Factors Influencing Professional Identity Development and Negotiation of Public Librarians in Aotearoa New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

Professional and social change has called into question the professional identity of the librarian. Professional identity is the product of the impact the organizational and/or professional life has had on one's understanding of self within its context (Whyte, 1956/2002), influencing discourse and behaviour (Sundin & Hedman, 2009). The influence of professional identity on perception and behaviour underscores the importance of the co-constructed relationship between librarian and those served. Thus, professional identity is key in discussions concerning the librarian in a 21st century society and beyond. This research explores the professional identity of public librarians in New Zealand.

This research adopted a mixed methods approach. From the literature review, a model was developed detailing this identity development process (Pierson et al., 2019). In Phase 1, a questionnaire was designed operationalizing elements of the conceptual model and purposeful selection of interview participants based on responses to open-ended questions. In Phase 2, semi-strcutured interviews were conducted with 40 participants, allowing participants to elaborate on responses and reflect on their professional identities.

Results uncovered a novel methodological approach combining elicitation and analysis of a metaphorical approach and the critical incident technique (Pierson et al., 2020). Critical incidents initiate an identity negotiation process, first by provoking an affective response, leading to discovery of an aspect of the identity and/or a growth moment, prompting individualised identity development. The outcome either affirms or undermines identity perception. This process may be repeated over time for the same incident. Differences of perceived separation between pre-existing and professional identities are also outlined. Five relational states of librarian professional identity are described. Finally, respondents often detailed identity perceptions through three moderators: meaning ascribed to profession; manifest profession, e.g., association bodies; and organisational/institutional context. These moderators play a key role in the wider librarian professional identity negotiation process, in which the critical incident negotiation process is embedded. Finally, this research offers nine theoretical propositions of librarian professional identity, its negotiations, and relational states.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS
research methods; public libraries; sociology of information

AUTHOR KEYWORDS
professional identity; public librarians; critical incidents; identity negotiations; LIS theory