Adult learning facilitators’ professional identity: An exploratory review based on a selection of empirical studies

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an exploratory review of selected literature that focused on adult learning facilitators’ professional identity. We employed the snow-ball technique for selection and followed the review protocol by Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2004) to explore empirical studies that discussed how professional identity is defined, what constructs encompass professional identity, which methodologies are relevant when studying professional identity and what are adult learning facilitators’ common characteristics as professionals. Our review shows that the studies included have a common understanding of professional identity: it is conceived of as a dynamic construct which encompasses job motivation and future vision as well. Narrative interview with biographical perspectives was used as the main research method in all the reviewed studies. This exploratory review offers a set of perspectives which could be considered as entry points into an in-depth (empirical) study of adult learning facilitators’ identity formation in various regional and national contexts.

KEYWORDS

professional identity, constructs, adult learning facilitators

INTRODUCTION

Adult learning professionals lack a unified identity due to the diversity and heterogeneity of the field of adult learning and education (Merriam & Brockett, 2007). This impedes on recognizing adult learning professionals and leads to a fragmented focus on their professionalization (Brown, Karmel, & Ye, 2012; Egetenmeyer & Strauch, 2009; Reischmann, 2015). A coherent professional identity nevertheless can be created by inquiring into adult learning professionals’ specific roles such as facilitators and/or program developers (Milana & Skrypnyk, 2009) and their sub-fields (van Dellen & van der Kamp, 2008). Hence, reflecting on how adult learning facilitators – who teach adults and belong to the non-formal sub-field – conceptualize themselves as professionals may lead to the creation of a coherent and unified professional identity.

Professional identity matters because it offers an opportunity “to construct their [teachers’] own ideas of ‘how to be’, ‘how to act’ and ‘how to understand’ their work and their place in society” (Sachs, 2005, p. 15 as cited in Beuchamp & Thomas, 2009, p. 178). Similarly, prospective adult learning facilitators may begin constructing their professional identity during their initial education and thus get mentally and psychologically prepared to act as professionals while adhering to professional roles, attitudes, norms and values (Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, & Bransford, 2005). Moreover, as termed by Bron and Jarvis (2008), they learn ‘the language’ that is used within a specific professional community,
so they realize they belong to the professional community. This enables prospective facilitators to be more committed to their profession (Hammerness et al., 2005; Schutz, Nichols, & Schwenke, 2018). Therefore, reflecting on issues around professional identity is useful when supporting adult learning facilitators as they may recognize and understand their own work and its situatedness within the professional community. Through this reflection, their professional competences may be continuously improved, which is crucial as facilitators’ professional identity also manifests itself in teaching behaviour (Yeung, Craven, & Kaur, 2014). Exploring how adult learning facilitators understand and interpret themselves as professionals is thus a baseline for professional development (Bierema, 2011; Jögi & Gross, 2009).

PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY AND ITS CONSTRUCTS

Professional identity is a complex notion that formed/shaped and reformed/reshaped continuously through multiple contexts, relationships, and emotions (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Beijaard, Verloop, & Vermunt, 2000; Gee, 2001; Nichols, Schutz, Rodgers, & Bilica, 2016; Rodgers & Scott, 2008), yet it is individual, unified (social) and discontinuous (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Beijaard et al., 2000; Kelchtermans, 2009). This complexity challenges researchers to come up with a collectively agreed definition which is lacking from existing studies (Beijaard et al., 2004; Beijaard et al., 2000; Izadina, 2013). However, some previous studies (e.g., Beijaard et al., 2000; Berger & Van, 2018; Canrinus, Helms-Lorenz, Beijaard, Butink, & Hofman, 2011, 2012; Kelchtermans, 2009) have attempted to explore certain constructs which describe one’s professional identity. For instance, Beijaard et al. (2004) review shows that constructs of ‘job satisfaction’, ‘self-image’ and ‘self-evaluation’ have been used in existing literature on teacher professional identity. Kelchtermans (2009) defines five constructs – self-image, job motivation, self-esteem, task perception and future perspectives – that altogether express teachers’ professional identity. Meanwhile, Canrinus et al. (2011, 2012) utilizes four constructs that define teachers’ professional identity which are self-efficacy, job satisfaction, motivation and occupational commitment. A recent study (Berger & Van, 2018) uses five constructs – motivation; self-efficacy beliefs; sense of responsibility; commitment to teaching; and perception of expertise – to describe teachers’ professional identity. We understand that one’s professional identity could be clearly interpreted through such particular constructs rather than by focusing on a broader view of the self.

