Professionalizing corporate professions: professionalization as identity project

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Abstract

Professional bodies have traditionally played a core role in professionalization, setting the ideals for professional identity, knowledge, and practice. However, the emergence of corporate professions has problematized the role of the professional body in contemporary professionalization. This article examines the role of the professional body and its ability to resonate with practitioners' professional identity construction through empirical analysis of public relations. The article introduces the concept of professionalization as identity project as another means by which to understand attempts at social closure in emergent corporate professions. For professionalization as identity project to be fully realized, the research suggests the blending of traditional discourses of professionalism with emergent discourses of entrepreneurialism is required. Consequently, the study highlights that corporate professionalization as identity project reflects the contemporary tensions and contradictions between the lived reality and orthodox ideology of 'being a professional'.

Introduction

> Let me only indicate that in my own studies I passed from the false question 'Is this occupation a profession' to the more fundamental one, 'What are the circumstances in which the people in an occupation attempt to turn it into a profession, and themselves into professional people?' and 'What are the steps by which they attempt to bring about identification with their valued model?' (Hughes, 1958: 45)

Traditionally, the professional body has played a central role in the creation and maintenance of a profession, providing central elements such as social closure, credentialism, a code of conduct and a professional identity (Abbott, 1988; Freidson, 2001; Johnson, 1972). Corporate professions (Ackroyd, 2016), more closely aligned to the market and representing corporate services such as management consultancy, information management, and advertising challenge this status of the professional body. Instead, these emergent professions emphasize the role of the firm/corporation in professionalization (Muzio et al. 2011a) as a means by which to attempt social closure and the use of image, rhetoric, and symbolism (Kipping, 2011) that has become paramount in this context. So far, this research has focused largely on management consulting and at the analytical level of the institution or organization. This article argues there is scope to develop a

more nuanced account of the professionalization of emergent corporate professions by encompassing other occupations and a more micro level of analysis. In turn, the article focuses on the professionalization of UK public relations (PR), examining the role of the professional body in the emergence of this corporate profession and whether the body's professional construct is a resource in practitioners' identity construction.

British society has witnessed a rise in the power and influence of PR. In line with this growth and power is a current attempt by PR to engage in its own 'professionalization project' (Larson, 1977), emulating the chartered status of the likes of accountants and surveyors. However, PR has rarely been the focus of management studies (Linstead, 2016). As Pieczka and L'Etang (2001) highlight, whilst research into PR and its status as a profession has begun to be developed (e.g. L'Etang, 2004; Pieczka, 2002), the majority of the research has focused on the US and has been dominated by the functionalist paradigm and applied research (L'Etang, 2008; Pieczka, 1996).

This study makes three central contributions to the study of corporate professionalization. Firstly, it presents corporate professionalization as an identity project; an alternative pathway to achieve social closure over expert work compared to those conventionally pursued by established professional groups. Here, professionalization is pursued via the professional body's resonance with practitioners' professional identity construction in order to generate a critical mass of membership and assert some control over the occupation. Secondly, in advancing a more nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics between the professional body and practitioner, the article suggests an innovative

reconfiguration of discourses of professionalism for professionalization as identity project to be fully realized. Finally, in focusing on the various ways in which corporate professionalization is more dependent on practitioners' identity construction, the research contributes a deeper appreciation of the tensions and contradictions between the lived reality of professionalism and its traditional orthodoxy as an ideology.

The article is organized into four main sections. The first, drawing on the sociology of professions and identities literature, considers the research conducted on emergent corporate professions and their attempts at professionalization. The second provides the detail of the study, outlining the data generated and its analysis. A findings section begins by providing the wider context of the development of the UK PR profession and then outlines the detail of how the professional body for PR constructs 'the PR professional' and the salience of this subject position for PR practitioners' identity construction. Finally, the discussion section considers the implications of these findings in relation to the literature on emergent corporate professions.

Professionalizing emergent professions

Recent research in the sociology of professions indicates the development of a more heterogeneous and fluid institutional landscape (Sciulli, 2005; Torstendahl, 2005). A complex combination of political and economic changes, such as pro-market government policies and increasing competition between expert occupations, has weakened professions' capacity for self-government while simultaneously remaining independent of state and market (Freidson, 2001: 220).

As a result, the relatively high level of occupational closure and control exercised by the 'liberal/collegiate' professions, such as law, medicine and accountancy has been substantially diluted (Ackroyd, 2016; Reed, 1996). Other expert occupations, in areas such as teaching, engineering and social work, have been forced to adopt weaker forms of professionalization dependent on their 'organizational resources' rather than legally supported and socially legitimated claims to high level specialist expertise (Macdonald, 2006; Savage and Williams, 2008).

