

A Review of Literature on the Concept of Professional Identity

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Abstract: Much of literature on professional identity has defined professional identity. Based on the present researches, the connotations of professional identity can be divided into three categories: self-identity or social identity, dynamic process or static state, academic professional identity or occupational professional identity. These three categories can overlap and cross each other. The denotation of the concept of professional identity focuses on the process line of “cognition, emotion and behavior”. In this paper, the concept of professional identity refers to the dynamic process in which learners accept their majors and continue to engage in positive learning behaviors and based on their understanding to the similarities and differences between themselves and their majors, they can adapt themselves to the majors and try to become outstanding performers as far as possible. The definition includes four denotation dimensions: cognition, affection, behaviors and appropriateness. In this paper, the concept of professional identity was explored.

1. Introduction

The disciplines in the higher education of China are highly professional. Different majors have distinctive entrance requirements, training process, educational returns and prospects, etc. In the undergraduate education that is “dominated by specialized education and supplemented by general education”, professional identity provides an important support for undergraduates’ learning enthusiasm. It has a bearing on academic performance and ability development, and directly affects the efficiency and quality of talent education in colleges and universities^[1]. Thus, it is necessary to explore the professional identity of college students.

2. Concept

At present, the definition of “professional identity” has not been unified by domestic scholars, and scholars have put forward their own definitions, which can be classified from three aspects. The first category is to classify professional identity as self-identity or social identity. “Self-identity” refers to a constant and consistent understanding of oneself, a feeling of familiarity with oneself, and a feeling of knowing one's future goals^[2]. Professional identity is classified as self-identity, which emphasizes the influence of self-conditions, that is, subjective factors, on professional identity and the psychological feelings of professional identity. Some scholars believe that “professional identity” is the recognition and acceptance of college students' majors. On this basis, they pay positive learning behaviors to achieve good results, thus obtaining three levels: cognitive understanding, emotional attitude and will behavior (Yang Hong, Long Zhe, 2009). Some foreign scholars also believe that professional identity is shaped from within a person and comprises the intrapersonal dimensions of professional identity (Gibson et al., 2010). In the field of self-identity, professional identity is the projection of reflective self, which is constructed by learners' thinking and perception of majors according to their own experience and conditions. It is not only the expression of professional recognition, but also the expression of holistic recognition of the unity of themselves and profession.

Besides some scholars classify “professional identity” as self-identity, some scholars also

defined it in terms of social identity. Tajfel (1978) put forward the definition of social identity. He thinks that social identity is an individual's consciousness of belonging to a certain social group, and this consciousness has significant emotional and value significance for individuals as members of society. Social identity comes from group membership or qualification. First, individuals bring themselves into a certain group to form the consciousness of group membership, and then evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of the group they agree with and compare with other groups. In the theory of social identity, the key of professional identity lies in the integration of individuals into professional learning groups, the formation of group consciousness and the positive evaluation of this professional learning group. There is a famous metaphorical assertion in social learning theory that the learning process is a process in which individuals confirm their membership of the community of practice through "legitimate peripheral participation". Learners will be influenced by symbolic environment such as gender, race and educational background while studying their major, resulting in a series of choices and thoughts such as "what do I learn" and "what kind of person do I want to be", which is the professional identity model under the social identity theory (Xing Qingqing, 2009). Some scholars have also proposed that professional identity is the attitudes, values, knowledge, beliefs and skills that are shared with others within a professional group, and can affect how people interact, compare and differentiate themselves from other professional groups in the work place(Adams et al., 2006; Crossley and Vivekananda-Schmidt, 2009). From the perspective of social identity, professional identity is a collective concept constructed by individuals' sense of belonging, value, recognition and acceptance of their groups, which emphasizes the decisive role of objective factors in professional identity.

The second category is to classify professional identity as a dynamic process or a static state. From a dynamic point of view, professional identity emphasizes psychological process and the dynamic progressive relationship among cognition, emotion and behavior. Wang Dingming^[3] pointed out that professional identity refers to learners' acceptance and recognition of their profession, and their willingness to learn and explore with positive attitude and active behavior, which is a dynamic concept accompanied by the learning process. Learners will change their existing views on profession due to the changes of internal factors and external environment, thus obtaining three sub-dimensions: cognition, emotion and continuity. Ji Y(2010)pointed out that identity is a dynamic, continually changing, and active process which develops over time through interaction with others. From a dynamic point of view, "professional identity" is the interaction among individuals, professions and groups, which is characterized by initiative, continuity and instability. It is a process in which individuals establish professional cognition, cultivate professional emotion and pay positive learning behavior.