This exploratory review is thus conducted to synthesize findings from existing empirical studies on educators’ professional identity, in general but also to zoom on adult learning facilitators, in particular. We therefore aimed to explore the following questions through this review:

- How is adult learning facilitators’ professional identity defined? What constructs are essential for defining that professional identity?
- What are possible methodologies to explore adult learning facilitators’ professional identity?
- What are common findings that characterize adult learning facilitators as professionals?

METHODOLOGY

We used two criteria when selecting studies about adult learning facilitators’ professional identity. First, the studies were empirical because we wanted to see how issues around professional identity are contextualized and how certain findings emerge from empirical data. Second, we focused on articles that used the exact term of ‘adult educator’; in our study, we use the term adult learning facilitator as a synonym.

To find existing studies which matched our criteria, we used a snow-ball technique which denotes finding related studies from the reference list of the reviewed research (Babbie, 1975/2009; Lecy & Beatty, 2012; Wohlin, 2014). In this paper, we included findings from six empirical studies which matched our initial criteria. We used Beijaard et al. (2004) methodology and analysed the papers based on their (1) purpose, (2) definition of professional identity, (3) methodology, and (4) major findings.

FINDINGS

We found that identifying professional identity as a career trajectory was a common focus in these studies, meaning that these researchers claimed that professional identity was very much embedded in adult learning facilitators’ notions of their career paths (Table 1). In particular, these reflected a conceptualization that encompasses perspectives on the past, present and future trajectories in terms of career advancement and professional development.

Purpose of the studies

These studies aimed at describing how adult learning facilitators’ professionalism evolves through time, particularly by using a critical lens to observe the past, the present, and to look into the future.

Definition of professional identity

Authors of these studies did not provide an explicit definition of professional identity, rather they focused on the professionalization paths of adult learning facilitators. Nevertheless, the studies implicitly defined adult learning facilitators’ professional identity as a career trajectory that evolves through time. Two studies (Brown et al., 2012; Andersson et al., 2012) defined professional identity by focusing on facilitators’ past, that is, by looking at their entry
Major findings

There were two paths for becoming adult learning facilitators, as Brown et al. (2012) found. The first path was described as adult learning facilitators gradually choosing the profession because some tasks and responsibilities of their previous jobs were related to educating adults (Brown et al., 2012). The researchers termed this group of adult learning facilitators as those with ‘organic’ entries into the field (Brown et al., 2012). The second path was determined as adult learning facilitators suddenly choosing the profession without a particular prior experience in educating adults (Brown et al., 2012). Authors described this group as facilitators with ‘disjunctured entries’ (Brown et al., 2012). The findings indicate that becoming adult learning facilitators was not a first choice as all interviewees had prior experience in other fields. In fact, researchers critiqued Singaporean government-led professionalization because of its failure to address those different entries into the profession (Brown et al., 2012). This is important since different entry points contribute to creating a variety of needs for professional development, which then impacts how they relate to their work in the present. Hence, common challenges that characterize ‘the present’ are the following: (1) insecure job and income; (2) solitary journey without mentors and colleagues; (3) difficulty to gain reputation because of high expectations from clients; and (4) heavy workload and doubt about

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Methodology

The studies employed qualitative research methodology, in particular narrative interviews within biographical perspectives. When looking at facilitators’ past and future orientations, as well as taking learning as a process, using the biographical perspectives seemed the most suitable one. Maier-Gutheil and Hof’s (2011) study was longitudinal, two facilitators were interviewed with the time range of 20 and 24 years. The other two studies encompassed interviews with 20 and 29 prospective and in-service adult learning facilitators.
government-led professionalization (Brown et al., 2012). Lastly, within the future aspect of adult learning facilitators’ career trajectories, researchers found that two tendencies ‘growing and diversifying’ and ‘causality’ were commonly observed among adult learning facilitators, but no interest in ‘moving up managerial positions’ was found in their current context (Brown et al., 2012). The tendency described as ‘growing and diversifying’ in future orientation indicated that they either move to different settings or to different fields, for example moving to freelance settings or moving to the consultancy field (Brown et al., 2012). ‘Causality’ in this context meant working on an as-and-when-required basis and paid by the hour (Brown et al., 2012).