Emergent expert occupations, such as management consultancy, information management, advertising and public relations, which are more firmly embedded in the market, have been recently termed as 'corporate professions' (Ackroyd, 2016). These corporate professions have a high status, pay well, and have an increasingly important social role but 'key features of traditional professionalism are largely absent' (Ackroyd, 2016: 26) where a body of knowledge hasn't been formalized and barriers to enter the occupation are low. As these professions tend to be situated in more corporate services, they are institutionally more aligned to the organization rather than the professional body. As such, they are typified by organizational bureaucratization, hierarchy, and performance measurement. Training standards and assessment, focusing on technical expertise and commercial objectives, are conducted by the organization, as is socialization into a professional identity and norms (Kirkpatrick and Noordegraaf, 2015).

These corporate professions have, in turn, taken on a more 'corporate' form of professionalization (Kipping et al. 2006; Kipping and Kirkpatrick, 2013; Muzio et al. 2011a) dependent on servicing firm-led demands and needs. Its manifestation has been explored in management consulting where corporate professionalization

prioritizes the firm/corporation in attempts at social closure (Kipping et al. 2006; Muzio et al. 2011a) i.e., the process to gain closure in the labour market and enhance material rewards and status for an occupation (Parkin, 1979). Consequently, professionalization has followed the central tenets of closure around a range of mechanisms: knowledge claims, where knowledge has been re-oriented around skills and experience 'on the job'; membership at the level of the corporation; legitimization claims that foreground the benefit of professional membership to the client; and international jurisdiction for the professional body. In all these facets of professionalization, the firm/corporation is dominant in its intervention rather than the professional body. The corporation co-produces the professional body's knowledge claims through corporate membership, while the firm also has a dominant voice within the professional body's governance. In addition, the professional body is only legitimized for its benefit to the corporation's stakeholders and the international jurisdiction of the professional body reflects that of the corporation (Muzio et al. 2011a).

This corporate professionalization has resulted in limited social closure but primarily entails the use of professionalism as a resource and branding strategy (Ashcraft et al. 2012) rather than an institutional process by which to govern an occupational domain. In the context of management consulting (e.g. Alvesson and Robertson, 2006; Gross and Keiser, 2006), this is where consultancies mimic traditional professions such as law in image, rhetoric, and symbolism (Kipping, 2011), and where both consultants' organizational and individual reputations convince clients of their expertise (Harvey et al. 2016). This 'professionalism as symbolic resource' can be operationalized through corporations and professional bodies (Gorman and Sandefur, 2011; Hodgson and Paton, 2016), through their

professional development programmes (Evans, 2008; Gilmore and Anderson, 2011; Gold et al. 2007) and links to Higher Education qualifications (Gilmore and Williams, 2007)

Therefore, research on corporate professionalization has highlighted a paradox in that this type of corporate profession emerges from the market to a quasi-professional position only to find the market is the most significant constraint on it institutionalizing its professional status (Leicht and Lyman, 2006; McKenna, 2006). The result is a 'hollowing out' (Muzio and Kirkpatrick, 2011) of the corporate profession where professionalization is merely symbolic or in defense of the corporation.

This research has been significant in beginning to understand how corporate professions attempt to professionalize whilst also providing some of the answers as to why they do not achieve a 'closed' professional status. However, so far, the majority of the research in this area has been on management consulting. Nevertheless, this constitutes only one example of the corporate professions. Consequently, a partial view of professionalization within this emergent form of profession has so far been provided. This may be due to the fact that these occupations are often dismissed as not constituting professions (Ackroyd, 2016). Nevertheless, researching other occupations that come under the categorization of 'corporate', such as PR, may start to develop a more nuanced account of this category of profession. This is in line with calls for future research in this domain from others (e.g. Muzio et al. 2011b; Muzio and Kirkpatrick, 2011). Therefore, within a different corporate profession such as PR, is corporate professionalization evident in its professionalization project?

Furthermore, research into the professionalization of the corporate profession has so far focused its analysis on the institution or organization but less so on the individual. This may be indicative of the mainstream theoretical tradition within the sociology of professions, which has been dominated by more structurally focused research (see Ackroyd, 2016; Saks, 2016). The level of analysis has tended to remain at the macro (but increasingly meso) level because professions usually controlled individual entry. Therefore, individuals' accounts of professionalization were not a central concern, but instead the power play between institutions and organizations. However, this emergent form of corporate profession does not have that structural feature of effective social closure, as evidenced by current research (McKenna, 2006). Arguably, due to the fluidity, heterogeneity and changes in notions of 'profession', we need to consider professions' "specific, situated meanings" (Pritchard and Symon, 2011: 437). This means that analysis at the meso and micro levels of professionalization could provide a more informed and sensitive understanding of this emergent form of corporate profession, as well as its similarities and differences with other professionalizing strategies.

