

## Overview

### *Metaphors at Work: Making Professional Identity*

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A strong sense of professional identity is a key psychological resource that enables workers to sustain motivation and to make work meaningful while untoward changes are affecting their domains of work. The present book examines professional identity – its nature, development, and application – through a cognitive science lens. The book is based on in-depth interviews with professionals, conducted as part of the Good Work Project (GWP). On the GWP, we have interviewed over 1200 professionals of various sorts, including doctors, lawyers, journalists, geneticists, and business people. The book examines a subset of 116 of those interviews which were conducted as part of the Contemplative Mind Project. To provide the richest view of professional identity, the book centers around in-depth case studies that are representative of the broader cognitive patterns found across this group of professionals.

The key finding of the book is that workers develop professional identity by combining a surprising range of disparate elements from their professional and personal lives. Professional identity links a wide range of experiences, contexts, thoughts, and emotions that otherwise would not be associated. I have identified two broad types of professional identity, both of which are influenced by a combination of personal circumstances and professional contexts, to differing degrees. In domain-oriented identity, the conventions, ideas, and practices associated with a professional domain play the stronger role in shaping one's identity. Conversely, in self-oriented identity a worker's personal history and circumstances are more influential in the making of identity.

In both cases, metaphors play a central role in how workers conceptualize the various elements that are used to construct professional identity. For example, Richard is a jazz musician whose quest to create a sense of psychological balance among his ensemble's members can be traced to what he characterizes as a chaotic childhood. Experiencing disequilibrium at a young age taught Richard the need to strive for a sense of balance when possible. Richard combines metaphors of balance from his childhood and his professional work because he perceives there to be a complementary – indeed, unifying – quality between these realms of his life. Conversely, Richard's use of a balance metaphor evokes qualities of discontinuity and flux. Achieving balance is itself a delicate, wobbly undertaking, with the threat of disequilibrium always nearby. Yet Richard mentally pairs this sense of potential discontinuity with the long-lasting, continuous success of his career. Far from being coincidental, the blending of the seemingly contradictory elements of discontinuity and continuity acts as a source of creative tension for Richard. As the example of Richard

suggests, in developing their professional identities workers blend elements from their professional and personal lives that they perceive to be complementary, while also combining aspects that are seemingly contradictory.

By drawing on the insights about the human mind afforded by cognitive science, this book reveals for the first time the cognition underlying professional identity. Understanding how professional identity is constructed is important for three reasons. First, there are enormous changes taking place in many professions due to increasing concern with ever-larger profit margins, a rapidly shifting political landscape, and the infusion of new technologies with unclear consequences. These changes present uncharted challenges and pressures on professionals, eroding their ability to serve the public good. Second, readers who are professionals can use the case studies as vehicles for reflection about their own work lives or the work of those they supervise. Third, the book makes important advances in cognitive science and even evolutionary psychology circles by using research data – rather than hypothetical examples or limited samples of language – to delineate forms of identity and their adaptive consequences. Indeed, this book opens entire new avenues of thought and inquiry regarding professional life and cognition.