From a static point of view, "professional identity" refers to the "identity" state achieved by individuals and profession, which is the result of dynamic identity. Static definition of professional identity focuses on psychological state, which is more emotional and stable, but its structure is single and lacks continuity. For example, Henning (2001) argues that professional identity is a subjective feeling that individuals have about their profession, which has a certain developmental process and is the extent to which individuals are internally consistent and balanced about their profession.

The third category is to divide professional identity into academic professional identity and occupational professional specialty. At present, the professional identity in China mostly focuses on college students, which refers to the degree of acceptance and identity of college students to their majors. This paper defines this kind of professional identity as academic professional identity. However, some studies take professionals as the research group, and understand professional identity as the sense of identity or identity model of occupations with high degree of specialization of related professionals. This paper defines this as occupational professional identity. Most of the studies abroad focus on the professional identity of professional groups, and few of the studies on college students are involved. This may be due to the freedom of major choice and change in western universities, and the undergraduate course pays attention to general education, supplemented by professional knowledge education.

The “profession” in the academic professional identity refers to the “college major”, which is set up by colleges and universities in order to impart the cultural and scientific knowledge of specialized occupations and according to the needs of social occupational division of labor^[4]. Compared with primary and secondary education, higher education gives learning individuals greater autonomy and exploration, and college students gradually establish their unique cognition and feeling of majors by entering colleges and universities. Academic professional identity takes college students as the research group, and emphasizes the positive change process of college students' cognitive understanding, emotional acceptance and giving behavior of their majors during the four years of college. For example, Qin Panbo^[5] defined “professional identity” as the emotional acceptance and recognition of learners on the basis of cognitive understanding of the subject they have learned, accompanied by positive external behavior and inner sense of appropriateness, which is a process of moving in emotion, attitude and even cognition. This definition points out that the change of college students' professional identity in a specific learning stage is closely related to learners' learning mode, learning rhythm and learning stage.

The “profession” in the occupational professional identity refers to the “professional occupation”, which requires special study and training before taking up the post, mainly referring to doctors, teachers, lawyers, archivists and so on. Occupational professional identity emphasizes the psychological state and content of “identity”. For example, Zhai Yan (2006) takes preschool teachers as the research object, and puts forward that preschool teachers' professional identity refers to the overall view of preschool teachers' significance as preschool teachers, and integrates the connotation of preschool teachers' professional identity into five aspects: self-image, professional preparation, work motivation, teaching practice and future prospect. The research group of occupation-oriented professional identity is the personnel engaged in professional occupation, which is more stable and continuous compared with college majors. Therefore, compared with the academic professional identity, the professional identity tends to be static research and professional identity content research.

To sum up, the current research on the concept of professional identity can be divided into three categories: self-identity or social identity, static state or dynamic process, academic professional identity or occupational professional identity. However, classifications can overlap. For example, Yang Hong (2009) pointed out that “identity” essentially means that the identity subject finally reaches the “same” state with the object through the process of moving in the emotion, attitude and even cognition of the identity object, that is to say, “identity” refers to both the process and the state. We define “professional identity” as a dynamic process in which learners accept their majors and continue to pay positive learning behaviors and based on the understanding to the similarities and differences between themselves and their majors, they can adapt themselves to their majors and become excellent as much as possible. Jenkins (1996) argues that the word “identity” has two meanings. First, identity, that is, the same between the two. Second, uniqueness, which is manifested in the consistency and coherence reflected in the time span. It can be seen that “identity” reveals the relationship between “similarity” and “difference”. “Identity” (or similarity) and “difference” are two different aspects of identity. Therefore, we think that the basis of professional identity is to recognize the “identity” and “difference” between oneself and the major, and fully understand oneself and the major. On the basis of identity, individuals can have legal and correct feelings for their majors, thus obtaining psychological safety, emotional pleasure, satisfaction and acceptance. This intrinsic emotional pleasure and satisfaction will directly lead to positive and continuous professional learning behavior motivation and explicit professional learning behavior effect^[4], thus helping learners to better adapt to their majors and encouraging learners to become excellent as much as possible. Therefore, the professional identity defined by we have four dimensions, namely cognition, emotion, behaviors and appropriateness. Cognition refers to professional learners' understanding of the “identity” and “difference” between their majors and themselves. Emotion refers to the degree of emotional connection between learners and their majors, that is, the degree that their majors can bring emotional pleasure to learners. Behavior refers to the active learning behavior that learners pay under the stimulation of cognition and emotion and get

good results. Appropriateness refers to the process of learners trying to adapt to their majors and the state of feeling adapted to their majors. The four dimensions have a distinct logical relationship. In this paper, “professional identity” belongs to self-identity and learning professional identity, which is both a process and a state.

3. Conclusion

There is no standardized concept of professional identity recognized by academic circles. Professional identity is a branch of educational psychology, but there is no clear and unified definition, which shows that the research on professional identity is immature. The definition and category of professional identity we provided will give a new perspective to its research field.

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