Research on professional identities, range across the functionalist (e.g. Chreim et al. 2007; Goodrick and Reay, 2010); interpretivist (e.g. Harris, 2002; Holmes, 2005); and post-structuralist (e.g. Brocklehurst et al. 2009; Hodgson, 2005; Mueller et al. 2011) perspectives. These studies focus on socialization into professional identities, maintenance of professional identities, and/or the use of professional identities to cope with other discourses and subject positions (both from within and outside the organizational context). Fewer studies have examined how the professionalization project potentially influences professional identity

construction. This is due to the sociology of professions favouring analysis of the professional domain according to institutions and social structures. Consequently, there is scope to explore what being a 'professional' means and the role an attempt at a professionalization project can play in that process.

Muzio and Kirkpatrick (2011) and Ackroyd (2016) demonstrate that there are still important questions to be answered as to why the professionalizing mechanisms and techniques of corporate professions still fail to achieve substantial and sustainable occupational closure. Focusing on the micro level and identification with the professional body's construct of the professional may help to elucidate more insightful answers in this regard. Consequently, this research also asks what is the relationship between the professional body and individual practitioner in a corporate profession such as PR? In particular, does the professional body's construct of the professional resonate with practitioners' understandings of themselves as professionals?

Researching professionalization and identification in PR

This study encompasses the central research design of 'asking questions', 'hanging out' and 'reading texts' (Dingwall, 1997) in order to engage with a range of audiences. It draws on empirical data generated from interview and observation data, and analysis of secondary documentation. Interviews were conducted with both senior personnel from the CIPR (The Chartered Institute of Public Relations) (total nine interviews) and a range of frontline practitioners in terms of seniority, gender, and level of interaction with the CIPR (total 30 interviews) from both in-house (seven interviews) and consultant (Taff PR – 10 interviews, Wilkin PR – 13

interviews) backgrounds.[i] Members of the CIPR all played a senior role in the organization and were all PR practitioners from a range of backgrounds including, consultancy, in-house and freelance. The PR consultants comprised two consultancies, one based in central London (Wilkin PR) belonging to a large international conglomerate of media companies, the other based in Wales (Taff PR). Both these consultancies were generalists in terms of the sectors they operate in, but the two differed in involvement with the CIPR with Taff PR having consultants as members and Wilkin PR not having any CIPR members, which allowed for some comparison across the consultancy cohort. The in-house practitioners were all very senior in their organizations but the sectors they operated in varied greatly, ranging from government to healthcare, construction to further education. However, what connected them all was that they had been in the first successful cohort of the Chartered Practitioner assessment conducted by the CIPR in 2009. Most of the interviews took place at a time, date, and location convenient to the interviewee (often their place of work). Interviews ranged in length from 45 minutes to two hours but lasted on average just over an hour. Every interview was recorded on a digital voice recorder and then fully transcribed in order to analyze the data.

The interview guide covered three main areas. The first focused discussion around the PR role, including how the interviewee got into PR, reaction to their career choice, and assessment of the skills for the job. The second looked at the lived experience of a life in PR and the final element was conversation concerning the professionalism of PR and the work of its professional bodies.

Within this study, the interview is considered as a site for stimulating identity work where questioning participants about their working lives is a catalyst for reflexive thought (Alvesson, 2003). In this context, the interview is a specific form of social interaction where both interviewer and interviewee draw on discourses to construct and present certain identities, both in the act of questioning and in response to questioning (Cassell, 2005; Potter, 2004). Consequently, both the interview and the texts generated from that interaction are co-constructed by the researcher and researched and constitute living social texts (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000; Ellis and Ybema, 2010).

Reservations have been raised as to whether interviews alone are sufficient in understanding identity construction processes (Alvesson et al. 2008) with calls for it to be accompanied by wider contextual activity and information. In this research, a total of three events were observed. All three events were coordinated by the CIPR and brought front-line practitioners and CIPR personnel together. The first was a CPD event on the topic of writing award entries for a CIPR awards scheme. The second was the national AGM, and the final event was a Wales focus group on the future of PR and policy for the CIPR.[ii] The observation of each event centred on key elements including: the use of images, artefacts, space, clothing, behaviour and talk within that event. Two forms of CIPR documentation also formed part of the analysis, namely the CIPR annual report that accompanied the national AGM and the CIPR website as the most publicly available portal into the organization.

The analysis of all the data collected was infused with an overarching theoretical drive to consider the on-going construction and organization of social reality through discourse (Brown and Lewis, 2011). Discourse encompasses forms of

social interaction such as practices and behaviour as well as artefacts, texts and visuals. Power/knowledge operates through discourse informing how people both understand themselves and operate in the social world (Alvesson and Deetz, 1996; Martin, 2001). As a form of 'disciplinary power' (Foucault, 1977), discourses retain power over individuals in defining the ways in which they can see themselves, although there is negotiation between competing discourses, which allows for a degree of individual agency (Brown and Lewis, 2011). As a result, discourse analysis of this nature incorporates a structured and systematic study of collections of inter-related texts or 'bodies of texts' (Phillips and Hardy, 2002).

