

Academics' Professional Identity: A Contingency Perspective

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to adopt a contingency approach and study important factors for academics' Professional Identity. Based on a sample of 112 academics we run a descriptive analysis to understand if variables such as gender, age, nationality and teaching mode do have an influence on academics' Professional Identity. Our results show that teaching mode is a relevant factor to be considered.

Keywords: Academic Professional Identity, Higher Education, Online Teaching, Management

1. Introduction

The topic of Professional Identity (PI) has been extensively researched in the last two decades [1, 2, 3, 4, 5]. PI refers to the extent to which one defines him or herself in terms of the work he or she does [6]. The main focus of the research on PI has been to study the strength of identification within a specific profession. In that sense, several professions have been analyzed: doctors [7], nurses [8] and academics [9] among others. More specifically, research on academics' identity has concentrated on analyzing academics individual identity as well as the development process of this identity [10]. While most of these papers offer an in-depth understanding of the concept of academics' identity; there is a lack of research that has taken a contingency perspective and studied the role that variables such as age or nationality play in relation to academics' identity. These factors have been described as influencing PI [1, 11, 12]. Therefore, our aim is to take this contingency perspective and study which factors might affect academics' PI. The study of these contingency variables will provide a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of the current knowledge that we have on the concept of academic PI. On the other hand, we also expect that our paper helps university managers in the development of their faculty. The paper is organized as follows. First, we will explain the concepts of PI and

academics' PI; review the relevant literature on the topic and develop our hypotheses with respect to contingency factors. Second, we will describe the methodology used in this study. Third, data analysis and results will be presented. Finally, we will discuss the implications of our results and highlight the article's main conclusions as well as limitations and further research.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

2.1. What is Professional Identity

Identity is a key element of social studies and has been historically studied within the disciplines of Psychology, more specifically Social Psychology, and Sociology [13]. The theory around the concept of identity stems from the research made on the self [14]. Social Identity Theory [15, 16, 17] highlights the key role of identity in human behaviour by suggesting the concept of social categories as a reference framework. Social categories emerge since reality is too complex to be perceived and interpreted. In that sense, its simplification is needed. Social identity is formed when individuals feel as part or want to become part of a group defined by these social categories. Once an individual identifies with a social category, he or she values positively

the other in-group members. Subsequently, assuming a social identity implies a positive evaluation of the social category.

In addition to Tajfel contributions, [18] contributes to the concept of social identity by widening its discursive nature. In line with this author, social identity emerges as a result of a negotiation process of meanings. The concept of self is considered as an evaluative dimension that allows structuring unexpected impulses by incorporating others expectations in that evaluation.

The self and identity are multiple in nature (e.g., cultural identity, ethnic identity, gender identity) since they represent a synthesis of multiple evaluations. In addition, the individuals' identity is influenced by the experiences that he or she has had during his or her life as well as the subjective meanings attached to these [19; 20]. In addition, the answer

that an individual provides to the question 'who am I?' is closely related to his or her identity, since it is a manifestation of his or her self-concept [21]. As stated by Inglehart and Brown, PI is a specific aspect of identity since it arises from the perception of belonging to a professional group and therefore is considered as a specific case of group identity [22].

As already mentioned, PI is bounded to a specific profession, which is described as a group of people that have been educated through the same discipline, considering the national rights that govern, define, and monitor the professions' knowledge [23]. There are several wide accepted definitions of the concept of PI (Table 1 shows these definitions).

Table 1. Professional Identity Definitions.

Definition	Reference
PI is "the relatively stable and enduring constellation of attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences in terms of which people define themselves in a professional role"	Schein [24]
PI refers to "the extent to which one define him or herself in terms of the work he or she does, and the prototypical characteristics ascribed to individual who does that work"	Van Maanen and Barley [10]
PI is "the part of being a 'professional' and is the integration of the professional training as a 'professional' that forms his or her own PI"	Moss et al. [25]

As a summary of these definitions (Table 1) it can be stated that PI is the part of the self-concept related to the profession individuals develop. In that sense, it is important to emphasize the salience of PI since it plays a role in determining individuals' behavior which will be guided by the professional values or beliefs of this profession. Through the identity construction process, individuals acquire the knowledge, abilities and sense of a specific profession. In this construction process, the individual internalizes the values and norms of the group (i.e., profession) in their self-concept adopting the group behavior [26, 27, 28]. In this paper we will study the PI of academics in the context of higher education.