Andersson and his colleagues identified two common paths for becoming adult learning facilitators which were described either as a desired new career or as a ‘plan B’ (Andersson et al., 2012). According to them, prospective adult learning facilitators’ choice of the profession as ‘Plan B’ was a result of triggering events such as illness or demands from the labour market. Further, they identified two important manners facilitators entered the field: acting as adult learning facilitators as soon as launching a career in the profession; and entering the professional community after developing competences through professional programs (Andersson et al., 2012). These different ‘entries’ shaped the creation of a professional identity, as found. In particular, those who learned about adult education on the go, through their everyday practices oriented themselves toward more local contexts and made professional decisions based on own experience rather than relying on common knowledge and theories. Those who studied in specific university programs were however more influenced by their university teachers’ pedagogical choices of teaching adults and their translation of adult teaching theories into practical actions (Andersson et al., 2012).

Maier-Gutheil and Hof’s (2011) study did not reveal explicit paths for becoming professionals but focused on who they are now as professionals, which implicitly indicated paths for becoming adult learning professionals. They claim that there are two overarching identities as adult learning facilitators: learners who are in the process of ongoing development and learners who are in the biographical process of personal fulfilment (Maier-Gutheil & Hof, 2011). An adult learning facilitator who was interviewed at the age of 38 and then when he turned 62 years old reflected upon himself as a professional who had been learning throughout the years, whereas the other facilitator who was interviewed at the age of 40 and 60 described himself as a professional who is pursuing his personal fulfilment which leads him to accomplish his social commitment (Maier-Gutheil & Hof, 2011). The dynamic of shaping and reshaping one’s professional identity through time was also apparent in this study. Particularly, the first interviewer initially described himself as a teacher who is an expert in his field, whereas 24 years later he defined himself as a continuous learner in order to adapt to new tasks (Maier-Gutheil & Hof, 2011). For the other facilitator, his identity reshaped from a doctoral student who was writing his doctoral dissertation to a professional whose career became central in his life (Maier-Gutheil & Hof, 2011). This research emphasized that if facilitators have their own interests to learn, they can acquire professional knowledge and skills through non-formal and informal ways (Maier-Gutheil & Hof, 2011). In this process, ‘self-observation’ is key to improve professional competences, however, it seems to be absent from professional programs, as claimed by Maier-Gutheil and Hof (2011).

Other studies

The complexity of the phenomenon as well as the multiple ways to exploring it are reflected in a number of other studies we reviewed (Table 2).

Purpose of the studies

These studies aimed at describing adult learning facilitators’ professional identities. The study of Milana and Larson (2010) focused on the issues of how prospective adult educators define their profession; how they distinguish adult teaching from child teaching; what drives them to choose to become adult educators; how they see their future in their vocational contexts; and what types of identities are common among prospective adult educators. While the study of Rushbrook, Karmel, and Bound (2014) concentrated on the issues of becoming and being freelance adult learning facilitators, Jögi and Karu (2017) focused on the impact of adult learning facilitators’ life and professional experiences on their professional identity.

Definition of professional identity

Professional identity was conceived of as a way of achieving professionalism (Milana & Larson, 2010). Meanwhile, Rushbrook et al. (2014) used the terms of ‘becoming’ and ‘being’ to define professional identity. Hence, ‘becoming’ is an identity building process and the evolving identity develops into ‘being’ for an adult learning facilitator (Rushbrook et al., 2014). Yet, the study of Jögi and Karu (2017) defined professional identity as collective and meaningful experiences that adult learning facilitators shared as professionals together. Among the studies, only Milana and Larson (2010) used particular constructs that represent one’s professional identity. They used the constructs of ‘self-image’, ‘job motivation’ and ‘future vision’ to explore prospective adult learning facilitators’ professional identity (Milana & Larson, 2010). Under the ‘self-image’ construct, the researchers focused on how facilitators define their profession and how they distinguish it from child teaching. They also found that facilitators’ motives for becoming adult learning facilitators were revealed by the construct of ‘job motivation’ (Milana & Larson, 2010). Lastly, researchers used the construct of ‘future vision’ to look at facilitators’ future plan in terms of their professional career (Milana & Larson, 2010).