Analysis of interview transcripts derived from this research initially focused on thematic coding. This involved coding transcripts by attaching keywords and/or themes to different segments in order to structure the 'raw data' (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; Kvale and Brinkman, 2009). This form of coding highlighted a basic fissure between the CIPR and practitioners where different codes emerged amongst data from the CIPR (e.g. 'status', 'credentials', 'commitment') compared to that from practitioners (e.g. 'PR practice', 'relationships'). This reduction is then followed by 'data complication' (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996) where similarities, paradoxes, and patterns are deciphered and related to theoretical concepts. This meant taking these initial codes and looking at each of them in more detail, at times generating further codes and abandoning other codes until a clear picture of how these two different stakeholders constructed 'the professional' developed.

The interview talk, observation materials and secondary data are interwoven in the following account of both the CIPR's and practitioners' construction of the professional. In line with the analysis, the interviews are a fundamental element of

the findings and the observations and analysis of secondary data bolster the interpretation of that interview material. As such, extracts of talk are cited from the range of practitioners and CIPR personnel interviewed supported by elements from the observations and secondary data where appropriate. In presenting this analysis I am aware that my research account is a 'rhetorical product' (Watson, 2000) where my own discursive practices are implicated (Ybema et al. 2009), as well as those of academic writing convention (Rhodes and Brown, 2005) and as such, the analysis is my construction of my participants' constructions of their selves at a particular space and time (Thomas and Linstead, 2002). Equally, as a former PR practitioner turned researcher, the dynamic between my former experiences and professional identities are interweaved through the construction of the study and this account of the research.

Professionalizing Public Relations in the UK

Like other forms of knowledge work (Alvesson, 2004), PR is often ambiguous and intangible in definition. The CIPR focuses on PR as an occupation that services reputation:

> ...with the aim of earning understanding and support and influencing opinion and behaviour. It is the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organization and its publics. (CIPR, 2017).

Therefore, PR practitioners are "symbolic analysts", who "solve, identify and broker problems by manipulating symbols" (Reich, 1993: 178). The UK PR

profession is recognized as being second in size to the USA (Gregory, 2011: 90). The industry employees 83,000 people and is estimated to be worth £12.9bn (PR Census, 2016: 9). Since the 1960s, PR has continued to grow as public perception and trust has become more important to organizations and elites (Cutlip, 1994; Davis, 2000; Evans, 2008). For instance, in 2015 the total value of corporate reputation for all UK-listed companies topped £1.7 trillion (Bruce, 2016).

PR's growing influence and power is also evident in the number of CEOs and elites who have a PR background such as, CEO of publisher Pearson, John Fallon, Director General of the Institute of Directors, Simon Walker and notably the UK's former Prime Minister, David Cameron. Likewise, in the public sector PR has continued to thrive despite recession. For example, the UK government announced plans to increase spend on communications for 2015 by 22 per cent to £289m equal to £4.50 per person in the UK (*PR Week*, 2014). Its future looks prosperous with the Institute for Public Policy Research ranking PR fourth in the list of top occupations for 2022 (Waddington, 2014).

The history of the development of PR's professional body bears some similarities to the establishment of the CIPD (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development) as a chartered body and the practices it engages in (e.g. Pritchard and Symon, 2011; Stewart and Sambrook, 2012; Watson, 2003). For instance, both bodies gained chartered status within a few years of one another (CIPD in 2000 and CIPR in 2005). The CIPD was approved to bestow individual chartered status for members in 2002 (CIPD, 2017), which the CIPR also achieved in 2008 (CIPR, 2008). Both institutions provide a CPD (Continuous Professional Development) programme, and codes of conduct, as well as other member benefits such as

training, resources, and member-only reports and communications. Additionally, both operate from a London headquarters supported by local branches (CIPD) or groups (CIPR) that run their own events and networking opportunities.

In the UK, the Institute of Public Relations (IPR) was formally established in 1948. From the beginning, PR's professionalization has centred on the traditional ideals of, "…professional parity with solicitors, doctors and accountants, who are recognized by the public for their robust qualifications and codes of practice." (Tobin, 2004: 56). However, the IPR had struggled to establish a system of entry to the Institute according to qualifications (L'Etang, 2004) and had to engage in prolonged negotiations over this matter when applying for chartered status with the Privy Council.

In 2003, the Department for Trade and Industry (DTI) and the IPR published a report into the PR industry to support the IPR's bid for chartered status. The research identified PR's growing importance to management and the need for more training and development across a broad range of capabilities (DTI/IPR, 2003). The key drivers behind the move to chartered status were to highlight the public interest facet of PR, thereby improving the image of PR practice, whilst also improving education and training within the occupation. The IPR was finally awarded the Royal Charter in 2005, becoming the CIPR.