2.2. Academics' Professional Identity

Following the above mentioned definitions of PI, we define academics' PI as the perception of belonging to the academic community, which implies ascribing and sharing the values and beliefs of this community of practice [29]. Such values entail the care for students, a desire to do one's best, contribution to the profession and the pursuit of knowledge among others [30, 31]. Henderson and Bradey define the identity of academic professionals as "the complex personal understanding of the way in which the world works including what it means to teach and learn in a professional degree program" (p.85) [32]. It is important to mention that in this paper, we will focus on academic communities in the specific context of higher education.

In general, the academics' PI literature has studied the tensions between the different roles embedded in the academic profession (i.e., teaching, researching and managing) [e.g., 32, 33]. On the other hand, given the complexity of academics' PI there is another stream of literature, which is less abundant, that studies the significance that different factors have on academics' PI [e.g. 34, 36].

Although the studies that have adopted a contingency perspective are limited, Clegg emphasized the fact that academic identities cannot be understood without considering the context in which they are embedded; showing the relevance and the needs to further study it [34]. In that sense, factors such as gender, nationality and age have been identified as critical in the context of academics' PI. For instance, Clegg in her study about the definition and meaning on academic identity highlights the important role played by gender [34]. In addition, Scotland concluded that a change in the academic's institutional culture resulted in the emergence of new academic identities [36]. In the general literature of PI, besides from these factors, the educative context has been highlighted as crucial [14]. In that sense, Clegg mentioned the identity tensions of academics when teaching more vocationally oriented courses rather than traditional theoretical ones [34]. These examples show that the nature of a course might affect the formation of identity. Translating this idea into a macro-level, teaching mode might be an interesting and generally neglected factor to be considered when studying academics' PI. In this context, it is important to mention that universities and business schools have restructured their teaching methodologies in relation to new market demand needs [34]. A clear example of this situation is the increase of online courses offered by higher education institutions as a way to provide flexibility to potential students [35]. In this line, investigating less traditional university course provision (i.e., online mode) in relation to academics' PI is needed [34]. According to Henderson, practice and identity are related to each other in the sense that identity is shaped by our practices [32]. Practice entails both the environment perception and the way in which individuals interact [32]. Given that an online teaching environment entails a different way of interaction for academics (e.g.,

students and academics do not generally meet face to face, feedback is provided through a platform) we expect their identity to be shaped differently. Based on this reasoning and previous empirical findings we hypothesize the following:

H1: Age (a), gender (b), nationality (c) and teaching mode (d) are relevant factors for academics' PI.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design

In order to analyze contingency variables (i.e., age; gender; nationality and teaching mode) relevant to academic PI we used descriptive design since it allows identifying relevant variables to a concept or decision without the need to demonstrate causality between the variables under study [37, 38]. The fact that our aim is to identify relevant contingency variables to academic identity shows the suitability of descriptive design in our study. In addition, descriptive

research can include multiple variables for study [39] which allows considering not only a single variable (as generally done in academic PI literature) but also other potential relevant contingency variables such as age or teaching mode.

3.2. Research Measures

The research instrument used to study relevant contingency variables to academic PI is a questionnaire which was developed based on a literature review. A pre-test was carried out with field experts in order to check the understanding and clarity of the questions resulting in minor changes with respect to the wording of some items. The questionnaire has two sections. The first contains information about contingency and demographic variables such as age or gender. The second section focuses on the concept of PI. In Table 2 we provide a description of each of the studied constructs and related items.

Table 2. Definition of constructs.

Variables and Items
<i>Academic Professional Identity (adapted from Brown et al. 1986) –</i>
Please assess each of the following items in a Likert Scale from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree)
PI1. I am a person who considers the university teaching profession important
PI2. I am a person who identifies with the university teaching profession
PI3. I am a person who feels strong ties with the university teaching profession
PI4. I am a person who is glad to belong to the university teaching profession
PI5. I am a person who sees myself as belonging to university teaching profession
Age
Gender
Male/Female
Nationality
Teaching Mode
Please state the teaching modes that you currently use or have used Online, Face-to-Face, Blended)

3.3. Sample and Data Collection

Data from a sample of academics from international universities was collected between July and September 2016. A total of 112 academics responded the online questionnaire which was distributed both in Spanish and English languages. These academics are lecturers or professors that are actively working in

a higher education environment developing teaching and/or research activities. The data collection procedure followed the next steps. An initial email was first sent in which the purpose of the study was explained and in which participation was asked. In addition, it is important to mention that confidentiality of the data collected was ensured. Then, after three weeks a remainder of this e-mail was sent. Table 3 shows sample descriptives.

Table 3. Sample descriptives.

