy, where he also teaches Negotiation in Complex Organisations and Organisational Behaviour. He holds a PhD in Management from the University of Naples Federico II. He has been a Visiting Researcher at the Cass Business School of London, UK, Adam Smith Business School, University of Glasgow, UK, Leuphana Universität of Lüneburg, Germany, and Copenhagen Business School, Denmark.

This page intentionally left blank

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to express his great appreciation to Dr Davide de Gennaro not only for the precious contribution related to the second and third chapter, but also and above all for his valuable and constructive suggestions during the planning and development of this book. His willingness to give his time and effort has been very appreciated.

This page intentionally left blank

INTRODUCTION

This book aims at offering a novel understanding of the reasons behind the crisis of the professional identity occurring at the individual level. Such reasons are often neglected, leaving much more space to the analysis of identity at the organizational and contextual levels.

Conversely, we contend that full comprehension of the dynamics taking place is now paramount from the individual perspective.

On these grounds, the book proposes an analysis of the factors affecting professional identity and image from both an internal and external standpoint, and the possible strategies and behaviours fostered by professionals to cope with the social view of their professions and to respond to the threats and uncertainties featuring their contexts.

In doing so, the book offers interesting insights into the professional world that is quickly changing also highlighting novel and stimulating challenges. It tries to tie together theoretical and practical aspects to better comprehend the evolution of professions in a period characterized by profound changes and uncertainties both from a social and economic point of view. Our goal, also through a case study of a particularly deprofessionalized context, is to identify common features and dissonances within the literature on the topic by proposing an all-encompassing investigation of the phenomena that may lead to a poor external perception of the profession. The results of the case study will therefore represent a starting point for future considerations on

professional identity, the threats affecting it, and the coping strategies and behaviours fostered by professionals to deal with them.

At least to our knowledge, this is the unique book to systematically address the issues relating to the crisis of professional identity according to a behavioural perspective, following a profound theoretical systematization – to date unavailable – that is strongly compelled with relevant practical implications on the individual level, sometimes neglected in the field. Also, the book benefits from rich empirical material on professional identity perception and professionals' proactive behaviour in order to find out behavioural dimensions previously not disentangled.

Indeed, the book is articulated over three chapters, providing a rich theoretical and empirical analysis to support and discuss the issues raised.

The first chapter explores the multifaceted aspects concerning professional identity as a complex phenomenon, which presents ramifications in many different disciplinary fields, ranging from the organization studies to those in the psychological and sociological ones. Going over the essential features of the literature on professional identity, we analyze the articulation of the phenomenon by discussing and comparing some of the proposed classifications. In more detail, the chapter will problematize extant literature through a systematic review in order to catch identity struggles with their antecedents and consequences from already existing empirical studies on professional identity. This approach enables the discussion of studies not yet analyzed in the academic debate to then reorganize the results with the aim of discovering overlooked issues and possible neglected relationships. The results from the review will support the discussion over the main threats to professional identity, leading to the struggles affecting professionals and to the reactions often providing

the reasons for resisting to organizational change. We believe that a deeper understanding of the threats and struggles to identity will enhance a better comprehension of what policies, reforms, and other kinds of actions might be of support for making professionals change agents rather than ‘bearers of hurdles to organizational change’.

The second chapter will deeply analyze from a theoretical perspective the reasons behind the identity crisis occurring in the professional field by discussing three main phenomena directly connected: deprofessionalization, precarization, and proletarianization. Numerous factors, such as persisting economic recession and austerity, automation generated by technologies advancements, and increased competition, are profoundly transforming the nature of professionals’ work, creating new threats and challenges for them who witness a deep transformation of their work. Deprofessionalization is a phenomenon that has been gripping the professions since the 1980s and that, due to the advent of technology and competition, has experienced a strong increase over the years and the data show this trend. Scholars have investigated perception of identity and of image and prestige in organizational contexts characterized by strong cultures, tight communities, and strict display rules – showing that people strive to fit into challenging roles without losing their individuality – but nevertheless economic volatility and technological change have led people to work outside these strong contexts in a constantly evolving scenario. More specifically, although much has been written about the changes occurring in professional practices and jurisdiction, scant attention has been given to professionals’ perceived image in the context of the ever-expanding pressures and increasing regulatory entropy, and this chapter aims to investigate these dynamics.