The CIPR currently has over 10,000 members (CIPR Integrated Report, 2016) and membership figures have more than doubled in the last 10 years (CIPR, 2014). Two thirds of CIPR members are based outside London with 45% of members working in PR consultancy and 55% working in-house (CIPR, 2014). The professional body claims that: "By the size of turnover and number of individually

registered members, we are the leading representative body for the PR profession and industry in Europe" (CIPR, 2017). It accredits university diplomas and degrees and provides its own training and networking programme; as well as several awards schemes for recognition of best practice. There are currently 168 Chartered Practitioners (CIPR, 2017). Qualification from, or membership to, the CIPR is not needed in order to get a job in PR and currently 2,000 of the 10,000 membership engage in CPD (Waddington, 2017).

The CIPR's professional

This initial section focuses on how the CIPR constructs the PR profession and PR professional. This section is drawn from interviews with senior figures of the CIPR. All these interviewees served on the main governing body for the professional body with the majority taking positions within the organization on a voluntary basis. Interviewees were either senior in-house practitioners (Fiona, Rachel, Selena), or freelance consultants (Daniel, Stacey, Penny), or managing directors of a consultancy (Justin). The findings highlight the central tenets of the professional according to the professional body, some of which are evocative of the classic professional project (Larson, 1977) and others that emphasize the importance of the professional body and its pursuit of professional development (Gold et al. 2007).

A professional on a learning and development journey

In keeping with the emergence of CPD as a professionalizing tool for associations (Gold et al. 2007), for senior figures within the CIPR, professional development is

placed centre-stage in the construction of the professional body and the professionals that belong to it – Fiona only has two words to describe the CIPR and its members, '…it would be professional development'. Likewise, Rachel draws on the notion of development and learning as a way of indicating the boundaries of the CIPR and who should be part of the organization and who should not: '…you have made a decision to join for a reason. I want that reason to be professional development, otherwise don't join.'

The centrality of professional development as the core of the PR professional is also present in the Institute's annual report. Its opening page, titled 'Who we are?: our members' views' (CIPR Annual Report, 2011: 2) states:

> The access to CPD modules that my CIPR membership gives me has proven invaluable… [I have] access to a wide and diverse range of materials to further develop my public relations knowledge and develop me for a future career in PR (CIPR Annual Report, 2011: 2)

A common phrase used by the senior members of the CIPR to emphasize this individual commitment to professional development is the 'member journey' – a professional development journey taken by each member upon joining the organization. In this context, the ultimate accolade is the Chartered Practitioner. This is considered to be, '…at the forefront of what we do' (Daniel) as, '…the calling card for achieving the highest level of practice in public relations…' (Rachel), and '…the hallmark of a profession' (Fiona).

A professional invested in the professional body

Whilst the professional body constructs the PR professional as invested in their own continual development, it is also keen to encourage practitioners to be similarly invested in the professional body's development as well as their own. When talking about why they got involved in the organization, senior CIPR personnel highlight the need for professionals to invest in the professional body arguing that, '…there's no point sitting on the sidelines carping, you have to get in there and sort it…'(Selena). In turn, these interviewees emphasize that for individuals to fully appreciate the value of their membership requires they invest time and energy into the organization:

> …I hear people who've got involved in the CIPR saying things like 'I always wondered what the CIPR did for me and then I realized I had to do something myself and once I'd done something for myself, the CIPR did a lot of things and fulfilled a lot of the things that I was looking for.' So I think it does require members to be active, you can't just join and suddenly expect your life to be transformed by an annual subscription… (Justin)

The annual report's title, 'Our CIPR' indicates from the outset that the reader of this text is part of the organization and part of the professional community it represents. Within the report, those engaged and active members are continually highlighted and praised. For example, the Chief Executive's Report cites this individual investment by members into the professional body as an indicator of its success (CIPR Annual Report, 2011: 4). By investing in the development of the organization as well as their own personal development, the PR professional is constructed as part of a distinct professional community.

A professional with status conferred by the professional body

The CIPR also constructs the PR professional as having status by virtue of association with, and accreditation from, the professional body. Of course, this traditionally constitutes one of the main driving forces behind occupations' attempts to professionalize (e.g. Johnson, 1972; Larson, 1977). Unsurprisingly, senior CIPR figures consider the organization as a significant external symbol that PR professionals can use to demonstrate credibility in the social world. As Penny observes: 'I would see the CIPR as a badge of the profession and I think that if anybody's serious about PR, they should be members of their professional body…' Senior members of the CIPR also argue that this 'badge' of credibility is further legitimized by the professional body's chartered status. As a result, Fiona emphasizes how gaining the charter gives PR parity with other disciplines: '…I think the achievement of chartered status just said 'we've arrived along with other professions'. So that I think is a real mark of quality…' This is underpinned by the notion of trust in the PR professional where, 'you'd trust a Chartered Practitioner with your reputation' (Daniel). This has always been a central facet of the professional (Freidson, 2001) despite it coming under question in more recent years (e.g. Nicholls, 2017). Nevertheless there is both an institutional and ultimately commercial advantage to being a trusted professional and the CIPR positions itself as an arbiter of with whom that trust should reside.