Methodology

These studies too used qualitative research traditions, that is, narrative interviews within biographical perspectives. Unlike
Major findings

The study of Milana and Larson (2010) has shown that prospective adult educators tend to define an adult educator as 1) a person who possesses knowledge of human nature which covers the pedagogical, sociological, and psychological understanding of others, i.e., adult learners; 2) a person who is open, engaged and empathic, which indicates personal competences of adult educators; and 3) a person who uses different learning styles to keep adult learners motivated and engaged in learning. Regarding the differentiation between adult and child teaching, the prospective adult educators are likely to highlight teaching methods considered for specific targets, i.e., adults, voluntary participation of adults in education and high level of adult responsibility for the learning process (Milana & Larson, 2010). Also, findings revealed that both internal and external factors influenced their choice of becoming adult educators (Milana & Larson, 2010). Internal factors indicated the prospective adult educators’ own decision to become adult educators in order to 1) obtain recognition of pedagogical knowledge and 2) make use of vocational knowledge and experience. Whereas external factors indicate that employers’ suggestion and labour market changes were the drivers to choose the program to become adult educators (Milana & Larson, 2010). Moreover, two common scenarios were found regarding future selves in the vocational context. The first scenario showed that prospective adult learning facilitators expected to use the knowledge acquired through the program to improve their future working conditions such as taking up new roles or positions (Milana & Larson, 2010). Yet, the second scenario was that they tend to follow their professional career as adult learning facilitators, but referred to working in private sectors or becoming self-employed rather than working at public institutions (Milana & Larson, 2010). Lastly, the research has found a shared identity among prospective adult educators that is grounded in a few core values such respect, recognition and appreciation of other human beings (Milana & Larson, 2010). Meanwhile, Rushbrook et al. (2014) claimed that being a freelance adult educator in Singapore means that one needs to have skills such as creating strong networks, positioning oneself into those networks; planning, including financial planning, and
coping with continuous shifts. Here, we could clearly see that one’s professional identity is described in close connection with one’s competences that are required for professional tasks and activities in a particular context. Yet, the study of Jögi and Karu (2017) found that collective experiences shared by Estonian adult learning facilitators were grounded in common values such as trustfulness; freedom, joint actions; equality; understanding human beings as learners; a belief that in the centre of education is the human being; an understanding of adult learning facilitators as cultural agents and supporters of adult learning (Jögi & Karu, 2017, p. 17). These common values shared by adult learning facilitators seem to extend the values revealed by Milana and Larson (2010). The meaningful experiences that shape one’s professional identity were determined by extraordinary events in professional lives, such as meeting their professional role models (Jögi & Karu, 2017). Researchers concluded that the creation of adult learning facilitators’ professional identity is a continuous process, which covers both self and social development, through whole life experiences (Jögi & Karu, 2017).

**DISCUSSION**

**Professional identity is a dynamic construct**

Previous studies focusing on teacher professional identity have collectively described professional identity as a dynamic construct and not as a static one (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijaard et al., 2004; Davey, 2013; Gee, 2001; Jögi & Karu, 2017; Rodgers & Scott, 2008; Vühäasantanen, 2015). In other words, it is an ongoing process which lasts through different contexts and relationships (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijaard et al., 2004; Gee, 2001; Nichols et al., 2016).

Some studies (Andersson et al., 2012; Brown et al., 2012; Milana & Larson, 2010) define the notion of professional identity as professionalism that evolves through time, incorporating the past, present and future. This is why those studies focus on facilitators’ career trajectories to understand how one’s professionalism changes over time. Further, some studies determine professional identity as learning and/or experiences that occurred through one’s professional life (Jögi & Karu, 2017; Maier-Gutheil & Hof, 2011). However, Rushbrook et al. (2014) study seems to be different from these studies. They used the notion of ‘being’ as built identity against the notion of ‘becoming’ as an identity building process. As Beijaard et al. (2004, p. 122) argue, within the ongoing process of becoming, there should be an answer to the question of ‘Who am I at this moment?’ as identity. This is similar to Kelchtermans’ (2009) elaboration on one’s identity as a product at a certain point in the time. Also, Akkerman and Meijer (2011) call this discontinuity of identity within the continuity of identity. Thus, the notion of ‘being’ used by Rushbrook et al. (2014) may indicate a product and/or a discontinuity within one’s continuously shaping and reshaping identity.