Consequently, the third chapter, drawing on the issues raised in Chapters 1 and 2, deepens the questions pertaining

'how' accounting professionals respond to the uncertainties characterizing their context and 'what' are the main strategies and behaviours they enact to cope with the social view of their profession and to redefine their image. To this aim, the chapter will draw on the case of Italian accountants, a profession characterized by a sharp deprofessionalization pattern, located in Southern Italy: more specifically, using a sample of 294 accountants, we examine how perceptions of professional image and difference in personality influence professionals' goal orientation in a context characterized by several threats undermining professional activity. This enhances our understanding of the accounting profession, identifying new reactions and behaviours based not only on exogenous and contextual factors but also on personal ones. These results will then be analyzed in a cross-cultural perspective in order to integrate the literature on the professional image which, to date, is focused only on Anglo-Saxon contexts. The use of a specific case study also makes it possible to identify some peculiarities and to relate them to the perception of identity of other geographical realities.

The text proposes a key analysis of a contemporary issue that is affecting professionals' category. The consideration of the individual level in the identity analysis makes this text of particular interest for practitioners (experts, consultants, professionals) to comprehend what are the main factors and events affecting the professional identity and what are the possible strategies and behaviours enacted by accountants to cope with the social view of their profession and to respond to the uncertainties leading their profession towards a process of deprofessionalization. This analysis represents a critical starting point to further comprehend from a theoretical, practical, and policy-making point of view what might be the interventions to react to the negative scenario that is leading professionals towards an identity crisis.

The text is also proposed as a study tool for undergraduate students of organization studies and organizational behaviour courses. Indeed, it offers an analysis of both the theoretical and practical on the professional identity. Thanks to the book, students will be able to critically address the key issues concerning the professional identity and its crisis also in a behavioural perspective. In doing so, the book represents a useful tool to support the study of individual behaviours and to stimulate an interesting debate on the solutions to be adopted to face the identity crisis. These themes are of high relevance in academic courses such as organizational behaviour and organization studies.

Therefore, we are convinced that the book will be of interest for those in the field of organization studies and organizational behaviour, in which the problems concerning individual and organizational identity represent key themes. Additionally, the book could be potentially interesting to practitioners in the accounting field, since it embraces a critical issue pertaining to the social view of their profession and to the strategies and behaviour to cope with the actual situation.

This page intentionally left blank

CHAPTER 1

PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY: FEATURES AND IMPLICATIONS

Andrea Tomo

1.1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last years, research on identity is receiving increasing attention (Brown, 2015). One of the reasons for this is the interest in the dynamics that identity involves in its formation (Ashforth, Rogers, & Corley, 2011).

With specific reference to professional identity, research to date has left a number of questions unanswered relating to the factors that influence the profession, how professionals carry out their tasks, and how they conceive the change in their professions in the face of context and jurisdictional threats. More specifically, although much has been written about the changes occurring in professional practices and jurisdiction, scant attention has been given to professionals' changing identities in the context of the ever-expanding pressures and increasing regulatory entropy (Ahuja, Nikolova, & Clegg, 2017). This lack of understanding of who professionals truly are and the challenges surrounding their professions is a notable deficiency, as they fulfil a crucial and well-acknowledged social role (Chreim, Williams, & Hinings,

2007). Indeed, professionals are conventionally recognized as workers who apply their knowledge, skills, and judgement to complete tasks in the pursuit of their own, their customers, and, in some cases, the public's interests (e.g. accountants, lawyers, and doctors; Bottery, 1998; Empson, Muzio, Broschak, & Hinings, 2015; Johnson, 1972; Madden & Mitchell, 1993; Samuel, Covalenski, & Dirsmith, 2009; Schön, 1983; Paisey & Paisey, 2000, 2006; Pierce, 2007; Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006; Preston, Cooper, Scarbrough, & Chilton, 1995; Willmott, 1990).

On the grounds of this social relevance, the world's rapidly changing conditions of the last 30 years have increasingly prompted threats to professions as well as challenges to research on professions (e.g. Albu, 2013; Carrington, Johed, & Öhman, 2011; Caza & Creary, 2016; Lander, Koene, & Linssen, 2013; Sikka & Willmott, 1995; Suddaby, Gendron, & Lam, 2009; Zeff, 2003a, 2003b), allowing for an understanding of professionals' reactions in the face of attacks to their jurisdiction and assaults to their professional niches by different actors. Despite the appreciable contributions in literature, which reveal professionals' behaviours and reactions, the prominent issue pertaining to the professional identity remains quite hidden (Bévort & Suddaby, 2016; Pratt et al., 2006). For instance, considering the accounting profession, we know little about how professional identity has changed after the repeated corporate scandals (Cappelli & Keller, 2013; Carnegie & Napier, 2010). Indeed, professional identity formation, struggles, and reconstruction may be recognized as prominent aspects in determining how people behave and carry out their work tasks (Ashforth et al., 2011; Caza & Creary, 2016). Also, concerns related to the growing 'commercialism' of professions (e.g. Bévort & Suddaby, 2016; Carnegie & Napier, 2010; Malsch & Gendron, 2013) raise many questions pertaining professionals' reactions to deal