The further affirmation that awards schemes implemented by the professional body provides for PR practitioners, re-inforce this construction of 'professional status'. This is in line with observation of a CIPR Wales event that focused on the topic, 'How to write great entries for PRide 2011,' a CIPR regional annual awards scheme. Despite the event's title, no presenter gave advice as to how to construct the award entry; instead talk focused on the campaigns in detail and what they had achieved for their client or organization. Consequently, although the visual and discursive cues around the event constructed it as part of the CPD programme for the organization (e.g. leaflets on CPD on display, banners around the event space demonstrating it was a CPD event, reminders from staff on the CPD points for attending this event as people arrived), practitioners' presentations indicated the event was an opportunity for them to demonstrate their professional status by virtue of working on an award winning campaign.

Together, this analysis of the CIPR, demonstrates how the professional body is attempting to harness some of the traditional ideals of social closure, credentialism and a body of knowledge, as well as the authority and prestige that these in turn bestow on its members. It attempts to achieve this by situating the core of its professional construct around the notion of professional development, rather than an abstract body of knowledge much like other 'new' professions attempting to professionalize. Through this emphasis, the body then attempts to construct a professional community by encouraging practitioners to invest in the organization's development as well as their own. This attempt at closure, based on professional development, then confers both the professional with status above those who are not part of this professional community. In turn, the PR professional is constructed as someone who engages with continuous professional

development, invests their time and energy in being an active part of that organization, and as a result has greater professional authority compared to other practitioners who do not.

The PR practitioners' professional

This section examines how practitioners construct themselves as professionals and the role of the professional body in that process. Practitioners' talk is analyzed against the central tenets of the CIPR's construct in order to track their identification with the professional body as a resource for their identity construction. Despite demonstrating a lack of identification with the CIPR, practitioners, both members and non-members of the CIPR, demonstrate an alternative professional self, presenting a more 'self-crafted' professional akin to the 'entrepreneurial self' (Bröckling, 2016; Miller and Rose, 2008; Rose, 1989, 1992).

Lack of identification with the CIPR

Despite the CIPR's attempts to construct a professional community with status, identification with the professional body is not seen by practitioners as conferring the traditional prestige of 'the professional' on them. As mid-level consultant and CIPR member Louise observes:

> 'I think we can use MCIPR after our name, but I never would. I saw
> somebody with it on their business card the other day and I just thought,

'god! I can't believe you've got that on your business cards'!' (Louise, Taff PR)

Similarly, senior consultant and CIPR member Ruby considers the use of the professional body as an identity bolster as indicative of insecurity rather than legitimacy:

'[...] I've got the letters after my name, but I don't feel the need to use them and I don't feel the need to have that industry backing always in people's faces to prove to people that I can do my job well. And in my experience I've found, it's people who can't do their jobs properly that feel the need to keep plugging it.' (Ruby, Taff PR)

Even those practitioners that have gained Chartered Practitioner accreditation recognize its limited status and prestige with the organizations that employ them. Senior in-house practitioner and CIPR fellow Melissa observes, 'I don't think my boss even knows I've got Chartered Practitioner and even if she did she probably wouldn't really think much of it.' (Melissa, In-house). Similarly, senior in-house practitioner and CIPR member Janet states, ''will it [Chartered Practitioner status] make a difference, will it give me more money?' And at the moment the answer to that is 'almost certainly no!'' (Janet, In-house).

Consequently, at best, the CIPR plays a tangential role in the construction of the professional where practitioners highlight, 'I think when we go for new business proposals we always say 'we're all CIPR members' and I don't really think it resonates that well with clients...' (Chloe, mid level consultant, CIPR member, Taff

PR). Similarly, Wilkin PR does not actively promote their association with the professional body because:

> '...we're head of global, top ten, so it speaks for itself, but there's no reason why you couldn't have an extra stamp and say 'well yes we're that and we're also that' which would help...' (Lily, mid-level consultant, non-CIPR member, Wilkin PR)

Therefore, despite the CIPR's attempt to establish boundaries around a professional community, practitioners are looking outside that community to other audiences such as clients as ways in which to construct their professional status. This suggests that the CIPR has so far been unsuccessful in infiltrating the PR labour market with its notion of professionalism and highlighting the benefit of PR practitioners with CIPR membership/accreditation to potential employers and clients, but instead assuming that closure will be achieved in some way through the exemplars of individuals that have that association. For instance, in relation to the Chartered Practitioner initiative, senior CIPR figure Stacey comments:

> '...what we hope is that the value of the designation and the practitioners that have gone through the process will be clear, [so] that people who are working with practitioners and want to appoint practitioners, will look at chartered practitioners because they believe that they've been through a particular process that's of value.'