Academic Nationality	n	%	University Location	n	%
American	22	19.64	America	17	15.18
European	90	80.36	Europe	90	80.36
TOTAL	112	100	Missing	5	4.46
			TOTAL	112	100
Gender	n	%	Teaching mode	n	%
Female	38	33.93	Online	21	18.75
Male	74	66.07	Face-to-Face	23	20.54
TOTAL	112	100	Blended	68	60.71
			TOTAL	112	100
Age	n	%			
Between 25 and 40	32	28.57			
Between 40 and 45	27	24.11			
Between 45 and 50	27	24.11			
More than 50	26	23.21			
TOTAL	112	100			

3.4. Validity and Reliability of Research Instrument

To check for the validity of our multiple items measures (i.e., academic PI) and define the fundamental constructs underlying our original variable we conducted an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) via principal component analysis. After having checked the sample adequacy for the EFA using Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO > 0.766)¹ test and Barlett's test of sphericity ($p < 0.001$) we obtained a one-factor solution which retains 54.35% of the construct indicator (See Table 4). As observed in Table 4, the loadings of all items exceed the 0.70 suggested threshold, except for PI1, which has a loading of 0.647. However, due to substantive reasons and the closeness to the suggested threshold we decided not to remove it. Finally, reliability was judged by using Cronbach's alpha. Results in Table 4 show that the threshold value of 0.70 for reliability is met.

Table 4. Validity and Reliability.

Construct	Items	Loadings	% of explained variance	Cronbach α
Academic PI	PI1	0.647	54.35%	0.78
	PI2	0.744		
	PI3	0.766		
	PI4	0.768		
	PI5	0.753		

Table 5. Chi-square results.

Contingency variables	Academic PI	
	Low	High
	<i>Age</i>	
Between 25 and 40	19	13
Between 40 and 45	15	12
Between 45 and 50	17	10
More than 50	15	11
Pearson Chi-Square	0.328 (0.955)	
Cramer's V	0.054 (0.955)	
	<i>Gender</i>	
Male	42	32
Female	24	14
Pearson Chi-Square	0.425 (0.328)	
Cramer's V	-0.062 (0.514)	
	<i>Nationality</i>	
American	11	11
European	55	35
Pearson Chi-Square	0.902 (0.238)	
Cramer's V	0.090 (0.342)	
	<i>Teaching mode</i>	
Online	16	5
Face-to-Face	16	7
Blended	34	34
Pearson Chi-Square	6.086 (0.048**)	
Cramer's V	0.230 (0.048**)	

4. Data Analysis and Results

Data was analyzed using IBM SPSS 21 software program and descriptive data analyses were made. Before running the final analysis, data screening was performed, missing values were treated using listwise deletion and normality for

skewness and kurtosis was checked. Gender, nationality and teaching mode are nominal variables. In the case of age and academic PI we formed groups following the next procedure. For age, we formed four balanced groups (as seen in Table 3). For the variable academic PI we formed two groups (i.e., high academic PI group and low academic PI group) following the median split procedure [40]. Next, Chi-square tests were performed in order to check for mean differences on academic PI based on age, gender, nationality and teaching mode. Results of these tests can be found in Table 5. The results suggest that from all contingency variables considered, only teaching mode and academic PI are significantly associated. These results provide support for H1d. The implications of these results will be discussed in the following section.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to take a contingency perspective and study the relevance of factors such as age, gender, nationality and teaching mode on academics' PI. Our results show that while age, gender and nationality are not associated to academics' PI, teaching mode is a significant factor to be considered. The relevance of teaching mode is in line with the literature that has analyzed the student's identity and found that the education context plays a role in the way students develop their identity [16]. Our results show that teaching mode is not only important for those individuals that are being taught but also for those that teach. Also, our results contribute to the stream of the identity literature that suggests that demographic factors are not relevant in the shaping of identity [28]. We also believe our paper has also implications for managers in the higher education context. In that sense, it is important to note that when developing strategies related to identity formation or personnel development, managers need to pay attention to the type of teaching mode of their faculty. In fact, the importance of online communities and the impact the technology has on identity has been already emphasized [41, 42].

Besides from these contributions, there are several limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, the study is cross-sectional in nature which limits the interpretability of our results. While our results show which factors might be relevant for academics' PI, they do not allow us to interpret in which way and how these factors are important. Being our aim to provide a preliminary picture of the factors to be considered in the study of academics' PI, we believe our methodology was suitable. However, future research should use case study methodology to deepen into the understanding of the role played by teaching mode in academic's identity formation. Second, PI is described as being changeable and dynamic. In fact, PI is constructed over time as a result of meaningful experiences, interactions and feedback that individuals have had during their lives [24, 43]. Future research should capture this dynamic nature by adopting a longitudinal perspective when studying academics' PI.

¹ KMO should be greater than 0.6

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