**Common Constructs of Professional Identity**

‘Job motivation’ has been a common construct that is used to describe adult learning facilitators’ professional identity. It is an important construct because it indicates the reasons for becoming and also for maintaining work as facilitators (Kelchtermans 2009; 2018). If identity is a told story (e.g., Rodgers & Scott, 2008), it is rooted in the past and happening in the present; and the motivations to become and to stay in the field are strongly tied to professional identity. Therefore, Richardson and Watt (2018) conclude that teachers’ motivation is closely linked to teacher’s perception of their profession and of themselves as professionals. Another construct which was used in the studies is ‘future vision’. This is indeed an inevitable construct that reflects facilitators’ perspective to the future and a consideration of their professional contexts, hence professional identity is conceived of as an ongoing (continuous) process. In Beijaard et al. (2004) view, it could constitute the answer to the question of ‘Who I want to become?’. Both constructs, ‘job motivation’ and ‘future vision’ are included in Kelchtermans (2009; 2018) conceptualization of constructs for teachers’ professional identity. Moreover, ‘job motivation’ as a construct has been also validated in the studies of Canrinus et al. (2011, 2012) and Berger and Van (2018).

**Common Characteristics of Adult Learning Facilitators**

Findings suggest that there are common characteristics shared by adult learning facilitators as professionals. **First**, to become an adult learning facilitator is driven by both external and internal motives. Studies (Andersson et al., 2012; Milana & Larson, 2010) have found that both internal and external motives play a role in choosing the profession. External motives were those reasons that mainly related to labour market changes, while internal motives were like possessing useful knowledge and skills. It has been a long-standing belief that internal motives have a greater impact on individual’s curiosity and interest to do something compared to external motives (Fülöp, 2020). However, we do not discriminate one type of motives against the other type because external motives enable the individual to develop curiosity and interest to do something, therefore both types of motives play a role for the individual’s learning and doing (Fülöp, 2020). **Second**, different ways of entering the profession of adult learning facilitators were identified and described, mainly relating to having or lacking prior adult teaching experiences (Brown et al., 2012) or developing skills on the job or having prior formal knowledge and competences (Andersson et al., 2012). These different entries result also from different entry requirements for adult learning facilitators in the specific national contexts. For instance, the flexibility, granted in Sweden and Denmark, of being an adult learning facilitator without a professional preparation is not common in Singapore. Further, the different career entries may pose challenges to the professionalization of adult learning facilitators, therefore professional development programs should accommodate these.
Third, there could be a few core values shared by adult learning facilitators. Milana and Larson (2010) found that respect, recognition and appreciation of human beings were the core values among prospective adults learners in Denmark. Similarly, the study of Jogi and Karu (2017) showed that the conception of human beings as learners and as them being the centre of education are crucial values. Nevertheless, future research should focus on an in-depth analysis of core values of this profession in different cultural and national contexts.

The Narrative Interview within Biographical Perspectives

All studies we analysed employed the narrative interview within biographical perspectives as the research method. People’s actual self-perception is always influenced by their past as well as their future expectations (Kelchtermans, 2009), thus the biographical perspective enables one to explore how they interpret their present, which is the result of past and has implications for the future. Within the biographical perspective, narrative interview is a suitable way to explore how the present is defined by the past and future. In fact, Kelchtermans (2009) has highlighted that the narrative interview within biographical perspective is the best possible method to explore one’s professional identity. Horsdal (2002) too highlights that the narrative interview, as a way for having access to someone’s past, present and future intentions, could be a useful method to explore a person’s identity. Moreover, Bron and Jarvis (2008) emphasize that the biographical perspective is an important tool that helps to understand how people become professionals and how their professionalism changes over time. We see that these studies on adult learning facilitators’ professional identity support these claims.

CONCLUSION

We have looked at a selection of empirical studies on adult learning facilitators’ professional identity and presented common characteristics shared by facilitators. Methodologically, most of the existing studies seem to utilize a dynamic notion of professional, meaning that researchers looked at how adult learning facilitators’ professionalism changed through times and contexts. The empirical studies employed a qualitative approach with biographical perspectives that aimed at understanding facilitators’ past and present experiences and future visions. Hence, some of these studies utilized ‘job motivation’ and ‘future vision’ constructs to interpret professional identity of adult learning facilitators. In terms of the findings, these studies revealed two different entries of adult learning facilitators into the field, which may require different approaches to their professional development. These different entries may pose a challenge to the shaping of a collectively relatable identity among facilitators. However, what we clearly see from these studies is that there are shared values within this community which may serve as an entry point in reflecting on issues around the various conceptualizations of adult learning facilitators’ professional identity.

The findings of our exploratory review could inform and guide us when further exploring professional identity of adult learning facilitators. In addition, such analysis should be extended to also include Central Asia as a regional focus where adult learning and education are crucial for societal and economic reasons.

Conflict of interest: Helga Dorner, editor-in-chief is also second author. Peer review has been handled without her involvement, hence, she does not have a conflict with the review process.

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