Finally, the central pillar of the CIPR's professional subject position is the notion of professional development and even here practitioners query the necessity of CPD

for a life in PR. For instance, Lily suggests more appropriate alternatives: 'So if I studied I would do a business management type course rather than a PR course or a media course just to try and up-skill that side of me...' (Lily, Wilkin PR). Likewise, in reflecting on the notion of professional development, senior consultant and non-CIPR member Adam, observes that it may be more relevant to him if it encompasses knowledge and development in industries and disciplines that PR practitioners represent:

> '...so I thought of trying to do the level one underwriters exam[...]I thought it would be brilliant to walk into an insurance company and go as my little biog 'I'm Adam and just for PR purposes so I can get you, I did this exam and I think how that relates to your business is in this way'...qualifications that aren't PR focused but are focused on disciplines would be useful credentials when talking to people in the wider world.' (Adam, Wilkin PR)

Ultimately, the analysis demonstrates a lack of identification by practitioners with the central elements of 'the professional' as constructed by the CIPR. However, this does not mean that practitioners do not identify with 'being a professional'; it's that what this constitutes is being meaningfully redefined.

Professional as the entrepreneurial self

Despite the lack of identification with the CIPR's professional subject position, practitioners still construct themselves as 'professional' by drawing on different discursive resources. Fundamentally, rather than prioritizing professional

development, PR practitioners situate experience of PR practice as a central way in which to construct oneself as professional:

> 'I think experience is important 'cos you can do PR for one year and not be a PR professional, but you can do it for two or three years and be a professional because you've got a certain level of understanding under your belt.' (Adeline, senior consultant, non-CIPR member, Wilkin PR)

Furthermore, the PR professional constructed by practitioners is someone who works with others of high status. For instance, Lily as a fairly junior consultant, highlights her access to powerful people as a marker of her professionalism:

> 'I love the fact that we can work with big blue chip clients and have access to their CEO or International President, I think god who am I and who are they? And I find it quite humbling that they will come to you for advice […] on a normal job, a normal day, you wouldn't access these people whereas you've got their email address – I think that's quite powerful.' (Lily, Wilkin PR)

Therefore, in attempting to construct a professional identity, practitioners highlight the networks of powerful people they can gain access to and the reflected status the latter gives them – i.e. if they are a trusted advisor to a President of a large company, then that indicates they are professional. Consequently, PR practitioners construct their professional status via association with senior corporate personnel rather than association with the professional body.

Overall, the practitioner's experience, network building, and association with corporate powerhouses are the central pillars of their professional subject position. Consequently, '... your own reputation will determine whether you're professional or not rather than the industry telling you...' (Harriet, mid-level consultant, CIPR member, Taff PR). This suggests a very individualized self-management approach to the construct of the professional in practitioners' talk, more akin to the classic neo-liberal 'entrepreneurial self' (Miller and Rose, 2008; Rose, 1989, 1992). This is where individuals become, '...entrepreneurs of themselves, shaping their own lives through the choices they make among the forms of life available to them' (Rose, 1989: 226) and where the market ultimately judges this power in the faith of the self (Bröckling, 2016).

For example, senior consultant and non-CIPR member Anita, considers herself as a professional because: 'I've become pretty good at making people aware of what I'm doing and the results that I'm getting and demonstrating that I'm providing value.' (Anita, Wilkin PR) Likewise, in-house practitioner and fellow of the CIPR, Minny observes:

> '...if you wake up one day and discover that you hate what you're doing and then you discover you can't go anywhere else 'cos you're not tooled up to go, that sucks and that's just not going to happen to me. If I decide I'm not happy anywhere, I walk and it's quite straightforward, but you can't do that unless you take control of your own career and people don't, they're just like 'oh I don't know how I got here' and you're like 'really'?' (Minny, In-house)

For a limited number of practitioners interviewed, i.e. those heavily involved with the CIPR, association with the professional body was part of that entrepreneurial self:

> '…that matters to me as an individual…to say, 'I am good at what I do, I'm confident in what I do, and I'm experienced at what I do, and here are the things that basically demonstrate that.' […] And therefore, when we became a Chartered body and there was an option to be a Chartered Practitioner, I didn't even think about it, it was like 'absolutely, I want that'' (Stacey)

However, for the majority of interviewees, both members and non-members, the entrepreneurial self was centred more on experience where the likes of Isabel comments that she is professional because: 'I'll try a bit of CSR [corporate social responsibility], and then try a bit of corporate PR, and then try a bit of consumer relations and so on, in order to develop my own repertoire.' (Isabel, mid-level consultant, non-CIPR member, Wilkin PR) Coupled with experience, the entrepreneurial self is situated amongst relationships with people of status as observed by Spencer: 'My career as a professional is heavily dependent on ensuring that I am always part of the right networks and that's a continual task I am always striving to achieve' (Spencer, senior consultant, CIPR fellow, Taff PR).

Discussion: professionalization as identity project

This research sought to provide a more nuanced account of the emergent corporate profession through a micro level of analysis of professionalization and identities. In doing so, it establishes corporate professionalization as identity

project. In this guise, professionalization is a process that pivots around individual identification with the professional body and its notion of professionalism in order to enroll new members and gain a critical mass and symbolic status that may allow for some degree of occupational closure. This alternative pathway to potentially achieve social closure is the first contribution of the study.

Corporate professions, such as PR, occupy and operate within highly contested and porous jurisdictional domains in which their capacity to control areas of expert work through conventional strategies of social closure and normative institutionalization – such as state supported credentialization and legalization – are much more restricted and tendentious (Kipping et al. 2006; Kipping and Kirkpatrick, 2013; Muzio et al. 2011a). As a result, corporate professions have to rely, to a much greater extent than established independent professions, on resonating with practitioners' professional identity construction in order to secure some degree of control over the occupation. Considered in these terms, practitioner identity construction is pivotal to the theorization of corporate professionalization.

In developing the notion of professionalization as identity project, the article provides analysis of the complex interplay between practitioners' identity construction and the professional body's construction of the professional. In turn, the second contribution of this study is the suggestion that a novel blending of conventional discourses of professionalism, and emergent discourses of entrepreneurialism, are required for professionalization as identity project to be fully realized (see also Hanlon, 2004; Harrington, 2016; Hodgson and Paton, 2016; Watson, 2003).

Likewise, the third related contribution of the research is that this innovative discursive process has to be understood and analyzed as emerging out of the ways in which underlying contradictions and tensions between practitioners' identity construction and their professional body's institutional positioning are managed. Managing the underlying contradictions and tensions between practitioners' identity construction and the professional association's legitimation claims is a recurring problem for any occupation intent on securing and/or sustaining professional status. However, in the case of corporate professions like PR, these contradictions and tensions are particularly acute and challenging insofar as they threaten to further destabilize an already strained relationship between practitioners' priorities and their representative body's commitment to orthodox conceptions of professionalism.

Practitioner-led conceptions of professionalism must be more responsive to, and aligned with, the organizational realities which practitioners routinely face in their everyday work. However, they are likely to exhibit a range of discursive features and organizational implications that clash with the, relatively abstract and remote, discursive legitimations of professionalism promoted by the professional association. Thus, the development of contemporary constructions of corporate professionalism, which discursively blend selected elements of established professionalism with emergent conceptions of entrepreneurialism, can be understood as a response to the continuing problem of reconciling the realities of practitioners' work situations with professional ideology. However, the extent to which this reconciliation can be fully realized currently remains uncertain.

Conclusion

Research on management learning and professional development has been consistently alert to the potential for learning to be a highly significant resource in identity construction (e.g. Bell et al. 2002; Gold et al. 2007; Warhurst, 2011). Yet, mainstream research in the sociology of professions has so far underestimated the significance of identity for our understanding of the dynamics of professionalization projects. For example, Macdonald's (2006) overview of research on professional work makes no reference to professional identity as a crucial component of professionalization. Likewise, Adams' (2015) international review of the sociology of professions does not include studies of professional identities. Nevertheless, in an increasingly heterogeneous professional landscape, the complexity of what constitutes professionalism must be explored from a diverse range of perspectives and levels of analysis in order to capture this continually changing professional terrain.

The notion of corporate professionalization as identity project suggests that whilst professionalism as an idea remains powerful, what it constitutes, and the process by which it is achieved, is evolving. Paying closer attention to identity construction and the role of the professional body in this process, allows researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the inherent tensions and contradictions in this evolving situation and how they can be negotiated.

It is argued that other more established professional groupings are moving in the direction of the corporate profession (e.g. Lindberg and Rantatalo, 2015; Spence and Carter, 2014). Therefore, we need to develop a better understanding of the similarities, differences, and complexities of these emergent professions as they may be a sign of things to come in professionalization and professionalism as generic means and modes of organizing expert work (see Kipping, 2011: 531).

Some of the implications of professionalization as identity project also require further examination. For instance, the emergence of a more individualized 'entrepreneurial self' (Bröckling, 2016) as a viable professionalizing identity project, as evident in this study, has important implications for our understanding of the process of professional development and learning and how it is framed in professionalization as an identity project. It questions what should constitute the process of professional development, which is often at the core of current professionalization strategies, as tensions continue to mount between the formal acquisition of knowledge and the applicability of knowledge in practice (Gilmore and Anderson, 2011; Gold et al. 2007).

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[i] Pseudonyms have been used for both the PR practitioners and the companies they work for to protect their anonymity.

[ii] Due to the confines of the length of a journal article, analysis from every event is not provided in the findings section but these events were part of the data collection process from which these findings and discussion emerged.